

Government grant to historic church signals change in funding practice

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WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Thanks to the intervention of the White House, a federal historic-preservation program will for the first time pay for renovations to a church sanctuary.

The move represents Bush administration efforts to expand the ways in which the government may provide financial support to religious groups.

Administration officials announced May 27 that the Old North Foundation of Boston will receive a \$317,000 grant to renovate sanctuary windows in that city's historic Old North Church. The church, which dates from 1723, is most famous for its role in Paul Revere's ride prior to the battles of Lexington and Concord on the night of April 18, 1775.

Old North Church is the nickname for the building that houses an Episcopal congregation whose formal name is Christ Church of the City of Boston. According to the federal Department of the Interior, the money will be given through the Save America's Treasures program, which provides support for renovations to buildings that are historically significant.

The foundation that will receive the grant and pay for the renovations is incorporated separately from the church itself, according to the church's pastor, Stephen Ayres. It has "an independent board that has an interfaith membership" mainly composed of non-church members, he said.

Because of constitutional concerns over government endorsement of religious activities, Save America's Treasures previously had not provided grants to houses of worship that still house active congregations. A 1995 regulation under the administration of President Bill Clinton made that policy explicit.

But officials with the Bush administration have been reviewing the policy in conjunction with historic-preservation groups and have effectively rescinded it with the Old North Church grant.

Interior Secretary Gale Norton, in a statement announcing the grant, said, "This new policy will bring balance to our historic-preservation program and end a discriminatory double standard that has been applied against religious properties."

Other administration officials said the philosophy behind the policy change was similar to that behind Bush's attempt to expand government's ability to give money to religious groups for social services.

In a May 27 speech to a group of Christian charity administrators meeting in Washington, Jim Towey, director of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, said the Old North Church grant was intended to end "discrimination" against houses of worship in federal preservation programs. "If [Old North Church] is not an American treasure, I don't know what is," Towey said.

Towey noted that government funding -- both for historic preservation and for faith-based social services -- should not directly subsidize religious teaching. "You can't preach with Uncle Sam's dollars," he told the group. "[President Bush] doesn't want government funding religion -- that's the worst thing that could happen to you. But he wants to fund programs that bring results."

In an interview after the speech, Towey acknowledged the Old North Church announcement marked an expansion of Bush's plans to give federal funds to religious groups, but that fairness demanded it. Save America's Treasures' previous policy of denying grants to active houses of worship made it seem "as if America's treasure box does not include faith-based jewels," Towey said. He noted the policy change meant that other houses of worship important to America's history -- such as the African-American churches that often served as incubators of the Civil Rights Movement in the South -- could become eligible for federal historic-preservation grants.

But some critics of the Bush administration's policies on church-state issues said this was a clear violation of the First Amendment.

"Somebody needs to spread the alarm that the Bush administration is taxing people to support houses of worship," said Barry Lynn, head of Americans United for Separation of Church and State. "[Old North Church's] repair and upkeep ought to be paid for by the people who worship there. Those congregants have no right to pass the collection plate to the taxpayer."

Representatives from Americans United also pointed to a line from the Supreme Court's opinion in the 1973 *Pearl vs. Nyquist* decision, written by the late Justice Lewis Powell. "If the state may not erect buildings in which religious activities are to take place, it may not maintain such buildings or renovate them when they fall into disrepair," the opinion said.

Ayres, the church's pastor, said he doesn't believe his church's acceptance of federal aid amounts to a violation of the First Amendment's ban on government support for religion.

"I understand the concern about entanglement and it's one that I think churches need to have as well, to know that we don't need to become beholden to the government