

An Open Letter to the President-elect



Dear President-elect Obama,

I'm sure you're hearing from a great many voices around the country this week about your choice of Rick Warren to offer the invocation at the upcoming inauguration. I am writing today to add my voice to those expressing regret at the choice and concern that the message being sent by the elevation of someone with Pastor Warren's values of narrow exclusionism to the "bully pulpit" of Inauguration Day.

I believe that reaching across the divide to include a strong, evangelical voice in the opening moments of your presidency is not just a good political move, it is a considered policy choice that helps bind up the wounds of a divisive campaign and eight years of polarization, preparing us as a nation to move forward together to solve the many problems that challenge us. This effort to begin your administration by representing differences of opinion in the selection of a pastor whose theological perspectives are different than your own is something I enthusiastically applaud.

The choice of Rick Warren is not. I agree with my Episcopal brother Bishop Gene Robinson, who said yesterday, "I'm all for Rick Warren being at the table, but we're not talking about a discussion, we're talking about putting someone up front and center at what will be the most watched inauguration in history."

Rick Warren is not only a vocal opponent of LGBT equality who does not believe in evolution, he has compared abortion to the Holocaust and backed the assassination of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. His views are far outside the religious mainstream and his credentials are steeped in an "Old Time Religion" of narrow exclusionism that ill prepares us for the challenges of the 21st century.

There are many fine, strong, evangelical voices in this country who do not carry Warren's baggage of having been one of the generals in the culture wars. Tony Campolo, Brian McLaren and Jim Wallis are names that come immediately to mind -- pastors who have balanced the challenge of bridging differences while standing firmly in their evangelical tradition.

It is true that the unfortunate choice of Rick Warren is particularly painful to LGBT Americans who have experienced first-hand the destructive impact of pastors like Warren who preach “family values” while practicing discrimination against gay and lesbian families. But it should also be a cause for concern to *any* American concerned that the exclusionism represented by Rick Warren is antithetical to the core values of inclusion, tolerance and the celebration of difference that so historically mark your embryonic administration.

I'm still setting my Pacific Standard Time alarm early on January 20th to make sure I don't miss a moment of Inauguration Day. I'm still profoundly hopeful at the new beginning we will celebrate together as Americans on that day as we work together to become a nation where “liberty and justice for all” is not just a pledge but a practice.

But I pray that as we make that journey forward together, as you make the considered choices you will make about who prays God's blessing on America you will consider ALL Americans as you make those choices -- and you will consider that we can do better than Rick Warren. Yes we can. Yes we can.

Faithfully,
The Reverend Susan Russell
President, Integrity USA