

Foster care agency allowed to continue Protestants-only policy

The U.S. government recently granted faith-based foster care agencies in South Carolina an exemption to a regulation barring religious discrimination in federally funded foster care programs.

by [Yonat Shimron](#) in the [February 27, 2019](#) issue

Soon after Sue Barrise, a 63-year-old former schoolteacher, moved to South Carolina, she found herself with a new home and the time and energy to foster a child.

She heard on TV and on the radio ads about a foster care agency named Miracle Hill. The 82-year-old organization popped right up on her screen when she did an Internet search for foster care agencies. That seemed like the natural place to start.

When she called Miracle Hill Ministries to find out more about the application process, she did not get past the first question: What church do you attend?

When she said she attended St. Mary Magdalene Catholic Church, the call ended, leaving her puzzled.

“Does it matter which church?” she wondered. She later got her foster care license through the state’s Department of Social Services and fostered a one-year-old girl for a year.

Miracle Hill accepts only Protestant churchgoers in its federally funded foster care program and requires participants to sign a statement of faith.

“We are an arm of the Protestant church,” said Reid Lehman, Miracle Hill’s CEO. “We exist to be a mission arm of Protestant churches and to proclaim Protestant faith.”

That exclusion has put Miracle Hill and South Carolina in the middle of a skirmish over religious freedom. While many of the recent battles have tested the reach and teeth of municipal and state antidiscrimination ordinances in cases of cake bakers, florists, and photographers refusing service on religious grounds, the Miracle Hill story has triggered a different question: Can faith-based social service providers who receive federal funds refuse to work with people who don't share their faith?

The Trump administration says yes. In January, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services granted faith-based foster care agencies in South Carolina an exemption to a regulation barring religious discrimination in federally funded foster care programs.

Texas hopes to win a similar exemption for a state law that offers child welfare service providers an avenue to refuse service when doing so conflicts with the provider's "sincerely held religious beliefs."

In South Carolina, the exemption is already rankling religious minorities in a state where two-thirds of adults identify as Protestant, according to Pew Research.

Dwight Longenecker, pastor of Our Lady of the Rosary Catholic Church in Greenville, said the government exemption is wrong.

"If they're receiving tax funding for their services, then they're receiving money from me as a Catholic, and therefore their services should be open to all," Longenecker said.

Jewish leaders are likewise upset.

"If this were reversed and a Jewish organization that took public money said it would not place children in Christian homes, I could hear across America the religious right screaming bloody murder," said Mathew Marko, rabbi of Greenville's Congregation Beth Israel.

The exemption is particularly disappointing, they say, because Miracle Hill does great work in the community. A sprawling ministry that runs homeless shelters, thrift stores, and drug-recovery programs as well as the foster care agency, Miracle Hill is the largest provider of care to the needy in the westernmost ten-county region of South Carolina, along the Interstate 85 corridor.

The ministry employs 352 people and has an annual budget of \$17 million. While it takes no government money for its adult programs, four years ago the ministry began taking federal and state dollars for its foster care program.

Last year, it received about \$600,000 in public funding.

Miracle Hill is first and foremost a ministry, which is why foster parents ought to share the ministry's faith, its CEO said.

"If they're going to have a spiritual influence on our clients, we want to have a common identity with shared common values," he said.

Miracle Hill supports 230 licensed couples but the need is far greater. At last count, there were 4,624 children in foster care but only 2,786 licensed foster care providers, according to the Department of Social Services.

Civil rights groups say that if Miracle Hill receives government funds, it has to abide by federal rules, including nondiscrimination laws.

"To say a subset of Christians can get a choice of any agency out there and pick the one that best matches their needs, and other families all get a smaller subset, is bad for children because it means some families will not get the appropriate agency and we lose out on families," said Leslie Cooper of the American Civil Liberties Union in New York.

For foster mother Barrise, being rejected by Miracle Hill because of her faith prompted her to start a support ministry for foster parents at her Catholic church. She hopes to be of help to other parents as they navigate what she said is an exhausting and frustrating licensing process.

Barrise said she is puzzled by Miracle Hill's rejection.

"These kids are all over," she said, "and they're not going to care what religion you are. They just want a safe place in a loving home and a little more consistency."
—Religion News Service

FOLLOWING UP (Updated March 26): A Catholic woman in South Carolina has sued federal and state governments, accusing them of allowing unconstitutional religious discrimination, Religion News Service reported. Aimee Maddonna's application to be a mentor to foster children at a group home of Miracle Hill

Ministries was rejected because she attends a Catholic church. Miracle Hill doesn't view itself as a social service agency but rather as a ministry and permits only churchgoing Protestants—"born-again Christians," in its parlance—to staff or participate in the ministry.

"The United States government and the government of South Carolina have enabled, sanctioned, and continued to fund the organization's preference for one religious group above all others in the provision of governmental services, to the detriment of the children that the State contracts with those agencies to serve," reads the suit, filed in U.S. District Court.

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