

Executive order aims to protect religious liberty from ‘government overreach’

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—President Trump unveiled a new initiative that aims to give faith groups a stronger voice within the federal government and serve as a watchdog for government overreach on religious liberty issues.

Trump signed the executive order May 3, the National Day of Prayer, “to ensure that the faith-based and community organizations that form the bedrock of our society have strong advocates in the White House and throughout the federal government,” a White House document reads.

The White House said those working on the initiative will provide policy recommendations from faith-based and community programs on “more effective solutions to poverty” and inform the administration of “any failures of the executive branch to comply with religious liberty protections under law.”

Trump said his initiative would help assure that the government supported people of faith.

“This office will also help ensure that faith-based organizations have equal access to government funding and the equal right to exercise their deeply held beliefs,” he said. “We take this step because we know that in solving the many, many problems and our great challenges, faith is more powerful than government, and nothing is more powerful than God.”

‘Takes more than a proclamation’



Amanda Tyler

Government and religious organizations can partner in a constitutional manner, but it demands great care and hard work, said Amanda Tyler, executive director of the [Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty](#).

“Details matter. We know from our experience and advocacy efforts with the prior two administrations that government and religious organizations can partner in constitutional ways to deliver social services, but that getting it right takes more than a proclamation and a Rose Garden ceremony,” Tyler said.

“Standing up for religious freedom requires both protecting the free exercise rights of all Americans and ensuring that government neither promotes any one faith tradition nor favors religion over irreligion.”

Previous partnerships

The creation of the White House Faith and Opportunity Initiative follows

the initiatives of previous administrations that created similarly named offices to foster partnerships between the government and religious organizations.

President Obama launched the Office of Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships, whose work ranged from fighting the Ebola and Zika viruses to feeding schoolchildren nutritious meals in the summertime.

That office, along with similar ones in 13 federal agencies, followed President George W. Bush's Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. The White House said agencies and executive departments that do not have such offices will have a designated liaison to the new initiative.

Trump supporters cheer initiative

Johnnie Moore, a minister and public relations consultant who serves as an unofficial spokesman for a group of evangelicals that often advises Trump, said the new initiative takes an approach different from the previous ones.

"Ordering every department of the federal government to work on faith based partnerships—not just those with faith offices—represents a widespread expansion of a program that has historically done very effective work and now can do even greater work," he said.

Pentecostal televangelist Paula White, an evangelical adviser to the president, cheered the new initiative.

"I could not be more proud to stand with President Trump as he continues to stand shoulder to shoulder with communities of faith," she said. "This order is a historic action, strengthening the relationship between faith and government in the United States, and the product will be countless transformed lives."

The White House also said the new initiative will be led by an adviser who

will work with faith leaders and experts outside the federal government. Obama's initiative also had an office director with a council of outside experts.

With additional reporting by Managing Editor Ken Camp.