



Time to Open up a Two-Way Street

by Jim Wallis 11-07-2008

Dear President-elect Obama,

I am sending you some wonderful [memos, letters, and reflections on what your election means](#), and what people's hopes and prayers are for you—from an amazing array of moral and religious leaders from America and around the world. Some of my favorite pieces of their advice include: looking after your soul, [loving your family](#) as an example to the rest of us, keeping your [intellect connected to your instincts \(from Bono\)](#), and [reading the 25th chapter of Matthew once a week](#) as a reminder of the impact of your decisions on those who Jesus called “the least of these.”

My advice to you is about your administration's relationship to the faith community. We haven't seen many good models recently, from either party, about how a White House relates to religion and religious communities. I think you could do better. We need to do more than merely having chaplains in the corridors of power, or religion functioning as a power bloc within a party to legislate its own narrow agendas, or mere photo-ops at prayer breakfasts for faith leaders at the White House. I think we all can do better.

Let me suggest another model, and let's call it “the two-way street.”

One direction of the two-way street is for the faith community to offer you its prayers and support. You will need that given all that we are facing. You know how the impact from the prayers of the faithful can be tangibly felt at times, and there will be times when you are going to feel an acute need for those prayers. On that same road is the support from people of good religion and good will, whether or not they voted for you. Your election was an historic milestone in this nation's life and history, and most of us in the churches, synagogues, and mosques are celebrating that achievement, no matter how people voted. Wanting the very best for our nation at this time of crisis and for you and your family as you seek to lead is a bipartisan religious commitment.

The other direction of the two-way street is what the faith community can say back to you. I believe there is more that the faith community can offer you, which previous administrations, from both parties, haven't fully availed themselves of.

For example, on the issue of poverty, you know who the people are who live and work alongside the poor in the worst neighborhoods in this country. It is often the faith community who best



knows the families, the kids, and the streets in our neediest communities. Nobody is closer to the ground and closer to the poor than many of those who work in faith-based organizations, religious congregations, and community organizing networks, as you know from your own experience as an organizer. I would go so far as to suggest that the knowledge and perspective of the faith community on issues of poverty is greater than the combined expertise of the departments of Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development, Labor, and so on. Street workers and leaders from faith communities often know a great deal about what will actually work to overcome the pain and misery of poverty in America. Let the faith community help you and even serve as your eyes and ears on the ground.

Likewise, I would suggest that the combined experience of internationally respected faith-based international relief and development organizations based here in the United States, the many missions and missionaries sent all over the world from American congregations, and the networks of relationships religious service organizations have in virtually every country in the world might be greater than the Departments of State, Defense, and other government agencies. The knowledge, experience, and critical relationships of those religious communities—especially in some of the world’s most troublesome places and countries—could be a vital resource for you in your most important decisions about foreign policy. The faith community around the world has learned a great deal about what most resolves human conflicts and what exacerbates them—because they have seen that first hand. They understand from their experience the wisdom of Pope Paul VI who once reminded us, “If you want peace, work for justice,” and the wisdom of the prophet Micah that we will not beat our swords into plowshares until everyone has their own vine and fig tree and no one can make them afraid. The religious community could be much more effectively used, not just as service providers, but as foreign policy advisors.

And if we are faithful to our religious obligations, we must do two more things.

First, we can bring people together on the great moral issues of our time from across political dividing lines because we have a “ministry of reconciliation.” Our communities are diverse politically and always will be. But there are issues now that transcend politics, and these “transcendent issues” include global and domestic poverty, hunger and disease, human rights, a consistent ethic of life, and the urgency of conflict resolution and peacemaking. It is likely that the faith community is better able to bring people together on those big questions than any other sector of society. Because you are calling us to come together to solve our big problems, we’d like to offer you our help.

Second, there will be times when our prophetic vocation will require us to challenge your administration, when that is needed. That is always the hardest thing for political leaders, especially presidents, to accept or even listen too. But I think you could do that and even know that you need that sort of accountability. The voice of religious conscience may be one of the most important for presidents to listen to. It’s really a deeper way to offer our support and to help make you a better leader—by being faithful to our own moral compass.

So I call upon you to open up that “two-way street” with the community of faith—as soon as possible. We are ready for a new relationship, and I believe that you are too.



God bless you my brother,

Jim Wallis