

Christian Liaison in the White House

Carolyn Sundseth was headed for the mission field when she received a call from the Reagan administration. Here she discusses the major religious issues of our day and her role on the White House staff.

A plaque sitting on a table behind her desk reads, "Carolyn—a woman of the Lord."

More than anything else, that is what Carolyn Sundseth is. But she is also a wife, a mother, a grandmother, a businesswoman. And right now, she is the associate director of public liaison for President Ronald Reagan.

Before coming to the nation's capital, Mrs. Sundseth and her husband, Victor, lived in Hawaii, where they had owned and run a successful contracting firm. The Sundseths were active in the local church and in the Youth With a Mission organization. In 1982, they were preparing for full-time work in the mission field when a call from the White House interrupted their plans. After much prayer, the Sundseths agreed that God wanted Carolyn in Washington, D.C.

As the liaison officer responsible for building bridges between the Reagan administration and evangelical Christian groups, Mrs. Sundseth has traveled across the country, meeting with religious leaders and church groups of every denomination. Not only has she sought to communicate the president's message to Christians, but she has listened to what Christians are saying to their government. An outspoken Charismatic, Mrs.

Sundseth has been excited to see many of the denominational and theological walls falling down, as God has begun to "stir His church from within."

This exclusive interview with Mrs. Sundseth was held in her office in the stately Old Executive Office Building on Pennsylvania Avenue, just next door to the White House. Here she talks about her duties in the Reagan administration and about Christians affecting the political scene in this nation today.

Charisma: How did a retired businesswoman who was headed for the mission field end up on the White House staff?

Sundseth: Out of the blue one day a young man I had known for many years called and said he was working on President Reagan's transition team for staffing. He asked if I would be willing to come to Washington as his confidential assistant. After much prayer with my husband, Vic, we decided that God was indeed speaking, so I agreed.

I started work on April Fool's Day in 1982 as a "confidential assistant," which in the White House really means "secretary." But I was promoted to my current position in 1983, replacing Dee Jepsen (wife of former Senator Roger Jepsen) who had left to work in her husband's re-election campaign.

I was assigned to be liaison to Protestant religious groups, agricultural groups and women's groups. At the White House, we are now organized not by "people groups," but by issues. I am now in the group that handles non-economic domestic issues and family issues. But as a matter of practical application, Christians are still calling me for their liaison with the White House.

Charisma: What do you do as a liaison for President Reagan?

Sundseth: We promote the president's programs to the groups we are responsible for. When we were trying to aid the freedom fighters in Nicaragua, that is what I spoke on mostly. When the president sent his deficit reduction plan to the Hill, I spoke on that. Now, it is tax simplification.

One of the major things that this administration is concerned with is getting the economics of the country under control. It is one of the things we would like to leave as a legacy. But of course, anytime you try to cut the deficit or simply taxes, everybody says, "What a wonderful idea, but please don't cut any of my programs!"

Charisma: How have Christians responded to the president's plan to simplify the tax code?

Sundseth: Christians, in general, are



White House aide Carolyn Sundseth doesn't hesitate to be bold when championing causes important to Christians such as herself. As a wife, mother, grandmother and career woman, she is especially popular with Christian women's groups. PHOTO BY BARRY GARDNER

in favor of it. We had been concerned that the tax deduction for charitable contributions would be eliminated, but that was left in.

The tax simplification program really helps families in a lot of ways, which was our major goal. The president feels strongly that the nation's morals and ethics and heritage are passed on through the family. The reason for a lot of our problems—in public education and abortion and all those things—is the breakup of the family. I know some Christians believe the reason is the removal of prayer from the public schools in 1962; of course, that is high on the president's

agenda, too.

Charisma: It seems that Carolyn Sundseth is always speaking to some Christian group or conference. How do you handle the rigorous schedule?

Sundseth: The joy of the Lord is my strength. I travel a great deal across the country, which has been a very interesting experience. Of course, it is pretty well-known that I am a Charismatic. Yet, it is interesting the number of Baptist groups, for example, who ask me to come in to speak in their churches. The old line denominations have been very open as well.

Charisma: Are Christians participating

in public affairs more today than they have before?

Sundseth: Praise the Lord, they are! I am finding that God is really stirring His people. Christians have been wonderful as lights of the world for quite awhile, but as the salt of the earth, we haven't done as well. We haven't seasoned our communities. And I use "we" editorially. I mean me, too.

For instance, when I was in Hawaii, I didn't get much news of the world and I wasn't sure that it affected me, anyway. It never occurred to me that public education was a concern of mine as a Christian woman. My children graduated 10

or 12 years ago and my grandchildren are in private Christian schools; why should I care what is happening in the public schools?

But now that I am here, I see that if I don't care, who will? If Christians are not going to run for the school board and serve on curriculum committees and be active in watching the legislators who, in many states, are passing educational reform bills that are taking the responsibility for the children from the parents to the state—if we don't, who will?

Charisma: Is this also true for national issues?

Sundseth: Oh yes. In Hawaii, I had not been active in the Right To Life movement at all. But there again, I had a family of boys, I was running a contracting business, and no one was doing much on Right To Life.

But then I came here, and at a school prayer rally out on the Ellipse in 1982, James Robison, one of the major evangelists in the country, shook his finger at us and said, in effect, "You Christians who sat in your pews and did nothing while the country went from abortion-on-demand to infanticide are as guilty of killing those babies as are the doctors and nurses." I thought, "He's talking to me!"

Charisma: Why are Christians of the 1980s participating more in politics than ever before?

Sundseth: The efforts of people like Tim LaHaye and Christian Voice and others certainly helped get Christians registered in unprecedented numbers for the 1984 election. But I also believe that God is stirring us from within. As I travel, I am finding that more and more churches are interested in holding public affairs seminars, for example.

The thing we are beginning to understand—and I didn't understand this myself for years—is that if Jesus Christ is going to be your Lord in every area of your life, He has to be the Lord of your politics, too. In the early days of our country, it was taken for granted that the church would take a major stand on everything from morality to slavery. Jesse Jackson can take a stand from a pulpit, but if a conservative Christian takes a stand, someone says the "wall of separation" between church and state has been violated! We need to be more knowledgeable about the Constitution, more knowledgeable about our rights and more knowledgeable about how we can have an impact on national policy.

Charisma: How can we have an impact?

Sundseth: It is my personal opinion that until Christians show up regularly at the polls, we won't have as much impact as we should have. No matter how much a congressman or senator would like to vote the way we ask him to, and the way his conscience dictates that he or she should, as a practical matter he may have to make trades or compromises. A congressman has to be re-elected every two years, a senator every six years. And until we can show that we can keep them from being re-elected, we aren't going to have as great an impact.

I believe the time is very close, though. Not only are more Christians getting active, but more congressmen and senators are deepening their own spiritual roots and are understanding that they can't separate their voting records from their personal beliefs.

Charisma: Are there many committed Christians who are running for offices?

Sundseth: Yes. I am so excited that nearly every time I go to a different state, I meet some Christian who feels he or she has been called by God to run for anything from city council to Congress.

Charisma: What has been the major hindrance keeping Christians from being elected?

Sundseth: Well, we are terribly naive. Naive about the process, naive about our rights and privileges. We are naive about the power we possess—not only the political power we possess because of our sheer numbers if we would ever work together, but the power we possess because of the Word of God.

Charisma: Can Christian officeholders really make a difference?

Sundseth: We can. And we are beginning to. For instance, there is a man who felt called of the Lord to run for Congress sometime ago, but felt that he couldn't—that he was too young and the incumbent was too strong. But God removed all the obstacles, and he ended up in Congress. He came to Washington determined to maintain a standard of righteousness. He started fasting and praying one day a week for the salvation of his brothers and sisters in the Congress and for this nation. Last session of Congress, there were four congressmen praying with him. This session, there are nine. Now, nine isn't very many out of 535 members of Congress, but nine men fasting and praying one day a week are going to make a difference. The power of God evoked by prayer is a power the world is not even aware of, and one that we Christians haven't used as we should.

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Charisma: Are there very many Christians working in the Reagan administration?

Sundseth: Yes, there are a good many. I don't know if there are more than there have been in previous administrations, but I think the ones that are here are more open about their faith than they had been before. Many of our cabinet members are open in their profession; they sponsor and speak at prayer breakfasts and things like that. There are many Bible studies going on throughout all the agencies, including here in the Old Executive Office Building. I ordinarily have three Bible studies in my office each week—one before work and two at the lunch hour. There is a real need for counseling and prayer here. We work long hours under a tremendous amount of stress.

Charisma: You have been one who has been outspoken about your faith.

Sundseth: Yes I have. And I've gotten in trouble a time or two for it!

Charisma: How did being outspoken about Christianity get you in trouble?

Sundseth: When the school prayer debate was going on, we had a group of kids who were refused the right to pray in the parking lot of their high school in Maryland come in to the Capitol for a prayer meeting. I had arranged for someone to open their meeting with prayer, but at the last moment that fell through so I took a cab to the Capitol building to open the meeting myself. I didn't write my prayer out; I usually don't. It never occurred to me that there would be lots of press there, but of course, there was. The next day, my prayer was partially quoted in the *Washington Post*, and Faith Whittlesey (former director of White House liaison who was also known as a Christian) was asked if she agreed with everything I prayed about. After that, I was asked to be careful about what I said in front of an open microphone!

Charisma: Have you toned down your approach or changed your presentation?

Sundseth: I'm still outspoken. Interestingly, when I was in Hawaii last February, I spoke at a dinner at my home church. When I came back to the table, the elder who had introduced me said that he had prayed that the Lord would give him a word for me, and the word that he received was "bold." And I said, "Surely God must have something out of James about taming my tongue, or about wisdom, but not about being bold!" And I asked him to give me a scripture to back it up. He gave me II Timothy 2:12 which

says, in effect, that if you stick with Christ, you will reign with Him, but if you deny Him, He will deny you. So, okay, I want to be bold.

Charisma: How do different religious groups respond to your candor?

Sundseth: I think people appreciate it, really. I also meet with cult groups frequently since I am required to work with all religious sects. But before I start my meeting, I say, "I believe that Jesus

I can take risks that I couldn't take if I were climbing up the career ladder and had to look to my next job.

Christ is the only Son of God and that He died for my sins and was resurrected, and He sits at the right hand of God interceding for me. He is the absolute Lord of every area of my life. What do you believe?" They appreciate that, and I believe it is what the Lord would expect.

Cult groups, like everyone else, have the right to come to the White House. President Reagan is their president, too. But they need to know where I stand. You can't help having what you believe color how you receive what is being said to you.

Charisma: What have been Reagan administration successes that would be of particular interest to Christians?

Sundseth: Unfortunately, we haven't gotten as far as we wanted on the so-called "social" legislation. We haven't gotten prayer back in the schools or abortion outlawed. But I believe we have changed the climate of this nation, resulting in an upsurge of patriotism among our young people and a greater acceptance of open profession of Christianity. It is also my personal belief—I'm not speaking for the administration—that the tremendous upturn in our national economy is because of the open profession of the need for God in decision-making. Our economy has gotten better faster than anyone forecasted. The change in climate may not be just because of the president; it may be a sign of our times, a response

to our decision to be bold in our declarations of faith in God and the amount of prayer going up for our leaders.

Charisma: We know of the political struggles that go on daily in Washington, D.C. But how much spiritual warfare is there?

Sundseth: When you openly profess your Christianity, Satan is going to get busy with your life. You've got to expect his darts. Washington, D.C., is a great place to flex your muscles in spiritual warfare. A lot of that goes on here!

Charisma: How do you handle this spiritual warfare?

Sundseth: I decided before I came here that time with the Lord was going to continue to be important for me. I get up at 5:30 in the morning to have an hour with the Lord before I get ready to come to work. I come to work earlier than most White House people; I'm here by 8:00 a.m.—sometimes 7:00—and it is usually 7:00 or 8:00 p.m. before I leave. My husband is retired, and he prays for me and with me. If something comes up that I feel I need extra prayer about, I call Vic during the day and he will pray with me over the phone. That's how I personally stay in tune with what God is doing. And I'm very grateful for the people who pray for me regularly. I believe what wisdom I have evidenced is the result of people's prayers for me to have the wisdom I need for this job.

Charisma: Are you surprised to find yourself in the White House at this point in your life?

Sundseth: This is certainly an unusual job for a grandmother to be in! But I think my age and my deep Christian roots may be an asset in that women's groups, in particular, can relate in some way to me. I have been a career woman. I am a wife, a mother and a grandmother. I worked out of the home when my children were young. I've changed diapers, carried garbage and done all the other things they do.

Because of my age, I can be bolder. I have absolutely nothing to prove and nothing to lose. I can take risks that I couldn't take if I were climbing up the career ladder and had to look to my next job.

Charisma: What will be your next job?

Sundseth: My husband, Vic, is 71 and I'm 63. We're looking forward to the time when we can go into full-time mission work of some kind. That is what we were ready to do when I got called to come to Washington! ■