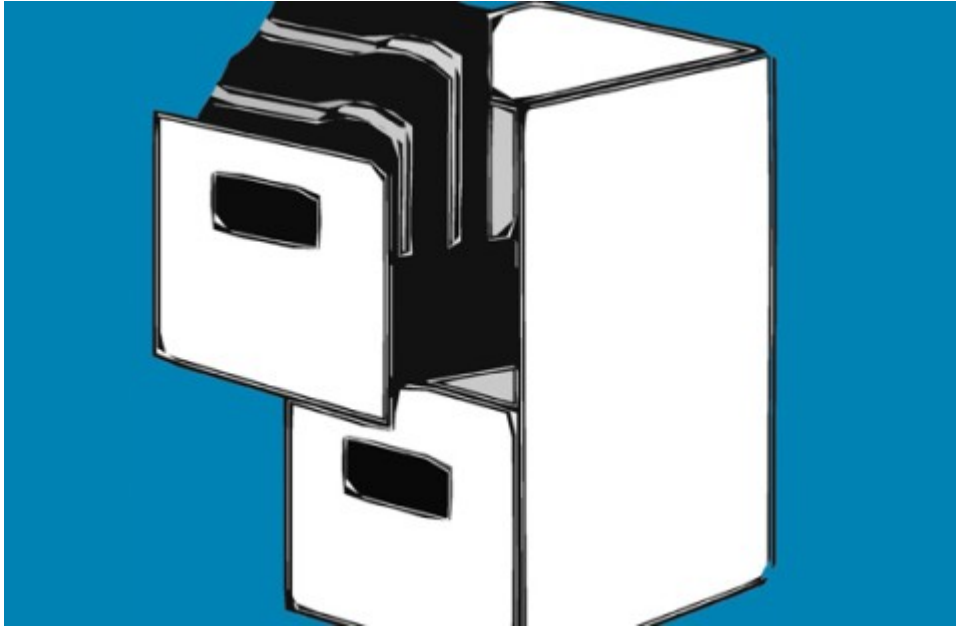


A response to "Unwanted Publicity"

Case by case: Case by case

by [Bradley N. Hill](#) in the [February 6, 2013](#) issue



Read [Ellen Blue's fictional narrative](#) first.

The pivotal moment in this scenario is when Lee says, in reply to Thomas, “Well, you thought it was fine when you and a bunch of our members went to that DREAM Act rally because you want to let those illegals stay here. How is that not political?”

Lee’s comment opens up the question of how or even if a church can work for justice and not be political. It also touches on the difference between clear and sanctioned actions taken by the church as a whole and those taken by individual members. Third, it brings to the fore the question of motive and manipulation. Finally it leads us to ask: “What can be done now?”

Justice and politics: Few Christians regard acts of mercy and compassion as political. Alleviating immediate suffering and meeting needs is seen simply as being charitable and being “like Jesus.” Any attempt to address root causes of suffering or social problems is a quest for justice, and the quest for justice is political because people disagree on the causes of injustice and on how to prevent it.

Disciples of Jesus are called to intervene with a view to transforming unjust systems. The DREAM Act is an attempt to do just that, and it is political. Political is often used as a pejorative word, but all legislation is political. Advocacy regarding any kind of social consensus that leads to a change in culture is inherently political. The church can and should be part of this process while avoiding partisan politics—the line crossed by Lee Martin.

Corporate and individual action: When the pastor and the members attended the DREAM Act rally, it was presumably with the approval of church leaders. Even if they went on their own accord, they were clear about their intent. Lee’s surprise declaration of his candidacy is neither done at the approval of the church nor was he clear about his intent. Lee’s appeal to the “precedent” set by the pastor is bogus. Lee was free to hold his own rally to announce his candidacy and to invite his pastor and church members to attend.

It is obvious that Lee lives out his membership on the fringes of the church. He “married into” the church and does not share its progressive values. It seems his primary group is among his fellow bankers, since at the end he was high-fiving them, not hanging out with church members.

A pastor can never operate as an individual without consideration for his role as shepherd and leader of the church. Pastors must always be aware of how their public behavior affects the church. In this case, Thomas was attempting to lead people toward justice ministries by example—and the church members knew and understood that this was what he was doing. His actions were consistent with the history and theology of the church.

Motive and manipulation: There is a clear distinction between Thomas’s and Lee’s actions. Thomas’s motive was to help Addie. He saw this kind of care as simply part of following Jesus. All who were part of the work party shared this approach and none sought any personal gain from their labor that day—except Lee.

Lee indeed may have shared the view that serving others is Christlike, but he co-opted the process to gain media coverage for his mayoral candidacy. He is one of whom the apostle Paul speaks, “They all seek after their own interests and not those of Christ Jesus” (Phil. 2:21). He violates Jesus’ injunction that “when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing” (Matt. 6:3). The church workers had their labor hijacked by Lee for his personal agenda—which is

why they were gathered together and murmuring. Thomas's endorsement of the DREAM Act was political, but it was not underhanded.

The one qualification to this distinction is the fact that Thomas also—as he recognized—had some self-interest involved: he knew that the church (and his ministry) could benefit from some media exposure. This is a reminder that no one is entirely righteous (Rom. 3:10).

Pastoral leadership: What happens now? Thomas thinks he should have been more suspicious of Lee and that his sermons should have had more of an effect on him. But these are not the immediate issues at hand. Thomas needs to learn that the case is not really about him.

Does he confront Lee, either privately or with the elders? A rift is likely brewing in the church, with many members unhappy. Some may take it upon themselves to confront Lee about his actions. Perhaps the church needs to articulate its values clearly so that the likelihood of a larger debacle is diminished.

Church leaders should not be concerned, however, about the loss of tax status. As 501(c)(3) organizations, churches are very unlikely to lose tax status for endorsing a political candidate. And in any case, church members could easily make it clear that they did not endorse Lee Martin.

With the manager of the television station on the line, one clear opportunity is already at hand for Thomas to address the situation. Thomas could respond like this: “The Lakeview Church was there to help Addie Sikes and we did not call the media. We do acts of compassion and mercy all the time, because that is the way of Jesus. We have no political motivation for doing so. While some in the church might agree with candidate Martin that care for the needy should be left in the domain of private charitable initiatives, not the government, others in our church do not think it is an either/or situation. In any case, the actions of the church in helping to build a wheelchair ramp cannot be considered to be support for candidate Martin, even though he took advantage of the situation for his own agenda.

“That being said, I should add that the church seeks not only to alleviate the needs of the poor and oppressed but to address the causes of poverty. If you want a real story about the relationship between justice, morality, the gospel and politics, then let's have a real interview. When can I come in?”