

Obama: On finding a balanced church: After Trinity

by [John Dart](#) in the [July 1, 2008](#) issue

With the added backing of delegates and superdelegates on the final day of primary elections, Barack Obama declared himself the winner June 3 of the hard-fought Democratic presidential campaign, becoming the Democrats' presumptive nominee and the first African American to be a major party's choice for the White House.

Although rival senator Hillary Rodham Clinton said that night that she had won the popular vote in party races—a claim disputed by the Obama camp—and would be the strongest opponent against Republican senator John McCain, she ended her bid to become the nation's first woman president days later.

The primary season struggled to a finish. In the later primaries Clinton scored well among white blue-collar workers and Obama lost ground among independent voters. In February, 63 percent of independents said they had a favorable impression of the Illinois senator, but in May that number dropped to 49 percent, the Pew Research Center said. Many political analysts put the blame on the provocative declarations of Obama's longtime pastor in Chicago, as well as on the 46-year-old candidate's reluctance to cut ties with his large congregation, which at times has featured divisive preaching.

After Obama held a news conference May 31 to talk about his decision to resign his membership at Trinity United Church of Christ, Mark Silk, editor of the journal *Religion in the News*, wrote on his blog at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut, that Obama “knew enough to put a little distance between himself and Jeremiah Wright” when first announcing his candidacy. Yet no one who has not been through a modern-day presidential campaign “can have any idea what the full blast of media attention is like,” Silk wrote.

Said Obama: “It's clear that—now that I'm a candidate for president—every time something is said in the church by anyone associated with Trinity, including guest pastors, the remarks will be imputed to me even if they totally conflict with my long-held views, statements and principles.”

The mocking of Hillary Clinton at Trinity in a late May guest sermon by Catholic priest Michael Pfleger (subsequently suspended by Chicago cardinal Francis George), Obama continued, “just reinforced that view that we don't want to have to answer for everything that's stated in a church.”

Trinity's current senior pastor, Otis Moss III, said the congregation would pray for Obama, and John Thomas, the head of the denomination, said he hopes Obama and his wife, Michelle, will find a suitable UCC-affiliated congregation.

Obama indicated that they would like a pastor “who would not shy away from speaking out on those issues when he or she saw fit” and yet one also focused on reconciliation—“unifying people” and having “a sense of righteous indignation about injustice.”

The remarks were “notable,” Silk commented, for “what he'll be looking for in a new church: socially engaged, African-American worship style, accepting of gays and lesbians—like Trinity, in short, but led by a different kind of pastor.”