

Faith-based programs

From the Editors in the [January 3, 2001](#) issue

A recent *New Yorker* cartoon showed one man sizing up another man in a clerical collar: “I see you’re a member of a faith-based organization.” We’re bound to hear a lot more public conversation about “faith-based organizations” during the presidency of George W. Bush. In a late December meeting with religious leaders, Bush reiterated his intent to support the work of faith-based groups in addressing social problems. He told a mix of Christian, Jewish and Muslim leaders—not all of them Bush supporters—that he plans to create an “office of faith-based programs” in the White House.

The notion that religious groups are uniquely poised to make effective use of government dollars emerged in the mid-1990s as a kind of “third way” on welfare policy. It’s a view that joins private-sector initiative with government money. This philosophy was enacted in the so-called charitable choice provision of the 1996 welfare bill, which forbids states from discriminating against religious groups when funding social-service programs.

Bush has embraced this approach with special fervor, and so have many Democrats—including Al Gore early in his campaign for president. Indeed, in the 2000 election it appeared that government support for faith-based organizations represented a new consensus in welfare policy.

What’s strange about this apparent consensus is that it remains almost entirely untested. Few states have promoted partnerships with religious organizations, and few religious groups have rushed to secure government funding. Whether such partnerships are as effective as proponents claim remains unknown. Ironically, conservative religious groups, which philosophically are inclined to support such partnerships, are the ones most wary of submitting to government guidelines, while liberal groups, philosophically uneasy with the move toward privatizing welfare, are the ones most comfortable (and often already experienced) in working with government.

A critical legal question also hovers over charitable choice: When does government support for religious organizations violate the First Amendment? An important answer will be given this year when a federal court in Austin, Texas, hears a case brought by the Texas Civil Rights Project and the American Jewish Congress. Those organizations claim that a Texas job training program which received government money pressured participants to join a church and to “find employment through a relationship with Jesus Christ.”

In theory, the charitable choice provision requires that the poor not encounter religious proselytizing against their will, and that they be given a choice between religious and secular programs. Whether such evenhandedness is possible, however, and whether such alternatives can in practice be provided remains to be seen.

The move toward government partnerships with faith-based organizations is, then, full of unknowns. It may indeed turn out to be a creative experiment. But it is likely to be creative only if Bush continues the conversation he has begun with grass-roots religious leaders. They are the ones who can report not only on what faith-based groups are doing, but on what they can't and shouldn't do—and on what government still needs to do.