

Black churches torn between Clinton, Obama: Divided loyalties

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If it's true that a house divided cannot stand, then black churches across South Carolina should be shaking. Take, for instance, Bible Way Church of Atlas Road in Columbia.

The black megachurch's pastor, Darrell Jackson Sr., is a paid consultant for Senator Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign.

In the pews, longtime Bible Way parishioner Anton J. Gunn directs the statewide political operation of Clinton's main rival, Senator Barack Obama.

The congregation as a whole, some 10,000 strong, sits somewhere in the middle, according to both men.

"I think we have a lot of people who support Hillary Clinton, and we've got a lot of people who support Barack Obama," Jackson said.

Both candidates will need all the support they can muster from the black community to win South Carolina's crucial January 26 presidential primary, a contest destined to play a significant role in determining the Democratic nominee. In polls last month, former senator John Edwards of North Carolina tended to be a distant third.

In a state where half of all primary voters are African American—a large majority of whom attend worship services three times or more each month—the road to the White House runs straight through black churches.

It's not unusual to see Democrats hunting for votes in black houses of worship. Churches have long been the center of African American communal and civic life, especially in the South.

"You hunt where the ducks are," said Scott H. Huffman, a political scientist at Winthrop University in Rock Hill, South Carolina. "African Americans in South

Carolina are highly religious; they're in church."

But this year's Democratic field, which pits a charismatic black man against a woman who bears a trusted family name, divides the loyalties of black churches and churchgoers—especially women—like no election in recent history. A September state poll found that 31 percent of black women favored Clinton, 31 percent supported Obama and 33 percent were undecided. December polls show Obama surging ahead among African Americans in South Carolina and Clinton clinging to an overall lead in the state.

"Is it the woman's turn or is it the African American's turn?" asked Tracy Thompson, a 30-year-old criminal justice instructor, as she stood in Brookland Baptist Church in West Columbia. "I think that is a struggle for a lot of African-American women right now."

Though accurate national poll numbers are hard to come by at this stage of the presidential campaign, anecdotal evidence suggests that the tug-of-war extends well beyond South Carolina's borders, said John C. Green, a senior fellow at the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life. "The idea of having a black president is really attractive, and so is the idea of having a woman president, so a lot of African-American women are struggling with the question: Which way do I go?"

Of course, many blacks say this election is about more than race and gender; it also concerns health care, the war in Iraq, experience and electability. And even those who are emotionally torn exult over their choices. It's about time, many said, that a woman or an African American sat in the Oval Office.

But from the choir lofts of the largest sanctuaries to the small corners of a preacher's soul, the Clinton-or-Obama dilemma is vexing consciences throughout the Palmetto State.

"It's crazy," said Willie Lyles III, 23, executive director of Freedom Temple Ministries in Rock Hill. "I was talking to my grandmother the other day, and you can just feel the tension inside her."

Thelma McKinney, 74, and Susie Smith, 65, expressed similar thoughts as they sat together in a pew at Bible Way Church on a recent Sunday.

McKinney, a member of the church for 25 years, said she was “mixed” between Hillary and Obama: “It’s so difficult because we’ve got a woman, plus we have a black man” in the primary, said the retired social worker. “And it’s a good thing because it’s time for a change.”

Smith said, “I like both of them. One should be president and the other vice president.”

Gunn, the Obama operative, and Jackson, his pastor, reflect another fault line in the black community: a generational division.

Gunn, 34, said he’s working for Obama because of the Illinois senator’s ability to bring people together and turn the page on the country’s stifling partisan past.

Jackson, 50, said he signed on with Clinton because of her experience as first lady and nearly seven years in the U.S. Senate. Like many African Americans, Jackson also said former president Bill Clinton, who is adored by the black community, was a factor in his decision.

“That got her an audience with me, but she had to close the deal,” he said. “When you get to know her, you will understand that she is as smart as he is.”

Both Clinton and Obama have released lengthy lists of clergy endorsements, including out-of-state civil rights leaders and heads of national denominations. Moreover, both campaigns have trotted out megastars like Oprah Winfrey (for Obama) and Maya Angelou (for Clinton) to help make their case to black women.

In addition, Bill Clinton has graced the pulpit of several black churches, including Bible Way, and met with dozens of black ministers. Two prominent black pastors, Suzan Johnson-Cook and Marcia Dyson, have discussed faith and women’s issues on behalf of Hillary Clinton in a statewide tour titled “For Such a Time as This,” a phrase from the book of Esther.

Obama has countered with endorsements of his own, as well as frequent Sunday visits to churches throughout South Carolina. But the focus of his outreach to religious voters, advisers say, is the 200 small “faith community contacts” who signed up during “faith forums” across the state. The forums are rooted in Obama’s experience as a community organizer in Chicago’s black neighborhoods. *-Daniel Burke and Cecile S. Holmes, Religion News Service*