



Delta Force

States across the country are trying to reduce welfare costs and attack the system's culture of subsidized family breakdown. They're capping benefits for additional children born into welfare families, booting childless recipients from the rolls, and setting time limits on assistance. One of the nation's most provocative experiments aims to reform not only welfare but the individuals who receive it—by turning over the state's role as social worker to local churches and synagogues.

"God, not government, will be the savior of welfare recipients," says Mississippi governor Kirk Fordice. The Republican governor is convinced that the religious community can succeed where government by itself cannot—by transforming the attitudes and behaviors of the welfare class. What is emerging in Mississippi is an unprecedented alliance between the governor, the state's Department of Human Services (DHS), and scores of local churches—all determined to tap the moral and spiritual resources of congregations to help lift Mississippi's 167,000 welfare recipients into permanent economic independence.

Mississippi appears ripe for such an experiment. It is at once one of the nation's poorest states and one of its most religious. There are more churches here per capita than in any other state, but it also has the largest percentage of citizens receiving welfare assistance. Here many children still begin their school days in prayer, but more and more of those same children are having babies, pushing the state's illegitimacy rate to 44 percent. Here the cab drivers listen to Christian radio but navigate in cities where more than half of all children now live with an unmarried mother.

A Gallup poll reveals that Mississippi and its southern neighbors boast "the greatest concentration and highest levels of religious fervor in America." So why hasn't all of this religiosity translated into stronger fami-

lies, fewer people dependent on government welfare, and fewer social problems?

It is perhaps ironic that a politician, not a preacher, has moved that question near the center of welfare reform in Mississippi. A year ago, Fordice summoned the state's religious leaders to the capitol, where he more or less read them the riot act. He challenged them to reach out aggressively to needy families in their communities, but to stop repeating the errors of government assistance. "The present system does absolutely nothing to inspire self-esteem, independence, or healthy family relationships," he has said.

The "Faith and Families Project" hopes to revolutionize that system by matching welfare families, typically headed by an unmarried mother with at least two children, with congrega-

Mississippi governor Kirk Fordice enlists congregations as social workers to shatter the cycle of welfare dependency.

tions ready to become their *de facto* social workers. DHS officials expect participating churches to help individuals find good jobs and keep them. That means getting personally involved in ways that most state caseworkers, each tracking more than 200 families, cannot: lending emotional support and helping with child care, household budgeting, even grocery shopping.

So far, the state has struck an arrangement that is keeping church-state litigators quiet. Churches are not asked to provide any financial support to welfare recipients; families are not

required to attend the churches providing help. No welfare benefits are funneled through congregations, but government assistance, averaging \$858 a month per family, continues until the family is independent.

State officials expect, however, that congregations will do what they dare not try: wield moral authority and spiritual values among the state's 50,000 AFDC families—one by one—to transform their culture of dependency. "The problem is not material poverty, it is behavioral poverty," says Donald Taylor, executive director of the Mississippi DHS. "We're not interested in getting churches to replace welfare. What we're asking them is, 'what can you provide to help move a family from economic slavery to economic independence?'"

The answers are becoming increasingly urgent as Congress converts the federal welfare system into block grants, shifting primary responsibility for the poor back to the state and local level. Mississippi's tough welfare-to-workfare program, buoyed by rapid job growth, has helped reduce AFDC rolls by 12,000 families over the last three years. But state and federal welfare costs, including Medicaid, food stamps

and supplemental security income, hit \$2.3 billion in Mississippi in 1993, or at least \$16,870 per family in poverty. Moreover, no state has a higher portion of its welfare expenses—about 80 percent—paid by the federal government than Mississippi.

By maintaining the state's safety net but focusing on permanent behavioral change, Fordice hopes to reduce generational poverty. The goal: to see each of the state's 5,000 congregations adopt a welfare family, or about 10 percent of the existing caseload. Fordice hopes to bring down the number of long-term dependents, keep newly independent families from slipping back into poverty, and help families at risk—hopefully making large new state expenditures on welfare unnecessary.

Will it work?

Beatrice Branch, Mississippi director of the NAACP, expects "minimal"

by Joe Loconte

Joe Loconte is the deputy editor of Policy Review: The Journal of American Citizenship.

results, claiming the plan "does not have broad-based support." Rims Barber, an ACLU lobbyist in Jackson, calls the program an election-year ploy, "a strong PR campaign, but that's all."

Try telling that to the Rev. Ronald Moore, the pastor of Stronger Hope Church in north Jackson. Moved by the governor's vision to enlist the aid of local churches, Moore began to challenge his black, middle-class congregation to reach out to welfare families in the city's depressed central and south sections. His congregation of about 200 has adopted 17 families, and five have found full-time employment. "I think the governor has hit a grand slam," says Moore. "He has caused many church leaders to say 'yes, we've dispensed love, but there is a group of people who we've not really changed.'"

Much of the state's religious community—dominated mainly by independent-minded Baptist churches and black congregations with memories of racial segregation—remains skeptical about any partnership with government. Nevertheless, about 175 churches have contacted the DHS to get profiles of welfare families in their neighborhoods, and have adopted more than 75 families on AFDC. In September, the Mississippi Family Council hosted a conference on breaking the welfare cycle that drew more than 200 church leaders and lay people.

The most common refrain was that churches—black and white—are indeed failing in their most basic moral and spiritual responsibilities to the poor.

"There is something wrong with a gospel that will not lead people out of poverty," says the Rev. Thomas Jenkins, chairman of the church-based New Lake Development Foundation in central Jackson. The foundation offers tutoring programs and classes for the General Equivalency Degree, carpentry, computer training, and transitional housing for women and children—all emphasizing the implications of faith on daily decision-making.

Moore, who recruits congregations statewide for the pro-

gram, emphasizes the role of the church in teaching personal responsibility and hard work, sexual abstinence and fatherhood. His favorite theme: "Stop doing what the government's been doing. Government has been trying to treat the effect, the aftermath. But we've got to go back to the basics and treat the cause."

Over the last year, Moore has addressed more than 300 pastors representing several denominations. Numerous churches have endorsed the initiative, including the National Baptist Convention, the nation's largest black denomination.

Top DHS officials, handpicked by Governor Fordice, are reading from

the same reform hymnal. Executive director Taylor has invited a leading consulting firm to work with his deputies and divisional directors to remake the agency's philosophy of assistance. State caseworkers who continue to function as "enablers," Taylor says, are in for a rude awakening.

The buzzwords at the DHS now are "accountability," "responsibility," and "permanent change." That's a significant leap for any state welfare department. And if large numbers of the state's congregations take up the governor's challenge to labor among the poor, then Mississippi could redefine the welfare debate with other words—such as faith, hope, and charity.

SCRAPBOOK

Graham Cracks the Racial Barrier

Mississippi governors haven't always had such cordial relations with religious leaders. In 1952, a fiery young Southern Baptist preacher named Billy Graham led an interracial crusade in Jackson, defying segregationist governor Hugh White's request that he hold entirely separate services for blacks.

Graham wrestled with the segregation question just as he was beginning to attain national prominence as an evangelical preacher. Though he rejected separate services during his Jackson campaign, Graham accepted segregated seating. He seemed to have done so with reservations. Toward the close of the crusade, he said that God's love knows no racial barriers. Moreover, he identified Jackson's two greatest social problems as illegal liquor (Mississippi was still dry) and segregation.



"There is no scriptural basis for segregation. It may be there are places where such is desirable to both races, but certainly not in the church," Graham told the crowd. "The ground at the foot of the cross is level. . . . [I]t touches my heart when I see whites stand shoulder to shoulder with blacks at the cross."

Though Graham's statements were both risky and visionary—he made them four years before Martin Luther King Jr. rose to national prominence—he waffled on the segregation question when challenged by critics. He must have done some soul-searching over the next several months: In March 1953, a year before the Supreme Court outlawed segregated schools, Graham told the sponsoring committee of his Chattanooga, Tennessee, crusade that he could not abide segregated seating. The committee balked. Graham didn't blink: Committee members watched in astonishment as he personally took down the ropes separating black and white sections.

After the Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, Graham never permitted any form of enforced segregation in his meetings, even in the Deep South.

"The church should have been the pacesetter. The church should voluntarily be doing what the federal courts are doing by pressure and compulsion," the young preacher said. Graham soon became convinced—as even many secularists now claim—that "a great spiritual revival is needed to relieve the racial and political tensions of today."

Background source: A Prophet With Honor: The Billy Graham Story, by William Martin (William Morrow, 1991)

Photo courtesy of Billy Graham Center

Can Congress

By Senator Dan Coats,

With responses from

Gertrude Himmelfarb, Don Eberly & David Boaz

Revive



Illustration by Phil Foster