Word. We want you to do the works of kindness and mercy you are called upon to do. [*Applause*] Thank you.

For too long, for too long, some in Government believed there was no room for faith in the public square.

Audience members. Preach on, brother!

The President. I guess they've forgotten the history of this great country. People of faith led the struggle against slavery. People of faith fought against child labor. People of faith worked for women's equality and civil rights. Every expansion of justice in American history received inspiration from men and women of moral conviction and religious belief. And in America today, people of faith are waging a determined campaign against need and suffering.

When Government discriminates against religious groups, it is not the groups that suffer most. The loss comes to the hungry who don't get fed, to the addicts who don't get help, to the children who drift toward self-destruction. For the sake of so many brothers and sisters in needs, we must and we will support the armies of compassion in America.

The steps we take today will help clear away a legacy of discrimination against faith-based charities. In the new year, I will announce further initiatives to help community groups that serve their neighbors.

Our Nation needs more mentors, particularly, mentors for children whose mom or dad is in prison. Our Nation needs more centers to treat addiction. Our Nation must recognize that if we can change a heart, we're more than likely to change someone's habits and addiction on drugs and alcohol. Instead of building towering bureaucracies, Government should be finding new and creative ways to support local efforts.

I call this approach compassionate conservatism. And in my State of the Union Message, I will ask members of both political parties to move forward with me on this vision. By promoting the compassion of our people, by promoting the great strength of America, we will bring new hope to neighborhoods all across this land.

You know something about America? We meet every challenge that faces our country. That's why I'm so optimistic about our future. And we will answer the call of our times. We will defend our freedoms, and we will lead the world toward peace. And we will unite America behind the great goals of justice and compassion.

In the work of compassion, it is not the people in Government who are the experts; the people in this room are the experts. The people in this room are helping lead America to a better day. You just need to know that. And you need to know that I am incredibly grateful for what you do. There is a saying: Nobody can teach you how to be a good servant of God; you have to learn it on the job. And you are doing that job so incredibly well.

Audience members. And you are, too!

The President. I appreciate your commitment—I appreciate your commitment. I appreciate your service. I appreciate your love. And now I'm proud to sign this Executive order providing equal treatment for faith-based charities all across the greatest land on the face of the Earth, the United States of America. May God bless you all.

NOTE: The President spoke at 12:45 p.m. in the Grand Ballroom at the Downtown Marriott Hotel. In his remarks, he referred to Anthony Cardinal Bevilacqua, Archbishop of Philadelphia; and Franklin Graham, chairman and chief executive officer, Samaritan's Purse. The Office of the Press Secretary also released a Spanish language transcript of these remarks.

Executive Order 13279—Equal Protection of the Laws for Faith-Based and Community Organizations

December 12, 2002

By the authority vested in me as President by the Constitution and the laws of the United States of America, including section 121(a) of title 40, United States Code, and section 301 of title 3, United States Code, and in order to guide Federal agencies in formulating and developing policies with implications for faith-based organizations and other community organizations, to ensure equal protection of the laws for faith-based and community organizations, to further the national effort to expand opportunities for, and strengthen the capacity of, faith-based and other community organizations so that