

Pangs of Faith

By Bill Treanor

The White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives (OFBCI), directed by John DiIulio, an Italian-American Catholic, could certainly use more than just the political patronage of President George W. Bush. From the quivers of both the political right and left, arrows in abundance have pierced the office's celestial plans. On the White House OFBCI's list of "good works" is making federal grant awards directly available to religious congregations and para-church organizations, and lowering administrative and regulatory barriers to ensure their equal access to the earthly rewards of public revenue.

A worthy candidate for patron saint of the embattled 10-person office is St. Sebastian, a Roman youth martyred in the Third Century by the Emperor Diocletian. Slain by the arrows that have made him a favorite subject of countless works of art, St. Sebastian's Feast Day of January 20 inaugurated the new compassionate conservative Bush administration.

The OFBCI is charged with implementing what supporters call a leveling of the playing field in government social welfare grant making. Said President Bush in his February budget address to Congress, "Government should welcome [faith-based] groups to apply for funds, not discriminate against them". To eliminate these barriers - no one has a researched list of just what they are - DiIulio's White House operation will oversee five departmental Centers for Faith-Based and Community Initiatives with four to nine staff apiece. The Department of Housing and Urban Development's office has existed since the 1996 implementation of welfare reform and its charitable choice provisions encouraging direct federal support to religious entities. There are now one-person operations at the departments of Justice, Health and Human Services, Labor and Education.

But many federal agencies are already ginning up reports touting their past involvement with religiously linked service providers. For example, the Corporation for National Service (CNS) issued a statement delineating its past extensive involvement with sectarian-sponsored groups, including Habitat for Humanity, the Catholic Network for Volunteer Services and the National Jewish Coalition for Literacy. Some 6,000 of AmeriCorps' 40,000 positions are assigned to these and other religiously affiliated grantees. The president has nominated former Indianapolis mayor Stephen Goldsmith to serve on CNS's 15-member board, where he is expected to be elected chairman at their first meeting after his senate confirmation. The president's new budget includes \$733 million for CNS,

enough to support 50,000 AmeriCorps volunteers. Of all federal programs, AmeriCorps offers the most flexibility to re-deploy the troops and provide DiIulio's office with some tangible programs to brag on. Never mind that in October, in a report to Congress, the CNS board, then chaired by retired Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation president Bob Rodgers, made recommendations similar to those that are now revealed as truth within the Bush administration.

The arrow-slinging from the left and the social welfare establishment was predictable, featuring all the spontaneity of a medieval morality play. In only one area, allowing religious groups that receive federal funds to discriminate in employment on the basis of a prospective or current employee's religious beliefs, have liberal critics been able to seriously disrupt White House plans.

Far more interesting have been challenges from the political right, including from some of the very groups (such as Teen Challenge) that the White House OFBCI was created to assist. In late February, Christian Coalition head and former GOP presidential candidate Pat Robertson was warning viewers of his "700 Club" TV program that "this could be a real Pandora's Box. And what seems to be such a great initiative can rise up to bite the organizations (receiving federal grants) as well as the federal government."

While critics from the left, led by the Rev. Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, fret that Bush's initiative will breach some often illusionary wall separating church and state, Robertson and his allies worry more about grant-making to the Hare Krishnas and the pseudo Church of Scientology. He's got company in the person of President Bush, who told the New York Times during the 2000 campaign, "I have a problem with the teachings of Scientology being viewed on the same par as Judaism and Christianity. ...But I'm interested in results. I am not focused on the process."

Focusing on the process is the brief given to the assistant to the president for faith-based and community initiatives, John DiIulio, Jr. The product of working class South Philadelphia, he earned a Harvard Ph.D. under the tutelage of criminologist James Q. Wilson. DiIulio, then a Princeton professor, burst on the youth policy scene in 1996 with a report and congressional testimony predicting a "rising tide of juvenile superpredators." DiIulio's Ivy League affiliations and Democratic registration made him the perfect crier for the 106th Congress' two leading kid-bashers, Sen. John Ashcroft (R-Mo.) and Rep. Bill McCollum (R-Fla.). Despite the fact that by 1996 the nation's juvenile criminal code had become the harshest since the first juvenile court was founded in 1899, Sen. Ashcroft and Rep. McCollum, supported by DiIulio, pushed bills with names like "The Violent Youth Predator Act of 1996."

But the nation's young people - DiIulio once called them "fatherless, godless and without conscience" - failed to cooperate and produce DiIulio's predicted 270,000 superpredators. Instead, the downward trend, already apparent in 1996, has

steadily continued. From 1993 to 1999, the juvenile homicide arrest rate dropped by 68 percent, while the overall arrest rate for juvenile crime fell by 36 percent. Now youth crime is at its lowest level in 25 years, despite the fevered efforts of Sen. Ashcroft, Rep. McCollum and DiIulio to channel most federal juvenile justice funds to prosecutors and lockups at the expense of the very youth-serving groups that DiIulio's faith-based and community initiative now hopes to assist.

With the damage done and his career advanced, DiIulio's views have now changed. He told the New York Times in February that he regretted becoming the apostle of the superpredator hype. "If I knew then what I know now," he told the Times, "I would have shouted for prevention of crimes." Says one colleague at the University of Pennsylvania where DiIulio taught before his White House appointment, "He's one of those guys who goes in the revolving door second and comes out first."

Exposure to actual community-based youth work and the youth workers who lead successful programs may have modified DiIulio's once-intemperate views. He has served on the board of Philadelphia-based Public/Private Ventures since 1997, resigning when he took the White House assignment. He's worked closely with P/PV's 16 city National Faith-Based Demonstration for High Risk Youth (NFBHDHRY), led until recently by Rev. Dean Truler

and now directed by Wendy Eaglekamp.

In April, P/PV gathered the faithful from those 16 cities in Washington to hear from, among others, DiIulio. Says P/PV President Gary Walker of DiIulio, "He genuinely wants high risk youth to get opportunity" and cites DiIulio's positive involvement in several P/PV administered projects. In addition to the NFBHDHRY work (funded by the Ford, Pinkerton and Stuart foundations and a \$2.5 million congressional earmark to P/PV in the budget of the U.S. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention), DiIulio's energies have helped spread better youth services throughout Philadelphia, says Walker.

Specifically, Walker credits DiIulio with convincing the Pew Charitable Trusts to put \$15 million over seven years into 21 YET (Youth Education for Tomorrow) Literacy Centers that operate in churches after school. The effort, run by P/PV Program Director Marciene Mattleman, who chaired the Clinton administration's National Institute for Literacy's advisory board, has enrolled more than a thousand youth in its first six months of operation. DiIulio also has championed Amachi, a P/PV administered mentoring program run by the former mayor of Philadelphia, Rev. W. Wilson Goode, who is now a P/PV senior advisor on faith-based initiatives. So far, reports Walker, more than 50 churches approached by Goode have produced some 500 mentors for children with a parent in prison. The mentors are screened and trained by the local Big Brothers Big Sisters program.

At Penn, DiIulio set up the Center for Research on Religion and Urban Civil

Society (CRRUCS), part of the Jerry Lee Center of Criminology. Its main endeavor is the Partnership for Religion and At-Risk Youth (PRRAY), which began life affiliated with P/PV. In DiIulio's absence (he says he'll stay at the White House for just two years, long enough to do the fun start-up part but not long enough to have to live with the results), CRRUCS and PRRAY are now run by Byron Johnson.

Johnson's work, says his website (www.sas.upenn.edu/jerrylee/bjohnson) "focuses on quantifying the effectiveness of faith-based organizations to confront various social problems." Like his colleague DiIulio, he's also closely linked to New York's conservative Manhattan Institute (www.manhattaninstitute.org), who's City Journal recently published a Johnson essay "on the efficacy of the 'faith factor' in reducing crime and delinquency among at-risk youth in urban communities." At the Manhattan Institute, DiIulio and former Democratic Congressman and Queens pastor Floyd Flake started The Jeremiah Project (TJP) "to study, promote and replicate the work inner-city ministers are doing in reducing youth violence and restoring civil society to urban communities across America."

One challenge for the White House OFBCI will be to convince faith and community groups not already active in serving the disadvantaged to make the leap of faith and become directly responsible for operating programs serving what are not always the most charming of clients. DiIulio maintains that there is a strong interest from currently uninvolved congregations, citing a study that found that only 7 to 10 per cent of church elders knew of the existence of federal charitable choice laws. When informed of the new possibilities for funding, says DiIulio "60 percent of 1,000 churches were interested in exploring the options."

One clear assumption that underlies the work of DiIulio, numerous conservative think tanks and now the White House, is that faith-based youth work yields better results than its supposedly thoroughly different secular counterparts. So a Selesian or Salvation Army sponsored Boys & Girls Club would, goes the theory, outperform a secular Boys & Girls Club or a Police Boys & Girls Club.

But recent reports by the Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation draw some heretical conclusions. Based on 10 years of work with more than 80 youth-serving agencies, one study found, "There is no scientific proof that 'faith-based' organizations that work with the truly disadvantaged have a higher batting average than secular organizations." Calling the current great awakening in favor of faith-based services a chimera, the Eisenhower Foundation says, "This is uniformed rhetoric, not reality." Rather than a religious identity, says the group headed by President Lynn Curtis, "success was more likely if a nonprofit organization had sound institutional capacity." The report adds, "Contrary to the marketing of the ideology that nothing works, we have seen that a great deal works. The problem is not lack of knowledge. The problem is getting political leaders to replicate what

works to scale.

If the White House is searching for a sound approach to strengthening neighborhood institutions, argues Curtis, look no further than the life work of the late Father Geno Baroni, the first (and last) HUD assistant secretary for neighborhoods during the Carter administration. Baroni provided early funding for more than 200 community self-help groups, many of whom were linked to religious institutions.

Echoing that view is a recent report, "The Promises and Perils of Faith-Based Organizations' Involvement in Child Care and After School," written by Suzanne Lemenestrel and Richard Murphy, director of the Center for Youth Development and Policy Research/Academy for Educational Development. They write, "Many of the country's leaders present faith-based organizations' involvement in social service program delivery as if this is a new phenomenon. It is not." They add, "Failure to focus on capacity enhancement [of youth service agencies] guarantees failure of effective program delivery." Noting that the president and DiIulio have used the phrase "level the playing field" to allow new providers onto the field. Murphy, the founder of Rheedlan Center for Children and Families in Harlem in 1970, writes, "Making the playing field suitable for children and the adults who were with them is equally important."

Noting that quality youth services require adequate funding, Murphy concludes, "The challenge for President Bush and like-minded leaders is: 'Are they willing to do the math?'"

Whizzing past all objections from current service providers or conservative nay sayers is Bob Woodson, president of the National Center for Neighborhood Enterprise. For Woodson, the grant-making aspects are the least important. He supports vouchers and a waiver by faith-based providers from most regulatory requirements, especially professional credentials for line workers. To that end, Woodson has thrown together yet another pressure group, the Coalition for Compassion - including compassionate conservative theoretician Marvin Olasky, the Family Research Council (FRC), American Values (run by the FRC's former president, Gary Bauer), and Eagle Forum's Phyllis Schlafly - to "heartily applaud" the Bush initiative.

Exploring the options also captures the mood on Capitol Hill. While the eventual expansion of charitable choice to most federal programs is a safe bet, it may have to wait. First, supporters in the Senate, led by Sens. Rick Santorum (R-Pa.) and Joe Lieberman (D-Ct.), want to pass the Savings Opportunity and Charitable Giving Act, which changes the tax code to encourage the establishment of Individual Development Accounts, and to promote donations to charities by the 84 million Americans who do not itemize their tax returns.

On the House side, the Community Solutions Act, championed by Speaker Dennis

Hastert (R-Ill.) and Reps J.C. Watts (R-Okla.) and Tony Hall (D-Ohio), contains similar provisions, plus expanding charitable choice to include, among other areas, juvenile justice, child welfare and child care, crime prevention and job training.

For now, Congress seems content to wait at least until this summer for DiIulio to come up with a detailed legislative agenda addressing eligibility for grants, job discrimination, the use of vouchers, the role of accreditation and employee credentials and a host of nettlesome questions, any one of which could eventually put a fatal arrow in the heart of the White House OFBCI. But with the protection of St. Sebastian (also the patron saint of athletes), DiIulio and Co. are expected to mastermind a crusade that might - and it also might not - profoundly change the youth service field.

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