

An Open Letter to President Bush and Congress from America's Clergy

May 16, 2001

Dear President Bush and Members of the U.S. Congress:

We welcome the goal of empowering communities of faith to work effectively with government and other civic institutions. As leaders from traditions representing the diversity and breadth of the religious landscape in our nation today, we affirm the critical role of faith as a source of healing in our society. Whether by commandment from Holy Scriptures or lessons from prophets and messengers, we share a calling to care for those who are suffering, to help those who have been left behind and to embrace those who have been forgotten.

It is out of our commitment to the success of such faith-based enterprises that we are writing today to express our serious reservations about the provisions commonly referred to as "Charitable Choice" in the Administration's Faith-Based Initiative. The "Charitable Choice" proposals would inject government dollars and bureaucratic oversight directly into houses of worship and other pervasively religious organizations. We believe this portion of the Faith-Based Initiative poses numerous dangers to both religion and government.

These provisions would entangle religion and government in an unprecedented and perilous way. The flow of government dollars and the accountability for how those funds are used will inevitably undermine the independence and integrity of houses of worship. Allowing government officials to pick and choose among religions for limited government funds will foster an unhealthy competition between religions and could lead to an insidious form of political abuse. Exempting government-funded religious institutions from employment laws banning discrimination on the basis of religion weakens our nation's civil rights protections for those seeking to provide assistance to those in need.

Such new legislation is not necessary. For decades many houses of worship have set up separate religiously affiliated institutions to perform government-funded social services, a system that has protected both the autonomy of houses of worship and the integrity of government programs.

Partnerships between religion and government must be undertaken with great caution so as not to undermine the very integrity and freedom that allows both the followers and the institutions of religion to practice and keep faith in our nation.

We urge you to protect the sacred role of religion in our nation by rejecting this avenue of infusing government funds into America's religious institutions.

Sincerely,

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Rabbi Marna Sapsowitz, Temple Beth Hatfiloh, Olympia, WA
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Rev. Robert L. Schaibly, First Unitarian Church, Houston, TX
Rev. Dr. Donna Schaper, Coral Gables Congregational Church, Miami, FL
Rabbi Amy Scheinerman, Beth Shalom Congregation, Taylorsville, MD
Rev. Richard A. Schempp, Presbyterian Church (USA), Lubbock, TX

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