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September 11, 2002

(02-82)

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Charitable choice survey raises critics' questions

By Robert Marus

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Faith-based charities that receive taxpayer funding report a high rate of satisfaction in working with government agencies. But barely half of them say they are familiar with government guidelines intended to prevent abuses of the Constitution.

These are among the findings of a recent survey of nearly 400 religious charities involved in "charitable choice."

The study comes as Congress debates whether to expand the ability of deeply religious charities to receive government funding.

The survey, "Fruitful Collaborations: A Survey of Government-Funded Faith-Based Programs in 15 States," was released Sept. 4. It was sponsored by the pro-charitable-choice Hudson Institute. The study -- directed by scholars Amy Sherman of Hudson and John Green of the University of Akron's Bliss Institute -- attempted to investigate how "charitable-choice" programs have been implemented on the local level.

Sherman and Green said the figures revealed an overall strong picture that charitable choice was not living up to its critics' fears. "At least according to those doing the work on the ground, charitable choice is working," said Sherman at a press conference announcing the study's release.

However, the authors acknowledged that the survey "indicates a few areas where improvement [in the way faith-based organizations implement charitable choice] is clearly warranted."

The study's emphasis was on the benefits of charitable choice. Based on questionnaires and interviews with leaders of 389 religious charities in 15 states, the survey concluded that 93 percent of the organizations reported a positive experience in working with government, and that 92 percent of the charities would contract again with government agencies in the future.

The study's authors said those figures dispel dire predictions by critics that charitable choice would lead to excessive entanglement between churches and government.

"Some critics of public funding of faith-based service providers assert that government contracts will threaten the faith-based character of such organizations, drive away private funding, or undermine the prophetic role of such organizations in criticizing the government," Sherman and Green noted.

Their figures showed that fewer than 10 percent of the organizations reported having concerns with any of those pitfalls. "Very few of the respondents were worried about these questions."

The organizations surveyed, however, did report higher rates of concern with government intrusion in their organizations since receiving tax funding. Thirty-eight percent said they experienced some level of intrusion by government officials monitoring their contract, while 62 percent said they experienced "very little intrusion."

An even higher percentage complained about onerous reporting requirements by government agencies. Seventy-three percent of the organizations surveyed said the reporting requirements were burdensome to some extent. Twenty-nine percent considered the requirements to be a "considerable burden" or a "great burden."

Since federal welfare-reform laws were passed in 1996, pervasively religious organizations (such as churches and synagogues) have been able to apply to provide government services under certain federal welfare programs. Critics -- including groups that support the separation of church and state -- say the practice violates the Constitution's ban on government support for religion.

Religiously affiliated charities like hospitals have long taken federal and state monies for services. But the organizations themselves could not be pervaded by religious content and had to be incorporated separately from churches or other organizations where religious indoctrination, religious requirements in hiring practices, or proselytization were present.

Charitable choice ended those restrictions for certain federal programs. President Bush and some members of Congress have been attempting to expand the programs to which charitable choice applies, with the White House calling the effort "Faith-Based and Community Initiatives."

The survey's authors also countered critics who say charitable choice includes too few safeguards to ensure that public funds are not spent on religious activities.

They found that 80 percent of the organizations with a strong faith-based component kept their government funding separate from other funds used for overtly religious purposes. Critics pointed out that means as many as one in five deeply religious charities surveyed could not document that public funds weren't used for religious indoctrination.

Other figures suggested difficulty with ensuring that no government money is spent on religious instruction. Just 46 percent of the pervasively religious organizations surveyed kept detailed records on public funding of the salaries of staff members, who may divide their time between non-religious and religious activities (such as spiritual counseling or leadership of worship services).

Sherman and Green acknowledged one significant red flag: a lack of familiarity with government guidelines set up to guarantee that public funds aren't used for sectarian purposes. Just 53 percent of the respondents said they were familiar with the charitable-choice guidelines. And only 45 percent said the guidelines were written into their contract with a government agency.

Critics of charitable choice present at the press conference said the study doesn't go far enough.

"There were no indications of soon or immediate plans to determine if the outcomes provided by faith-based organizations are quality services," said Richard Schmitz, spokesman for the National Association of Alcoholism and Drug Abuse Counselors.

Supporters of charitable choice often suggest that faith-based organizations can deliver social services better than government or private, secular agencies. Schmitz noted that the Hudson study relied only on the responses of the organizations themselves, not the clients or the services they actually received.

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Moderate publisher loses bid for Congress

By Bob Allen

ROME, Ga. (ABP) -- Baptist publisher Cecil Staton lost a Republican runoff Sept. 10, ending his bid for election to the U.S. House of Representatives in Georgia's newly created 11th congressional district.

Phil Gingrey, a former state senator, defeated Staton 64 percent to 36 percent in the runoff. Gingrey will face Democrat Roger Kahn in the general election.

Staton, president of Smyth & Helwys Publishing in Macon, finished second to Gingrey in a three-way primary Aug. 20, with 33 percent. After the primary, the third GOP candidate, Bob Herriott, endorsed Gingrey.

Staton, in his first bid for public office, ran as a conservative in an acrimonious campaign, surprising many moderate Baptists who for years have looked to his firm as a primary alternative to what they regard a fundamentalist bent in the Southern Baptist Convention's official publisher, LifeWay Christian Resources.

Near the end, the race turned into a holy war. Courting faith-based voters in the largely rural district, Staton described himself as a "minister and a man of faith" and accused his opponent of supporting homosexuals. According to the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, that charged perplexed both Gingrey -- who once sponsored a bill supporting the Boy Scouts of America for excluding gays -- and gay-rights activists.

"Honestly, I think it's laughable," said Allen Thornell of Georgia Equality, the state's largest homosexual political group. "Gingrey has gone out of his way to show that he is anti-gay."

The newspaper also reported that Staton led a group in 1997 to start a church affiliated with the Alliance of Baptists, which affirms gays and lesbians. Staton claimed he was unaware of the Alliance's tolerance of homosexuals and accused his opponent of trying to politicize his church membership.

Staton later drew criticism for mailing a piece that began with the greeting "Dear Christian" instead of the usual "Dear Citizen" or "Dear Voter." In the end, even the founder of the Christian Coalition of Georgia threw her support to Gingrey, a Roman Catholic.

In a statement conceding the runoff, Staton congratulated Gingrey but added, "I believe that the values we ran for are still worth fighting for," according to the Rome News-Tribune.

In addition to being the principal owner of Smyth & Helwys, which has more than 30 employees, Staton serves as publisher of the Mercer University Press. According to the candidate's Web site, he also owns a broadcasting company with interests in three radio stations and, with his wife, has real estate investments in Bibb and Floyd counties.

According to the Center for Responsive Politics, Staton raised \$676,000 for his campaign, including \$521,000 of his own money.

Staton has been on leave of absence from Smyth & Helwys since announcing his candidacy last fall and is on sabbatical from Mercer. He put his campaign headquarters in Rome, and, according to the News-Tribune, moved his broadcasting holding company there earlier this year.

Staton got 5,694 runoff votes in a district that takes in parts of 17 counties from Columbus nearly to Tennessee. Gingrey's vote total was 9,965.

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