

# Thanks, but no thanks: Congregations say no to the faith- based initiative

by [Mark Chaves](#) in the [June 1, 2010](#) issue

More than a decade ago, the faith-based initiative was launched in Congress with the idea of tapping the energy and genius of religious organizations, including congregations, to meet social needs. The idea of fostering more government partnerships with religious groups was controversial from the start, for it raised the specter of the government becoming entangled, perhaps in an unconstitutional manner, with religion. Controversy aside, we can now assess whether the initiative has had any success in involving more congregations in social service work. The evidence suggests it has not—and is not likely to do so.

First, a little history: when Congress enacted welfare reform in 1996 under President Bill Clinton, the legislation required states that contract with outside organizations for social services to consider religious organizations as eligible partners. Thus welfare reform represented a significant achievement for those who wanted to expand the role of religious organizations in publicly funded social service programs.

President Bush advanced this agenda by establishing an Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives in the White House; by starting similar offices in 11 federal agencies; by proposing legislation that applied the religious provisions of the welfare reform bill to additional programs; and by using his bully pulpit to draw attention to what he believed is the capacity of religious organizations to play a more significant role in the social welfare system. This faith-based initiative aimed to do several things: increase the number of religious organizations submitting grant proposals; make it easier for religious organizations to win grant competitions; and encourage nonprofit organizations and local government agencies to develop partnerships with congregations and other religious organizations.

The Compassion Capital Fund (CCF) administered by the Department of Health and Human Services was the only new federal funding stream created by the initiative. Its annual budget was \$30 million in 2002, increasing to \$57.8 million in 2007. It awarded hundreds of mini-grants (up to \$50,000) directly to faith-based and community organizations. The CCF also funded dozens of intermediary organizations to provide training and technical assistance to faith-based and community organizations that were seeking public funds and to give capacity-building subawards to local organizations. These intermediary organizations awarded small grants to hundreds of organizations, including congregations.

These Washington-based efforts inspired action inside and outside government aimed at increasing religious organizations' involvement in social services—and government support of that involvement. Many states and cities appointed “faith-based liaisons” or task forces to increase religious organizations' involvement in social services.

Congregations—churches, synagogues and mosques—were only one type of religious organization targeted by the faith-based initiative, and their significance in the welfare system pales in comparison to religious organizations that are dedicated to social services, such as Catholic Charities, Lutheran Social Services and Jewish Family Services. But influencing congregations was clearly one of the central goals of the initiative. Congregation-based programs were held up as examples of the local, holistic, personal and religiously based services that, it was argued, are better at delivering social services than impersonal government agencies and private bureaucracies. Clergy were invited to conferences and workshops on grant opportunities. Newsletters, Web sites and guidebooks were produced to encourage congregations to apply for grants.

Congregations were among the small and inexperienced community organizations that the CCF's intermediary organizations supported with technical assistance and capacity-building awards. Beyond their potential as direct recipients of government funding, congregations were seen as potential partners. Secular organizations applying for grants were encouraged or required to develop partnerships with local religious organizations, which mainly meant congregations.

Since congregations were both symbolically and practically important to the faith-based initiative, it is reasonable to ask: Did the faith-based initiative have any impact on congregations? Did it prompt congregations to get more involved in

providing social services?

The initiative certainly piqued congregations' interest. On the basis of the National Congregations Study, a nationally representative survey of congregations from across the religious spectrum (the survey was done in 1998 and again in 2006-2007, so change is measurable), we know that in the wake of the faith-based initiative more congregations invited a speaker from a social service organization, more conducted an assessment of community needs and more expressed interest in applying for government money. The percentage of congregations featuring a speaker from a social service organization increased from 22 percent in 1998 to 31 percent in 2006, and the number that planned or conducted a community needs assessment increased from 37 percent to 48 percent. The number of congregations that said they would apply for government funding if it were available increased from 39 to 47 percent.

Though interest in social service work increased to some extent across the religious spectrum, only white evangelical Protestant congregations became substantially more interested in receiving government funding. This was, of course, the group particularly targeted by the faith-based initiative. But it is also the group with the lowest level of interest in government funding—which was true both in 1998 and in 2006. In 2006, 35 percent of white conservative Protestant churches expressed interest in applying for government funding (up from 22 percent in 1998), compared with 47 percent of white liberal congregations, 50 percent of non-Christian congregations, 53 percent of Catholic congregations and 71 percent of black Protestant congregations.

Expressing interest is one thing, doing something is another. Almost all congregations do something that might be called social service, but from 1998 to 2006 there was no increase in the percentage of congregations pursuing social service in a substantial way. At both points in time, about 11 percent of congregations had a paid staff person devoting at least a quarter of that person's time to social services. Only about 4 percent of churches received government funding in support of this work at both points in time. Nor was there any increase in the extent to which congregations collaborated with government or nonprofit organizations.

Did the faith-based initiative lead to intensified effort by congregations that were already involved in social service work? Not in any straightforward way. The

congregations that engage in social services reported no increase in the number of programs sponsored, the number of volunteers mobilized or the amount of money spent on these efforts. There was no increase in the percent of congregations that have a staff person working at least quarter time on these programs. The data suggest that large congregations that were doing social services in 1998 might have intensified their social service involvement in recent years, but the evidence is not definitive.

Surely in these years some congregations began social service projects that they would not have launched without the faith-based initiative. Surely some churches developed new collaborations with nonprofit organizations or government agencies or received new government funding. But the faith-based initiative did not broadly change congregations' behavior or their role in the social welfare system.

Not incidentally, there was one service arena in which congregations did become more involved since 1998: disaster relief. The percentage of congregations reporting some involvement in disaster relief increased from 8 percent in 1998 to 13 percent in 2006. It seems likely that this increased involvement reflected the outpouring of congregation-based assistance that followed the Indonesian tsunami and especially Hurricane Katrina. Congregations do respond to the needs of the world around them. But congregations did not respond to the faith-based initiative.

The faith-based initiative did not change congregations because it was based on flawed assumptions about churches' role in the social welfare system. One mistaken assumption was that congregation-based social services represent an alternative to the social welfare system. The reality is that there is no such alternative system in the religious world. Congregations long have occupied an important but limited place in community welfare systems. Far from constituting an alternative to the current system, congregational social service depends on the current system. Congregations pursue social ministries mainly by supporting other organizations with money, staff time or volunteers. It is much more common for a congregation to plug into an existing program than to start a new one.

The faith-based initiative failed to change congregations in part because it tried to bypass existing networks and support systems in favor of putting resources into one small part of those systems. Congregations are usually a part of these networks and systems; they rarely stand separate from them. A better informed faith-based initiative would focus on building up the social service delivery network as a whole.

Another mistaken assumption behind the faith-based initiative was that congregations represent a vast reservoir of volunteer labor. It's true that congregations are good at mobilizing people. But they are good at mobilizing small groups of volunteers to conduct well-defined tasks on a periodic basis. Congregations are good at mobilizing 15 people to spend several weekends renovating a house, or getting five people to cook dinner at a homeless shelter one night a week, or organizing ten young people to spend two weeks painting a school in a poor community.

The "well-defined" and "periodic" aspects of this work are important because they point to the limits of volunteer-based efforts. Failing to recognize these limits can lead to frustration when volunteers are asked to take on vague and ill-defined assignments, such as open-ended mentoring projects. When these limits are recognized, congregation-based volunteer teams can contribute mightily to a community. It is no accident that congregations' most significant social service collaborations are with organizations, like homeless shelters and Habitat for Humanity, that are good at taking advantage of exactly the resource that congregations are best at providing: small groups of volunteers carrying out well-defined, limited tasks.

Perhaps the most effective method of increasing congregations' participation in social service work would be to find more ways to use small groups of volunteers to do specific tasks. Figuring out more ways to use the resources that churches truly are good at providing may be less exciting than imagining an alternative social welfare system based in churches, and it may be less attention-grabbing than the prospect of public money flowing into congregations. It certainly is less controversial. But it also is a more realistic approach to the worthy goal of increasing partnerships between congregations and community organizations.

---

*This article is a revised version of an article that Mark Chaves and Bob Wineburg wrote, "Did the Faith-Based Initiative Change Congregations?" which appeared in the March 2010 issue of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly.*