

FEMA's plan to reimburse churches draws criticism: Watchdog groups concerned, others say no cause for alarm

by [Adelle M. Banks](#) in the [October 18, 2005](#) issue

The Federal Emergency Management Agency intends to reimburse religious groups that have offered relief to victims of hurricanes Katrina and Rita, marking a new step in the White House's faith-based initiative.

The move by FEMA is being criticized by two watchdog groups on church-state separation, while a scholar knowledgeable about the faith-based initiative says it should not cause constitutional alarm.

Butch Kinerney, a spokesman for FEMA, said the government will reimburse sheltering expenses of private nonprofit organizations if they made an agreement with county or state government officials to house evacuees. "We want to make sure that every group, religious or nonreligious, which opens its doors and opens its arms to shelter evacuees from this storm is able to get compensated for its generosity," Kinerney said in an interview.

"Any time the government enters a formal arrangement with houses of worship, a red flag should go up for advocates of religious liberty," said Holly Hollman, general counsel at the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty. "The general rule is that churches should have no financial entanglement with government."

Barry W. Lynn, executive director of the Washington-based Americans United for Separation of Church and State, issued a statement protesting the plans. "After FEMA's ineptitude in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, it's distressing to see the Bush administration making even more blunders," said Lynn. "Before millions of taxpayer dollars are turned over to churches, there must be strict accountability provisions and safeguards to protect the civil and religious liberty rights of those who need

help.”

But Robert Tuttle, a law professor at George Washington University Law School, called the reported plans “entirely an extension of the faith-based initiative” and said they don’t prompt the kinds of constitutional issues that have been raised by other aspects of the initiative.

“There’s nothing that’s particularly constitutionally troubling about it as long as the government is treating religious providers no different from others in that same circumstance,” he said in an interview.

Tuttle, who also serves as an analyst with the Albany, New York-based Roundtable on Religion and Social Welfare Policy, noted that though it is unusual for individual houses of worship to be reimbursed by the government, there is precedent for FEMA funding for religious buildings.

In 2002, President Bush ordered FEMA to change its policies so religious nonprofits could qualify for emergency relief after a natural disaster. After the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, Congress passed legislation that permitted grants to houses of worship that were damaged at that time, Tuttle said.