

Romney camp looks to rally Christian conservatives

by [David Gibson](#) in the [May 2, 2012](#) issue

Even before Rick Santorum announced April 10 that he was dropping his presidential bid, Mark DeMoss was fielding calls from religious conservatives who sensed that the end was nigh and were eager to set up meetings with Romney.

DeMoss, an evangelical public relations executive and a senior adviser to the Romney campaign, also said that immediately after Romney's latest primary victories he got a call from a prominent evangelical who wanted to organize a summit with other Christian conservatives to start rallying support for Romney for the fall campaign. If and when that meeting comes off, it would represent a marked counterpoint to conservative conclaves earlier this year that strongly backed Santorum.

In an op-ed in *USA Today* published April 2, Richard Land, the top public policy official for the Southern Baptist Convention and no fan of Romney, wrote that Romney's nomination is inevitable and explained why evangelicals would rally behind him.

It was exactly the kind of movement DeMoss has been working toward, and it could be key to deciding Romney's political fortunes—and those of the Republican Party—heading into November's face-off with President Obama and the Democrats.

"I'm optimistic that things are coming together nicely behind Mitt Romney and could do so fairly quickly," said DeMoss, who championed Romney even as other evangelical leaders and voters expressed serious reservations about his conservative credentials or his Mormon faith.

Certainly nothing could be more effective for Romney in closing out a long and bitter primary season than marshaling support from the evangelicals who have formed the core of the opposition to him all year, whether they were backing Santorum or one of the other "not Romneys" who variously filled that role.

Moreover, as Romney pivots to a general election campaign against Obama, nothing will be more critical than winning the hearts and minds of social conservatives who might prove the difference in what is expected to be a close election determined by the turnout of each camp's core constituency.

But the process of winning over evangelicals won't be easy. Romney has kept key social conservative leaders at arm's length, and evangelicals have shown him little love in return. That breach will take time and effort to overcome.

"Right now, Romney is lacking a compelling narrative to close the deal," said Ken Blackwell of the Family Research Council, whose leadership has often cast a wary eye at Romney. "He's going to have a base intensity problem unless he can unify the conservative base."

"There is a significant challenge" for Romney to convince social and Christian conservatives that they can't "just sit back and disengage," agreed Deal Hudson, a veteran Republican consultant for outreach to Catholic voters. A postprimary move to the center to battle Obama would be Romney's "biggest mistake," Hudson said. "That would just kill him."

There are some factors working in Romney's favor, according to his allies and some religious conservatives who increasingly, if grudgingly, acknowledge that they may have to settle for Romney as the GOP nominee.

A good choice of a running mate is one. "He must pick a well-known social conservative," Richard Land wrote. Romney has a range of good options, any of which is sure to please the Christian right. Ohio Senator Rob Portman and Wisconsin Representative Paul Ryan are among those frequently mentioned, with South Carolina Senator Jim DeMint, a Tea Party leader, also generating some buzz. —RNS