

Obama is quick to make contact with evangelical leaders: Off-the-record session in Chicago

by [John Dart](#) in the [July 15, 2008](#) issue

Only days after Barack Obama resumed his presidential campaign wearing the label of “presumptive Democratic nominee,” the Illinois senator invited a number of evangelical leaders to a private meeting with him in Chicago. The off-the-record session grew to include mainline Protestants and Roman Catholics.

The discussion June 10 with more than 30 people was the first in a series of closed meetings that Obama aides said he wants with faith leaders in coming months—despite the setbacks and agonizing split the Illinois senator experienced with his former church.

It appeared that Obama wanted to move fast to clarify his views and to listen to different perspectives. “Reaching out to the faith community is a priority for Barack Obama and will be a priority under an Obama administration,” campaign spokesperson Jen Psaki told reporters (who were barred from attending).

“Obama’s team made an important statement when they invited religious leaders who would not see eye-to-eye with Obama,” said David Brody, senior national correspondent for Christian Broadcasting Network. The fact that Franklin Graham, Billy Graham’s son and successor, met and shook hands with Obama before any meeting with Republican presumptive nominee John McCain “says a lot about Obama’s religious outreach effort,” Brody wrote June 12 on his CBN blog.

The discussion at a law firm’s office “went absolutely everywhere,” Bishop T. D. Jakes, a prominent black pastor who heads a Dallas megachurch, said to the Associated Press. The participants “discussed policy issues and came together in conversation and prayer,” said Joshua Dubois, the campaign’s director of faith outreach.

Pastor Eugene Rivers of Boston, representing the Church of God in Christ at the meeting, said Graham asked about the senator's Christian conversion and his father's connections to Islam, according to Religion News Service.

Rivers, who personally supports Obama, said the senator said of his father: "The least of the things he was was Islamic." When asked about whether he believed Jesus is the only way to salvation, "Obama said, brilliantly, 'Jesus is the only way for me. I'm not in a position to judge other people,'" Rivers recalled.

The National Association of Evangelicals' Rich Cizik, who directs governmental affairs at the NAE office in Washington, told AP, "People were asked for their insider wisdom and understanding of the religious community."

Despite his opposition to the "leftist political strands of the Democratic Party," founder-publisher Stephen Strang of *Charisma* magazine said that he attended out of curiosity and asked Obama about his stance on abortion. "He came across as thoughtful and much more of a centrist than what I would have expected," Strang said, guessing that Obama's answer took about 15 minutes.

At the same time, Strang wrote in his online report that Obama supports gay rights and attended a congregation of "the most liberal Protestant denomination." In addition, Strang said, "he has ties to Islam as a child through both his father and stepfather," a characterization that Obama supporters decry as inaccurate and misleading.

Strang, who endorsed former Arkansas governor Mike Huckabee during the Republican primaries, urged McCain to hold similar private meetings because "there is a lot of latent support for him in the Christian community."

Other charismatics and evangelicals attending included Stephen Strang's son Cameron, who founded Relevant Media Group, which is aimed at young Christians; best-selling evangelical author Max Lucado of San Antonio; and Luis Cortes of Esperanza USA, sponsor of the National Hispanic Prayer Breakfast.

From the mainline Protestant side, Presiding Bishop Mark S. Hanson of the Chicago-based Evangelical Lutheran Church in America took part, telling Obama that Lutherans "are on the ground" around the world with ministries of disaster relief, responses to HIV and AIDS, community development and poverty alleviation.

Hanson, who is also president of the Lutheran World Federation, said that churches and other nonprofit agencies need strong U.S. government partnerships to be effective in places like Kenya and Tanzania, where the bishop traveled the following week in his LWF role.

Participants also included clergy from three black denominations: Stephen Thurston, head of the National Baptist Convention of America; T. Dewitt Smith, president of the Progressive National Baptist Convention; and Bishop Philip R. Cousin Sr. of the African Methodist Episcopal Church.