

LDS Church unlikely to participate in Obama's faith-based initiatives

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President Barack Obama will use today's National Prayer Breakfast in Washington, D.C., to announce his faith-based initiatives, which reportedly will be directed by religious leaders including a former president of the Southern Baptist Convention, a Jewish rabbi and an African-American bishop.

A Mormon is unlikely to be among those leaders.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has operated an "effective welfare and humanitarian program for more than 60 years without government funding," spokesman Scott Trotter said Wednesday, signaling the church also is unlikely ever to accept federal money under Obama's initiatives.

That stance continues the approach taken by the church in 2001, when President Bush created the first faith-based initiative.

"We like to do [our welfare projects] on our own," the late President Gordon B. Hinckley said at the time. "Once the government is involved, regulations follow."

Trotter said Mormon leaders do not object to the government trying to "strengthen the efforts of other churches in welfare and social services."

But other Utah-based faiths are also wary of any regulations Obama may attach to federal money, such as any rule that would prohibit grant recipients from limiting hiring to those who share their faith.

During Obama's campaign, he pledged to allow churches to restrict hiring in the nontaxpayer-funded portions of their programs, as long they followed laws prohibiting hiring choices based on sexual orientation in the federally funded portions, according to The Associated Press.

Religious leaders will monitor whether he keeps that promise.

The Rev. Gregory Johnson, president of Utah's Standing Together, said most Evangelicals would likely forgo federal funds if it meant surrendering control over hiring. "We do believe we should have the right to self-identify," he said. "We can't be true to who we are if we violate [our convictions and morals]."

Others in Utah welcome Obama's program even with potential regulations.

Leslie Whited, executive director of Lutheran Social Service of Utah, can't foresee rule changes that would cause her agency to refuse federal money.

"We try to create a welcome for every person who walks through our doors," said Whited, whose agency provides refugee services, disaster funds, international adoptions and other programs.

Potential employees are judged by their qualifications, not their faith or sexual orientation, she said.

Whitehead hopes the new administration will consider religious agencies as integral to its efforts. She was encouraged by the symbolism of Obama's actions on Martin Luther King Jr. Day, when he wielded a paintbrush at a faith-based charity.

"We [faith groups] are always there, quietly working behind the scenes out of our belief systems," she said. "I'm not sure we're always thought of in planning government programs."

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