WHAT HAPPENED TO COMPASSIONATE CONSERVATISM — AND CAN IT RETURN?

WELCOME:
RYAN STREETER, AEI

OPENING REMARKS:
MARVIN OLASKY, WORLD MAGAZINE

PANEL DISCUSSION

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MARVIN OLASKY, WORLD MAGAZINE

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RYAN STREETER: Good afternoon everyone. Welcome to AEI. My name is Ryan Streeter. I’m the director of domestic policy studies here at the American Enterprise Institute, and it’s my privilege to welcome you to today’s event, “What happened to compassionate conservatism — and can it return?”

We are honored to be joined by Dr. Marvin Olasky today, who is going to come up and give some remarks, and then after his remarks we’ll have a panel discussion. And then open it up for question and answers, and we’ll adjourn at 1:30 p.m.

Dr. Marvin Olasky is the editor in chief of World Magazine, and he’s also the distinguished chair in journalism and public policy at Patrick Henry College. For nearly 25 years, from the early 1980s until 2007, he was a professor of journalism at the University of Texas at Austin, which delights me, since I was at UT Austin before coming to AEI. Hook ’em horns. I don’t know if you still — still good to do. He was also visiting professor at Princeton from 2004 to 2005 and then the provost at the Kings College in New York City from 2007 to 2011.

Dr. Olasky has authored many books and many articles, which you can find just by googling, and so look it up. His articles range across a whole bunch of topics, from history to public policy to the relationship between faith and culture. He’s been very prolific.

I’d like to draw your attention to two today that are pertinent to today’s discussion: “The Tragedy of American Compassion,” which I suspect a number of you have read, and “Compassionate Conservatism.” These books played a significant role in the welfare reform debate of the 1990s and the overall debate about the role of nongovernmental actors in combating poverty. Because of these books and Dr. Olasky’s related efforts, President George W. Bush called Marvin, quote, “compassionate conservatism’s leading thinker.”

So we’re honored today to have compassionate conservatism’s leading thinker with us, Dr. Marvin Olasky. (Applause.)

MARVIN OLASKY: Well, thank you, Ryan, for those kind words. Thank you all for coming. In the next 20 minutes I want to offer five understandings that defined compassionate conservatism in the 1990s, and then I’ll give you five promising events and trends from the late 1990s and then five problems that killed compassionate conservatism in the early 2000s. I’ll conclude by noting what will it take, maybe, to revive it, but I want to start with a tribute to one mostly forgotten Washingtonian.

When thinking of an abstract subject, it’s often good to keep a particular person in mind, so I want to tell you about the greatest poverty-fighting person I ever knew, Hannah Hawkins.

For 30 years, starting in 1985, she ran Children of Mine, a program in Anacostia about five miles southeast of here. That’s the part that the tourist guides forget. I’ve visited there over a couple of decades, and this short African American woman taught me to look beneath the surface of glowing programs. On one visit, she had just come back from a
government-sponsored meeting about Southeast Washington revitalization, and she fumed, “The beautiful people were there looking for money. Just like the War on Poverty, money went into the pockets of the greedy. Those folks were ready to clean up, unless stuff gets funky — then they call me in to be the cleanup person.”

The old building that housed Children of Mine was crowded. The roof sometimes leaked. A realistic soundtrack for her program would have some police sirens in the background, a lot of chattering kids, occasionally gunshots. But Hannah scowled — she scowled about the opportunities to send kids to nice facilities. She’d get invitations for them to show up on days when officials were visiting nonprofits. And those charity managers wanted to create an illusion of vibrant activity.

So why did children flock to her when she commanded them: “Wash those dirty hands”? I watched her tell a kid, just becoming a teenager, “Your armpits stink. Wash them before you come tomorrow.” And the boy meekly said, “Yes, ma’am.” Why?

He and others obeyed because most of the adults they knew were selfish, but Ms. Hawkins wanted what was best for them. She said, “I ain’t easy to deal with, but my children know I love and care about them,” and she said, “I’m trying to bring them from disgrace to grace.” She gave them maxims, such as, “Stay on the street called straight” or “People who pick fights end up dead or in jail.” And she would not accept any government money because, she said, “then I won’t be able to have prayer.” And she said once she agreed to accept federally supplied meals, but the milk was warm, the tacos were cold, and the watermelon was sour.

So Hannah, a handful volunteers, some donors, made it possible for her to read Bible studies, tutor kids, give them grammar lessons, along with meals. She would say, “I need one person to tell me what a verb is.” Money was tight. She hated waste. She told of official anger when she didn’t give milk to children who didn’t want milk. She says, “They said I didn’t give children complete meals. I said I wanted to teach the children not to waste.” And she scorned the response she got from the officials: “Give it to them, any way. Give them a complete meal. Let them throw it in the thrash.” I could go on, but you get the picture.

Three years ago, Hannah Hawkins died of cancer. And the point of everything I think I’ve written about poverty fighting is to help the hundreds of almost-Hannahs that I’ve met around the country. I agree with Hannah about the billions of dollars we waste by providing stuff that’s thrown into the trash. But, more importantly, dozens of federal programs encourage people to throw their own lives into the trash.

So here are the five understandings that were crucial to the growth of compassionate conservative approaches in the early and mid-1990s. Number one, people are poor for a variety of reasons. Some are structural: bad schools, deindustrializing economy, racism. Some are personal: drug or alcohol use, mental illness, a “blame others” worldview, unwillingness to work. Anyone who tells you it’s all one or all the other is blowing smoke.
Two: Government can be efficient in sending out checks. Social Security is a pretty good example. Government does a poor job in dealing with personal problems. That’s partly because of bureaucracy. It’s also because those personal problems involve values, and values come from religion. We rightly worry about government proposing or opposing particular religious views.

Three: It’s good to honor points of light. But here’s what I’ve learned from American history: Charity groups based on religious understandings have been, can be, more than points. In the past, they have illuminated every city with charity that was challenging, personal, and spiritual. There are a bunch of conventional histories of poverty fighting which tend to disparage those efforts, but what I’ve learned from a year in the Library of Congress, just going through all the old records: They were more effective than recent governmental programs in helping people climb out of poverty.

Four: The Depression did overwhelm some of those charities. And the federal government then set up parallel secular programs. Over time, those became big bureaucracies that grew and sustained themselves by enabling people to remain poor. With a steady income from taxpayers, they crowded out organizations relying on contributions. Many people saw no need to volunteer. Professional social workers were taking care of problems, but with growing caseloads, those social workers will say, and they understand, they mainly shuffle paper.

And, then five: More reliable funding for charity groups should not depend, in my view, on getting more grants from Washington. For two reasons. First, officials are not the best judges of what works and what doesn’t work. We need to empower people with intimate knowledge of the programs. And then, second, insofar as many of the most effective groups are religious, governmental involvement is inherently a problem.

So these are the five understandings that I developed from this historical research. And then suddenly after Republicans in the ’94 election and in 1995, they suddenly had majority in the House of Representatives for the first time in 40 years. So it’s possible, at that point, to turn the historical and sociological understandings I was developing into public policy. So, I’ve thought, here are five things that happened.

First, Republicans, transformed one big program by turning AFDC, Aid to Families with Dependent Children, into TANF, Temporary Aid to Needy Families, and temporary meant establishing time limits. Needy meant creating work requirements for those who could work and concentrating aid on those who could not. Congress passed a reform measure actually three times, and finally Bill Clinton reluctantly signed it into law.

Second, Bill Clinton also signed into law what became known as “Charitable Choice.” And that said, religious organizations are eligible for federal grants as long as those grants do not subsidize religious activities in any way. I wasn’t really thrilled with that legislation because I naively thought that religious organizations were supposed to be religious.
Third, here was a better proposal, I thought, from J. C. Watts and Jim Town, both representatives. They introduced an American Community Renewal Act, called ACRA, that would have, among other things, given individual taxpayers a tax credit of $0.75 for every dollar they contribute to local poverty-fighting organizations, up to a modest $200 starting out, and maybe if it worked, it would have increased.

I liked the ACRA because those who claimed, the tax credit would have to volunteer personally with the charity, and in doing so they would have to develop a greater sense of ownership in solving local problems. Dan Coats, when he was a senator, introduced a similar bill, proposed a tax credit for contributions up to a $1,000 for tax payers filing jointly. Those measures did not succeed, for a whole lot of reasons. One arguing against them at that time was that itemizers would merely switch their donations to the more powerful tax credit column.

Fourth: There were some really good things happening at the local level. Mayor Steve Goldsmith, Indianapolis, provided, I thought, the best examples. He visited there, spent some time, he set up a Front Porch Alliance that helped community groups overcome governmental barriers.

I’ll give you an example. The church wanted to turn a patch of ground adjacent to it into a playground. Prostitutes used it. Drug dealers used it. The church needed help with the legal complexities to try to turn that into a playground that kids from all over would use, and the city provided that help. There are several dozen organizations that had to sign off on that particular patch of ground. The city people helped them go through it all, got it done, and, lo and behold, that place of drug dealing and prostitution became a playground for kids.

And then five: Good things happen in some states. And I’ll tell you a story about how George W. Bush became involved in this. In 1995 there was an Austin bureaucracy called the Texas Commission on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse (TCADA). It tried to shut down Teen Challenge of South Texas. The problem according to TCADA was the Teen Challenge counselors had not sat in classrooms for 78 hours of formal counselor training. They didn’t deny they were doing an effective job; they hadn’t gone through the hoops. It didn’t matter that Teen Challenge on a shoestring was more effective in helping people get off drugs and alcohol than government programs that, per person, cost more than a year at Harvard or Yale.

Bob Woodson, the former AEI fellow who turns 81 next week — I mean, talk about another great poverty fighter. Bob set up a rally for Teen Challenge at the Alamo, with great Texan significance. And the people there held up two kinds of signs, I remember. One was saying, “This program saved the taxpayers of Texas $30,000 a year per person,” at that time. And the other one said, “Thank you, Lord Jesus, for bringing me out of alcoholism,” or drugs. So public policy signs, religious signs.

I wrote about TCADA versus Teen Challenge in the magazine I edit, World. I asked readers — this is about the only time I think I’ve done that. I asked readers, send your cards and letters to the governor’s mansion in Austin, and gave them the address. And they did. And I wrote a column in The Wall Street Journal, and more of them did.
Messages piled up. And there was a call from the governor’s office: Could I come over and explain what was going on?

So I went and had lunch with W, and maybe because of his own battle with alcohol, he got it right away. He supported Teen Challenge. He then supported bills that the Texas legislature passed to keep the bureaucrats off the back of other groups.

That, for me, was compassionate conservatism. Conservative — liberate what Edward Burke called the “little platoons,” what Alexis de Tocqueville called “America’s volunteer spirit.”

In 1999, I had some minor involvement with the speech W gave in Indianapolis. The Washington Post called it, quote, “The most elaborate definition to date of this compassionate conservative credo,” end quote. And I mentioned that because The Post accurately summarized the main point of the speech, quote, “Bush said he would dedicate $8 billion for tax incentives to encourage people to contribute to charities and community groups,” end quote. OK, this was great. It’s exactly what I’ve been pushing for: decentralized compassionate conservatism.

Steve Goldsmith, Indianapolis mayor, was Bush’s top domestic policy adviser during the presidential campaign. And Steve was a bottom-up, little-platoons guy, so I felt confident that W would be able to stick with what he had proclaimed. Well, then in 2001, here are five surprises that intervene.

I tell you what I believe happened, but I haven’t gone back to interview the principal players, and I would like to do that when I get some time. In the meantime, I’m glad to be corrected by any of you who know more about what happened because some of this is still a mystery to me. But here is what happened first.

Early in 2001, Steve Goldsmith lost favor with some key Bush staffers, and maybe Bush himself, I don’t know. I’ve heard gossip. I don’t know why. Suddenly, John Dilulio, a smart professor who had been adviser to Al Gore, gained the nod as head of the new Office on Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. That made sense politically. W was president-elect, without a mandate, you know. it took five weeks for him to actually to get the call finally from the Supreme Court, so reaching out to Democrats like John was important. And some people who looked at the Faith-Based Initiative as a Bush attempt to get federal dollars to evangelical churches saw the appointment of John, a Catholic, undercut that speculation. Plus, John is smart. John is funny. He is a good guy. But the appointment had a big downside. John was not at all a decentralizer.

He thought federal grant-making in the poverty area had been poorly handled. He was absolutely right there. He wanted to do a much better job evaluating programs. He did not favor charity tax credits to other decentralizing approaches.

And the second surprise, which followed naturally from the first, the Bush administration, contrary to what W had said in 1999, deemphasized tax credits. It stuck with a centralized grant approach. That did not promote the little platoons. It quickly became a
political mistake as well. Once John emphasized grant-making, the controversial question of eligibility came to the fore. Should federal money go to groups that have Bible study and prayers as integral parts of their programs? On the other hand, if they stopped doing that, then they felt, and I think rightly, like a ship that was trying to go without an engine. So that didn’t work.

So John first said, “No, they can’t do this. They can’t have — (inaudible) — this stuff,” and evangelicals rebelled. I heard that Karl Rove forced John to reverse his position. But then when evangelical groups were eligible, all — lots of others, atheist, agnostic, liberal protestants, some Catholics rebelled. See, the political charm of tax credits, which I think is why Karl Rove initially thought this was a cool idea, is that individuals make the decision. When grant-making is centralized, Dad makes the decision. I have four sons, and I’ve learned from hard experience that one of the children is highly likely to say it’s not fair. And that’s what happened here.

So, third: Once the Bush administration stuck with centralization, the key question for the press was, how much money are you spending? When the total amount of grant money did not explode, reporters declared compassionate conservatism to be a political hoax. And when some organization did announce a new grant, the issue was who’s in and who’s out.

So part of the tragedy here is that tax credits could have been a bipartisan push. Mark Sauder, who was one of my favorite conservative Republicans back then, told me that two liberal Democrats, Bobby Scott and Chet Edwards, were willing to cosponsor a bill to that effect. It never happened. Instead, from what I’m told, Bush administration folks asked Mark Sauder to stand down. This is what he told me. And he did. And the reason, I’m told, is that in 2001 a balanced budget seemed like a big thing. You know, we are much more sophisticated now. Bush folks chose between two items, I’m told, that would cut government revenue. One, establish tax reform — establish estate tax reform, or two, have charity tax credits. Well, if a Republican administration has to choose between those two items, guess which is likely to interest big political donors? So estate tax reform was in; charity tax credits were out.

Fourth: Once the Faith-Based Office emphasized grant-making, bureaucratic organizations that knew how to push paper had a big advantage. And since the idea of helping the little guy still remained, guess what emerged as the big way to help them? Teach local leaders how to apply for grants. And that flipped compassionate conservatism on its head. Instead of fighting bureaucracy, it was building bureaucracy.

And, fifth: When John Dilulio resigned at the end of August 2001, the possibility of righting the program remained, but a week and a half later came 9/11. And, by the way, here’s an article I actually wrote in August of 2001: “The Washington Game,” a move-by-move account of how a weakened faith-based initiative bill passed the House, which it did, but then it died in the Senate, and with 9/11 it was all over. I have copies of this for everyone right there on the front row, and if you’re interested in the blow-by-blow at that time and how this actually worked politically as best I could do at that point from interviewing lots of people, take one of those along. Read it and weep.
George W. Bush moved from being a domestic-oriented president emphasizing compassion to a war president emphasizing fighting back. That’s what he had to do. War and compassion don’t go together well. War is hell. War is also expensive. Democratic lawmakers, then as now, wanted more money for social spending. To get money for war, Bush increased money for welfare, and many Republicans came to equate compassionate conservatism with more government spending. Compassionate conservatism equals big government. Compassionate conservatism is a left-wing thing. Phooey on compassionate conservatism.

Well, I also want to say that it wasn’t all over with 9/11. Mostly was. John’s successors tried some decentralization within the grants approach. They had far better judgment than their predecessors. They tried some voucher programs. I need to learn more about this period, but the basic problem was that Washington still controlled the money. The basic structure remained but with increased spending.

So, finally, can compassionate conservatism make a comeback? I don’t think it will ever, under that name. That brand, I guess, to use that word, has been spoiled. But the essence of it may. And on one public policy question, we have a splendid opportunity right now. Remember, one critique of a poverty-fighting tax credit in the 1990s was that the federal government was already promoting charitable giving with tax deduction incentives. And those led about 30 percent of Americans to itemize taxes.

Now the tax experts say that with the recent tax reform, by doubling the standard deduction, well, that will reduce the percentage of those who use the itemized deduction from about 30 percent to about 5 percent. And that diminishes fear that a tax credit would merely lead people to shift money from one giving category to another. So if we actually want to try do something decentralizing now, the opportunity, I think, is there if Republicans particularly are willing to push it, and not just try to play grants our way, but try to decentralize and trust the little platoons.

And the larger question, bigger than the public policy question, I have to say, is whether the millions of Americans have the will to follow the example of the great Hannah Hawkins.

In World every year we hand out Hope Awards for effective compassion, and so my reporters and I have seen thousands of volunteers sacrificing for others. But we need millions. Compassion like that doesn’t come naturally. The Hannas of the world love others because God first loved them. The current trend toward declining religious involvement, I suspect, also means declining compassion. But one thing I think is clear fiscally and socially: If we continue on our present welfare-expanding path, we are heading for a crack up. We need a new reformation. God only knows whether we’ll have one.

Thanks very much. (Applause.)

Well, I’m interested in reactions. (Laughter.) In what order? I guess, Ryan, start with you. I mean, you know lot more about what happened in the early 2000s than I do.
DR. STREETER: OK. So, thanks for your remarks, and I’ll just make a couple of points and then turn it over to my distinguished co-panelists, who know a lot more about the substance of the underlying issues than I do. I would just piggyback off of what you said about the environment in the Bush White House early on. I was there as a staffer — a domestic policy staffer — and worked for a time in the office that was set up to implement the initiative. And I think that historical context is important, and not just for the Bush administration, but even the run-up to it — the 1990s.

If part of the goal is to figure out how we can recover some of the conditions that led to what became compassionate conservatism, I think it’s important to understand that environment, so I’ll come to that in just a second.

My experience — and this is a little impressionistic — is that in the early days of the Bush administration’s effort to implement this, you had a couple of camps involved in this initiative, which had a White House office, a relationship with the Domestic Policy Council, and then had offices first in five, then seven, federal agencies, whose job it was to implement the president’s goals. And I came to — and this is just my terminology from the time that I used to use. I talked about the reformers and the missionaries that were part of the initiative.

There were some of us — I considered myself part of the reformers set. I’d worked for Steve Goldsmith in Indianapolis and thought of goals of the faith-based and community initiative as reforming public policy around the assets of local, community-based, values-based organizations; that is, using what is sort of latently strong about their approach to fighting poverty, and then figuring out what that means for public policy. And I’ll give you some examples in just a second.

Then, I would say, that the initiative as it was staffed up also had what I’d refer to as missionaries — people that just really wanted to pursue the inclusivity goals of the initiative, as getting more faith-based, community-based groups involved in applying for federal grants, involved in federal programs. I would say what sort of united those two groups was probably the Charitable Choice sort of aftermath, which was to try to rewrite federal rules to comply with First Amendment jurisprudence about church and state relations that had swung too far to the direction of excluding religious organizations from the provision of services.

So I’d say both camps were united in rewriting the rules, which was done through the public rulemaking process to make it easier for smaller, values-based, religious-based organizations to participate. But the what I called the missionary crowd were those who really wanted to focus the initiative on getting as many religious organizations involved in federal programs as possible, which flows from some of John Dilulio’s efforts and others, and really came to sort of define the initiative overall.

But there was this period of time, from the beginning of the administration up through 2003, 2004, when some of those early policy reforms were still pursued in a kind of individualistic way. I can do this more by way of anecdote. I remember sitting in my office
in 2002 — in the fall of 2002 with the late David Crow, and we got a call from the president’s chief of staff.

In the fall at the White House is when you’re preparing the budget and the State of the Union and all the things you’re going to propose in the following year. And I should say, this is the fall of 2002 as well. So this is a year after 9/11, to give you some context, that that had happened. That was still fresh in everyone’s mind. It really changed the nature of the presidency. There weren’t a lot of people thinking, very close to the president, about the commitments made around the faith-based and community initiative. It had really kind of fallen to the background, and those of us who were working on it understood why.

It was also the fall of 2002, which meant that the DC shooter was rampant, for those who were here back then. We’d had anthrax. We had the DC shooter — my wife was putting our two small children in the back of our car and driving down and picking me up every day so I wouldn’t walk the five blocks home from the Metro, because of the DC shooter that we never knew when it was going to strike next. So that was the environment. So it seemed like everybody had really forgotten about the needs of this initiative.

But the chief of staff calls and said the president’s been reviewing his briefing papers on what’s going to go in the budget and what’s going to go into the State of the Union, and he said it feels a little light on the compassion agenda. And so we pulled off the shelf this book, which all of us staffers had, and when I showed my students, when I used to teach at the university, that campaigns actually used to produce things like this with actual policy substance, they’re shocked that campaigns actually did this.

There is a lot of the compassionate agenda through here, but starting from page 119, right after his “Duty of Hope” speech, which really laid out his agenda in July of 1999, when you were very involved in shaping then-Governor Bush’s thinking, he gave a speech about what his vision for using the armies of compassion to actually fight poverty and cure social ills would look like. And then after every speech there would be a fact sheet with a number of policy proposals. It goes on for 12 pages, including the charitable tax credit he talks about, but other types of things, one of which was to provide more drug treatment options for people that were seeking treatment and couldn’t find it.

So that night we sat down and drafted what became, essentially, the beginnings of the Access to Recovery Program administered by SAMSA, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, which would open up treatment options to faith-based providers and the like, which was, again, proposed in here —

DR. OLASKY: And vouchers —

DR. STREETER: And “voucherized” so that it could utilize these resources at a wider range of service providers than were presently allowed during that time. The next year, the Department of Labor put into place Ready for Work, which was a prisoner reentry program, which was initially 11. I think it grew to 20 pilot sites to really focus on the role of community-based organizations and in fighting recidivism.
So you had these things going on, at the same time I would say, the general trend of the initiative was toward inclusivity of faith-based groups in federal programs, rather than changing federal programs to fit the behavior and needs of local armies of compassion actors. So I think the diagnosis that you have is generally right.

It was a movement that had some reform elements that sort of got overtaken, particularly after the 2004 reelection by this broader effort to include groups in federal programs, and really led to an environment in which the idea that local actors could actually change the way federal programs behaved had sort of been lost for a variety of reasons, some of which we articulated, some of which many of us may not understand.

So I think it’s worth backing up from there and realizing that the conditions leading up to this initiative of the Bush administration was really birthed in the 1990s, and it’s a — I have to refer to the 1990s as the decade of the mayor. It was a really interesting time in American public policy, particularly urban policy. You had Rudolph. You had Rudy Giuliani in New York, Goldsmith in Indianapolis, John Norquist in Milwaukee, Rendell in Philadelphia, Golding in San Diego. And this was the age of welfare reform, community policing, the beginnings of school choice and school reform, Hope VI, which took an approach to public housing to dismantle it and voucherize, create mixed income housing.

It was a — all of these efforts really were focused on the idea that communities take ownership for solving problems in distinct ways: problems related to poverty, crime, education, and so on. And these efforts that were happening in the urban policy domain were set against the backdrop of a lot of activity focused on what we called the armies of compassion in the Bush years, which were really the institutions, the core mediating structures of civil society.

There was a book by AEI Press by Berger and Neuhaus, first published in 1976 and then republished by AEI later, called “To Empower People,” which some of you may have read. It’s a great read. It was very influential on me and a lot of us working in domestic policy back in the 1990s. If you go to the Amazon page for “To Empower People,” the first sentence says that “Berger and Neuhaus, when they wrote this, anticipated” — this was a quote from Amazon — “anticipated the major worldwide project of the 1990s: the renewal of civil society. They showed that such ‘mediating structures’ as family, neighborhood church, and volunteering civil associations are crucial institutions, whose weakening spells disaster.” So this book was influential.

The 1990s also became the decade when Bob Putnam’s very famous work on social capital was underway. These things together created a sense among policymakers that if we’re going to successfully combat poverty, if we’re going to improve our schools, if we’re going to help kids grow up in healthy homes, you can’t do this unless you take the lead from community leaders and this overlapping kind of Venn diagram of nonprofit leaders, business leaders, and government actors. And this really is best achieved at the local level.

I also point out that the welfare reform that Marvin referred to in 1996 was prefaced by 10 years and more of governors experimenting with welfare reform, seeking waivers from
federal policy. And if you’re going to successfully reform welfare and particularly require people to work or expect them to be engaged in looking for work, you can’t do that unless those people are connected with people who can help them along the way — with business leaders, with nonprofit leaders and the like. So by the time that welfare reform rolled around in 1996, you had a lot of effort already going on at the state level that presupposed the importance of community institutions.

So I would just — we can talk more about what to do going forward after I’ve turned over the floor. I’ve already taken too much time, but I would just point out something that I think is illustrative. If you go back to 1994 and you look at the Contract with America that led the Republican Revolution in 1994 — I’m making this not as a partisan statement, but to show a change over time — if you go back and pull that Contract with America document and you just read it, there are 10 bills that eventually came from it. And presupposed in a good number of those bills are the importance of neighborhoods, strong families, schools, work, and community-based support for people who are going to work from welfare.

If you fast forward to the 2010 Tea Party election and you look at the campaign rhetoric and the campaign pages of the people that, again, another huge wave of Republican policymakers. That language is almost completely devoid from their campaign platforms, from the websites that they put up and all of that. It was really kind of an anti-spending. It was a reactionary movement about what was going on in the Obama administration at the time. But the vision for how to reform government had almost nothing to do with localities, and I think that’s illustrative of the shift that you’re talking about. And we can try to diagnose exactly what the reasons are, some of which we might get right, some of which we may not know.

So I think understanding that history — kind of the run-up from the 1990s through the 2000s — is really important if part of the goal is to recover some of those conditions that could lead to a more robust, localized, and compassion-driven agenda. So with that, I’ll turn it over to my colleagues.

DR. OLASKY: That’s very helpful, thank you.

Christopher Fay, I just want to mention that we met maybe originally two decades ago when Christopher was running a massive feeding — what had been a massive feeding program at Broadway Presbyterian Church, which is about, what, 100th Street and Broadway in New York City? And Christopher was instrumental in transforming that to a program that was smaller but much more effective. Because, as I understood, the massive feeding program — you know, great numbers. You can print in bulletins all these people we’re feeding; we’ve seen the same people year after year after year after year. So how successful is it? Then Chris changed it to a smaller group that actually helped people out of poverty.

Maybe you can talk about that a little bit and what you’re currently doing and then discuss what we’ve just been talking about here.
CHRISTOPHER FAY: Alright, I will do that. So I am someone who comes to this issue not as a policy analyst or even as someone who is really that conversant in policy. I come in as someone who tried to help homeless people get out of poverty and crisis, and I experimented first within inner-city churches. Marvin pointed out one called Broadway Presbyterian Church in New York, where a soup kitchen began and was serving about 300 to 400 people a day, and yet it was really helpers and helpees. It was — the people who were being served didn’t know the names of those who were serving them, and the people who were serving them didn’t know the names of those who were being served. And it was a very — it was an exercise in feeling good about what we were doing and not an exercise in really making a difference in the lives of those who were being served.

It’s also an environment where the police were called all the time. There was a lot of discord, a lot of antagonism. And I once actually had a moment of — one of those lightbulb moments when no volunteer showed up. And I went out on the street, and there were 300 people waiting to be served. And I said, “Can I have everyone’s attention? We need some volunteers. Are any of you be willing to come in and actually serve the others? So which of you homeless individuals would be willing to be a servant to the others?” And the hands went up all along the row. And when they were traipsing in, I had to turn them off at some point and say, “that’s all I need,” because there were so many who wanted to do it. And many of them said to me, “I never understood why you didn’t ask us before.” Basically, why didn’t you ask us to be involved in the process of feeding ourselves? And so that became that lightbulb moment.

We turned it from a soup kitchen run by volunteers to a culinary arts program where the homeless people managed the program themselves. They managed the inventory. They cooked the food. They served the food. And then they would meet afterward and talk about how about their lives have been affected by this experience. And it suddenly became an extraordinarily successful program. And people started getting off of drugs, and we found ways to get them into jobs.

So that was one of those moments when I realized that there was a secret to fighting poverty, which was really the idea of empowerment and people. To empower someone means you have to have faith in their ability to do something for themselves and create a community in which that can occur. And so we named our program Broadway Community. It was on Broadway, and the concept was people change within the context of community and people also have to change.

This is another thing that I firmly believe. and it is the crux of what we do now. I run a program called Homestretch. It’s a program for homeless families. The difference between what I did in New York at that time was chronically homeless men and women, mostly single adults. Now I’m working with families with children, but some of the basic principles are the same, which is that they actually have to be involved in the process of changing their own lives. And what we do is create an environment where that is most likely to occur. It requires having faith in the individuals that they have the ability, the capability within themselves, the resilience, the hope that you can capitalize on that and create a structure where effort and achievement is rewarded.
And I’m proud to say we actually — last year we had our year-end results. These were all homeless families again. They come from us referred by shelters. Ninety-one percent of the families that exited the program moved into housing they can afford on the income they earn — 91 percent. And of those, 63 percent moved into market-rate housing. Now, in Fairfax County, if you know anything about that, the average apartment costs about $1,800 a month for a family of four. The average income for a family when they come into the program is only minimum wage, part-time salary. That means that these families made tremendous changes in their own lives in order to move out of poverty. So what we’re doing is actually very much in the vanguard. It’s not what’s happening in the field today.

Because of government policy, we feel very strongly that the government policy around housing and homelessness right now is misguided. It’s based on the supposition that people cannot and will not change, when we actually have the supposition that people can and want to change and will change given the right structure and opportunity. But we actually come to — when I was in New York, we took no government money in order to have the freedom to do it the way we thought was most effective.

And when I first came to Homestretch, we did accept government money. And then government policy changed and came to a point where we realized that our historically high results with client families would plummet if we continued to accept government money, and so we made the decision to go off of it. And that wasn’t because of a political or a philosophical decision about the role of government. It was based on a purely practical, pragmatic decision about what works and what is most effective to help a homeless family change the course of their life.

For instance, what’s happening right now is startlingly — we should all be upset by the process of what HUD is doing. If I were to accept any government money from Fairfax County, from the state of Virginia, from the Justice Department, or directly from HUD, I could not require the families to do anything. Can’t require someone who doesn’t know English to learn English. Can’t require a family to pay rent — contribute toward the cost of rent. Couldn’t ask an able-bodied person to look for work. I couldn’t have asked them to save money. I could not ask someone who had an addiction to comply with some kind of addiction treatment. It’s all considered putting a barrier in the path of that family to stay in the house.

Furthermore, I would be required to give them short-term rental subsidies, so I couldn’t work with them for much more than six or eight months. Now, this last year, the fact that 63 percent of the families leaving our program moved into market-rate housing means that they made progress by being required to work, by being required to go to school, by being required to learn English if they didn’t know English, being required to save money and to pay off debts and to reestablish credit. All these things that we know are fundamental to a successful life.

But right now, in this country, almost any program working with the homeless, if they want to access government funds, are required to do it that way. And in DC, the numbers
of homeless families are exploding. I don’t know how many of you are aware of this, but the District of Columbia has a terrible problem. The numbers of homeless families have increased ever since they started practicing this model. So we’re trying to get the word out that this should be alarming to every American, no matter what political persuasion you come from.

And getting back to — I know that I’m being off the topic, but for us, the most important thing is to pay attention to those people on the ground level who have found ways that really work, that empower people to move out of their circumstances and not pity them and create environments in which they are cursed to stay. I actually think right now in this country, many homeless — many very poor people are actually encouraged to become homeless because that’s where they can get certain assistance. We know of situations where, say, two sisters, both with three kids, both working four part-time jobs. One loses her job and goes into the shelter and suddenly becomes eligible for a subsidy that she wasn’t eligible for before. Why shouldn’t her sister, who is in the same circumstance, just quit her job, go into the shelter, and get that subsidy? It’s ridiculous.

We’re not actually thinking about poverty from the point of view of the poor. We have to be able to look at it in a reverse way — see what it’s like to be poor. Find — open those doors of opportunity for them. And that has to be done at the ground level by people who really understand what it’s like to work with the poor and to be poor. And so I totally embrace what Marvin said about finding those groups that are doing good work and trying to provide support to them.

And one of the most important things we can do is shed light on them, because if we could create systems that perpetuate people in poverty, what happens is the rest of us start thinking that people are consigned to poverty forever. We start to lose faith in humanity. We start to lose faith that people who were in those circumstances want to get out and the means and hope to do it if they’re just given the right structure and right support.

There’s nothing like seeing someone ascend out of poverty. The joy that that gives them, that sense of achievement. We have a woman now who is about to graduate from Homestretch. She came in, she was sent to us by the shelter because they couldn’t rapidly rehouse her because she had too many kids. She had five kids. Her debt was too high. She had very few skills. She had a high school diploma, but never did any college and so no landlord would rent to her. So she was sent to us because she was considered a high-needs client. Well in two years, by working hard at all of these things — saving money, paying off her debts — she increased her credit score by 151 points. She has quadrupled her salary. She has — she is going to graduate by actually buying a home. So this is from homelessness to homeownership in about two and a half years.

She did that because she was given the right structure and the right support to capitalize on her own strengths. And she did it using her own energy and her own talent. And for her, she will never be the same person again because she has proven to herself that she can be a remarkable and extraordinary human being. And I think of what her children see when they witness this. Her children, who experienced poverty, also watched their mother become
a hero to them. They will probably never go through that kind of thing again because they know what it’s like to have determination. They have been witness to perseverance and to grit.

So this is very exciting work for us to do this, and we feel like government needs to get out of the way, needs to open pathways of opportunity for people. We need to find the organizations that are doing good work, learn from them, celebrate them, and publish those results. And we should stop HUD in its tracks right now. I’ll stop right there.

DR. OLASKY: Thanks. I admire Chris and everything you’re striving to do.

I also admire Angela. I’ve learned from her AEI papers, her analyses, and I admire that she’s able to do that and also that she’s not only authoring good papers like that but has also coauthored four children.

ANGELA RACHIDI: Yes, exactly. Well thank you for inviting me here and thanks for — it’s a pleasure to be with everybody.

I for the most part started my career in 2002 working for the Human Resources Administration in New York City. So this was a time — this was as the mayoral administration was turning over from Rudolph Giuliani to the Bloomberg years. And as many people know, Mayor Giuliani had implemented welfare reform in New York City. And so when I think of compassionate conservatism, because of my time — I ended spending about 10–12 years at HRA — it really comes from that perspective of working directly with a welfare agency administering a very large federal program in terms of TANF, but with some local flexibility.

And why it’s really a pleasure to be here with Dr. Olasky is because much of what you’ve talked about and much you’re written about I saw firsthand with individuals in New York City who were experiencing these programs and what these programs were offering to them and also some of the negative consequences of those programs.

A couple reactions, or I guess a few things I wanted to mention, is when I first started working in 2002, it really was when welfare reform, at least in New York City, it had been implemented for a couple of years, but it was really picking up steam. The bureaucratic issues had been mostly figured out, and so participants were going through the program as they were intended to.

Compassionate conservatism to me is this expectation that government will provide assistance as long as there is some sense of personal responsibility from the recipient and they are contributing.

What I learned in New York City is that that type of a social contract is very consistent with how poor people think. They also agree that in receiving any aid, whether from the government or anyone else, they want to have a contribution in response to that. And so I think in that sense just conservative principles in general had a very positive effect on welfare policy, and I saw it firsthand in New York City.
What I think has happened since then in the 2000s is there’s been a little bit of a move away from that in welfare policy for a variety of reasons, but another thing that happened is those principles were not present in our other safety-net programs. And it wasn’t always trickling down to what Dr. Olasky talked about — to faith-based organizations, nonprofits, because this bureaucratic system that we’ve been talking about was set up. A lot of those organizations didn’t necessarily feel empowered to serve participants of these large federal programs. So if you look at the data, you know we saw — we see large reductions in poverty for example after the reforms that were made in the late 1990s, but then since the early 2000s we see somewhat of a stagnation in terms of progress on poverty.

And that — it doesn’t matter how you measure that, whether it’s consumption poverty. Our AEI colleague Bruce Meyer measures poverty based on consumption. People measure it based on all resources in the household, government benefits — everything. People measure it based on market income. No matter how you look at it, you see this trend of large reductions in poverty with either stagnation or slight increases in the 2000s.

There’s a lot of reasons for that, some of which we heard today. Recession obviously plays a role, but I would also argue that not having these principles of compassion and conservatism in the sense that you receive government aid, there are going to be some expectations on you. Whether it’s work, whether it’s other contributions, it was limited to our cash welfare program. It was not expanded into other safety-net programs like food assistance, Medicaid, housing. Those principles are really — are largely absent from those programs, and I think that that has contributed to some of the stagnation that we have seen.

So hopefully we’ll have a chance — a little bit of a chance — to talk about where we see the future of compassionate conservatism. I would say — where we are right now is that we — I’m hopeful at least. There are some indications that we might be seeing a little bit of a resurgence potentially from the federal level, but where I’m seeing it more is from the state and local level.

There are — and I do think states and localities are in a better position to do the types of things that we were talking about for all the reasons that we’ve talked about. They’re just closer to populations. They have more flexibility to serve populations, and they have a better understanding of the issues that families are experiencing in their communities.

So to give you some examples where I see some of these principles coming back into play — it’s just the recent waiver requests for the Medicaid program a number of states have requested from the federal government. They’re allowed to implement its work requirements but also just engagement requirements, meaning it doesn’t have to be work. It can be training. It can be — it’s intended to be something so that people who are receiving public health insurance from the government — it’s largely people who do not have children — but that they are giving something back. And there is some expectation that is placed on them in order to receive public benefits.

At this point that is all wrapped up into this waiver process that is allowing states to experiment with some of these principles, and I think that that is where I’m hopeful that some
of these things will continue to happen not only in Medicaid, but in housing, HUD, and food assistance programs. And, again, I think it’s coming though from the states, and I think that the states are the ones that are going to be encouraged to have a resurgence of some of these principles that we’re talking about.

So I’m just going to end there because I know we’re going to have a little bit of a conversation about maybe where we see the future or how we see the future in terms of some of these principles.

DR. OLASKY: OK, do we go to questions at this point from the audience, or what’s your pleasure?

DR. STREETER: It’s certainly a good idea. Yeah, let’s do it.

DR. OLASKY: Martin?

DR. STREETER: You have a microphone coming to you.

Q: Martin Wooster, Capital Research Center, who’s been around so long that I have provided research to Joseph Jacobs for the compassionate conservative. A question for Mr. Fay. OK, you talked about bad things the government did. Are there things the government can do that can help you other than removing stupid regulations, like zoning require — I mean, is there anything, or is it just what you described? What — you know, are there deregulatory steps that government could do that would help you?

MR. FAY: Thank you. I may have come off as far too one-sided about my feelings. I clearly feel like HUD is doing something very misguided, and it’s — but I do not come from the perspective that government has no role to play in alleviation of poverty. I believe that we should be looking at what works and supporting what works and doing the kinds of things where the — funneling money toward local organizations and supporting innovation.

The problem that I have generally with what happens with government bureaucracy is they tell you how to do everything and tie your hands. So you — any kind of innovative approach tends to be impossible. So, you know, look at how the difference between a foundation — how a foundation supports a charitable organization and how government does it. Foundations will come and visit you and look at what you do. And if they like what you do, they’ll support you. Now, they might actually ask for more data. They might ask you to be more rigorous in your collection of metrics. They may try and help you grow in scale. They may do any number of things, but that’s how a foundation approaches supporting charitable work.

It’s not that way with government generally. Government comes in, finds out whether you’re doing it the way they want it to be done, and rank you accordingly. I’ll give you one example of this that I thought was stunning. In Fairfax County, a couple of years ago, when we were still receiving some money, we were part of a continuum of care, which is basically a group of organizations all receiving a single grant from HUD. We would participate in this
continuum, and roughly 300 families would being served. And that year, HUD required that you count whether any family had increased their income while receiving services. Now, it seems to me if you’re going to be providing help for homeless families, one of the things that should be a good measure is whether their income increases. That should be fundamental. While that was part of what they were tracking, but it had no — it didn’t matter in terms of scoring.

Now, out of 300 families over the period of this grant, we had nine families and nine families total during that period of the grant increased their income. So we had, of those nine families, eight were ours, so our rate of success was eight out of nine. Their rate of success was one out of 291 — everybody else’s rate of success. We got the lowest ranking of all the organizations because we had requirements: required them to work, required them to, you know, go learn English, et cetera, et cetera.

So that said to me that fundamentally we were looking at the wrong thing. They were not actually looking at what is effective. They were looking at what — who — is following the rules. We should be always looking at what is really effective and base the rules on what’s effective, not the other way around. That’s where I find the biggest problem with government bureaucracies. Not the fact — I would love to see government become involved in supporting more innovative solutions. I don’t think we could — for instance, I don’t think we can help the homeless without vouchers. There’s a certain number of families that are always going to need to move into subsidized housing, not everyone, but some will. So there’s some things out there that only a government can do. I hope I answered your question.

DR. STREETER: If I could follow up on that just real quickly. I know the question wasn’t directed to me, but I think the lessons from welfare reform, from school choice and even now these reforms to Medicaid, I think give some answers to the question. I think — I’m of the view that our programs — our social welfare programs should have clear objectives. I think you should be able to write those objectives on an index card and then you should — the default mode should be a kind of radical flexibility at the local level and a willingness to live with uneven results because of that.

The work requirements and the time limitations that were part of the ’96 welfare reform were very straightforward and clear. And like Angela said, that only applied unfortunately to that one program and not to our other food assistance, health insurance, and other types of programs. They were very clear. And what happened as a result was the flexibility then that was given to meet those objectives of required work was local actors having to work together. I mean, county welfare agencies went from being essentially outposts of a federal bureaucracy processing checks and benefits to having to work with workforce development systems, local chambers of commerce, and others to help people get into work.

And that’s — and that’s a messy process. And some states did it better than others, and some cities did it better than others, but in general the results were good. And I think with charter schooling it’s the same thing. The requirements and objectives for what it takes to set a charter — you have a government oversight body that approves that charter, but then you allow parents and teachers and others to run that school in accordance with the
objectives that they’ve sent to the chartering authority. And there’s a reason why I think that movement has exploded as well.

And so I think that the lessons, you know, really flow from watching what succeeds at the local level, like what you’re doing, Chris. I think, you know, when you see what both Chris and Angela said is that low-income families want to improve their lives. They want to see things get better. And you really need to allow the local actors that are working with them the flexibility to achieve that, and not over-stipulate it, which is unfortunately too often the case in which you’re running into with HUD. So I think that kind of flexibility is a good thing.

Seeing the — even though what CMS right now, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, what they’re doing to allow states to use work requirements as far as Medicaid reform goes, it’s generally been off the radar screen. It hasn’t gotten a ton of attention. But where the critics have been, you know, picking up on it, it’s this resistance to allowing states this flexibility. It’s not even — right now, the administration’s not even requiring states to do this. They’re just allowing states to do this, and I think they have upwards of I don’t know if it’s 15 now or so applications to do this or more — I’m not sure — where states say, we want the flexibility to change the way Medicaid works so that we can actually get families engaged, help them find work and the like. And so it’s — just getting to the point where we’re able to allow that flexibility is a huge, huge achievement. And unfortunately there’s a strong lobby of people that don’t want to give states that flexibility.

DR. OLASKY: Yes. Yes, sir, in the third row. Yeah.

Q: Great. I guess I have more of a political question here. I wonder if — because compassionate conservatism relied on traditional, strict conservative definitions of who counted as needy, support needing to be temporary, and so on and so forth, the movement failed to actually gain a sufficient political base among working-class voters and lower-middle-class voters whose anxieties are clearly driving our discourse right now.

So I guess to give an example, when Romney lost in 2012, the discourse among conservatives is that this shows that we need to start talking about the poor and the needs of the poor. But if you actually look at the exit polling, what people said is it’s not so much that they were rejecting Romney because he didn’t care about people in general. It’s because he didn’t care about people like them.

So I guess my question would be: Can compassionate conservatism be a viable political ideology without kind of expanding the focus of need to broader sections of the income base?

DR. OLASKY: Well, it’s a really good question. I don’t think the — I would like to think at least that the concern is not just why — how come I’m not getting my piece of the action? I think the concern more often is when people like me are getting their piece of the action, but they don’t really need it, then the sense is they’re stealing from me. When people who really need it get it, I don’t think you would get that same reaction, so it’s a different conception of who really needs it and who doesn’t need it.
So I think that actually can play if you’re careful to make the point of distinguishing between those who are really needy and those who aren’t. And the problem with a lot of programs is they’re not. That discourages a whole bunch of people — discourages the people who are really striving through their own efforts to come out of poverty because they say, “Why should I do all this work if other people without doing it get the same?”

And then it also discourages all these other voters you referred to, who just see it as unfair. So if other people aren’t getting what’s perceived as unfair, I don’t think you’re going to have that reaction against it. After all, we don’t in our own neighborhoods. I mean, if we know someone who is disabled and can’t work, we don’t expect that person to work. The concern we have often is if a person could work perfectly well and doesn’t want to. And I think that’s what leads to the political problems.

DR. STREETER: Yeah. It’s a great question. When I was advising Mike Pence when he was a governor of Indiana, we applied for one of these waivers at Medicaid. And we wanted to change Indiana’s Medicaid program into a complete consumer-driven health care plan, where everyone had a health savings account and had preventative services paid for. And we were — our proposal was based on a pilot project with about 45,000 Medicaid recipients that Mitch Daniels had started before Pence was governor. And it took us 18 months of negotiations with the Obama administration just to allow those provisions to be accepted as part of our waiver.

And the thing that we kept coming back to them with — requiring someone to put a dollar or two a month into a savings account was kind of a bridge too far. It was like something was being done to people that would be really hard when you’re living in poverty. And we kept showing them that our survey data showed that 98 percent of the people who had formerly been on Medicaid, who were part of this pilot program, wanted to stay in the pilot program and not go back to Medicaid. There was buy-in from the recipients that it’s actually a better program. They had free preventive care. They had choice that they could use those dollars for that the state put most of the majority into the health savings accounts.

But they learned what it was like to actually start thinking about their health in new ways and to pursue health care in a way that people who have more money have the luxury or at least the ability to do. And that, in the end, became sort of the point that was hard to argue with — was that the recipients themselves were bought into this.

And I think you find the very same thing with the charter school movement. When it first was introduced state by state, it was controversial. But go to any charter school now and look at the makeup of the people on the board and the children in school, and it’s going to be very diverse politically. It’s going to be — you know, people are going to defend that school that their kids go to.

Look what’s happened here in Washington, DC, since charters were introduced. The public schools have gotten better. The charters have gotten better. Lots of kids are in them. It’s a much vibrant environment with lots of buy-in.
And I think — and we could go on down the road into what happened in the welfare reform. And when it felt like we were doing something to people, but then when people got the experience of getting introduced to employers, with training providers that could give them the skills that they needed to actually work and find dignity in their work and take care of their kids that way, people were bought into the program.

And so I think the lesson is that you always have to be working at the level of the person whose needs are foremost. And if public policy is formulated that way and if people running for public office actually spend time with people who are in these programs, they’ll actually perhaps be more authentic in their claims, and their ideas will create greater buy-in in the future.

DR. OLASKY: Yes, sir.

Q: John Salome. I’m an economist. I have a question, particularly for everybody, but it’s the role of religion itself on the part of the recipient as to whether or not the program will be more effective. Because I hear, you know, a lot of secular solutions. But I just wonder if — not just faith in general, but religious faith, how important that is in getting these programs to work, particularly since the government precludes it.

DR. OLASKY: I could just tell you, this goes back to about 1990, when Deborah Norville was the hostess on “The Today Show.” Some of you may remember that. And she wasn’t the brightest person around in interviewing, but she once had four people who had all been drug addicts and no longer were. And she asked the first, “Well, how did you come out of drugs?” And he says something like, praise Jesus, you know, and goes on from there. And she asked the second, and he says the same. And the third, it’s also pretty similar.

And, again, this is I think the common experience of what happens. People need to go through a spiritual transformation of some sort to come out of something so dire. And, finally, Deborah Norville asked the fourth, well, apart from religion, what changed you? So, I mean, that’s the way — that’s what I’ve heard in 25 years going all over.

Now, if you look at — there are different religions that may work in different ways, but in some way it’s a question not just of physical things, not just of money or anything like that. It’s a question of worldview, which comes out of religion and what’s important and what’s not. And that’s what changes people. It’s something that a lot of secularists don’t like to consider. But I think that’s the historical reality.

MR. FAY: I’d like to comment on that, too. Homestretch right now, the program we’re running now is ostensibly a nonpartisan, nonsectarian organization. It happens to be staffed by a whole bunch of Christians. So it is our faith that dictates how we do things and the approach we take.
And another thing I want to say is the faith of the individuals that come into the program is usually the thing that we build upon for them to find their hope and their strength. So it’s a faith of the giver, and it’s a faith of the one who is receiving. It’s critical to it.

And we have people of all faiths come into our program, but that same principle applies. They rely on that, and we capitalize on that. We build up on that because it is the worldview and it’s our sense of values and our sense of self-worth all come from our spirituality.

DR. OLASKY: Yes, ma’am.

Q: Thank you. Jill Turgeon. I serve on the Loudoun County School Board, probably wondering what a school board member is doing here. Professor Olasky, you talked about decentralization. And I think you were primarily referring to like the economic policy and so forth.

I think really the underlying problem that I am seeing — and this runs across education and social issues and so forth — is a decentralization. What needs to happen is a decentralization mind-set of a sense of personal responsibility and empowerment. And I see this again across education choice and so forth.

And one of the problems, again — you know, we’re here talking about policy and we’re here at AEI and it’s great, but the things that’s only — the only thing that’s going to make impact is when we get the message out to the public. And I think the left does this much better than the right.

We just had a big rally here in DC on issues that seemed like these individuals had this empowerment and a personal message, but it really had nothing to do with the empowerment of them as individuals. They were asking the government to do more.

So I think what we need to see happening is more empowerment on an individual level. And, again, it would go across all sorts of arenas. If we were — what can we do? How can we get that message out there? Where can we start? We’re not going to have rallies on personal empowerment. I don’t know. But what can we do to get that out to the public and to get people rallied around this idea of we have the empowerment, as Mr. Fay said, with the programs that he has implemented in Fairfax?

DR. OLASKY: Well, as an editor, I think of journalism and having people who actually go out into parts of the community which aren’t on the tourist/guide programs and find out about these. Again, Hannah Hawkins I think was one of the — was one of the largely unknown great resources of Washington, DC. And she didn’t get much publicity. She just kept doing it year after year. And I know people like that all over the place.

I mean, how many of you before today had heard of Christopher Fay? And yet he’s been doing this for a long, long time.
So I see this as a journalistic responsibility to not just go and sit around and get a press release from someone or have a public relations person tell you something and just relay it or be a propagandist for political party, but actually go out into cities and ask around who’s doing a real good job and go and report and tell those stories.

Yeah. We tried to do this in World, and our Hope Award stories are some of the best-read stories because people want to know. They trust us that we’re actually not just going to do something that’s not true, but here’s a real account. And I think that type of stuff makes a huge difference.

DR. STREETER: I do think it’s important for our public leaders to talk about these things more. I mean, I think — you know, there was — we had a lot of public leaders really on the right and the left in the 1990s talking about localized solutions in many of these issue areas that we’re talking about. It wasn’t just conservatives. It was on both sides.

And I think to the extent that Republicans and conservatives have sort of neglected these themes of late — I mentioned the 2010 Tea Party election as an example. The election of Donald Trump has caused progressives to take up to the realities of federalism again. We just put out a collection of essays two months ago here at AEI on localism — restoring localism in America, and it’s got a fairly balanced set of contributors from both the right and the left, kind of this sense that we’re — for whatever reason, we’ve become so polarized in recent years and decades. It seems like we’re obsessed with the national conversation. We’re always having national conversations and shouting matches on cable TV and in social media. And we don’t give a lot of air time to what’s actually happening on the ground.

And I share Angela’s optimism. There’s a lot of experimentation going on in cities and state levels right now, but we’re not really hearing about it. And so I think we kind of have to deal with the reality that it is. We do for whatever reason seem to be obsessed with people who are in the national spotlight, and so I think we need to hold those people accountable, our own representatives. Journalists can do this as well. Hold these people accountable to talking about the way that policy can actually be driven by local actors and perfected by local actors.

DR. OLASKY: You know, I’ll tell you one funny story. This is back in 1995 when Newt Gingrich had referred to a book of mine, “The Tragedy of American Compassion” — was telling all the freshmen representatives at that point to come read it.

So I was — gave a talk to about 30 of them and was explaining things. And I saw some nodding heads and not nodding off to sleep, but actually nodding in agreement. And I lost them, though, when asked, well, what practically should I do? And I said, well, you should actually go and volunteer at a charity in your district, and go there and — and don’t go there with press. You know, maybe after a few months you could have reporters, but just go there and learn about it, and then you’ll be able to talk about it. And they all said, no, we don’t have time for that. You know, they had time to consult pollsters, but not to do that.
Q: Stanley Carlson-Thies, Institutional Religion Freedom Alliance. I was in the Bush faith-based office since the beginning. You know, one thing that you mentioned that kind of worked was TANF and welfare reform came out of a lot of discussion that wasn’t just in think tanks or the media — thanks for the work you do, Marvin — but among members of Congress and policy people generally. And so they crafted legislation that made it possible and even imperative that these kind of principles be implemented at the state and local level. And that didn’t happen across these other programs.

And so the faith-based office had just marginal things that it could do. Access to recovery was a great idea. It came out of the administration. But then states revolted against it. They wanted all that money reprogrammed into the regular programs. So I think one of our big problems is that on Capitol Hill the debate has become less government/more government and not civil society — different ways of approaching things.

DR. STREETER: Yeah. It’s a great point. You should be up here, Stanley, not me.

DR. OLASKY: Hello, by the way. It’s been a long time.

DR. STREETER: Good to see you. OK, we have time for one more. Do we have one more hand up? Yeah. Yeah. We’ve got a hand right here. Brian.

Q: Hey. Brian Noise. I really appreciate the examples you all gave along the way — what you did in Indianapolis, you know, the compassion, the conservative — sorry. As all these things are being said at the local level, there were some along the way where they got a national voice, the Contract with America, you know, Bush. Is there somebody that’s got a national voice now that is carrying some of these local examples and bringing them forward?

DR. RACHIDI: I mean, Speaker Ryan does like to talk about these issues, and he has for a number of years. I think maybe given that he took up the speakership, it’s not quite — it’s not quite as good of a fit anymore, but he — you know, he put on a poverty conference during the election. He’s always kind of talking about these issues. So I don’t know if he can still be the champion given the role he plays now, but I would say that he is one person.

The other two people I would mention is Senator Tim Scott and Rubio — Senator Rubio in the Senate, who also have really sort of started talking about these issues and seem to show a genuine interest in kind of reviving discussions, many of the discussions we’re having today. But reviving these discussions among their colleagues, which, like you said, is really important because that discussion at the national level is ultimately what drives a lot of what happens at the state and local level.

DR. OLASKY: Yeah. It’s hard. In some ways, we’ve seen the ascent in recent years of what I suppose could be called callous conservatism rather than compassionate conservatism, and it’s hard to turn that around, but I think that — I have hope that it will be. I think America is waiting for people who can actually give a message of hope and not a message of fear. We’ll see.
DR. STREETER: You know, those are the first three names I thought of, too, that Angela mentioned. I would say at the state level, you have governors like Doug Ducey in Arizona and, you know, even John Hickenlooper in Colorado has talked about some of these themes. I find Ducey, particularly — if you go back and read like a State of the State address, the last one that he gave, it’s completely filled with this language and set of objectives. I think someone like Eric Holcomb in Indiana, a protégée of Mitch Daniels, falls into this camp.

So I think there are emerging leaders in governors’ offices and in state houses as well that, you know, when we fast-forward — we have this conversation in another 10 years, we’ll point back to them and say they kind of led the next kind of revival.

DR. OLASKY: Amen.

DR. STREETER: Looking at the clock, I think we’re done. Thank you all for being at AEI today. It’s been a pleasure to have you. Thanks very much. (Applause.)

(END)