

Political activity in churches limited

Churches must remain neutral if they want to keep tax-exempt status.

WINSTON-SALEM — A federal lawsuit filed against the Christian Coalition for partisan political activity does not mean that churches have to forsake all forms of politicking, ministers and tax experts say.

"There's a great deal of interest in what the boundaries are," Oliver Thomas, a tax attorney for the National Council of Churches, told the Winston-Salem Journal. "There are no boundaries under the Constitution. Churches are able to get as involved as they want to, under the Constitution."

But if a church wants to preserve its tax-exempt status, that all changes.

According to the Internal Revenue Service, churches may engage in political activity, but they must do so with strict neutrality.

"What they can't do is get involved in

campaigns," Thomas said. "They can't give money to a campaign, can't endorse a campaign."

They also cannot oppose a specific campaign. What they can do is speak out on political issues, such as abortion or welfare reform, and individuals can support or oppose certain candidates as long as they don't do it with church's backing.

A nonprofit organization with tax-exempt status — such as a church — can do some lobbying as long as it is not a substantial part of the group's activities, according to the tax code.

But if the organization engages in partisan political activity, it runs the risk of losing its tax-exempt status. Contributors no longer would be allowed to write off their donations to the organization, and the organization would have to pay taxes.

The civil lawsuit that the Federal Elections Commission filed July 30 against the Christian Coalition deals with a different matter.

The Christian Coalition isn't covered by the same section of the tax laws that apply to churches, and the suit doesn't

deal with tax laws at all. The suit, which says that the coalition improperly aided Republican candidates through its voter guides and other activities, involves election laws.

The coalition is considered a "social welfare" organization under tax laws, which means it has more flexible guidelines for politicking than churches and other kinds of organizations enjoy. Because of how it is classified under the tax laws, the coalition does not have to pay taxes, but contributions to it are not tax-deductible.

The Rev. C. Mark Cortis, the pastor of Calvary Baptist Church in Winston-Salem, said his congregation has a committee that discusses political involvement and related issues.

Calvary allows the local chapter of the Christian Coalition to meet at the church each month, as it would similar groups, and any candidate who comes to services at the church around election time is simply introduced, he said. "For the government to say I can't do that, I would fight that pretty vigorously," Cortis said.

Churches have a tradition of giving

information to members and exposing them to candidates' positions on issues, he said, and the government needs to keep its hands off that type of activity.

"I think that any time that the government seeks to restrict churches' activities, that's a dangerous thing, because I believe in a separation of church and state," he said.

The Rev. Serenus Churn, the pastor of Mount Zion Baptist Church in Winston-Salem, said that religious leaders can — and should — discuss certain issues with their congregations.

"The truth of the matter is that politics never can really and truly be divorced from religion," he said, and religious groups must deal with the ethical and moral dilemmas of this world.

Because he has been preaching to the congregation at Mount Zion for 12 years, Churn said, his members probably have a good idea of where he stands on certain issues — and probably which candidates he would support — even though he cannot endorse a candidate on behalf of his church. "I don't think you have to be so overt about it," he said.

Russia edges U.S. in foreign arms sales race

WASHINGTON — For the first time since the breakup of the Soviet Union, Russia regained its lead over the United States last year in arms sales to the developing world, according to a congressional report.

In 1995, Russia agreed to sell about \$6 billion worth of weapons, up from \$3.7 billion the previous year, the Congressional Research Service reported. The last time it reached that level was in 1990, before the Soviet Union collapsed.

New U.S. accords for arms transfers last year dropped to \$3.789 billion from \$6.218 billion in 1994. This excludes commercial sales not in the official U.S. government program.

France, the number-one supplier in 1994, also experienced a drop in new contracts, to \$2.4 billion from \$8.3 billion. Britain was a distant fourth with \$500 million worth of new agreements.

Not all accords are carried out. The United States was still far ahead in actual

deliveries of arms last year — \$9.537 billion worth to Russia's \$2.4 billion — because of the spate of new orders that followed the Gulf War. New orders often take several years to fill.

In addition, there were \$1.2 billion worth of U.S. commercial deliveries in the fiscal year that ended in October 1995.

The report, written by defense specialist Richard Grimmett, was made available this week. It covers arms to be transferred to all nations except the United States, Russia, Canada, Japan, Australia, New Zealand and European countries.

"With options for arms exporters limited in a declining international marketplace, competition for available foreign deals has intensified greatly," the report said.

"There is a continuing likelihood that there will be a concentration of conventional arms sales to a limited number of developing countries," it predicted.

Yeltsin aids: boss's handshake still firm, no heart surgery in the works

MOSCOW — Boris Yeltsin's spokesman condemned the latest report that the president is seriously ill, insisting Monday that Yeltsin worked long days even though he was undergoing daily medical tests at home outside Moscow.

Yeltsin's handshake, according to Kremlin spokesman Sergei Yastrzhembsky, is "firm and hard," and there is no truth to a U.S. magazine report that the president is so ill he needs heart surgery abroad.

Time magazine reported Sunday that the Kremlin was considering sending Yeltsin to a Swiss clinic for double-bypass surgery.

The magazine said it had obtained a Kremlin medical advisory detailing the seriousness of Yeltsin's condition. The Kremlin denied the existence of such a report.

Yeltsin's health has been a serious concern for months, especially during the runoff before his July re-election, when he disappeared from public view

for days.

The 65-year-old leader's low profile continues; Yastrzhembsky said Monday that Yeltsin had decided against making a speech marking the five-year anniversary of the failed Soviet coup this week.

Instead, a representative will read a message from Yeltsin.

"The president is not far from Moscow and spends many hours daily with documents.

He settles the most urgent problems over the phone," Yastrzhembsky said.

"Boris Yeltsin doesn't simply sign all those documents we report about daily, but thoroughly studies and checks them," Yastrzhembsky said.



Russian President BORIS YELTSIN looked weary and slurred words at his Aug. 9 inauguration.

He noted that the president often works in the Kremlin.

Asked about Yeltsin's heart condition, Yastrzhembsky said he had nothing to report, but he met Yeltsin last week and "I can confirm that his handshake is firm and hard."

He did promise to release an official communique on Yeltsin's health after the current round of medical checkups.

However, he added that "every individual has the right to demand that the doctors show a certain degree of discretion."

Yeltsin was hospitalized for long stretches last year with two bouts of serious heart trouble.

Since his re-election last month, he has made several televised appearances, looking frail and sometimes speaking with difficulty.

At his inauguration August 9, he looked weary and slurred his words.

Aides have said that the president was simply worn out by his grueling re-election campaign.

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