

Towey leaving helm of faith-based initiatives: Garnerers both plaudits and criticism

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President Bush's lieutenant for promoting government funding for faith-based social programs has announced that he is leaving his post after the end of this month.

Jim Towey, 49, director since 2002 of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, will become president of St. Vincent College, a small Benedictine Catholic school in Latrobe, Pennsylvania.

In his White House role, Towey has pushed hard to boost the faith-based plan—garnering him both plaudits from some religious conservatives and criticism from supporters of church-state separation.

The White House statement from Bush April 18 said that under Towey's leadership the office "applied the compassion of America to help solve some of our most challenging problems," and that "his work on behalf of the poor and the sick has improved lives."

Towey, who holds a law degree, had served for 12 years as the chief U.S. lawyer for the late Mother Teresa and her order of nuns, the Missionaries of Charity.

He told reporters in Washington that he believed the project "will continue to bear fruit for years and years to come, and I thank God for President Bush's leadership on an initiative that has faced a steady headwind from day one."

Towey's tenure, and the office itself, proved controversial. Opponents of direct government funding for pervasively religious charities cited church-state concerns in criticizing Bush's move. Some have successfully sued programs funded under the plan for violating the First Amendment's ban on government endorsement of religion.

In characteristic style, Towey was dismissive of such criticism at his farewell press conference. “This is the death rattle of the voices that were heard when President Bush first took office, because the wall between church and state is still standing,” he said. “But faith-based groups have been welcomed into the public square and the poor have benefited from having access to their effective programs.”

Both his predecessors in the office, John Dilulio and a former Towey aide, David Kuo, ended up criticizing the White House’s handling of the issue after their departures. They and other ex-supporters of the plan have suggested that Bush’s political operatives have simply used it to gain support among religious voters—without actually expanding funding for social services.

Towey’s at times pugnacious rhetoric in defense of the plan has frustrated its critics. For instance, during his departure press conference, Towey twice called those critical of the initiative “secular extremists,” echoing a charge he had made before.

One critic of the program, Holly Hollman of the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, said that that sort of rhetoric is unnecessary. “On several occasions, the BJC voiced its concerns to him and sought ways to work together more constructively,” she said. “Unfortunately, Towey never seemed to recognize that people of faith criticized the initiative precisely because of their faith.”

The Towey announcement prompted another opponent to urge Bush to disband the faith-based office. Welton Gaddy, a Baptist pastor and president of the Washington-based Interfaith Alliance, said in a news conference: “Mr. President, for the sake of religious liberty, please stop mixing religion with politics in the appropriations process and stop violating the Constitution by sponsoring and funding favored religious groups.”

In his own press conference, Towey touted the program’s successes during his tenure, declaring that “the court has upheld repeatedly the initiative [as] constitutional.”

Towey’s claim is not fully accurate, said Chip Lupu, a law professor who monitors the legal state of the initiative for the nonpartisan Roundtable on Religion and Social Welfare Policy. While federal courts have turned away two broad challenges to the entire program, results of recent lawsuits challenging specific religious programs as First Amendment violations have been far more mixed.

“It is true, no court has said the initiative taken as a whole is unconstitutional,” said Lupu, who teaches at George Washington University Law School. “But [Towey] knows that, of the cases in the lower courts that are initiative-related—there are five or six—they’ve lost almost every one.” In addition, he noted, similar lawsuits are pending in other federal courts. *-Associated Baptist Press*