Charitable choice: A closer look

by Carl S. Dudley in the March 14, 2001 issue

What do faith-based groups and social agencies really make of President Bush's effort to try to expand the role of faith-based groups in addressing social needs? What do they think of the "charitable choice" legislation, which makes religious groups eligible to receive social welfare funds from the government? To find out, a group at the Institute for Religious Research interviewed leaders of 14 socially active congregations in the Hartford area along with officials at 13 related social agencies. We also spoke with staff in the governor's office, with administrators of relevant state agencies, and with political leaders from both parties.

It quickly became apparent that the welfare reforms of 1996, which imposed work requirements and limits on welfare eligibility, have changed the social landscape. Many people formerly on welfare are now working, yet their social situation has not necessariy improved. Many are now faced with child care and transportation costs which their meager paychecks cannot cover.

"Even though [people] have work now, they are finding life is so difficult with this work pattern that they are getting very discouraged. People are more discouraged than I have ever seen," said the director of a Salvation Army shelter. "We are [seeing] more and more parents who are homeless. . . . People are poorer than they were before. . . . They have to pay day care and transportation costs. So their expenses have gone up and their income has gone down."

A citywide agency executive pointed to the implications of these changes for churches and faith-based programs: "It used to be that public assistance was the permanent system and church intervention . . . was the temporary fix, because the state welfare was there. Now we have turned that on its ear. We have said that welfare is the temporary fix. . . . We don't know what the permanent one is going to be."

How will churches respond to the role they are being asked to play? It is too soon to know for sure, but our research tended to dispel five prominent notions about charitable choice.

Misperception No. 1: Charitable Choice threatens the wall between church and state.

In the case of welfare-related programs, we found no wall. Pragmatism and passion for ministry long ago breached any pure separation of church and state in the Hartford area. Kevin Loveland, director of Social Services for Connecticut, reported that a significant portion of the state welfare dollars is funneled through Catholic, Lutheran, Jewish, Salvation Army and many other faith-based agencies. And we found that government funding and private funding have been mixed together in every kind of congregational social ministry and faith-based agency.

This is not to say there is no tension. Congregational leaders were concerned about fulfilling their unique religious mission, and about avoiding exploitation by the state. As one evangelical said, “Our board feels strongly that they [do] not want to compromise what they know to be the ‘active ingredient.’” Others worried that the state was avoiding its essential responsibilities. “The churches are conned into accepting responsibility so that the feds and the state can dump it on the churches and say, ‘Now it is your problem, not ours,’” said one leader. A pastor agreed: “I had the impression that the welfare legislation was just to make the churches pick up the tab.”

But even for those who had questions, a pragmatic passion for ministry prevailed, as eloquently summarized by a Catholic nun: “Would we try to get federal monies? I don’t think we would have any scruples if we saw a need that was not being met and our parish could do that for the neighborhood.”

Misperception No. 2: Conservative evangelicals are most interested in government funding of faith-based organizations.

Although John Ashcroft and other religious conservatives first championed charitable choice, according to sociologist Mark Chaves conservative evangelical churches are in fact the least likely to take advantage of charitable choice legislation, whereas black Protestants and urban Catholics are the most likely. His findings were supported by our research. The African-American churches we contacted either receive or have received significant government funds for their social ministries.

Interestingly, we also found that the historically black churches in general have far more diverse ministries and far more diverse sources of income for their ministries than white churches. Listen to a member of the staff of a Christian Methodist

Episcopal church: “We have a technology center for the community. We also have a project where we will take students and train them to fix cars and then they can buy them. . . . We have food banks and an after-school tutoring program. . . . We have identified about 58 ministries. We are partnering with the board of education, and we partner with the different social service agencies, and with different churches.”

As for fund raising, most mainline and suburban congregations are supported by just member donations, endowments, and occasional denominational funds. By contrast, African-American churches look not only to member contributions but to bank loans, fund-raising events, ads in printed programs, foundation grants, local businesses, United Way funds, and a wide variety of partnerships with government agencies—schools, police departments, employment programs, housing programs, prisons, and the like. The government is but one of many sources. Despite all these revenue streams, leaders in the black churches still feel unable to keep up with the cost of programs needed to help citizens in their communities. It’s not surprising, then, that they are interested in the possibilities of charitable choice.

Misperception No. 3: It takes a hero pastor to produce a successful faith-based ministry.

News reports on successful faith-based ministries usually cite an outstanding church with an unusually gifted minister—like a Eugene Rivers in Boston, or Johnny Ray Youngblood in New York, or Mary Nelson in Chicago. But we found no solo ministries. Even among the heroes, *partnership* was one word we heard consistently from every congregation and social agency. We found life-transforming programs under excellent leaders, but they were all sustained by networks of many people.

A Unitarian group explained its participation this way: “We wanted to find a big project. We started to educate ourselves and realized that we couldn’t do this by ourselves. We needed to work in partnership with the community.”

The staff in another project said simply, “Networking is the name of the game.” The pastor of a thriving church entered his plea, “We want to work with other churches!” A community development group said its strategy was always to “find a local church which has the most impact within the targeted area, and get them involved right away.”

Such networks have been more carefully documented by Harold Dean Trulear in his national work with Public/Private Ventures. “Cooperative strategies enable . . . a

congregation to multiply resources and develop relationships that maximize its efficiency in delivering services to high-risk individuals."

Misperception No. 4: Faith-based organizations primarily benefit city churches.

City ministries exist on the front lines of emergency care for families and individuals, and compared to suburban congregations they have many more social ministries. But suburbanites have a profound role to play. A priest at St. Peter's Church said, "Quite a few suburban Catholic churches help with clothes collection or sending people in to do something with the mission work in the inner city. It opens up their lives to new experiences, and some nice relationships have developed. Getting people from suburban churches to volunteer in this area is such a rich resource—because rather than just being on the altar committee, in the city they can work with indigent elderly, with teens and with the tutorial program, and even with the handicapped."

Human relationships forged in these ministries cross every division of race and wealth, faith and ethnic background, city and suburb, age and political party. From all we learned, these are the longest and most diverse relationships of individuals and organizations in the metropolitan area. As the pastor of an historic black church explained, "Most of our partners are in the religious arena. . . . Some of the secular groups that we partner with have slightly different motivation. . . . But we have a very powerful partnership with the Jewish community, especially Beth Israel." We encountered mutually beneficial and enduring bonds of friendship that had been forged through shared social concerns and tested by crisis and years of accomplishments.

Misperception No. 5: Most states are inhospitable to charitable choice.

This view was strengthened by a recent "national report card" on utilization of charitable choice, issued by the influential Center for Public Justice. By their scoring, 12 states received passing grades. Two-thirds of the states received an F, including Connecticut, despite its having a Republican governor and a congressional representative, Nancy Johnson, who successfully sponsored an expansion of charitable choice funding in 1999.

In fact, Connecticut officials deny that they are opposed to charitable choice. They acknowledge that no state program is officially designated a charitable choice

program, but they also say that they see no problem with the charitable choice guidelines.

So why is the states' record so meager? We found one large barrier on the part of congregations: disillusion with and distrust of politics. "I am very cynical about the political process," said an African Methodist Episcopal pastor with almost 30 years of ministry experience. The director of a nearby social agency said, "Our experiences with the city have been horrible! Politics—horrible!" A member of a large, affluent congregation commented, "Politics in Hartford is a combat sport." A respected Baptist pastor crystallized the problem for many: "The red tape. They give you something, and then they put so many restrictions on it, you can't use it."

Leaders want a program that delivers help without crippling red tape and political hassle; they want a partnership, not an administrative nightmare. Amy Sherman suggested in these pages last year that religious groups should develop a "mediating organization" for obtaining and managing government funds.

We found ample evidence that churches are already deeply involved and broadly supported in an amazing array of social ministries. Community leaders recognize but are not inhibited by the concerns about separation of church and state, or the possibility of evangelical proselytizing.

But as a group they appear unlikely to take advantage of charitable choice without a trusted organization that negotiates between government agencies and faith-driven ministries based on mutual accountability. Our research would strongly support the development of such an intermediate body, which would filter the requests from churches and related agencies, and provide oversight and administration of faith-based programs.