

GOP, Bush continue wooing black pastors: Picking up the pace

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The Republican courting of black clergy, evident during the 2004 presidential campaign, has picked up the pace again, to the dismay of some Democrats.

The first of seven regional U.S. conferences drew scores of African-American ministers February 1 to a Los Angeles megachurch headed by televangelist Frederick K. C. Price. The meeting was designed to build support for banning same-sex marriage—an issue that resonated with black pastors last year.

A prominent Washington area pastor, Bishop Henry Jackson of Hope Christian Church in Lanham, Maryland—a registered Democrat who voted for Bush last year—hosted the regional summit. But he also unveiled the “Black Contract with America on Moral Values,” contending that black churches are not changing lives while trying to fit into morally conservative and politically liberal labels.

The plans were reminiscent of former House Speaker Newt Gingrich’s “Contract for America” of a decade ago. A separate group with links to Gingrich was expected to announce this month a “Mayflower Compact for Black America” with plans to organize in key states for the 2006 and 2008 elections, according to the *Los Angeles Times*.

Democrats who make up the Congressional Black Caucus are expressing alarm. “Our party is in grave danger,” Representative Major R. Owens, a longtime congressman from New York, told the *Times*.

The GOP has received only about 10 percent of the black vote in the last ten presidential elections, but Republican organizers noted that the concerted effort by Republicans in Ohio last year increased Bush’s support there from 9 percent in 2000 to 16 percent in 2004.

In one of the first meetings of his second term, President Bush met January 25 in Washington with more than 20 African-American leaders, including clergy and

supporters of faith-based initiatives.

The gathering, scheduled for 45 minutes, lasted more than an hour, said Robert L. Woodson Sr., founding president of the National Center for Neighborhood Enterprise, which has received a federal grant of \$400,000 to help train faith-based groups in the Washington area.

“It was a very serious meeting, and he walked us through the various issues that are important to the success of his next administration,” Woodson told RNS. Besides discussing faith-based initiatives, Bush talked about reforming Social Security, addressing AIDS and trading with Africa.

Other participants included Bishop Charles Blake of West Angeles Church of God in Christ in Los Angeles; Bishop Keith Butler of Word of Faith International Christian Center in Southfield, Michigan; and Eugene Rivers of the National Ten Point Leadership Foundation in Boston. Business leaders and community activists also were included.

Though White House Press Secretary Scott McClellan said beforehand that the pastors “represent a diversity of views from within the African-American community,” it was clear that many of the ministers were theological conservatives.