

# Going on faith: Six myths about faith-based initiatives

by [Mark Chaves](#) in the [September 12, 2001](#) issue

The White House initiative on faith-based social services, widely touted as ushering in a new era of partnership between governments and religious organizations, is based on several myths.

*Myth No. 1: Religious organizations face substantial discrimination when competing for government grants and contracts.*

Though occasionally some overzealous bureaucrats demand that as a condition of receiving public funds a Catholic hospital must remove its crucifixes, or that the Salvation Army must not use the word “salvation,” these instances must be weighed against the hundreds, perhaps thousands, of government grants and contracts received over decades both by large religious social service agencies, such as Catholic Charities or the Salvation Army, and by many smaller religious organizations. Approximately 60 percent of Catholic Charities’ budget, and approximately 20 percent of the Salvation Army’s, comes from government sources.

Before any changes were made by charitable-choice legislation or President Bush’s faith-based initiatives, religious social service providers who wished to maintain a religious atmosphere or religious content in their programs—and not all, perhaps not even most, wish to do this—commonly did so openly and with no consequent problems with or interference from the government. In a 1993-94 survey, only a minority (11 percent) of religiously affiliated, government-funded child service agencies reported having to curtail religious activities, and only a minority (22 percent) of publicly funded, religious, international aid agencies reported encountering any sort of problem regarding their religious activities.

Moreover, most, perhaps all, of the activities about which problems were reported were activities such as proselytizing and requiring attendance at worship or at religious instruction that still are prohibited by the “charitable choice” provision included in the 1996 welfare reform legislation and by the “Charitable Choice

Expansion Act” recently passed by the U.S. House of Representatives.

The White House report “Barriers to Participation by Faith-Based and Community Organizations in Federal Social Service Program,” released in August, does not change the basic picture. Indeed, this report, its title notwithstanding, mainly documents just how open the current funding system is to religious organizations.

Throughout the report, the facts are at odds with the rhetoric. The report claims that federal officials are biased against religious organizations, but that bias did not stop Habitat for Humanity—an explicitly religious organization—from receiving over half of a \$20 million funding stream from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Another HUD program is highlighted as an example of outright exclusion of religious organizations from a funding opportunity. This program, which funds residences for the elderly, prohibits religious organizations from being “project owners” but allows them to be “sponsors who initiate a project.” But this appears to be a distinction without a difference; in the 35-year history of this program more than two-thirds of the funded sponsors have been religious organizations.

The White House report also cites percentages of various funding streams going to religious organizations as if these numbers by themselves imply that religious organizations are prevented from competing fairly for these funds. In 2000, for example, 21 percent of the Department of Health and Human Services abstinence education funds went to religious organizations.

But it is impossible to assess whether or not this number should be considered problematic without also knowing how many grant applications, and of what quality, came from religious organizations. In the one instance in which such a benchmark is provided the evidence undermines the claim that antireligious bias is pervasive: 2 percent of the applicants for Department of Labor Welfare-to-Work funds were religious organizations, and religious organizations received 2 percent of the grants. The facts, if not the rhetoric, contained in the White House report make it clear that even six months of diligent searching for antireligious discrimination in five federal agencies has not been able to produce compelling evidence that such discrimination is a major, or even a minor, problem.

*Myth No. 2: Religious congregations—churches, synagogues, mosques—are intensively involved in social service activity.*

The intensity of congregational involvement in social services varies greatly. Regarding food programs, for example, congregations may donate money to a community food bank, supply volunteers for a Meals on Wheels project, organize a food drive every Thanksgiving, or operate independent food pantries or soup kitchens. When it comes to housing, congregations may provide volunteers to do occasional home repair for the needy, assist first-time home buyers with funds, participate in neighborhood redevelopment efforts, or build affordable housing for senior citizens. When serving the homeless, congregations might donate money to a neighborhood shelter, provide volunteers to prepare dinner at a shelter, or actually provide shelter for homeless women and children in the congregation's own building.

Most congregations engage in some social service of this kind, but only a tiny minority actively and intensively engage in such activity. Only 6 percent of congregations have a staff person devoting at least quarter time to social service projects. The median dollar amount spent by congregations directly in support of social service programs is about \$1,200, which is about 3 percent of the median congregation's total budget. In the median congregation, only ten individuals do volunteer work connected with congregational social services. Some congregations intensively engage in social service activity and constitute important social service institutions in their communities, but those congregations are the exception rather than the rule.

*Myth No. 3: Religious organizations are better than secular organizations at delivering social services.*

Although some studies have been made of religious organizations' effectiveness, there are very few systematic comparisons between religious and secular organizations doing similar kinds of work. From the studies we have, it appears that religious nursing homes, for example, might be somewhat more effective than secular nursing homes, but religious child care centers appear to be of lower quality than secular nonprofit alternatives.

few studies have focused on organizations directly relevant for the activities envisioned by charitable choice: those involved in service delivery to the poor or to individuals receiving public assistance. When David Reingold and colleagues compared religious and secular social service agencies in seven Indiana counties, they found the results mixed. On the one hand, the religious organizations are more

likely to have tightened client eligibility criteria in response to welfare reform; are less confident about their ability to improve clients' job skills; and have fewer ties to public funding agencies, to firms that may provide employment opportunities for clients, and to other service providers. On the other hand, the most disadvantaged welfare recipients are more likely to seek assistance from religious than from secular organizations.

In short, we have no basis for assuming that religious organizations in general are likely to be more effective than secular organizations at delivering social services. The most that could be said is that religious organizations may perform better in some arenas and worse in others.

*Myth No. 4: Religious organizations deliver services in a more holistic, personal way, focusing on deep transformation rather than short-term solutions.*

Recent research on the social services of churches, synagogues and mosques suggests congregations are actually more likely to engage in activities that address immediate, short-term needs than in programs requiring sustained involvement to meet longer-term goals. Housing, clothing and especially food projects are much more common than programs dealing with substance abuse, mentoring or job training. Fewer than 5 percent of congregations have programs in any of these latter areas. By comparison, 11 percent have clothing projects, 18 percent have housing or shelter projects and 33 percent have food-related projects. Eight percent of congregations report providing services to homeless people, although there is substantial overlap between this category of activity and the food, clothing and housing or shelter projects.

Congregations certainly play an important role in many communities' social service systems, but their role is generally not that of providing holistic or transformational services. This pattern is found in every extant survey.

Moreover, the initial reports from self-conscious and well-intentioned efforts to involve congregations in more holistic kinds of activities, such as mentoring programs, are not promising. Mississippi's "Faith and Families" program, designed to connect needy families with mentors in religious congregations, proved to be ineffective and is no longer operating. An in-depth case study of a congregation's mentoring effort in Wisconsin found that people in the congregation experienced great difficulty connecting with and knowing how to help the poor people in the

program. This congregation gave up on its mentoring efforts after only seven months, and the larger program of which it was a part, which involved several congregations, folded after three years.

*Myth No. 5: Much faith-based social service activity is isolated from the world of secular and government-funded social service and needs to be better integrated into larger community social service systems.*

A recent national survey of congregations found that collaboration with other organizations already is the norm for faith-based social services. Eighty-four percent of congregations that engage in social services do so in collaboration with other organizations; 59 percent collaborate with a secular organization; 20 percent collaborate with a government agency.

Studies of religious social services beyond congregations also show that collaboration with secular nonprofits and government is the rule. Many church-based soup kitchens, for example, depend on food from secular food banks and on city grants to pay for cooks and drivers. Churches often are key players in this system—commonly providing physical space to feed people and volunteers to serve the meal—but there seems to be little need for special efforts to bring them into partnerships that are already the norm. Far from toiling alone and unsupported, the vast majority of faith-based efforts already occur—and in many ways depend upon—collaboration with secular nonprofits and government.

*Myth No. 6: The new faith-based initiative is likely to involve new kinds of religious organizations in publicly funded social services.*

Which congregations are likely to take advantage of potentially expanded opportunities to receive public funds for social services? Three patterns are evident. First, large congregations are considerably more likely to express interest in seeking government funds.

Second, and perhaps most important, a congregation's racial composition is by far the most powerful predictor of willingness to apply for government funds. In one, two-thirds of the African-American congregations surveyed expressed a willingness to apply for government funds compared to only 28 percent of predominantly white congregations. Taking into account other congregational features, predominantly black congregations are five times more likely than other congregations to seek public support for social service activities. In at least one state that has actively

encouraged religious organizations to apply for public funds, black churches have been much more likely than white churches to do so.

Third, Catholic and liberal or moderate Protestant congregations are significantly more likely to apply for government funds in support of social service activities than are conservative or evangelical congregations. Forty-one percent of congregations in liberal or moderate Protestant denominations said they would be willing to apply for government funds, compared to 40 percent of Catholic congregations and only 28 percent of congregations in conservative or evangelical denominations.

Furthermore, when informants were asked to classify their congregations as liberal-leaning, conservative-leaning or middle-of-the-road, those identified as theologically and politically conservative are significantly less likely to express willingness to apply for government funds, and this is true even after controlling for denominational affiliation and other characteristics.

What's significant about these data is that the larger and more liberal religious organizations already are the most likely to be involved in social service and other kinds of community activity. And African-American churches already are more likely to be engaged in certain key types of social services, such as education, mentoring, substance abuse, and job training or employment assistance programs. Far from bringing new types of religious organizations into the social service arena, the faith-based initiative is likely to reach the congregations already active in this area.

Despite the questionable assumptions that have fueled recent government efforts to support faith-based organizations, it appears these efforts will continue, and may even escalate. If so, several aspects bear watching.

One troubling prospect is that the faith-based initiative, rather than simply remove discrimination against religious organizations, will give them a privileged status. As pointed out above, there is little evidence of substantial discrimination against religious organizations applying for government funds. Efforts to alter the status quo could end up tilting the playing field toward religious organizations.

One way this could happen is through the creation of grant programs for religious organizations only, as in California's recently launched program designating up to \$5 million for religious organizations' employment assistance programs. Similarly, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services created a \$4 million fund to support prevention of substance abuse and HIV infection, and initially limited applicants to

religious organizations or organizations collaborating with religious organizations. The California initiative is being challenged in court, and the DHHS initiative was changed, after it was publicized, to expand eligibility.

Another way religious organizations may be favored in public-funding competitions would be through the easing of regulations for religious organizations, exempting them from the accreditation requirements, incorporation procedures or discrimination laws by which other recipients of public funds must abide. More subtle still, government agencies may publicize funding opportunities particularly among clergy or religious organizations, offer grant-writing or accounting assistance specifically to religious organizations, or establish a “faith-based liaison” to grease the wheels of grant applications. All this, arguably, would constitute favoring religious organizations rather than removing discrimination against them.

Other aspects of the initiative also warrant close scrutiny. How much change will be attempted and accomplished through administrative rather than legislative action? How much change depends on state and local action rather than federal action? To what extent will this initiative, even if it succeeds in changing funding patterns, simply shift resources from some organizations to others without increasing either the quantity or the quality of services provided?

If we are going to assess the progress, potential and limits of the faith-based initiative, we will have to be diligent in looking beyond the rhetoric for answers to these questions.