

Melissa Rogers picked for Obama's faith-based office

by [Adelle M. Banks](#) in the [April 17, 2013](#) issue

Church-state expert Melissa Rogers will be the new director of the White House Office of Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships. Rogers succeeds Joshua DuBois, who left the office in February after serving throughout President Obama's first term.

"I'm honored to be able to serve President Obama by forging and promoting a wide range of effective partnerships with faith-based and secular nonprofits that help people in need," Rogers said in a statement March 13.

Rogers is already well acquainted with the office she will direct. She chaired the office's first advisory council and spearheaded the work to reform the office.

In 2010, President Obama signed an executive order reflecting recommendations from the council that called for greater transparency and clearer rules for religious groups that receive federal grants.

"Melissa has been a stalwart advocate for religious freedom," said DuBois, who noted her key roles in the creation of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act and the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act—prominent religious freedom statutes.

DuBois, who served as a spiritual as well as a political adviser to President Obama, noted Rogers's Baptist ties and roles as a laywoman in her local congregation volunteering in its food pantry and nursery.

Colleagues from a range of religious organizations welcomed Rogers's appointment. "Melissa has a sincere sensitivity to the different beliefs and points of view that people or entire communities may hold on delicate and, frankly, 'hot button' issues," said Nathan Diament, executive director of public policy for the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America, who served on the advisory council with Rogers.

Shaun Casey, an ethics professor at Wesley Theological Seminary and former faith adviser to President Obama's campaign, said he expects Rogers's expertise could help the White House address the ongoing concerns of critics about faith-based organizations receiving government funding and hiring staffers based on religion. "It's logical to assume it will be on her radar screen," he said.

Rogers comes to the post after serving in several positions at the intersection of religion and public policy. Most recently she directed Wake Forest Divinity School's Center for Religion and Public Affairs and was a nonresident senior fellow at Washington's Brookings Institution.

She previously was executive director of the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, a board member of the Public Religion Research Institute and the general counsel of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs.

J. Brent Walker, director of the Baptist Joint Committee, called her a "perfect choice" for the position.

"Melissa is an honest broker, a consensus-builder and a problem-solver," added Joel Hunter, a Florida evangelical leader, and Rabbi David Saperstein, a Reform Jewish official, in a joint column in the *Washington Post's* "On Faith."

Hunter and Saperstein, who served on the advisory council with Rogers, noted that she has been "a key leader in countless common ground projects," including a recent document on public religious expression whose drafters had worked from a range of perspectives—from the conservative American Center for Law and Justice to the liberal American Civil Liberties Union.

C. Welton Gaddy, president of the Interfaith Alliance and a longtime critic of the faith-based office, expressed confidence in Rogers's ability to tackle thorny issues, including the debate on hiring.

"I know of no individual better suited to oversee this important endeavor, with sensitivity to the competing views and priorities at play, and with great integrity, than Melissa Rogers," Gaddy said. —RNS

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