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DIVERSE RELIGIOUS AND CIVIC ORGANIZATIONS ISSUE REPORT ON WAYS GOVERNMENT AND RELIGIOUS GROUPS MAY WORK TOGETHER TO SERVE THOSE IN NEED

Washington, D.C., Feb. 27, 2001—A diverse group of religious and civic organizations have issued a report, In Good Faith: A Dialogue on Funding Faith-Based Social Services, discussing ways in which the government and religious groups may work together to serve those in need. The report comes at a time when policymakers and the public are focused on the issue of government funding of faith-based organizations.

The group, made up of organizations that often disagree about church-state issues, agrees that the government in some instances may fund religious groups’ social service work and that religious organizations and the government may cooperate in a variety of ways to assist those in need. The group continues to disagree about some crucial issues in this area, namely the constitutionality and advisability of the “charitable choice” provision, first made law as part of the 1996 welfare reform package. “Charitable choice” permits all faith-based organizations to compete for government social service funding, regardless of their religious nature. “Charitable choice” is a part of President Bush’s initiative of expanding government reliance on faith-based and community initiatives.

This group began its work almost three years ago in an effort to identify both areas of agreement and disagreement in a complex and developing area of the law. Its work has been supported by The Pew Charitable Trusts.

On Tuesday, February 27 at 2pm at the National Press Club, the group will officially release its report and host a panel discussion moderated by E.J. Dionne, Jr., a Senior Fellow at The Brookings Institution and Co-Chair of the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. Panelists will include three of the report’s drafters: Murray Friedman, Director, Feinstein Center for American Jewish History, Temple University; Heidi Unruh, Policy Analyst for Evangelicals for Social Action; and Richard Foltin, Legislative Director and Counsel for the American Jewish Committee. Other panelists will provide perspectives on the experience of religious organizations that have been and continue to provide service to their communities in different ways. These panelists will include Reverend Donna Jones of the Cookman United Methodist Church in Philadelphia, Darren Walker of the Abyssinian Development Corporation in New York, and Rev. Lynn Bergfalk of City Gate.

“This report is evidence that people with vastly different philosophies can agree on some ways for government and religious organizations to cooperate while maintaining some principled differences on the subject,” remarked Murray Friedman, the director of the project supported by The Pew Charitable Trusts, and Director of the Feinstein Center for American Jewish History of Temple University and the Philadelphia Chapter of the American Jewish Committee. “Principled debate must continue, but it should not obscure substantive agreements or thwart consensus solutions to community needs.” The project’s sponsors are the American Jewish Committee and the Feinstein Center for American Jewish History, Temple University.