News



Republican vice presidential nominee Sen. JD Vance is interviewed by Pastor Jason Howard at the Monroeville Convention Center in Monroeville, Pa., Sept. 28, 2024. (RNS/Jack Jenkins)

Jack Jenkins

View Author Profile

RNS

Religion News Service

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

MONROEVILLE, Pa. — September 30, 2024

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Republican vice presidential candidate JD Vance took the stage at Christian nationalist preacher Lance Wallnau's election-season revival tour on Saturday (Sept. 28), using the setting to make a theological defense of the GOP campaign's controversial immigration policies and to appeal to Wallnau's conservative Christian crowd in a hotly contested swing state.

Seated for an interview with Pastor Jason Howard, who leads Sanctuary, a church nearby, Vance brought up his campaign's restrictive stance on immigration while answering a string of questions about policy and his faith.

Citing a "Christian idea that you owe the strongest duty to your family," Vance said Christian leaders should likewise be concerned first about protecting their country, not citizens of other nations. "It doesn't mean that you have to be mean to other people, but it means that your first duty as an American leader is to the people of your own country," said Vance, a Roman Catholic.

He insisted that supporters of former President Donald Trump "should not let Kamala Harris claim the high ground on compassion," calling President Joe Biden and Vice President Harris' immigration policies "a disgrace" and saying the Trump-Vance campaign's plans for immigration policy, which include a pledge to enact the "largest deportation" in U.S. history, will "maximize compassion" compared with the Biden administration.

The town hall with Vance, held in a convention center east of Pittsburgh, was worked into the latest stop of Wallnau's Courage Tour, "marking the dawn of our nation's Third Great Awakening," according to its promotional materials. Since February the tour has been visiting 19 "bellwether counties" in nine states, aiming to break "demonic strongholds," Wallnau has said. With many stops in swing states, those counties are thought to be crucial to an electoral victory for Trump.

Wallnau, a self-described prophet who predicted Trump's 2016 win and has supported the former president since, has declared himself a Christian nationalist. Wallnau is associated with an influential network of charismatic Christian leaders known as the New Apostolic Reformation and is thought to have coined the phrase "Seven Mountains Mandate," to describe a movement to put Christians in control of seven spheres of society: family, religion, education, media, arts and entertainment, business and government.

Wallnau and other prominent Pentecostal nationalists have been relatively quiet in their support of Trump in the current campaign, and Vance's appearance at Saturday's event shocked many observers for its seeming embrace of right-wing Christian nationalist figures.



Lance Wallnau speaks during the Courage Tour event in Monroeville, Pa., on Sept 28, 2024. (RNS/Jack Jenkins)

"This is Vance's endorsement of one of the worst, most conspiratorial, Christian supremacist spectacles in the country," Matthew D. Taylor, a scholar at the Institute for Islamic, Christian and Jewish Studies who tracks NAR religious extremism, wrote on X after Vance's appearance was announced on Thursday.

Vance's remarks seemed aimed at quelling some of the controversy that sprang up after he and Trump accused Haitian migrants in Springfield, Ohio, of eating townspeople's pets and made other comments about immigration that drew pushback from religious leaders, including Pope Francis. In a recent exchange with reporters, the pope refused to recommend either major-party candidate in the U.S.

presidential race, saying: "Both are against life, be it the one who kicks out migrants or the one who (supports) killing babies."

Vance has defiantly insisted on referring to the Haitians in Springfield, in his home state, as "illegal immigrants" even though they are in the U.S. legally. "If Kamala Harris waves the wand illegally and says these people are now here legally, I'm still going to call them an illegal alien," he said, apparently forwarding an inaccurate charge that Harris is responsible for the Haitians' presence. The legislation allowing migrants to find employment in Springfield predates her coming to Washington.

Wallnau, who briefly introduced Howard and Vance, earlier framed the election as a clash between good and evil, and he rejected claims by Trump's opponents that the former president has proved himself a threat to democracy. Wallnau, who was raised in Pennsylvania before relocating to Texas, disparaged unions and appeared to make veiled references to conspiracy theories involving vaccines and federal law enforcement agencies before leaving the stage.

"The threat to democracy is when you establish the institutional power of the pharmaceutical industry, the defense industry, the CIA, the FBI, the IRS, the three-letter organizations that have a monopoly on power," he said. "When they talk about a threat to democracy, they're saying you are a threat to the established hierarchy that is now ruling in the gates of influence. Yes, we are a threat to that."

Advertisement

Other, mostly right-wing figures decried transgender rights campaigns and what they described as encroaching "communism" or "socialism" in schools and American society writ large. One speaker, Gene Bailey, host of "FlashPoint," a show on the Christian TV network Victory that frequently has Wallnau as a guest, led the crowd in a prayer for "liberal family members," asking that God would call such "prodigals" back to Christ.

Bailey also urged Christian pastors to speak out in this election, warning those who fear losing their nonprofit status for violating the IRS' Johnson Amendment, which prohibits charitable organizations from endorsing candidates, "If you don't stand up for it now, you won't have it next year."

Vance took a similar approach later in the day while responding to a question from a young staffer at Grace Life Church, a local congregation. "The First Amendment doesn’t mean anything if churches aren’t allowed to preach what they think they should preach without the government or anybody else telling them what to do," Vance said.

The nominee’s point seemed to resonate with the crowd, which was sizable but did not fill the space. Standing at the back of the room was Russell Longley, who said he runs a church in Upstate New York and has been following Wallnau’s Courage Tour, which he described as a movement to be "proactive as a Christian." Longley’s faith, he said, compelled him to support the Trump-Vance ticket, because while Trump may have "character flaws," the former president and Vance nonetheless ascribe to "biblical" principles.

Longley outlined a take on immigration similar to Vance’s, likening the country to a person’s home. "The Bible says that we should take care of our own household, that we should take care of us," he said.

Will Hawk, who said he has an Assemblies of God background and leans "towards Pentecostal" Christianity, stressed that he celebrates differences of opinion but said his Christian faith inspires action. "I absolutely believe (the United States) was founded on Christian principles, and in order for it to be sustainable, the reason why it has sustained as long as it has, is because of that underpinning, because of that foundation," he said.

He also said "the enemy" — as evangelical Christians often refer to Satan — is "always trying to erode what God has established," adding, "You can see it in culture — in some ways, he’s successful."

"That’s why a tour like this is important to reengage people, to get them to understand and know that we are in a battle. It’s a fight," Hawk said.

Some attendees had come as Trump-Vance supporters and said they were unfamiliar with Wallnau. Melissa Kish, a Presbyterian from nearby Irwin, said she had never heard of Wallnau until the event, but said faith was important to her. "We need to find God again, and we need to find religion," she said. "We need to find the good things in life and be good people, and it doesn’t seem like that’s happening anymore."

Vance’s appearance drew protesters as well. Outside the convention center, a truck sponsored by the group Faithful America bore a sign directing viewers to a "Christians against Trump" website.

A lone protester, George Zadigian of Ohio, stood at the edge of the parking lot holding a sign reading "Fellow Republicans, Defend America, Reject all MAGA candidates." On his hand he wore a gold ring bearing a crucifix. Zadigian said he teaches a men’s Catholic fellowship as well as a Protestant men’s Bible study, and took issue with Vance and Trump’s appeals to faith.

"Trump is not the least bit Christ-like in his speech or in his policies," he said. He later singled out Trump’s immigration policies, decrying proposals such as a border wall and separating immigrant parents from their children as un-Christian, and he grew visibly emotional while discussing Christian nationalism.

"I don’t believe Christ would have supported Christian nationalism, and I think those that are trying to meld together Christianity and Republican policies are leading Christianity into a swamp, into a morass," he said.

This story appears in the **Election 2024** feature series. View the full series.