



**United Way Mass Bay and the Faith & Action Initiative (A):
Should Faith Be Funded?
Sequel**

The Community Investments Committee (CIC) met on March 27, 1997, to decide whether to approve a faith-based initiative for the United Way of Massachusetts Bay (UWMB). The CIC did not endorse the proposal without considerable debate. But in the end, the members authorized a pilot faith-based grant-making program. The full UWMB board gave its approval on April 9, 1997, and funding of \$305,000 was included in the AY1998 budget passed in June 1997.

CIC Meeting

Senior Vice President Pat Brandes asked UWMB staff member Pam Kading Webb, a capable and straightforward public speaker, to present the faith-based initiative to the CIC on March 27. That left Brandes free to act as a facilitator, entering the discussion as initiator, follower or opposition as needed. Webb described the planned structure of the initiative, the fact that information-gathering interviews were underway, and the benefits that the pilot could bring to UWMB.

“We did get a certain amount of resistance” at the CIC meeting, remembers UWMB consultant Kristen McCormack, “I would say from people more steeped in traditional youth programming and the way that it’s executed and the way that it’s funded. There was a lot of fear. People who had not been exposed to faith-based youth programming didn’t have a thorough understanding of how those programs worked.” Committee members were particularly concerned that UWMB not fund programs that were trying to convert children to a particular faith.

Nor were the committee members the only skeptical ones. “There was in fact some resistance on the staff,” says McCormack. “The staff had as many questions as the committee did.”

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CIC chair Kathryn Plazak, who had been skeptical going in, did “not feel that I was a lone voice. I think that on balance people were favorably disposed towards it, but it did need to be thoroughly vetted and chewed on for a while.” Among issues raised at the meeting was how a religious institution, which by definition is of a particular denomination, can serve a multicultural, multi-religious community. The committee also discussed how the UWMB mission might conflict with that of its grantees.

Despite these misgivings, CIC endorsed Brandes’ suggestion that UWMB pilot a program giving three-year grants to faith-based organizations. The grant programs would serve primarily low income urban youth in “UWMB priority neighborhoods.” The committee formally approved a recommendation that for the next fiscal year, the Neighborhood Fund include \$350,000 for a staff coordinator and grants funding for a faith-based social action project.¹

On April 9, 1997, it was board member Ann Romney’s turn. Romney, one of the proposed co-chairs of what became known as the Faith and Action (FAA) initiative, presented the concept to the full board. The proposal, coming as it did with the imprimatur of the CIC as well as the support of UWMB President and CEO Marian Heard, met with little debate. Romney argued that the new “faith-based project” would take grants such as those for Mattapan/ Dorchester Churches in Action to a new level.

On June 4, 1997, the board, in its annual budget meeting, approved a starting budget for FAA somewhat less than the \$350,000 CIC recommended in March. The Board allocated \$200,000 for AY1998, with the understanding that an additional \$105,000 would be available from unspent AY1997 funds intended for the African-American communities of Mattapan, Dorchester and Roxbury. The FAA allocation became a line item in the UWMB budget separate from the Neighborhood Fund.² On June 19, the CIC reviewed the board’s approval of \$200,000 in funding for the faith-based social action project.

Now that FAA had secured board approval, the real work for its steering committee was only beginning. Comments co-chair Gloria White-Hammond: “We all knew that it was dicey and it was risky, but we bought into it.”

¹ Total funding preliminarily approved for the AY98 Neighborhood Fund was \$665,000. Source: March 27, 1997, Community Investment Committee Minutes.

² For 1998, the board gave the Neighborhood Fund \$490,000, and the Faith-Based Social Action Project \$200,000. In reality, the FAA funds drew from the Neighborhood Fund, which by way of comparison had been allocated \$645,000 in AY1997. Source: Investing in Our Communities, UWMB Funding Reports, June 1996 and June 1997.