

COLUMNISTS

Faith-based program needs careful approach

One of the most widely discussed planks in the new president's platform is his call for federal aid to so-called faith-based charitable and service organizations and agencies.

In his second week in office, President Bush established a new White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives to serve as a liaison to nonprofit groups and to identify exemplary programs that might serve as national models. He also established centers at the Departments of Justice, Education, Labor, Health and Human Services, and Housing and Urban Development to insure that these departments cooperate with religious and secular nonprofit organizations.

The president's program is not exclusive to the Republican philosophy of government. Even during the Clinton administration, the Department of Housing and Urban Development, under then-Secretary Henry Cisneros, started the first federal religion-based office in 1994.

Nevertheless, President Bush's initiative has divided members of the political and religious communities. Significantly, the divisions do not follow along the usual Democratic/Republican, liberal/conservative, or religious/secular fault lines. Advocates and skeptics alike defy easy categorization.

While many religious leaders welcome the Bush administration's determination to assist them in their service to the poor, the needy, and the marginalized, other



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essays in theology

religious leaders look askance at this new faith-based initiative because of their fear that (1) the federal government might intrude in an unwelcome manner into the internal religious operations of their groups and agencies; (2) in order to secure federal subsidies, religious organizations might be tempted to dilute or downplay their spiritual message and ministry to the needy as well as their prophetic criticisms of the government itself; (3) faith-based organizations might be smothered in bureaucratic paperwork; and (4) the government might use this aid as an excuse to reduce traditional governmental programs that are essential to the well-being of the nation and of its most vulnerable citizens.

Many political figures, on the other hand, think that it is high time that the federal government lift the barrier against support of worthy causes sponsored and carried out by religious agencies. They make the argument that many faith-based programs, staffed by highly

motivated, selfless people, have done a far better job of helping people in need than governmental programs that ignore the vast spiritual resources that can contribute mightily to healing and rehabilitation.

Many others in the political arena, however, express concern about the intrusion of the government into the private realm of religion, and of religion into the public realm of government.

Some ask if the new president is reaching out to disaffected African-American church leaders — Democrats by habit, but social conservatives by conviction — in order to improve his political standing with that particular constituency.

The photo in most papers the day after the president established the new White House office had a disproportionately large number of black ministers standing behind Mr. Bush, but few, if any, recognizable faces from the Catholic Church, the mainline Protestant and Episcopal churches, and the Jewish community. Why were they not also invited?

Will the Bush administration play favorites with various religious communities, channeling funds especially to evangelical and fundamentalist Protestant groups that have been key elements of the Christian Coalition and the base of the Republican Party?

Will tax dollars be spent on programs that discriminate in hiring and firing?

How far will the government go in monitoring and policing religious organizations that are accused of abuses, such

as requiring their clients to study the Bible and pray to Jesus? Will religious organizations then challenge such government scrutiny as a violation of the First Amendment?

Many assume that a majority of Americans favor government aid to religious groups that help people in need. When pressed, however, 23 percent say that it is a good idea only if the faith-based programs avoid religious messages, and 31 percent say it is simply a bad idea. More than half, therefore, are either opposed outright or willing to give only qualified support.

What this clearly suggests is that the matter of federal aid to faith-based groups and organizations is far more complex than it first appears. Where people stand on this issue does not necessarily tell us anything about their political party or ideology, or whether they are persons of religious faith.

Consequently, the best advice one can offer to the Bush administration is to proceed with extreme caution and with as little political baggage as possible. For starters, the circle of advisers from the religious communities themselves must be as broadly representative as possible.

For Catholics, that means a circle wider than Father Robert Sirico, head of the conservative Acton Institute, or individuals associated with the various conservative think-tanks in Washington.

Father McBrien is a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame.

Kids' answers from page 7:
M. Midian, O. oil, S. snake, E. Egypt, S. Sinai

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