

CAPITAL COMMENTARY

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We Won't Tolerate a Faith-Based Bait and Switch!

It's odd, isn't it? During the Clinton years, Congress four separate times added Charitable Choice to social programs to ensure equal opportunity for faith-based groups to compete for federal funds. But as soon as President George W. Bush announced his faith-based initiative, many in Congress abruptly decided that equal treatment was a terrible idea. The House in 2001 did pass the Community Solutions Act, expanding Charitable Choice to additional programs, but the Senate said no. The Senate's own faith-based bill, the CARE Act, was held up by opponents until even its minimal equal treatment language was stripped out. Makes you wonder just who is playing politics with the faith-based agenda.

But now, at long last, Congress is set to actually send faith-based legislation to the president. The House last Wednesday overwhelmingly approved the Charitable Giving Act, a bill like the Senate-passed CARE Act. The two bills will have to be reconciled in conference committee and approved again by both House and Senate. Yet it looks like only a matter of a short time before President Bush will finally get to sign faith-based legislation into law.

Is this a great victory? Yes and no. What's in the bill is important, but what's been left out is even more vital. Members of Congress who are working against equal treatment need to be held accountable for maintaining government discrimination.

The focus of both the Charitable Giving Act and the CARE Act is encouraging greater private giving to charities. Both bills will enable non-itemizing federal taxpayers to claim a tax break for charitable contributions. Another change encourages donating money from IRAs to charities. The bills also propose some additional social spending and \$150 million annually in Compassion Capital Fund money for technical assistance to community-based and faith-based groups. The House bill includes a notable statement challenging corporations to drop policies

that restrict or bar faith-based groups from applying for their grants.

These provisions will have a very positive effect. So loud huzzahs! The faith-based initiative has always been about increasing private support for charities. But it has never been *only* about increasing private support. Its distinctive and historic goal has always been to end government's bias against faith-based organizations by eliminating funding rules that exclude faith-based groups or that require them to marginalize their faith in exchange for the money.

Many faith-based groups will never seek government money. That's their choice. Exactly. It shouldn't be a decision forced on them by government discrimination. When officials seek services for the needy, they should fund the best programs without first screening out faith-based organizations that appear somehow "too religious." Ending government's bias is urgent and the only way to honor the religious liberty guaranteed by the Constitution.

So let's congratulate every member of Congress who supports these faith-based bills. At the same time, let's put them on notice that these votes are no substitute for ending discriminatory treatment of faith-based competitors for federal funds. What members must do is support language in social program bills to ensure that faith-based groups that accept federal funds won't lose their decades-old federal civil right to staff on a religious basis. Without that right, faith-based groups can end up faith-less.

Members of the House and Senate, if you want to shine as supporters of the faith-based initiative, you must go beyond encouraging private donations and join the fight to defend religious staffing. Thank you for these votes, but we'll be watching to see what you do on behalf of equal treatment and religious liberty.

— Stanley Carlson-Thies
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