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HEADLINE: Obama adds final names to faith–based council

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By Religion News Service

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WASHINGTON – President Obama named nine advisers to the White House office for religious and community groups on Monday, adding a gay rights leader, an Orthodox Jew, a black bishop and others to an eclectic 25–person council.

The bulk of the council, which will advise Obama on certain domestic and foreign policy issues, was appointed last month when the president unveiled his revamped White House Office of Faith–based and Neighborhood Partnerships.

The following people were added on Monday to the Advisory Council on Faith–based and Neighborhood Partnerships:

Anju Bhargava, founder of the Asian Indian Women of America

Bishop Charles Blake, presiding bishop of the Church of God in Christ

The Rev. Peg Chamberlin, president–elect of the National Council of Churches

Nathan Diament, director of public policy for the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America

Harry Knox, director of the religion program of the Human Rights Campaign

Dalia Mogahed, executive director of the Gallup Center for Muslim Studies

Anthony Picarello, general counsel for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops

Nancy Ratzan, president of the National Council of Jewish Women

The Rev. Sharon Watkins, general minister and president of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

Council members, who will serve one–year renewable terms, will advise Obama on coordinating government programs

with local community groups, according to the White House. Obama has named four priorities for the faith–based and neighborhood office: poverty and abortion reduction; responsible fatherhood and promoting interfaith dialogue abroad.

In picking a diverse council, Obama fulfilled a campaign pledge to listen to an array of religious voices, said the Rev. Jennifer Butler, executive director of Faith in Public Life, a progressive think tank in Washington. The council includes noted conservatives, like the Rev. Frank Page, a former president of the Southern Baptist Convention, and high–profile liberals, like Fred Davie, the openly gay senior adviser for the non–profit Public/Private Ventures.

"There's always a temptation to just get people on board who agree with you on everything," she said. "But

Obama is sticking to his word that he wants to bring diverse Americans together to talk about even some of the most controversial issues of the day."

Whether the council can get anything done is another matter, said Ira Lupu, a professor at the George Washington University School of Law who tracks government partnerships with faith-based groups.

"They'll meet and have task forces and issue reports," he said. "The question is whether they can say anything in their reports that will actually move government policy."

Gay rights leaders said they were heartened by the addition of Knox to the council, but remain ambivalent about the faith-based program in general, especially since the White House has yet to decide whether groups that take federal money can discriminate in hiring.

"I am relieved to see good colleagues on the council," said the Rev. Rebecca Voelkel of the *National Gay and Lesbian Task Force*. "But we need to see President Obama on a concrete level putting his language of inclusion and justice for (lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender) folks in practice."

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Highlights: National Gay and Lesbian Task Force