

Baptist returns to post leading faith-based initiatives office

February 15, 2021

President Joe Biden issued an [executive order](#) Feb. 14 reestablishing the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood initiatives, and he reappointed a prominent Baptist expert in church-state relations to direct it.

The Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Initiatives—which has operated under several slightly different names since President George W. Bush established it 20 years ago—will “work with leaders of different faiths and backgrounds who are on the frontlines of their communities in crisis and who can help us heal, unite and rebuild,” Biden said in a [statement](#) accompanying the announcement of the executive order.

The office initially will focus on partnerships to address the COVID-19 pandemic and boost economic recovery, as well as “combat systemic racism, increase opportunity and mobility for historically disadvantaged communities, and strengthen pluralism.”

The Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships largely remained unstaffed during most of the Trump Administration. In 2019, President Donald Trump announced Paula White—a Pentecostal evangelist and member of Trump’s informal council of evangelical advisers—would lead what he renamed the Faith and Opportunity Initiative.

“The American people are key drivers of fundamental change in our country, and few institutions are closer to the people than our faith-based and other community organizations,” Biden’s executive order states.

“It is important that the federal government strengthen the ability of such

organizations and other nonprofit providers in our communities to deliver services effectively in partnership with federal, state and local governments and with other private organizations, while preserving our fundamental constitutional commitments guaranteeing the equal protection of the laws and the free exercise of religion and forbidding the establishment of religion.

"The federal government can preserve these fundamental commitments while empowering faith-based and secular organizations to assist in the delivery of vital services in our neighborhoods. These partnerships are also vital for the success and effectiveness of the United States' diplomatic, international development, and humanitarian work around the world."

Melissa Rogers, senior fellow at the Brookings Institution and former general counsel at the [Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty](#), will return to the post she held from 2013 to 2017, during former President Barack Obama's second term. Rogers also will serve as senior director for faith and public policy on the White House Domestic Policy Council.

Josh Dickson, who led faith outreach efforts for the Biden-Harris campaign during the election, will be deputy director of the reestablished office.

Trey Baker, formerly national director of African American engagement for the campaign, will serve as the office's liaison to Black communities, including historically Black religious groups.

BJC Executive Director Amanda Tyler applauded the announcement, saying Rogers "has the expertise and experience necessary to lead the reestablished White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships at a crucial time when our country is facing multiple crises."

"Her appointment to the Domestic Policy Council also shows that the administration recognizes the complexity and intersection of religious freedom concerns across a number of domestic policy issues," Tyler said.

She added Dickson and Baker “both have strong records of collaborating with a number of religious and community organizations representing the full breadth of our pluralistic society.”

Rachel Laser, president and CEO of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, likewise affirmed the executive order and Rogers’ reappointment to the office.

“Rogers’ mastery of church-state law and policy and her track record of finding shared values make her exceedingly qualified for both positions. When she served in the Obama administration, Rogers successfully worked with people across faiths and the nonreligious to adopt policies that protect the religious freedom of people who use federally funded social services,” Laser said.

“Americans United looks forward to working with the administration to restore church-state protections that safeguard everyone’s religious freedom. Government partnerships with faith-based organizations must be evidence-based, inclusive and equally welcoming for people of all faiths and the nonreligious. They must prohibit taxpayer-funded employment discrimination. And social service providers accepting government funds must not be allowed to discriminate against people in their programs or force them to participate in religious activities in order to receive vital services.”