

# Faith-based experiment

From the Editors in the [February 7, 2001](#) issue

Let a thousand lawsuits bloom. That's pretty much what John Dilulio Jr. said after being selected to head President Bush's new Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. Dilulio cheerfully acknowledged that the government's plan to encourage partnerships with religious groups raises First Amendment questions. When does government funding of faith-based organizations constitute an illegal "establishment" of religion? Can government be impartial in giving grants to religiously affiliated groups? At what point do government guidelines restrict the "free exercise" of religion? "These are debates we ought to have," said Dilulio. "We ought to sue each other until we drop."

Like Dilulio, most proponents of using faith-based organizations as providers of social services are aware of potential legal problems. But they are willing to test constitutional interpretations for the sake of encouraging creative and effective social programs. Their biggest fear is not of lawsuits but of failing to encourage faith-based groups in their crucial role in shaping and transforming lives.

While the potential for violating First Amendment protections is certainly real, there is constitutional room for experimenting with government-religious partnerships. The separation of church and state has always been a fuzzy line in American life, constantly redrawn as new situations and challenges arise. Consider the fact that last year the Supreme Court rejected school-sponsored prayer at high school football games but affirmed the public financing of computers for religious schools. The court can make similar distinctions, as needed, in the case of faith-based organizations. If it turns out that a thousand lawsuits do bloom, we think the fundamental guarantees of the First Amendment will survive the test.

Meanwhile, using government funds more deliberately to empower the social work of faith-based groups is an experiment worth trying. If anything has become clear about life in late modern capitalism, increasingly supervised by a value-neutral state, it is that it needs the contributions of community- and faith-based groups—groups which are not value neutral, but which operate out of a substantive

moral vision and which can articulate that vision in face-to-face relationships. Such groups mold individual character, build marriages, and shape civil interactions for the benefit of the entire society.

It is not surprising that faith-based groups appear especially effective in dealing with those who are homeless, in prison, mired in poverty, or suffering from violence and addiction. People in such circumstances certainly need government programs, but they also need friendship, the loyalty of a specific community, a compelling vision of the virtuous life, and a commitment to transcendent truths—things that neutral government agencies are not designed to provide.

An office of faith-based and community initiatives will not revolutionize social services—and it would be a serious mistake to think it will. Dilulio himself, a creative and tough-minded thinker with a sharp eye for practical results, has admitted that the empirical evidence on the topic is slight. (“Most of what we know about the positive social effects of religion concerns churchgoing, not faith-based programs,” he wrote in the fall 2000 issue of *Public Interest*.) Specific issues of health care, education, and tax and welfare policy remain key to the plight of the poor—not to mention the amount of money actually earmarked for local initiatives. (Bush’s program, it should be noted, does not add any more money for social programs.) The creation of such an office is not “the solution” to any aspect of welfare policy. Yet it is likely to be a part of the solution, and for that reason it deserves support.