

## **EVANGELICALS NEED CREATIVE COMMON SENSE**

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*Doug Petersen, Ph.D.*

The establishment of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives has created a firestorm of reaction in Washington, DC among the nation's media pundits.

Less than 60 days after President Bush established the Office some conservative Christian activists have nearly succeeded in hamstringing it. They express concerns that government funded religious charities would be forced to surrender their religious mission, be dependent upon the government dole, or run the risk of the State messing in the institution's financial affairs.

It also doesn't help that government grants would be awarded to the Hare Krishnas or Sun Myung Moon's Unification Church. Pat Robertson, one of the most vocal critics of the faith-based initiatives declared that if government funds flowed to "non-western" religious groups, it would create "an intolerable solution."

Not surprisingly, this criticism has emboldened liberal critics. According to Barry Lynn, Executive Director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, the statements from Robertson and others confirm that proposed legislation is "in deep trouble." Lynn pronounced a bipartisan bill, sponsored by Congressmen J.C. Watts (R) and Tony Hall (D), to expand partnerships between government and faith-based programs, "to be dead on arrival."

Unquestionably, the firestorm fueled by both sides has handicapped, at least temporarily, the efforts of the OFCI.

Perhaps in reaction to the sting of unexpected criticism from his anticipated allies, John Dilulio, Director of the OFCI, suggested in a speech to the National Association of Evangelicals that while concerns are understandable, those who have access to the national platform must be careful to speak only for themselves. He cautioned that these leaders should not assume they represent the voices of the thousands of faith-based groups throughout the country who serve the needy.

Prof. Dilulio is right. It is frustrating to hear national evangelical voices trying to jettison President Bush's proposals to empower faith-based organizations.

Pat Robertson's concern that in return for funding, government will demand faith-based charities 'to give up their unique religious activities' is likely unwarranted. Indeed, the language in The Public Services Act regarding Substance Abuse and Treatment Programs, carefully crafted by lawmakers, is explicit. The law guarantees that program participants shall retain . . . control over definition, development, practice, and expression of its religious beliefs. Further guarantees are provided in the Additional Safeguards section: neither the Federal Government nor a State shall require a religious organization to A) alter its form of internal governance; or B) remove religious art, icons, scripture, or other symbols.

As the Congress becomes increasingly sympathetic to government funding of faith-based social services, religious leaders need to use some creative common sense. The failure of the nation's war on drug use should be motivation enough. According

to a recent national poll conducted by the Pew Charitable Trusts, 74% of Americans believe that current anti-drug strategies won't work. Everyone concedes that we need new ideas.

Indeed, there are proactive and creative strategies that work. Take the case of Teen Challenge. For 42 years this faith-based ministry has provided effective and holistic intervention and rehabilitation programs for thousands of young people, adults, and families with life-controlling drug and alcohol addictions. The Teen Challenge Center in Rehrersburg, Pennsylvania owns a horticultural farm staffed by recovering addicts. Each year sales generate revenues exceeding \$250,000; the profits are reinvested. This innovated attitude is also on display at the Teen Challenge Center in Orlando, Florida. While students are receiving drug treatment, they also manage a full service car wash that produces \$35,000 monthly.

These Teen Challenge projects, and others like them, provide work opportunities for the students and additional financial support. Further, these creative common sense ventures illustrate the spirit of "social entrepreneurialism" that President Bush so favors. Logically we should ask how such successful and productive enterprises can be reproduced over and over. There can be little doubt that Bush's proposed "Compassion Capital Fund"--seed money for 'social entrepreneurs'--would multiply these efforts exponentially.

As proposed legislation moves into largely uncharted territory, we cannot lose sight of our common goal: to reduce the problems so pervasive in society. Unquestionably, measures that permit faith-based groups to compete with other private providers for billions of federal dollars will create excitement for some and despair for others. In the meantime, much of the current debate could be reframed around compassionate measures that don't even come close to crossing church-state lines.

After all, the primary function of the Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, according to Dilulio, is to "boost charitable giving, both human and financial." He encourages young people and old to volunteer more of their time and to give more of their money.

Dilulio's call for "unflinching, empirical" documentation by qualified researchers will forge partnerships between University and faith-based organizations where academics can place their considerable expertise at the service of these communities. Already, colleges and universities are offering consultations, certificate programs, and Online courses focusing upon leadership and management of religious nonprofits. Graduate programs and research dissertations will naturally follow. Finally, John Dilulio's emphasis upon 'performance-managed, performance-measured' assessments of faith-based endeavors will set standards and produce best practices for what works and what doesn't.

What this adds up to merits the support and involvement of the community of faith, with or without a penny of public support. As a result, FBOs will enjoy stronger leadership, operate more effective programs, realize an influx of volunteers, and receive more funds from private sources.

We may differ on the perceived risks of direct government funding of faith-based organizations. Certainly we should maintain reasoned and informed discussions, without the polarization of politics, about the implications and issues of the

separation of Church and State. Some may have to opt out. But we also need to use common sense. The Bush proposal and the newly established Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives deserve our critical but loyal support.

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