

# Neighbors

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [August 1, 2001](#) issue

The intersection of religion, government and social needs is where this journal has positioned itself throughout its history, so I accepted an invitation from the Aspen Institute to listen in on a discussion of the Bush administration's faith-based initiative. The panelists, representing a remarkable range of opinion, included Michael Horowitz from the Hudson Institute, who served in the Reagan administration; Wendy Kaminer, contributing editor, the *Atlantic Monthly*; Martha Minow, Harvard Law School; Susan Thistlethwaite, Chicago Theological Seminary; Douglas Kmiec, Catholic University; Bishop John Hurst Adams, Congress of National Black Churches; and Arthur Brazier, pastor of the Apostolic Church of God in Chicago and a bishop in the Pentecostal Assemblies of the World. (A videotape of the program is slated to be released at [www.greatcollisions.org](http://www.greatcollisions.org).)

Kmiec and Horowitz argued for more religion in the public square, with Kmiec arguing that what's really wrong with our society is that God has been pushed out of the public square—and out of the public schools. Brazier eloquently warned of the corrupting impact of government money flowing to churches. Adams worried that the church can't be prophetic if it relies on the government for funding, Thistlethwaite reminded the audience that the U.S. is no longer a white, Protestant, Christian nation, and Minow expressed concerns about constitutionality.

Audience reaction indicated a strong suspicion of the federal government's motives and concern about the threat to church integrity posed by government funding.

I came away with a deepened appreciation for the complexity of the issue. But the faith-based initiative does represent a shift of responsibility in caring for the needy from the public to the private sector, and that concerns me.

When not at the Century, I am the pastor of an urban church that has a mission to reach its neighbors in need and which supports generously a variety of outreach ministries. The church understands that it exists for the sake of the world, and for the sake of its needy neighbors whoever they are. But no church or combination of churches or faith-based organizations can deal with the social, political and

economic structures that allow people to be hungry or homeless or lack health care in the wealthiest nation in the world. Addressing issues such as a living wage, education, and access to health and child care is the responsibility of all of us together—the polis, the body politic. No talk of faith-based initiatives should deny or disguise that reality.