

United States of America
White House Faith-Based and Community Initiative
Innovations in Effective Compassion Conference

REV. FORD: Thank you. Good morning. I am Reverend Jonathan Ford and as has been stated, I'm the Executive Director of Turning the Tide. We are a faith-based and community technology center located in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

I'm here today to introduce Judge Michael Mukasey, Attorney General of the United States. Judge Mukasey, along with his predecessors, have worked diligently to level the playing field to ensure that all organizations, including faith-based and small community-based nonprofits, have equal access to government grants and opportunities.

My organization, Turning the Tide, is one of the faith-based organizations that have been able to partner with the government in serving ex-offenders and ex-prisoners returning to our communities because of the Faith-Based and Community Initiative and more importantly, the work under Judge Mukasey's leadership at the Department of Justice. Turning the Tide stands for technology and information delivered for empowerment. This name refers to our church's mission of literally turning the tide of the conditions and aspirations of residents in our surrounding neighborhoods from one of little or no hope to one of revitalized thinking and empowerment which is desperately needed in our community. While many community residents do not believe in the potential they have, our church and our parishioners, we see their potential just as clear as the morning sun and we are committed to working hand in hand with them and other community partners in helping them to realize that great potential.

In 2005, Turning the Tide received its first federal grant, a grassroots grant from the Department of Labor. Through the success of applying for and winning this grant and other small grants, Turning the Tide has leveraged that success to win more grants and more support, including support from the Department of Labor, the Department of Health and Human Services, as well as the Department of Housing and Urban Development. This has come along with support from state and local government as well as corporate America and private entities. Through these grants, Turning the Tide has been able to expand our services. We now provide technology training, employment service, HIV and AIDs counseling, as well as testing, and other supportive services to ex- prisoners as well as their families, helping them to secure employment and build successful lives.

In honor of his work to make sure our communities are safe, provide opportunities for ex-prisoners, and to level the playing field in ensuring small grass roots organizations and faith-based organizations can

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compete equally for federal grants, it is my pleasure to introduce Judge Michael Mukasey, the 81st Attorney General of our United States.(Applause.)

ATTORNEY GENERAL MUKASEY: Thank you very much, Reverend Ford, for the introduction and for your work. Good morning. It is a pleasure to join you in celebrating the work of the Faith-Based and Community Initiative.

I would like to thank the President for his leadership on this important issue and Jay Hein for inviting me to join you. Seven years ago, the President launched the Faith-Based and Community Initiative. When he did that, he called on each of our agencies to put faith-based and other local community organizations at the center of the government's efforts to respond to human needs, and we've answered that call. Throughout the federal government, and even beyond, because many state and local governments also follow the President's lead.

We are working as never before in partnership with faith-based and community organizations to achieve real results. Take the Department's efforts to promote rehabilitation in prison and to try to smooth out what is often a rough transition from prison back to free society. Working with faith-based and community organizations, the Justice Department's Federal Bureau of Prisons operates Life Connections, a voluntary faith and character based in prison reentry program in five facilities. An interim study of this program showed that graduates were about 50 percent less likely to commit acts of serious misconduct in prison. Similarly, the Administration's Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative has provided more than \$100 million to 69 state agencies, all of which work with faith-based and community organizations to help ex-prisoners in getting jobs, housing, and other services they need to help keep them from reoffending. Primarily results showed that these ex-prisoners have done far better on almost every measure, from housing, to employment, to avoiding alcohol and drug abuse. Or consider our efforts to combat gang violence. Although prosecutions obviously play a large part in the fight against violent crime, prevention does too.

Enforcing the law by taking those who terrorize our streets off those streets is important, but our ultimate goal is to keep kids out of gangs in the first place. Faith-based and community groups are key partners in those efforts. Through our Gang Reduction and Intervention Program and our comprehensive anti-gang initiative, we have funded large numbers of faith-based and community groups that aim to give kids and their families healthy and safe alternatives to gang involvement. The results have been impressive. For example, the Dallas-Fort Worth site reports that of 900 former gang members and other at-

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risk youth who participated in its programs in 2007, not one, that's right, not even a single one committed an offense during that school year. Moreover, their school attendance and family relationships improved during the same period.

I could go on and on, but these examples are enough to make my point. Working with a full range of local groups, including faith-based and community organizations, is often the best way to tackle programs, especially local problems. Programs like these, that build on the existing structures of local organizations, can help tremendously in a lot of what we're trying to do to make people's lives better and keep them safe. The results produced by these programs are among the many accomplishments of the Faith-Based and Community Initiative that we appropriately celebrate today. But perhaps the most significant and lasting accomplishment of the initiative is not the results of any one program, but the mere fact, and there's really nothing mere about it at all, that these programs and others like them are now welcomed as partners by our government. As you know, that was not always the case.

When the President launched his Faith-Based and Community Initiative in 2001, faith-based organizations faced many and varied obstacles to working with federal agencies. Good faith concerns about entanglement between government and religion lead to a situation in which the religious identity of faith-based organizations trying to partner with government often had to be hidden or compromised. In some instances, these organizations were totally excluded from federal programs. Where they were allowed to take part, they were often required to change their religious character or to restrict their religious activities in ways that were really not required by the Constitution. Of course, religiously-affiliated providers were not always excluded and signs of religion were not always discouraged. But there was a chilling effect and a lot of confusion. Many organizations doubted that they were eligible to be government partners at all. And government officials feared that they might be wrongly accused of supporting religion if they were to give a grant or a contract to a faith-based organization. The President recognized that this meant a lost opportunity to work with some of the best available partners in many communities, the groups who were already established and doing exactly the kind of good work we were trying to support. So he called for a reexamination of why it was that faith-based organizations faced hurdles when they tried to work with federal agencies and how we might lower or eliminate those hurdles in a way consistent with the Constitution.

The Department of Justice has played and will continue to play a major role in that reexamination. In doing so, we built upon the principles behind Congress' charitable choice laws and the Supreme Court's

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first amendment jurisprudence that government must respect the essential character of faith-based providers, that no one needing help may be turned away because of his or her religion, and that no one may be forced into religious practices and that directly-awarded government funds must be spent on social services, not on religion.

Building upon these principles, we helped enact equal treatment regulations in nearly every federal department that offers grants to nonprofit organizations. We provided guidance on how and when government may enlist faith-based organizations and what faith-based organizations may do with government funds. We clarified the statutory rights of faith-based organizations to consider their faith in making hiring decisions and we made sure that these groups knew about their rights. And we argued strenuously in the Courts including in the Supreme Court on behalf of those programs and the equal treatment principles that underlie them. Thanks in part to these efforts today, as never before, the law guarantees even handedness. The watch word in this area is now neutrality. That means a body of laws and regulations that provide for the equal treatment of faith-based and other community organizations in the awarding of government grants and in participation in government programs. It means greater freedom for faith-based organizations to be faithful to what they are.

Faith-based groups, like other community organizations can promote common values, provide a sense of community, associate freely, and serve society in accordance with their beliefs. And they can do so free from government interference. The point is not to elevate faith-based organizations above others or to give them any preferences in the process, simply because of their faith, but neither is it to disregard or to disadvantage them simply because of their faith.

Our nation is large and diverse and our federal government does not by any means have all the answers to every challenge that we face. Sometimes we must rely on communities, private groups, and the American people to provide their own solutions. Faith-based and community organizations always have had and always will have a vital role to play in coming up with those solutions. From the Salvation Army to the United Jewish Communities, from Big Brothers/Big Sisters to Boys and Girls Clubs of America, our nation has been blessed throughout its history with the guidance and involvement of community organizations, some that were based on principles of faith and some that were not.

Thanks to the President's initiative, government can now profit from this guidance and involvement as never before. If a nonprofit organization has a good program for fighting gang violence, the Department of Justice should be able to fund it. It should not and now does not matter in the slightest if that group has a

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Catholic priest on its board of directors. If someone has developed an innovative program to help teach life skills to prison inmates, to help them become productive members of society once they've served their time, it should not and now does not matter in the slightest if the person teaching that class wears a Jewish yarmulke or a Muslim kufi. What should and now does matter a great deal is that the program is effective and that all groups including faith-based groups have an equal opportunity to compete.

We, as a nation, cannot afford even if some would want to do such a thing to turn away help just because it is offered by someone who is motivated by religious faith. We as a government do not have the right to turn away from competing for grants those who fail to meet a religious litmus test. Work remains to be done. But I'm proud of what we have achieved so far.

I believe we have gotten closer to the intent of the first amendment and to the design of the American experiment in which religious faith is honored, but not required and in which religious motivations for service, like humanitarian motivations, are respected and in which excellent, local organizations, both faith-based and secular alike, can be partners with the government. The reforms we have accomplished are vital for religious freedom, both for organizations that participate and for people who need help and they have moved us toward our overall goal of better services.

We have tried to clear the air, to clarify for faith-based organizations and also for government officials what the guidelines are and where the line is between inappropriate government support for religion and inappropriate discrimination against religion. This greater clarity has encouraged many faith-based organizations to lend their expertise and their services to the government by becoming our partners and by making it clear to government officials that their mandate is to seek the best providers. These reforms have contributed to the overall goal of ensuring the most effective help for all of our citizens.

I want to thank you for your hard work in advancing the noble goals of the President's Faith-Based and Community Initiative and for your help in creating the level playing field required by our laws and by fundamental principles of fairness. Thank you very much. (Applause.)