

Time for pastors and churches to voice their opinions

by Randy Bright <http://www.tulsabeacon.com/?p=6354>

Last week I sat down with the building committee of a church, having not built anything for a couple of decades, that was considering a major construction project and was seeking information and advice.

I have long been a proponent of master planning for churches, which might puzzle those who have read many of my articles in which I have stated that cities should not be conducting comprehensive plans that are generally obsolete within a few years of adoption. If I am against that kind of planning, why wouldn't I say the same thing about churches?

The short answer is that churches, like all property owners, are dealing with a finite asset - that is the property within their own property lines. In addition, they plan only for their own property, unlike city government that makes plans for everyone, not just themselves.

Unfortunately, I can no longer advise churches that a well-developed master plan won't be obsolete within a few years of completion. Typically, a master plan is approved by the city as part of its normal site plan review, and the hope is that, once approved, the city would honor it in perpetuity even if it adopts a new form-based code. But there is no longer a guarantee of that. In fact, once a form-based code is adopted, it is likely that a church will have to undergo a new site plan approval to determine if the church's master plan is compatible with the new form-based code.

So from that standpoint, given the unpredictable timing of code adoption from city to city, it is very difficult for churches to do any reliable long-term planning at all. That is not difficult to confirm, since I have written many articles over the years describing the hardships that churches have undergone at the hands of their own city leaders.

The question is, of course, what can be done about it? Church people, and especially pastors, are reluctant or afraid to fight for their rights. For one, they are concerned that if they resist too much it would endanger present or future plans they may have. For two, they are afraid that getting involved in a political process, especially when it would involve speaking out from the pulpit, would endanger their tax-exempt status.

I know that a lot of pastors out there won't like to hear this, but I believe that they must take the lead in defending their congregation's rights to continue to exist and operate within their own communities. They should actively encourage their members to make their opinions known to city leaders, to attend city meetings, and to run for public offices, especially those that involve planning for their communities. Fortunately, there is help available.

If you are not already aware of Pulpit Freedom Sunday, it is time to learn about it and get involved.

In 1954, the Johnson Amendment led us to believe that pastors could never say anything political from the pulpit under the threat that the church's tax-exempt status could be taken away. This has effectively muzzled the church, and we are now paying the consequences of that silence.

The truth is that pastors, up until 1954, have had a long history of political speech from the pulpit, dating back to the Revolutionary War. During the war, pastors were rounded up, hunted down, and executed by the British because they motivated people to fight from the pulpit. The freedoms we have today are largely due to the courage and sacrifices of those pastors. (Go to the Wallbuilders website to learn more.)

Pulpit Freedom Sunday – a movement sponsored by Alliance Defending Freedom – is an effort to restore our freedoms by challenging the IRS to enforce the Johnson Amendment against pastors who preach politics from the pulpit.

In 2008, 33 pastors preached a sermon that expressed support or opposition to political candidates, then sent a recording of the sermon to the IRS. In 2009, there were more than 80, in 2010, nearly a hundred, and in 2011, 539.

This year, there were 1,586. According to Alliance Defending Freedom, not one church has lost its tax-exempt status because the government fears that Johnson Amendment will not withstand a court challenge. And even though the IRS has not done anything to any of the participating pastors, Alliance Defending Freedom has promised to provide legal defense for them free of charge.

I do what I can to alert churches to the problems that our government is creating for them, but I am only one voice. It will take the effort of pastors, laypeople and others to guarantee that individuals and churches keep their rights.

The church and its pastors have been silent for far too long. It's time for all Christians step up to the plate, swallow hard, and say that there is too much at stake to continue doing nothing.
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