OBAMA-BIDEN TRANSITION PROJECT

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To: State Department Transition Team

From: David Young, former Director of the Office of International Religious Freedom (DRL/IRF)

Re: Religion and Foreign Policy: How to Improve the State Department's Religious Freedom Office

The State Department's Office of International Religious Freedom (IRF) is broken. Created by a Congressional mandate in 1998, the office is headed by an Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom and produces annual reports on conditions of religious liberty around the world. The IRF Act also established an independent, federally funded IRF Commission that advises the Administration; the Ambassador is a nonvoting member of the commission. During the Bush Administration the IRF Office has grown by leaps and bounds, and yet has little strategic focus or coordination with other bureaus in the State Department.

The IRF Office holds great potential to be reshaped into a productive part of the Department, but this will require a major restructuring, extending over a year or more. The office currently is almost universally seen in the State Department as a single-note instrument for those who view religious liberty as the sole focus of U.S. foreign policy. Given recent history, this will not be an easy perception to change. During the past eight years, the IRF Ambassador and office have been allowed to operate largely in their own corner, primarily focused on the personal agenda of the ambassador. But this has had significant costs.

I served as Director of the IRF Office from 2003-05 and saw firsthand how the operation could be integrated productively into the Department. As a career diplomat with experience in human rights advocacy and as a United Methodist minister committed to interfaith dialogue, I would suggest the following in order to reshape the IRF operation and make it more productive:

<u>Broaden its Focus to be an Office of International Religious Affairs:</u> The name and focus of the office should be changed to make its mandate more productive and integrated with the overall mission of U.S. foreign policy. After all, the relationship between religion and foreign affairs is not solely about religious liberty. Successful foreign policy requires understanding why people do what they do and a good estimate of how they will react to what we plan to do. Historically, U.S. policy has not been particularly successful in analyzing and predicting the impact of religion on politics. An Office of International Religious Affairs, perhaps linked to the Policy Planning Staff and staffed with recognized experts, could play a supportive role helping analyze how religious movements, such as Islamic extremism, impact foreign policy. The annual religious freedom reports should be only part of the work of the office.

<u>Engage the Building and our Embassies:</u> The IRF office has limited effectiveness in part because it has little contact with key players in the State Department, especially the regional bureaus that form the backbone of policymaking. The new Ambassador should quickly establish close ties with the Assistant Secretaries responsible for human rights and for policy in the Mideast, South Asia, East Asia, and Africa.

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Use More Carrots and Less Sticks: The main approach of the IRF Office during the Bush Administration has been to publicly chastise other countries for not protecting religious freedom. But without ongoing engagement, this is rarely effective. In response to egregious violations of religious liberty, the IRF Act allows for designating a nation as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) as a means of shame and sanction. In some cases, this is an easy, cost-free step, for example, with rogue states such as North Korea and Burma. However, the Ambassador and the independent IRF Commission have paid inordinate attention to the application of and threat of CPC designation as an end in itself. For example, the Commission this month urged the Administration to designate Iraq as a CPC. While preoccupied with applying these sticks, the office has not offered incentives to encourage positive change.

Travel Frequently and Meet with Foreign Governments and Embassies in Washington: The new Ambassador should travel regularly to priority countries where religious issues impact U.S. interests and policy. This is essential both to advocate for U.S. human rights concerns and to contribute to our understanding of developments overseas.

Develop Public Diplomacy Exchanges to Strengthen Moderates, especially in the Muslim World: Religious dialogue and interfaith conferences can be excellent "smart power" tools to develop closer ties with moderate Muslims, especially in the aftermath of the Bush years. Public diplomacy exchanges in both directions can help reinforce to Muslim audiences the strong U.S. commitment to equal rights and dignity for all, including religious minorities, as well as the vitality of our pluralistic, multi-faith democracy. Weeklong exchange programs should be expanded to bring faith leaders and officials from target countries to the U.S. in order to promote mutual understanding and respect for minority rights. The Administration can recruit distinguished American religious leaders and retired Members of Congress to travel overseas as Goodwill Envoys to join in religious dialogue. This approach will pay far greater dividends than a punitive one.

Participate Actively in Constituent Outreach: In addition to establishing broad ties with USG colleagues and foreign counterparts, the new Ambassador needs to repair frayed relations with interested Members of Congress, such as the House Task Force on Religious Freedom, and the Commission on International Religious Freedom. Committing to regular meetings with members of these bodies is essential. The Ambassador and staff should regularly meet with and appear before gatherings of important American religious communities of all traditions. The office should annually join celebrations of Yom Kippur and the Seder, Iftar and the Eid, Christmas and Easter, as well as important celebrations of other faith traditions. The Ambassador should actively participate in public outreach in close coordination with the President's Council on Faith-based and Community Partnerships.