

The New York Times

The New York Times, January 29, 2008

The Faith To Outlast Politics

By David Kuo And John J. DiIulio Jr.

IN his State of the Union address Monday evening, President Bush asked Congress to permanently extend the federal laws permitting religious nonprofit organizations to compete for federal grants.

Seven years ago this week, Mr. Bush started his faith-based initiative. He promised to build on these “charitable choice” laws, which were begat by bipartisan compromises between President Bill Clinton and Senator John Ashcroft. “Government cannot be replaced by charities,” Mr. Bush declared, “but it should welcome them as partners, instead of resenting them as rivals.”

The president’s original plan called for making federal grants and vouchers more readily available to the thousands of religious nonprofit organizations that provide job training, affordable housing, after-school programs and other social services. The initiative prescribed \$8 billion in tax credits and new spending, including at least \$700 million in a “compassion fund” to benefit exemplary programs. It was designed so that small congregations and ministries that had long served needy neighbors on shoestring budgets — and not just large, national religious charities — could get their fair share of government aid.

It did not happen. The number of faith-based organizations receiving a federal grant rose from 665 in 2002 to only 762 in 2004, according to a Rockefeller Institute study. A program that was projected to finance mentoring for 100,000 children of prisoners has so far paid for only 33,000, according to the White House. Over the past six years, federal grants to faith-based programs have shifted away from the local “armies of compassion” praised by Mr. Bush and toward large, national organizations with religious affiliations.

Every nonpartisan study has concluded that the initiative has not delivered the grants, vouchers, tax incentives and other support for faith-based organizations that the president originally promised.

In a book published last year, Michael Gerson, Mr. Bush’s former speechwriter, concludes: “The faith-based initiative was not tried and found wanting. It was tried and found difficult — then tried with less and less energy.”

President Bush has promised much. It will be left to the next president to deliver on those promises. The good news is that every major presidential candidate seems open to doing just that.

Hillary Clinton has declared that there is no contradiction between “support for faith-based initiatives and upholding our constitutional principles.” John McCain has supported the idea especially as it relates to improving educational programs for disadvantaged children. Barack Obama describes faith-based programs as a “uniquely powerful way of solving problems” especially where former prisoners and substance abusers are concerned. When he was governor of Massachusetts, Mitt Romney created his own faith-based office.

Politicians from both parties have come to realize that faith-based programs are indispensable even if they are not miraculous. America’s churches, synagogues, mosques and other congregations supply dozens of major social services — like day care, homeless shelters and anti-violence programs — worth billions of dollars each year, as Ram Cnaan, a professor of social work at the University of Pennsylvania, has proved in several studies. Dr. Cnaan is not even counting the work done by inner-city religious schools and other local faith-based programs. From coast to coast, the primary beneficiaries of these services are low-income children and families

who are not otherwise affiliated with the religious nonprofit organizations that serve them.

The Constitution is no longer a potential obstacle to a successful faith-based initiative in the White House. In several cases decided since 2001, the Supreme Court has clarified that even “pervasively sectarian” religious nonprofit organizations remain tax-exempt and can receive government social service grants on the same basis as secular nonprofit organizations. Their eligibility is constitutionally secure so long as they do not proselytize or engage in sectarian instruction; serve all persons without regard to religion; follow applicable federal anti-discrimination laws; and use public monies only to serve grant-specified secular purposes.

Increasingly, governors and mayors, with or without Washington’s help, are on the case. Since 2001, governors by the dozens and over a hundred mayors have started faith-based initiatives on their own. In numerous places, the initiatives have persisted through changes in administrations and party control — further evidence for the emerging political consensus in favor of using public dollars to support faith-based organizations. The ideological disputes that infect inside-the-Beltway debates over the separation of church and state have little life in cities where what gets accomplished (or not) in juvenile justice, health care and other social services is a visible, life-and-death drama.

In Monday night’s address, President Bush rightly focused attention on the faith-based saints in the Gulf Coast. Religious nonprofit organizations have led the physical and financial recovery in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. That includes giants like Catholic Charities and the Salvation Army, universities like Loyola, and many among the roughly 900 local congregations (down from 1,500 before the levees broke) that have revived themselves since August 2005. Blessed by federal and state government support, religious groups in New Orleans have built thousands of houses, opened neighborhood health clinics and provided cash assistance to the destitute and the homeless.

Faith-based initiatives have a centrist past that can be prologue. The first “faith center” in the federal government was in the Department of Housing and Urban Development under President Clinton.

Surveys by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life find that large majorities among Demo-

crats, Republicans and independents favor using federal money to support the work of faith-based organizations. Support remains steadfast among Americans of every race, class, region and religion.

And among the 4 in 10 adults who describe themselves as born-again or evangelical Christians, big changes are under way that will help the next president promote faith-based initiatives. Some prominent evangelical leaders remain focused on abortion or gay marriage, or oppose sacred places serving civic purposes with government support. But Pew surveys find that over two-thirds of evangelicals favor permitting churches and other houses of worship to apply for federal grants. Since 2001, new conservative Christian leaders — like Rick Warren, the author of “The Purpose-Driven Life” — have commanded attention from the news media, developed robust domestic and international social service ministries, and avoided being seduced into single-issue or partisan politics.

Younger evangelicals are keenly interested in alleviating poverty. Only 40 percent of 18- to 29-year-old evangelicals identify themselves as Republicans, down from 55 percent in 2005, a Pew survey last year found. A slight majority (51 percent) now say they are either independents (32 percent, up from 26 percent in 2005) or Democrats (19 percent, up from 14 percent in 2005).

On Jan. 19, 2005, Mrs. Clinton, speaking before clergy members in Boston, captured the spirit that is likely to prevail in the White House, no matter who is elected: “But I ask you, who is more likely to go out onto a street to save some poor, at-risk child than someone from the community, someone who believes in the divinity of every person, who sees God at work in the lives of even the most hopeless and left-behind of our children? And that’s why we need to not have a false division or debate about the role of faith-based institutions, we need to just do it and provide the support that is needed on an ongoing basis.” Amen.

David Kuo, the author of “Tempting Faith: An Inside Story of Political Seduction,” was the deputy director of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives from 2002 to 2003. John J. DiIulio Jr., the author of “Godly Republic: A Centrist Blueprint for America’s Faith-Based Future,” was the office’s director in 2001.