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Dilulio: 'Faith-Based' Hopes

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'Faith-Based' Hopes

Religious nonprofits have been struggling harder than ever.

By John J. DiIulio Jr | FEBRUARY 9, 2009

In 2001 President George W. Bush created the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. I was its first director. Our main purpose was to promote poverty-fighting partnerships between religious nonprofit organizations and federal agencies.

Bless Bush! He put "faith-based" on the federal policy agenda to stay. He was a compassionate conservative at heart. Witness his multi-billion-dollar H.I.V./AIDS initiative in sub-Saharan Africa and his innovative program for mentoring prisoners' children. And he inspired caring souls in state and local governments to launch their own faith-based initiatives.

All good, but legacy-minded Bush loyalists have stretched the truth in their final "fact sheet" on the faith-based initiative issued on Dec. 2, 2008. Its self-congratulatory semi-truths mock the nonprofit organizations, both religious and secular, both national and local, that entered 2009 struggling harder than ever to meet growing health and human services needs caused largely by Bush-era increases in poverty and unemployment.

Take the "150,000 social entre-preneurs" who were allegedly "trained" to have "impact." That counts people who attended brief off-site events that were more like political rallies than training programs.

Or take "more than 110,000 matches." Fine print: not 110,000 live matches between prisoners' children and adult mentors, but every match ever wholly or partially funded by Washington since the program's inception, including some that lasted less than a year. Bush's original goal was 100,000 prisoners' children matches fully funded and functioning for at least four years, plus a million mentors for other at-risk youth mobilized in partnership with four national secular service organizations.

Spin seduces, but facts matter and history bites. Pseudo-statistics suitable only for presidential library framing are pardonable but will be found out. Besides, self-serving half-truths do not increase actual charitable giving, supply more poor children with health care or bless more inner-city churches with grants.

The whole truth is that America's "armies of compassion" remain much as Bush described them in his maiden campaign speech in 1999: "outnumbered and outflanked and outgunned," needing "more support, public and private" and forced to "make bricks without straw."

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The whole truth is that religious nonprofits, large and small, national and local, have been struggling harder than ever to meet human needs begotten by increases in poverty and unemployment. Thanks to well-meaning leaders and staff in my former office, Bush's faith-based initiative had a little post-2006 surge, but the office's "mission accomplished" hype unintentionally masked and mocked the unmet needs.

Now President Barack Obama promises to do better. On July 1, 2008, in a speech and interviews in Zanesville, Ohio, he outlined his faith-based plan. His advisers consulted me, and I publicly endorsed his plan. In August 2008, I spoke at the Democratic Convention's "faith caucus" meetings. After the election, Obama's transition team consulted with me on faith-based issues. So consider the source.

To succeed, Obama, a former Catholic Charities community worker in Chicago, must insist that all grantees serve all people in need without regard to religion. He must keep the faith-based effort fact-based, bipartisan and open to corrections. And he must honor all campaign pledges to create or expand programs that benefit low-income children and families.

Will he? In any case, heated controversies are unavoidable. Will Obama uphold or rescind the executive orders and waivers that Bush bestowed on worthwhile groups that hire only coreligionists? Will his council track how his policies actually affect religious nonprofits that serve the poor in places ranging from post-Katrina New Orleans to sub-Saharan Africa? Will his administration pull grants from failed programs favored by key clergy supporters?

Our new president truly seems to want to help the civic saints who go marching in to help people in real need. Pray for him, his staff and his faith-based initiatives. At least for his first 100 days, have the audacity to hope that those prayers will be answered.

John J. DiIulio Jr. is the author of *Godly Republic: A Centrist Blueprint for America's Faith-Based Future* (Univ. of California Press, 2007).