
Belief and Bureaucracy in the Twin Cities: Testifying to President Bush's Faith-Based Initiative

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President George Bush's Faith-Based and Community Initiative has created a whirlwind of controversy not only in Washington, but also across the country. Opinions and concerns voiced by both political parties, by civil rights leaders, and by prominent conservative Christians have dominated the public spotlight.

But what do the men and women who are in the front lines—the founders and directors and staff members of community faith-based groups—think? Are they interested in dabbling in government funding? Are they fearful of compromising their faith values and becoming dependent on government grants, as some conservative religious leaders have claimed?

A variety of pastors and directors and organizers of faith-based groups in the Twin Cities agreed to share their thoughts with me last summer. Again and again, they said something like this: "Faith-based groups are doing good things. Our programs are working; we are seeing results." Despite media coverage that highlights lukewarm support for the Bush proposals from both political and religious leaders, they expressed hopeful enthusiasm and general support for the initiative.

Few groups seem fearful of compromising their faith in exchange for funding or of becoming dependent on government funds. Rather, the concern that these small organizations voiced was more mundane: the bureaucratic

hurdles. Many don't have the capacity to tackle a grant application; beyond that, they worry that keeping up with paperwork and other requirements would take time and energy away from their service missions. These groups also wonder how a distant federal apparatus could know them well enough to have faith in what they do. How can their quiet voices be heard?

From Government to Grass Roots

Is the Washington action worth the hype? Do Twin Cities agencies want to compete for the money that would be accessible to them through a federal initiative? Are these groups even interested in federal funding, or willing to accept it?

To answer these questions, I began by compiling a list of small faith-based agencies with a variety of missions: shelters, food shelves, substance abuse programs, community outreach groups. After preliminary meetings with representatives of these groups, I put together a survey and requested individual appointments with about twenty of them.

Nearly all of the people I spoke to are working in tough, needy neighborhoods. For the most part, they represent a single church congregation or an independent agency that has only a handful of staff members. The services they offer range from crisis aid (food, clothing, affordable housing, advocacy), to prevention programs such as after-school tutoring, to correctional help and intervention for everything from physical abuse to abuse of narcotics.

Support for President Bush's proposal to empower and collaborate with faith-based service groups was virtually unanimous, regardless of whether a particular group intended to apply for federal grants or not. Many have been encouraged by the attention that has been drawn to their work.

"It's a long time coming," said Pastor Monica DeLaurentis of the Inner City Church of Minneapolis, who heads numerous crisis ministries and welfare-to-work programs out of her church. "This is encouraging for faith-based [agencies] because for the longest time no one saw any validity in what we do. People would say, 'A church? That's not going to change a person, that's not going to help someone out of poverty, that's not going to get someone off welfare.' Yet now Hennepin County is coming to me for resources; there is so much validity in faith-based [efforts], and now people are starting to recognize that."

The Reverend Roger Magnuson, an attorney with the Dorsey and Whitney law firm and head pastor of Straight Gate Church in Minneapolis, said, "What people really need is personal involvement of people in their lives that typically comes from those who are in faith-based institutions rather than impersonal government programs. Government right now tends to tax the things we want more of and subsidize the things we want less of. I think the initiative is clearly constitutional and a very good idea."

Along with their enthusiasm, many program directors expressed concern that they might be overlooked because

of their small size and grassroots, inner-city profile. "This could be a great opportunity," said Efrem Smith, director of the Park Avenue Foundation. "I would hope that there would be an opportunity for people like us to at least make a case for why we would be a great place for funding, despite the fact that we aren't well connected or in the loop."

Diane Thibodeaux, who with her husband is co-pastor of Holding Forth the Word of Life Ministries in north Minneapolis, said, "It is wonderful that they are making money available to others. I am hoping that the smaller organizations will get the money also, because usually by the time you get down to the inner-city and minority churches, forget it. But inner-city and minority groups need to be in the city providing services to help these people. Our organization isn't large, but we are effective even though we are operating on a shoestring budget. We just make it work. We never turn people away; that is the inner-city church. It's the way we are taught."

Keeping the Faith

Issues that have dominated discussion in Washington and caused many high-profile figures to be wary of the initiative did not concern many Twin Cities organizations. Although skeptics have suggested that faith-based groups wouldn't want public funding for fear of government intrusion, few Twin Cities organizations expressed fundamental opposition to the idea of public funds. In fact, a number of them have

applied for or accepted local government grants in the past. Almost a quarter of the organizations I spoke with are already receiving city, county, or state funding, mostly from grants made available by the 1996 Charitable Choice law to faith-based groups that provide services to welfare recipients.

Other critics have expressed concern about "mission creep": Would groups desperate for funding and salivating over bigger budgets compromise the faith component of their services, and thereby lose the very essence of what makes them unique and effective? Nearly all of the directors that I talked to, nine out of ten, said no: if push came to shove, they'd take faith over federal money any day. (Two groups had decided that, given the nature of their programs, a more subtle faith component would not only enable them to reach a larger number of people but also help them qualify for public money that would greatly aid their programs.)

"Every faith-based organization has to know that if getting federal funding is going to alter the core component of their program at all, they are fools to take the money," said Dick Copeland of Sharing and Caring Hands in downtown Minneapolis. "If getting the funding doesn't change them, then the extra money makes a great difference."

"I am called first and foremost to serve the Lord," said Lee Ormiston of Family Baptist Center in north Minneapolis. "I am not going to go looking for funds in places where it will restrict me from doing what the Lord is leading me to do."

Many groups cite personal experience or other community groups that have accepted public money as examples that government goals and faith-based initiatives can meet on common ground. Floyd Beecham of Urban Hope Ministries in north Minneapolis, an organization that has accepted county and state grants since the mid-1990s, knows that the mix can work. “We have been very up front about who we are,” Beecham said. “I made it very clear that we were faith-based and Christ-focused. If someone has a problem with that, then we can leave each other alone. And I have given back money before. We are not in this for money. We are in it for souls. We need the money, but not at all costs.”

Pastor Rich Scherber of Minnesota Teen Challenge in Minneapolis also testifies that faith-based groups can join with government without compromising their ministries. During negotiations on a contract with Hennepin County that would result in funding for his Christian-based chemical dependency program, Scherber said, “we have been very clear with them that we cannot [change], and we don’t want to get into this if we have to compromise. [Both sides] have been very clear about what our boundaries are, and they have put it in writing: we are not going to make you compromise that you are a Christian group.”

In response to concerns that the government would be funding religion, the people I spoke with said that they understand that the government can’t support evangelism or other strictly

religious activities, and they are willing to find ways to help the government help them. “We are not willing to water down our Christian message,” said Efreem Smith, “but we already receive funds from foundations that aren’t interested in evangelism. When we received money from a certain foundation in town last year, it wasn’t to fund evangelism, it was to buy new computers for our after-school youth computer center. Now, we didn’t stop talking about Jesus, we just didn’t use the foundation’s money to do it.

“We know that fulfilling the Christ-centered mission of who we are is not going to happen through government or corporate funds,” Smith said. “It’s going to come from funds that come through our congregations, from funds from churches in the area, and from Christian individuals. So even if we go after funding, whether it’s a corporate, city, state, or federal grant, we know that our bread and butter to survive as a Christian organization is going to be individuals and churches. If the churches think that government funds are going to keep their programs alive, that’s not true. It’s that if you are alive already, you can use those funds to buy clothes. But it’s not like resuscitation.”

Never Dependent— Ever Dependent

Which brings us to skeptics’ concern that faith-based groups might become dependent on government funding. Along with Efreem Smith, most don’t foresee a problem. “Money is just a vehicle to get us where we

need to go for a time,” said Pastor Hattie Horne, director of True Love Ministries of the Arts in north Minneapolis. “That money may never come again, so you can’t get dependent on someone else’s paycheck. I wouldn’t get caught up on government money—the government can take their money back when they want to.”

Pastor John Bohnsak, head of Community Emergency Service, which serves Minneapolis’s Phillips neighborhood, said, “We have found it worthwhile to follow the advice of our original donor and never become dependent on government or foundation money. Both are subject to the winds of policy and politics.”

Commonsense money management can prevent dependence on government money, the agencies say: know the provisions of a grant up front, and don’t depend on a grant for too large a percentage of the operating budget.

“Since we don’t get any [federal] money now, it is my guess that if we ever applied, we would never apply for a grant that would be the majority of the funds that we get,” said Victor Rosenthal of St. Paul’s Jewish Community Action.

“Dependence?” said Monica DeLaurentis. “I have lived dependent since we started [this ministry]. My population can’t afford our services. For the last eight years I have been dependent on God, and whether the money comes through a church, a business, an individual, or the government, I am still dependent. We are dependent on someone believing in what we do. Without the body of Christ, I am done.

When people stop caring about or believing in people in the city, we are finished. Dependence is not a concern for me, because I live it, one way or another.”

Bureaucratic Baggage

Many of these people are both pastor of a congregation and head of an understaffed service program. The primary obstacle to applying for federal funds is the fact that they don’t have the resources—time, money, energy, staff—to allocate to tackling a government grant application.

And that’s assuming they’re already up to speed in the political sphere. Government policies and funding opportunities can change rapidly, and keeping up with shifting government winds often doesn’t make the to-do lists of these service-oriented folks. While many are interested in the president’s initiative, they felt informationally impoverished when it comes to the nitty-gritty of knowing specifically what it would mean for them and how they could go about taking action.

“How do we do this? Do I have to know Bush? We don’t know what to do or how to apply,” said Monica DeLaurentis. “We are interested in applying for federal grants, but we have been so focused and driven just trying to do the work we do. . . . The main obstacle [for us] is that we are so ministry minded that I am going back and forth just doing the work. Every once in a while I stick my head out and catch wind of something, but that’s all I have time for.”

Hattie Horne expressed similar concerns: “A big problem in the inner city is

a lack of knowledge of how to get things off the ground and running, so I am involved in ministries all over the Twin Cities and I am trying to get informed because I don't want our people to feel like we always have to stay low."

Time and energy are always at a premium. And as anyone who has applied for a government grant knows, the application process can be intimidating. As the Reverend Gary Reiersen put it, "The amount of energy required to pull together a government grant is gargantuan. You have to estimate whether or not that effort is really going to be worth it." Reiersen is director of a large organization: the Greater Minneapolis Council of Churches, with over 700 affiliated congregations and a volunteer base of 30,000 people.

If getting a grant proposal off the ground is difficult for an organization the size of MCC, smaller groups could end up being permanently grounded by the process. Who has time to fill out a grant proposal when a line of hungry people are waiting for you to open your doors, a single welfare mom is on the phone with a crisis, fifty neighborhood kids are arriving for summer enrichment programs, and volunteers are waiting to be told what to do? And where is the money to hire a grant writer going to come from when a program is already operating on a shoestring budget, funds for the month are running out, and staff members are barely getting paid?

Nor do these agencies have time to deal with the bureaucracy and pen and ink antics that go along with public funds. Again, Reiersen commented:

"We are a fairly large agency that is used to dealing with bureaucracy, but it would be very difficult for a smaller group or agency to handle. We are very aware of the ability of individual congregations to affect social issues, but most of them, particularly in the inner city, have very limited capacity. They often have only a single employee, their pastor, who is already strapped, and the thought of them contracting with a government agency is beyond conceiving, just because—who is going to do it?"

"There is a technical side and a philosophical side" to collaborating with the government, said Lee Ormiston. "On the one hand, you have the average person who is theologically oriented. How are we going to get through all that paperwork? I don't have a secretary, and none of the four people on my staff are secretaries. We have a volunteer do our bookkeeping. That is a huge problem with the government program. The other side is that many people in faith-based organizations are tremendously motivated and committed, but they are not interested in getting caught up in the bureaucracy.

"If this is going to work, the application is going to have to be streamlined, simplified," Ormiston continued. "There are other organizations in north Minneapolis that do live off foundation grants. Often, however, they aren't as connected to the community as you would think because they spend 90 percent of their time and energy getting their next grant. That's not what I am called to do. I would rather find creative ways to self-finance."

“That’s the reason why, in the past, a lot of people didn’t want to get government funding,” Diane Thibodeaux said. “The money was there [in local grants] but then you have so many restrictions hanging over your head and so much paperwork that you had to hire a person just to fill out the forms.”

Bureaucratic baggage is likewise a major sticking point for Victor Rosenthal: “Applying for federal money is a pain; I have done it before. I would certainly be reluctant to apply just because of all the paperwork that goes into applying for a government grant. I would also want to make sure that however this money is provided, the strings attached would not be so onerous that it would almost make it better not to get the money.”

The faith-based organizations that have received government money in the past did not dismiss concerns about bureaucratic hurdles. Many of them simply had larger staffs with the time and knowledge to apply for government grants. Others cited special circumstances—one-time opportunities or helpful connections—that enabled them to apply. Having applied for government money also gave groups a greater appreciation for how resource-consuming the process could be, and they were careful to say that whether or not they applied for grants in the future would depend on whether the accompanying requirements would be too burdensome.

Accountability and Integrity

For all their concern about bureaucratic overload, these faith-based

groups appreciate the need for accountability when taxpayers’ money is on the line.

“I think it is important not to be too critical of those requirements,” said Gary Reierson. “Society has a right to demand that tax money be used to produce solid results and to do so in a way that is in line with the law. That is what those laws are in place to ensure.”

“Faith-based groups have been systematically screened out in the past, and that has to stop,” said Art Erickson of Urban Ventures. But if the initiative is going to work, he said, “another point of integrity is that we need to be able to put in a decent proposal like everyone else. We also have to deliver what we promise and document how we spend the money and be accountable, just like everyone else.”

Lee Ormiston expressed the paradox this way: “It is a huge challenge to get government to believe in us and know that their funds aren’t being misused. But at the same time, as a taxpayer, I don’t want government funds misused either. So I would love to have more resources to help more people, but I am concerned about the paperwork, and at the same time I am concerned that if you don’t have the proper controls there are a lot of people who will just take the money and not use it properly.”

“There is a catch-22,” said Dick Copeland. “The government needs some information on where the money is going, and government needs to keep its hands off the programs. [The fact is that] there are a lot of people who look at anything good and make it a scam.”

If these small, grassroots groups were to apply for federal funds, would they be able to compete with larger, sometimes national nonprofit agencies? Many don't think so—and why waste the time and energy to find out? How is a distant federal agency going to know them and their work well enough to have faith in what they are doing?

“You can't have truly evaluated operations like these by looking through a big stack of application forms,” said Fred Myers, founder of Rebuild Resources. “We describe [the program] to people and they still don't get the idea of how we work. They think we are just another stab at chemical dependency [treatment]. They only understand when they come out and see us. Now, I don't know if you apply to some office in Washington, D.C., if people would know your ability to run something well or provide the kinds of results that are worth [funding].”

Bridging the Gap

Faith-based groups, especially the small ones, often don't have the capacity to deal with government grant applications and resource-sapping paperwork and regulations. The government, on the other hand, needs to know how its money is being spent—and it needs to know which organizations are reputable, which offer services the community needs and values, which services are really making a difference.

Intermediaries between the federal government and grassroots faith-based organizations—perhaps associations of

small groups—may be needed. Private agencies located in each state, or in major metropolitan areas, would be in a position to advise the federal government about local problems and service organizations. They could notify faith-based groups of funding opportunities, help them with grant applications, and even manage the paperwork load.

The Greater Minneapolis Council of Churches and TURN, a resource and networking organization that has served the metro-area Christian community for over fifteen years, are excellent examples of potential intermediaries. Both suggest that they have the capacity to meet the requirements and produce the paperwork that government requires, and they have the networking ability to partner with local congregations and agencies. The Reverend Devin Miller of the New Beginnings Center of St. Paul said that such collaboration is key to getting funding to the frontline defenses.

Political support of the president's initiative could benefit even the faith-based groups that didn't get federal funds. As Efrem Smith commented, corporations, foundations, and educational institutions that have not made donations to faith-based groups in the past, either for fear of violating separation of church and state laws or for other reasons, might be persuaded to pitch in.

For this, we might pray and say thanks. ■