

IRS probes appearance by Obama at UCC convention: UCC president confident no violations occurred

News in the [March 25, 2008](#) issue

The Internal Revenue Service has notified the United Church of Christ that it has opened an investigation into possible “political activities” connected with Senator Barack Obama’s speech at the denomination’s national convention last year.

UCC president John H. Thomas termed the investigation “disturbing,” but said that church officials took great care to see that Obama’s appearance at the UCC General Synod meeting last June in Hartford, Connecticut, “met appropriate legal and moral standards.”

Engaging in partisan political acts can endanger a church body’s tax-exempt status. Thomas expressed confidence that no violations occurred at the convention. The UCC announced February 26 that it has received the IRS letter.

Barry Lynn, the executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, which frequently alerts the IRS to violations by liberal and conservative churches, said it had looked into the situation and “saw no evidence of UCC officials seeking to appear to endorse [Obama’s] candidacy.”

Lynn, who is a UCC minister, added that “public officials can appear at religious gathering to address issues even if they are candidates. However, the sponsoring group may not use the occasion” to endorse or support the candidate’s campaign.

Obama, an active member of the UCC, addressed 10,000 people attending the 50th anniversary meeting on June 23. Before the Illinois senator spoke, a UCC official admonished the crowd that leaflets, signs, placards or other forms of electioneering would not be tolerated. Activity by Obama campaign supporters was barred inside the Hartford Civic Center, according to an article on the UCC Web site.

Don Clark, a Chicago attorney who is the church's special counsel, said the IRS investigation will give the UCC a chance to correct inaccuracies. "It's disconcerting," Clark said, "since the IRS did not communicate with us, or seek any facts from us, in advance."