

Obama's faith-based advisers divided over religious exemption for anti-gay discrimination

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WASHINGTON (RNS) President Obama's faith-based advisers are coming down on different sides of a debate over a pending executive order that would ban discrimination based on sexual orientation among federal contractors.

The dividing line: Should the directive contain a religious exemption?

The latest entreaty to the White House about banning LGBT discrimination includes four former members of the President's Advisory Council on Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships.

"An exception would set a terrible precedent by denying true equality for LGBT people, while simultaneously opening a Pandora's Box inviting other forms of discrimination," wrote the more than 100 signatories to a Tuesday (July 8) letter to the president.

Signatories opposed to an exemption include Harry Knox, president of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice; Fred Davie, executive vice president of Union Theological Seminary; Rabbi David Saperstein, director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism; and Metropolitan Community Churches Moderator Nancy Wilson.

A week earlier, a letter signed by three former advisory council members and Obama's former chief liaison to evangelicals asked the president to include an exemption for religious groups.

"A religious exemption would simply maintain that religious organizations will not be automatically disqualified or disadvantaged in obtaining contracts because of their religious beliefs," they wrote in the July 1 letter to Obama.

Signers of that letter included, among others, Florida megachurch pastor Joel Hunter; the Rev. Larry Snyder, CEO of Catholic Charities USA; and the Rev. Noel Castellanos, CEO of the Christian Community Development Association; as well as former evangelical liaison Michael Wear.

The dueling opinions come a week after the Supreme Court's controversial Hobby Lobby ruling that found some religious owners of family businesses did not have to abide by the Obama administration's contraception mandate. Obama's original contraception mandate exempted explicitly religious groups such as churches, but affiliated institutions like hospitals and colleges are now suing for a similar exemption.

Shin Inouye, a White House spokesman, said he did not have details on when the executive order might be released. "We continue to hear from interested groups on this issue," he said.

The diversity of religious views represented among past faith-based advisers reflects the current range of opinion on how Obama should move forward on LGBT government regulations, which are considered the next front in the fight over government rules about employment.

Before the Hobby Lobby decision, more than 150 mostly evangelical leaders signed a June 25 letter urging Obama to "protect the rights of faith-based organizations that simply desire to utilize staffing practices consistent with their deep religious convictions." They suggested specific language that was similar to the Senate version of the long-stalled Employment Non-Discrimination Act.

That request followed a letter from 90 organizations asking the Obama administration to end the Bush-era policy of permitting federally funded religious groups to hire and fire based on a person's faith.