

Theocracy Alert

Deepening the faith

Bush and Congress aim to institutionalize Faith-Based Initiative

By Bill Berkowitz

Online Journal Guest Writer

August 6, 2005 ([WorkingForChange](#))—One of the first orders of business for George W. Bush in January 2001 was to establish a White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, the cornerstone social policy of his presidency. At a ceremony attended by numerous religious leaders, Bush announced executive orders that instructed the Departments of Health and Human Services, Labor, Justice, Education and Housing and Urban Development to set up Centers for Faith-Based and Community Initiatives within their agencies.

That done, Bush moved to cement his executive actions in congressional legislation. There he was rebuffed, however, over objections that government money would be used for religious proselytization, and that recipients of government grants would be allowed to discriminate in their hiring, based on religion.

Bush called on Senators Rick Santorum (R-PA) and Joseph Lieberman (D-CT) to craft a legislative compromise. When they failed to win a consensus, the president went back to issuing executive orders. Now, House allies are trying to come up with a legislative package that will pass muster. One of the keys to the compromise is a "Sense of the Congress" resolution dealing with the religious hiring question.

Bush seized the bully pulpit: "The indispensable and transforming work of faith-based and other charitable service groups must be encouraged," the president said. "Government cannot be replaced by charities, but it can and should welcome them as partners. We must heed the growing consensus across America that successful government social programs work in fruitful partnership with community-serving and faith-based organizations -- whether run by Methodists, Muslims, Mormons, or good people of no faith at all."

The president laid out an "agenda to enlist, equip, enable, empower and expand the heroic works of faith-based and community groups across America"; groups he referred to as "neighborhood healers."

Despite Congress' failure to pass substantive faith-based legislation, the Bush administration has been steadily advancing the ball. It established the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, and Centers and Task Forces for Faith-based and Community Initiatives in 10 federal agencies and the Corporation for National and Community Service. It has handed out more than \$ 3 billion in grants to a passel of faith-based organizations. It has issued executive orders making it easier for religious organizations to compete for grants, has held numerous training sessions to help religious groups get government grants, and the president has regularly taken to the "bully pulpit" to push the initiative forward.

Now, Bush and his congressional allies are attempting to institutionalize his faith-based initiative through broad-ranging legislation.

Because Bush's Faith-Based Initiative was established through executive orders, the White House Office could be eliminated should a future administration decide to rescind those orders. To obviate this possibility, on March 2, Representative Mark Green (R-WI), introduced H.R. 1054, [The Tools for](#)

[Community Initiatives Act](#). Green's bill "would make the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives... and ten similar federal agency offices a permanent part of the federal government," according to the website of OMB Watch.

The bill would "establish the offices and outlines their responsibilities. It does not include portions of current regulations that address how religious groups handle federal grants. Instead, these issues are included in a non-binding 'Sense of Congress' section, which does not address the issue of hiring on the basis of religion for federally funded jobs."

The provisions of H.R. 1054 would exist "until Congress acted to eliminate them."

OMB reports that the "Sense of Congress" section "is focused primarily on ensuring the right of religious organizations to maintain their religious character when they become federal grantees, and states that federal funds cannot be used for inherently religious activity. It requires that religious activities be offered 'separately in time or location from any program or service supported with direct federal financial assistance, and that participation in any such religious activity must be voluntary for any beneficiary.' By limiting this protection to 'direct' federal funds, the bill legalizes religious discrimination and proselytization for beneficiaries using vouchers."

"Congressman Green thinks faith-based and community organizations have played an instrumental role in helping people," said his press secretary Luke Punzenberger.

"This gives assurance that the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives will stay in place after Bush leaves office. It ensures that under future administrations, the office will stay."

In a late June hearing, entitled "Authorizing the President's Vision: Making Permanent The Faith-Based and Community Initiative -- H.R. 1054, The Tools for Community Initiatives Act," Stanley W. Carlson-Thies, an original staff member of the Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives who is currently the director of Social Policy Studies at The Center for Public Justice, testified in favor of the bill.

Carlson-Thies told members of the House Subcommittee on Criminal Justice, Drug Policy, and Human Resources that he fully supported "codifying the institutional structure and equal treatment principles of the faith-based initiative."

Carlson-Thies said that he "regard[ed]... the faith-based initiative to be highly important for the federal government and in revitalizing our society's efforts to serve the needy and to strengthen families and communities."

While acknowledging that there were still impediments standing in the way of the faith-based initiative, including the "institutional complexities of our social service system, vested interests, bureaucratic inertia, the length of grant and contract cycles, active and passive resistance to change by some officials inside government and some well-funded groups outside of government," and more, "the promise of the faith-based initiative is only beginning to be realized."

The Center for Public Justice, which describes itself as "an independent organization for policy research and civic education, whose mission is to equip citizens, develop leaders, and shape policy," has and is a "subcontractor on several projects funded by the federal government," Carlson-Thies also acknowledged. The center has provided "research and technical assistance products for the HHS [Health and Human services] Center for Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, and training and technical assistance to state commissions and other partners of the Corporation for National and Community Service." He also pointed out that he "also provided research and technical assistance on faith-based policy issues on contract to several states."

The Center for Public Justice has also received nearly half a million dollars from the conservative philanthropies since 1996.

"Unlevel Playing Field: Barriers to Participation by Faith-Based and Community Organizations in Federal Social Service Programs," a seminal White House report issued in 2001, "documented a series of impediments that... hampered faith-based groups seeking federal support," Carlson-Thies said. According to the report, in addition to the mountain of paperwork that tended to overwhelm applicants, the major obstacle faced by faith-based organizations was "an overriding perception by federal officials that close collaboration with religious organizations is legally suspect."

His testimony included both the recognition that some religious groups that received government money had been the target of successful lawsuits because they crossed the line between providing services and religious indoctrination and a batch of specific recommendations for strengthening and expanding the initiative. His comments, however, failed to touch upon one of the more controversial and important questions surrounding the initiative: Do faith-based organizations dealing with social services perform as well as, or outperform, government agencies?

What results is the administration getting for its money? According to the *Washington Monthly's* Amy Sullivan, few if any studies exist that back the president's claims of faith-based success stories. In an article published in the *Monthly* late last year, Sullivan pointed out that the administration had not systematically tracked and "monitor[ed] the effectiveness" of programs run by faith-based organizations.

Josh Taylor, a spokesperson for Rep. Chet Edwards (D-TX), a staunch supporter of the separation of church and state, told Anne Farris, the Washington Correspondent for The Roundtable on Religion and Social Welfare Policy that, "The congressman is not opposed to the concept of the office and he supports allowing faith-based groups to compete for federal money."

"But," Taylor added, Rep. Edwards "adamantly believes faith-based groups receiving federal money should meet three standards -- no direct funding of houses of worship, no proselytizing and no religious discrimination in job hiring."

In addition, Taylor pointed out that Rep. Edwards thinks the bill should have accountability standards written into it. According to Farris, "one amendment under consideration would require an evaluation of the effectiveness of faith-based and community organizations as service providers. At present, the bill does call for each federal agency to submit annual reports on their progress in partnering with such groups, an analysis of barriers they face, and a summary of information provided to faith and community organizations."

Bill Berkowitz is a longtime observer of the conservative movement. His [WorkingForChange](#) column Conservative Watch documents the strategies, players, institutions, victories and defeats of the American Right.