

Faith-based programs a lesson in capitalism

Civil rights pioneer touts community involvement as economic engine

BY KEVIN GOYETTE
Editor

Arthur Fletcher believes that faith-based community programs are not just about charity. He believes they are vehicles of economic opportunity for African-Americans.

Fletcher is an author of civil rights legislation, former U.N. **1**

Continued from page A1

of the burden of government-funded community programs (for children, the elderly and the indigent). In return, those groups would not have to pay taxes to perform the services.

Opponents of the plan argue that that federal money should not be used to subsidize religious organizations. Some in the faith community also worry about the imposition of government bureaucracy on faith-based charities that would run just fine on their own.

Proponents say it's a good marriage - and that religious-based groups should not be discriminated against in applying for federal grants.

Legislation has passed the U.S. House of Representatives already, but has yet to appear before the Senate.

In letters to Virginia Senators John Warner and George Allen both say they support the general principle behind federal faith-based initiatives.

Fletcher said it's actually an old idea - the groundwork for faith-based community action has been in place since 1977

ambassador, member of four presidential administrations and was named among the most influential African-Americans in a 1990 survey. He was in Caroline this week spinning his newest ideas about community involvement and economic development to local churches.

Fletcher told members of Mt.

and the federal community reinvestment act. But with new legislation pending, the time is ripe now for involvement.

"Very little had been dispersed [in the media] about the role that churches could play," Fletcher said. "That role [as non-profit groups] was cut out for them. They're already running schools and health facilities and housing for the aged."

But Fletcher's idea of faith-based involvement is much broader than just charity. He sees it as a window of opportunity for African-Americans.

Starting as non-profits, Fletcher argues, African-Americans can learn capitalism from the ground up - without the burden of taxation. The community as a whole benefits, and the African-American community specifically benefits. It's a win/win situation.

"We need [churches] more than ever," Fletcher said. "This is a golden opportunity to do it."

To go along with the faith-based initiatives, Fletcher is also proposing a massive economic development trust fund

Zion Baptist in Dawn and St. John's Baptist in Milford about how church congregations can get involved in the community - running health facilities, schools and developing housing for the aged - and compete for federal grants to do so.

It's an idea that the Bush administration has embraced. Under Bush's plan, congregations and other faith-based groups could help to bear some

See Faith, page A11

to back up churches that need loans to start up fledgling non-profits.

In concert with Martin Luther King Day, working African-Americans, who would buy in at \$40, or a minimum day's wage, would fund the bond. The fund would then be used to guarantee loans to African-American churches.

"If we did that every year [on King Day], there would be no end to our abilities," he said. "We can really, for the first time, be involved in economic development."

The ideas had strong resonance in Caroline, where African-American congrega-

tions are already involved, but are also planning greater things outside the church doors.

The Dawn and Milford stops, organized by local Ernest Rollins and Carl Lewis, were two on Fletcher's year-long national tour, where he works his ideas with ministers, pastors and clergy.

His efforts in Caroline have already resulted in a need assessment study. Churches here are now looking at what their communities need, what federal, state and county governments are funding, and where they can participate.

"We're going to turn to faith," Fletcher said.