

Laity, clergy urged to protect churches from partisan politics

May 11, 2017

Congregational leaders from across the country are being urged to speak out to protect the law that keeps partisan politics out of the nation's pulpits.

Leaders of churches, synagogues and other houses of worship—clergy and laity alike—[can go online to sign a letter](#) opposing efforts to repeal or weaken the so-called Johnson Amendment, which President Donald Trump has said he wants to “destroy.” The 1954 law prohibits congregations and other tax-exempt organizations from directly endorsing or opposing political candidates. But those organizations still can engage in political debate on any issue.

The president's recent executive order, “Promoting Free Speech and Religious Liberty,” zeroed in on the Johnson Amendment, noted Amanda Tyler, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty.

Presidential fixation

“Although the executive order did not clearly change anything from a legal or practical standpoint, it did show President Trump is fixated on this issue,” said Tyler, a leader of a coalition created to preserve the Johnson Amendment and to protect pulpits from partisanship.

That group recruited 99 organizations—from Baptist, to Catholic, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, Sikh and other faith traditions—to send a letter to House and Senate leaders, insisting the current law safeguards “the integrity of our charitable sector and campaign finance system.”

A subset of that group has created a website, “Faith Voices,” which hosts a letter that can be signed by concerned congregational leaders. Like its predecessor, the new letter will be distributed to members of Congress, informing them of the broad-based support for the Johnson Amendment and church-state separation.

“Destroying the Johnson Amendment requires an act of Congress. But we have heard it has been targeted by people working on tax reform, and it might be attached to a spending bill,” Tyler said. “So, now is the time—when people are starting to focus on this issue and congressional action is likely—for people from faith communities to speak up and express their personal concerns.”

Sign and comment

The ecumenical coalition supporting the website and the new protest letter involves the Baptist Joint Committee and at least 10 other groups, including the multi-racial New Baptist Covenant. [Visitors to the site](#) can click a link to add their names to the letter. They also may add comments about “what a change in the law would mean to them,” she said.

“This site is for what we call ‘faith leaders,’” Tyler explained. “That’s not just clergy, but also people who consider themselves leaders in their faith community. ... As Baptists, we believe in the priesthood of the believer, and so we have all kinds of church leaders. Their voices are important.”

The letter begins: “As a leader in my religious community, I am strongly opposed to any effort to repeal or weaken current law that protects houses of worship from becoming centers of partisan politics. Changing the law would threaten the integrity and independence of houses of worship. We must not allow our sacred spaces to be transformed into spaces used to endorse or oppose political candidates.”

Retain independent voices

The letter also discusses the necessity of retaining independent voices in order for faith communities to maintain their prophetic role in society. It mentions the divisive and detrimental effects that would ensue if congregations become politicized.

“I therefore urge you to oppose any repeal or weakening of the Johnson Amendment, thereby protecting the independence and integrity of houses of worship and other religious organizations in the charitable sector,” the letter concludes.

The option that allows letter signers to describe what a change in the law would mean for them is significant, Tyler said, adding, “Often, these individuals are much more articulate on this issue than their advocates in Washington are.”

National polls say repeal of the Johnson Amendment is unpopular. Repeal would affect not only the presidential and congressional elections, but also “every race on the ballot,” Tyler reported. “It is difficult to think of a congregation that would not be divided if the Johnson Amendment were destroyed.”

To learn more about the letter and to endorse it, [click here](#).