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How Faith Based Initiatives help unlicensed reform schools thrive

by Michele Ulriksen

When George W. Bush became president, he created the White House Office of Faith-Based Initiatives (www.whitehouse.gov/government/fbci/mission.html). Mr. Bush created Centers for Faith-Based Initiatives in seven cabinet departments: the United States Agency for International Development, and the Departments of Housing and Urban Development, Health and Human Services, Justice, Agriculture, Labor, and Education. The purpose of the Centers was to eliminate regulatory and contracting obstacles for faith-based and other community organizations. This act has made it possible for religious boarding schools to avoid becoming licensed and regulated leaving those inside no protection.

It began when Mr. Bush was Governor of Texas. Texas' legislature passed the Faith Based program then allowing deregulation for faith based boarding schools. The legislature then passed a bill allowing the creation of alternative accreditation programs in which faith-based child-care centers could forego state licensing and instead receive accreditation from one of these newly created private agencies. Deregulation was an essential component of the faith-based initiative because it ensured that more faith-based providers would be eligible for government funds (see Texas Freedom Education Fund at www.tfn.org/aboutus). This plan created new licensing laws for religious facilities; self-regulation that substantially reduced health and safety requirements and oversight.

The state of Texas approved the Texas Association of Christian Child-Care Agencies (TACCCA). The TACCCA was comprised of eight pastors, three of whom also operated homes accredited by TACCCA. With TACCCA's creation, the Texas Department of Protective and Regulatory Services (TDPRS) no longer had jurisdiction over these programs. Therefore, TDPRS could not investigate complaints of abuse. Also upon the creation of TACCCA, then-Governor Bush invited the Roloff Homes to return to Texas, even though the State had previously closed down the Roloff Homes in 1985 after numerous allegations of abuse. The State's position was that the Roloff Homes should either comply with licensing requirements or close its doors. The Texas Supreme Court agreed and the United States Supreme Court dismissed the appeal from this decision (*State v. Corpus Christi People's Baptist Church, Inc.*, 683 S.W.2d 692 (1984) and *Corpus Christi People's Baptist Church, Inc.*, 474 U.S. 801 (1985)).

TACCCA was supposed to uphold the same standards as TDPRS. TACCCA, however, never conducted the legally required surprise-inspection at any of its facilities (see letter from Texas Department of Protective and Regulatory Services to Rev. Davis Blaser, Texas Association of Christian Child-Care Agencies (Mar. 8, 1999), file with the Texas Department of Protective and Regulatory Services).

In 1999, the state of Texas found evidence of physical abuse and neglect at the Roloff Homes' Rebekah girls. Charges were filed against Faye Cameron, the home's supervisor (and wife of Pastor Wiley Came

result of the charges, Faye Cameron was convicted and banned from ever working with children in Texas. Nonetheless, TACCCA reaccredited the home. Pastor Cameron served on the board of TACCCA at the reaccreditation. Sadly, this would not be the first case of conflict of interest we would see with these faith self-appointed organizations. The rate of confirmed abuse and neglect at alternatively accredited facilities is times higher than that of state-licensed facilities. This can be confirmed by the Texas Department of Public Regulatory Services. Because of the problems incurred, the Texas legislature had to discontinue its alternative accreditation program in 2001.

Luckily someone was watching and paying attention: because of past problems with these facilities, the Freedom Network was created by concerned citizens. This is a watchdog group that was founded in 1999 as a nonpartisan, grassroots organization of more than 23,000 religious and community leaders - www.tfn.org - it monitors far-right issues, organizations, money and leaders.

FACCCA – Florida is the new safe haven for unregulated religious schools

Although Texas was forced to abandon its alternative accreditation program, those who wished to avoid interference were not left without options. The Florida Association of Christian Child Caring Agencies (FACCCA) was created to do the same thing TACCCA did in Texas. When Faye Cameron was banned forever from working with children in Texas and TACCCA was discontinued, FACCCA and the State of Florida welcomed the Camerons. FACCCA also welcomed the Palmers after the State of California shut down their facility in California; the school I was in.

There have been numerous complaints of abuse against FACCCA facility employees. Rebecca Ramirez's assault allegation against VCA's Palmer (Secrets in the Schoolhouse by reporter Mollye Barrows) is no isolated allegation. In 2003, a former student of FACCCA's Camp Tracey filed a lawsuit against the facility alleging that he was forced to perform sex acts with two camp counselors (Paul Pinkam, Man Sues Chu Alleges Abuse - Harvest Baptist's Camp Tracey Cited, THE FLORIDA TIMES-UNION, May 10, 2003 at <http://www.nospank.net/n-k92r.htm>). A grand jury investigated Camp Tracey in 1987 after years of past abuse allegations by children and parents. Allegations leading to the investigation included excessive corporal punishment and the use of ropes and handcuffs to restrain children. The grand jury criticized the absence of procedures allowing residents of Camp Tracey to contact authorities in the event of abuse (www.isaccorp.org/faccca/camptracey1.pdf).

In 2004, John Burt was convicted of molesting a fifteen-year-old girl at another FACCCA-accredited father's house (Activist Gets 18 Years for Molesting Teen, AP, May 12, 2004, www.isaccorp.org/faccca/ourfathershouseconviction.pdf).

Shockingly, FACCCA allowed Burt to open the home, even though he had served jail time in the eighties for anti-abortion activities. In May 1993, Burt was present at the fatal shooting of a Pensacola Medical Servant (Associated Press, Troopers Nab Anti-Abortion Figure Sought in Sex Case, ST. PETERSBURG TIMES, May 10, 2003, www.isaccorp.org/faccca/johnburtarrested.pdf). He led a demonstration on one side of the clinic, while a follower, Michael Griffin, shot Dr. David Gunn on the other side of the clinic. When Burt was arrested on molestation charges, FACCCA President Ed MacClellan said the charges were "out of character with his persona." (Associated Press, Preaching Life While Preying on Their Fears, ST. PETERSBURG TIMES, May 10, 2003, www.isaccorp.org/faccca/ourfathershouse1.pdf).

In 2003, authorities shut down Teen Transformation Ministries, another FACCCA-accredited school, after a former resident made an abuse complaint against the facility (Associated Press, Boys' Home Closes after Reports, ST. PETERSBURG TIMES, June 11, 2003, www.isaccorp.org/faccca/teentransformation.pdf). A thirteen-year-old boy was denied medical attention for a broken shoulder. He also alleged that he was threatened.

septic tank and made to stay there for ten minutes. He further alleged that he was forced to pull down his pants and sit on a fire-ant mound.

Each of these complaints show what program participants may be subjected to in the absence of state regulation. There have been other allegations made against FACCCA's facilities, but because FACCCA seems not to regulate the facilities to allow participants access to victims' services, it is impossible to provide statistical data on the actual occurrence of abuse. The allegations that have been made, however, indicate the absence of any regulation by FACCCA. Deregulation systems such as those in Texas and Florida are unconstitutional. Deregulation violates the program participants' Fourteenth Amendment Equal Protection rights by placing a less protected class than children in state-regulated programs. Deregulation also violates the First Amendment Establishment Clause by allowing special treatment for religious groups.

In a state regulated program, it would be rare to find staff members who are child molesters or abusers. In order to work in a state run facility, you must pass a criminal background check to work with minors. A person with a questionable background would be immediately disqualified. But at these unregulated FACCCA run facilities, a staff member's background goes unchecked and they rarely have anything but a high school diploma. Many unsuitable candidates to work with kids who have mental health issues. All they have to say is that they are "Christian" and they are deemed suitable to work in the facility with your kids. This is horrifying at best.

This paper written and researched by Candice Aiston, and edited by Michele Ulriksen.
Contact Michele Ulriksen at: www.westhillscommunications.com

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