Obama Still Funding Failed 'Faith-Based' Programs

A religion reporter questions the use of U.S. grants to faith-based groups for HIV/AIDS prevention.

March 28, 2013 By Andy Kopsa

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During a trip to Uganda last fall, I traveled through small villages near Jinja, a city about 71 kilometers from Kampala and home to the source of the Nile. Young Mormons, wearing the uniform of crisp white shirt, black tie, nametag and backpack, walked from hut to hut.

They traveled in pairs: one white Mormon and one black Mormon. My driver and guide told me that having a black missionary made the approach easier. Presumably, the young black missionary would speak at least Swahili.

However, those rite-of-passage mission trips are funded by the church, enabled through strict adherence by congregants to its aggressive tithing requirements.

But it is when mission trips—by any other name—are funded by U.S. taxpayer money that we must put a stop to it.

George W. Bush ushered in an era of unprecedented funding to faith-based (read: Christian) organizations.

The United States has always funded religion in one way or another—think of tax-exempt status for churches and all houses of worship no matter the religion and multi-million dollar support of Catholic hospitals.

But Bush's vision was special. Billions in U.S. taxpayer money were doled out to the Evangelicals who got him elected, a de facto payoff. The funds came through virtually every department under executive branch oversight, including the departments of defense, justice and health and human services.

Domestically, the grants had names like "Healthy Marriage," "Compassion Capital" and "Abstinence-Only" programs among others. But arguably, one of the largest payouts to these religious groups came via PEPFAR, the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief.

So what's the big deal—that was George W. Bush? He is history and we have moved on, right?

The answer to that is kinda.

How taxpayer money is ‘wasted’

President Obama has done precious little to end PEPFAR funding to anti-gay, anti-condom, "abstinence-only" organizations operating in Africa (and indeed other parts of the world).

Failed and damaging abstinence programs are being implemented throughout sub-Saharan Africa—they did not go away when George W. Bush left the White House.

For example, Samaritan’s Purse (SP) was the most rewarded faith-based organization under President George W. Bush. Between 1999 and 2002, it received over $6.5 million in federal grants, accounting for 17 percent of total funding to "Evangelical" organizations, according to the National Committee on Responsible Philanthropy (NCRP).

SP is led by Franklin Graham, who is not shy about his anti-Muslim and anti-condom beliefs. His organization exists for one reason: to implement a Christian worldview via public/private partnerships around the globe.

The organization brags about converting Muslims to Christianity through the distribution of "hygiene kits" and clean water projects in Niger. They have been found to be evangelizing Haitians as part of their relief efforts.

But despite being censured previously for proselytizing with federal money, Graham’s group still gets millions.

According to SP’s 990 tax returns for 2011, the organization received over $7 million in federal grants in that year alone.

But, it is impossible from these tax documents alone to determine from which U.S. operating division the money came and how it was spent. Or, that the government funding was kept separate from religious activities, which is required to award the grant, or from funding the production of Swahili Bibles distributed throughout sub-Saharan Africa, including Kenya.

Most recently, SP was awarded $1.3 million in grants to implement "Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage" programs in Mozambique. Mozambique is the last country in a multi-country plan that also included Kenya, Ethiopia and Uganda.

The latest installment to SP was over $85,000, made last fall. This amount appears innocuous at first blush. However, this is just one PEPFAR quarterly payout of one award to one organization, through one operating division of the U.S. government.

While in Uganda last year, I tried repeatedly and unsuccessfully to visit SP. Even my intrepid in-country fixer could not get them to speak with us. But then again, neither would in-country representatives from USAID or the U.S. embassy.

These organizations and the Obama administration must be held to account for the millions of U.S. taxpayer dollars still wasted on abstinence-only "preventative" programs handed over year after year to Evangelical groups like SP, who have little interest in preventing the spread of HIV.

Problems with funding religious groups

SP and all other Christian organizations like it take our money for one purpose: to give them the

ultimate reward, the opportunity to witness—to the savages—for Christ. History repeats itself; Christians "saving" the "savages" be it during the colonial era or today. It just happens that today the U.S. taxpayer is footing some of the bill.

According to my sources close to the PEPFAR implementation program, "abstinence-only" is shifting literally from "abstinence-only-until-marriage" to more inclusive messages to target populations who still practice polygamy.

They also tell me that they recognize the problems with funding these groups, and that the administration has reduced funding them and such programs.

But, "abstinence-only" is abstinence only and "decreased funding" is still funding.

When implemented by a religious organization, the programs seem to have less to do with prevention of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections and have more to do with the promotion of Christianity, degrading of homosexuals and providing opportunities for conversion.

Of course, there are faith-based groups doing good work: running hospitals, providing antiretroviral treatment and caring for the sick and suffering. And there are interfaith groups in the United States pushing hard to end this kind of funding.

In order to serve America's dedication to inclusivity and true religious freedom (through PEPFAR or any other program) inside and abroad, those programs proselytizing and/or peddling in false sexual health information must be defunded.

To be defunded, Americans must be made aware of the continuation of these federally funded programs, then the organizations have to be routed out. This can only be achieved through greater access to the public information—on how our money is being used.

The state of transparency has improved under President Obama—at least regarding tracking the kind of grants I am writing about.

Pressure has been put on government departments and agencies to not drag their heels on fulfilling Freedom of Information Act requests and to modernize with searchable databases on websites. Again, there have been some improvements.

But, when it comes to faith-based funding, the information is far harder to come by. Part of that may be a hangover from the Bush era, but possibly another part is that the Obama administration does not want to be held accountable for these bad habits that are yet to die.

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