

# The sins of our preachers

By Katharine H.S. Moon

**L**ike Barack Obama. I too am a member of Trinity Church, but my church is in Boston, not Chicago. It is predominantly white, not black. And the denomination is Episcopal, not United Church of Christ, as the one in Chicago. I know all too well the quandary of cutting one's loyalties to a church. I also know about the intimate mixing of racial or ethnic identity and faith in the body of a church. Some people have called for Sen. Obama to sever his ties to his pastor, Rev. Jeremiah Wright Jr., for his fiery comments about race in America. But this is a loaded demand, not because of race, but because of the particular nature of the pastor-parish relationship.

Churches, synagogues, mosques, prayer meetings. They are not just places of religion. They are communities of mutual help, support and practical guidance in matters of daily life. As social scientists well know, they are instrumental to building and maintaining social capital. For new immigrants, as well as racial and ethnic minorities, they serve a particularly special 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 also the place that connects us to potential jobs, educational opportunities, health care and housing options if information and access are hard to come by in the larger society. Places of worship are also providers of everyday services. It is through the congregation that we ask for help—to look after our children or our elderly parents when we are in a jam, to get emotional and spiritual guidance and support in times of personal or family crisis. Often, it is the people in the worship hall who help us find our mates, help paint our houses and visit us in hospitals. A house of worship is much more than the pastor.

Like many Korean-Americans in this

country, I grew up in an immigrant Korean-American church in New Jersey. As a teenager, I taught Sunday school, led the children's choir, sang duets with my sister at Christmastime, helped wash dishes in the kitchen and more. But in my mid-30s, I left that church and became a member of Trinity in Boston. I had no ax to grind with my pastor, even if his sermons put me to sleep from time to time and his interpretations of the Bible were less than persuasive. Though I never felt I was leaving him behind, I was sorely aware that I was leaving a community of people who had helped rear me from child to adult. This community inspired me to tears when we sang together "Amazing Grace" and "Silent Night" in Korean. And I miss the power of those feelings—"grace," in the Christian tradition, one might say—even as I cherish my adopted congregational family of mostly white Episcopalian Bostonians.

Did Rev. Wright commit a mortal sin? Did he break any laws in preaching what he did? Did he incite his flock to perpetrate racial violence? Did he force his views down the throats of his congregants? If so, the entire congregation, not just parishioner Obama, should

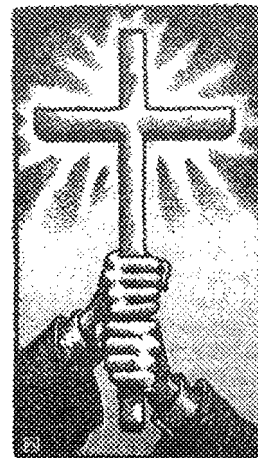


Illustration by Paul Lacuna

take him to task.

What we ought to remember is that many white congregants of evangelical churches whose pastors had outright lied to them about their extramarital affairs and sexual orientations while exhorting them to live "righteously" did not denounce or condemn their pastors. Many such folks followed the Chris-

tian precept to forgive.

There are plenty of preachers in America who preach hate against blacks, Latinos, Asians, gays and lesbians, and the list goes on. There are too many clerics who have embezzled funds from their congregants and have molested children entrusted to them by their flock. If we expect Rev. Wright to be taken to task for his speech, we should do the same for each and every clergy member in America, for his or her speech and actions.

Our faith communities are much more than the pastors, imams and rabbis who stand up and raise their voices in prayer. Individual leaders come and go, but it is the congregational community—black, white, Asian, Latino or multicultural—that stays with us and our families.

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