

Evangelicals decry Bush use of churches: Campaign sends laundry list of duties

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A laundry list of duties sent to conservative Christian volunteers by the Bush-Cheney reelection campaign is causing alarm among evangelical leaders who are concerned that the use of congregations as political organizing bases will endanger churches' tax-exempt status.

The circular, which specifically directs volunteers to send church directories to state campaign officials, dismayed Republican-friendly figures such as Southern Baptist church-state specialist Richard Land. "I'm appalled that the Bush-Cheney campaign would intrude on a local congregation in this way," Land said.

If he were a pastor, Land said to Baptist Press, he would say from the pulpit that for members to hand over directories to win votes is a "violation of the trust of your fellow church members and of the body collectively, just as it would be inappropriate to share it with a marketing group."

Richard Mouw, president of Fuller Theological Seminary, expressed a similar concern to the *New York Times*. "Theologically speaking, churches are really in a position to speak truth to power," Mouw said. "But this smacks of too close an alliance of church and Caesar."

To Richard Cizik of the National Association of Evangelicals the strategy sounded as if an overzealous campaign worker "stepped over the line of appropriate behavior." Added Cizik, NAE vice president of governmental affairs: "When party officials, whether Republican or Democrat, do that, it's simply the obligation of church members to determine what is appropriate, ethical and legal and to say No."

Spokespersons for the Bush- Cheney campaign, responding to inquiries from news media after they learned in early July of the effort, defended the instruction sheet as

legally permissible. “We strongly believe that our religious outreach program is well within the framework of the law,” spokesman Terry Holt told the *Washington Post*.

The sheet lists a total of 22 duties to be performed by certain dates. By July 31, volunteers are to “send your Church Directory to your State Bush-Cheney ‘04 Headquarters or give [it] to a BC04 Field Rep” as well as “talk to your pastor about holding a Citizenship Sunday and Voter Registration Drive.”

By August 15, volunteers are to “talk to your church’s seniors or 20-30 something group about Bush/Cheney ‘04” and “recruit 5 more people in your church to volunteer” for the campaign. They are told to “finish calling all pro-Bush members of your church” during October—in addition to distributing voter guides, though the source of those guides is not named.

Internal Revenue Service spokesman Frank Keith said it would be improper for the IRS, on the basis of limited information, to judge whether such activities would put a church’s tax-exempt status in peril. Keith noted to the *Washington Post*, however, that the IRS recently reminded both Republican and Democratic national committees that such nonprofit groups “are prohibited from directly or indirectly participating or intervening in any political campaign on behalf of, or in opposition to, any candidate for public office.”

The warning was issued about one week after many news outfits reported on a Bush-Cheney campaign e-mail circulated in Pennsylvania that sought to identify 1,600 “friendly congregations” with which Bush backers might assemble regularly.

Distribution of voter guides and registration drives are legitimate at churches as long as they don’t specify preferred candidates or parties. In practice, voter guides tend to be transparent as to which party is favored, if only because of the issues that are given highest priority.

The thousands attending the Southern Baptist Convention’s annual meeting in June cheered avidly during Bush’s videotaped message to them. And the SBC’s 2004 voter guides are expected to reflect ethical stances and political views consistent with those of conservative Republicans.

The most frequently heard critic of Republican attempts to advance faith-based cooperation with government is Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State. He called the new tactic a “shameless attempt

to misuse and abuse churches for partisan political ends.” But Lynn, a United Church of Christ minister, is not a GOP favorite.

The clap of thunder heard this time from the right is more likely to catch attention, observers say. The newest Bush incursion may have some evangelicals calling it “friendly fire” that is strafing otherwise loyalist church leaders.