

**BREAKOUT SESSION: The Effects of Charitable Choice**

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**D.C. CONGREGATIONS IN THREE LOW-INCOME WARDS  
AND THEIR EXPERIENCES WITH GOVERNMENT FUNDING**

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## **D.C. Congregations in Three Low-income Wards and Their Experiences with Government Funding**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

During his presidential campaign, George W. Bush ran on a platform of compassionate conservatism—a social policy agenda that calls for government to be “compassionate to actively help our fellow citizens in need.... [and] conservative to insist on responsibility and results” (Bush 2002). A basic premise of this philosophy is that government should encourage people and communities to help themselves and to help one another.

As president, Mr. Bush has taken steps to translate this philosophy into action. Shortly after assuming office, he created the White House Office of Faith-based and Community Initiatives (OFBCI), and later through Executive Order created Centers of Faith-based and Community Initiatives (CFBCI) in six cabinet-level agencies (Agriculture, Education, Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development, Labor, and Justice) and two administrative agencies (the Agency for International Development and the Federal Emergency Management Agency). The purpose of the OFBCI and corresponding Centers is (1) “to encourage support for the good works of faith-based and community organizations, ... [including] passage of legislation that would create a level playing field on which private and charitable groups, including religious ones, have the fullest opportunity permitted by law for faith-based organizations to compete for federal funding; and (2) to identify and eliminate improper Federal barriers to effective faith-based and community serving programs and protecting religious liberties” (OFBCI website 2003). Similar to the legislative aims of the Charitable Choice provision of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, the new faith-based initiatives extend the goals to more federal agencies and programs.

The CFBCIs provide technical assistance to faith-based providers interested in applying for government funding and have earmarked funds for programs that serve vulnerable groups—the homeless, prisoners, at-risk youth, addicts, elders in need, and families moving from welfare to work. To address these issues, the Department of Health and Human Services in 2002 established a \$30 million Compassion Capital Fund, and the Department of Labor awarded \$17.5 million in grants to 12 states and 29 organizations.

President Bush’s faith-based initiatives have stirred much debate. Some lawmakers charge that the faith-based initiatives violate the separation of church and state or undercut civil rights and anti-discrimination laws. Many clergy and pastors are worried that the government may be attempting to privatize the church, alter its sacred mission, or even stifle its prophetic voice. Some service providers and

researchers question if the faith-based community has the administrative infrastructure to meet government accountability and performance standards generally required of grantees and contractors.

A growing body of research literature (Chaves and Tsitsos 2001; Cnaan 1997; Printz 1998) documents the types of services provided by faith-based organizations and the capacity of these groups. Studies are beginning to surface that assess the implementation of Charitable Choice within states (Bielefeld, et al. 2001; Green and Sherman 2002). Less well studied, however, is the experience of religious congregations, particularly those in low-income neighborhoods, in seeking and receiving government funds. Using a small sample of congregations in three low-income areas of Washington, D.C., this paper explores how these congregations are responding to the various faith-based initiatives, what experiences, if any, they have had in working with government, what is their overall service capacity, and what types of technical assistance might be helpful to them in working with government.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The research design for this study was shaped by two factors: (1) selection of relevant geographic areas for study; and (2) selection of congregations that either provide the types of social ministries or outreach programs targeted by the faith-based initiatives and/or have had experience with government funding.

Using data from the 2000 Census, we determined that just over half (52 percent) of all residents of the District who had incomes below poverty in 1999 lived in political Wards 6, 7, and 8—areas commonly known as “East of the River” (see map). Indeed, these Wards were home to some of the District’s neediest families: 62 percent of children were in families that received Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), 50 percent received Medicaid, and 63 percent received food stamps. Nearly half (46 percent) of all D.C. children under age 18 reside in Wards 6, 7, and 8 (D.C. KIDS COUNT 2002).

Because only a small percentage of religious congregations receive government funding or have had experience working with government agencies, a strictly random sample of congregations in the three Wards would yield very limited results for this study. We therefore drew on previous research conducted by the Center on Nonprofits and Philanthropy at the Urban Institute to help us identify the congregations that would most likely provide complex social services and/or receive government funding. A survey of faith-based organizations in the Washington, DC metropolitan area, conducted in 1997, provided an overview of social service ministries by type and capacity (Printz 1998), and a study of computer access in Wards 6, 7, and 8 gave us additional information about the religious congregations in these three Wards (Manjarrez and De Vita 2002). Combining these two databases, we identified 103 congregations in these three Wards, 83 of which were likely to meet our selection criteria. A total of 18 congregations

(evenly distributed by Ward) were randomly selected, and 5 pastors or clergy agreed to be interviewed by the authors. One congregation was located in Ward 6, two were in Ward 7, and two in Ward 8.

In addition to these personal interviews, the authors conducted a focus group with eight pastors and clergy from the three Wards. All focus group participants had attended at least one workshop sponsored by the D.C. Mayor's Office of Partnerships and Grants on how to apply for government grants and contracts. The focus group discussion centered around their need for technical assistance, their experiences in working with government, their opinions regarding the faith-based initiatives, and their ideas for facilitating collaboration between faith-based organizations and government.

## **FINDINGS**

As Chaves and Tsitsos (2001), Bartkowski (1999), and others have found, the size and denomination of religious congregations are highly correlated with the congregation's experience and perceptions of Charitable Choice and other faith-based initiatives. Larger congregations and mainstream denominations, such as Catholic and Lutheran churches that maintain hierarchical structures or entities that facilitate social service activity, tend to express more favorable views on church-state relations and partnerships with government. This correlation was observed in our sample of religious congregations in the D.C. low-income neighborhoods, but the complexities of church-state relations and the experiences of these congregations with receiving government funds were highly nuanced and varied. Based on our interviews and focus group discussions, five broad findings emerged.

### **1. Staffing constraints and infrastructure limitations will make it difficult for smaller congregations in low-income areas to partner with government.**

Although all of the religious congregations in this study offered some type of social outreach or social ministry program, the types of programs offered, the staffing and administrative arrangements used, and their experience with seeking and receiving financial support from government differed greatly. Simple social service programs staffed by volunteers were offered by all congregations, but complex programs, such as child care, substance abuse counseling, or residential programs, were more likely to be provided by larger congregations and run by paid professionals. A smaller congregation might provide *space* for a complex program, but it generally was not responsible for the staffing or operation of the program. Only a few congregations in the study had received financial support from government agencies, although none of this support was directly from federal agencies.

Food programs were the most common service offered by all of the congregations in the study, but the type of food program provided, frequency of service, and staffing arrangements varied greatly among these congregations. For example, one congregation with 300 members operates a food pantry, run by three volunteers who distribute bags of groceries to between 35 and 50 families once each month.

Another congregation with about 100 members operates a meal program in its fellowship hall, providing lunch five days per week for 90 to 125 people daily. This program is staffed by a part-time, paid director, two paid “volunteers” who receive a monthly stipend of \$60 for buying the food and coordinating the kitchen, and four or five daily (unpaid) volunteers. A moderate-sized congregation (about 400 members) provides the service delivery system in its Ward for the city’s Meals on Wheels program. It recruits volunteers from its own congregation to deliver meals, coordinates with volunteers from other congregations, and generally is responsible for getting meals to older and disabled residents five days each week. Volunteers, vans, and coordinating skills are the critical ingredients for successfully running this program. The congregation does not receive government funding for this coordinating and distribution service. Clergy reported that it was relatively easy to recruit volunteers for these food-related ministries. The volunteers generally received little or no formal training, but experienced workers tended to coach and guide the new volunteers so they would learn what to expect and what was expected of them.

In contrast, complex programs, such as residential programs for mentally retarded individuals, tenants programs to assist low-income families to become self-sufficient, and some after school tutoring and mentoring programs, are provided by larger congregations using paid staff, who, depending on the nature of the work, are often professionally trained in counseling or administration. These complex programs demand extensive time commitments on a daily, weekly or even ‘round-the-clock basis, and clergy indicated that it was sometimes difficult to recruit and retain staff for these positions. As one deaconess put it, “We have people with wonderful hearts, but they have needs that sometimes don’t allow them to solely volunteer.” As the size, intensity and complexity of the social ministry program grows, so does the likelihood that the staffing and administration of the program will become more time-consuming, demanding, and professional. Smaller congregations often do not have the capacity to meet such demands and are likely to be at a disadvantage in seeking government support for their programs.

## **2. Reactions to the proposed faith-based initiatives were mixed.**

The initial announcement of the Charitable Choice provision and more recent faith-based initiatives evoked a myriad of reactions from these clergy. One called it “very exciting; long overdue; and wonderful.” Another said, “It was very encouraging to me, but I was very cautious, as I am now.” And yet another stated “I’ll believe it when I see it. My history with government made me cautious and skeptical.” Although larger congregations tended to have somewhat more positive views of furthering church-state partnerships, there was no discernible pattern in how local clergy in low-income neighborhoods first viewed (or continue to view) the initiatives. The responses were tempered by the size of their congregation, denomination or affiliation, theological views, and past experience with government.

## **3. There was universal agreement that working with government is a complicated process.**

Despite a range of views on the potential benefits or liabilities of the proposed faith-based initiatives, the clergy in this study unanimously and emphatically agreed that working with government is complex and complicated. One pastor called it “bewildering;” another said that it “takes the heart out of good people who want to do the right thing.” Uniformly, the message was that there was “too much paperwork” and “too much technical and bureaucratic jargon.”

Congregations that sought and received government funding described how they worked with lawyers to design and negotiate these contracts. Smaller congregations with modest resources sometimes collaborated with one another and hired grant writers to assist them with the application process. Those that were unsuccessful expressed disappointment and even anger at the time and resources consumed in these “wasted efforts” to secure a \$50,000 grant. Several clergy indicated that they had more success seeking small grants of \$5,000 and \$10,000 because they could procure these grants without “much red tape.” As one respondent said, “Bureaucracy is big and vast...[You] need to submit a lot of different proposals. Twelve will get you one. It’s a matter of volume and politics.” Most of the smaller congregations felt that they did not have the time, resources, or expertise to engage in grant writing activities because it detracted from “doing the Lord’s work” and offered no assured reward.

#### **4. Technical Assistance is Necessary but Not Sufficient**

Nearly all of the study’s participants had attended one or more workshops designed to provide technical assistance to faith-based organizations seeking government funds. Many described these sessions as a “good start” for learning about funding opportunities, building a network of contacts, and “getting into the game.” One congregation that was awarded a government grant praised the funding agency for its continued technical assistance during the grant period, but other clergy said that they needed help not only to identify opportunities but also to negotiate the proposal/contract process.

Many of these clergy viewed the proposal process as highly political and sometimes questioned the fairness of the decisions. One participant who had sat on a review panel claimed a proposal that scored low marks was “pushed forward after a member of Congress intervened in the decisionmaking process.” Another said that knowing the decisionmakers was critical. “If my card isn’t in your rolodex, how do you know I’m doing good work?” Still others felt strongly that federal grants would be awarded to states or localities that had current or potential political clout. “[The money] probably won’t work its way down to the grassroots organizations.”

Even congregations that were successful in getting government support for their social ministries said that they lost money in implementing the programs. One clergy said that they received \$100,000 from the government to run an after-school program, but that the congregation ended up adding another \$50,000 from its own funds to complete the work. The congregation is looking for ways to continue the program and make it self-sufficient. Another pastor reported that his congregation had been awarded a

\$15,000 government grant to run a job training program. They had difficulty meeting the contract requirements and ultimately incurred a \$7,000 cost overrun. He described the project as too big and too ambitious and said that the congregation was discontinuing the project and returning to its traditional social ministries.

### **5. What Is Needed Most? Money**

Repeatedly, clergy from low-income neighborhoods said that what they needed most was money to run their social ministries and to help those in need. Many participants described the current faith-based proposals as unrealistic and insincere efforts to work with the faith community. “\$33 million for the entire United States is not a commitment.” “It’s a joke and slap in the face.” “I thought there would be new money. This just sets up a lot of competition with community-based organizations and government agencies for a few dollars.”

On the other hand, several clergy explained that money was essential to run a quality program. “Money makes it possible to have dedicated staff and make people feel valued.” “Particularly in low-income neighborhoods, we need to invest in [staff] with interest and skills by giving them education and training.” Although volunteers can be effective in providing simple services, paid staff with adequate training and education were seen as necessary for addressing the complex issues of poverty and self-sufficiency.

## **REMEDIES AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Perhaps the overriding concern of clergy in D.C.’s low-income neighborhoods was that the new faith-based initiatives would not reach the poorest areas and most needy residents. Although the political rhetoric regarding faith-based initiatives is strong, they saw few tangible benefits emanating from the policies. Clergy feared that funding would be siphoned off by intermediary organizations or congregations located outside the poorest neighborhoods. Several proposed that the distribution of funds should be earmarked for low-income areas using census data or other objective sources as one way of ameliorating some of the political aspects of funding decisions.

There also is a need for better coordination of the technical assistance workshops. Some clergy who attended several workshops sponsored by different government agencies felt that the information often was repetitive. As one clergy said, “After a few meetings, I stopped going. I heard the same old stuff. It’s not about helping the people. People were jockeying for positions.” One suggestion was that applications of faith-based groups that attended the workshops and received technical assistance should be given priority or preference in the grant review process—something akin to the veteran’s preference system. Another suggestion was to use the workshops to build the capacity of faith-based providers.

Groups that successfully complete the workshops would be “pre-approved” for grants and eligible for a streamlined application process.

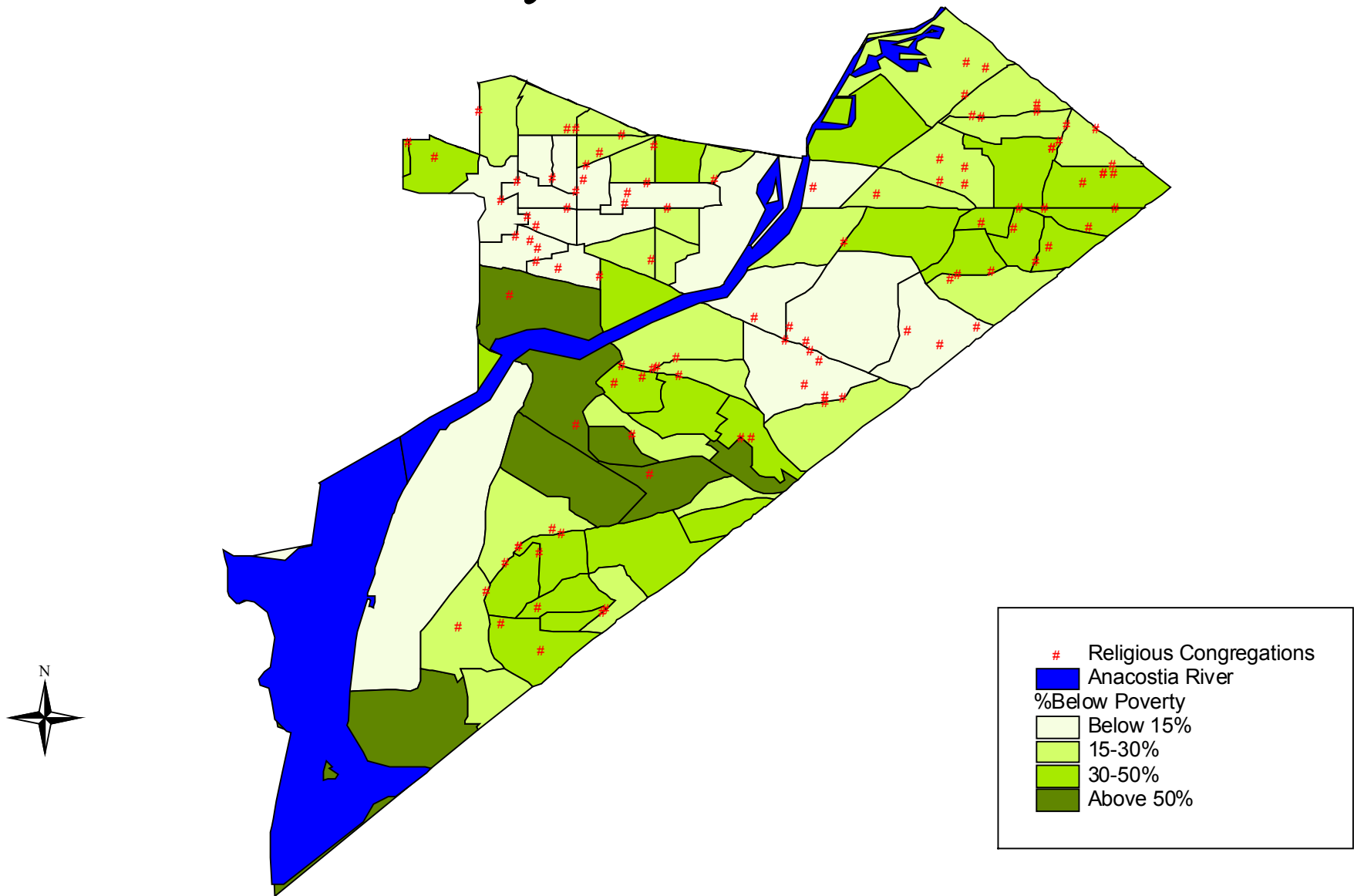
Finally, clergy suggested that there should be greater incentives to encourage people to volunteer. They thought that if volunteers received a tax credit or deduction for the time spent in volunteer activities, it might increase volunteerism and benefit lower-income people who do not itemize their income tax returns.

In short, while policymakers debate the legalities and feasibilities of faith-based initiatives, the pastors and clergy who work in some of the poorest communities view the new partnerships cautiously, sometimes hopefully, but often skeptically. Some congregations are willing to explore the feasibility of working with government, despite the difficulties; others are reticent. The overriding concern, however, is making sure that the funding attached to the faith-based initiatives reaches communities and people in need. As one Muslim respondent put it: “Trust in God, but tie your camel.”

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# Religious Congregations in Wards 6, 7 and 8 by Census Tract



Source: Center on Nonprofits and Philanthropy and U.S. Bureau of Census, 2000