

August 7, 2008

Dear Partners in Faith,

I received a letter in May from the **Alliance Defense Fund** (ADF), inviting me to join other clergy throughout the nation to participate this fall in **“Pulpit Freedom Sunday.”**

The sermon that day:

“is intended to challenge the Internal Revenue Code’s restrictions by specifically opposing candidates for office whose political positions conflict with Scriptural truth. In so doing, it is our hope to recapture the rightful place of pastors and churches in American life.” (attachment)

The **Wall Street Journal** reported that this is an effort by the ADF to create a legal test to the Internal Revenue Service’s (IRS) interpretation of the limits of political speech within churches. The plan is to recruit 50 clergy and their congregations that will intentionally cross the line drawn by the US Congress, and enforced by the IRS. It is hoped that the publicity surrounding their actions will force the IRS to audit and sanction the participating churches.

From the article:

"The action marks the latest attempt by a conservative organization to help clergy harness their congregations to sway elections. The protest is scheduled for Sunday, September 28, a little more than a month before the general election, in a year when religious concerns and preachers have been a regular part of the political debate." (*Pastors May Defy IRS Gag Rule*, WSJ, 05/09/08)

While ADF asserts that “churches and pastors have a constitutional right to speak freely and truthfully from the pulpit, even on candidates and voting, without fearing loss of their tax exemption,” the **Rev. Barry Lynn**, executive director of **Americans United for the Separation of Church and State**, argues that the ADF "free speech" argument is specious because IRS rules merely preclude the government from subsidizing political campaign activity through the use of tax-exempt resources.

Lynn reported to **ABC News**:

"There is a very simple test religious leaders can use to determine if they're violating the law. Ask yourself: 'Is what I'm doing intended to help someone's candidacy?' If the answer is 'yes,' don't do it." (*Pastors Challenge Law*, ABC News Internet Ventures, 06/20/08)

I have found the insights of **J. Bennett Guess, Minister of Proclamation, Identity and Communication, OGM**, helpful as I seek to respond to the ADF invitation. I have borrowed heavily from Guess in writing the following paragraphs.

(*Note the church-state line, but step up to it*, United Church News, 05/01/07)

Just as the American people have many different perspectives on faith, we're equally diverse when it comes to electoral politics. We're Republicans, Democrats, Greens and Independents. We're liberals, conservatives and moderates. As leaders and communities of faith it is important for us to engage the important moral and political issues of the day. Our national commitment to diversity and justice for all binds us together across our different convictions, creeds and practices.

In order to fulfill the role of the faith community in society it's necessary to understand the difference between political and electoral activity. We need to know the church-state line, we need to step up to it, but we must avoid crossing it. As leaders and communities of faith we are called to be God's prophetic and pastoral voices. We can raise difficult issues. We can hold challenging forums. We can champion important causes. But we must not endorse particular candidates, or raise money for their campaigns or parties, or offer special favors not extended to others.

The role of religion in our society—to bring lasting and transforming change, both personally and communally — is always greater than any single candidate, party or election. For leaders and communities of faith to lose perspective of God's long-term reign of peace with justice by focusing on a single candidate, instead, is not only illegal, it's short sighted.

As registered voters, the electoral process belongs to each one of us. But as leaders and communities of faith, we fulfill our role in society by doing acts of mercy, by speaking truth to power, by educating our members and neighbors about important issues, by encouraging all to vote their personal convictions, by praying for our public servants, and by honoring the separation of religion and state.

**I invite you to join** me and many other partners in faith to stand firm against this latest attempt by ADF to cross the line and jeopardize the unique role and moral authority that leaders and communities of faith have exercised throughout the history of our nation. On September 8 we will hold a press conference in Columbus, Ohio, when we will sign a letter to the IRS to express our concerns and request that the IRS immediately investigate ADF's activities and seek injunctive relief to prohibit ADF from engaging in any further promotion of "Pulpit Freedom Sunday."

**I invite you to preach** on September 21 about the freedoms that the laws and the Constitution of our nation provide to all leaders and communities of faith.

St. Paul advised the faithful in Galatia:

**"For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery."**

I will not use the pulpit of my congregation to serve the interests of any candidate or political organization. Instead, I will stand firm in faith for religious freedom. Please join me.

Your Partner in Faith,

Eric Williams, Senior Pastor  
North Congregational UCC  
Columbus, Ohio 43220  
[ncpastor@midohio.twcbc.com](mailto:ncpastor@midohio.twcbc.com)