

## **New White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships: Does it silence or support the B**

Written by Dr. Barbara Williams-Skinner, NNPA Special Commentary  
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(NNPA) - The February 5 announcement by President Barack Obama of the White House Office of Faith Based Initiative and Neighborhood Partnerships offers potential hope for real change, especially for the Black Church.

Despite President Obama's incredible national and global popularity, Black Church leaders may do well to ask a critical question. Will President Obama's Faith Based Office seek to silence outspoken Black Church leaders through the enticement of social service grants? Or, will the President fund high quality service programs of even those Black clergy leaders who may at times disagree publicly with policy positions of his Administration.

A few clues into the scope of changes in President Obama's Faith Based Initiative have already been revealed. A first area of change is in the broadening of the mission to include four key policy areas: (1) Reducing poverty as part of the economic recovery; (2) Reducing the need for abortion; (3) Supporting fathers who stand by their families; (4) Encouraging and fostering interfaith dialogue around the world.

Another major change is that faith groups are being encouraged to engage both in providing critical social services and in helping to shape policies as true partners of the Administration.

The change in the name of the office to the White House Office of Faith Based and Neighborhood Partnerships reflects this focus. It is the same spirit of partnership that we have seen when President Obama appointed three Republicans to his cabinet and when he conducted several meetings with Republican congressional leaders in seeking to pass the Stimulus Package.

There are two other important signs that the Obama Faith-Based Office will reflect real "change that we can believe in."

First, the executive order expands the scope of the office to establish an Interfaith Council comprised of up to 25 faith and secular leaders with 15 having been announced. Of the four African American Council members on the Council, both AME Bishop Vashti McKenzie and Civil Rights Movement icon the Rev. Dr. Otis Moss, Jr., are well known for their progressive politics.

The African American Church community can be confident just knowing that no amount of grant funds for social service program will silence these two prophetic voices.

A second important signal of the kind of White House Faith Based office will emerge is in the appointment of the new director, the Rev. Joshua Dubois, a 26-year-old former Pentecostal pastor who headed religious affairs during the Obama campaign.

Dubois, who represents a new generation of clergy leaders, has a reputation of fairness and integrity. He has repeatedly affirmed his commitment to reach out to both faith and secular leaders in addressing serious human needs now facing American communities.

Despite the positive changes in the Obama White House Office of Faith Based and Neighborhood Partnership from the office in the past, one question still remains. What about the

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ability of Black Church leaders to use faith as a criteria for hiring employees in serving broken communities in need of both spiritual and physical transformation? President Obama, a strong supporter of the separation of Church and State, sidestepped potential political and legal battles on this issue by agreeing to refer problem cases concerning religious hiring to the White House Counsel.

Finally, how should the Black Church judge the overall success of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships? Success should be based on such factors as genuine efforts to provide technical assistance that equips the Black Church to effectively receive and manage social service grants.

It should be based, as well, on inclusion of additional African American females and younger clergy leaders on the Interfaith Council. But ultimately, success will be based on whether progressive African- American clergy leaders feel the freedom to respectfully and publicly voice their concerns about Administration policies even as they secure and manage federal grants that address pressing human needs. This is change we can believe in.

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