News



Jared Kushner, middle left, senior adviser to the president, stops by a White House listening session with pastor Paula White, middle right, and other evangelical leaders, hosted by the Office of Public Liaison on July 27, 2017. Others present include Johnnie Moore, Jennifer Korn, Ronnie Floyd, Mac Brunson, Jack Graham, Greg Laurie and Skip Heitzig. (Courtesy of Johnnie Moore)

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The invitation was unexpected. Would any of the preachers and pastors and other religious leaders, who had come to hear the administration's views on issues they cared about, like to meet the POTUS in person?

A number of them fumbled with their iPhones to get them selfie-ready as they made their way to the Oval Office. And when they filed in, President Donald Trump greeted them warmly.

“Now this is a group that has the real power," he said. "They have influence with God.”

A little while later the crowd gathered round the president. Some laid a hand on him for a prayer that led the participant recalling the episode, Tony Suarez, to feel as though “the anointing of the Holy Spirit was in that room.”

Among those standing nearest the president were Florida prosperity gospel preacher Paula White; Tim Clinton, head of a national Christian counseling association; and South African-born TV evangelist Rodney Howard-Browne, who is known for leading raucous worship services at his megachurch in Tampa, Fla.

“I remember being overwhelmed,” said Suarez, who is executive vice president of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference. “It was a very spiritual moment.”

Trump’s close ties with this group of conservative Christian religious leaders is, by all accounts, unprecedented. They come after he was elected president with 81 percent of the white evangelical vote — a higher share than cast ballots for Mitt Romney, John McCain or George W. Bush.

“When someone like Robert Jeffress or Jerry Falwell Jr. says ‘This is the most faith-friendly president we’ve ever had,’ in some ways they’re right,” said John Fea, professor of American history at Messiah College in Pennsylvania. “No other group of evangelical pastors has had such access.” Since inauguration, there have been meetings, dinners, photo ops and conference calls, according to participants. And there have been countless other encounters, including some at prayer events and signing ceremonies and a concert at the Kennedy Center.

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On Sept. 1, some from the group were back in the Oval Office as the president declared a National Day of Prayer for victims of Hurricane Harvey. Texas pastor Robert Jeffress led another laying-of-hands benediction that cast Trump as a national savior.

"Father, I thank you that we have a president ... who believes in the power of prayer," he said. "This country has been bitterly divided for decades upon decades, and now you have given us a gift, President Donald Trump."

And unlike the business advisory councils that disbanded over the president’s response to violence by white supremacists last month in Charlottesville, Va., the evangelicals are still standing by him.

Extensive interviews with key participants — as well as public statements and photos — reveal that a cadre of conservative Christian religious leaders — mostly white and male (with notable exceptions such as White and Suarez) — has the ear of the politically powerful on matters of national priority, from judicial appointments to immigration and criminal justice reform.



President Trump meets with faith leaders inside the Oval Office on July 10, 2017. (Mark Burns)

And while presidents before have consulted with spiritual advisers — evangelist Billy Graham is the best-known example — the current group's members certainly appear to care not only about Trump’s own spiritual well-being, but also have concrete

views about a range of issues and make no secret of wanting policy changes.

But exactly how much influence they wield — and whether they benefit from the association — is a matter of conjecture and debate.

About 30 evangelical pastors and heads of Christian organizations attended six hours of meetings July 10 at the Eisenhower Executive Office Building, where most White House staff members have offices. Afterward, the religious leaders were invited to the Oval Office, where they prayed for Trump.

Just like alumni?

In June 2016, in the midst of the presidential campaign, Trump formed an evangelical executive advisory board after meeting with some 1,000 conservative Christians in New York.

That board, with around 25 members including Liberty University President Jerry Falwell Jr., Focus on the Family founder James Dobson and Southern Evangelical Seminary President Richard Land, was dissolved when he became president. But while the current group includes some of the same names, it has no formal status.

“It’s sort of an influential informal coalition of evangelical leaders that has a special relationship with the White House,” said Johnnie Moore, a minister and public relations consultant who serves as an unofficial spokesman for the group.

“It’s like being an alumni of a school, and so you’re no longer a student at the school but you continue to get together with your friends and people and you care about the same things. And you meet and you might interact with the school as alumni of the school,” Moore added. “You don’t work for the school. You don’t have any formal association with the school.”

Frank Page, a former president of the Southern Baptist Convention, attended one of the main meetings, on July 10 at a building that houses offices of White House staff. But he isn’t even sure of his own status.

“I don’t know if I’m actually a part or not,” he said. “I have not seen anything codified.”

While some who have attended events, including Franklin Graham, have referred to a “faith council,” Jeffress, the Dallas pastor, rejected the term. That would come with

“certain legal ramifications,” he said.

Which is true. Sunshine laws such as the Federal Advisory Committee Act establish procedural and transparency standards for “any committee, board, commission, council, conference, panel, task force, or other similar group” established to advise members of the executive branch.

Asked about its links to the group and its members, the White House declined to provide specifics of meetings or contacts.

And a number of individuals who are known to be part of the group said through spokespersons that they were unavailable for interviews for this story — including White, the Florida preacher whom many described as one of the key leaders of the group; radio hosts Dobson and Eric Metaxas; and Franklin Graham, who heads the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association named after his father.

“My experience is I’ve had more access with these guys than I did under Bush and other GOP leadership,” said Pentecostal preacher Harry Jackson. But participants who did respond confirmed that most of the group, estimated to be at least 50 people, got together on July 10 for extended sessions at the Eisenhower Executive Office Building, next door to the White House.

“It was a day hearing reports from various administration personnel and, yes, seeking advice from evangelicals as to what we cared about, what mattered, what issues were on our hearts,” said Page. “So it was both a reporting and speaking gathering.”

Moore said a number of lower-level White House staff attended the meeting, and he described them as “taking prolific notes and those notes being delivered as memos, is what we’re told, to the various departments.”

As for the high-level officials, Jared Kushner, Trump’s son-in-law and senior adviser to the president, was there “in a listening capacity,” according to Suarez.

Kushner also got up and spoke, said Mark Burns, CEO of The NOW Television Network in Easley, S.C. “And then, of course, right after Jared leaves, he comes back with” Vice President Mike Pence.



Pastor Mark Burns' family with candidate Trump. (Gene Ho Photography)

"No one there really thought that we would be contacted by the vice president or the president but the vice president came in and gave us a brief word," said another former SBC president who was there, Ronnie Floyd. "He just gave us a kind word and said, 'Hey, the president heard that you guys are working over here, wanted to come by and tell you thank you and he would love for you to come to the Oval Office.'"

That prayer session that ensued was a particular point of pride for Burns.

"Matter of fact, if you see the picture of that circulating, I think my hand is the only African-American hand that you see in the picture," he said, adding that he'd been to the Trump White House "a handful of times."

The day of meetings at the Eisenhower Building and the Oval Office followed a much-tweeted dinner in the White House Blue Room on May 3, on the eve of the National Day of Prayer, when a handful of evangelical leaders were pictured

standing behind the president along with leaders of several other faiths as he signed an executive order about religious liberty.

Jeffress characterized the dinner as a “thank you” to the campaign’s evangelical advisory board.



Vice President Mike Pence delivers remarks during a dinner with religious leaders on May 3, 2017, in the Blue Room of the White House in Washington, D.C. (Official White House photo by Shealah Craighead)

On July 27, some from the group met again at the White House, the visitors this time consisting of what Jordan Easley, pastor of Englewood Baptist Church in Jackson, Tenn., called the “Faith Leadership Initiative.”

Moore said there have also been conference calls "every few weeks." And in-person meetings involving some of the key players appear to have taken place on the margins of other events — such as the National Prayer Breakfast and the July 1 “Celebrate Freedom” concert at the Kennedy Center in Washington, co-sponsored

by Jeffress’ church, First Baptist Dallas.

“There are more meetings now than there were during the campaign,” said Suarez, though he wasn't able to participate as much then because his wife was battling a cancer that took her life.

Pentecostal preacher Harry Jackson said he’s had as many as a dozen meetings with Trump, Kushner and others since the inauguration.

“My experience is I’ve had more access with these guys than I did under Bush and other GOP leadership,” Jackson said, referring to President George W. Bush’s administration.



Bishop Harry Jackson of Maryland speaks at the unveiling of the “Justice Declaration,” a statement by Christian leaders on criminal justice, in Washington, D.C., on June 20, 2017. (RNS/Adelle M. Banks)

Jeffress argues that there’s “nothing unusual” about evangelical leaders meeting at the White House. He believes they are not the only group being consulted in this way.

If that’s true, maybe the other groups haven’t posted about it on social media as prolifically. But it’s certainly not the case with mainline or progressive Christians.

“I’d absolutely say we’re frozen out,” said Steven Martin, the communications director for the National Council of Churches, a group that includes mainline Protestant, Orthodox and historically black denominations.

Muslim and Sikh groups have also reported little or no contact.

RNS asked the White House whether similar forums exist to consult with leaders of other faiths. A White House spokesman replied with a statement saying that the president and his staff’s participation in events such as the National Prayer Breakfast and a Passover seder dinner is “showing his commitment to the faith community.”

The statement cast the issue in general terms.

“The Trump Administration looks forward to creating our own initiatives to continue our work with communities of faith,” it said. “The White House continues to invite different faith leaders on an ongoing basis, like we do with all groups, for meetings and briefings to talk about a variety of issues important to them.”

Charlottesville

Whatever the group's status, A.R. Bernard, a black megachurch pastor in Brooklyn, left it after the president said there were "fine people on both sides" of the conflict in Charlottesville.

But Jeffress stayed on, saying he agreed with the president.

“President Trump said exactly the right thing in exactly the right way in his comments on Charlottesville,” he said.

Suarez, the Hispanic pastor, said he’d received a thousand phone calls and emails over the issue.

“I think there’s this perception that we’re just the amen corner to President Trump. This is a group made up of people with pastoral hearts that will share praise, they’ll share inspiration in the sense that they’ll pray with the president, they’ll share Scripture with the president, but they’ll also share concern,” he said.

Suarez cites Scripture to explain how he could work with a man who has hardly been seen as a paragon of moral virtue, especially in the way he has dealt with and spoken about women.

In the Book of Samuel, the prophet Nathan confronts King David over his seduction of Bathsheba, the wife of a top general he got rid of by deliberately sending him on a fatally doomed military mission, Suarez recalled.

"I don't see Nathan saying, 'Oh, you slept with Bathsheba? We're done, bud. We're done with you.' But I do see him call (David) out and say, ‘Thou art the man.’”

A short list of accomplishments

The hope is that they can influence key policies. And the meetings with White House officials have covered a range of issues, including health care, taxes, religious liberty and judicial appointments, according to participants.

In small ways, evangelical advisers seem to be having some influence. Several said they had a hand in Trump’s nomination of Sam Brownback to be religious freedom ambassador, and it’s believed they also applied pressure to ensure that Secretary of State Rex Tillerson kept a special envoy to monitor and combat anti-Semitism, despite cuts at the department.

But given the amount of access they’ve had, the list of accomplishments is relatively short.

Some accounts say that at the July 10 meeting, one of the subjects that came up was a transgender ban on soldiers in the military, which the president announced two weeks later. One of those present, Tony Perkins of the Family Research Council, later told The New York Times that he pressed Trump about it for months.

But Tim Clinton, president of the American Association of Christian Counselors, who was also at the July 10 meeting, disputes that evangelicals pushed for the ban.

Tobin Grant, a political scientist at Southern Illinois University, says that with a few exceptions — such as Land, former head of the Southern Baptist Convention's policy arm, and Ralph Reed, former head of the Christian Coalition who now runs an organization called the Faith & Freedom Coalition — these evangelicals are pastors, not political operatives.

"They tend to be people who are not involved in politics or policy," he said. "They're newbies on this."

The evangelical advisers were also not known to have been involved in picking Supreme Court Justice Neil Gorsuch, though they backed the choice. Trump publicly thanked the Federalist Society and the Heritage Foundation for help with that nomination.

They are, however, pushing for socially conservative judicial appointments — an issue of critical importance to evangelicals who would like to see the courts reverse abortion rights and LGBT protections while carving out religious liberty exemptions.

And they also support a repeal of the Johnson Amendment, the law — which the president has promised to "destroy" — that prohibits tax-exempt churches from endorsing political candidates.

Dream come true

What is beyond doubt is that the access evangelicals are getting to Trump and his advisers has been a dream come true.

Since the late 1970s, conservative evangelicals have wanted to influence the direction of the country through politics. Groups such as the Moral Majority and the Christian Coalition were set up to accomplish just this.

The idea was to get Christians elected to every level of government, from school boards to statehouses. At the same time, leaders such as Reed and Jerry Falwell Sr. never hid their desire to bring change through the election of a president who could elevate and enshrine conservative Christian values on issues such as school prayer, abortion, marriage and gay rights.

Fea, the Messiah College historian, calls this "the playbook," and he says it's as operative today as it was 40 years ago.

Of course, modern presidents before Trump have surrounded themselves with people who prayed with them or provided them spiritual guidance.

George W. Bush notably created the Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. The office, located on Jackson Place near the White House, allowed for federally funded partnerships between the government and faith-based groups for the delivery of social services, such as drug and alcohol rehabilitation or after-school programs.

But before President Obama, no modern-day president asked religious advisers to play roles in recommending policy, said Melissa Rogers, former special assistant to Obama and director of the White House Office of Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships.

Obama was the first president to create a faith-based advisory council. During his eight years in office he appointed three such councils consisting of 20-25 members that met for about a year and were tasked with studying particular issues, including human trafficking, poverty and interreligious cooperation.

The councils were diverse; they included members of Baha'i, Baptist, Buddhist, Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Mormon, Muslim, Native American, Orthodox Christian and Sikh faiths.

But Obama met with each faith-based advisory council only twice, first when they were appointed and second when they concluded their work.

And critically, Rogers said, the Obama faith-based councils held public meetings, produced public reports and were subject to the Federal Advisory Committee Act.

Just why Trump keeps soliciting these evangelical advisers is probably a political calculation, said Fea.

“Donald Trump knows that he can ride these evangelicals,” the historian said. “He needs this as part of his base. I still can’t believe that at some deep level of spiritual or moral conviction he believes what these evangelical pastors believe. I think it’s utilitarian: ‘Let’s keep these people close.’”

This story appears in the **All the president's clergymen** feature series. View the full series.