

Pastors defy prohibition on politicking

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By Naomi Snyder and Jennifer Brooks, USA TODAY



By Shelley Mays, The Tennessean

Pastor David Shelley of Smith Springs Baptist Church in Nashville talks Sept. 26 to members of the news media before a church service in which he made political statements.



NASHVILLE — Nearly 100 pastors across the USA stood up at their pulpits last Sunday and did what federal law says they can't — tell their congregations how to vote.

The campaign was sponsored for the third straight year by the conservative Christian group Alliance Defense Fund as a challenge to the restrictions on pulpit politicking. The group hopes to provoke a legal battle that would overturn the law's prohibition on candidate endorsements from tax-exempt non-profits and churches.

"Our goal always has been to empower pastors to speak freely from the pulpit without government censorship or control," said the Scottsdale, Ariz.-based group's senior legal counsel, Erik Stanley.

IRS spokesman Dan Boone declined to comment, and the IRS has issued no response. On Tuesday, Americans United For Separation of Church and State, a non-profit that has been monitoring the activities of the Alliance Defense Fund, filed a complaint with the IRS against Fairview Baptist Church in Edmond, Okla.

"When churches become cogs in any candidate's political machine, they ought to lose their tax exemption," the Rev. Barry W. Lynn, executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, said in a statement. "I urge the IRS to investigate this matter and apply the law."

Among last Sunday's participants:

- In Yukon, Okla., outside Oklahoma City, pastor Dan Fisher of the 1,500-member Trinity Baptist Church told his congregants he liked Republican candidates Mary Fallin for governor and Scott Pruitt for attorney general, among other endorsements he made.

Fisher said the Bible is clear on the Second Amendment issue, with numerous stories of God's people defending themselves with weapons.

- In Minnesota, Gus Booth, pastor of the 195-member Warroad Community Church in Warroad, endorsed Republican gubernatorial candidate Tom Emmer and several other candidates.



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"We as Bible-believing Christians should elect the most Bible-believing candidates," he said, adding that he plans to send an audio CD of his sermon to the IRS.

- In Nashville, pastor David Shelley of Smith Springs Baptist Church told about 30 people in the pews Sunday about the abortion views of state and federal candidates and said, "We need to end legalized abortion to stop the slaughter."

Church member Lyndell Cowan said after the service that she wouldn't vote for politicians just because her pastor recommended them, but the sermon was helpful.

"You get so little information, you go into the voting booth and you don't know who these candidates are," she said.

The IRS has yet to penalize the churches participating in previous years, Stanley said. Only one church has ever been penalized for running afoul of the law — a New York congregation that took out a full-page ad in 1992 to rail against then-candidate [Bill Clinton](#), Stanley said. It lost its tax-exempt letter from the IRS for a year, he said.

The tax code provides tax-exempt status to churches and other charitable groups unless they participate in political campaigns or make statements on behalf of candidates.

Some churches and non-profits legally start political action groups, but contributions to those organizations are not tax deductible, said Ira Lupu, a professor at [George Washington University Law School](#).

"The whole idea is that taxpayers shouldn't be subsidizing political activities," he said.

David Masci, a senior researcher with the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, said clergy endorse candidates with some regularity across the country in violation of the rules.

"It doesn't seem to be something the IRS devotes a lot of resources to," he said. But, he said, many mainstream churches recoil from the idea of erasing the line between church and state.

"It puts congregations in an awkward position," said [Richard Land](#), president of the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission. "It's not a wise thing for churches to endorse

candidates. We think candidates should endorse us."

"We think the mixing of the sacred nature of the church with the exceedingly worldly nature of politics is ... unseemly," he said.

The [United States Conference of Catholic Bishops](#) provides a "Faithful Citizenship" document on its website intended to help Catholics evaluate candidates based on Church teachings, without offering endorsements.

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