

Hard words: Wright's jeremiad

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [April 22, 2008](#) issue

I wish Jeremiah Wright had made his point about America's failings without saying "God damn America." But not for a moment do I wish he had been less prophetic. The great biblical prophets did and said outrageous, controversial things, which consistently got them in trouble and occasionally landed them in jail. I wish Wright had not said "America's chickens are coming home to roost" about the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. But he claimed to be paraphrasing a commentator on TV who—quite reasonably—had pointed out objectionable and self-defeating U.S. foreign policies.

Critics of Wright and Barack Obama wonder how Senator Obama could have remained in Wright's congregation for 20 years. The answer is that Wright didn't say "God damn America" every Sunday. Wright's sermons, week after week, were biblically based, relevant, literate and eloquent. When preachers of the land think about whose sermons and lectures they want to hear, Wright's name is near the top of the list.

With cable TV shows playing a few sound bites of Wright over and over again, it's no wonder people who don't know a thing about Trinity United Church of Christ or Jeremiah Wright come to the wrong conclusions. I'm not the only preacher in the land who knows how vulnerable any one of us is should some ill-chosen words be lifted out of a sermon to be replayed over and over.

Wright and Trinity Church should be put in the context of the church's entire ministry. Under Wright's leadership, Trinity reached out to the community with mission programs, education, social services, AIDS education and treatment programs and health care. Driving on Stony Island Avenue on Chicago's far South Side, you pass by a large community health center sponsored by Trinity. One way to evaluate and measure a ministry is by the mission it performs. Among Chicago churches and Chicago clergy of all denominations, Trinity is widely admired as a model of what a public church can and ought to be.

Katharine Moon, a professor of political science at Wellesley and a Korean American, recently remembered the church in which she was nurtured and reminded us all of the special role congregations play:

Churches, synagogues, mosques, prayer meetings are . . . communities of mutual help, support and practical guidance. As social scientists know, they are instrumental to building and maintaining social capital. For new immigrants, as well as racial and ethnic minorities, they serve a particular purpose. Often, the immigrant or ethnic church is the one public place where a common language, food and humor particular to one's cultural heritage can be shared. . . . It is through the congregation that we ask for help — to look after our children or elderly parents. . . . Often it is the people in the worship hall who . . . help us paint our houses, and visit us in hospitals. . . . A house of worship is much more than a pastor. (*Chicago Tribune*, March 25)

Those sensible, valuable words should help us think more clearly about pastors and congregations, and about what it means to be a member of a congregation—even if one happens to be a candidate for president.