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Political Overtures from Church in Memphis

A Baptist church in Memphis has sent loud signals to all and sundry as to who it feels are considered worthy political candidates for the present municipal elections. The Bellevue Baptist Church, Memphis has linked to another website that lists three candidates deemed pro-family, indicating that they should be supported.

The action taken by the church appears to be a reprisal against what a political action committee run by the Tennessee Equality Project (TEP) did. The TEP political action committee wants to see some anti-gay council members replaced with candidates who are friendlier to the cause of gay rights.

The link is promoted on this statement on the church's website that reads, "Please access the Family Action Council of Tennessee website (www.familyactiontn.org) and click on the Memphis City Council Elections for a list of those councilmen who have stood strong for our values on this issue and are being strongly opposed by the TEP Political Action Committee".

When you click on the link you will be taken to the website of the Family Action Council of Tennessee that lists the accomplishments of three political candidates and lauds them as having "stood strong for pro-family values".

According to the principle of separation of Church and State, it is deemed wrong for churches and their leaders to overtly support or denigrate any candidate running for public office. This is not limited to public speeches or sermons but also any action on behalf of the church, like linking to a political website. In line with this, the IRS has

issued a warning, “An organization has control over whether it establishes a link to another site. When an organization establishes a link to another web site, the organization is responsible for the consequences of establishing and maintaining that link, even if the organization does not have control over the content of the linked site.”

In Bellevue Baptist’s case, the site it linked to happens to be run by a 501 (c)(4) organization that may legally endorse candidates. But the church, as 501 (c)(3) non-profit organization is under a different set of regulations that does not allow making a stand on political issues or candidates.

One of the strongest proponents for church involvement in politics is the Alliance Defense Fund. They openly encourage churches to go against the law by endorsing or opposing candidates publicly during sermons or announcements. Groups like the ADF are aiming to initiate a political movement among churches to elect their favored candidates to office.