

AlbertMohler.com

Can Faith-Based Programs Keep the Faith?

Wednesday, February 11, 2009

The Obama administration has announced its own authorization of what have been known as “faith-based” funding programs, and in so doing it dodged — at least for now — the most controversial question related to this funding. Can faith-based organizations receive this funding and maintain their own convictions in hiring decisions?

Former President George W. Bush made the funding of faith-based programs a centerpiece of his administration’s agenda and protected the right of faith-based organizations to hire staff consistent with their own moral and theological convictions. During the presidential campaign, Barack Obama declared his intention to remove that protection and to require all participating organizations to work within non-discrimination policies in services and hiring.

“You can’t use that grant money to proselytize to the people you help and you can’t discriminate against them,” he told a campaign audience. Similarly, Joshua DuBois, director of the new White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships, said: “The president is still very much committed to clear constitutionality and legality in this program. He’s committed to nondiscrimination.”



Groups on both sides of this controversy expressed frustration that the Obama administration did not come down clearly on either side in establishing the new office. Sources within the administration said that the issue was under legal review, and groups pressing for the government to require full non-discrimination expressed confidence that the administration would, in due time, come down in their favor. Given the President’s assurances, it will be difficult for the administration to do otherwise.

For decades, many religious organizations have sought federal funding for social ministry programs. The logic is understandable, and there is no doubt that religious institutions and organizations are often far more effective and efficient in delivering these services. The refusal to fund these programs would, in essence, represent a discrimination against these religious organizations. The Bush administration was right to see this as both wrong and costly.

Nevertheless, I would never advise a Christian organization to participate in these federal programs or to receive tax monies. The brutal reality is that when government money flows, government regulation inevitably follows. Furthermore, taking government money sets a bad precedent and can easily become a seductive snare. When government policies violate the organization’s convictions, or when regulations would require a compromise of those convictions, government funding is a trap.

I fully expect that the Obama administration’s guidelines for the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships will eventually reflect the assurances the President made when running for office. Beyond this, we can expect court challenges if this does not happen. If and when these policies come into effect, Christian organizations will almost surely find themselves denied the right to hire staff on the basis of their own convictions. Faith-based organizations will, in effect, be denied the right to be faithful to their own convictions, beliefs, and principles.

Groups are pushing for the administration to act quickly. Some have advised that the policy is likely to require groups to separate ministerial staff (not funded by tax monies) and staff positions related to the government funded programs. Those funded positions would, under this construction, be fully covered by non-discrimination policies. A Christian church or denomination would, under this policy, be denied the right to deny a position in a sponsored faith-based organization to an atheist. Homosexual rights activists are calling for similar coverage.

When President Obama commented on this question, he made reference to the fact that religious organizations must avoid any effort “to proselytize to the people you help” through these funded programs. Take a good look at those words. That is a price too high for any Christian organization.

If the government is going to fund faith-based programs, it must respect the right of such organizations to be faithful to their own convictions. To do otherwise is to secularize these programs in the name of faith-based partnerships.

Yet, even in the very unlikely event that the Obama administration maintains the Bush administration’s policies in this area, the price is still too high. Let the faithful pay for faith-based organizations, and let the faithful hold these organizations accountable to keep the faith. Government funding is just too seductive, too complicated, and too dangerous. The Obama administration may soon make these dangers all too evident.

Content Copyright © 2002-2010, R. Albert Mohler, Jr.

