

C. Welton Gaddy, President, Interfaith Alliance

(Unedited Transcript)

Thanks very much for the invitation to be here, and for your presence and the opportunity to interact with you.

Let me tell you that I didn't have anything to do with putting this program together. I would never follow Tim McDonald. I am smarter than that. The only reason I feel comfortable as going on right now is he wasn't real excited today.

(Laughter.)

Thank goodness you asked him to keep seated. And he probably left little doubt in your mind as to exactly where he stands on things.

(Laughter.)

I too was asked to talk about the faith-based initiative, which I will be glad to do. But let me just give you the bottom line up front. I believe in faith-based initiatives. I have spent my whole professional life in faith-based organizations, taking faith-based 0193initiatives. But I don't support direct government funding for faith-based initiatives.

The general relationship between religion and politics has become so confused with specifics of the institutional relationship between religion and government, that both relationships are now in trouble. Presently religion, its rhetoric, its values, and its institutions; religion is manipulated for partisan political purposes, to the extent that individual's votes on social political issues are used as criteria not for judging people's political persuasion, but for judging the authenticity of people's religious experience.

At the same time, some religious leaders are attempting to advance narrow, sectarian agendas by means of the authority, machinery, legislation, and policy initiatives of the government. To the extent that many in the nation fear an establishment of religion that violates the nation's historic and constitutional commitment to religious freedom, a fundamental right that means, at 0194minimum, freedom of religion, freedom for religion, and freedom from religion, for every American citizen.

Not only are the religious liberty phrases in the First Amendment to the Constitution currently in jeopardy, so are the integrity of the religion itself, and the vitality of democracy. Nowhere do the dangers detailed in these observations find more specific expression, with more dramatic clarity, than in the present White House-based program popularly known as the Faith-based Initiative.

Though this signature program of President George W. Bush has failed in its effort to gain major public support among voters, or authorization and funding from the United States Congress, the president defiantly launched the program by means of an executive order, and has funded it through agencies whose leaders are members of the president's cabinet.

Explicit threats to religious liberty in this land abound in this particular faith-based initiative. In clear violation of the 0195"No Establishment" clause of the Constitution, faith-based offices in the government provide tax dollars to the budgets of pervasively sectarian organizations, even houses of worship, to support various social service

ministries that frequently are accompanied by religious indoctrination, and in some instances, rank proselytization.

Were that not egregious enough, as a danger to both religion and government, federal tax dollars are now funding programs that are exempt from basic civil rights laws. In other words, in the name of faith, the government is providing funding that jeopardizes the government's commitment to preserving and defending religious liberty, and civil rights guarantees, for all citizens of this nation. If you question that, look at what happened to the reauthorization of the Headstart program in Congress, just a few days ago.

But beyond constitutional concerns related to the faith-based initiative, which most of us could discuss in detail, I want to talk about some serious concerns about what 0196this program is doing to religion. Because you see, I happen to believe in the power of religion to be a positive and healing force in society. But that's religion not as a political strategy, not as a tool of the political community. The faith-based initiative, to quote Congressman Chet Edwards, is "a solution looking for a problem."

Stated another way, it is the wrong way to attempt to do right. The faith-based initiative invites a politicization of religion, and turns recipients of its dollars, including houses of worship, into contract employees of the federal government. Such developments virtually guarantee government's intrusion into the life of religious institutions.

Now tell me, what do the politicians in government offices know about which religion is being most effective in its ministries in the local community? And what business does the government have trying to figure that out? Allow politicians to judge the effectiveness of one religion over another in the delivery of services, and you will create a level of 0197interreligious competition in this nation that swells into bitter conflict.

There's another problem here as well. Anyone who understands government funding knows well that where government tax dollars go, government regulations follow close behind. I read in the biography of Geno a line that just jumped out at me on this very subject about the fact that government is always fearful of any public entity that receives government money, but the government can't control. The government wants to control.

And when the government politicizes any part of its obligation to provide for the public's welfare, the full intent of the goal of that government's responsibility is in jeopardy. How can we expect a politician looking for votes in the next election to judge fairly what organization in the local community ought to receive government funding? The attraction always will be to the agencies with leaders and constituencies that hold the greatest promise for electoral support. That's no surprise. 0198 Indeed, many have suggested, as did Tim, that the faith-based initiative itself was a political strategy aimed at increasing the number of African-American voters supportive of President Bush. So far the track record of the present initiative offers little mitigation of this fear, of this concern.

The faith-based initiative provides taxpayers money to advance religious faith. Prior to the 2004 presidential election, during a visit to an African-American church in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, President Bush held up a Bible before that congregation, and waving it in the faces of that congregation, declared that the Bible is the true guideline for his faith-based initiative, promising that this program was about the work of transformation and conversion.

What kind of transformation? And whose conversion? And conversion to what, we must ask?

Here is the making of serious trouble in this which is now the most religiously diverse nation in the world. A development that could mark an end to the relative peacefulness with 0199 which varied religious traditions here have related to each other in the past. This is not good, either for religion or for democracy.

The faith-based initiative endangers the integrity of religion, the autonomy of houses of worship, and the current configuration of the landscape of the religious community in this nation.

Unfortunately, but not surprisingly, the government officials seeking to lure religious leaders to their side by waving in their faces money to conduct ministries that mesh with the basic convictions in these ministers' hearts, these government officials do not understand the nature of houses of worship and other religious organizations.

We have been told that the faith-based office wants to fund the construction of certain parts of houses of worship. Well, let me tell you something. Churches and synagogues, and temples and Gurdwaras do not have the luxury of single-use buildings. The rooms in our buildings are multipurpose in the broadest 0200 sense of that term. And when we do social services, we take spiritual faith as seriously as we do professional expertise. The government cannot divide up our buildings and our ministries for purposes of funding, any more that we can divide the persons who occupy these buildings and receive their ministries.

Gross insensitivity regarding the nature of religion and its work fuels agendas by government leaders which, if kept successfully will hurt the very institutions and ministries which they claim to want to help.

Now beyond the Constitution and religious problems with this program, there are profound pragmatic problems related to this program. Careful research tells us that faith-based programs are not necessarily any more effective in the delivery of social services than more traditional secular programs. I would suggest to you that not in every instance are they even as honest. And I'm saying that as a first-year seminarian who had his bubble burst when someone stole my seminary notes, 'cause they thought my notes were better than theirs. 0201

(Laughter.)

The faith-based initiative elevates good intentions over professional standards, and refuses to protect recipients of the services by means of a requirement of basic professional structural, physical, and financial accountability. The standards that apply to government-funded faith-based initiative organizations don't come anywhere near matching the basic standards needed for fire protection, health care, the quality of the providers; as do other organizations.

Now I cannot help but conclude that the faith-based initiative is indeed about something other than charity and religion, though it is badly hurting both. In the wake of the devastation of recent hurricanes, for the first time in my memory, houses of worship are asking the federal government for financial remuneration for the expenditure of their funds in providing compassionate help to victims of these disasters.

You know why? They wouldn't have thought of that 10 years ago. But this government created such a wrong-minded expectation, that 0202compromises the historic vitality of compassionate, generous, unselfish religious ministries in this nation.

This nation will function best when the religions do the work of religions, and when the government does the work of the government.

Yes, I believe in a partnership between the two. It's very much in order. But not the monopolization of either one over the other. Last Friday in Baton Rouge, Louisiana (unintelligible) Tim were there, a representative of the Louisiana governors office came to speak to an interreligious delegation of leaders that went there to see what we might do to help. And in the last session, the representative from the lieutenant governor's office came and lectured us about how important it would be for us as members of the faith-based community to do our work there. He said, "Look, we are depending on you, it's on your shoulders."

And I said to him, in front of the group, "With all due respect, sir, we are doing our job 100 to 120 percent. We have a right to expect the government to do its job. It is a part of your moral responsibility to provide for the public welfare."

The whole federal budget is a moral document. The government has an institutional and moral responsibility to provide for the public welfare, and even if there is never a faith-based initiative line item in the federal budget, every other line item in the federal budget ought to show the government's compassion for the weakest and the poorest among us.

I assure you, religion will do its part by staying true to its nature, but it is time for the government to do its part, without trying to act like a religion, or to advance religion.

After reviewing the Baroni principles for social action and Geno's principles, I'm comfortable in suggesting to you that devotion to the vision of the man in whose memory we have come together will lead us inexorably toward a relationship between religion and government that values cooperation and interaction, but demands formal, constitutional, institutional separation between the two for the good of both, as well as for the good of the people who are served by both.