

# 'Nothing is more powerful than God': A look at President Donald Trump's new faith-based initiatives

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SALT LAKE CITY — President Donald Trump's recently announced White House Faith and Opportunity Initiative gives old drama a new name, according to religious liberty advocates.

The program, launched with an executive order May 3, reignites debates about the flow of public money into religious organizations and how best to safeguard the separation of church and state. In promising support for faith-based social service providers, the White House opens the door to a slew of potential problems, said Rabbi Jack Moline, president of Interfaith Alliance.

"Do I care if a Muslim organization feeds the hungry or if a Jewish organization provides medical care for the indigent or if a Roman Catholic organization provides housing for the homeless? I do not care a bit and I applaud them for it. But if they're going to promote their faith with federal funding, then they're violating the (Constitution's) establishment clause," he said.

Trump seemed unconcerned about potential church-state conflicts during the Rose Garden signing ceremony attended by leaders from a variety of faiths. He emphasized the "vital role" faith groups play in solving societal problems and said his commitment to religious freedom extends to the realm of government funding.

The initiative will "help ensure that faith-based organizations have equal access to government funding and the equal right to exercise their deeply held beliefs," he said, according to a White House transcript. "We take this step because we know that, in solving the many, many problems and our great challenges, faith is more powerful than government, and nothing is more powerful than God."

*Evan Vucci*

*President Donald Trump arrives for a "National Day of Prayer" event in the Rose Garden of the White House, Thursday, May 3, 2018, in Washington. (AP Photo/Evan Vucci)*

## Church and state

Trump's Faith and Opportunity Initiative follows in the footsteps of similar efforts from the previous two administrations.

President George W. Bush created the White House Office of Faith-based and Community Initiatives in 2001 to help level the playing field in the distribution of federal money to nonprofits. It celebrated the work of faith-based social service agencies and sought to ensure they weren't left out of aid distributed by federal programs aimed at addressing issues like poverty and homelessness.



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President Barack Obama gave the Bush administration's office a new name and an expanded mission. His White House Office of Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships continued to allow government resources to support faith-based organizations, but it also encouraged the flow of information back into the White House. The office collected input from faith groups on proposed policies and potential solutions to societal problems.

Bush and Obama, like Trump, faced pushback for their faith-based initiatives. People have always disagreed on where the line should be drawn in constitutionally mandated separation of church and state, said Amanda Tyler, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty.

The Constitution states that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion," which has been interpreted over the decades to mean that the federal government cannot favor one faith over another in its policies.

*Evan Vucci*

*President Donald Trump speaks during a "National Day of Prayer" event in the Rose Garden of the White House, Thursday, May 3, 2018, in Washington. (AP Photo/Evan Vucci)*

In the context of the faith-based initiative, some argue that sending government money to a religious organization that only hires members of a certain faith or teaches that same-sex marriage is a sin illegally favors conservative Christian faith groups.

"That line has always been difficult to discern, but, to this point, we've agreed that it would be unconstitutional for government money to directly fund religion," Tyler said.

The Trump administration spent more than a year debating how best to enact its version of a faith-based initiative. The president has yet to appoint the adviser who will lead the new White House program.

However, this delay didn't necessarily stem from neglect, experts said. It's difficult to navigate this area of federal policy, as the Bush and Obama administrations illustrated.

Obama announced his Advisory Council for Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships within two weeks of taking office, but it took council members more than a year to decide how to ensure that partnerships between faith-based service organizations and the federal government were mutually beneficial and constitutionally sound.

*Evan Vucci*

*President Donald Trump speaks during a "National Day of Prayer" event in the Rose Garden of the White House, Thursday, May 3, 2018, in Washington. (AP Photo/Evan Vucci)*

Religious organizations involved in the faith-based initiatives had to keep federal money separate from the budget they used for explicitly religious activities.

Additionally, the Obama administration published a final rule in March 2016 that required religious organizations to provide people seeking their services with information about their rights. Beneficiaries were allowed to ask for recommendations on other service providers if they were uncomfortable with the religious mission of the first agency they encountered.

"There's been a guiding principle that we cannot predicate receipt of these services on religious beliefs. The beneficiaries receiving government services must be able to do so no matter what religion they belong to," Tyler said.

### **Trump's shift**

Trump's executive order revokes the Obama-era policies regarding what faith-based service providers must do for potential clients who aren't comfortable with the religious nature of their work. These providers will no longer have to offer information on alternative service agencies.

"The most troubling change (related to the new executive order) is the removal of language that protects beneficiaries," Tyler said. "I think there's been a shift from focusing on the needs of beneficiaries to the needs of religious providers."

Stanley Carlson-Thies, who worked with the faith-based initiative under both Bush and Obama, is less concerned about this shift, noting that there are several other rules in place, including in the Constitution, to ensure that the faith-based initiative won't violate the separation of church and state.

"The rules are very careful to say that, in a typical grant program, the money is there to provide a service, not to proselytize," he said.

*Evan Vucci*

*Cissie Graham Lynch listens as President Donald Trump speaks during a "National Day of Prayer" event in the Rose Garden of the White House, Thursday, May 3, 2018, in Washington. (AP Photo/Evan Vucci)*

He added that some faith-based service agencies were truly bothered by the Obama-era requirements.

"Some (faith-based) organizations were concerned that in referring someone to another organization for prenatal care, they would end up being served at a place that would push elective abortions," he said.

However, Carlson-Thies, who is founder and senior director of the Institutional Religious Freedom Alliance, agreed that the Trump administration committed a public-relations blunder with the rule change, further angering those who were already suspicious of the faith-based initiative.

"I don't think there's a substance problem. It's a perception problem," he said.

### **A better future?**

Like Bush and Obama before him, Trump appears confident that working more closely with faith-based service providers is worth weathering an initial storm of critical press coverage.

"Americans of faith have built the hospitals that care for our sick, the homes that tend to our elderly and the charities that house the orphaned," Trump said during the Rose Garden ceremony. "I will always protect religious liberty."

Trump's supporters insist his faith-based initiative will build on the good work of the Bush and Obama administrations.

"Ordering every department of the federal government to work on faith-based partnerships — not just those with faith offices — represents a widespread expansion of a program that has historically done very effective work and now can do even greater work," said Johnnie Moore, the unofficial spokesman of Trump's evangelical advisory board, to Religion News Service.

But furthering the work of previous faith-based initiatives will take more than identifying additional point-people, according to Mark Chaves, a Duke University sociologist who has been critical of the program from the beginning. The faith-based initiative's flaw under Bush and Obama wasn't its leadership; it was the availability of funds, he said.

"This was never about putting more resources into the social safety net. It was about redirecting the same resources to different organizations," Chaves said.

Carlson-Thies argued that the value of the faith-based initiative is about more than money. It's about a meaningful flow of information from the halls of power to communities across the country and back.

"The government always has difficulties in translating its good ideas into what's really effective on the ground. To do that properly, it needs to have voices on the ground to speak to," he said.