

Praying for the president—regardless of party: Presidential Prayer Team

by [John Dart](#) in the [April 21, 2009](#) issue

The church sign of a Pentecostal congregation facing a busy Los Angeles-area street bore a single message for months: let us pray for our new president. The church's pastor, a Republican, said that right after the November elections he and congregational leaders decided to follow New Testament admonitions to pray for those in governing authority.

"I favored this because our church had mixed feelings—about half and half Democrats and Republicans," said Kevin Belsby, senior pastor of Pathway Christian Fellowship, a Foursquare Gospel-affiliated congregation in Northridge. "But we believe in praying for all presidents, and we do it enthusiastically."

Across the country in Episcopal liturgies, parishioners have switched from George W. Bush to Barack Obama in such prayers (though during Lent the prayer is for the office rather than for its occupant).

At St. John's Episcopal Church in Washington, Connecticut, rector Randall Balmer, best known as an author and a Barnard College expert on U.S. religious history, confessed in a brief interview to his "longing last summer and fall for the opportunity" to pray for the Democratic nominee.

Praying for U.S. presidents—as well as for governors, lawmakers and other governing officials—has long been a practice in some American churches and for "civil religion" events. Annual days of prayer and prayer breakfasts tend to be organized predominantly by conservative Christians.

Thus it remained to be seen whether a countrywide, evangelical-rooted network, the Presidential Prayer Team, formed right after 9/11 and amassing nearly 500,000 members during the Bush presidency, would survive the November 4 election.

It has, so far. More than 25,000 members dropped out after the election by unsubscribing to the PPT e-mails, but in the same period more than 41,000 new

people signed up, according to John Lind, CEO of the Scottsdale, Arizona-based organization.

Neither the Foursquare church in California nor Balmer's Episcopal parish are a part of the PPT. Lind said in a telephone interview that he often learns of churches that on their own include prayers for the president, regardless of political party.

The Presidential Prayer Team is distinctive in urging daily prayers. "We want people to pray daily for our president, daily for our nation," Lind said. In a measure of gratitude, Bush invited PPT representatives to the Oval Office and prayed with them for 26 minutes on January 19, his last full day in the White House.

With the January 20 inauguration, the Web site (www.presidentialprayerteam.org) began posting numerous photos and straightforward reports on Obama's initiatives, appointments and speeches with suggestions for prayer:

"As President Obama continues to travel around the country, pray for his protection and safety at every turn. Pray that those who may seek to harm him or members of his administration will be foiled before they are able to carry out their plans.

"As President Obama has presented his budget to Congress, pray for legislators as they consider its many provisions and seek to recommend adjustments. Pray for God's will to be done in this massive undertaking that the best may be done for our nation."

Asked what he thought of conservative radio talk show host Rush Limbaugh's much-expressed hope that Obama will fail as president, Lind declined to say. "I haven't heard all of what he has said, so it would be problematic for me to comment."

The PPT Web site, reporting on results from its online poll in January, stated that a majority of its members were pessimistic about "the future of our nation under the Obama administration," but about 85 percent also said they "would encourage other Christians to pray for the president."

Though some Christians cite Paul's letter to the Romans and 1 Peter 2:13-17 in honoring those in authority, Lind said the "cornerstone verses" for his organization are 1 Timothy 2:1-2, which urge prayer "for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity."

Lind worked at Youth for Christ, Promise Keepers and ChildHelp USA before becoming president and CEO of PPT in 2002. Some members have told him that they had a difficult time switching from a Republican to a Democrat in their prayers.

Barbara Brown of Foresthill, California, quoted on the Web site, said in part: "I have to remind some of my Republican friends that even though we did not vote for President Obama, he is now our president and he deserves our respect, honor and prayers as commanded by God."

One by-product of team members' prayers, Lind said, is how regular prayer affects the persons praying. "They are being shown something in their own personal lives that they need to change or improve," he said. "Part of what the country needs for sure, especially during these tough times economically, is a sense of unity."