

Bush-Cheney campaign under fire for effort to identify, target 'friendly' congregations_61404

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Religion News Service

WASHINGTON (RNS)-The Bush-Cheney campaign is under fire from church-state separationists for asking supporters to help identify "friendly congregations" in Pennsylvania that might be good locations for distribution of campaign information.

"The Bush-Cheney '04 national headquarters in Virginia has asked us to identify 1,600 'friendly congregations' in Pennsylvania where voters friendly to President Bush might gather on a regular basis," said an e-mail from Luke Bernstein, a staffer in the re-election campaign in Pennsylvania.

"In each of these friendly congregations, we would like to identify a volunteer coordinator who can help distribute general information to other supporters."

The Interfaith Alliance and Americans United for Separation of Church and

State say such a move crosses the line of using religion for partisan purposes.

“Whether or not this is legal, this is an astonishing abuse of religion,” said Welton Gaddy, president of the Interfaith Alliance.

“It is the rawest form of manipulation of religion for partisan gain.”

Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, said churches that participate as requested could endanger their tax-exempt status.

“This is the most shocking example of politicizing churches I've ever seen,” Lynn said.

“The last thing this country needs is a church-based political machine.”

The e-mail sought coordinators in places of worship who could help distribute updates and information about voter registration “in a place accessible to the congregation.”

Sharon Castillo, a spokeswoman for Bush-Cheney '04, said the effort was designed to connect individuals, not congregations, to the campaign.

“The message ... that was sent out is intended to encourage individual-to-individual contact,” she told Religion News Service. “We strongly believe that people of faith strongly support this president because of his policies, and we want to empower them to be part of our campaign.”

The reference to “friendly congregations” did not intend to suggest there should be gatherings within houses of worship specifically to help the campaign, she asserted.

“We fully respect the letter of the law, and we in no way want to imply that people should congregate at their places of worship” for political purposes,

she said.

The campaign is launching similar efforts in other states, Castillo added.

Only people who had already signed up on a campaign website to be part of a “social conservative coalition” received the message, she explained.

The sign-up area for volunteers on the Bush-Cheney site mentions “religious conservatives” among 31 options for coalitions they can join.

Other categories include Catholic, Jewish, “pro-life,” home-school and various professional, racial and ethnic groups.

Placing people with religious interests in the same league as farmers and other special-interest groups shows an insensitivity on the part of the Bush campaign, said Gaddy, former pastor of Broadway Baptist Church in Fort Worth.

“This administration shows less sensitivity to actions that compromise the sanctity of houses of worship and the integrity of religion than any previous administration,” despite its frequent discussions of religion and houses of worship, he said.

Sandra Strauss, director of public advocacy for the Pennsylvania Council of Churches, said congregations could distribute nonpartisan bulletin inserts about the right to vote, for example, that would not violate legal and ethical boundaries.

Mara Vanderslice, director of religious outreach for Sen. John Kerry's presidential campaign, said in a statement that the approach of campaigners for Bush is disrespectful to churches and risks their tax-exempt status.

“Religious voters should be encouraged to raise their voices in this election, and we expect millions of devoutly religious people to vote for

John Kerry,” she said.

“Although the Kerry campaign actively welcomes the participation of religious voices in our campaign, we will never court religious voters in a way that would jeopardize the sanctity of their very houses of worship.”

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