

President's Letter

Faith in Government?

A look at President Bush and faith-based Initiatives

By Gary Reiersen

President George W. Bush's creation of a White House Office of Faith-based and Community Initiatives and his comments about government grants going to faith-based groups has created widespread, and at times heated, discussion. I think it is important to note what is not new about President Bush's initiative.

First, grants by federal, state, county, or city governments to faith-based organizations for non-sectarian purposes, i.e., where religious content is incidental, are not new. The first grant made to a non-profit organization in the United States went to the Sisters of Charity in Washington, D.C. to take care of the elderly in the 1820s. The Greater Minneapolis Council of Churches (GMCC) receives about 18 percent of its funding each year from all four levels of government.

Approximately half the budget of Catholic Charities, 70 percent of Lutheran Social Services, and over three-quarters of Volunteers of America comes from government contracts. Our motivation is like that of a maxim recently attributed to Catholic Charities: We don't do what we do because the people we serve are Catholic or because we want them to be Catholic, but because we are Catholic.

Second, charitable choice, a provision of the welfare reform legislation, which opened up the possibility of government grants going to local congregations serving those moving from welfare to work, is not new. The possibility of such grants, under the provisions of the 1996 federal legislation, gave the opportunity to seek waivers from government units from equal opportunity hiring practices and other restrictions commonly placed on non-profit organizations contracting with government. To my knowledge, no group in Minnesota has requested or been granted waivers and no local congregations have requested or received grants. Texas, however, has had both, and those grants are being contested in the courts.

Third, what faith-based groups bring to their work is not new. Among other things, faith-based groups bring the leveraging of extraordinary resources in the people-power of its members through volunteer service.



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GMCC, for example, has 30,000 volunteers whose over 300,000 hours of volunteer service each year is valued at \$4.7 million by the Minnesota Office of Citizenship and Volunteer Service.

Faith-based groups also usually have very low overhead costs. GMCC's was under 8 percent last year, general administration and fund-raising combined.

And faith-based groups produce solid outcomes in a variety of key areas with the most challenging issues, e.g., recidivism reduction, drug and alcohol treatment, school truancy and performance, etc.

So what could be new about the President's proposal? Bush spokesman Ari Fleischer said Bush would seek to fund only the "community service aspects" of faith-based organizations and not the "religious aspects." That would not be new.

But some things could be new about the President's proposals: Grants to local congregations — with or without waivers — for a broad range of human services, not just welfare reform. Grants to programs with significant religious content. A Minnesota Office of Faith-based and Community Initiatives, suggested by Bush for each state. Grants from federal or state offices of faith-based and community initiatives directly to local efforts or additional funds flowing through county or city budgets to local faith-based programs.

The proof, I believe, will be in the pudding. That is, will the final budget to pass Congress and be signed into law contain funds to implement any of these new elements? Or will faith-based programs compete for already existing grants to non-faith-based programs?

The key question in all this, I think, is this: If faith-based programs with significant religious content produce the results society wants, should they be funded by government?

There have been a myriad of other quite appropriate questions which have been raised by others. Wouldn't grants to faith-based organizations silence the prophetic voices of religious organizations challenging government actions, an historic role of the faith community? Will all faith groups, including Hare Krishna and the Nation of Islam, be eligible for funding? (The Star Tribune editorial of February 21, 2001, put forth this important question very well.) Shouldn't the determiner of social service delivery be grounded not in faith but in good research, accountability for the spending of the money, and the production of documented outcomes? Should the money go to programs that contain mandatory religious activities? Wouldn't religious groups, in accepting government grants, be likely to water down their religious content and thereby lose their souls?

There are many questions and much discussion (and probably court cases as well) which lie ahead for all sectors of our society in reviewing the President's proposals. It should be an interesting discussion and one vitally important for us all to weigh in on.

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