

Progressive Faith Groups Now Trying to Shift Debate

Activists Optimistic That Obama Will Back Causes

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With a president they view as more sympathetic to their causes, progressive religious activists are pushing the new Obama administration for aggressive action -- on poverty, the environment and social justice issues -- that would mark a significant shift in the faith agenda that dominated the Bush years.

Many faith groups close to President George W. Bush focused on abortion, stem cell research and same-sex marriage. But now, liberal and centrist evangelicals and other activists say they are getting a voice and trying to turn the debate.

"The last administration showed no interest in talking to a large chunk of the religious community," said Melissa Rogers, director of the Center for Religion and Public Affairs at Wake Forest University in North Carolina. "We're already seeing change. . . . This administration, so far as I can see, is not making a similar mistake."

The change, however, represents more than a new agenda. It also sets up potential conflicts for President Obama, who has reached out to religious activists across the spectrum. He runs the risk of alienating supporters and detractors alike as his administration attempts a dialogue on a host of issues and begins new policies, such as his decision this month to lift the ban on federal funding to international groups that provide abortions and abortion counseling.

Faith groups praised the administration's outreach during the transition. Between the election and the inauguration, Obama's staff held more than 20 meetings with a diverse mix of religious groups that included mainline Protestant organizations such as Lutheran Services in America as well as the Salvation Army, Prison Fellowship and the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities.

Those attending said administration officials were seeking advice on how the new White House can work with faith organizations through Obama's Council for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships. The meetings also focused on such issues as the environment, AIDS worldwide, Middle East policy, detainee interrogations, criminal justice reform and the economy.

High-level Obama staff members attended the sessions, which were held at the transition headquarters or by teleconference. They included Melody Barnes, director of the Domestic Policy Council; Heather A. Higginbottom, the council's deputy director; and Michael Strautmanis, Obama's director of intergovernmental relations.

On Thursday, Obama named Joshua DuBois, a 26-year-old Pentecostal pastor who ran religious outreach for the campaign, to head the White House's new office for faith-based programs, a White House aide said. DuBois is close to the president, and faith leaders see his ascent as a sign of the importance of their causes to the new administration.

While the progressive groups are emphasizing social justice, many also are urging Obama to help reduce abortions. The fight over the issue has always been complex and is likely to become even more so. While many liberal groups say they want abortions reduced, other antiabortion groups remain adamant about seeking a prohibition.

Catholic bishops, for example, will find Obama a "mixed bag," said Stephen Schneck, director of the Life Cycle Institute and a professor of politics at Catholic University. While many of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' positions on social justice align with those of the Obama administration, the bishops' firm opposition to abortion and embryonic stem cell research will put them at odds with the president.

"Clearly for the bishops, first and foremost, are these life issues," Schneck said. "While they're certainly willing to work with the Obama administration on everything else, for them the key to a long-term relationship with the administration has to revolve around abortion."

Other areas of dispute also are becoming clear.

The National Religious Campaign Against Torture praised Obama's decision to close the U.S. military prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and end harsh interrogation techniques, but it criticized his creation of a task force to study whether the CIA should be able to use additional interrogation techniques. "We cannot afford to risk a return to the secret abuses of the past," said a statement from the group, which represents 257 religious organizations.

Many have also expressed concern about Obama's stated desire to reverse the Bush policy of allowing religious groups to hire only people of their own faith in federally funded projects. When Obama announced his plan for an office for faith-based initiatives, he said that groups receiving federal funding could not discriminate in hiring. Obama officials have been largely vague on this point since.

Religious hiring rights are a priority for many religious groups.

And even groups more ideologically aligned with Obama may find themselves squaring off with him as he attempts to balance their competing interests with his agenda in other areas, such as the economy.

Sojourners, a liberal evangelical group, intends to keep the pressure up with a march in April, the Mobilization Against Poverty, that will call on the president to cut the poverty rate in half within 10 years.

The organizations say they are only attempting to help Obama stay on the course he has promised.

Said Sojourners organizer Jim Wallis: "We're trying to help him fulfill his commitment and hold his administration accountable at the same time."

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