

IRS Backs Pastors

✖ The Internal Revenue Service (IRS) ruled last week that a group of ministers gathered for a series of public policy conferences surrounding 2006's election season did not break any rules that would have put their churches at risk of losing nonprofit status.

Though based on a complaint filed against the Houston-based nonprofit Niemoller Foundation, the IRS decision has larger implications for every local minister, as it indicates that pastors cannot be penalized for speaking out or taking political action on moral issues-and encouraging their congregations to do likewise. Besides endorsing a specific political candidate or using ministry funds to support a political cause, pastors are free to become politically active "on behalf of moral values," the IRS stated.

"Not only do pastors and churches have freedom, but now they know about it," said Kelly Shackelford, chief counsel of Liberty Legal Institute, which represented Niemoller to the *Dallas Morning News*.

In 2005, Niemoller spent \$1.2 million hosting a series of closed-door "Pastors' Policy Briefings" for the Texas Restoration Project, a network of evangelical pastors involved in getting their congregations to the polls to vote for biblical values. The meetings included a handful of politicians, including conservative-minded Texas Gov. Rick Perry, who was up for re-election.

The Texas Freedom Network, a liberal group that fights against church-state connections, filed the complaint based on a specific 2006 conference, alleging that the event was a masked effort to get pastors to endorse Perry.

"This ruling is disappointing because it will embolden wealthy

special interests who want to funnel money into nonprofits as a backdoor way to drag churches into partisan campaigns,” said Texas Freedom Network spokesman Dan Quinn reports the *Washington Times*. “We continue to think that using faith as a political weapon is sleazy, regardless of whether the IRS agrees that Niemoller violated its tax-exempt status.”

The IRS directed its decision specifically to Niemoller, which also funded a similar campaign in Florida to support the state’s amendment to ban same-sex marriage. But most conservative groups are trumpeting the verdict as a win for pastors and churches nationwide.

“This liberal attempt to intimidate pastors has backfired,” Shackelford told the *Dallas Morning News* newspaper. “It’s [their] nightmare-they accidentally caused the IRS to put it in writing. ... It’s more than just a win because, thanks to the IRS letter, pastors now know they have the freedom to act as we always believed they had.”