

OPINION

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Media over-hype Rev. Wright issue

By Art Cribbs

FEW would disagree that America has come a long way since the days when Alabama Gov. George Wallace confidently proclaimed from the steps of his state capitol, "Segregation yesterday, segregation today and segregation forever."

Today we see ourselves as an open society that is no longer divided by race, religion or ethnicity. However, the current campaign for U.S. president is leading many of us to question whether we are viewing the world through rose colored glasses.

We can be justly proud that one of our major political parties is staging a highly competitive campaign featuring a woman and an African American. Each has real potential to become president. This is a remarkable achievement given the history of Jim Crow laws affecting blacks in America and the fact that female suffrage is less than a century old. While saluting this exciting development, one has to be concerned about the tenor of the campaign, particularly as it relates to race.

Beginning several months ago with the South Carolina Democratic primary, the issue of race was inserted ever so subtly into the campaign. This subtlety quickly disappeared with showing of clips in the media featuring the Rev. Jeremiah A. Wright, former pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago. These clips, some of which are as much as 15 years old, portended to show Rev. Wright making inflammatory statements on the issue of race in America. Absent from those featured clips were context, comprehension of the progressive black church experience, or an accurate parallel analysis of scripture and contemporary issues affecting black people.

Instead, a national debate was created by the media which has sought to tie these statements to Sen. Barack Obama. They contend that since Obama has been a member of Trinity UCC under Pastor Wright's leadership, he should be held accountable for every sermon Pastor Wright preached. As a pastor, I know full well members of my

GUEST VIEW

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congregation do not agree with every word that spews from my mouth. Further, it is not my responsibility to preach sermons that conform to their thoughts, wishes or values. It is my responsibility to challenge and expand their thinking.

The assaults on Pastor Wright demonstrated a lack of knowledge and respect for the church and especially the black church tradition. They exposed an effort to get at Sen. Obama by tapping into the nation's reservoir of latent racial prejudices.

This media-led disinformation campaign utilizes distorted messages in an unrelenting effort to raise fear in an electorate already consumed with doubts about the candidacy of someone it categorizes as "black," while failing to acknowledge Obama's black and white racial heritage and his African and American ancestry.

The media has shaped a message of spiritual turbulence in a society still sensitive to racial tensions. Thanks to

the Internet and related technology, today's media are ubiquitous. Even the most minor comment or action can be captured with a cell phone camera, digitally altered and broadcast around the world.

This has brought about unseemly competition among all forms of media, not only to be first, but to be more outrageous, sensational and reckless than their counterparts. Never, in all the 30 years I spent as a journalist on radio and TV have I witnessed such a lack of professional judgment. The media has indeed become the message!

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The UCC has a long and honorable history of supporting racial justice and religious tolerance in this country. Six hundred of its 5,700 congregations were formed before 1776 and 11 signers of the Declaration of Independence were members of its predecessor bodies. It was in the vanguard of the abolitionist movement and the first church to ordain an African American, a woman and an openly gay pastor.

In this the 21st Century, it's time for us to live up to the ideals espoused by our Founding Fathers. For the sake of preserving our democracy and creating an environment that honors all citizens of this great nation, we must work together to build a bridge over the chasm that separates our ideals and our practices.

This year, we have the unique opportunity to judge a presidential candidate "by the content of his character and not by the color of her skin." Hopefully, we will grasp this opportunity with both hands!

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