

Why Trump puts his faith in evangelicals

By Daniel Burke, CNN Religion Editor

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(CNN)When President Donald Trump speaks to evangelicals, he often portrays himself as their patron, protecting churches and ministries from secular elitists and big bad bureaucracies.

"As long as I'm President, no one is going to stop you from practicing your faith or from preaching what is in your heart," Trump told evangelicals at the Faith & Freedom Coalition last month in Washington.

The President has repeated that pledge -- at a [Rose Garden ceremony](#), a [commencement address](#) at Liberty University, and, most recently, [a concert in Washington](#) hosted by a Baptist church from Dallas.

But if Trump presents himself as evangelicals' saving grace, the benefits can run both ways. Evangelicals, particularly conservative, white evangelicals, remain among his staunchest supporters, according to surveys. And this week, as [revelations of a secular sort](#) consumed Washington, the President turned to evangelicals for a friendly audience, and perhaps a little divine intervention.

In an interview airing Thursday, Trump sat down with Pat Robertson of the Christian Broadcasting Network. The aging icon of the religious right has been outspoken in his support for Trump, calling him "God's man for this job." It will be Trump's [second interview with CBN](#) since he became president.

And earlier this week, photos surfaced from an impromptu Oval Office prayer session in which two dozen evangelicals laid their hands on the President and petitioned the Almighty on his behalf.

"We were praying that God would give him guidance and direction and protect him," said Richard Land, who served on Trump's evangelical advisory board and is president of Southern Evangelical Seminary in Charlotte, North Carolina.

The images of hands praying over the President's distinctive coiffure caught fire on social media. [To some](#), the timing seemed suspicious. Though raised Presbyterian, Trump is not affiliated with a church, nor does he attend worship services most Sundays. Was he "getting religion" just as the waters were rising around his White House? Was it a repeat of President Bill Clinton conspicuously carrying a Bible and meeting with religious leaders during the Monica Lewinsky scandal?

The White House disputes that interpretation. "The idea that someone would pray only when they're in crisis is ridiculous," said Sarah Huckabee Sanders, deputy White House press secretary.

Land agrees. "That's a very cynical and negative connotation of what happened."

Instead, Land, a Southern Baptist who has been active in presidential politics since the Reagan administration, said he and two dozen fellow evangelicals were summoned to Washington for a "work day."

The group, many of whom advised Trump during the campaign, heard reports from administration officials and gave feedback on issues like Israel's security, judicial nominations and the Senate's health care bill. Jared Kushner dropped by, as did Vice President Mike Pence -- a fellow evangelical -- who said the President invited the group to visit the Oval Office that afternoon and say hello, Land recalled.

As evangelicals gathered around Trump's desk, he asked how their work meeting was going, Land said, and several praised his recent speech in Warsaw, in which the President pledged to protect Western values.

"Then we asked if we could pray with him," Land said.

The Russia investigation was never mentioned, Land said, except as an "irritant" during the work session with administration officials. "It's seen as the Beltway chasing its own tail. It's not what evangelicals care about, I can tell you that."

As for the manner of prayer, it's not uncommon for Christians to lay their hands on the person they are praying for. As evangelical researcher and writer Ed Stetzer noted, black pastors laid their hands and prayed over President Barack Obama, mainline Protestants do it, and it even happened, several times, with Trump during the 2016 campaign. There is strong biblical precedent for the practice, too. Jesus and his apostles [did it all the time](#).

It's also important to note that, while most white evangelicals voted for Trump, [they are not a monolithic group](#). On the whole, he draws his strongest support from several evangelical subgroups: Old guard culture warriors like Robertson, professional politicians such as Ralph Reed, who leads the Faith & Freedom Coalition, and Pentecostal prosperity preachers like Paula White and Kenneth Copeland.

[7 types of evangelicals](#)

According to a [Pew Research Center survey](#) released in April, Trump's support among evangelicals remains strong. Three-quarters of white evangelicals approved of the way Trump is handling his job as president, which was nearly twice as high as the president's approval rating with the general public (39%).

Land said Trump seems to enjoy the time he spends with evangelicals. In May, before he signed an executive order promising to expand religious freedom, the President hosted a few dozen evangelicals at the White House and gave them a private tour of the second floor, including the Lincoln Bedroom and Truman Balcony, according to Land and others who attended the dinner. For sure, the evangelicals invited to these meetings laud Trump with an almighty allotment of praise.

At the concert in Washington this month, a Baptist choir sang a new hymn called "Make America Great Again" and Pastor Robert Jeffress said, "We thank God every day that he gave us a leader like Donald Trump."

But as Trump has acknowledged, his relationship with evangelicals remains somewhat transactional. "You fought hard for me," he told the Faith & Freedom Coalition, "and now I'm fighting hard for all of you."

The President has promised to protect their religious rights, nominated conservative judges, [filled his Cabinet with conservative Christians](#) and offered evangelicals what some call unprecedented access to his administration. Some evangelicals, in turn, have buffered him with a steady stream of adulation.

"Mr. Trump understands that evangelicals were a very important part of his coalition," Land said, "and evangelicals understand that Mr. Trump has been delivering on his campaign promises. The last time I checked, that's how our government is supposed to work."