

A ministry or a program?

by [Kevin Armstrong](#) in the [July 5, 2000](#) issue

When many ministers' primary role shifted from being pulpit preacher to being institutional CEO, clergy found themselves wondering, "When did my study become an office?" Today, as congregations consider tapping government funds to provide social services once provided by secular agencies, another question may be arising: "When did our ministry become a program?"

That's not to say all congregation-based outreach programs lack religious identity. But there is that danger. Congregations would do well to mine the Gospel stories as they determine how their ministry is distinct from the services offered by a secular program. Jesus's public ministry begins with an announcement of his identity and authority and is quickly followed by temptation and conflict. Congregations that engage in public partnerships should expect to face similar temptations, to be carefully watched, and to be asked the same questions Jesus was asked: Who are you? What can you do for me? Why do you speak this way?

For some people, whether congregations should be eligible for government funds is primarily a legal question. But for congregation, it should first be a theological one. What makes a faith-based partnership a ministry if the congregation does not disclose its identity as people acting in response to God? Churches should also know that as a social-service ministry grows in budget and staff, the congregation's sense of ownership tends to decline.

Before accepting a check, every congregation ought to ask whether it would be willing to give back the money and continue the mission if the church's identity ever became compromised. Faithful responses to that question must take into account those being served, paid employees, perhaps even congregants and their families who rely on the ministry. One ancient test may be to ask how the ministry would change if the church declared with Peter, "I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you." Good stewardship means being clear with one another about what's at stake in accepting or declining funding.

Most congregational ministries assume some level of connection between worship and service. But the Charitable Choice provision of federal law, which allows congregations to compete for government funds, makes clear that these monies may not be used to proselytize or evangelize. Congregations need to ponder that claim on their ministry. Ironically, though many evangelicals have been in the forefront of arguing for the Charitable Choice option, many evangelical congregations have opted out of the program precisely because the guidelines diffuse the connections between service, witness and worship.

In Indianapolis, African-American congregations are four times more likely than their white counterparts to apply for government funding for social programs. These congregations persuasively argue that up until now they have been shut off from funding even though they possessed the skills, desire and competency to improve their neighborhoods. But as one pastor confided after his congregation received its first grant check, “I wonder if my people still remember it’s the Lord who provides”—and not the government funder.

Faith-based partnerships are not for every congregation. In fact, most have no interest in applying for these funds. Charitable Choice does provide every congregation with opportunities as well as temptations. Faith communities have always delivered social services. The new rules of funding require them to consider more rigorously than ever what they can do effectively, appropriately, and without compromising their religious identity. If they don’t ask themselves these questions, critics may begin asking who’s providing ministry, now that congregations are providing social programs.