



# POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS AND THE CHURCH

Recently, several questions have arisen regarding the participation of churches and pastors in political campaigns. This information is provided to give you some general guidance in these matters. The broad, general rules are these:

## **You may not:**

- A church cannot intervene in a political campaign. It does not matter if the intervention is in support of or opposition to the candidate.
- A church cannot contribute to a political campaign. This includes allowing specific candidates use of your facilities, posting of signs encouraging the support of specific candidates or monetary support.
- A pastor should not use the pulpit (or other official church function) to encourage people to vote for a specific candidate, or in support or opposition to specific issues with commentary directed toward the political campaign.

## **You may:**

- A pastor may encourage people to get out and vote.
- A pastor can preach the biblical perspective on certain issues that may also be political issues so long as no additional commentary is provided that could be construed as an attempt to influence people to vote a specific way.
- Provide a published compilation of voting records of all members of Congress on major legislative issues.

The general rule is neutrality. Churches, including pastors and leaders in their official capacity, must guard against the appearance of endorsing or opposing a candidate for political office. Failure to abide by the prohibitions contained in Section 501(c)(3) can have serious consequences.

This does not mean that pastors and leaders cannot be volunteers and participate in campaigns as private citizens.

## **501 (c) (3) Status:**

- Most churches and religious organizations claim a tax exempt status under section 501(c)(3) of the tax code.
- A 501(c)(3) organization is prohibited from ANY participation in political campaigns that is in support of, or opposition to, any candidate(s).
- Violating the prohibitions in section 501(c)(3) can jeopardize a church's tax-exempt status subjecting the church and their activities to review by the IRS.
- The IRS has become more aggressive in recent years in enforcing the prohibitions under section 501(c)(3).

## **Should a church lose its 501(c)(3) status the consequences can be severe including:**

- The church's income and property may no longer be exempt from tax at the federal, state or local level.
- Donor contributions would no longer be tax deductible.
- The church may lose its designation as a religious organization and the protections available with regard to civil rights laws.
- The church may lose its favorable treatment with regard to unemployment tax and minister's housing allowance.

## **Sources, citations and additional information:**

- **Campaign Activities, Richard Hammar**  
<http://www.christianitytoday.com/cbg/churchlawtax/articles/campaignactivities.html#activities>  
(last visited December 5, 2011)
- **Exemption Requirements, Internal Revenue Service**  
<http://www.irs.gov/charities/charitable/article/0,,id=96099,00.html>  
(last visited December 5, 2011)
- **Charity, Churches and Politics, Internal Revenue Service**  
<http://www.irs.gov/newsroom/article/0,,id=161131,00.html>  
(last visited December 5, 2011)
- **The Church and Clergy Tax Guide, Richard Hammar (2007)**

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The information contained in this pamphlet is specifically created for the Iowa Ministry Network and its leadership and pastors. This information is intended as a general guideline and should not be substituted for competent legal advice from an attorney or other competent professional well versed in these matters.