Faith-based action: Different groups have different agendas

by Arthur E. Farnsley II in the March 14, 2001 issue

President Bush has quickly followed through on his promise to preach the message of faith-based solutions to social problems. He wants to expand “charitable choice” far past its original 1996 parameters. While experts warn against exaggerating how much religious groups can do, the turn to faith-based groups is a fact of life. Federal and state governments are turning to congregations as well as other religious nonprofits to lead community development and deliver social services. Foundations are investing considerable sums in faith-based activities and in research about them.

There is no evidence yet to substantiate or refute the claims of those who are pushing the faith-based initiatives, nor will there be for some time. But even with hard data it will be difficult to judge the success because the many interested parties have very different goals. I realized this most clearly when, long before the election, I invited several Indianapolis community leaders, including local clergy of all races, to discuss congregations’ capacities.

The meeting was interrupted by clergy from a local black Baptist alliance, who were angered by my claim that black churches, along with many other groups, were having trouble writing effective grant proposals or administering and evaluating social programs.

I was tempted to dismiss their concerns as political. They just wanted to get some of the new money, I thought, whereas I was approaching the issue administratively, and as a social scientist. But I realized that the issue of getting government funds is inherently political, and that it’s crucial to understand the perspective of different constituencies.

To the black Baptist pastors, the new reforms provided an opportunity to bring resources earmarked for the African-American community under African-American control. They had labored long for a chance to help allocate the money coming from government and foundations. Now that the chance had arrived, they did not

appreciate someone from outside the community questioning their capacity to administer the money.

In a much-quoted study, University of Arizona researcher Mark Chaves found that African-American churches are five times as likely as white churches to say they would apply for public funding if it were available. Based on the evidence in Indianapolis, one can predict that African-American churches are also more likely actually to apply for such funding. In a recent grant competition meant to solicit religious participation, nearly two-thirds of all the congregations applying were African-American, even though African-Americans make up only 20 percent of the area's population.

This high level of interest fits the historical role of the black church, but it also fits personal beliefs. In a recent survey of Indianapolis residents, African-American respondents were 40 percent more likely than white respondents to describe themselves as "very religious or spiritual." They were more than twice as likely—63 percent to 30 percent—to say that the Bible should be taken literally as the word of God. This higher degree of religiosity translated directly into beliefs about religion's role in secular affairs. On every question about economic or political decisions, from general influence on public policy to specific influence on the minimum wage, between 75 percent and 85 percent of African-Americans said that religion should be involved. On the same battery of questions, whites answered affirmatively only 45 percent to 55 percent of the time.

Answers to a direct question about welfare reform were true to form. Three-quarters of African-Americans said that religious groups should receive state and federal financial support to extend existing social welfare programs or to start new ones. Only 54 percent of whites said the same.

When President Bush says money should be channeled through the faith community, many African-Americans hear a very specific political promise. They hear the offer of an opportunity for the black church to control more of the resources hitherto handled by federal and local government. They see a chance to assume responsibility for development and services that affect their community.

The Bush administration is well aware that shifting funds toward black churches provides a unique opportunity to reach out to African-Americans, only 9 percent of whom voted for him. While some liberals may be alienated by the focus on faith-

based programs, they are not Bush supporters anyhow.

The range of perspectives on faith-based programs can be classified not only in terms of race or ethnicity, but also with respect to people's various agendas. In this regard, I would distinguish four groups. The first of these is made up of economic conservatives whom we might call the shopkeepers. They would like to get government out of the welfare business because they believe smaller, more local organizations will do a better job. They like privatization and they advocate subsidiarity.

Despite the worst fears of liberals, no serious religious or political leaders are arguing that government should simply let the churches take over. Neither John DiIulio, who now heads the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, nor Stephen Goldsmith, the former Indianapolis mayor who will lead the Corporation for National Service, has ever argued for total privatization of community development and social services, though both strongly advocate a new mix of public and private in which congregations figure more prominently.

When the aforementioned shopkeepers hear Bush's message, they imagine a world full of mediating institutions—some religious, some secular—that link civil society with government, the former getting larger while the latter gets smaller. The shopkeepers support faith-based reforms as one promising type of privatization.

A second group is made up of social service and foundation professionals whose job is to promote the common good. We can call this group the servers. Most servers do not ultimately care about the issue of privatization so long as people's lives improve. They care about efficiency and are interested in better outcomes, and they believe that the faith community offers new ideas and solutions. The servers hope that faith-based services will offer positive moral content, attract new volunteers, and draw on the firsthand knowledge of local communities. It is worth noting that some predominantly secular service organizations with religious roots—Goodwill is a prime example—are trying to recover those roots in order to partner with congregations.

When the servers hear the message of faith-based reform, they imagine a bold social experiment to be measured by its objective outcomes. The leader of Indianapolis's premier homelessness coalition falls into this category. When he received a grant to encourage congregational partnerships to provide transitional housing, he saw it as a chance to merge his agenda with that of the churches. He

was surprised to learn that some churches saw it as a chance to further their own mission goals with a new source of funds. He was further surprised to learn that a few churches balked at the idea of being evaluated by objective measures. They especially resisted the administrative urge to quantify their efforts, though “outcomes-based assessment” demands nothing less.

A third group of hearers is the separatists. When they hear talk of faith-based initiatives, they imagine the walls between church and state being dismantled. They foresee public money being used for sectarian purposes, and a world in which the provision of services is linked to religiously approved belief or conduct.

The faith-based reformers tell the separatists not to worry, that secular alternatives are required by law to be available. What they do not tell them, however, is that in the juvenile division of Marion County Superior Court, parents have been encouraged to choose faith-based counseling over services from secular social workers. Those parents, often poor and undereducated, have no institutional power. Faced with the prospect of a child headed for detention, they must essentially invoke their right to secular counseling in order to receive it—an act that takes some nerve under the circumstances.

The fourth group of hearers is made up of salvationists, who imagine faith-based initiatives will offer a multitude of new opportunities to lead people to religious truth. Like the servers, they believe good character and moral conduct are essential to changing individual lives and transforming communities, but they know full well that values do not float free from specific ideas and practices. And they know which ideas and practices change lives.

Many evangelical Christians shy away from partnership with the secular social services and staunchly avoid any entanglement with government. But a different kind of evangelical sees in faith-based reforms an opportunity to press a Christian mission agenda with money from government and foundations. They know that the liberal servers and the conservative shopkeepers who hold the purse strings share some of the separatists’ discomfort, but these salvationists are determined to see how far they can push the envelope.

The 1996 charitable choice legislation specified that religious groups are allowed to display religious symbols and discriminate in hiring while receiving public funds, but cannot evangelize or prosletyze. More explicit interpretation of these guidelines has

not yet been established, but salvationists know what they want. Amy Sherman, who has studied charitable choice and who is also a strong supporter of the program, has said that “the courts have not yet decided what is allowed and what is proscribed under Charitable Choice, but Christians should hope for as broad an interpretation as possible.”

Even within relatively strict interpretations, salvationists are prepared to maneuver. In Indianapolis, when the mayor’s office sponsored a grant program for summer youth programs, some congregations proposed using the money for religious activities that the earmarked dollars (at the time outside the scope of charitable choice) could not legitimately fund. Some of the applicants were informally encouraged to consider programs wherein the government funding paid for the secular program from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., while their own funds paid for a separate program that ran from 3 p.m. to 5 p.m. and might include religious content. Each program would honor the letter of the law, keeping church and state separate, despite the fact that most parents would need to enroll their children in both programs to get adequate child care.

In many ways, the African-American activists who support faith-based reforms represent one large subset of salvationists. Whether white or black, salvationists see in faith-based reforms a chance to forward their mission goals. Each believes that they, more than secular social workers, have what the dispossessed in their communities most need. Each is part of a larger tradition that includes many who distrust public entanglement. Each is apt to measure results not by statistical outcomes, but by one lost sheep at a time.

Faith-based welfare reform is a potential winner for President Bush because it appeals to salvationists, shopkeepers and servers. Separatists balk, and are relying on the courts to buttress the wall between church and state.

Non-Christians might also be excused for casting a wary eye. If enough money flows to Christian providers, it is possible that the quality of secular or non-Christian alternatives will gradually decline, not as the result of central planning or bad intentions, but as the unintended consequence of thousands of individual decisions to choose Christian alternatives. The legal requirement that secular services be available may slowly lose its teeth if those services become demonstrably inferior due to shifts in the funding stream.

For the moment, at least, many groups hear something they like in the promise of faith-based reforms, but for very different reasons. If the evidence in Indianapolis is any guide, those different reasons are likely to be divisive. Some salvationists are uncomfortable with the outcomes-based standards that are essential to the servers. A few chafe under requirements that they keep burdensome records, saying their real work is person-to-person, not administrative minutiae. They sincerely believe that the world is made better when hearts are changed one heart at a time.

No one in government, foundations or traditional service agencies disputes the value of changed hearts, but they are accustomed to managing thousands of cases within the boundaries of limited funding. Utility is evaluated by measuring the good accomplished at specified per-capita costs. Government agencies, especially, cannot afford the luxury of saying that any cost is justified so long as one lost sheep is found. They must evaluate outcomes rationally and bureaucratically.

The servers will never be comfortable with the underlying theological motives of the salvationists. The shopkeepers, many of whom have a libertarian streak, are stuck. They have no problem with salvationists, white or black, pressing their own religious agendas with their own money. However, even the most ideological among the shopkeepers realize that for the foreseeable future churches cannot do the job with their own money alone. Government must continue to subsidize social work and community development being performed by private groups. Some shopkeepers are hesitantly willing to put public money in private hands, but are uneasy about funding the evangelical missions of the salvationists.

Each of these groups is, of course, an ideal type, and most people fall into more than one category. Politics does make strange bedfellows. We might consider whom we will wake up beside when the dust kicked up by President Bush’s armies of compassion begins to settle.