

Bush's Faith-Based Budget

By William Fischer, The Inter Press Service News Agency
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President George W. Bush's latest budget proposal slashes funds from more than 150 government programmes, but his Faith-Based Initiative isn't one of them.

NEW YORK, Feb 17 (IPS) - Funding for this favourite of Bush's conservative Christian supporters includes 385 million dollars for five programmes related to faith-based and community initiatives --an increase of 150 million dollars over last year.

The budget request for new money for the controversial programme includes 100 million dollars for the Compassion Capital Fund, 150 million for the Access to Recovery drug treatment programme grants, 75 million for a prisoner re-entry programme, and 10 million dollars for maternity group homes

At about the same time as the budget was being delivered to Congress, a senior official with the Initiative was resigning.

David Kuo, who served as deputy director of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives for much of Bush's first term, wrote in a column for a religious website, Beliefnet, that at first, the project was "a dream come true for me."

He lauded promises by Bush in 2000 that in his first year in office he would provide 6 billion dollars in tax incentives for private charitable giving, 1.7 billion for groups that care for the poor and 200 million dollars for a Compassion Capital Fund to assist local faith-based organisations.

"Sadly, four years later these promises remain unfulfilled in spirit and in fact," Kuo wrote. "From tax cuts to Medicare, the White House gets what the White House really wants. It never really

wanted the poor people stuff."

Bush's FY2006 budget proposal contains significant spending cuts for education, Medicaid health benefits, state law enforcement, community nutrition programmes, a migrant and seasonal farm worker-training programme, and other domestic initiatives, to offset ballooning budget deficits, tax cuts, and heavy spending on defence and homeland security.

Of the 50 programmes eliminated, one-third relate to education, including grants for local schools in areas such as vocational education, anti-drug efforts and the Even Start literacy programme.

Medicaid provides health care to seniors, children, and families in need. The proposal reduces benefits and raises co-payments for optional beneficiaries, including some nursing home patients and parents of low-income children.

Bush unveiled his Faith-Based Initiative as a key element in his "compassionate conservatism" plank as a presidential candidate in 2000, proposing an 8-billion-dollar programme to promote religious charities and other community groups.

After his election, he hailed the idea as "a fresh start and bold new approach to government's role in helping those in need."

The White House website declared, "Too often the government has ignored or impeded the efforts of faith-based and community organisations. Their compassionate efforts to improve their communities have been needlessly and improperly inhibited by bureaucratic red tape and restrictions placed on funding."

"The White House Office and the Centers for the Faith-Based and Community Initiative

- located in 10 federal agencies --are working to support the essential work of these important

organisations."

It is believed that only Christian groups have applied for government grants thus far.

The initiative has been controversial since its inception. For civil liberties groups and some in Congress, two issues were paramount.

The first was their conviction that the programme violated the U.S. Constitution's First Amendment separation of church and state. The second was that church-based groups applying for federal grants under the programme were free to hire only people of the same religious faith as the grantee.

Many in Congress and elsewhere said this was tantamount to officially-sanctioned religious discrimination. Principally for these reasons, Congress refused to appropriate funds for the initiative.

The president then issued an executive order allowing grant-seekers to apply for grants from various government agencies, which used funds already appropriated.

The National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy's (NCRP) recent report on evangelical grant-making, "Funding the Culture Wars: Philanthropy, Church and State", examined the activities of 37 non-governmental foundations, uncovering nearly 170 million dollars in grants given to hundreds of evangelical organisations from 1999-2002.

It found that many of the grantees have also received funds from the Faith-Based Initiative programme.

"Most of the grant recipients have a 'Statement of Faith' prominently displayed on their websites or other promotional materials," the study found.

"Others declare themselves 'faith-based' or 'Christ-centered'. Nearly all of them incorporate three distinct elements into their mission, social services and public policy advocacy: personal salvation, biblical infallibility and a commitment to religious proselytising."

Jeff Krehely, NCRP's deputy director, recently wrote in the magazine *Tom Paine*: "Something else that most of them have in common: a close relationship with the Bush administration, either as recipients of government grants, or as champions of the administration's most divisive policies, including its opposition to reproductive choice, gay marriage and...any kind of human sexuality that does not involve one man (and) one woman."

Krehely cited a group known as Samaritan's Purse as an example of organisations receiving both private foundation and government grants. This group, he says, received

6.6 million dollars from the foundations analysed in the NCRP study, and 5.6 million from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) to work on abstinence programs whose goal is to stop the spread of AIDS in Africa.

Krehely wrote that "Samaritan's Purse is led by Franklin Graham, who provided the sermon at George W. Bush's first inauguration and more recently was in the headlines for denouncing Islam as an 'evil' religion."

Graham has also crusaded against the use of condoms, and Krehely says the group was censured for proselytising while carrying out anti-AIDS work in Africa -- paid for by another grant from USAID.

"Some of the organisations in the NCRP study -- including the largest --are not required to file IRS tax returns because they are technically established as churches," he told IPS.

"But as evangelical organisations increasingly rely on public funds, through tax deductions or government grants, to do their work and influence major policy decisions, they should be held to

higher accountability standards than is currently the case." (END/2005)

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