

Conversations with the Experts

Religion and Work-Family Issues



David Gray

Bio: Rev. Dr. David E. Gray directs the New America Foundation's Workforce and Family Program, which researches and develops solutions to social, economic, and family policy issues. He also serves as a senior advisor to New America's Education Policy Program.

Dr. Gray speaks frequently about work-life balance, family and child well-being, politics, religion, and workforce policy at events, on Capitol Hill, and in the media. His writing has appeared in publications such as the *Baltimore Sun*, *Washington Times*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *USA Today*, and *Washington Post*. He is a contributing blogger for the Huffington Post and has been interviewed widely by the foreign and domestic press.

David is a former Acting Assistant Secretary for Policy at the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL), where he managed the DOL offices of regulatory policy, programmatic policy, compliance assistance/technology, and economic analysis/research. In this role he also staffed a number of White House working groups and represented the United States abroad in negotiations in Mexico and Chile. He has served as a Counsel to the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Governmental Management and as a legislative aid to several members of Congress.

David is the senior pastor at Bradley Hills Presbyterian Church, a chaplain at American University, and a term member of the Council on Foreign Relations. He is a graduate of Yale, Harvard, Northwestern University School of Law, and Wesley Theological Seminary.

An Interview with David Gray *by Julie Weber and Karen Corday*

Corday: Please tell us about your background and how you ended up working on religion and work-family issues.

Gray: It comes from my passions for family, pastoring, and policy. I have two boys, my wife works, and trying to make our own decisions on balance as a family gave me an interest in the area. I've been a lawyer on Capitol Hill, and I worked in the Department of Labor on the Family and Medical Leave Act, which touched on how to support workers and understand the business perspective of work and family issues. I also help pastor a church, and I see a lot of stressed-out parishioners as well.

Weber: When you use the word "religion," what exactly do you mean?

Gray: I mean a belief system that individuals have in some higher being or something greater than themselves. It can be an organized group of believers or a sense of personal spirituality.

Corday: What do you see as the most important policy issues that fall under the religion/work-family umbrella?

Gray: One important area has to do with religious observance and the need for individual employees who have a particular faith to be supported in the exercise of that faith and still have the opportunity to succeed at work. There are many religious minorities for whom this issue hits particularly close to home.

For instance, in the fall, we had Ramadan, Rosh Hashanah, and Yom Kippur, celebrated by Muslims and Jews. There can be a conflict between Muslims' Friday prayers or Jewish holidays and work schedules. For people of any faith, there can be a lack of time and flexible scheduling to allow for religious observance. To me, this is especially critical.

There are other areas of concern such as religious clothing in the workplace, acting on religious beliefs as an employee, and how organizations avoid hiring preferences based on religion. These are not unimportant issues, but I haven't worked on them as closely myself. I think in general the ways in which employees and families are valued and supported is a spiritual issue; making sure people are emotionally and physically sound is a spiritual issue, too.

Weber: What projects are you presently engaged in that contend with these issues.

Gray: I've been working on the broader issue of workplace flexibility over the last few years with the New America Foundation. I've worked with the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, Workplace Flexibility 2010, and I've worked with several administrations and with people on the Hill from both sides of the aisle.

Religious groups have brought some opinions on the need to make workplaces flexible in ways that work for both businesses and employees. Over the years, we've had a number of meetings with different religious groups here at New America. On February 11, 2010, we're having an event specifically on religious observance in the workplace. We'll have people from Sikh, Muslim, Jewish, and Christian communities as well as people from the policy world talking specifically about workplace flexibility and religious observance.

Corday: What projects have you worked on in the past that address these issues.

Gray: I've done briefings for Capitol Hill staff on the need for more flexibility in the workplace. There's a Hill working group with whom we've worked with over the past couple of years. Back in 2007, we had a briefing in the House on workplace flexibility and religion in particular. We had someone from *Islamica Magazine*, the Jewish chaplain from Georgetown University, a Christian leader, and me as the moderator.

There was a fascinating turnout of people from both sides of the aisle and both parts of the Hill. There was the late Senator Kennedy's labor council as well as people from very conservative offices. It's not often that you have a briefing in which people from religious communities talk to Hill staffers.

In general, I've written a lot of articles and policy papers on workplace flexibility as well as op-eds. I've advocated on the issue in the media and at conferences. I published one op-ed this past October specifically on workplace flexibility and religion: <http://www.newamerica.net/blog/new-america-voices/2009/religious-observances-show-need-workplace-flexibility-15632>

Weber: What future research do you think needs to be done in this area?

Gray: The Fatherhood Initiative that President Obama is interested in focuses on fathers who are not taking responsibility for their children, and there is great potential to expand that initiative to include workplace flexibility. I think there's an additional component of fathers who are involved in the lives of their children but need to find more balance. Many social conservatives come to the issue of workplace flexibility through family issues. There could be some more research and discussion about attitudes, opinions, and ways to connect to different groups.

I think the cost of the lack of balance needs more research. We did a paper two years ago (http://workforce.newamerica.net/publications/policy/stress_balancing_work_and_family) on the health effects of a lack of workplace flexibility, and I'd like to see continued research on this. I also think there should be more surveys of how religious minorities feel about the workplace and flexibility. Finally, we need research on how religion both contributes to a lack of balance and helps with work-family balance. I'm trying to write a book on that exact subject.

Corday: Is the idea to use religion to help with the balancing? Using the lessons one might learn from a spiritual practice and applying them to work and family?

Gray: Yes, thinking about religious values, such as how the "Protestant work ethic" can contribute to the problem of work-family balance, for instance, but also how principles on stewardship and the Sabbath might have some resonance with people when thinking about work-family balance.

Corday: What role can workplace practitioners and policy makers have in moving this agenda forward?

Gray: I think that HR practitioners need to become as educated as they can on the needs of a diverse workforce. As our nation becomes more diverse in every way, including religion, HR practitioners will need to be increasingly in tune with this in order to hire and retain the best workers. I think policy makers need to support

greater incentives to create more flexible workplaces. Flexible work arrangements, extended time off, and career maintenance and reentry are some of the areas where policy makers have an opportunity over the next few months and few years to make a real difference.

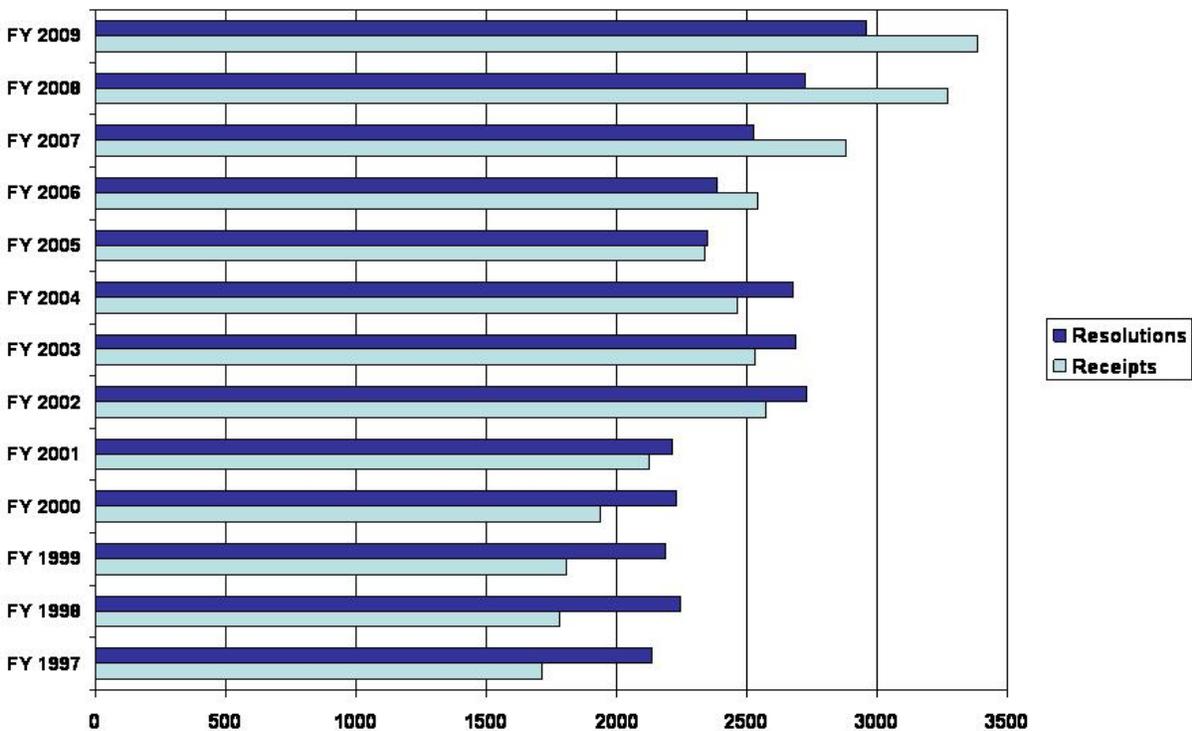
Corday: Do you think education on different religious groups should be a part of diversity training in the workplace? Would that be a good place to introduce this topic to practitioners?

Gray: I think it would be. Racial and gender diversity defined changes in the workplace a generation ago. We're not completely where we need to be, but it's an improvement. Now there needs to be a spotlight on religious diversity. Human resources must be attuned to that in order to successfully retain workers, minimize conflicts, offer appropriate legal protections, and make appropriate workplace policy decisions.

Weber: Are you optimistic about potential policy changes actually taking place?

Gray: I am optimistic about the general workplace flexibility area, mainly because of different groups taking it on. It's not just a woman's issue—it's also a man's issue and an older workers' issue, and an issue for religious Americans.

Religion-Based Charges Filed with the U.S. Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997-2009



Note: FY = fiscal year. EEOC total workload includes charges carried over from previous fiscal years, new charge receipts and charges transferred to EEOC from Fair Employment Practice Agencies (FEPAs). Resolution of charges each year may therefore exceed receipts for that year because workload being resolved is drawn from a combination of pending, new receipts and FEPA transfer charges rather than from new charges only.

Source: U.S. Equal Opportunity Commission. (n.d.) *Religion-based charges FY 1997-FY 2009*. Retrieved from <http://www.eeoc.gov/eeoc/statistics/enforcement/religion.cfm>

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