Inaugural Prayers
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Watching the events celebrating President Obama's inauguration, I think I witnessed several records being made. My (unofficial) tally includes: the first inaugural prayer in which most of the audience joined in, the first prayer that produced audible laughs, the most prayers by Black ministers at inaugural events, and of course the first prayer by a gay bishop.

Public prayers are difficult to execute well. In a church, pastors praying speak to the listeners, both God and the people. They blend their own concerns, which they hope the listeners will adopt, with their requests to God. Within a single church, this is done by conventional rhetorical approaches and wording familiar to the faithful. In a national setting like an inauguration, where people belong to different denominations and religions, or even no religion, the pastor must find rhetorical means to include the entire audience, not just people of their own persuasion. This is easier said than done.

Reverend Rick Warren, the evangelical founder of a (large) mega-church, used the strategy in his invocation of making religious references specific to different religious groups. He mentioned the Jewish prayer "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God"; the common Muslim epithet of Allah as "the compassionate and merciful one"; and Jesus as "loving to everyone." In case the point was missed, Warren returned to the theme, "remember that we are Americans, united not by race or religion or blood, but to our commitment to freedom and justice for all."

Using the terms "we" and "us" throughout the prayer, Warren asked twice for God to bless, guide and care for the president, his colleagues, and his family.

But the prayer also touched on key elements of evangelical belief: God's judgment of the world, the possibility of salvation for individuals (referring to Jesus as "the one who changed my life"), "new birth" (another way of saying "born again"), and the popular use of "Yeshua," the Hebrew form of Jesus' name. Judging from postings across the Internet, evangelicals found this mix of general and specific religious references enjoyable, even if it turned off others.

The use of the Lord's Prayer was inspired, even if it worked only partially. Warren used the traditional wording, which nearly all American Christians learn, and they all joined in. The prayer itself is religiously quite general, its wording is not even specifically Christian. But of course only Christians know it and thus can join in and say it.

Reverend Joseph Lowery was for 20 years the president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. His benediction prayer spoke to the civil rights movement, beginning with the third verse of the Black patriotic hymn, "Lift Every Voice and Sing." This was a powerful beginning for the African American Community familiar with the reference and was completely lost on those of us who were not.

Lowery then prayed for the president and his family, especially for guidance facing the economic crisis. He also prayed for Americans to work together to overcome "social and economic disruption," asking God to let us take the cooperative power of the inauguration's "spirit of fellowship...back to our churches, our temples, our mosques, or wherever we seek your will."

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The humor came from Lowery's ending in which he echoed a ditty drawn from Big Bill Broonzy's 1951 protest song "Black, Brown and White." That song came from the time when whites did not serve Blacks in stores or restaurants, did not give them equal pay, and often refused to employ them--to say nothing of the segregation problems that led to the Civil Rights Movement! The website Broonzy.com points to a joke in Zora Neal Hurston's story, "In Harlem Slang," that includes the yellow man reference and which both Broonzy and Lowery recast for their own purposes. Judging from comments in the blogosphere, many people completely missed that connection and took offense frequently in profane terms.

In the end, it was the prayer delivered by the gay bishop, Gene Robinson, at the Sunday concert that was most inclusive of all Americans. Organized in two sets of repetitive cadences worthy of Jesse Jackson's masterful rhetoric, Robinson called on God to "Bless us with tears... anger... discomfort... patience... humility...." Tears for people in poverty or abused or underfed. Anger at discrimination on the basis of gender, immigrant status, or sexual orientation. Discomfort at easy answers to the nation's difficulties, and so on. Robinson then asked God, inclusively referring to God "of our many understandings," to grant President Obama a variety of support, wisdom, and blessings. The prayer required no inside knowledge nor was it designed to carry messages to anyone other than the general audience present.

So did Warren and Lowery fail to deliver on Obama's expectations for their prayers? Perhaps not. It seems to me that Obama's intention for both prayers was to reach out to the constituent groups the pastors represent. If the pastors were unknown to members of their groups, then the rhetoric they employed would perhaps have made them comfortable.

Note: Videos of all prayers appear on Youtube.com. Thanks to ChristianityToday.com for the video of the Rt. Reverend Gene Robinson. Texts of the prayers appear at:
http://seattlepi.nwsource.com/national/1151ap_inauguration_warr en_text.html,