

Remarks of Senator Barack Obama
(As prepared for delivery)
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Zanesville, Ohio

You know, faith based groups like East Side Community Ministry carry a particular meaning for me. Because in a way, they're what led me into public service. It was a Catholic group called The Campaign for Human Development that helped fund the work I did many years ago in Chicago to help lift up neighborhoods that were devastated by the closure of a local steel plant.

Now, I didn't grow up in a particularly religious household. But my experience in Chicago showed me how faith and values could be an anchor in my life. And in time, I came to see my faith as being both a personal commitment to Christ and a commitment to my community; that while I could sit in church and pray all I want, I wouldn't be fulfilling God's will unless I went out and did the Lord's work.

There are millions of Americans who share a similar view of their faith, who feel they have an obligation to help others. And they're making a difference in communities all across this country – through initiatives like Ready4Work, which is helping ensure that ex-offenders don't return to a life of crime; or Catholic Charities, which is feeding the hungry and making sure we don't have homeless veterans sleeping on the streets of Chicago; or the good work that's being done by a coalition of religious groups to rebuild New Orleans.

You see, while these groups are often made up of folks who've come together around a common faith, they're usually working to help people of all faiths or of no faith at all. And they're particularly well-placed to offer help. As I've said many times, I believe that change comes not from the top-down, but from the bottom-up, and few are closer to the people than our churches, synagogues, temples, and mosques.

That's why Washington needs to draw on them. The fact is, the challenges we face today – from saving our planet to ending poverty – are simply too big for government to solve alone. We need all hands on deck.

I'm not saying that faith-based groups are an alternative to government or secular nonprofits. And I'm not saying that they're somehow better at lifting people up. What I'm saying is that we all have to work together – Christian and Jew, Hindu and Muslim; believer and non-believer alike – to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

Now, I know there are some who bristle at the notion that faith has a place in the public square. But the fact is, leaders in both parties have recognized the value of a partnership between the White House and faith-based groups. President Clinton signed legislation that opened the door for faith-based groups to play a role in a number of areas, including helping people move from welfare to work. Al Gore proposed a partnership between Washington and faith-based groups to provide more support for the least of these. And

President Bush came into office with a promise to “rally the armies of compassion,” establishing a new Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives.

But what we saw instead was that the Office never fulfilled its promise. Support for social services to the poor and the needy have been consistently underfunded. Rather than promoting the cause of all faith-based organizations, former officials in the Office have described how it was used to promote partisan interests. As a result, the smaller congregations and community groups that were supposed to be empowered ended up getting short-changed.

Well, I still believe it’s a good idea to have a partnership between the White House and grassroots groups, both faith-based and secular. But it has to be a real partnership – not a photo-op. That’s what it will be when I’m President. I’ll establish a new Council for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships. The new name will reflect a new commitment. This Council will not just be another name on the White House organization chart – it will be a critical part of my administration.

Now, make no mistake, as someone who used to teach constitutional law, I believe deeply in the separation of church and state, but I don’t believe this partnership will endanger that idea – so long as we follow a few basic principles. First, if you get a federal grant, you can’t use that grant money to proselytize to the people you help and you can’t discriminate against them – or against the people you hire – on the basis of their religion. Second, federal dollars that go directly to churches, temples, and mosques can only be used on secular programs. And we’ll also ensure that taxpayer dollars only go to those programs that actually work.

With these principles as a guide, my Council for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships will strengthen faith-based groups by making sure they know the opportunities open to them to build on their good works. Too often, faith-based groups – especially smaller congregations and those that aren’t well connected – don’t know how to apply for federal dollars, or how to navigate a government website to see what grants are available, or how to comply with federal laws and regulations. We rely too much on conferences in Washington, instead of getting technical assistance to the people who need it on the ground. What this means is that what’s stopping many faith-based groups from helping struggling families is simply a lack of knowledge about how the system works.

Well, that will change when I’m President. I will empower the nonprofit religious and community groups that do understand how this process works to train the thousands of groups that don’t. We’ll “train the trainers” by giving larger faith-based partners like Catholic Charities and Lutheran Services and secular nonprofits like Public/Private Ventures the support they need to help other groups build and run effective programs. Every house of worship that wants to run an effective program and that’s willing to abide by our constitution – from the largest mega-churches and synagogues to the smallest store-front churches and mosques – can and will have access to the information and support they need to run that program.

This Council will also help target our efforts to meet key challenges like education. All across America, too many children simply can't read or perform math at their grade-level, a problem that grows worse for low-income students during the summer months and afterschool hours. Nonprofits like Children's Defense Fund are working to solve this problem. They hold summer and afterschool Freedom Schools in communities across this country, and many of their classes are held in churches.

There's a lot of evidence that these kinds of partnerships work. Take Youth Education for Tomorrow, an innovative program that's being run by churches, faith-based schools, and others in Philadelphia. To help narrow the summer learning gap, the YET program hires qualified teachers who help students with reading using proven learning techniques. They hold classes four days a week after school and during the summer. And they monitor progress closely. The results have been outstanding. Children who attended a YET center for at least six months improved nearly 2 years in reading ability. And the average high school student gained a full grade in reading level after just three months.

That's the kind of real progress that can be made when we empower faith-based organizations. And that's why as President, I'll expand summer programs like this to serve one million students. This won't just help our children learn, it will help keep them off the streets during the summer so they don't turn to crime.

And my Council for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships will also have a broader role – it will help set our national agenda. Because if we are going to do something about the injustice of millions of children living in extreme poverty, we need interfaith coalitions like the Let Justice Roll campaign standing up for the powerless. If we're going to end genocide and stop the scourge of HIV/AIDS, we need people of faith on Capitol Hill talking about how these challenges don't just represent a security crisis or a humanitarian crisis, but a moral crisis as well.

We know that faith and values can be a source of strength in our own lives. That's what it's been to me. And that's what it is to so many Americans. But it can also be something more. It can be the foundation of a new project of American renewal. And that's the kind of effort I intend to lead as President of the United States.