

February 28, 2003

RELIGIOUS LEADERS SAY:  
OPPOSE THE "Houses of Worship Free Speech Restoration Act" H.R. 235

Dear Representative,

We, the undersigned religious and denominational organizations, are writing to urge you to oppose H.R. 235, "The Houses of Worship Free Speech Restoration Act," introduced by Rep. Walter Jones (R-NC). As religious leaders, clergy and organizations representing people of faith and good will, we believe the Jones bill would turn the inner sanctuaries and pulpits of America's houses of worship into partisan political rally halls.

You may remember that Representative Jones offered a strikingly similar bill in the 107th Congress, entitled the "Houses of Worship Political Speech Protection Act" which failed overwhelmingly by a vote of 178-239 under "suspension of the rules" on October 2, 2002. Though H.R. 235 represents a modified version of that legislation, there remain significant concerns about its implications for both our nation's houses of worship and the integrity of our political process.

As H.R. 235 may be considered by the full House in the coming weeks, we wanted to make you aware of our continued concerns and opposition to this legislation.

Current federal law states that houses of worship, like other 501(c)(3) organizations, cannot legally engage in partisan political activities and retain their tax-exempt status. This provision of federal law has served as a valuable safeguard for the integrity of both religious institutions and the political process. H.R. 235 would lift these important safeguards, and allow houses of worship to keep their tax-exempt contributions while endorsing their favored political candidates.

Religious leaders, denominational offices and faith-based organizations oppose H.R. 235 for many ethical reasons:

- \* Current law upholds the integrity of houses of worship. Churches, synagogues, temples and mosques should not be used as political headquarters or as a means of partisan fundraising for political activities. Tying houses of worship to partisan activity demeans the institutions from which so many believers expect unimpeachable decency.

- \* This bill is unwanted and unneeded by America's clergy. In a Gallup-Interfaith Alliance Foundation poll, a full 77% of clergy were opposed to their fellow clergy endorsing political candidates. Another poll conducted by The

Pew Research Center for the People and the Press and The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life found that 70% of Americans feel that houses of worship should not come out in favor of one candidate over another during political elections.

\* The bill is predicated on false assumptions about existing law. Supporters of these bills have argued that their enactment is necessary to allow religious leaders to speak out on issues of interest to their congregations. The reality is that religious leaders have an absolute right to use their pulpit to address the moral issues of the day.

The only activities tax-exempt houses of worship may not engage in are the endorsement or opposition of political candidates, or the use of their tax-exempt donations to further partisan campaigns. Current law simply limits groups from being both a tax-exempt ministry and a partisan political entity. For a complete guide on this issue, we urge your staff to consult "Politics and the Pulpit: A Guide to the Internal Revenue Code Restrictions on the Political Activity of Religious Organizations," published by the non-partisan Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life.

<http://pewforum.org/publications/reports/IRCbrochureBIG.pdf>

\* This bill runs contrary to the spirit of the recently passed Bipartisan Campaign Finance Reform Act. Despite claiming otherwise, H.R. 235 continues to have campaign finance implications that run contrary to the spirit of the recently passed Bipartisan Campaign Finance Reform Act of 2002. In particular, H.R. 235 would permit considerable expenditures of tax-deductible funds to publicize endorsement-sermons and other election-related presentations made during religious services or gatherings through television, radio, and other media. In this respect, it contradicts Congress's recent emphasis on reducing the influence of soft money on Federal elections and requiring the disclosure of the sources of election spending. For additional information on the campaign finance implications of this legislation, we urge you to consult The Campaign and Media Legal Center's analysis on H.R. 235. (<http://www.camlc.org/press-442.html>)

For these reasons, we urge you to oppose H.R. 235 and any similar legislation that seeks to alter the tax code as it pertains to houses of worship.

Sincerely,

American Jewish Committee  
American Jewish Congress  
Anti-Defamation League  
Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs  
Central Conference of American Rabbis

Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)  
Church of the Brethren Washington Office  
Episcopal Church, USA  
Friends Committee on National Legislation (Quakers)  
General Board of Church and Society, United Methodist Church  
Hadassah, the Women's Zionist Organization of America  
Interfaith Alliance Foundation, The  
NA'AMAT USA  
National Council of Jewish Women  
National Council of the Churches of Christ, USA  
Presbyterian Church (USA), Washington Office  
Sikh Mediawatch and Resource Task Force (SMART)  
Soka Gakkai International -- USA Buddhist Association  
Union of American Hebrew Congregations  
Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations  
United Church of Christ Justice & Witness Ministries

---

Roger.Joseph.Limoges, M.P.M.  
senior public policy associate  
The Interfaith Alliance  
1331 H Street, NW  
Suite 1100  
Washington, D.C. 20005  
202.639.6370 x105