

Blair courts controversial US pastor Rick Warren in bid to unite faiths

Former prime minister builds network of Christian allies as he prepares to launch a religious 'offensive' in North America

Jamie Doward and Paul Harris
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Tony Blair. Photograph: Nathan Denette/AP

Tony Blair is preparing to launch a "faith offensive" across the United States over the next year, after building up relationships with a network of influential religious leaders and faith organisations.

With Afghanistan and Iraq casting a shadow over his popularity at home in Britain, Blair's focus has increasingly shifted across the Atlantic, to where the nexus of faith and power is immutable and he is feted like a rock star.

According to the annual accounts of the Tony Blair Faith Foundation, a UK-based charity that promotes cohesion between the major faiths, the foundation is to develop a US arm that will pursue a host of faith-based projects. The accounts show that his foundation has an impressive – and, in at least one case, controversial – set of faith contacts. Sitting on some £4.5m in funds as of April last year, mostly gathered through donations, it is now well placed to make its voice heard.

The foundation's advisory council of religious leaders includes Rick Warren, powerful founder of the California-based Saddleback church. It attracts congregations of nearly 20,000 and is reportedly one of the largest in the US. Warren, who has addressed the UN and the World Economic Forum in Davos, has been named one of the "15 world leaders who matter most" and one of the "100 most influential people in the world".

His influence was confirmed in December 2008 when Barack Obama chose him to give the invocation at his presidential inauguration. But the decision angered many liberals, who see Warren as an opponent of gay rights and abortion on demand; a prominent alliance with Warren is likely to attract similar attacks on the former British prime minister.

Also on the council is David Coffey, president of the Baptist World Alliance (BWA), a

Virginia-based network of churches that spans the globe and is particularly active in the US.

Another initiative has been to team up with the Belinda Stronach Foundation in Toronto. Unknown in the UK, Stronach, daughter of a Canadian billionaire, is hugely influential in Canada where as a philanthropist, businesswoman and former politician she has served in both the Conservative and Liberal parties. Attractive and barely into her 40s, media commentators have dubbed her "bubba's blonde", a reference to her friendship with Bill Clinton.

According to the accounts, Blair intends to open an office in Toronto to develop the relationship.

His desire for North America to be the focus of his faith-based operations was confirmed by the decision to hold his foundation's inaugural event in May 2008 in New York, for the "charity's key partners and religious stakeholders".

The accounts also shine a light on the close connections the foundation now enjoys with major political institutions in the US. "With the Washington-based Centre for Interfaith Action, the foundation supported a meeting of major international organisations active in faith-based approaches to combating malaria (plus the White House, World Bank, UN, World Health Organisation) to co-ordinate international efforts," the accounts state.

That Blair, a charismatic politician driven by faith, should be at home across the Atlantic is no surprise to political analysts. "He comes across as confident and persuasive," said Professor Shawn Bowler, of the University of California at Riverside. "He does not talk like a modern robo-candidate in the way so many US political figures do." Unlike in the UK, Blair's religious fervour is seen as a strength. "Blair is very open about his faith and that plays a lot better in the US than in Britain," Bowler said.

But the overtly religious dimension has drawn criticism. "The Tony Blair Faith Foundation is a fundamentally flawed concept," said Terry Sanderson, president of the National Secular Society. "If religion is constantly at the fore, then the old suspicions and hatreds will continue to fester."

Other North American faith-based initiatives endorsed by the foundation include the New York-based Global Nomads Group, which brings together young people through video conferences "to discuss the global issues that affect their lives", and the Faiths Act Fellowship, which selects "30 young leaders aged 18-25, drawn from the different faiths from the US, UK and Canada, to embark on a 10-month journey of interfaith service".

Blair's status is such that he is now called on to sprinkle stardust at religious gatherings, such as a speech he delivered at the National Prayer Breakfast in Washington. Even his autobiography, *The Journey*, for which he was paid a £4.6m advance, appears to be aimed at the US market. "Tony Blair is an extremely popular figure in North America," said Sonny Mehta, his publisher. "His memoir is refreshing, both for its candour and vivid portrayal of political life."

So embedded is he that Blair regularly crops up in Washington society diaries. Last September, the former Republican vice-president, Dick Cheney, was dining in the same restaurant. Blair got top billing in the gossip columns.

GLOBAL MISSION

May 2008: Launches the Tony Blair Faith Foundation in New York.

September 2008: Opens a three-year programme at Yale exploring the role of faith

in the modern era.

October 2008: Supports Face to Faith programme, a pilot project for schools in the US, Canada and India.

December 2008: Teams up with the Belinda Stronach Foundation in Toronto.

February 2009: Speaks at the National Prayer Breakfast in Washington.

March 2009: Helps to open a Baptist World Alliance centre in Jordan.

August 2009: Takes part in launch of the Faiths Act Fellowship, bringing together young leaders from different beliefs in the US, UK and Canada.

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