

Faith-Based Initiative at 25 Years: An Introduction

April 30, 2021

Today marks the 100th Day of President Biden's Administration. That hundredth day landmark, traditionally, has been a platform for reflection on the political priorities and achievements of any first presidential term. This one in particular presents our Program for Research on Religion in Urban Civil Society (PRRUCS) with an opportunity to reflect on one achievement -- [Executive Order 14015](#) -- that has been in the making for 25 years.

This executive order, which President Biden signed before concluding his first month in office, established the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships. Its mission: "empowering faith-based and secular organizations to assist in the delivery of vital services in our neighborhoods." This was not the first time, however, that such a federal office was established. On the contrary, it may be categorized as "Faith-Based Initiative 5.0", according to the seminal essay published last month by PRRUCS Senior Affiliate Stanley Carlson-Thies. The White House Office itself was famously inaugurated across the political aisle by President George W. Bush twenty years ago; but the legislative framework for it was laid five years earlier back on the Democratic side by the Clinton administration's Charitable Choice provision of 1996. And so, in the chronicling of Carlson-Thies, the initiative has benefited from remarkably bipartisan support while also seesawing back and forth between different administrations, with significant alterations according to policy preferences in each case.

Therefore, with the reinstatement of a White House Office that appropriates a twenty-five year legacy, we are confronted with the following questions: what was the original vision of the faith-based initiative? In what ways has it fulfilled its promise and in what ways has it failed? Do religious organizations in America serve the common good in distinctively valuable ways such that it is justifiable for the federal government to partner with them in addressing major social problems -- withstanding objections related to founding principles of church-state separation? Why might it be necessary to reestablish the Office now, two and half decades since the initiative's inception? What have the new administration's changes wrought? What new promises might this Office hold for current social challenges? Conversely, what new challenges might it confront in redressing them? And, perhaps most pressing, is there a way for this historically bipartisan initiative to overcome the present circumstances of hyper-polarization and both salve the wounds of hurting individuals and reconcile a nation wracked by division?

Responding to these questions and to the assessment of Carlson-Thies are his colleagues who are affiliated with the PRRUCS Common Ground for Common Good (C2G2) project. This project draws together public-spirited scholars and policy leaders who hold disparate and sometimes notoriously clashing convictions about the salient church-state issues of our day, but who dare to engage each other in a spirit of mutual respect. Their

lively responses here model that robust civic disagreement that is healthy and indeed necessary for a democratic polity that is committed both to the widest possible scope of legitimate pluralism as well as to moral unity in some ultimate and non-trivial sense.

This particular church-state issue is not only non-trivial but indeed personal for many respondents. Several were intimately involved in the creation of the first White House Office under President Bush, some were leaders of that Office's first faith-based partners, and virtually all have direct experience with the movement in some way, having witnessed both its transformative power for good as well as its occasionally traumatic ugliness. To briefly consider each comment:

Two of the ministers and community leaders present at the inception of the Office were Reverends **Samuel Atchison** and **W. Wilson Goode**. Rev. Atchison recalls how political infighting impeded the movement's progress in the first decade. He also recalls how the Office managed to impact hundreds of thousands of lives positively anyway, including the 350,000 young people with incarcerated parents served by the Amachi Program alone, which was co-founded by Dr. Goode and which Dr. Goode describes in greater detail here as an important case study. Rev. Atchison suggests that there is much good work for the faith-based movement yet to accomplish, and believes that it may be particularly well-poised to address and even begin to reconcile the parallel problems of entrenched racial injustice and working-class despair that might otherwise seem intractable, zero-sum contests.

Timothy Goeglein and **Tevi Troy** offer reflections from within the first White House Office itself. Goeglein traces the development of President Bush's own thinking on faith-based social service such that it became for the President, as he sometimes said himself, the top priority of his entire domestic policy agenda. Goeglein contrasts Bush's 2001 commencement address at the University of Notre Dame with the more famous presidential address of Lyndon B. Johnson at the University of Michigan, wherein he proclaimed the Great Society, in order to highlight the pathbreaking approach that Bush was carving out to mobilize communities, religious and non-religious, in the federal government's campaign to alleviate poverty. Tevi Troy, the first Director of this office within the Department of Labor, remembers the resistance that potential religious partners encountered in their efforts to heed this summons. It was frequently just institutional inertia that explained why government grant requests by faith-based organizations were being dismissed. And that was precisely why, Troy explains, the original White House Office was crucial: it could correct longstanding bureaucratic "misperceptions" and act as a "beacon for welcoming in religiously based organizations hoping to join the quest to address our nation's many social ills." It was not, at least in the first instance, a policing agency to ensure the strict compliance of government partners with the policy preferences of the ruling party, whoever that party might be. If the Office assumes that more narrow role, he fears that the heaviest losses will be suffered by those most in need.

Government cooperation with faith-based organizations to solve common problems, on the other hand, could be a no-brainer. **Kathleen Kennedy Townsend** recalls her experience as Lieutenant Governor of Maryland working with a wide variety of religious

organizations and services: “no one ever complained, made a fuss, said that this was an inappropriate mixing of church and state. The reason? Because these churches served people, they helped out, they did not discriminate, nor did they proselytize.” At the federal level, however, she did witness a few problems, bordering on the ridiculous, in cases where the image of the provider seemed more important than the needs to be addressed. **S. Mary Scullion** also recognizes that faith-based service can both hurt and heal. Presenting both a careful diagnosis of the former variety and a clear-sighted explication of the latter, she concludes that spiritually authentic service is not so much a formula of “us taking care of them”, but rather a “deeper awareness that we are engaging in a common liberation.” Faith-based partnerships at their best, moreover, are also rewarding for pluralist societies at a macro scale, bringing different if not estranged religious communities together in ministry toward the common good.

A more statistical analysis of the circumstances surrounding the new White House Office is conducted by **Michele Margolis** and **Jane Eisner**. That a Democratic administration re-prioritized faith-based service should not be as surprising as many would think, Margolis explains, on account of the high degree of religious identification within the party. Not only are the supermajority of Democratic voters religiously affiliated (with the most religiously devout also being the strongest Democrats), but their elites / lawmakers are as well. Their current members of Congress identify as Christian at significantly higher rates than the US population as a whole. The good news here, Margolis concludes, is that on the perennially controversial issue of religion in the public square, America might not be quite so divided after all. The bad news, Jane Eisner discerns, is that the grounds for religious consensus have shifted dramatically, according to the latest Gallup Poll of March 2021. For the first time in the eight decade history of these Gallup polls, less than half of America is affiliated with a religious congregation. And if Americans are increasingly disaffiliating, how strong will the religious communities be as government partners in the provision of vital social services? Eisner suggests that these trends could and perhaps should prompt a moment of reckoning for religious congregations about their own top priorities; but it also presents an opportunity to regain the cooperation if not full adherence of the religious-but-disaffiliated in a mutual recommitment to the “needs of the world outside the sanctuary doors.”

Should faith-based organizations be compelled to shift their religious doctrine or practice consonant with changes in public policy in order to remain government partners? That is the question, inflected by the Supreme Court’s Obergefell Decision of 2015, that confronts **Marci Hamilton** and **Ron Sider**. Hamilton takes the affirmative position, arguing that religious organizations cannot discriminate against other groups in carrying out taxpayer-funded social service. Permitting them to do otherwise, Hamilton claims, would be tantamount to endowing them with “most favored nation status”, which should awaken even the most dormant American scruples about church-state entanglement. Sider objects, arguing that we would not imagine applying this same exacting standard to non-religious organizations. “Planned Parenthood, for example, should not lose its right not to hire pro-life staff simply because it has a government contract.” His plea for moderate, compromise policies that protect the civil rights of all Americans while also safeguarding diverse religious views on debated topics is, he concludes, not only politically strategic for

both sides in the current moment, but also “in keeping with the best of the American tradition of freedom, choice, and pluralism.”

As should be evident, these essays overlap in a number of their insightful evaluations, but they are by no means all harmonious. The collection, in the end, is not intended primarily to celebrate a 25th anniversary. They are instead meant to promote reflection on the trajectory of our civic commitments at present. It will be important to think together with these essays, as the future of the faith-based project may well be integral to the health of the American community as a whole.

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