

# C APITAL C OMMENTARY

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## Re-Igniting the Faith-Based Initiative

President Bush recently visited an inner-city job-training program, St. Stephen's Community House, in Columbus, Ohio to promote his welfare and faith-based proposals. The visit followed his strong call last month for the Senate to push forward the CARE Act to increase support for America's "Armies of Compassion," like those at St. Stephen's. "The federal government," he said, "should not discriminate against faith. There must be a level playing field."

Yet, to most observers, the Faith-Based Initiative appears to be idling in neutral at best. Expansion of Charitable Choice—"the stake in the sand" that defines in law important protections for faith-based groups who choose to collaborate with government social programs—passed the House, but was dropped from the Senate bill, causing some of the President's "armies" to question whether to enlist to work in a partnership with government at all. Tax incentives in the CARE Act to encourage charitable giving may be slashed drastically by the Senate Finance Committee for budget reasons. And worst of all, the bitter debate over the Initiative in Congress and in the press shows that groups like St. Stephen's must fight for even *basic* freedoms to live out their faith that should be theirs under the First Amendment.

How then to re-ignite the Initiative? First, the President and the Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives should confront their critics and articulate clearly the principles that propel the Initiative. Sidestepping difficult issues allows opponents to define the debate. The Constitution gives faith-based organizations the same right to use public funds to provide public services that "secular" groups have. All should be free to hire staff that reflect their principled convictions, religious or secular. No group should have to change its mission or hide its distinctive character to get funding. No bias for or against anyone, only a level playing field for all.

Second, the President and the White House Office must now show faith-based supporters that

they will defend their rights not only in rhetoric but also in reality. Case in point: As part of welfare reform, opponents of Charitable Choice have offered a series of amendments to try to strip away the ability of faith-based groups to hire staff who agree with the religious basis of their programs. Ignoring existing civil rights law, they allege this freedom permits "religious discrimination." Faith-based groups know that this right is essential to preserve the mission and integrity of their programs. A true partnership, they argue, would honor their right to control who they hire. The Supreme Court has long recognized this right. Will the White House come to their defense?

Third, the White House Office must take bold steps to fulfill its original mandate to end government discrimination against faith-based programs. Thanks to Charitable Choice, first adopted into law almost six years ago, thousands of people across the country have received job training, drug treatment, literacy and GED classes, and much more from faith-based organizations, often right in their own neighborhoods. However, many government programs remain closed to faith-based solutions, either due to outdated regulations or perceptions by government officials that faith-based partners are still off-limits for public programs, because of the "separation of church and state."

Proponents of the Initiative should seize the offensive, accelerate the regulatory reform efforts now underway to create a level playing field, and work with Congress to expand Charitable Choice to new programs. Faith communities are no less a part of "the public" than secular groups, and they are right to insist on equal treatment by government. People deserve the right to offer and receive faith-based services as part of the public safety net. Let the Initiative advance and stand firm. Re-light the fire!

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