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Report lauds Bush's faith-based ventures

Chaz Muth Catholic News Service | Dec. 15, 2008

WASHINGTON
The incoming Obama administration is being handed a report that recommends it embrace the outgoing Bush administration's partnerships with faith-based organizations, but with some reforms.

The Brookings Institution, in cooperation with Wake Forest University Divinity School's Center for Religion and Public Affairs, released its in-depth report with recommendations for the new administration on future partnerships with faith-based organizations at a Dec. 5 press conference at the National Press Club in Washington.

With 16 recommendations, the issue was being studied by Brookings before Democratic Sen. Barack Obama won the Nov. 4 presidential election.

Since both Obama and his Republican challenger, Sen. John McCain, pledged during the campaign to continue partnerships with faith-based organizations if elected, the governance studies program at the Brookings Institution proceeded with its study so it could be ready before the new president takes office, said William Galston, senior fellow at the Washington-based organization.

Galston called the completed report "a valiant effort to pour oil over a very turbulent issue," and said, "This would be the perfect place to change the tone of our politics."

Among its many recommendations, the report calls on the Obama administration to:

-- Welcome religious organizations to partner with government and increase funding for programs that work.

-- Clarify restrictions on direct aid and religious activities.

-- Protect the identity of religious providers and improve monitoring of compliance with church-state safeguards.

-- Address religion-based decision-making in government-funded jobs.

-- Avoid cronyism and religious patronage by highlighting peer review, evaluation and accountability.

"The next administration should welcome religious organizations to partner with government to serve those in need, whether through financial or nonfinancial partnerships," the report said. "Both religious and secular groups have particular strengths in reaching and serving certain populations, and both have long and productive histories of partnering with government."

President George W. Bush established the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives by executive order in December 2002. In essence, it was designed to give organizations run by religious groups equal footing with secular groups in eligibility for federal funding for programs they operate to help the poor and needy.

The move was met with skepticism among established Washington political leaders, many of whom were concerned the initiatives would cross the line between church and state.

However, the U.S. Supreme Court has rejected claims that federal involvement with faith-based groups is unconstitutional. Both Democratic and Republican political leaders have embraced the partnership between the government and religious organizations in such causes as addiction recovery, prisoner re-entry into society, health services, HIV/AIDS, homelessness and at-risk youths.

There are risks for religious groups -- such as Catholic Relief Services and Catholic Charities USA -- when partnering with the government, because it creates a situation where organizations can become too dependant on public funding, said Melissa Rogers, director of the Center for Religion and Public Affairs at Wake Forest University Divinity School in Winston-Salem, N.C., and a co-author of the report.

Though Rogers applauded many of the Bush initiatives in faith-based organization partnerships, she strongly recommended reforms.

The current administration's policies restricting the use of direct government aid for "inherently religious" activities is confusing, Rogers said.

"Existing executive orders and rules should be amended to prohibit the use of direct aid to subsidize explicitly religious activities," she said. "Accompanying materials should note that any explicit religious content must be privately subsidized and offered separately, in time or location, from programs funded by direct government aid."

E.J. Dionne Jr. -- a senior fellow with the Brookings Institution, a syndicated columnist and a professor at Jesuit-run Georgetown University -- said that in recent years some civil servants charged that the peer review processes in some cases appeared slanted toward entities with political leanings sympathetic to those of the Bush administration.

"Using this system to reward religious friends and cronies is unacceptable," Dionne said. "The next president should direct agency heads to instruct peer reviewers on their legal and ethical obligations."

He suggested all employees should have a confidential way to raise concerns about preferential treatment and discouraged seating peer review panels dominated by advocates of a particular faith or political ideology.

The more divisive recommendation came in a proposal to address religion-based decision-making in government-funded jobs.

While Rogers voiced her opposition to religious discrimination in jobs subsidized with direct government aid, Stanley Carlson-Thies of the Center for Public Justice at the Institutional Religious Freedom Alliance contended that faith-based organizations should be allowed to hire people based on their religious convictions, even if the job is funded with public money.

"Does a person have a right to withhold a payment on some taxes because they don't agree with all of the services?" asked Carlson-Thies, who spoke during the public release of the report. "They should be able to protect their religious identity."

The report authors and panelists -- who also included David Saperstein, director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism -- pointed out that during the presidential campaign Obama pledged support for government partnerships with religious and neighborhood-based social service organizations.

"Change comes not from the top down," Obama said during the campaign, "but from the bottom up, and few are closer to the people than our churches, synagogues, temples and mosques."

Though the president-elect has praised the concept behind the Bush efforts with faith-based partnerships, he has criticized the administration, saying it underfunded programs for the poor and disadvantaged.

"I still believe it's a good idea to have a partnership between the White House and grass-roots groups, both faith-based and secular," Obama said. "But it has to be a real partnership, not a photo-op. That's what it will be when I'm president.

"I'll establish a new Council for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships," he said. "The new name will reflect a new commitment. This council will not just be another name on the White House organizational chart. It will be a critical part of my administration."

The report lauds Bush for his progress in faith-based-organization partnerships, but it also is critical of many of his approaches, which it said reduced opportunities to find common ground and raised serious constitutional issues.

"We also believe that if partnerships with faith-based institutions are to succeed, there must be more accountability, more transparency," Galston said. "We advocate a pragmatic view on the question of which services are best provided directly by government, and which by religious and secular intermediaries."

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