News



People pray with Franklin Graham before Republican presidential nominee former President Donald Trump takes the stage at a faith event at the Concord Convention Center, Oct. 21, 2024, in Concord, N.C. (AP/Evan Vucci)

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Shortly after President-elect Donald Trump finished his victory speech last week in West Palm Beach, Florida, the room burst into a rendition of the Christian hymn "How Great Thou Art." The moment, which was captured on video, was a reminder of Trump's robust support among conservative evangelical Christians, who have consistently backed the former president with upward of 80% voting for him in all three of his elections.

Among the crowd in Florida on election night Tuesday (Nov. 5) was longtime Trump supporter Robert Jeffress, the pastor of First Baptist Church in Dallas, who preached a sermon to the businessman on the morning of Trump's 2017 inauguration. Jeffress described the atmosphere at Trump's victory party as "electric" and suggested the vibe was similar when he returned to his church last Sunday.

"Our people were elated, for the most part, over the election results," Jeffress said.

Conservative Christians have long celebrated what they see as the landmark successes of Trump's first term, particularly his appointment of three conservative justices to the Supreme Court and their overturning of Roe v. Wade to end nationwide abortion access. This time, however, Jeffress and other evangelical advisers of Trump say they are hoping for more — although exactly what form those policies will take appears to be the subject of debate.

For Jeffress, a key policy concern for Trump's second term is "protecting the religious freedom of all Americans."

"The things (Trump) is most interested in is anything that will prohibit not only pastors from preaching what is in their heart, but what would keep laymen from exercising their faith in the workplace, whether it be doctors being forced to perform abortions or high school football coaches not allowed to pray before a football game," Jeffress said.

Trump, for his part, promised during his campaign to create a federal task force to fight "anti-Christian bias," saying if he didn't win, Democratic presidential nominee Vice President Kamala Harris would "come after Christians all over the country." He also promised to get rid of the so-called Johnson Amendment — a part of the tax code that prohibits churches from endorsing candidates — "permanently the next time," after signing an executive order that weakened the restriction during his first term as president.

"They didn't want you to speak to people, and if you did they take away your tax-exempt status," Trump told a group of mostly pastors in Powder Springs, Georgia. "And I said, 'But these are the people that me and others want to hear from, and you're not letting them speak. What's that all about?'"



A man wears a Make America Pray Again hat before former President Donald Trump speaks at the National Religious Broadcasters convention at the Gaylord Opryland Resort and Convention Center, Feb. 22, 2024, in Nashville, Tenn. (AP/George Walker IV)

The Rev. Franklin Graham, son of famed evangelist Billy Graham and head of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, said he hoped Trump would address a myriad of foreign policy concerns. He said he was especially hopeful Trump would "find a way to negotiate an end to the war in Ukraine," suggesting there should be a special ambassador appointed to go to Russia, which invaded Ukraine in 2022, to speak with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

"Democrats demonized the Russians so much that if you talk to them, it looks like you're doing wrong," said Graham, who also praised Trump's efforts to forge a relationship with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un.

Graham also said he hoped Trump would work to establish peace amid the ongoing Israel-Hamas war in the Gaza Strip that has spread to southern Lebanon and the surrounding region, noting the president-elect helped bring about a bilateral agreement on Arab-Israeli normalization known as the Abraham Accords during his first term in office. Trump criticized Biden's handling of the Israel-Hamas war and has urged Israel to "finish the job" and destroy Hamas.

"Now (Trump's) got somebody who can help restart that and come up with a comprehensive peace deal for that region," Graham said, referring to Trump's decision to appoint real estate tycoon Steven Witkoff as his Mideast envoy.

The Rev. Samuel Rodriguez and the Rev. Tony Suarez, the president and vice president of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference, and both Trump faith advisers, listed a desire for Trump to take action on "children's and parental rights," especially in regards to transgender children who seek out gender affirming surgery, something conservative Christians have grown increasingly vocal in opposing.

Trump campaigned on the issue, pledging to roll back civil rights protections for transgender students and running an ad that declared "Kamala is for they/them. President Trump is for you." The president-elect has not detailed his plans to address the topic, although some conservatives have floated excluding transgender students from Title IX protections. Doing so could alter policies in public schools regarding bathrooms, locker rooms and which pronouns students use. Since Trump was elected, transgender youth have flooded crisis hotlines, according to The Associated Press.

"We want policies that prevent government intrusion into children's medical and personal development, particularly regarding sensitive issues like gender identity," Rodriguez wrote in an email. Evangelicals and other conservative Christians, he argued, oppose state-level policies that have "enabled government involvement" in "matters that should remain private and family-centered, respecting faith-based values in both education and public spaces."

Rodriguez also wrote that he hoped Trump would protect religious liberty in the U.S. and globally — including "policies that protect people of faith from government overreach and hostility."

"Additionally, on the international stage, we hope to see the administration champion religious liberties, building a robust defense against all forms of totalitarianism, whether religious or secular," according to Rogriguez.

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Virtually every conservative Christian leader RNS spoke with mentioned abortion as a key issue of concern, although there were differences in terms of policy focus. The discrepancy may be a byproduct of the Republican Party's struggles since Roe v. Wade was overturned in 2022. Since then, multiple red states have either rejected attempts to curtail abortion rights or backed ballot initiatives that enshrine abortion rights in the state's constitution. This election, advocates for abortion rights achieved victories in seven of the 10 states where abortion was on the ballot.

Even so, many conservative Christians are unwavering in their opposition to abortion. Suarez conveyed that he hoped Republicans would be firmer in their anti-abortion stance despite recent political setbacks. Doug Wilson, a pastor in Moscow, Idaho, who has advocated for Christian nationalism and become a rising star among conservative figures in Trump's orbit such as Tucker Carlson, said he hoped the next president would focus on appointing conservative judges and justices, adding that he hopes "the pro-life issue" would "become an explicit litmus test" for any Supreme Court nominees.

Evangelical leaders were less uniform when discussing a potential national abortion ban, a policy liberals have warned could happen now that Republicans are projected to regain control of the U.S. House along with the Senate and the presidency. Trump

distanced himself from the idea during his campaign, although he responded vaguely when asked during a debate whether he would veto a ban were he to occupy the Oval Office.

Ralph Reed, the head of the Faith and Freedom Coalition, dismissed the plausibility of a national abortion ban in a conversation with reporters last week, saying the policy is unlikely to get approved by Congress in the first place. But Jeffress was more precise: The pastor focused on the need for exceptions in abortion legislation.

"I think the majority of Americans … do not support banning abortion with no exceptions," Jeffress said. "They may disagree on what those exceptions should be, but most people I know, including evangelicals, don’t believe that a mother ought to be forced by the government to give up her life to possibly save the baby."

He added: "I think what the president will do is what the president has said, and that is no national abortion ban — certainly (not) one that would outlaw abortion with no exceptions. He believes in the exceptions."

The faith leaders also noted support for other policies that are not tied explicitly to faith, such as a desire to reduce immigration, which Trump has paired with a plan to enact mass deportations. Rodriguez and Suarez also said they hoped Trump would help pass a form of immigration reform.

But no matter what, for Jeffress and other evangelicals, there is trust Trump will pursue policies that reflect the support they’ve given him throughout his political career.

"I think what appeals to many evangelicals about Trump is they believe that President Trump will do effectively what (God) has commanded government to do," Jeffress said. “God never commanded government to lead a spiritual revival in America. That is not the responsibility of government. It’s the responsibility of the church and the responsibility of government, according to Romans 13 and 1 Timothy 2, to keep citizens safe from evildoers and leave Christians alone to practice their faith, that’s it."

This story appears in the **Trump's Second Term** feature series. View the full series.