

Obama, evangelicals meet on religious concerns

by [Sarah Pulliam Bailey](#) in the [November 15, 2011](#) issue

President Obama formally extended his ear to evangelicals ahead of the 2012 election, meeting with top leaders of the National Association of Evangelicals in the White House for about 30 minutes in mid-October.

International

religious freedom was a top priority for the group as they thanked Obama for condemning the charges against Youcef Nadarkhani, an Iranian pastor facing execution for his conversion to Christianity. George Wood, the general superintendent of the Assemblies of God, cited other cases of people who have been persecuted in other parts of the world.

"Someone

commented that all these things relate to issues of religious freedom," NAE President Leith Anderson said in an interview after the October 12 meeting. "He [Obama] did a lot of listening."

The group also

discussed immigration reform and tricky legal questions surrounding the issue of whether religious organizations can hire based on religious beliefs while receiving federal funds, Anderson said. Discussions included the concern for budget cuts, including proposed reductions in funding for overseas development, and Obama referred to his desire for further job creation.

One issue that did not come up was abortion,

which has been a sensitive point of divergence for both sides. "Issues that relate to the poor we would address as pro-life issues, but it was not specifically a discussion on abortion," Anderson said. "It was not intentionally omitted. We had a limited amount of time."

One

participant in the meeting said Obama and NAE leaders acknowledged a "respectful disagreement" over same-sex marriage, and NAE officials advocated for the right of military chaplains to voice their opposition to homosexuality following the repeal of the Don't Ask/Don't Tell policy.

The NAE, which represents 40 denominations across some 45,000 local churches, extends a request to meet with the president each year, Anderson said. This is the first time Obama has accepted.

"Evangelicals

have had good access to the Obama White House, at least that's my experience. He clearly knows where we disagree on issues like marriage and abortion, and he acknowledged that we have significant differences," Anderson said. The NAE president also said that Obama called it "a priority" for the White House to assist efforts to protect the lives of Christians persecuted in other countries.

Previous presidents have

also met with the NAE. At the 1983 NAE convention in Orlando, President Reagan delivered his famous speech referring to the Soviet communist system as "the Evil Empire." "Did we have something of that magnitude that happened today? It wasn't that type of setting and circumstance," Anderson said.

The White House meeting followed a screening the night before for 80 religious leaders of 58, a new film on global poverty. Leaders from several Christian agencies, such as Compassion International, World Relief, Food for the Hungry and International Justice Mission, met with members of the Obama administration to watch the film and discuss ways to help the poor.

Evangelical-based

relief organizations have been adjusting to the new administration, said Stephan Bauman, president and CEO of World Relief, the NAE's affiliated humanitarian arm. While President George W. Bush's pet project was global AIDS relief, Christian agencies hope to see continued funding

through President Obama's Feed the Future program, Bauman said.

"The

president is in a totally different place in Congress and the economy, so it's hard to compare the two administrations," he said. —RNS