

W's faith-based plan is profoundly flawed

By **JOHNNY RAY YOUNGBLOOD**
and **MICHAEL GECAN**

As organizers and leaders for 25 years of groups made up primarily of congregations, we have this message for President Bush: Spare us the sermons about faith-based organizations.

In the Northeast corridor alone, within an easy Amtrak ride of the White House, our groups are building thousands of homes, running innovative public high schools, creating scores of after-school projects, leading living-wage campaigns, enrolling poor children and families in health care programs and working with mayors and governors on open-space and environmental cleanup issues.

Yet we are not exclusively faith-based for a variety of reasons. Many of our members, both individuals and organizations, have no connection to religious institutions. They are labor union locals, homeowners groups, parents groups, settlement houses and other grass-roots associations. They are as committed to the values of human development and social improvement as any congregation or religious institution.

If the President is going to have an office of faith-based solutions, is he also going to create a parallel office of nonfaith-based solutions?

Being faith-based may be a guarantee of good intentions, but it is no guarantee of competence. We see many examples of poorly designed, badly managed social service and political action projects in the religious sphere. These groups see new government initiatives as the answer to their prayers for funding and staffing, not as ways to improve the social fabric.

Worse yet, sometimes the faith-based tag doesn't guarantee honorable intentions. Most Americans were appalled to learn recently of the exploitation of a major federal housing program by a toxic brew of phony faith-based groups and Long Island real estate operatives. The U.S. housing department, let's remember, used to boast that it created the nation's first agency for faith-based initiatives.

Former President Bill Clinton's leniency toward four New York religious leaders who were convicted of stealing \$40 mil-



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lion of federal funds made even those with very strong stomachs queasy.

America doesn't need a government agency to tell the difference between, say, Mother Teresa's model of faith-based organizing and Osama Bin Laden's — just good judgment and common sense. Besides, the work of faith-based organizing isn't some separate, discrete activity. It should be the job of each member of Bush's administration to reach out to groups that are productive, deflect organizations that are well-intentioned but ill-equipped and crack down on

groups that seek to exploit federal funding.

While everyone appreciates recognition, we don't need the new administration to spend valuable time and energy applauding the contributions of religious organizations. It's more important for Bush to work on closing the national divide that widened under Clinton — the growing gap between millions of families making minimal wages and those so rich they buy third and fourth estates for the tax advantages.

All the talk about faith-based solutions leads the nation away from the tough problems that only government can begin to solve on a large scale. Will the new administration insist that federal contractors and beneficiaries pay their employees a living wage? Will it learn from the success of our organizations in New York and Baltimore and lead a national campaign to build hundreds of thousands of homes affordable to families making \$20,000 to \$40,000 a year?

Will it support large-scale blight-removal strategies that prepare older cities for the commercial, industrial and residential redevelopment that will make them competitive once again with surrounding suburbs?

We've had eight years of public piety and soothing sermons from the White House. It's time to get down to business and pursue strategies that will lift millions of Americans out of poverty and into the social and economic mainstream.

The Rev. Youngblood is co-chairman and Gecan is senior organizer of the Industrial Areas Foundation-East, a group of 14 primarily congregation-based organizations.