



# Bush's Faith-based *Legacy*

by Mariah Richardson-Osgood

**O**n June 1, 2004, at the first White House National Conference on Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, President George W. Bush delivered a revealing speech to an audience of more than 1,500 religious leaders and social workers from across the United States. In this speech Bush addressed the “relationship between people of faith and government policy” and articulated his perception that faith-based organizations are being discriminated against as a result of church-state regulations.

At the beginning of his remarks the president thanked profusely various Christian representatives for their support and involvement in community services and praised the work of representatives from the faith-based programs he’d set up in seven cabinet departments since the announcement of his Faith-Based and Community Initiative (FBCI) in January 2001. Bush then launched into an oration on the importance of faith in American society and promised, on behalf of the federal government, to assist faith-based programs in their efforts to reach out to those in need.

Cited were sensationalized success stories, such as that of Brad, a drug-addicted, uneducated man who found religion in prison with the help of Gospel Rescue Ministries and is now working at the World Bank and studying

computer science. Bush also told the story of Elijah, a young man from Sudan who was rescued by a Catholic organization and is now studying to become a mechanical engineer. While these stories provide examples of the power and effectiveness of social service organizations, Bush improperly attributes such successes to the “power of faith” when the jury is still out on that question. Relevant studies on this are currently underway but there is no evidence to date that faith-based programs are more or less successful than secular programs. Thus Bush’s assertion that faith-based programs are the hinges for social betterment in the United States is at best premature.

Needless to say, civil libertarians have already shown how Bush’s support for faith-based organizations (FBOs) violates the separation of church and state. What is more alarming, however, is that the president is blatantly attempting to embed FBOs in both federal and state governments, potentially leaving a legacy that will continue long after he has left office.

**AT THE FEDERAL LEVEL,** Bush has created FBCI centers in seven cabinet departments—Agriculture, Education, Veterans’ Affairs, Housing and Urban Development, Health and Human Services, Labor, and Justice—as well as in the

U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Small Business Administration. The basic mission of each center is to help FBOs compete for government funding on equal footing with other organizations. The centers provide a plethora of information for FBOs on the application process for a federal grant. This includes instructions on how to write a grant proposal, information on other grant regulations, and FAQs. Each department has an accommodating website with links to other FBCI sites.

Specifically, the Department of Justice has created an Office for Victims of Crime (OVC) and is offering a grant program to assist FBOs in their efforts to improve outreach to crime victims. The grant program—Helping Outreach Programs to Expand (HOPE)—helps local organizations improve their facilities and services. In addition to offering financial support, the Office of Justice Programs (OJP) is looking to increase the participation of FBOs by effectively disseminating information to them about funding and other opportunities. Information on the Department of Justice's FBCI can be viewed online at [www.ojp.usdoj.gov/fbci/](http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/fbci/).

The Center for Faith-Based and Community Initiatives at the Department of Labor (DOL) provides support for FBOs aiming to help people thrive in the workforce. The support includes educating organizations about local opportunities to collaborate as well as alerting FBOs about national funding opportunities. (See its website at [www.dol.gov/cfbci/](http://www.dol.gov/cfbci/).)

Similarly, the CFBCI at the Department of Agriculture seeks to educate FBOs about collaboration and funding opportunities and is in the process of integrating faith-based programs into the Food and Nutrition Service, the

Foreign Agriculture Service, and Rural Development. The DOA additionally provides FBOs with the opportunity to submit grant applications for the Food Stamp Program Participation Grants, which make available a total of \$5 million. (Visit [www.usda.gov/fbci](http://www.usda.gov/fbci) for more details.)

The Department of Education's CFBCI is designed to go hand-in-hand with Bush's pledge of "No Child Left Behind." The DOE seeks to break down the "barriers" that FBOs face and provide the organizations with the opportunity to support the department's mission, which is to ensure equal access to education and to promote educational excellence ([www.ed.gov/faithandcommunity](http://www.ed.gov/faithandcommunity)).

The CFBCI at the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) aims to engage FBOs in the prevention and treatment of homelessness and in the availability of affordable housing opportunities. According to the FBCI government website ([www.whitehouse.gov/government/fbci/](http://www.whitehouse.gov/government/fbci/)), HUD awarded a total of 765 grants and \$53 million to FBOs in 2003.

The most prominent department with a CFBCI is the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). Its center strives to integrate faith-based programs into its mission to improve human services for the neediest U.S. citizens. The HHS in 2003 awarded 680 grants and a total of \$90 million to FBOs—a grant increase of 41 percent from 2002 and a funding increase of 19 percent. In addition, the HHS houses the Compassion Capital Fund (CCF), the signature grant for the FBCI, and a \$47 million presidential initiative. The CCF awards two types of grants: an intermediary grant for capacity building organizations and a mini-grant,

Two organizations in Washington, D.C., that received Faith-based and Community Initiative grants.



which is smaller and goes directly to providers. Intermediary grants allow the intermediary organizations to provide assistance to faith-based and community organizations by assisting them in accessing funding resources, training staff members, and developing promising, successful programs. The intermediary organizations may also issue subgrants to FBOs for their programs' needs, so long as the programs address issues such as homelessness, at-risk children, and drug and alcohol rehabilitation.

The HHS provides relatively detailed evaluation criteria, including a point-system, for both types of CCF grants. The intermediary grant applicants receive points for proposing a logical, technical assistance strategy and providing a specific description of the region they intend to serve, including the needs and proposed approach to addressing those needs. These applicants are expected to have a detailed strategy for selecting subgrant awardees and must establish a specific protocol on staff abilities and goals. The more specific and prepared the organization is the more likely it is to receive points and, thus, a grant. The criteria for the grants given directly to the provider—or the “mini-grants”—are similar to the criteria for the intermediary grants. They include staff data, past experi-

ence in social services, clearly stated objectives, and budget justifications. The grant awardees, though predominantly of Christian affiliation, do include some minority religions.

Though the HHS has successfully provided grants to faith-based and community organizations, it has failed to provide an uncomplicated guide to operating a federally funded FBO. Bush asserts that “groups should be allowed to access social service grants, so long as they don’t proselytize or exclude somebody simply because they don’t share a certain faith.” However, it’s not that simple. How is a federally funded FBO supposed to separate its faith from its service when it’s encouraged to hire individuals who align with its *faith*-based missions? The “charitable choice” provision

applies to HHS and allows organizations to take their faith into account in making employment decisions. Bush may claim he’s looking to maintain a separation of church and state but the reality is that the lines have become too blurred for organizations to know their limits.

For example, the HHS website ([www.hhs.gov/fbci/](http://www.hhs.gov/fbci/)) offers several FAQs addressing issues surrounding government money and religious services. According to the site,

“You may conduct [a nonreligious social service] in a room in the church hall and still have a Bible study taking place in another room in the same hall.” In other words, as long as an organization doesn’t directly force someone to participate in religious activities it isn’t violating the “inherently religious” restriction. All seven cabinet departments stress that inherently religious activities must be kept separate from the government-funded service. Training, education, counseling, and other service activities aren’t “inherently religious,” though they can be conducted in highly religious ways. It seems the “inherently religious” loophole is one of the many weaknesses in Bush’s effort to federally fund FBOs.

It also appears that the cabinet departments are making an effort to stress that the use of federal money to proselytize and endorse “inherently

religious” activities is forbidden and is even grounds for criminal prosecution. But there are definite moral implications of embedding faith-based programs in the federal government. Moreover, the whole faith-based effort goes beyond the federal level as Bush pushes it to state governments as well.

**IN HIS JUNE 1** White House speech, Bush said:

There are . . . twenty governors and over a hundred mayors who have faith-based offices. I think when people [state and local politicians] realize that more money is now available to the faith

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communities, they'll change their attitude about whether or not to be accommodating to faith-based programs. I think they'll change their attitude.

Toward the goal of changing such attitudes, the HHS in 2003 awarded significantly more money to states and local governments than to organizational grant applicants. Now twenty-one states currently have FBCI liaisons or offices in the governor's office, a state agency, or a governor-appointed foundation. According to the FBCI website, its mission is to engage grassroots organizations and provide information and resources to FBOs about "partnering with the state government to provide social services." In thus establishing faith-based programs at the state level, and understanding a state's discretion in distributing the funds to charities and organizations in the form of "block" grants, Bush is instituting a deep-rooted faith-based system that extends beyond his direct influence and that of the federal government in general.

Furthermore, according to a *Los Angeles Times* 2004 Electoral Vote Tracker, out of the twenty-one states with CFBCIs, nine tend to vote Republican, four vote Democratic, and eight are "swing" states of which seven voted Republican in the 2000 elections. Thus the majority of the states involved in the FBCI program are Republican. By this it can be seen that Bush's allegedly nonpartisan initiative is, in truth, as partisan as much else that he does.

The overriding problem, however, is rooted in the president's unrelenting effort to use the church for the betterment of the state—or, rather, to use favored churches for the betterment of *his* state, as evidenced by recent press reports. For example, according to a June 23, 2004, press release from Americans United for the Separation of Church and State, a Philadelphia church that endorsed Bush received a \$1 million "faith-based" grant. The Reverend Herbert H. Lusk II endorsed Bush in the 2000 elections and is a firm advocate for Bush's faith-based initiative. It seems Lusk's allegiance to Bush paid off when Lusk's Greater Exodus Baptist Church received the grant for its charitable operation, People for People.

This isn't the first time federal funds have been used to support religious organizations. In 2001 Pat Robertson was critical of the faith-based initiative and in 2002 his Operation Blessing received a \$500,000 grant from HHS. Robertson hasn't criticized the initiative since.

According to the Associated Press, the 2004 Bush campaign endorsed a memo that sought to mobilize church

members in support of the president's campaign for reelection. The mobilization effort includes persuading churches to provide their directories to the campaign and refer other conservative churches to the Bush-Cheney 2004 headquarters. It also includes encouraging pastors to hold voter registration drives and talking to various religious groups about the campaign. Not only do churches risk losing their tax-exempt status by becoming involved in such partisan politics, however, but the Bush administration is itself blatantly crossing the line separating church and state. It's one thing to embrace FBOs as social service providers but it's undeniably inappropriate as well as generally unconstitutional for the administration to exploit peoples' religious beliefs to strengthen the Bush campaign.

**BUSH IS OBVIOUSLY THINKING** beyond the simple improvement of social services in the United States. He has ulterior motives. As evidenced by his effort to embed faith-based programs in federal and state governments, as well as his exploitation of religious organizations in his quest to

stay in office, Bush is well on his way to leaving a deeply rooted faith-based legacy.

In his June 2004 speech he proclaimed, "The strength of this country is not our military or the size of our wallets; the strength of this country is the hearts and souls of the American people." But not everyone's heart is aligned with the same faith, or any faith at all, and the government has no business

augmenting the coffers of any religious organization, much less to the exclusion of others. Steps must therefore be taken now to rid the system of religious bias and rebuild the wall of separation, cracks in which have allowed religion to infiltrate government policies and programs and vice versa.

Rooting out faith-based favoritism and restoring the First Amendment won't be easy, however. New regulations by a new administration won't be enough to do the trick. The damage runs too deep. It will take a concerted effort by dedicated people to reinstruct federal, state, and local bureaucrats in the proper allocation of government monies and in the importance of maintaining government neutrality in matters of religious belief. 🗣️

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