

Commentary: Cheers and caution for President Trump's new faith-based initiative

May 9, 2018

(RNS) — In the 2000 presidential campaign, Republican George W. Bush and Democrat Al Gore each pledged to establish an office in the White House through which the federal government would acknowledge and support the social services faith groups were providing in local communities.

Sixteen years later, after the Bush and Obama administrations blazed a trail marked by both success and controversy, President Trump came to power without a plan for the faith office.

The shuttered White House faith office reflected two broader trends in the Trump administration: A lackadaisical presidential transition that was slow to fill appointed posts in the government, and a lack of interest in the State Department's Office of Religion and Global Affairs.

Without these formal channels through which the administration could engage with and understand religion's place in domestic and world affairs, Trump relied on an unofficial cadre of evangelical campaign loyalists.

This kept him in touch with a key political constituency, but also gave the appearance of favoritism toward one religious group and indifference (if not outright hostility) toward others.

Now, 16 months into his presidency, Trump appears poised to finally establish a faith office of his own.

As part of his National Day of Prayer observance, the president [announced an executive order](#) Thursday (May 3) creating a new White House Faith and Opportunity Initiative.

I applaud the broad outline of President Trump's faith initiative. Better late than never. But implementation will be key. This has to be done right.

The new office's legitimacy rests on how sensitively and inclusively it engages diverse faith communities and negotiates the complex legal and political dynamics it will face.



President Trump speaks during a National Day of Prayer event in the Rose Garden of the White House on May 3, 2018, in Washington. (RNS photo by Adelle M. Banks)

The order flows somewhat from the framework of the two previous administrations' faith offices. That is a good thing, as it demands a more structured way for the White House and the bureaucracy to communicate with faith groups and advise one another on matters involving religion.

This initiative appropriately invites religious, community, and nonprofit leaders to advise the government and equip partners on issues including poverty, addiction, criminal justice, and marriage and family life. All this is welcome and needed.

There are a few pitfalls Trump must avoid to ensure the initiative's success.

First is the matter of staffing. There is a natural tendency for presidents to transition campaign advisers and staffers into related federal jobs. This is not a bad thing in itself, as campaigns provide staffers education, engagement, and experience that will benefit them as administration officials.

But in Trump's case especially, it will be important not to create a jobs program for his evangelical political supporters. This office needs professional staff with expertise, sensitivity, and strong ecumenical and interfaith impulses.

A second concern is inclusion. This only works in a legally secular and religiously plural society if it is diverse and inclusive. To put it mildly, Trump has struggled with religious inclusion and neutrality in his rhetoric and in his governing.

Acknowledging and supporting the public-spirited work minority faith groups are doing would give the president a chance to right a wrong.

But the perennially contentious issue of religious freedom will be the initiative's most fraught concern.

Since its inception in 2001, the White House faith office has grappled with difficult religious-liberty questions. Under Bush, a key debate concerned whether groups receiving federal funding could discriminate in hiring. Under Obama, the Affordable Care Act's contraceptive coverage mandate created high-stakes legal battles, largely bypassing staff in the faith office who should have been consulted in developing accommodations for employers with religious objections to artificial contraception.

Today, religious-liberty clashes are even more contentious, as combatants imagine an intractable war between LGBT rights and traditional religious beliefs. There is little Trump's new faith office can do to make things better, and much it could do to make things worse.

This latest faith initiative includes a more robust focus on religious liberty, formalizing conduits in every agency between faith groups and the Justice Department.

But there are already courts with jurisdiction to hear religious-liberty cases

and no shortage of well-funded interest groups to provide legal counsel.

It will not be helpful for Trump's faith office to function as a complaint hotline eager to intervene on behalf of socially conservative religious groups, many of which are inclined to see themselves as victims.

The courts have upheld religious freedom, and will continue to protect the rights of Americans to act in accordance with their beliefs about marriage and sexuality.

As the only nationally elected public official, the president has a duty to all Americans, many of whom have competing conceptions of religious freedom.

A formal evangelical office staffed by campaign surrogates and focused on a narrow policy agenda would be a disaster.

I have often disapproved of how Trump, as a candidate and as president, engaged with religion. I have to hope he implements his faith initiative with wisdom and goodwill.

If there's going to be a White House Faith and Opportunity Initiative, we all need it to be a success.

Jacob Lupfer, a frequent commentator on religion and politics, is a writer and consultant in Baltimore. His website is www.jacoblupfer.com. Follow him on Twitter at @jlupf. The views expressed in this commentary do not necessarily represent those of Religion News Service or the Baptist Standard.