

Evangelical Leaders Meet and Decide to Back Sen. John McCain

More than 90 evangelical leaders decided to support Sen. John McCain at a meeting in Denver on Tuesday.



[] More than 90 evangelical leaders representing millions of conservative Christians met in Denver on Tuesday to lament the condition of the religious conservative movement and to conclude they should get behind Sen. John McCain even if they didn't like everything about him as a candidate.

"The alternative is so bad we must support John McCain," said Phyllis Schlafly, founder and president of Eagle Forum, adding that the leaders should have held a strategy meeting in 2001 when it was clear Vice President Dick Cheney wouldn't run for president instead of waiting until four months before the 2008 election.

Mostly white and middle-aged, the group was called together by Mathew Staver, president of Liberty Counsel and dean of the law school at Liberty University.

"Our shared conservative evangelical values and our concern about judicial activism compelled us to unite around the presidential candidate who most closely aligns with us," Staver said. "That candidate is obviously Sen. John McCain. United we will move forward to advance our values in the short- and long-term. We are committed to a transgenerational, multiethnic and multiracial conservative movement."

Various speakers lamented the lack of a unified strategy that had evangelicals supporting various primary candidates and the fact that their message does not seem to resonate with younger voters, African-Americans or Hispanics in the same way Sen.

Barack Obama's does.

More than an hour was spent listening to younger leaders tell the group that religious conservatives must be perceived "to care" about social issues and the environment to appeal to young people who are voting for the first time.

Obama has reached out to evangelical leaders more than McCain, a fact that irked some at the meeting. But others said they must support McCain regardless because an Obama presidency would mean passage of highly liberal policies that would probably allow "same-sex marriage," severely hurt religious freedom and ensure the appointment of only judges who would keep abortion on demand as the law of the land.

Rick Scarborough, founder and president of Vision America, predicted that laws would be passed that would essentially criminalize basic Christian beliefs.

Jim Garlow, lead pastor of Skyline Church in San Diego, who is rallying pastors regarding the California marriage amendment, quoted 2 Timothy 1:7, a verse that says God did not give Christians a spirit of fear. But he said California pastors are being motivated by the fact that if a law passes forcing them to marry same-sex couples, they may go to jail if they defy it.

Alveda King, niece of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and Phil Burress, president of Citizens for Community Values in Ohio, each reported on meetings they had with McCain.

Burress said he grilled McCain on his beliefs and has decided to support him. After the McCain meeting Burress sent an e-mail to supporters that he read to the Denver group.

The e-mail said in part: "I was once one of those people who said 'no way' to Sen. John McCain as President. No longer. The stakes are too high. And if Obama wins I need to be able to get up on November 5th, look at myself in the mirror, and when I pray, say, 'Lord, I did all that I could.'" The full text of the email and a related news story are included in The Strang

Report.

In Denver, Burress told the group: "I thought the difference between Bush and Kerry was enormous," referring to the 2004 presidential election. "But the difference between McCain and Obama is like the Grand Canyon."

Gary Glenn, head of the American Family Association for Michigan, said he felt conservative Christians would be more enthusiastic for McCain if he put former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee on the ballot as vice president. He suggested that the group approve a motion recommending this, which would be hand carried to McCain. It was decided to have a committee approve the wording and e-mail to the participants to sign.

Glenn asked for a show of hands of who would sign the document. Most of those in the group raised their hands.

Sarah Huckabee, Mike Huckabee's daughter, attended the meeting but made no comment.

Earlier Staver had tried to get the group to approve a 10-point "Declaration of American Values." A couple of the points regarding free trade stirred up some controversy. The group assigned David Barton, founder and president of WallBuilders, and Staver to work on the wording and e-mail it to participants to approve later.

Donald Hodel, former president of the Christian Coalition and Focus on the Family, told the group they must work for the long-term but engage in the short-term, referring to electing McCain this fall. He also pointed out the importance of electing conservatives to the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate who would protect conservative values.

Hodel also predicted that McCain would win and said conservative Christians needed access to the White House during a McCain administration.

Marc Nuttle, an attorney from Oklahoma and author of the book *Moment of Truth* (Frontline), also quoted statistics that showed McCain would win in the Electoral College.

Others privately said they feared an Obama landslide. One participant said he couldn't imagine anything worse. "Obama has done the impossible," he said. "He's made Hillary Clinton look good to Christian conservatives."