



A woman waves a "Christians for USAID" poster Feb. 5, 2025, at a rally near the U.S. Capitol supporting the U.S. Agency for International Development, known as USAID. The agency, a top funder of Catholic Relief Services and other humanitarian work worldwide, is under threat as the Trump administration moves to dismantle it. (NCR photo/Rhina Guidos)

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Responding to reports that President Donald Trump's administration has touted "zeroing out" foreign aid, faith-based groups that receive government funding to offer assistance abroad and their religious allies are sounding the alarm that they cannot replace the agency's crucial relief efforts on their own.

At a meeting that took place Feb. 28, Peter Marocco, the deputy administrator of the U.S. Agency for International Development, and a group of mostly evangelical Christian humanitarian aid groups discussed the administration's dismantling of USAID and its 90-day freeze on foreign aid funding. But people familiar with the meeting who spoke to Religion News Service on the condition of anonymity said the conversation centered on whether the federal government should be dispensing foreign aid, which government officials referred to as "philanthropy."

News of the meeting was first reported by [Fox News](#) and [The Washington Post](#).

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The federal officials who led the meeting, one of RNS' sources said, suggested foreign aid may no longer be "in the interests of the U.S. government."

The evangelical Christians at the meeting included representatives of Samaritan's Purse, World Relief and Compassion International. A few nonevangelical groups, such as Islamic Relief USA, Catholic Medical Mission Board and Corus International, were also present. Catholic Relief Services, which was the top recipient of USAID funding from 2013-2022, according to Forbes, was not invited, an absence that one person familiar with the meeting described as "conspicuous."

"Everyone in the room was fairly timid and afraid," said one attendee of the meeting.

Representatives for the State Department did not immediately respond to a request for comment about the gathering.

Many of the organizations at the meeting declined to speak to RNS on the record, citing the government's request that the discussion be kept behind closed doors and broader concern about running afoul of the Trump administration.

Galen Carey, vice president of government relations at the National Association of Evangelicals, attended but declined to offer details, saying he wanted to respect the government's request to keep it off the record. But he noted that he conveyed to the government that there are "a lot of lives being saved" through foreign aid, and singled out the work of the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, known as PEPFAR, which is credited with helping prevent millions of HIV infections and saving millions of lives.

Despite their reluctance to speak to the press, some of the religious groups are prepping to publicly voice their frustrations Tuesday (March 11), when Carey and leaders from other religious groups such as World Relief, Bread for the World, Compassion International and ADRA, the global humanitarian arm of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, plan on convening a "Prayer Vigil for Foreign Aid" on Capitol Hill.

"Elon Musk called what USAID does evil," Taylor said, referencing a tweet from the billionaire. "It reminded me of the Isaiah text: 'Woe to you that call evil good, and good evil.' That's exactly where we are right now."

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The next day, religious demonstrators organized by Sojourners and other groups will host a separate event on the Hill focused on foreign aid as part of a weekly faith-based demonstration.

Carey, who spent a decade overseas managing foreign aid programs, also cast doubt on the idea that religious groups could carry out the same level of assistance without the government's help. He said the U.S. has a "convening authority" that allows for the creation of things such as direct partnerships between governments as well as security agreements, which would be difficult or even impossible for private religious groups to forge on their own.

Operating entirely without government involvement, Carey said, "would be much less effective," adding that U.S. interests would also "be less well served in that

scenario."

"I really think we need to understand — and I tried to express this in the meeting — that there's such an important role for both to play, and we're much stronger when we move together," he said.

Carey was echoed by the Rev. Adam Russell Taylor, president of the Christian advocacy organization Sojourners who previously worked in foreign aid for organizations such as World Vision and the World Bank. Taylor said the suggestion that the government should abandon foreign aid and leave religious groups to fill the void is "deeply misguided and shortsighted, and I would say even immoral."

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"I just think that the numbers don't add up at all," he said, referring to the billions of dollars in funding currently under suspension. "It also is just a real betrayal of U.S. values — including Christian values — that are tied into this understanding, this reality that we live in an interdependent world."

Like Carey, Taylor argued the foreign aid that faith groups and other organizations offer through government grants is often effective precisely because it relies on a partnership.

Some of the aid programs, he said, require "working in some of the most dangerous, hardest to work places in the world, some of which are the same places where you have high degree of corruption and you have governments that if the money was going purely to them, it would not reach the people that need it most, and it would not have the impact that we want."

"Because of this partnership and actually delivering a lot of those aid programs through faith-based NGOs, it has actually prevented a lot of fraud and the misuse of those funds," Taylor said.

One of the faith leaders present for the meeting expressed hope to RNS that Secretary of State Marco Rubio could "save" aspects of USAID, but argued "it's not feasible at all for religious groups to replicate the work of USAID — you're looking at durable decades long partnerships rooted in Constitutional protections and American values get utterly cancelled.

"Faith groups will, of course, carry forward our work of mercy and aid, but these decisions are deadly serious and will have lasting, shockwaves of damaging effect," the faith leader said.



The Rev. Adam Russell Taylor. (Courtesy of Sojourners)

"It's quite stunning that elements of the Trump Administration are going scorched earth not only on the foreign aid budget by proudly claiming success on the zero-based approach, but also the secondary impacts on churches and faith-based groups that once supported much of his agenda."

Carey said he believes it's possible the partnerships he works with may survive, saying he is "confident" there are people within the administration and in Congress who will advocate for their cause. "I do feel hopeful that, at some point, the collective wisdom of our many years of experience will be brought to bear on the issues."

One source familiar with the meeting said some present were encouraged that the government was listening to the faith groups, and that the tone of the gathering wasn't combative.

Taylor pointed to reports that some Republicans, such as Sen. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, have privately communicated misgivings with the Trump administration's approach to foreign aid. Even so, Taylor argued, the current

moment is a "test of courage."

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This story appears in the **Trump's Second Term** feature series. [View the full series.](#)