



To Transition Team for the Council for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships  
From The Coalition to Preserve Religious Freedom  
Date January 8, 2009

### Keeping Faith With—and In—the Faith-Based and Community Initiative

The Coalition to Preserve Religious Freedom is a multi-faith alliance of social-service, education, and religious freedom organizations. It was formed in 2003 to be an advocate to Congress, the administration, and the public about the importance of safeguarding the religious identity, faith-based standards, and faith-shaped services of faith-based organizations.

We are gratified that President-elect Obama has made such a firm and active commitment to maintaining and strengthening the faith-based initiative, extending into a third federal administration the vital work of making the best possible partnerships for service between government and civil society, including the faith-based organizations that are such a vital part of civil society.

We are glad that the President's Council for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships will be a prominent part of the administration and will conserve elements of the existing faith-based and community initiatives apparatus. We appreciate the strong effort underway to integrate the Council and its work fully into the other operations of the White House and the Cabinet.

We are pleased about the commitment to allocating greater resources to address human need domestically and abroad, while understanding that the current deep economic crisis requires a priority response that may delay other spending. We do not believe that government funding and programs are the only or always the most important response to need, but we agree that when a government response is needed, it should be robust and effective.

And we salute the President-elect's call for an "all hands on deck" approach to addressing social needs, and are glad to see that commitment put into practice in the wide-ranging consultations of the campaign, the President-elect himself, and his transition team.

We wish to stress a single but vital point: because so many of the "all hands" are faith-based organizations for whom a religious identity and practices are constitutive, a true "all hands on deck" approach must respect their faith character and not insist on secular uniformity. In our view, a level playing field is not one where secular standards are applied across the board, but rather one where faith-based organizations have an equal opportunity with secular organizations to participate, with all participants required to do demonstrably effective work and to live up to the same standards of financial accountability.



We accept that direct funding comes with limits on inherently religious activities. Yet we would emphasize that, in keeping with the President-elect's commitment to pragmatic solutions that meet the very real human needs in our society, the ultimate standard in selecting providers ought to be not, "Who are you?" but, "Can you provide the needed help?"

For the partnership of government with civil society to flourish, we urge that there should be no additional restrictions on religious staffing when a faith-based organization accepts federal funds to provide services. With regard to those spending programs that currently do include a restriction on religious hiring, we note the congressional intent to lift such a requirement where it would impose a substantial religious burden on a faith-based organization (Religious Freedom Restoration Act of 1993). And even as the new administration continues to clarify the required limits on inherently religious activities when the government directly funds services, we urge an expansion of the Bush administration's effort to shift more programs from direct funding to indirect funding, so that the ultimate beneficiaries of services can have a choice of secular or faith-infused programs.

While much of the interest in (and controversy about) the faith-based initiative over the past dozen years has concerned government funding of faith-based social services, many of the most troubling developments have nothing to do with funding but rather with federal, state, and local rules in areas such as licensing, employment law, accreditation, and public accommodation standards. We appreciate that the various nondiscrimination requirements that are being applied are intended to advance protections for individuals. Yet they may have the effect of making it impossible for faith-based organizations to maintain their integrity and vigor and to continue to provide services. We urge a strong commitment by the new administration to safeguarding the religious identity, faith-based standards, and faith-shaped services of faith-based organizations—crafting solutions to problems of discrimination that do not trade off institutional religious freedom for individual civil rights.

We are glad for the open door to express our concerns along with our appreciation. We are ready and eager to collaborate with our new President and new administration for a true "all hands on deck" approach to addressing national and global social needs.

Coalition to Preserve Religious Freedom

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