



Clergy slam U.S. faith-based office

Larry Buhl, PlanetOut Network

published Wednesday, April 26, 2006

An alliance of nonpartisan religious leaders used the resignation of White House "faith czar" James Towey to urge President Bush to dismantle the controversial White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives.

The Interfaith Alliance joined Wednesday with Americans United for the Separation of Church and State in calling on Bush to shut down the office, which they say has created a religious hierarchy among denominations to gain federal funds and discriminated against those without a conservative ideology.

The Rev. Amos Brown, pastor of the Third Baptist Church in San Francisco and member of the Interfaith Alliance, called the office "born in sin."

"There was no bipartisan group of leaders consulted to form (the office). It was very disingenuous to conceive a program for the direct funneling of federal money into churches' coffers," Brown said.

The Rev. Welton Gaddy, head of the Interfaith Alliance, said the United States will function best when religions do the work of religions and when government does the work of government. "Government must provide for the safety and security of all its citizens. Faith-based groups must be able to serve people, without being yanked around by government strings," he said in a written statement.

Those strings, many churches, rights groups and LGBT leaders say, have mandated that religious groups discriminate against people. In 2003, Towey's office issued a 12-page booklet stating explicitly that church-run government programs should be able to discriminate in hiring on religious grounds.

"Towey was the Bush administration's point man in trying to roll back civil rights laws barring religious discrimination in hiring in government-funded programs," said the Rev. Barry W. Lynn, executive director of Americans United for the Separation of Church and State, in a prepared statement.

Although Towey is gone, religious leaders who decry discrimination say the administration's policies will live on as long as the office remains intact.

John Marble, executive director of the National Stonewall Democrats, told the PlanetOut Network that the Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives has given undue access and influence to anti-gay groups such as Focus on the Family and the Family Research Council.

"The office has not only been a depository for kickbacks to special interests like anti-gay groups that control the GOP, but it has also been a leading tool for the administration to promote junk science, especially related to sexual health, especially transmission of HIV. The office and the administration have promoted abstinence only education to prevent STDs and unwanted pregnancies," Marble said.

He said Wednesday's announcements from the church leaders suggest an increasing backlash from mainstream and left-leaning religions against the right-wing religiosity of the Bush administration.

"I think this is a good thing for the LGBT community. In general it's very important for the gay community to work with organizations of faith to advance civil rights and freedoms," Marble said.

Leaders calling for the dismantling of the office say they will demand that each member of Congress running for office this year, and presidential candidates in 2008, to announce his or her stand on faith-based initiatives in government.

"Our actions are not an opposition to the role of religion in society," said Imam Mahdi Brai, executive director of the Muslim American Society and member of the Interfaith Alliance.

"We support religious rights and freedoms, but we don't need an office like this one to do our jobs," he said. "We recognize a higher authority, but that authority does not reside in the White House."
