

HIRING BY FAITH

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This issue has already stalled faith-based legislation in the House and Senate and is currently holding up legislation for Head Start programs that are often run locally by church groups or conducted in churches. A bill before the House would allow religious organizations involved in Head Start to be exempt from the federal nondiscrimination hiring practices to hire teachers of similar faith traditions.

The problem here and in other cases is that federal laws are not clear about hiring practices for faith-based groups that receive federal funding, according to Jim Towey, director of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives.

"Congress currently has a thicket of laws that are very confusing at the street level for providers of social services," Towey said in a conference call with reporters June 24, the day before his office released a nine-page booklet to members of Congress on "Protecting the Civil Rights of and Religious Liberty of Faith-Based Organizations: Why Religious Hiring Rights Must Be Preserved."

The booklet makes the argument that faith-based groups should be able to "take their faith into account when they make employment decisions," just as groups such as the



Reuters/CNS

President George W. Bush, backed by representatives of charitable groups, urges the Senate on April 11, 2002, to support legislation that would strengthen the works of U.S. charities. The president spoke on his Faith-Based and Community Initiatives program from the White House. One way the president wants to strengthen charities is to allow faith-based social-service organizations that receive federal funds to hire their employees based on religious beliefs.

World Wildlife Fund and Planned Parenthood, both recipients of federal funds, hire employees that share like-minded philosophies.

For some groups, this clarification would be welcome.

The Rev. Ronald J. Sider, head of Evangelicals for Social Action, a group based in Wynnewood, Pa., that encourages evangelical Christians

to work with the poor, said that the "right of religious organizations to select staff on the basis of religious belief is an essential element of religious freedom."

Father J. Bryan Hehir, president of Catholic Charities USA, doesn't see the current push from the White House as making any "sweeping changes" to the way faith-based

groups already do business. He said they need to be able to "hire in such a way to keep the identity of the organization," which is already guaranteed by the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

For others, the faith stipulation sends up its share of red flags. Predictably, those opposed to faith-based legislation in the first place aren't happy with the extra push to preserve religious hiring rights.

Americans United for Separation of Church and State called the new campaign "an appalling endorsement of government-approved job bias." And the group's executive director, the Rev. Barry Lynn, said "most religious charities that provide social services don't discriminate in hiring, so it's perplexing that the White House is pushing ahead with this controversial policy."

Trinitarian Father Stan De Boe, justice and peace director of the Conference of Major Superiors of Men, is likewise concerned about the heightened pressure to allow religious groups to hire in-house, so to speak.

"How does it promote the mission (of the faith-based group) to exclude better qualified people" and merely look to hire those of the same beliefs? he asked CNS.

The priest said major social service providers, such as Catholic Relief Services and Catholic Charities, hire employees of diverse faiths, but stressed that the organizations "don't lack a Catholic identity."

Or as David Krug, executive director of Port Ministries, a Catholic social-service program in Chicago, put it: "We have the League of Nations here," referring to the background of the 30 employees who run the program's shelters, mobile soup kitchen and tutorial centers.

"We look to hire people based on the needs we have," he said.

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