Fuller Prefers 'Sweat Equity,' not Government Funds
by Martin E. Marty

ATLANTA (FEBRUARY 17, 2004) -- At a seminar on the pros and cons of accepting governmental funds for "faith-based" humanitarian ventures, an evangelical expressed suspicion. Referring to biblical coinage she said, "Whoever accepts the king's shekels receives the king's shackles." Millard Fuller, founder and president of Habitat for Humanity International, on a recent program did not use the "shekels" saying, though he could have. He's much at home in biblical lore and language and aware of what the "king" [=government] can mean.

He was asked a question about religiously based non-profits and government ties at a forum on February 17 in Atlanta at Emory University's Center for the Interdisciplinary Study of Religion. The program asked, "Where Do the Children Live?" and Fuller is in a good position to contribute an answer. The organization he and his wife Linda founded in 1976 has built 150,000 homes, is heading toward 200,000 structures in 89 countries by the end of 2005, and he knows what a large percentage of the dwellers are children.

These are children who often had lived in such dilapidated and disgraceful hovels that they asked school bus drivers to drop them off a block away so they would not suffer shame from classmates. Dr. Fuller, a master story teller, told the audience of numerous incidents in which a child of poverty found life changed, thanks to the dignity and comfort of the simple home a parent or parents with relatives and friends and neighbors and volunteers from a distance provided.

Fuller is a dreamer, a realist full of hope who welcomes support from donors who share his Christian orientation, or who as citizens or with companies in any of those nations want to provide better housing. He and his colleagues know how important it is for owners-to-be to provide "sweat equity," to be ready to take ownership, and to pay on their interest-free mortgage in a no-down-payment home they could never have thought of or owned without Habitat volunteers and guidance.

So far, so good. But wouldn't governmental support, part of many faith-based ventures, greatly boost Habitat's efforts? No, said Fuller, and he fleshed out that answer in response to a question at the forum. HFHI is successful because its leaders and donors are very

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clear about their root motives, and tangling them with governmental red tape and restrictions would be limiting. He did not sound anti-governmental, and is happy to hear of other agencies that on other grounds work out other addresses to the housing problem. But for Habitat, government is only involved on occasion in respect to legal titles for sites.

I tried to push him into edgier places, something hard to do because he's so experienced that he knows where the edges are and how to avoid them. Since Habitat is so explicitly Christian, are there problems when it builds, as he proudly announces it now does, in numbers of predominantly Muslim, or other-religious, nations? Well, yes, but these are readily addressed. Habitat does not proselytize, has no creedal tests for homeowners-to-be, and believes on Christian grounds that believers are to respond to human need, any human's need, without taking religious roll call. A radical idea if I ever heard one. Are there problems with NIMBY folk, who applaud Habitat housing "but not in my back yard?" Oh, yes, he replied, frequently such folks at first feel pushed to an edge of their own. But as they come to know their new neighbors and see their property values go up, not down, and especially when they meet happy children next door, their attitude almost always changes and they even on occasion join the volunteer staff at another Habitat house down the block.

No questions from the floor at the Forum or from this conversation partner seemed to cloud Dr. Fuller's brow, well known for the way it beams optimism and hope. He appears a bit subdued when he thinks of the misery among those whose needs Habitat cannot meet and no one else meets either. But he is ready to say that he, like most of his staff, affiliates, and volunteers, feel called to go about their work of providing homes. Habitat is not the only model, but is an effective one for private citizens linking to work for the public, the common good.

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