

# **FEMA plans reimbursement to churches for relief aid**

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WASHINGTON (ABP)—In a largely unprecedented move, the Federal Emergency Management Agency says it will offer monetary reimbursement to churches and other houses of worship aiding Hurricane Katrina evacuees.

Some watchdog groups greeted FEMA's Sept. 26 announcement with skepticism. But an attorney for a Baptist organization said the special Katrina circumstances make the situation more than a simple question about the proper separation of church and state.

"Any time the government enters a formal arrangement with houses of worship, a red flag should go up for advocates of religious liberty," said Holly Hollman, general counsel at the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty. "The general rule is that churches should have no financial entanglement with government."

The courts have generally frowned upon direct government grants to churches or other deeply religious organizations except to perform secular social services.

However, those grants are usually provided with strict regulatory oversight from government agencies. Federal courts have said government agencies

subsidizing prayer, worship, evangelism or other explicitly religious activities violates the First Amendment.

The Washington Post first reported FEMA's decision Sept. 27. The paper said FEMA officials made the decision at the behest of Congressional Republicans and officials with the American Red Cross.

According to the newspaper report, FEMA officials said the program would be the first "large-scale" effort to reimburse churches involved in recovery from a natural disaster.

The funds would only be available to houses of worship that established shelters, food-distribution centers or medical clinics at the request of state or local officials, FEMA said. And only churches in the three states most affected by Katrina—Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama—would be eligible.

But for churches in those circumstances, "a wide range of costs would be available for reimbursement, including labor costs incurred in excess of normal operations, rent for the facility and delivery of essential needs like food and water," FEMA spokesman Eugene Kinerney said.

The churches would have to document their costs in the reimbursement requests, just like secular non-profit agencies seeking reimbursement.

Churches routinely house evacuees or the homeless in the initial days following a natural disaster, but then turn them over to long-term Red Cross facilities soon afterwards. But FEMA and the Red Cross have been stretched to the limit by two years of repeated significant hurricane strikes on American shores. Therefore, many church shelters are housing people for much longer periods of time than congregational leaders may have anticipated.

In addition to that, some churches providing services in the Katrina-

devastated zone are facing financial hardship of their own—with large proportions of their own congregations evacuated, homeless and unemployed.

Hollman acknowledged the circumstances are unprecedented. But, she added, the FEMA decision is problematic unless the reimbursement process is adequately monitored to assure no churches are reimbursed for religious activities.

“Because there is a unique relationship between church and state under our constitutional system, certain safeguards must be in place,” she said.

In a Sept. 27 statement criticizing the FEMA decision, Americans United for Separation of Church and State pointed to several examples of Christian groups doing Katrina relief and proselytizing. One was a report in the Southern Baptist Convention’s news service about SBC disaster-relief workers distributing evangelistic tracts and Bibles in the hurricane zone.

“If these groups can’t separate their evangelism from their relief work, they should not be eligible for public funding,” Americans United Executive Director Barry Lynn said.

But the head of the agency that coordinates SBC disaster-relief efforts told the Post that he would decline government aid.

“Volunteer labor is just that—volunteer,” North American Mission Board President Bob Reccord said. “We would never ask the government to pay for it.”

News of religion, faith, missions, Bible study and Christian ministry among Texas Baptist churches, in the BGCT, the Southern Baptist Convention ( SBC ) and around the world.