

Obama picks religious adviser DuBois for faith-based post; questions remain

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WASHINGTON (ABP) — President Obama has selected a 26-year-old Pentecostal minister who served as his top religion adviser during the presidential campaign to head a revamped White House office on faith-based social services.

Critics of President Bush's attempt to expand the government's ability to fund the charitable work of churches expressed guarded optimism at the pick of Joshua DuBois to head the renamed White House Council for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships.

The New York Times first [reported](#) Jan. 29 that DuBois, who joined the Obama campaign last year and served as its chief liaison with the evangelical Christian community, would head the new council. Other news outlets confirmed the news.

Burns Strider, who served as a religious strategist with Joshua DuBois Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign, said Obama's (PBS Photo) choice of DuBois "is no surprise, but even more it's an indicator of the importance placed on the goals and work of the faith office." Strider, a Mississippi native who was raised Southern Baptist, now does consulting with the Eleison Group, which focuses on faith and politics.

Questions remain

Advocates of strict church-state separation who have criticized direct

government funding for explicitly religious charities and the way Bush used the faith-based issue were largely supportive of the expected appointment. But they said thorny questions remain for how Obama will handle the faith-based effort.

Welton Gaddy, president of the Interfaith Alliance, described DuBois as “an impressive, compassionate advocate with whom I have had several opportunities to meet throughout the electoral campaign and the work of President Obama's transition team.”

Gaddy said he would have preferred Obama close the office altogether, but since the president has chosen simply to re-tool it, “the question remains whether or not a change in the name of the office as organized by the Bush administration will reflect substantive change in the policies of the Obama administration that advocates for religious liberty find acceptable.”

Gaddy, who also serves as pastor for preaching and worship at Northminster Baptist Church in Monroe, La., said he was “cautiously optimistic” that Obama’s faith-based office would avoid the mistakes he thought Bush’s made.

“In recent conversations, senior transition officials assured me of President Obama's interest in establishing a council that protects religious freedom and assures constitutional separation between the institutions of religion and government,” he added.

Bush legacy

Gaddy and other church-state separationists opposed many aspects of the initiative, which Bush used to expand the numbers of government social-service programs that provided grants directly to churches and other overtly religious charities. While Bush and his supporters contended that churches were unnecessarily being left out of the programs, opponents said religious charities were already eligible for such grants as long as they

clearly separated their clearly religious work from their other charitable work.

Bush officials argued that religious organizations should be eligible for funds on the same basis as secular providers, while retaining their special rights to discriminate in hiring on the basis of religion.

That aspect of the program proved the most contentious in Congress, and Gaddy and others have expressed hope that Obama would reverse Bush actions allowing religious organizations receiving federal funds to take religion into account when hiring for jobs wholly or partially subsidized with government dollars.

Obama promised not to allow discrimination under the program [in a July campaign speech](#), but he and his surrogates have said little about the issue since.

Given the new president's background in constitutional law and assurances they have received from DuBois and other Obama officials, opponents of Bush's faith-based efforts expressed hope that the new administration in general — and DuBois in particular — would handle the initiative in ways more sensitive to their concerns.

“Josh clearly has the background and interest in bringing diverse groups together for a common purpose,” Holly Hollman, general counsel for the Baptist Joint Committee, said Jan. 30. “He recognized the need to carefully consider various approaches to the more difficult aspects of the policy. We were pleased that he listened to our suggestions for correcting some of the problems in the Bush administration's approach and that he expressed a real desire to get things right.”

Another criticism of the faith-based push under Bush was that his White House politicized the effort. That included accusations of grants to conservative religious groups as payoffs for their support of Bush in the

2000 and 2004 elections.

Strider said efforts to increase funding for faith-based groups under President Clinton's administration did not prove the political football they did under Bush, and that he expected DuBois and Obama to handle the effort in a similar fashion to Clinton.

"Politics doesn't belong in the faith-based office, and we are fortunate President Obama chose a trusted adviser in Rev. DuBois who is committed to dialogue with the whole faith community and will focus on programs and services that work for all," he said.

-Robert Marus is managing editor and Washington bureau chief for Associated Baptist Press.

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