

Obama pledges to expand Bush's faith-based works: "A real partnership, not a photo op"

News in the [July 29, 2008](#) issue

Adopting a federal program criticized strongly by some liberals, Senator Barack Obama says he would expand and improve President Bush's initiative to fund religious charities and community ministries and make it central to his administration should he reach the White House.

Speaking July 1 at East Side Community Ministry in Zanesville, Ohio, Obama said such groups are well placed to solve the country's most pressing problems, from poverty to the environment.

"I believe that change comes not from the top down but from the bottom up," Obama said, "and few are closer to the people than our churches, synagogues, temples and mosques."

In an interview from Ohio, the Illinois Democrat said faith-based groups can deliver more services with less bureaucratic red tape, and should not be prevented from receiving public money because of their religious affiliations.

"Frankly, in some communities," faith-based social services "may be the only game in town," he said. "And it's important that we don't leave them out as they carry on their work."

A liberal Democrat pledging to expand a signature program of a conservative Republican president may come as a surprise, but as a former community organizer in Chicago, Obama knows personally the outsize role that houses of worship can play in their neighborhoods.

Obama is also pushing to reach religious voters—particularly non-Hispanic Catholics and centrist evangelicals. Polls show his Republican opponent, Senator John McCain, leading among those communities, but Obama may be quickly closing the so-called

God gap.

The plan Obama unveiled would expand President Bush's Office of Faith-based and Community Initiatives, which the Illinois senator said was underfunded and "never fulfilled its promise." He added: "It has to be a real partnership, not a photo op."

Bush's faith-based initiative, which was never approved by Congress, sought to open federal funding to grassroots religious charities and community groups. But former staffers and church-state watchdogs criticized the Bush administration for improperly mixing piety and politics.

In the interview, Obama said his proposed President's Council for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships would not be a "radical departure" from Bush's model, but would streamline the grant-funding process for religious groups and educate them about federal regulations.

For instance, taxpayer money would not fund proselytism, and religious groups would not be allowed to discriminate in hiring personnel for government-funded programs, Obama said.

"I've said very clearly I believe in separation of church and state," Obama said in the interview, "But for us to fail to fund faith-based organizations that are on the ground doing great work day to day is counterproductive and not necessary [in order] for us to follow our Constitution."

Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, said he was "disappointed" that Obama would "continue a failed policy of the Bush administration.

"The president's faith-based initiative has undermined civil rights and civil liberties and become deeply mired in partisan politics," Lynn said. "It ought to be shut down, not continued." Nevertheless, Lynn said he was pleased to hear Obama say he would bar government-funded proselytism and religious discrimination in hiring.

Obama's announcement was greeted favorably by John Dilulio, who served as director of Bush's faith-based office in 2001 before quitting the post. "His plan reminds me of much that was best in both then-vice president Al Gore's and then-Texas governor George W. Bush's respective first speeches on the subject in 1999," Dilulio said in a statement.

Obama also said he would commit \$500 million per year to summer literacy programs like Philadelphia's Youth Education for Tomorrow, which is run by churches and other nonprofits. The programs would serve 1 million students. The money for them would come from reducing the federal travel budget and cutting wasteful spending, according to Obama's campaign. -*Daniel Burke, Religion News Service*