

California Episcopal church defies IRS: Takes stand to defend freedom of pulpits

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After consultation with the congregation, clergy and legal counsel, the governing board of All Saints Episcopal Church in Pasadena, California, on September 21 voted unanimously (26-0) “to challenge legally, and in a court of law,” the right of the Internal Revenue Service to proceed with either of two summonses served on the church by the IRS on September 15. The summonses conveyed demands for documents pertaining to an antiwar sermon delivered at the church during the presidential election campaign of 2004.

In October of that year George Regas, the church’s former rector, gave a guest sermon in which he termed President Bush’s doctrine of preemptive war a “failed doctrine.” Although Regas did not explicitly endorse a particular candidate, his sermon prompted an investigation by the IRS, begun in June 2005, to determine whether the church should face a penalty, including possible revocation of its tax-exemption. Endorsement of a political candidate by a church or other nonprofit organization is a violation of IRS regulations.

Bob Long, lay leader at All Saints, said that though the church has nothing to hide from the IRS, the vestry voted in favor of noncompliance “because we believe that these summonses intolerably infringe upon our constitutional rights.”

Commenting on the situation, Ed Bacon, All Saints’ present rector, said: “You can’t talk about the love of the neighbor without talking about public policy.” He also said that the stand his congregation has taken is “not for ourselves alone but to defend the freedom of pulpits in faith communities throughout our land.”