

California Church Uses Government Funds for Welfare-to-Work Program

The pastors say they still have an opportunity to minister, but offer 'practical kindness' when their hands are tied

Soft-spoken and waering a conservative dark blue suit, Henry Alexander could be mistaken for a businessman. Yet he is senior pastor of Pomona's Shield of Faith Christian Center, as well as the driving force behind the church's successful, government-funded Welfare-to-Work program.

Since Alexander and his wife, Marty, founded the church two decades ago, they have hoped to impact the Pomona, Calif., community for Christ in nontraditional ways.

"We had to deal with practical issues being faced by the city, and here in Pomona there's high unemployment," Alexander said. "We couldn't focus on the message of salvation alone; we had to address the context."

That meant helping unemployed residents get jobs. So at first informally and church-funded, Alexander's ministry began helping the unemployed do just that. But with the advent of welfare reform in 1996, which enabled churches to apply for federal dollars for social services they provided, Alexander believed he could expand the service.

"It seemed like the government was opening the door to something we were involved in anyway," he said. Alexander's church successfully applied for funding and received \$250,000 for a two-year contract.

While church officials were happy to receive the funds, Alexander said they also had mixed emotions—"like trepidation. We knew we'd got it, but now we had extra responsibilities."

Those responsibilities included satisfying government accounting requirements, as well as making at least 75 job placements in the two-year contract period. That, said Marty Alexander, is not as easy as it seems: "That's because 70 percent of our clients are those no one else can help, like the homeless."

But the church has fulfilled those responsibilities without any apparent problems and is looking forward to the upcoming receipt of an additional \$250,000 for another two-year contract, Alexander said.

Ministry clients said they appreciate the service. Marissa Biafore said Shield of Faith gave her more personal attention than other agencies did. "The other companies I went to said to call, and they will do what they can. Shield of Faith made calls while I was there and helped me on my résumé."

Another client, Tanya Rivera, appreciated the special attention Shield of Faith staff provided. "I like the way they didn't require me to follow up, but they said they would call me."

Rivera said she even enjoyed the interview, which she

described as uplifting. "I genuinely felt better about myself when I left," she said.

Shield of Faith Job Developer Karen Burr said she tries to be an encourager, "or a self-esteem builder. I'm helping a person who has been 'emotionally beaten down' by their environment see that they are somebody [with] value, and that value can be put on paper in the form of a résumé and passed on to someone who needs them," she said.

Even with the use of government funds, the opportunity for ministry is still there, Alexander said. Prayer is offered to those who make use of the employment service, though it is not forced upon them. Biafore was a grateful recipient of prayer. "I felt better after they prayed for me," she said.

However, Alexander said he is not trying to violate even the spirit of the contract. "We feel privileged to serve the people. If we can give them Jesus that's our greatest desire. If the contract states we can't give them Jesus, then we would still carry out our acts of practical kindness."

While some Christians might say Shield of Faith is treading a fine line, church officials say they have yet to experience any downside from using government funds. Alexander said, "The circumstances [in Pomona] are so needy that most people just want to back up and let us do the work."

However, Alexander sounded a cautionary note for churches thinking about accepting government dollars. "Folks really need to prepare themselves and operate with strict financial accountability."