

White House Taps Baptist Woman to Head Faith-Based Office

Melissa Rogers, former general counsel for the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, has been named the director of the Obama administration's faith-based office.

Rogers will lead the White House Office of Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships, an office first opened by President George W. Bush in 2001 and continued under President Barack Obama. A focus of the office under both administrations has been encouraging partnerships between public and private entities to help meet the nation's social service needs.

A 2010 executive order issued by Obama addressed many of the church-state separation concerns voiced by critics of the Office. It amended prior federal policy by clarifying the government's responsibility to ensure that partnerships are on secure legal grounds and do not violate the First Amendment's ban on government promotion of religion. It incorporated many of the recommendations made by a task force Rogers led that was charged with reforming the office. That task force was composed of a group of religious and community leaders, including BJC Executive Director J. Brent Walker.

Walker lauded Rogers' selection.

"I am so happy for Melissa, and proud of her, too," Walker said. "Her leadership in the church-state field—as the BJC's general counsel and as chair of the task force charged with reforming the office—has made her the perfect choice to fill this important position in the Obama administration.

"Melissa possesses a keen understanding of the First Amendment's religion clauses and is sensitive to practical issues of their application," Walker said.

BJC General Counsel K. Hollyn Hollman, who succeeded Rogers, said she looks forward to Rogers' leadership in the White House office.

"Since the opening of the faith-based office, the Baptist Joint Committee's focus has been safeguarding the standards that make private-public partnerships successful and consistent with constitutional standards that protect the religious liberty of individuals and social service providers," Hollman said. "As a proven leader and expert on church-state law, Melissa is the most knowledgeable and capable person I can imagine to lead at this time.

"I am hopeful she will be able to provide leadership throughout the implementation of the Obama administration reforms as well as offer thoughtful consideration for any additional reforms," Hollman said.

Rogers has served as director of the Wake Forest University School of Divinity Center for Religion and Public Affairs and as a nonresident senior fellow at The Brookings Institution. She also teaches courses on church-state relations and Christianity and public policy within the divinity school. Rogers previously served as the executive director of the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life in Washington, D.C.

She has co-authored a case book on religion and law for Baylor University Press, *Religious Freedom and the Supreme Court*. During her tenure as BJC General Counsel from 1999 to 2000, Rogers helped lead a diverse coalition that was instrumental in bringing about the enactment of the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act of 2000.

Rogers earned her law degree from the University of Pennsylvania Law School, where she was a member of the National Moot Court Team and a Legal Writing Instructor. She graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Baylor University.

Rogers succeeds Joshua DuBois, who stepped down from the office in February to teach, write a book and launch an organization.