

Obama puts 'mutual responsibility' at heart of campaign

Mary Barron | Aug. 29, 2008



Denver

Barack Obama accepted his party's nomination for president Thursday by renewing the call for mutual responsibility at the heart of his campaign — a call that has animated his political strategy since his days organizing troubled neighborhoods from church basements in Chicago.

“That’s the promise of America — the idea that we are responsible for ourselves, but that we also rise or fall as one nation; the fundamental belief that I am my brother’s keeper; I am my sister’s keeper,” Obama said. “That’s the promise we need to keep. That’s the change we need right now.”

His speech, titled “The American Promise”, capped a Democratic National Convention that has sought a new emphasis within the party on faith and values. Religious Democrats held an unprecedented four faith caucuses, organized by the party’s Faith in Action leader, the Rev. Leah Daughtry, and moderated by Obama’s faith outreach team.

The shift suggests a new moment of openness within the party to men and women of faith, including Catholics, who in turn have taken on a more active role lobbying for religious values and a faith-based progressive agenda that goes far beyond the traditional hot-button issues of abortion and gay marriage.

Obama promised better governmental cooperation in helping Americans overcome their struggles and achieve their dreams, contrasting his governing philosophy with the Bush administration’s attitude, which he characterized as “You’re on your own.” But he also called on individuals, specifically those Democrats who have made him their nominee, “to recover what John F. Kennedy called our ‘intellectual and moral strength.’”

He outlined plans for programs consistent with social justice values that Catholic groups have brought to the fore, and he also discussed hot-button religious issues formerly exploited by Republican campaigns to claim religious voters for their own.

Many have praised Obama for his abilities, part of the toolkit of a community organizer, to find common ground among divergent views. On those divisive issues, he proposed a search for areas of agreement.

New platform language geared toward providing support for pregnant women in an effort to reduce the numbers of abortions — in ways studies suggest will be effective — have already come out of that process. Similarly,

Obama suggested that while people disagree on same-sex marriage, the common ground should include efforts to ensure that gay and lesbian people do not suffer discrimination and are not barred from the kinds of things, like visiting the person they love in the hospital, that other couples take for granted.

He promised affordable, accessible health care for all and referenced his plans to provide money for college students in exchange for their participation in service programs in their communities.

In the area of economic justice, Obama said he would stop the current practice of giving tax breaks to corporations that ship jobs overseas and would start giving them to companies that create good jobs here. He said he would eliminate capital gains taxes for small businesses and start-ups and would cut taxes for 95 percent of working families.

He plans to invest \$150 billion over the next decade in affordable, renewable sources of energy like wind and solar power and new biofuels, creating new jobs in the process.

Dr. Patrick Whelan, a physician who heads the 4,000-member Catholic Democrats organization, based in Cambridge, Mass., said he felt "a real excitement in the air" for religious groups as the convention wrapped up.

"It will be interesting to see how much the candidate sets the tone for American Christianity," he said. "His style is so different from what George Bush projects into the public sphere."

Obama's appeal to young people could become an engine of rejuvenation for faith as well, he said.

Democratic Party Chairman Howard Dean made an appearance at the final faith caucus of the convention and said he was thrilled that his party had moved past the point of feeling that religion shouldn't be discussed because of its potential to be divisive.

Because the Democrats are such a diverse party "we speak differently about our faith, but that doesn't mean it isn't important," he said. "We'll let the voters decide which party best tries to live those values every day."

(Mary Barron is a freelance writer from Colorado who is covering the Democratic Party for NCR during this year's presidential race.)

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