

Kerry endorses faith-based grants: Advisory group would tackle constitutional questions

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Senator John Kerry, who carries Democratic Party hopes for the White House, said he supports government funding of faith-based initiatives as long as they respect the separation of church and state and do not allow discrimination in hiring.

In comments that were part of his prepared remarks at the African Methodist Episcopal Church General Conference in early July, Kerry said he differs with those who think government should have no role in supporting faith-based groups. "I know there are some who say that the First Amendment means faith-based organizations can't help government," he said.

"I think they are wrong. I want to offer support for your efforts, including financial support, in a way that supports our Constitution and civil rights laws and values the role of faith in inspiring countless acts of justice and mercy across our land."

Kerry's campaign released an outline of how government and faith-based organizations would relate if he were president. His proposal calls for enabling faith-based organizations to compete on an "equal footing" with other private groups for federal funds and would create a program to provide training and technical assistance to help faith-based and other groups apply for such grants.

It would establish an advisory group of religious leaders, legal experts and social-service providers that would tackle constitutional questions. It also would prevent tax dollars from being spent to purchase Bibles or build churches.

President Bush made government support of faith-based initiatives a major theme of his 2000 campaign, but major legislation intended to foster increased cooperation with religious groups has stalled in Congress.

More recently, two progressive activists in Washington wrote separate letters to Bush and Kerry on the issue—with opposing recommendations. Welton Gaddy, executive director of the Interfaith Alliance, urged that the White House office shut down the operation to “reverse the past four years of bad public policy which inappropriately has mixed religion with politics in the appropriations process,” although he praised older faith-based programs such as Catholic Charities and Lutheran Social Services.

Replying in part to Gaddy, Jim Wallis, convener of the Call to Renewal organization, wrote Bush and Kerry: “Shutting the door on efforts to find the right mix of partnership between the government and churches—that respects the separation of church and state—is akin to saying the faith community is not willing to be creative when it comes to serving ‘the least of these.’” *-Religion News Service*