



## **Guidelines for Political Activities by Churches and Pastors** *September 2007*

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As the 2008 elections approach, and leftist advocacy groups begin again their efforts to silence churches and pastors who would otherwise speak on the great social and moral issues of our time, churches and pastors need to know about the law. In response to that need, the Alliance Defense Fund is providing these guidelines<sup>1</sup> and will respond free of charge to inquiries by churches, pastors, and priests on permissible political activities through informal e-mails, telephone advice and legal opinion letters.

These guidelines summarize the requirements of the Internal Revenue Code as they apply to churches and pastors. These guidelines should not be construed as legal advice regarding your particular situation. Churches and pastors may obtain legal advice free of charge regarding a particular situation by contacting the Alliance Defense Fund.

Many people of faith believe that the societal principles found in the Bible – liberty, peace, justice, reconciliation – require them to assume a responsibility *toward society*. Thus, “it is a limitation and denial of faith not to seek its expression in both a personal and a public manner, in such ways as will not only influence but transform the social order. Faith demands engagement in the secular order and involvement in the political realm.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, for people of faith, it is theologically incoherent to require them to disconnect their faith from their political lives.

But some groups are trying to drive people of faith from active participation in the great debates on the profound moral issues facing our country. On the one hand, when people of faith speak out about moral issues *in public*, they are accused of attempting to force their religion upon others; but when they speak of moral issues *in church*, they are accused of engaging in politics. The Jeffersonian “wall of separation” doctrine has been twisted to attempt to silence people of faith not only in the public square, but also in their churches. This attitude is an unofficial but outspoken bias against people of faith.

A good example of this bias is the issue of abortion. When people of faith speak out against abortion in the public arena, they are told not to force their religious views upon others. When people of faith speak out against abortion in their churches, they are told not to bring

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<sup>1</sup>The Alliance Defense Fund encourages you to copy and share these guidelines with anyone who may benefit from their use.

<sup>2</sup>PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (U.S.A.), GOD ALONE IS LORD OF THE CONSCIENCE: A POLICY STATEMENT ADOPTED BY THE 200<sup>TH</sup> GENERAL ASSEMBLY 48 (1989).

politics into the church. Opposition to abortion is interpreted as support for pro-life political candidates and opposition to pro-abortion candidates, *even when candidates are not mentioned*.

Sometimes churches are also threatened with loss of their tax exempt status, and bogus complaints are filed with the Internal Revenue Service, leading occasionally to IRS investigations. Thus, the possible loss of tax exempt status is used by those hostile to people of faith to chill their right of free speech and to silence them in their own churches.

These are guidelines for action, to help ensure that churches and pastors conform with the law. While the law may allow variations from these guidelines, experience has shown that the safest and best course for churches and pastors is to act in conformance with these recommendations. One caution – state laws may be more restrictive than these guidelines and, therefore, in applying them to specific situations regarding state candidates or state elections, an attorney should be consulted.

### **IRS Tax Exempt Status of Churches**

Almost all churches are tax exempt under section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code on the basis that they are “operated exclusively for religious, charitable . . . or educational purposes.” As a 501 (c)(3) exempt organization, a church:

- (1) is exempt from paying corporate income taxes and donations to it are tax deductible on federal tax returns, and
- (2) may expend funds for religious, charitable and educational purposes and an insubstantial amount on lobbying and to promote legislation.

A 501(c)(3) exempt organization, however, may not “participate in, or intervene in (including the publishing or distributing of statements), any political campaign on behalf of any candidate for public office.” Thus, a church may not participate in a political campaign by expenditure of its funds. Still, not all *political activity* which would influence an election falls under this prohibition.

### **Political Activities**

Political activities referred to here are activities which influence the election of candidates for public office – most of which are referred to as electioneering. Activities which can influence the election of a political candidate are quite broad and range from contributions to a political candidate to activities such as publishing the voting record of incumbents who are also running for reelection. Only some of these activities are considered active electioneering which cannot be done by a church, *but some of this activity can even be done by a 501(c)(3) organization*; it depends on the type of activity.

Active electioneering cannot be done by a church. Active electioneering involves endorsements of candidates and expenditures of funds to expressly advocate the election or defeat of a candidate for political office. Active electioneering is of three types: (1) a direct

contribution, which is a monetary contribution *given* to a candidate, (2) in-kind contributions, which include giving anything of value to a candidate (such as a church mailing list) or paying for a communication that expressly advocates the election or defeat of a clearly identified candidate made in coordination with a candidate, and (3) independent expenditures, which are expenditures expressly advocating the election or defeat of a political candidate made *without* the knowledge of or consultation with any candidate.

Issue oriented speech may incidentally influence elections, but the government is far more limited in its ability to limit discussion about issues. Issue advocacy includes the discussion of issues of public concern, the actions of government officials in office, and the positions of candidates on issues. As long as one does not use explicit words expressly advocating the election or defeat of a clearly identified candidate, one is has broad liberty to praise or criticize officials and candidates.

Pastors, priests, and other church officials may, however participate in political campaigns when they do so as individuals, not in the name of the church.

The following is a list of activities that may be considered political activities in the broad sense and that a church, or a pastor in his individual capacity and using personal funds, may wish to do. A “yes” response means the activity is permissible, a “no” means it is not recommended.

**Guidelines for Political Activities  
by Churches and Pastors**

|  | <b><i>Church</i></b> | <b><i>Pastor</i></b> |
|--|----------------------|----------------------|
| (1) Discuss the positions of political candidates on issues  | Yes                  | Yes                  |
| (2) Endorse political candidates   | No                   | Yes                  |
| (3) Financial contributions to political candidates  | No                   | Yes                  |
| (4) In-kind contributions to political candidates  | No                   | Yes                  |
| (5) Independent expenditures in favor of or against political candidates                                       | No                   | Yes                  |
| (6) Contributions to political action committees (PACs)  | No                   | Yes                  |
| (7) Payment of expenses for attendance at a caucus or state/national political party convention                | No                   | Yes                  |
| (8) Appearance of political candidate at church meeting or service where all candidates were invited to appear | Yes                  | N/A                  |
| (9) Non-partisan voter registration activities   | Yes                  | Yes                  |
| (10) Non-partisan voter identification activities  | Yes                  | Yes                  |
| (11) Non-partisan get out the vote activities  | Yes                  | Yes                  |
| (12) Non-partisan voter education  | Yes                  | Yes                  |

|      |   |     |     |
|------|---|-----|-----|
| (13) | Lobbying for legislation  | Yes | Yes |
| (14) | Expenditures related to state referendums                             | Yes | Yes |
| (15) | Distribute:   |     |     |
| (a)  | Candidate surveys or voter guides                                     | Yes | Yes |
| (b)  | Voting records of incumbents  | Yes | Yes |
| (c)  | Candidate campaign literature   | No  | Yes |
| (16) | Distribution by others of political statements in church parking lots | Yes | N/A |
| (17) | Rental of church lists to political candidates (at fair market value) | Yes | N/A |
| (18) | Church bulletin or newsletter:  |     |     |
| (a)  | Political ads at regular rates  | Yes | N/A |
| (b)  | Political ads at less than regular rate                               | No  | N/A |
| (c)  | report news stories   | Yes | N/A |

## **Explanation of Individual Items**

### **Item 1.      Discuss the positions of candidates on public issues.**

Pastors and churches are free to discuss the positions of candidates on issues – including criticizing or praising them for their positions. This is called issue advocacy.

### **Item 2.      Endorsement of political candidates.**

The endorsement of a candidate includes any statement which uses explicit words to expressly advocate the election or defeat of a clearly identified candidate, such as “elect,” “support,” “defeat,” or “oppose.” This is called express advocacy. Distributing campaign literature from a candidate is one form of express advocacy. A church may not engage in express advocacy.

A pastor, however, in his individual capacity, may endorse a political candidate. The pastor may state his affiliation with his church, as long as it is indicated that this is for identification purposes only and that his endorsement is from him personally, not his church.

One controversial area is whether a pastor may personally endorse a political candidate from the pulpit. The IRS has taken the unequivocal position that this is not allowed. Some, however, believe that the First Amendment’s provisions on free speech and free exercise of religion protect such statements. We believe that this is not a prudent step for a pastor and do not recommend it.

Churches and pastors may support or oppose the appointment of judicial, cabinet or other non-elected officials so long as it does not involve a partisan selection process. This is considered lobbying, not electioneering.

**Item 6. Contributions to political action committees (PACs).**

A political action committee is any organization of two or more people whose major purpose is to engage in active electioneering by contributing to candidates or by expressly advocating the election or defeat of candidates for political office. Churches may not organize PACs and contributions to PACs from church funds is forbidden.

**Item 8. Appearance of a candidate at a church meeting or service.**

A political candidate may appear at a church service. The appearance of a candidate before a church service, however, is limited as follows:

- (1) All legally qualified candidates should be invited;
- (2) The questions should be prepared and presented by an independent non-partisan panel;
- (3) The topics discussed should cover a broad range of issues of interest to the public;
- (4) Each candidate should have an equal opportunity to present his or her views on the issues discussed; and
- (5) The moderator should not comment on the questions or otherwise make comments that imply approval or disapproval of the candidates.

Political candidates may be introduced at a church service or may preach or read scripture without any restrictions so long as they do not speak about their candidacy.

However, public officials, who are also candidates, may be invited to speak to a church *as a public official*, without complying with the above requirements, if no reference is made to the public official's candidacy, if the public official speaks only in his/her capacity as a public official, and if there is no campaign activity in connection with the public official's appearance.

In addition, a church may allow political candidates to use church facilities for meetings or campaign appearances on the same basis that other non-church groups are allowed to do so. If other non-church groups are required to pay some rent for using the church property, the political candidate should be charged the same amount.

**Items 9, 10 and 11. Non-partisan voter registration, voter identification, and get out the vote activities.**

A church may participate in non-partisan voter registration, voter identification and get out the vote activities. To be non-partisan, these activities may not be directed at the supporters of any particular candidate or political party. A church may, however, direct these activities at certain groups using non-partisan criteria, such as church membership, geographic location or position on certain issues. Furthermore, such activities will not be viewed as non-partisan if they are accompanied by literature praising or criticizing particular candidates or political parties for their positions on issues.

**Item 12. Non-partisan voter education.**

A church may participate in non-partisan voter education. Here, voter education involves discussion of the electoral process, such as how to run for public office or delegate, how to register, and where to vote. All these activities are permissible as long as they are not directed at

supporters of one particular candidate or political party.

**Item 13. Lobbying for legislation.**

Churches may spend an insubstantial amount of their funds yearly on lobbying. An insubstantial amount is generally considered 5 to 20 percent of a church's total resources. Lobbying is of two types: (1) direct lobbying, which involves direct communications with governmental officials regarding legislative or executive action, and (2) grass roots lobbying, where the church communicates with its members or the general public urging them to contact governmental officials in support of or in opposition to legislative or executive action. As a result, a church may discuss legislative issues, support or oppose legislation, encourage its members or the general public to support or oppose legislation, and support other organizations with their lobbying efforts. Furthermore, churches may lobby candidates on their positions on issues and distribute educational material to candidates or at political events, as long as this is being done to get out the organization's message and not to assist any candidate.

**Item 14. Expenditures related to state referendums.**

Churches may make expenditures in connection with state referendums, including making a financial or in-kind contribution to a referendum effort. Such expenditures are considered direct lobbying. In addition, state election laws should be consulted for any requirements imposed on state referendum activities.

**Item 15 (a). Candidate surveys or voter guides.**

A church may publish the result of surveys of candidates on public issues (often called "voter guides"). Voter guides should not include an endorsement of a candidate or expressly advocate the election or defeat of any candidate. Further, voter guides should not include advocacy of voting for candidates who support particular issues, i.e., single issue voting. As a result, church questionnaires should conform to the following guidelines:

- (1) Questionnaires should be sent to all candidates;
- (2) The questions should cover a wide variety of issues;
- (3) The questions should not indicate a bias toward the church's preferred answer;
- (4) The candidate's responses should not be compared to the church's preferred position;
- (5) The responses should be published in the candidate's own words or in a neutral, unbiased and complete summary of the candidate's position; and
- (6) The survey should not be published under the direction or control, direct or indirect, of any candidate.

**Item 15 (b). Voting records of incumbents.**

Churches may also publish the voting records of incumbent public officeholders. In the case of publication of voting records, the church has more leeway than in publishing candidate surveys as follows:

- (1) Incumbent's positions should not be compared to the positions of other candidates or the church's position;
- (2) The voting record should be distributed on a regular basis, not just at election time;

- (3) The voting record should be broadly distributed to the general public, not targeted to certain voting blocks;
- (4) A variety of issues of interest to the general public should be presented.

**Item 16.      Distribution by others of political statements in church parking lots.**

Under many state constitutions, if a church parking lot is open for public use, people have a free speech right to distribute literature there. Even if there is no such right, a church is not responsible for political literature distributed by others in their parking lot without their permission or consent and a church has no obligation to bar people from distributing political literature there.

**Item 17.      Rental of church lists to political candidates (at fair market value).**

Lists of members of the church congregation may be rented to candidates for their use in seeking support or raising funds. The candidate must pay the fair market value for the list if it is rented from the church.

**Item 18.      Church bulletin or newsletter.**

**(a) & (b)      Political ads at regular rates.**

A church bulletin or newsletter may publish an ad for a political candidate or political action committee, as long as the ad is purchased at the regular rate for such ads published in that bulletin or newsletter. If discounts are given regular advertisers under certain circumstances, the same discounts may be extended to the political advertiser if the same circumstances exist. A political ad may not otherwise be sold to a candidate at less than the regular rate since this would constitute a financial contribution to the candidate. Churches may accept paid political advertising provided the advertisement is identified as paid political advertising, the church expressly states that it does not endorse the candidate, and advertising is solicited from all candidates on an equal basis.

**(c)      News stories.**

A church bulletin or newsletter may publish news stories on political candidates and political campaigns. The publication of voting records and candidate surveys in bulletins are subject to the limitations delineated in Items 15 (a) and (b). A bulletin or newsletter, however, may not publish an editorial endorsing a candidate for political office.