

George W. Bush's Faith-Based Initiative:

Responses from the Administrative Committee of the Seventh-day
Adventist Church, Americans United for the Separation of Church and
State, *Christianity Today*, and *Rolling Stone*

As part of his campaign for the U.S. presidency, George W. Bush expressed his intention if elected to launch a major national effort to direct taxpayer money into churches and other religious groups to provide social services. On January 29, shortly after his inauguration, Bush followed through by forming a new federal agency, the Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, through executive action. The office has a commission to expand government aid to religious ministries and to create church state "partnerships."

Churches, lobbying groups, and the media have responded to this unprecedented step on the part of the president. On March 6, 2000, the Administrative Committee of the Seventh-day Adventist Church worldwide considered, adopted, and entered into its minutes a statement of principle, partly in response to the initiative, regarding government funding of religious organizations.

According to Clarence Hodges, public affairs and religious liberty director for the Adventist Church in North America, "This working statement is a step toward developing guidelines for properly evaluating funding programs that may impact the relationship between church and state." John Granz, Hodges's counterpart for the worldwide church, does not see the statement as "the end of the road," but as guidance for future discussions about this issue.

To provide perspective for the Adventist Church response, we have gathered comments from several other sources: Americans United for Separation of Church and State, a self-described "religious liberty watchdog group" based in Washington, D.C., *Rolling Stone* magazine, and *Christianity Today*.

The Seventh-Day Adventist Church Consensus Statement Regarding United States Government Funding of Religious Organizations

VOTED, To record the following statement which will serve as a guide to the ongoing conversations concerning the funding of faith based initiatives as proposed by the administration of the United States government.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church recognizes both the natural involvement of religious groups and the necessary and proper involvement of government in seeking solutions to social problems. Religious groups are required by faith to be of service, to heal the wounds of society. Government must, to fulfill its responsibility, address the same issues and search for solutions to the same problems. Neither may properly look to the other

to take the entire burden. Addressing the needs of people is a shared responsibility. Therefore, religious groups and government should cooperate in seeking solutions to social problems, each doing so with mutual respect for the role of the other.

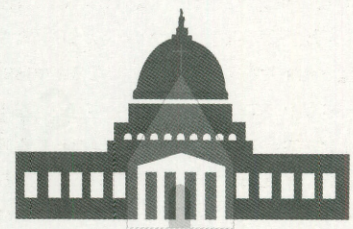
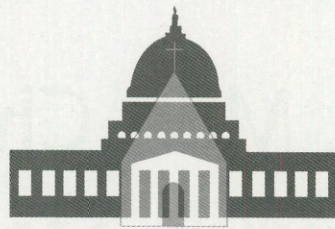
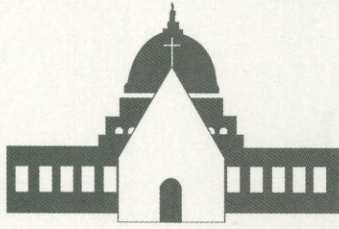
The church also recognizes the fragility of religious freedom and the necessity of giving careful attention to every aspect of any proposal or program that might change the relationship between religious organizations and government that has been so carefully developed over the centuries of the American experience. While the relationship is ever changing, as it exists in an ever changing society, certain aspects of that relationship, made clear from experience, must be safeguarded. The following aspects of this relationship require special attention in the context of governmental funding of any function of any religious or religiously affiliated organization.

1. *Autonomy.* The church must remain free to be who and what it is. Cooperation between government and religious groups should not compromise the right and freedom of those groups to manage their own affairs. The mission and voice of the church must not be diminished or circumscribed by governmental intervention. If a church, in order to participate in government programs, gives up the right to hire only those who share its convictions, it gives up too much. A delicate balance must be maintained between the internal autonomy of religious groups and the necessity to avoid governmental funding of religious functions.
2. *Dependence.* Religious groups must beware of becoming so dependent on government largess that their independence, the authenticity of their witness and voice, and indeed their very survival, are threatened.
3. *Neutrality.* The genius of the American relationship between religion and government has been the requirement of governmental neutrality. Government must never be allowed to differentiate between acceptable and unacceptable religions. The state knows and establishes no religious orthodoxy. Few things could be more destructive of the fragile relationship that has produced so much religious freedom in the United States than to allow government to evade the requirement of neutrality.

Americans United for Separation of Church and State -- The Bush "Faith-Based" Initiative: Why It's Wrong

1. *Bush's plan violates the separation of church and state.*
According to Americans United, "Bush's faith-based plan turns the time-tested constitutional principle of church-state separation on its ear. . . . Forcing taxpayers to subsidize religious institutions they may or may not believe in is no different from forcing them to put money in the collection plates of churches, synagogues and mosques."
2. *Federally funded employment discrimination is unfair.*
Bush's proposal would allow churches to use taxpayer money, yet to discriminate on the basis of religion. In effect, a U.S. taxpayer would be forced to provide funding for a job for which he or she could be considered ineligible because of religious beliefs.
3. *Religion could be forced on those in need of assistance.*
Bush's approach would allow religious institutions that receive taxpayer support to provide social services, yet also give the same organizations freedom to proselytize among those who receive assistance provided by the same money.
"Bush's policies will put the disadvantaged in an impossible position," Americans United points out. "They will either submit to religious coercion or go without food, shelter or other needed services to which they are legally entitled."
4. *Bush's plan opens the door to federal regulation of religion*
Public officials have a responsibility to account for funds expended under their jurisdiction, which almost inevitably leads to greater government scrutiny and regulation. On this point, Americans United quotes the Rev. Wanda Henry, a Baptist minister: "Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., said the church is not the master of the state, nor the servant of the state, but the conscience of the state. Charitable choice threatens to make religion the servant of the state, rather than its conscience."
5. *The vitality of our faith communities will be hurt.*
For centuries, religious organizations in the United States have depended on voluntary contributions for support. "Once religious institutions are working in tandem with the federal government and receiving tax dollars to provide services," warns Americans United, "members may be less

Source: Adventist News Network



inclined to 'dig a little deeper' to help with expenses.... Once these contributions drop off, the attendant spirit of volunteerism may also wither away."

6. *Bush's plan pits faith groups against each other.*

In the United States, government has traditionally remained neutral on religious issues, neither favoring or supporting any particular faith tradition. However, Bush's plan would require those groups to "battle it out for a piece of the government pie. Pitting houses of worship against each other," cautions Americans United, "is a recipe for divisive conflict."

7. *Some religions will be favored over others.*

Bush has promised not to discriminate against "Methodists or Mormons or Muslims or good people with no faith at all," yet he has also announced his intention to exclude the Nation of Islam because it "preaches hate." According to Americans United, Bush has suggested that his administration "may also discriminate against groups affiliated with the Wiccan faith."

Americans United sees Bush's proposal "on shaky legal ground," even without this consideration. Yet "once the president starts picking and choosing which faiths will get government aid and which ones won't, the plan quickly starts to drown in constitutional quicksand."

8. *There's no proof that religious groups will offer better care than secular providers.*

"Few studies have examined whether religious ministries are more successful than secular groups in providing aid or producing better results,"

according to Americans United, "and it is unwise to launch a major federal initiative with so little research in the area."

9. *Both liberals and conservatives are concerned about Bush's plan.*

Opponents of the Bush proposal range from Americans United, to the NAACP, the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, the American Civil Liberties Union, the National Education Association, the American Counseling Association, and the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs.

The conservative Cato Institute and Capital Research Center have also expressed reservations. Americans United quotes Cato Institute's Michael Tanner as saying that the Bush plan "risks destroying the very things that make private charity so effective."

10. *If it ain't broke, don't fix it.*

The present system permits religious organizations to provide services using public funds, but requires strict safeguards to protect taxpayers and the religious liberties of those who receive service. "Bush's plan radically alters that set-up by allowing churches and other houses of worship to preach, proselytize and discriminate while providing public services," warns Americans United.

Source: Americans United for Separation of Church and State.
For an unabbreviated list, see <www.au.org/press/pr22001.htm>