



# Compassionate conservatism

## Ahead

How Would It Work?

## Bush vs. Gore on Faith-based Charity

By Joe Loconte

**W**hat exactly, Americans wonder, does George W. Bush mean when he says his presidential campaign is founded on something called “compassionate conservatism”?

In an important speech last year, Governor Bush chided those who simply want governmental social programs scaled back while remaining indifferent to the fate of American individuals and communities who are failing. Some of America’s most effective healers of social disorder and personal trauma, he notes, are churches and religious charitable organizations. But “it is not enough to call for voluntarism,” he says. As an alternative to the bureaucratic welfare state, “more support and resources—both public and private” must be channeled to private charities, secular and religious.

Bush was the first governor to endorse the “Charitable Choice” provisions of the 1996 welfare reform law—those landmark new rules that permit churches and other religious organizations serving the poor to be eligible for government anti-poverty funds without having to purge themselves of their

religious character. He has also made Charitable Choice the template, via executive order, for other efforts to attack social problems through the mechanism of faith-based charities.

Governor Bush’s campaign proposals for encouraging private and religious charitable work include at least \$8 billion in new tax incentives for charitable giving to groups that help the poor; block grants for maternity homes for unwed mothers, available to a range of community groups including churches; mentoring programs for the children of prison inmates; a green light for faith-based programs in four federal prisons. Bush would also open all federal after-school programs to competitive bidding, giving religious groups equal access to at-risk students. “We will allow private and religious groups to compete to provide services in every federal, state, and local social program,” he says. “Wherever we can, we must expand their role and reach.”

The governor’s record has two driving principles: circumvent needless regulations while recruiting private and religious groups as equal partners with government agencies. In 1996, Bush ordered the Texas Department of Human Services to write Charitable Choice protections into all its contracts. These protections, as first spelled out in the ’96 welfare reform bill, explicitly allow religious groups to compete for federal funds without having to first purge the faith content from their

programs, whether that involves Bible-based concepts or the presence of religious symbols like crucifixes. There are also provisions that protect religion-based employment decisions, one of the next great church-state battlegrounds.

In addition to putting these federal principles into effect across his state, Governor Bush extended Charitable Choice provisions into entirely new areas—to cover grants for abstinence programs, for example. In 1997, Bush signed legislation that deregulated religious drug treatment programs and allowed private accreditation for child-care centers, many of which are church-based. Last year he earmarked \$7 million in competitive grants for faith-based groups and created a full-time liaison to help ensure they get the money.

The results have been modest, yet important in redefining the role of government versus the private sector. The state's Pathfinders project, for example, has connected 605 welfare recipients with mentors from community organizations, most of them churches. In Tarrant County (Fort Worth), 33 congregations provide volunteers and support services. "It's been us on the government end who have held back in involving churches," says Debby Kratky, who runs the county's welfare-to-work program. "But the hardest-to-serve clients don't respond well to government organizations."

Bush's readiness to marshal federal money and protections for religious groups would mean a reinventing of government unimaginable to his Democratic rival Al Gore. For this is not government by proxy. We're not "enlisting their help to merely duplicate the weaknesses of government-style aid," explains Don Willett, Bush's special projects director. "We are trying to create a safe harbor for explicitly religious programs."

Bush expects religious groups to introduce needy people to faith as part of their caregiving. For it is faith, he argues, that produces deep changes in character. "The power of the church is its capacity to change the heart," he told *Christianity Today*, "and we should not force the church to change its mission." That is why, for example, Bush helped Prison Fellowship ministries set up the nation's first Christian prison inside a state facility. The InnerChange program at Jester II prison in Sugarland, involving more than half the inmate population, makes Christian conversion an explicit goal.

The Supreme Court has ruled that charitable groups cannot use public funds to teach religion. But Stephen Goldsmith, former Indianapolis mayor and Bush's domestic policy advisor, thinks proselytizing won't be a problem as long as public money isn't directly supporting it and government provides non-religious options. Nevertheless, Bush promises to establish a federal office to assist and defend religious organizations under legal attack. They will need it, because civil libertarians are already trolling for a test case. Says Jean Bethke Elshtain, professor of political ethics at the University of

Chicago: "The ingenuity of people who want religion to disappear knows no bounds."

Though he admits that ministry will not replace Medicare, Bush pledges to "look first" to religious groups to help those in need. Already, most churches and synagogues run at least some small social program, from soup kitchens to child care. No one knows how many groups and individuals might be willing to get deeply involved in the lives of the poor. Based on research by University of Arizona sociologist Mark Chaves, however, many congregations will have nothing to do with government money, with or without the protections of Charitable Choice. So one danger of Bush's talk of raising "armies of compassion" as alternatives to government action is simply exaggerated expectations.

On May 24, 1999—seven years into his vice presidency—Gore delivered his first substantive address on religion. Speaking in Atlanta to the Salvation Army, he denounced the "hollow secularism" of the Left and praised the work of faith-based groups in treating social ills.

The punchline was a pledge to form a "new partnership" between church and state. Toward that end, Gore for the first time endorsed Charitable Choice efforts to strengthen the religious liberty of groups getting government money to deliver welfare services. He even promised

to expand the law beyond welfare-to-work efforts, to cover drug treatment and juvenile delinquency programs. "We must dare to embrace faith-based approaches that advance our shared goals as Americans," Gore argued.

It seemed a gutsy move. Ed Kilgore, policy director for the Democratic Leadership Council, calls it "the Sister Souljah speech for Al Gore" (referring to Bill Clinton's 1992 campaign rebuke of a rap artist which seemed to establish his independence from left-wing special interests). The day after Gore's address, Julie Segal of the religion-baiting Americans United for the Separation of Church and State was despondent. "I felt like I was cut off at the knees," she told one newspaper.

When it comes to action rather than rhetoric, however, the Clinton-Gore team has so far dared only to embrace the status quo. Federal agencies still squash religious beliefs among would-be service providers, while the administration's record on Charitable Choice is one of obstruction, not observance.

"The single most important obstacle to prompt expansion of this promising innovation is the hostility of the Clinton-Gore administration," says Steve Hilton, communications director for Senator John Ashcroft (R-Mo.), who sponsored the legislation. In December 1996, the Department of Health and Human Services proposed "technical corrections" to the law that would have made groups deemed "pervasively sectarian"—too religious—ineligible for funds. In October 1998, the Department of Justice similarly opposed any federal money for religious groups. The President and Democratic leaders in Congress are singing the same tune.



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If Gore intends to break ranks with the Left on this issue, he has done nothing to suggest it. "He's comfortable with the concept," explains Elaine Kamarck, Gore's senior policy advisor, "as long as there are appropriate constitutional protections."

Actually, the law already contains such protections. The reality is that although Gore will laud "the power of faith" to spark behavioral change, he appears skittish about helping any groups that actually confront destructive behavior with Bible-based morality.

For example, while Gore boasts of new partnerships between religious organizations and the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), he has failed to challenge HUD regulations that require all help be offered in a non-religious manner. The agency's blanket ban on proselytizing prevents the International Union of Gospel Missions, the nation's largest association of faith-based homeless shelters, from becoming involved. "HUD officials are friendlier, but we haven't seen regulatory change," says the Reverend Stephen Burger, the group's executive director.

The Vice President also opposes government vouchers that would help poor families escape failing inner-city schools. Ignoring evidence that the moral and academic discipline of religious schools produces higher-achieving students than public schools, Gore invokes church-state separation dogmas to terminate the discussion. "I have always opposed vouchers, and I always will," he promised a Des Moines audience last fall.

At a National PTA last year, Gore discussed how to teach "values" to children, while omitting any role for religious groups. Yet he found time to call for "an active government" that would, for instance, spend more on dubious after-school programs.

"Gore is not going to fundamentally change the way federal programs are organized, financed, and administered," concludes John DiIulio, political scientist at the University of Pennsylvania and an occasional Bush advisor. Indeed, Gore would permit only a limited role for religious groups. "He sees faith as an addition, a supplement," says his advisor Kamarck. "He does not see decreasing the size of the social safety net and replacing it with voluntary organizations." Don Eberly, a leader in civic renewal efforts, puts it more pointedly: "Democrats just don't see it as permissible to treat religion as anything but a private phenomenon."

Gore's Atlanta speech allowed him to rhetorically shed the anti-religious husk that insulates his party leaders from mainstream America on applications of faith. But he would assist only religious providers who are already mostly secularized, or willing to become so in exchange for government funds. His basic approach is to have more private groups help out with existing government programs, while imposing political correctness on their practices. "Gore would like religious groups to be part of the dance," says Marvin Olasky, an academic who has advised Bush, "but the government would still call the tune."

Superficially, Bush and Gore strike similar-sounding themes: Both say government programs are too secular, that faith-based approaches are healing social ills, and that church and state should not be afraid to work together. A close look at their records, however, finds important fractures between their positions. They uphold two competing visions of the role of faith in society—with Bush viewing religion as a leading force for cultural renewal, and Gore promoting religion as a private affair or handmaiden to the state.

How much political capital would either man expend to create his version of a faith-friendly government? Bush's strongest constituency, religious conservatives, would be behind him if he were to act. For Gore it would be the reverse: His left wing would

fight him tooth and nail if he tried to shield religious good-doers from government meddling. Says Elshtain, "It's hard to imagine the party of Barbra Streisand signing on with this."

Just consider the Charitable Choice provisions that permit religious organizations to use religious criteria to hire staff. When labor unions and gay rights groups file suit, what will a Gore Justice Department do? "My guess is that he would come down strongly for protections against religious discrimination," says Gore ally Ed Kilgore. Translation: Charitable groups doing business with government could not require new employees to share their religious mission.

By contrast, when Texas regulators tried to shut down Teen Challenge, a Christian-based drug rehab center, because its staff lacked state-approved credentials, Bush intervened. Today the group hires mostly former addicts, receives private accreditation, and remains eligible for federal

food-stamp money—while making religious commitment the linchpin of its recovery strategies. And so, the group sustains a much higher cure rate than its government-run counterparts.

Perhaps that's a glimpse of a new kind of public square, one neither explicitly sacred, nor forcibly stripped of religion. Even Jefferson, who envisioned a "wall of separation" between church and state, could applaud such a place. Religion, he once wrote, may be "deemed in other countries incompatible with good government, and yet proved by our experience to be its best support."

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## Searching for What Works

By Marvin Olasky

I've been writing about compassionate conservatism for over ten years. Recently I traveled to the city of Minneapolis looking for specific examples of compassionate programs.

One stop was the Jeremiah project. Born in 1993, it has generated big contributions from Target Stores, the General Mills Foundation, and the liberally inclined Greater Minneapolis Council of Churches. Last year the organization moved into a \$3 million facility for 18 single moms and their children. Its program follows the textbook social work assumption that if