Religious Groups Reap Federal Aid for Pet Projects

By DIANA B. HENRIQUES and ANDREW W. LEHREN

St. Vincent College, a small Benedictine college southeast of Pittsburgh, wanted to realign a two-lane state road serving the campus. But the state transportation department did not have the money.

So St. Vincent tried Washington instead. The college hired a professional lobbyist in 2004 and, later that year, two paragraphs were tucked into federal appropriation bills with the help of Representative John P. Murtha, Democrat of Pennsylvania, awarding $4 million solely for that project. College officials said the work would improve the safety and appearance of the road into the campus, which President Bush visited two days ago to give the college’s commencement address.

Religious organizations have long competed for federal contracts to provide social services, and they have tried to influence Congress on matters of moral and social policy — indeed, most major denominations have a presence in Washington to monitor such legislation. But an analysis of federal records shows that some religious organizations are also hiring professional lobbyists to pursue the narrowly tailored individual appropriations known as earmarks.

A New York Times analysis shows that the number of earmarks for religious organizations, while small compared with the overall number, have increased sharply in recent years. From 1989 to January 2007, Congress approved almost 900 earmarks for religious groups, totaling more than $318 million, with more than half of them granted in the Congressional session that included the 2004 presidential election. By contrast, the same analysis showed fewer than 60 earmarks for faith-based groups in the Congressional session that covered 1997 and 1998.

Earmarks are individual federal grants that bypass the normal appropriations and competitive-bidding procedures. They have been blamed for feeding the budget deficit and have figured in several Capitol Hill bribery scandals, prompting recent calls for reform from White House and Congressional leaders.

They are distinct from the competitive, peer-reviewed grants that have traditionally been used by religious institutions and charities to obtain money for social services.
As the number of faith-based earmarks grew, the period from 1998 to 2005 saw a tripling in the number of religious organizations listed as clients of Washington lobbying firms and a doubling in the amount they paid for services, according to an analysis by The Times.

Sometimes the earmarks benefited programs aimed at helping others. There have been numerous earmarks totaling $5.4 million for World Vision, the global humanitarian ministry, to conduct job training, youth mentoring and gang prevention programs. Another earmark provided $150,000 to help St. Jerome’s Church in the Bronx build a community center, and Fuller Theological Seminary, a leading evangelical seminary in Pasadena, Calif., received $2 million to study gambling and juvenile violence.

But many of the earmarks address the prosaic institutional needs of some specific religious group, like the ones giving the Mormon Church control over two parcels of federal land of historic significance to the church, transferring 10 acres of federal forest land to a small church in Florida, allowing a historic church surrounded by a federal park in Ohio to use public land to expand its parking space, and handing several acres of government land over to a Catholic college in New Hampshire. (An interactive database of almost 900 faith-based earmarks can be found at nytimes.com.)

Earmarks have also helped finance new buildings on religious college campuses, including a fitness center at Malone College, a small evangelical Christian liberal arts college in Canton, Ohio.

The $1 million that helped build the center came from an earmark by Representative Ralph S. Regula, whose district includes the college, according to Suzanne Thomas, director of communications for the college. Another earmark helped pay for a new school of nursing, she said.

In seeking the earmarks, the college hired a Washington lobbyist “to help us with a ‘boots on the ground’ program of meeting with various Congressional and Senate leaders,” Ms. Thomas said, noting that many private colleges are enlisting similar lobbying help.

Several scholars who wrote books about religious advocacy work in Washington in the 1980s and early 1990s say the push for earmarks identified in The Times analysis represents a sharp departure from the lobbying strategies traditionally associated with religious groups. One of them, Allen D. Hertzke, a professor at the University of Oklahoma in Norman, said, “I never heard religious lobbyists talk about earmarks.” That view was echoed by Daniel J. B. Hofrenning, a professor at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minn.: “Getting heavily into the pork-barrel politics of earmarks — that is a distinctive change.”

It is a shift that some religious advocates find worrisome.

“Earmarks are bad public policy,” said Maureen Shea, director of the Episcopal Office of Government Relations in Washington. “If earmarks are not in the public interest, I would wonder why the faith community would be involved in them. It would hurt our credibility.”
James E. Winkler, who has represented the United Methodist General Board of Church and Society since 2000, says he fears that the pursuit of earmarks could muffle religion’s moral voice. “For example, we’ve opposed the war since day one,” he said. “But what if an earmark benefiting us — money for a Methodist seminary, perhaps — is attached to the supplemental appropriation for the war? You can see how very serious moral conflicts could arise.”

The Rev. Richard Cizik, vice president for governmental affairs at the National Association of Evangelicals, said that while religious organizations should be able to compete for federal money, such groups “shouldn’t do that through earmarks.” He explained, “As good stewards of the public trust, we have to be transparent and above board — and earmarks are not transparent or above board.”

And, constitutional lawyers point out, because the First Amendment prohibits direct government financing of religious activities, earmarks that steer money to religious groups pose constitutional risks. Indeed, several faith-based earmarks were successfully challenged as unconstitutional long after Congress approved them.

Paul Marcone, a lobbyist and former Capitol Hill staff member who specializes in getting earmarks for nonprofit clients, disputes the notion that religious groups should not pursue them. “Despite what the critics say, there is far more transparency in earmarks than in the discretionary grant process,” Mr. Marcone said. “It’s the difference between unelected bureaucrats using a peer-review process and an elected member of Congress.”

Applying for competitive government grants “is a very frustrating process,” Mr. Marcone added. “You might score very high and have an innovative program, and still not get funded.” By contrast, he said, all his nonprofit clients who sought earmarks received grants within two years of signing on with him.

The lobbying firm to which Malone College and dozens of other religious organizations have turned is Mr. Marcone’s former employer, the Russ Reid Company, based in Pasadena, Calif. Since 1964, Russ Reid has provided direct-mail and other fund-raising services to some of the nation’s largest charities, like World Vision and Habitat for Humanity.

But it also maintains a government relations office in Washington, directed by Mark D. McIntyre, a former Congressional press secretary and a vice presidential speechwriter in the Reagan administration. “If your focus is on how faith-based organizations are getting earmarks, I’m your guy,” Mr. McIntyre said in a brief telephone conversation last month. But the company subsequently canceled an interview with Mr. McIntyre and declined to comment further about his work.

Among the dozens of institutions for which Russ Reid has helped obtain earmarks are several faith-based rescue missions, including the Detroit Rescue Mission Ministries, the Light of Life Mission in Pittsburgh and the Gospel Rescue Ministries of Washington; a host of religious colleges and seminaries, including Fuller seminary and Vanguard University in Costa Mesa,
Russ Reid has also lobbied for earmarks for World Vision, the humanitarian service ministry. Seeking earmarks is a departure for World Vision. “On the international side, we do not do earmark advocacy,” said Joseph Mettimano, director of public policy and advocacy. Instead of competing for an earmarked slice of money, the charity joins with other aid organizations to lobby for a bigger pie of foreign aid, he explained, adding that similar solidarity on the domestic front could “absolutely” be beneficial.

World Vision is evaluating whether to continue to seek earmarks, according to Romanita Hairston, its vice president for domestic programs. A main concern is the cost-effectiveness of such financing, but the controversy over earmarking is also being weighed, she said.

Among the beneficiaries of Mr. Marcone’s lobbying was the Silver Ring Thing, a faith-based abstinence program for teenagers. The program’s earmarked grant was suspended after being challenged as unconstitutional in May 2005, but other earmarks have been granted to Silver Ring Thing programs in Pennsylvania, Alabama and South Carolina.

Federal law and regulations require that all faith-based recipients of earmarks use the money only for non-religious purposes. But a federal appeals court decision late last year has raised fresh constitutional questions about earmarks awarded specifically to religious rescue missions. The ruling came in a pending case that involves a homeless shelter owned by the city of Boise, Idaho, but operated, under city contract, by the Boise Rescue Mission. In a preliminary ruling, a trial judge refused to ban voluntary worship services at the city-owned shelter.

In November, the Federal Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit in San Francisco reversed that decision, citing “serious questions” about whether the city’s support for the faith-based rescue mission has the unconstitutional effect of advancing religion.

Constitutional questions aside, the political controversy over earmarks has already begun to affect their availability for all petitioners, including faith-based groups. But some lobbyists are optimistic that earmarks for faith-based groups and other nonprofits will be spared.

Indeed, Mr. Marcone said that increasing the transparency of the earmark process could actually work to the advantage of faith-based groups and other deserving nonprofit groups. If members of Congress are required to put their names on their earmarks, he explained, “they are going to want to award money to programs that are going to make them look good, and those are going to be groups that are doing good work.”

But for those who believe religious organizations should not pursue private-purpose earmarks, that is not necessarily good news.

Clyde Wilcox, a Georgetown University professor who has written extensively on religion and
politics, said religious groups would naturally justify earmarks. But their moral authority in Washington — “the extra prophetic power of the religious voice,” as he put it — largely arises from the fact that they are not seen as self-interested, he said. “The loss of that prophetic voice would be profound.”

Kenneth Wald, a professor at the University of Florida who also studies religion in the political arena, foresees a more pragmatic danger for religious organizations that lobby for earmarks. “If they start to act like any other special interest, they’ll start to be treated like any other special interest,” he said. “I think it’s nuts to take that risk.”
An article in the New York Times this week, “Religious Groups Reap Federal Aid for Pet Projects,” gives some troubling details about the growing trend of religious groups seeking and receiving no-strings-attached federal grants disbursed by a direct act of Congress, usually called “earmarks,” to fund their pet projects. Sometimes these grants are for secular purposes, such as ministries that fund job training programs or religious colleges studying how best to reduce gang violence. However, on other occasions, the secular purpose is far more questionable: transferring public land to a church. God’s Lobby: Religious Advocacy in American Politics, book project based on research conducted as a senior fellow for the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. “The Quest for Global Religious Liberty: Why Liberals Should Care About Defending the First Freedom, article project. PUBLICATIONS. Books New York Times, Diana Henriques and Andrew Lehren, “Religious Groups Reap Federal Aid for Pet Projects,” May 13, 2007. U.S. News and World Report, February, 2007. Danish daily newspaper Kristeligt Dagblad, September 2006. In a recent tweet, President Trump stated that churches in Texas “should be entitled [to federal aid] for helping victims of Hurricane Harvey...” Now, the language used in Trump’s tweet suggests he would support the use of federal funding to aid in supporting the victims of Harvey. (Something President Obama signed an executive order in support of, in 2010, which added safeguards to a Bush-era initiative that increased aid churches were able to receive for non-religious activities, in order to safeguard any inappropriate.