

Questions linger on faith-based makeover: Decision on hiring discrimination postponed

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President Obama has unveiled a revamped White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships, but postponed a decision on whether religious groups can discriminate in hiring—an issue that has bedeviled similar government projects.

“The goal of this office will not be to favor one religious group over another—or even religious groups over secular groups,” Obama said in Washington February 5 at the National Prayer Break fast, where he announced the new office. “It will simply be to work on behalf of those organizations that want to work on behalf of our communities, and to do so without blurring the line that our founders wisely drew between church and state.”

Obama has said his project will be a new and improved version of former president George W. Bush’s Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, which was created in 2001. Like Bush, Obama created his faith-based office by executive order. But Obama’s office will be supplemented by a new 25-person advisory council. Leading the White House office will be Joshua DuBois, a 26-year-old Pentecostal pastor who headed religious outreach for Obama’s presidential campaign.

Said Obama in a statement: “Joshua understands the issues at stake, knows the people involved, and will be able to bring everyone together—from both the secular and faith-based communities, from academia and politics—around our common goals.”

Obama said the office’s top priority will be “making community groups an integral part of our economic recovery” and relieving poverty. The office will also address teenage pregnancy and abortion reduction, as well as “support fathers who stand by their families,” especially young men.

“There is a force for good greater than government,” Obama said. “It is an expression of faith, this yearning to give back, this hungering for a purpose greater than our own, that reveals itself not just in places of worship but in senior centers and shelters, schools and hospitals.”

In a shift from the Bush administration, the office will play a role in foreign policy, the White House said, and will work with the National Security Council to encourage interfaith dialogue.

The announcement fulfills a campaign pledge Obama made in July to expand and upgrade Bush’s faith-based office, which Obama had criticized as an underfunded “photo-op.”

For the most part, religious leaders across the theological spectrum praised the announcement. But the new president has already backed away from one campaign promise, according to some scholars and activists.

In July, Obama said that religious groups will not be able to use federal grants to proselytize or to hire only members of their own faith. The issue presents a unique challenge for the president, who boasts a background in community organizing and constitutional law. Religious groups say hiring coreligionists is essential to their identity and mission; others argue that federal funds should not be used to discriminate.

The order that Obama signed avoids a clear statement on hiring practices, instead saying that the office may “seek the opinion of the attorney general on any constitutional and statutory questions.”

Rabbi David Saperstein, a member of the new advisory council and director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, said “the hiring issue is going to be dealt with by Josh [DuBois], the White House counsel and the attorney general’s office.”

Church-state watchdogs quickly objected to the lack of clear hiring guidelines and the new faith-tinged advisory panel. People for the American Way president Kathryn Kolbert said it was “disappointing” that President Obama missed an opportunity to put the hiring restriction into practice immediately. “It’s not about left or right: it’s about upholding the Constitution,” she said.

The same criticism came from Americans United for Separation of Church and State and the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty. The BJC's executive director, Brent Walker, said his group "will continue to press for" a ban on religious hiring discrimination.

The ACLU was uneasy about the new council being formed. "President Obama launched his faith-based initiative today by heading into uncharted and dangerous waters," said Caroline Fredrickson, director of the ACLU's Washington legislative office. "There is no historical precedent for presidential meddling in religion—or religious leaders meddling in federal policy—through a formal government advisory committee made up mostly of the president's chosen religious leaders."

Of the 15 people named initially to the advisory council, several are evangelicals, including Jim Wallis, executive director of Sojourners; Frank Page, a former president of the Southern Baptist Convention; megachurch pastor Joel C. Hunter of Lakeland, Florida; and Richard Stearns, president of World Vision.

The panel also includes Larry Snyder, president of Catholic Charities; Bishop Vashti McKenzie of the African Methodist Episcopal Church; William Shaw, president of the National Baptist Convention, USA; and Melissa Rogers, director of the Wake Forest University Divinity School's Center for Religion and Public Affairs. Council members are appointed for one-year terms. *-Religion News Service*