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A Message That Transcends Race

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By Dana Milbank
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FAYETTEVILLE, N.C., Oct. 29 The Obama rally in the rec center had turned into a gospel revival.

Killing time before Michelle Obama arrived to campaign for her husband here Wednesday afternoon, the ministers and lay leaders of the General Baptist State Convention decided to strike up a spiritual:

So glad I'm here

So glad I'm here

So glad I'm here in Jesus's name.

The faithful stood and waved their arms in the air and, as others stomped on bleachers and clapped in time, they gradually changed the words to "Oh, yes, we can." By the end, some of the Baptist leaders were shouting out the Obama campaign theme: "Yes, we can!"

Obama, taking the stage, knew her audience well. "We have less than a week," she said. "Hallelujah! Praise God."

For the woman who would be first lady, it was the continuation of a delicate mission she has been on since the primaries ended: Get out the vote among African Americans, but in a way that doesn't frighten white voters. In this case, Obama made an overt appeal to the 800 religious leaders in the room, virtually all of whom were black and many of whom were veterans of the civil rights movement.

"I can't tell you how many times Barack and I meet folks who are 70, 80 years old, come up to us and grab us by the arm and with tears streaming down their faces tell us, 'I never thought I'd live to see the day,' " she said. "Barack talks about Dr. King's great phrase, 'the fierce urgency of now.' . . . This is an urgency that has been felt by great men and women of faith throughout our history, from Lucretia Mott to Fannie Lou Hamer, from Dr. King to many people in this room." That led to her get-out-the-vote pitch. "We need that same urgency right now," she continued. "See, I don't want to look back and think what might have been. We've done that way too much in our lifetime."

It's a paradox of Barack Obama's campaign: The candidate is on the verge of making history as the first black president, but Obama aides are skittish about the topic, and understandably so. Obama's candidacy relies on an appeal that goes well beyond race, and he rarely appears before the sort of audience his wife addressed in Fayetteville. Yet across the country, and particularly in states such as North Carolina, Obama's fortunes depend in part on a massive turnout among African Americans, about 98 percent of whom support him.

During the primaries, Michelle Obama helped rally black voters, but she emerged as a target of conservatives for what they saw as her racial politics: her college thesis about "Princeton-Educated Blacks and the Black Community"; her fist-bump on the stage with her husband; unfounded rumors on the Internet about her use of the word "whitey"; and her ill-chosen comment that "for the first time in my adult life, I'm really proud of my country." Over the summer, the number of people with negative views of her climbed considerably.

But this fall, Obama has proved herself to be a skilled politician and has avoided any flare-ups. Arriving to greet supporters at a rally in Rocky Mount, she danced a little jig to show her excitement, then plunged into the crowd, hugging supporters in a manner that clearly worried her Secret Service detail.

She presented herself as an everywoman ("My father . . . was a Joe the Plumber himself") and borrowed parts of her husband's stump speeches as she told the crowd, over and over again, "Barack Obama gets it." The audience, at Rocky Mount High School, was perhaps 80 percent black, and she delivered her line about the old folks who "thought they'd never live to see the day" and a plea for them to vote to avoid disappointment again. "For too long, we've been talking about what could have been," she said. But that was a bit part of her speech, which spent more time on Iraq and health care.

The talk to the Baptists was more overt. "God is good," she said after taking the stage in a blue suit with sparkles at the collar. "God has built this church into a community that serves all of his children." She read her words carefully from two teleprompter screens on the stage with her, and stood in front of four American flags. "We know that we've only made it this far because of those who came before us," she told the church leaders. She quoted from Luke -- "to whom much is given, much is expected" -- then turned colloquial.

"Don't we deserve leaders who get it?" she asked.

"Yes!" the audience called back.

"Well, Barack Obama gets it," she said.

"Yes, he does!"

"Barack Obama gets it, that's all I'm tryin' to tell people."

The audience stood to applaud, and answered almost every line of her speech with shouts of "yeah" and murmurs of assent.

"At times like these, I always remember what Jesus told us," she said. "You are the light of the world."

"Yes! Yes!" they called back.

She urged the ministers to remind parishioners "that this time is our time. Let our light shine."

For the Baptists, it was almost literally an answer to their prayers. In their impromptu concert before Obama appeared, they had sung many of the old favorites, including "We Shall Overcome." But there

was a decidedly upbeat theme to the spirituals they struck up, alternating between sides of the room: "Victory Is Mine," and "Everything's Gonna Be Alright," and "We've Come a Long Way, Lord."

We've come a long way, Lord, a mighty long way

We've borne our burdens in the heat of the day

But we know the Lord has made the way

We've come a long way, Lord, a mighty long way.

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