

Responses to hurricane boost hopes for faith-based funding: Legislative battles ahead

by [Kim Lawton](#) in the [March 21, 2006](#) issue

As criticism of the government's response to Hurricane Katrina continues, praise of faith-based groups that have responded is providing new momentum in a campaign to expand federal funding of religious social services.

Religious groups were some of the first on the Gulf Coast scene, delivering desperately needed help in relief operations last year. Many faith-based groups are still there, taking a high-profile role in rebuilding efforts, which raises the question: Should religious groups get government money for their work?

"If a faith-based group is actually doing the best job at administering a service, why not?" said Pam Pryor, vice president of We Care America, a nonprofit organization that advocates creation of more governmental-religious partnerships. "Katrina definitely proved that these folks know how to do what they do, and they know how to do it quickly," Pryor told the PBS program *Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly*.

But caution was urged by Hollyn Hollman of the Washington-based Baptist Joint Committee, which advocates strict church-state separation. "I think it's very unfortunate that some people would use this tragedy to advance a policy that's been extremely controversial," she said.

President Bush has been implementing his faith-based initiative by using changes in government regulations. But the administration has had less success in persuading lawmakers on Capitol Hill to turn the initiative into law.

Both sides are gearing up for possible new legislative battles. "I think there's wonderful fertile ground for pushing more of the faith-based initiative and embedding it legislatively," Pryor said.

An important step occurred in December when Bush signed a law allowing private schools—including religious schools—to receive federal aid as part of the government's hurricane recovery package.

One priest, Michael Jacques of St. Peter Claver Catholic Church in New Orleans, said such aid is needed now because nearly all of the Catholic schools in the city are operational, compared to less than 15 percent of the public schools. Because of drastic budget woes, however, the Archdiocese of New Orleans announced that it will have to close more than 30 churches and consolidate dozens of parishes and elementary schools.

"This is a real justice issue for me," said Jacques, a longtime supporter of government aid to parochial schools. "It's not just a matter of constitutional things."

While the new law applies only to the current school year, opponents fear it could lead to more widespread voucher programs in the future.

Another controversial question is whether the government should reimburse religious groups for the emergency work they did during Katrina. Louisiana state senator Sharon Weston Broome, a Democrat, is working to make that happen, but so far those reimbursements have been bogged down.

Some groups, including Southern Baptists, say they don't want the government money. The SBC had a massive post-Katrina operation that included providing more than 10 million meals.

Rabbi Stan Zane of Beth Shalom Synagogue in Baton Rouge also says he would not take the money. After Katrina, the synagogue sheltered evacuees and took in additional students at its day school. They rescued Torah scrolls from flooded synagogues and helped reconnect separated families.

The Baptist Joint Committee is promoting private alternatives to government funding, such as the Bush-Clinton Katrina Fund. In December the fund announced that it was giving \$20 million to local faith-based groups.