

# *Evangelicals, Having Backed Trump, Find White House 'Front Door Is Open'*

By Noah Weiland

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WASHINGTON — When the White House wants to gather evangelicals for one of its many issue-specific “listening sessions,” the Rev. Johnnie Moore is often one of the first to hear.

It wasn't always clear that Mr. Moore, a 34-year-old Southern Baptist minister who was a co-chairman of the Trump campaign's evangelical advisory board, would be a frequent White House guest. Some critics, and even some evangelicals, wondered whether conservative Christians' sometimes uneasy alliance with the Trump campaign was a marriage of convenience that would be abandoned after Inauguration Day. But one year in, conservative religious leaders are hailing the president's actions in office.

“This White House, the front door is open to evangelicals,” said Mr. Moore, who estimates that he has visited at least 20 times since Mr. Trump took office, averaging nearly once every other week. “It hasn't been evangelicals reaching into the White House. It's been the White House reaching out to evangelicals. Not a day goes by when there aren't a dozen evangelical leaders in the White House for something.”

This week will be a culmination of those ties. On Thursday, Mr. Moore will join what he calls the “Super Bowl for peacemakers” here: the annual National Prayer Breakfast, where around 3,000 clergy members, politicians and business leaders will eat, network and listen to speeches, including one from President Trump.

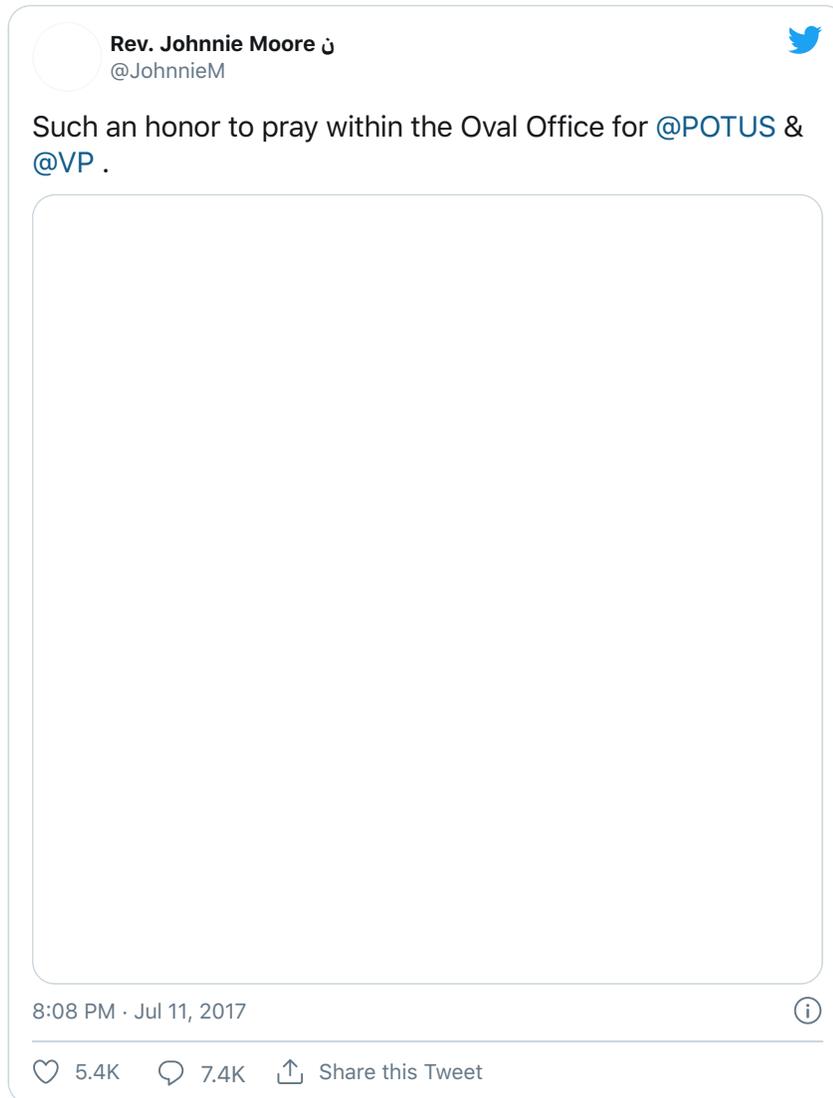
Mr. Trump will stand before an audience that has cheered the president's first-year agenda as its own: announcing that the American Embassy in Israel would move to Jerusalem, anointing a national “prayer Sunday,” appointing Neil M. Gorsuch to the Supreme Court, signing anti-abortion legislation, opening a “conscience and religious freedom division” at the Department of Health and Human Services and fighting to end the Johnson Amendment, which threatens religious organizations with the loss of their tax-exempt status if they endorse political candidates.

Many evangelicals did not see such a list of accomplishments as inevitable. Mr. Trump's formal evangelical advisory board ended with the campaign. But his continued attention to evangelical causes is not a coincidence. Mr. Moore and others have helped remnants of the board remain active in the White House, providing the administration with a constellation of religious figures to lend its platform gravitas among evangelicals.

Mr. Moore, a former Liberty University vice president who now lives in California, is one of around a half-dozen original members of the evangelical advisory group who pays regular visits to the White House, which can start with policy briefings from West Wing staff and agency officials and end with impromptu visits to the Oval Office, where Mr. Trump and Vice President Mike Pence will banter, then pray, with them.

The group, which also includes Tim Clinton, Robert Jeffress, Darrell Scott, Samuel Rodriguez and Paula White, who has been called Mr. Trump's personal "spiritual adviser," is a frequent and influential voice in the ears of senior administration officials.





Jennifer Korn, who as a deputy director of the public liaison office manages contact between the White House and faith groups, sends out invitations to policy briefings and the “listening sessions.”

Ms. Korn invites senior West Wing advisers such as Jared Kushner, Ivanka Trump and Kellyanne Conway to visit the groups, which range from 20 to 100 guests and are often tied to specific faith-related legislation, executive orders and court appointments. Ms. Trump recently sat in on a meeting with female faith leaders that Mr. Moore and Mr. Jeffress attended.

“We are the front door to the White House,” Ms. Korn said, echoing Mr. Moore’s words.

Mr. Jeffress, another core member from the campaign board, has been one of Mr. Trump’s most reliable evangelical advocates, regularly appearing with him in Trump Tower in New York and then in the White House.

“I can’t look into the president’s heart to know if he really personally believes these positions he’s advocating, or whether he thinks it’s smart politics to embrace them because of the strong evangelical influence in the country,” Mr. Jeffress said in an interview. “But frankly, I don’t care. As a Christian, I’m seeing these policies embraced

and enacted, and he's doing that.”

Mr. Jeffress, who once said President Barack Obama's politics could lead to the rise of the Antichrist, said the issues that evangelicals discuss at the White House “go beyond what most assume,” including opioid abuse and criminal justice overhaul. He and Mr. Moore are sympathetic to the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, known as DACA, that shields young undocumented immigrants, which is often viewed as a progressive cause.

When he is in the Oval Office with faith leaders, Mr. Moore said, they try to “personalize” issues for Mr. Trump, including in a recent discussion on DACA, when the group told the president that he should view the issue as a father and grandfather.

Mr. Moore, who has spent time in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, Bahrain and Israel speaking out against religious persecution, said that evangelical advocacy in the White House also helped expedite the confirmation of former Gov. Sam Brownback of Kansas as ambassador for international religious freedom, a post for which he and the core group of evangelical voices in the White House had long pushed.

Evangelicals voted heavily in Mr. Trump's favor in the presidential election and, polls show, continue to back him.

“Evangelicals were so great to me,” Mr. Trump said last year.

Yet the symbiosis between conservative Christians and Mr. Trump was never perfect, and some of that tension has lingered into his presidency. The Rev. A. R. Bernard, the pastor of the Christian Cultural Center in Brooklyn and a member of the campaign board, announced that he was no longer associating with the White House evangelical group after Mr. Trump's failure to condemn white supremacists who marched in Charlottesville, Va., in August.

Mr. Bernard, who said he had made at least four visits to the White House, saw Mr. Trump as largely indifferent to faith leaders' to-do list.

“There was nothing hidden. He wanted that voting bloc. He wanted their votes,” Mr. Bernard said of Mr. Trump's engagement with evangelicals during the campaign. “It was transactional. He wanted to do whatever he thought would get those votes.”

When reports emerged last month that a pornographic-film actress was paid \$130,000 to keep quiet about her claims of an affair she had with Mr. Trump, it further complicated his relationship with evangelicals, who maintained that it is not the responsibility of the president to live a pure life.

“He's not the pastor of our country,” Franklin Graham, a member of the camp advisory board, said on television. Tony Perkins, the president of the evangelical Family Research Council, said that evangelicals would give Mr. Trump a “mulligan.”

Mr. Jeffress agreed.

“Evangelical support for President Trump has always been based on his policies, not on his personal piety,” he said.

Mr. Scott, a pastor at the New Spirit Revival Center in the Cleveland area, is one of the early members of the campaign advisory board who continues to visit Mr. Trump in the White House. He said Mr. Trump’s interest in evangelicalism stemmed not from opportunism but from wanting to atone for a life largely devoid of conventional religiosity.

Mr. Scott said that the president’s bluster was withheld when he visited with faith leaders, and that Mr. Trump would often apologize if he cursed in front of them.

“I find his reverence for clergy very old-school,” Mr. Scott said. “When he’s in the room with clergy, he adopts the position of the lesser. He seems to regard the clergy as the greater.”

Mr. Trump has the view of “while you guys were off pursuing a higher calling, I was off building buildings,” Mr. Scott said. “Now it’s time for me to catch up.”

This week, as he shuffled from meeting to meeting and dinner to dinner ahead of the prayer breakfast, Mr. Moore said he hoped evangelicals’ new clout in Washington would give them a new face.

“People sort of think of evangelicals as these bumpkins. That always drives me crazy,” Mr. Moore said before he dashed out of a downtown Washington cafe. “I think we are far more informed than people give us credit for.”