

State politics threaten vital services

By Rick Maier

A long-standing tradition of state funding to local faith-based organizations for human services is in jeopardy unless the House of Representatives passes what should be a no-brainer correction to the Georgia Constitution.

Last year a group contesting the firing of employees at the Methodist Home in Atlanta used Georgia's rigid constitutional provisions restricting state aid to religious institutions to argue its case. These rules, referred to by Governor Perdue as the Blaine Amendment, were influenced by a late-19th-century movement to prevent government funding of Catholic schools.

With the Atlanta lawsuit as precedent, faith-based organizations are now just one lawsuit away from losing state funding. These organizations don't expect the state to pay for activities such as chapel services - private donations more than cover that portion of costs. But unless the rules change, the state may soon discriminate against organizations because they are faith-based.

Separation of church and state is a widely accepted American principle, one which faith-based organizations support because it prevents government interference. But the state interpretation is now too stringent, more so than the Federal rules which have been corrected by a series of U.S. Supreme Court rulings.

Middle Georgia depends heavily on faith-based organizations to help the needy – from children's homes such as Hephzibah and the Methodist Home, to adult services such as the Salvation Army, Rescue Mission, and Loaves and Fishes. These organizations do not force religion on those they serve, and churches and private donors often contribute substantially to the cost of operations, lowering the cost to taxpayers.

The state doesn't have the resources to replace these faith-based social services, plus I believe that private organizations deliver support more effectively.

The needed correction to our Constitution, known as the Faith and Family Services Amendment, is 12 simple words: "except as permitted or required by the United States Constitution, as amended." Governor Perdue wholeheartedly supports the amendment. The Senate has already passed it by more than the required two-thirds majority. Now it's up to the House to pass the bill, and for us to approve it on the November ballot.

Please ask your State Representative to support this amendment before the legislative session ends in a few weeks.

Rick Maier is Treasurer of Wesleyan College and a member of an informal local group of faith-based organizations working to increase public awareness of this issue.