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Faith-Based Initiatives: What Might This Mean?

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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When I was in England last month working with a religiously-affiliated client, the project supervisor asked me: "So what do you think your new President's 'faith-based initiative' will mean for volunteering in the United States?" I realized that it was hard to answer the question. One reason, of course, is that the Bush Administration has yet to explain its plans for this program in concrete terms. But I found myself wondering whether we can make any predictions or--more importantly--whether we might take a proactive stance and make the initiative work for us.

Nothing New or Something to Fear?

There is nothing new about our society's reliance on religiously-affiliated organizations to provide social services, including the fact that many such groups have been contracting with government at all levels for decades. In fact, the implication that turning to faith-based groups for help is somehow new and untried is quite strange. However, in the past, faith-based services that sought government funds were generally incorporated as 501 (c)(3)s to be independent of their sponsoring houses of worship. And, by accepting public money, they usually agreed to provide at least some of their services to people of any faith. In terms of volunteer involvement, many of these existing groups begin their recruitment "in house," seeking help from the congregations of the sponsoring faith, but also welcoming volunteers of any religious background.

The fears attending the new Bush initiative come from several angles. First, there are many Americans who fervently believe that the separation of church and state is in danger if government money can now be used to support activities that not only "serve," but "preach." Second, those belonging to non-Christian faiths are concerned that they will not be able to compete for funds and attention when facing the majority religion. Third, churches and other religious settings may want to obtain money, but not at the expense of required reporting to the government or adherence to outside standards. Fourth, secular nonprofit organizations fear that faith-based programs may be treated differently, resulting in lowered standards of service and unfair competition for limited resources.

What's interesting, of course, is that there seems to be no evidence that faith-based groups asked for this new attention! It seems driven by the President's own agenda and many are suspicious that it is yet another smokescreen for divesting government of expensive social obligations.

... Or... What We Make of It?

This is not a forum for partisan political discussions and that is not why I am raising the subject. But we in the volunteer community may be able to take this new attention to religious groups and make it work to the advantage of our organizations. Almost 25 years ago, Marlene Wilson wrote an article in what was then *Voluntary Action Leadership* magazine entitled "Religion: The Sleeping Giant." In it she spoke of the enormous potential of churches, synagogues, mosques and meetings to mobilize thousands of volunteers, acting on their faith and moral principles, to tackle social needs. She noted that religious congregations needed to understand the principles of volunteer management in order to be effective, and she correctly predicted a rise in the number of paid staff assigned to such functions as "Director of Lay Ministry." However, the potential of which she spoke has not been fully realized. Maybe the time is right to increase our efforts in this direction.

In truth, most secular volunteer programs have not found it easy to galvanize faith-based volunteers, who tend to prefer service centered on their own congregations or in organizations affiliated with their faith. Because many churches are themselves facing changes in their membership and, in some places, have been losing members, "outside" volunteer recruitment can be seen as competitive to "church family" identity. Naturally, in a country of our size and with our diversity of faiths, we can also find examples of the opposite behavior. Historically it has been religious congregations who stepped in when needs were great, whether with emergency goods for the poor or in political advocacy, from the Underground Railroad to the Central American sanctuary movement.

I suspect--and am eager to hear from you about--that faith-based groups are right now asking themselves what the new political climate means and what they would actually like to do about it. Do they want to start programs with government funds? Do they want to become more involved in meeting community needs?

This is where any leader of volunteers can come in. Take the initiative and start a dialogue. For example:

- Take a walk around your neighborhood and inventory the houses of worship within walking distance of your agency. Extend an invitation to each of them to send a representative to an open house to discuss possible collaboration on behalf of an issue affecting the community you share. Or hold individual meetings with each congregation, discussing ways to meet both their needs and the needs of your clients. In either case, your opening would be: "Since the new Administration is so interested in faith-based initiatives, we thought we could open a dialogue with our neighboring houses of workshop and see what this might mean right in our own

backyard."

- Using a similar pitch, why not engage current volunteers in possible outreach to their own congregations? They may never have seen the connection between the volunteer work they do as individuals and the lay ministry goals of their clergy and fellow congregants. Of course this would be a totally voluntary option, since some volunteers will not want to become a liaison to their faith community for you. But others will be excited at the possibility of representing your work to their worship family and, in turn, offering their friends the chance to join them as volunteers.
- Do some research (a great job for an interested volunteer!) on service projects local faith communities already do: soup kitchens, after-school tutoring, adult education programs, various fundraisers. Do any of these have a logical connection to your agency or its clients? Is there a way you can propose a collaboration with mutual benefits?

What does your crystal ball tell you about the impact of the Bush Administration's Faith-Based Initiatives on volunteering? If you are outside the United States, what experiences can you share to give Americans new ideas for working with communities of faith? What experiences--good or not--have you had in the past in working with religious groups? Are you yourself in a faith community discussing this Initiative, and what is being said? What possibilities do you see for increasing the amount of collaboration or recruitment of new volunteers?

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Posted 7/26/01

Submitted by Steve Whitman, Program Specialist for Faith-Based Initiative, Virginia Department of Social Services, Community Programs Division., Richmond, Virginia, USA

One specific topic that seems to be overlooked (or, possibly neglected) by the media and others commenting on Faith-Based Initiatives is that THE primary reason that faith-based organizations, particularly evangelical Christian churches, are so much more effective in addressing and meeting people's needs is that they very purposefully keep the Gospel of Jesus Christ central in all they do. This flows from a conviction that the Gospel is the ONLY thing that can effectively bring genuine and lasting change to a person/family/community. This is also the main reason why these particular groups/churches are reluctant to receive government funding for their programs. It certainly isn't "wrong" for churches to provide social programs without incorporating the Gospel, but it must be understood (accurately) why many groups/churches are reluctant to do so.

Posted 7/20/01

Submitted by Winnie W. Morgan, Faith Involvement Coordinator for Department of Social Services, North

Carolina, Orange County

As the Faith Involvement Coordinator for the Department of Social Services in Orange County, NC, I have found that faith volunteers are VERY capable and willing to get involved without evangelizing. I match volunteer teams from churches/faith groups with families transitioning off of welfare to work. It has been an amazing program of "church goers" walking their talk as they truly extend a human hand out to walk with the family in this transition versus just giving them a "handout". It is a problem solving model around barriers that these families face from transportation, child care, lack of education, and much, much more. I have managed many volunteer programs during my life but this one has been the most rewarding as far as the outcomes. Not only do women become successful with employment but people become friends across socio-economic classes and so many other differences. They learn that we are more alike than we are different. We have not slowed down to figure out what President Bush is going to do with his initiative but we are curious.

Posted 7/20/01

Submitted by Gerald (Jerry) Pannozzo, 2nd Vice President, NY AVA, New York, NY

I feel strongly about the separation of church and state and I'm skeptical about monitoring systems. In addition, I recently read an article in *Lambda Update*--Summer 2001, with regard to the issue of civil rights and the faith-based initiative. However, I see this as an educational opportunity for all of us. I first became aware of faith-based organizations through ICVA. Therefore, when I was assigned to work on the NY AVA Membership Recruitment Campaign 2001, I proposed outreach to four populations with lower representation and/or potential for increased levels of participation within NY AVA - individuals who completed the Big Brother Big Sister NYC Mentoring Certification Program, faith-based communities, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and HIV communities and NYC/IYV (Founded by Rustie Brooke) Members of the NY AVA Membership Committee have discovered that the definition of "faith-based" is not necessarily universal and that we can get sidetracked when it comes to our different philosophies. As we have faced this multi-layered issue, we have reminded ourselves of our goals - to effectively engage volunteers, promote and advocate for the profession, and provide training and networking opportunities for those who supervise/manage /coordinate volunteer.

Posted 7/17/01

Submitted by Charlotte Smith Neyland, Services Director, Longmont, Colorado

Good article and good suggestions. I am seeking a grant to offer free volunteer management training to our local faith-based organizations and will share your article and probably due as you suggested, get some folks together. Our agency has a number of local churches signed up with us for our free recruitment services. We have good relationships with them. And, by the way, Marlene Wilson founded our agency, Volunteer Connection of Boulder County in 1969. We have a legacy fund in her name. She lives here and is one terrific lady.

Posted 7/17/01

Submitted by M. Wilson, The HELP Center, President, CA., USA

Faith-based organizations helping the poor and people in crisis by becoming non-profits and starting

programs is like the start of our country all over again, except of course we have alot more red tape, but this country used to have alot of churches and groups who helped their neighbors and friends, it used to be the American way.

Posted 7/9/01

Submitted by Mary Carchrie, Director, Senior Service Corps, Cape Cod, Massachusetts, USA

Many of the faith communities have no real experience managing a volunteer program. We are collaborating with the Parish Nurse Ministries of Cape Cod to start a volunteer transportation and friendly visitor program. Rather than competing, we compliment each other. We provide the structure and they provide the clients and many of the volunteers.

Posted 7/9/01

Submitted by Jeanna Young, Membership Involvement Director/Riverbend Church, Texas, US

As the Membership Involvement Director for Riverbend Church, in Austin, Texas, I coordinate the efforts of helping fourteen different Outreach Ministries recruit volunteers for their organizations. Riverbend has approximately 8,000 members, and approximately 4,000 that are active either in Ministries inside our walls, or in the community. These Outreach Ministry opportunities include many diversified organizations such as the Austin Children's Shelter, CASA of Travis County, Habitat for Humanity, Austin Interreligious Ministries, and many more. Our church philosophy is that these organizations are better trained and have more expertise in their areas than any effort our individual congregation would be able to provide. My degree is in Political Science, and I believe, as with everything in politics, this is just a ploy by the Bush Administration to impress his right winged supporters. This Initiative is not needed for religious institutions. You are correct, we did not ask for it.

Posted 7/9/01

Submitted by Pat Tufton, Nutrition Education Assistant, NDSU Extension, Family Nutrition Program, North Dakota, Dickey

This is a very interesting topic. I think you have covered all angles of it pretty well. Faith-based ministries have always been active in this country and they have high rates of success. I would like to see a method by which these faith based ministries could continue as they are and still have funding for, perhaps buildings and the physical type of needs, without interfering with their procedures for ministering to the individuals. If even these needs were met, it would free up their funds to be used directly for people needs.

I think it can be a good thing; but I also think it could be death to the faith based ministries, if they are going to be subjected to the rules of never mentioning God or Jesus and telling people about the bible. These are the reasons for their success and why they have such higher success rates. They give people a reason to live and improve themselves. The Government run programs work just the opposite so many times. They destroy a person's sense of worth and make it harder to rise above their circumstances. When people are told they are nothing but an animal and are at the mercy of circumstances, it is very discouraging. When they are shown from the bible that they are actually

created by a God who loves them, they can rise up and know their worth. There are definitely many pitfalls, and possible benefits to the President's program. I really believe he means it all for the good of the people and this country and that he does not want to destroy, but to build up.

Posted 7/9/01

Submitted by Nita Moser, Public Relations, Cary Medical Center, Maine

I have worked with many volunteer programs in our area and it seems that the hardest community to motivate to action is the church community. With all those people, buildings, kitchens, and other resources... I welcome the initiative but hope that Bush includes a motivational video especially for our area.

Posted 7/9/01

Submitted by Jayne Cravens, Online Volunteering Specialist, UNV, Bonn, Germany

I have been deeply disturbed that, under Bush's similar plan in Texas, faith-based organizations were not subject to the regulations and reporting required of secular organizations -- and the reports of abuse of both people and funds are now coming to light. If faith-based initiatives want to compete for funding, fine -- but they absolutely should be subject to the same rigorous reporting and regulation of nonprofit, secular organizations. Also, I have been deeply disturbed that many of those closely allied with Bush that are pushing for this plan represent only one area of faith. Some are people that have been openly hostile to non-fundamentalist-Christian religious. I can't imagine that Bush's plan would look at a mentoring program run, say, by Muslims, and one run by a Christian group, in the same way.

Posted 7/9/01

Submitted by Betty Clark Keenan, Barton County Interfaith Volunteer Caregivers, Kansas

As a coordinator for Interfaith Volunteer Caregivers one of our main concerns is how to keep our program going through fund raisers. We are aware of the guidelines most foundations offer. They have a limited interest in funding a program that is ongoing. So the interest of receiving funding is uppermost on the mind. The question that comes to mind is how much control will the government have and how much paper work is involved.

Posted 7/5/01

Submitted by Rustie Brooke, Founder, NYC/IYV, New York City

Great topic. In New York City this previous May 2001, The Support Center for Nonprofit Management sponsored an excellent roundtable discussion of the Faith-Based Initiative. A diverse representation of community interacted at this initial exploratory meeting, which I attended. May I recommend to those in the area interested in this topic, please contact Dr. John Vogelsang at The Support Center, 212 924.6744. This important conversation will be continuing.

Posted 7/3/01

Submitted by Lisa M. Anderson, Supervisor, Journey Partners, Lutheran Child and Family Service, Mi, USA

I am the supervisor of a faith-based volunteer mentor program, subsidized by state and federal funds. We have had tremendous success with this program, despite having to overcome a variety of

prejudices. State workers tend to be hyper-vigilant and suspicious about the temptation to evangelize on the part of volunteers. Volunteers are sometimes outraged at the perceived lack of response on the part of workers to families in crisis. It has been heartening to see the hand of "a higher power" at work to build long-lasting supportive relationships between all these groups of people after getting through our more basic human distrusts.

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