

Pentecostal Leaders Rally in D.C. to Support Bush's 'Faith-Based Initiative'

Hundreds of pastors are seeking a controversial partnership with the government to provide services to the poor

Hundreds of pastors from across the United States converged on Washington, D.C., April 24-25 to take part in the House-Senate Majority Faith-Based Summit. Leaders and participants expressed the hope that a partnership between government and faith-based groups will provide new solutions to providing charitable programs to communities across America.

"It's time to bring new resources to people in need," Vice President Dick Cheney announced at the summit's opening reception. "And I'm speaking to the experts tonight—those with a real track record of changing lives."

The meeting was hosted by Sen. Rick Santorum, R-Penn., and Rep. J.C. Watts, R-Okla., both devoted Christians. Watts, chairman of the House Republican Conference, said he has seen firsthand the awesome work that faith-based organizations do to help those who cannot help themselves. Watts challenged those attending the summit to "recognize that God has called you for such a time as this, and to step up to the plate."

The National Center for Faith Based Initiative (NCFBI) in West Palm Beach, Fla., served as co-host for the summit. Pentecostal Bishop Harold Calvin Ray, founder of the NCFBI and pastor of Redemptive Life Fellowship in West Palm Beach, said his organization will serve as a clearinghouse for more than

50,000 churches to help them secure needed resources for economic rejuvenation and for empowering troubled communities.

Ray also is founder of the Kingdom Dominion Church Fellowship, a network of about 300 independent Pentecostal churches in the United States.

A former attorney, Ray left his practice in 1990. Today he pastors Redemptive Life Fellowship, a 4,000-member church in West Palm Beach, Fla. Since its inception a little more than a year ago, NCFBI has gained the support of 10 of the most prominent black pastors in the country who serve as its board of governors. Two of those appointees are Los Angeles pastor Charles E. Blake and Bishop T.D. Jakes of Dallas.

"I'm glad the government is finally seeing that works without faith is dead," Jakes told summit attendees. Blake told the Dallas Morning News that

"there is tremendous unharnessed and unchanneled economic power in the black community" and that "by joining hands the church will gain the leverage it needs."

The NCFBI has partnered with three key national organizations—The National Black Chamber of Commerce, The National Center for Neighborhood Enterprise, and The American Center for Law and Justice.

These alliances are part of Ray's overall plan to make NCFBI the flagship of the faith-based initiative in this country. "Since our inception one year ago, we have consistently and quietly worked to position ourselves for a moment in history we prophetically discerned would come," Ray said.

The summit comes at a time when faith-based approaches to poverty, drug abuse, illiteracy and crime are receiving nationwide attention through President Bush's White House initiatives and "charitable choice" measures being introduced on Capitol Hill.

Even though a recent pole by the Pew Research Center showed 75 percent of the country favors faith-based initiatives, the movement is not without its critics. Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, argues that partnerships between the government and groups such as NCFBI are unconstitutional. Some conservatives also fear that receiving federal money would undermine a faith-based organization's core beliefs, or that Muslims and other groups might also apply for the funds.

But those who attended the summit were encouraged by what they heard from religious leaders and key government officials. Said Ray: "We believe this summit will serve as a catalyst and inspiration to thousands of grassroots organizations whose daily work in the local neighborhoods of our nation are making a demonstrable difference."