

White House releases final faith-based panel names: A diverse council

News in the [May 5, 2009](#) issue

President Obama has named nine new advisers to the White House office for religious and community groups, adding a gay rights leader, an Orthodox Jew, a black Pentecostal bishop and others to an eclectic 25-member council.

The bulk of the council, which will advise Obama on certain domestic and foreign policy issues, was appointed in March when the president unveiled his revamped White House Office of Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships.

The following people were added April 6 to the Advisory Council on Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships:

- Anju Bhargava, founder of the Asian Indian Women of America
- Charles Blake, presiding bishop of the Church of God in Christ
- Peg Chamberlin, president-elect of the National Council of Churches
- Nathan Diament, public policy director of the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America
- Harry Knox, religion program director of the Human Rights Campaign
- Dalia Mogahed, executive director at the Gallup Center for Muslim Studies
- Anthony Picarello, general counsel for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops
- Nancy Ratzan, president of the National Council of Jewish Women
- Sharon Watkins, general minister-president of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

Chamberlin, a minister in the Moravian Church, is executive director of the Minnesota Council of Churches. She has been president-elect of the National Council

of Churches since late 2007 and will succeed Armenian archbishop Vic ken Aykazian on January 1, 2010, in the NCC post.

Council members, who will serve one-year renewable terms, will advise Obama on coordinating government programs with local community groups, according to the White House. Obama has named four priorities for the faith-based and neighborhood partnerships office: reducing poverty, reducing the number of abortions, promoting responsible fatherhood and promoting interfaith dialogue abroad.

Most members of Obama's newly completed advisory council—and dozens of other interested parties—attended an April 6-7 gathering in the Old Executive Office Building to hear government officials say that the faith-based office offers a conduit to the administration, but not federal funding.

“This office does not control any grant money, thankfully so,” said Joshua DuBois, the office's executive director.

In picking a diverse council, Obama fulfilled a campaign pledge to listen to an array of religious voices, said Jennifer Butler, executive director of Faith in Public Life, a progressive think tank in Washington.

The council includes noted conservatives, like Frank Page, a former president of the Southern Baptist Convention, and high-profile liberals, like Fred Davie, the openly gay senior adviser for the nonprofit Public/Private Ventures.

“There's always a temptation to just get people on board who agree with you on everything,” Butler said. “But Obama is sticking to his word that he wants to bring diverse Americans together to talk about even some of the most controversial issues of the day.”

Whether the council can get anything done is another matter, said Ira Lupu, a professor at the George Washington University School of Law who tracks government partnerships with faith-based groups.

“They'll meet and have task forces and issue reports,” he said. “The question is whether they can say anything in their reports that will actually move government policy.”

Gay rights leaders said they were heartened by the addition of the HRC's Knox to the council but remain ambivalent about the faith-based program in general,

especially since the White House has yet to decide whether groups that take federal money can discriminate in hiring. *-Religion News Service*