

An 'aggressive' faith-based initiative: Concerns over church-state issues

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A new report by an independent group explains in depth what observers of President Bush's "faith-based initiative" have been noting for years now: that Bush has used his presidential powers to bypass Congress and "aggressively implement the initiative."

The bipartisan Roundtable on Religion and Social Welfare Policy released the 63-page report August 16. It analyzes the lengths taken by the Bush administration to make it easier for pervasively religious groups—including churches, mosques and synagogues—to receive government funding.

"The common perception is that President Bush's Faith-Based Initiative has been stalled by a reluctant Congress," says the report, written by three officials of the Roundtable. "But as this report illustrates, the Bush administration has made concerted use of its executive powers and has moved aggressively through new regulation, funding, political appointees and active public outreach efforts to expand the federal government's partnerships with faith-based social-service providers in ways that don't require congressional approval."

The initiative—designed to increase the amount of social-services funding the government can channel through religious groups—has been the centerpiece of President Bush's domestic agenda. However, disputes in Congress over church-state and civil rights issues related to the initiative have blocked bills to authorize it.

Nonetheless, Bush has "aggressively" implemented the policy through "executive orders, rule changes, managerial realignment in federal agencies, and other prerogatives of his office," according to the report.

Historically, concerns over church-state issues have prompted lawmakers and government agencies to require that any religiously affiliated group receiving government money be essentially secular in the services it provides and the way it

conducts its business. That meant that churches or other strongly religious groups would set up separate nonprofit organizations—such as Catholic Charities or Lutheran Social Services—that had religious goals but operated like secular groups.

Bush officials—and many among his base of support in the conservative Christian community—argued that such rules amounted to “discrimination” against some religious groups. They have repeatedly contended that deeply religious groups could be trusted to use government funds only for secular services—such as drug counseling—while avoiding using such funds to pay for “inherently religious” activities. The latter use, Bush administration officials have conceded, would plainly be unconstitutional.

Therefore, the report says, the White House “has sought to remove barriers to participation by faith-based organizations.” However, it continues, “in so doing, [the administration] may also have weakened longstanding walls preventing religious groups from inserting spiritual activities into secular services.”

For example, the report noted, excluding only “inherently religious” activities from the list of acceptable recipients of government funding was problematic because “the term defines only a set of activities that may never be paid for by direct government expenditure, and suggests a false conclusion that everything that is not ‘inherently religious’ may be paid for with public funds.” As examples of activities that are not “inherently religious” but that could still contain significant religious content, the report pointed to counseling services and education.

Since 2001, the report says, Bush and his administration have proposed or implemented 15 major rule changes enabling the faith-based plan “that together mark a major shift in the constitutional separation of church and state.” The changes included deleting words in Veterans Administration rules that require its grantees to certify they exert “no religious influence” in the services they provide.

Among the report’s other observations:

- Since becoming president, Bush has often devoted the presidential “bully pulpit” to promote the initiative, giving more than 40 speeches touting it and devoting sections of each of his State of the Union addresses to the issue;

- Although Bush officials have repeatedly pointed to the presumed superiority of faith-based social-service providers as reason for funding them, “little research has yet been conducted that is able to show faith-based organizations are more effective than secular organizations in addressing social problems. While more elaborate scientific studies are under way, the White House has relied on largely anecdotal evidence to support the view that faith-based approaches produce better long-term results.”

- There are some inaccuracies in a major study on which Bush officials have relied to prove that federal agencies have discriminated unfairly against religious providers. For example, the 2001 “Unlevel Playing Field” report stated that the Department of Housing and Urban Development had not given grants to any religious provider under a \$20 million home-ownership program.

But in fact the Christian group Habitat for Humanity had received over half of the program’s total funding in fiscal year 2000. “The misinterpretation arose because Habitat was not listed as ‘a primary religious’ organization because it offered ‘essentially secular housing services,’” the Roundtable report said.

The Roundtable is operated by the Rockefeller Institute at the State University of New York at Albany and is funded by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. The full report is available on the group’s Web site at www.religionandsocialpolicy.org. –
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