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Donald Trump will be sworn in as America's 58th President tomorrow, Friday

NEWS FOCUS - Episcopal leaders address church's part in Trump's inauguration

The involvement of Washington National Cathedral and its choir in the upcoming

inauguration of President-elect Donald Trump has stirred concern in parts of the US-based Episcopal Church. The Cathedral Choir accepted an invitation to perform during the musical prelude to next Friday's (20 January) inauguration ceremony.

The cathedral confirmed three weeks ago that it would once again play out one of its traditional roles in US life by offering Trump and the nation a chance to come together in prayer. The invitation-only 58th Presidential Inaugural Prayer Service will take place at 10 am next Saturday (21 January), the day after Trump is sworn in as the 45th president.

After news of the choir's participation prompted a deluge of comments on social media as well as emails to officials involved, Presiding Bishop Michael Curry, Diocese of Washington Bishop Mariann Budde and Cathedral Dean Randolph Hollerith all issued statements addressing those concerns.

"We all know this election has been contentious and there are deep feelings being felt by Episcopalians on all sides of the issues," Curry said in his statement. "We recognize that this election has been contentious, and the Episcopal

Church, like our nation, has expressed a diversity of views, some of which have been born in deep pain.”

Acknowledging that there has been “much discussion, and some controversy” about the appropriateness of the cathedral hosting the traditional prayer service, and of one of its choirs singing at the inauguration, Curry said that those issues raise “some basic Christian questions about prayer.

“When I pray for our leaders, why am I doing so? Should I pray for a leader I disagree with? When I pray, what do I think I am accomplishing?” is how Curry described the questions.

The presiding bishop said the practice of prayer for leaders is “deep in our biblical and Anglican / Episcopalian traditions.”

Curry said that tradition of prayer means Episcopalians are praying that “their leadership will truly serve not partisan interest, but the common good.”

The National Cathedral Dean issued a statement on the choir’s performance and the

interfaith prayer service. The Very Rev. Randolph “Randy” Marshall Hollerith said -

As the new Dean of Washington National Cathedral, I have seen firsthand the Cathedral’s singular ability to draw the nation’s attention to an issue or a cause. Many of my predecessors harnessed the power of the Cathedral during important moments in our country’s history. Dean Francis Sayre, for one, set the standard with his vocal opposition to poverty, segregation and the war in Vietnam. Bishop John Walker, a personal hero of mine, led the way in the fight against apartheid and racial injustice.

I have stepped into this position during a very polarized moment in our nation’s history. The 2016 election divided our country in a way that I have never seen in my lifetime, and its aftermath has only deepened those divisions. Many people in our country are angered by the exclusionary and divisive rhetoric that too often surrounds the incoming administration. I understand that anger; indeed, I have felt it myself. At the same time, I also understand that many good people across this country voted for the President-elect out of a deep sense that the American dream has passed them by.

My job as a priest, and God's call to us as a Cathedral church, is to join with others to work for justice and to proclaim the reconciling love of Jesus Christ. Our loving faithfulness to God and one another can play an important role in creating a context in which to build a more civil society.

As I think about how to expand on the legacy of my predecessors, I want us to help build bridges between the divided parts of our nation. In fact, the first time I stood in the Canterbury Pulpit last August, the text for the day was Isaiah's call to be "repairers of the breach." In that sermon I said: "As the body of Christ, as the hands and feet of Christ in the world, we are to be repairers of the breach in everything we do. We are to be healers, reconcilers, peacemakers, seekers of justice, and builders of bridges between people, races, and religions." Washington National Cathedral is perfectly positioned for this kind of work, and I believe we can serve as a model for others on how we might come back together as a country.

I understand the strong disagreement many people have with the decisions to accept an

invitation for the Cathedral choir to sing at the Inauguration and for the Cathedral to host the Inaugural Prayer Service. I am sorry those decisions have caused such turmoil and pain. Yet I stand by those decisions — not because we are celebrating the President-elect, but because we want to model for him, and the rest of the country, an approach to civility.

Understand that civility does not mean endorsing a president's views, behavior or rhetoric, nor compromising our own Christian values. Our willingness to pray and sing with everyone today does not mean we won't join with others in protest tomorrow. We will always strive to bridge the divide and repair the breaches in our life together. As a Cathedral, we have decided that we will approach this moment as open-handedly as possible.

In this and in all disagreements, we should never turn away from the opportunity to engage in any conversation. We can have no conversation, and this Cathedral can have no convening authority, if those with whom we disagree only see a turned back or are met with condescension or derision. God meets us where we are, and we must do the same for one another.

At the Inauguration on Friday, our choir will sing “God Bless America,” among other pieces, not as a political endorsement, but as an affirmation that we are still one nation under God. Why are we going? For the same reasons Hillary Clinton, George W. Bush, Jimmy Carter and others are going: to honor our nation, to support our democracy, to promote the peaceful transition of power, to celebrate our aspirations and to lift up the values that have blessed this nation.

Let me be clear: We are not singing for the President. We are singing for God because that is what church choirs do, and we are singing for our country because that is what this Cathedral does at important moments in our national life. More importantly, we are engaged in this Inauguration to remind people, if even in a modest way, that God’s reconciling love is present and at work during this time of deep division and anxiety. How desperately we all need to be reminded of the God who loves every single one of us.

The very next day, the President will come to the Cathedral for an interfaith service of prayer, music and scripture readings from a variety of sacred texts. Like previous inaugural prayer

services, it is designed to reflect the diversity of our nation and to remind the President as he sets out on his job that he is called to lead all us, not just a narrow few.

I believe our job is to work together to build a country where everyone feels welcome, everyone feels safe, everyone feels at home. We will need all people from across our nation to be a part of that process, and we cannot retreat into our separate quarters if we have any hope of accomplishing this task. We must meet in the middle, and we start through prayer and song.

It pains me that our decisions have caused such anguish. But, if these gestures serve as a catalyst for bridging the divide then, God willing, we are on the right path.