



Dear Church Board Members,

As elected leaders in a U.S. recognized non-profit, tax-exempt organization (called a 501(c)3 organization, referring to the relevant section of the tax code), you might be worried about what you and your staff can and cannot say and do during an election year. Many leaders mistakenly think they must avoid any engagement with the political process whatsoever.

**The truth is — there’s a LOT you can do.**

You have a wide range of legitimate ways to integrate your faith, vision, and values with public and political life. You need know what the limits are and carefully avoid wrongdoing, but you also need to use your leadership position for its intended and needed purpose: **to bring moral wisdom, vision, and leadership to your congregation, community, nation, and world.**



We’ve consulted with lawyers who specialize in this area, and here’s a short, simple, and trustworthy summary of what they’ve told us:

**You can** encourage people to vote and educate them on values your faith tradition emphasizes.

**You can** preach and teach about specific issues important to your faith - however “political” they seem.

**You can not** support or oppose, with money, services, or words, any specific candidate or party from the platform of your non-profit organization.

**Your staff and board members can** speak out as individuals, not using church property or media and not “on the clock” while being paid for church-sponsored duties, but using their own voices, their own first amendment rights, their own freedom as moral human beings and Christian leaders. In other words, if your organization wants your members to express the faith and values you teach through their political responsibilities, you as leaders are free to set an embodied example by doing so as individual Christians and citizens in your own personal lives. All you need to do is say, *“I am speaking as a Christian and private citizen, not as an official representative of my church.”*



**Using your own feet, you can march.**

**Using your own personal social media channels, you can speak out.**

**Using your own time and other resources, you can volunteer,  
express yourself, tell your story, and volunteer for the  
campaigns you believe in.**

**Using your own front yard or car bumper or front window  
or tee shirt, you can send out your message.**



When your pastor was ordained or commissioned for pastoral ministry, he or she did not cease to be a human being, or a citizen, or a neighbor with a share of power and responsibility in a democracy. And when you contracted them as an employee of your tax-exempt organization, you did not indenture them as slaves by requiring them to work for your organization 24/7 with no personal life or free time. So you need to help your pastor or pastors have a clear framework within which to express their faith (and example) as individuals, including their human responsibility in a democracy.

So we urge you to stay within the bounds of what is legal and right, but also we urge you to use your organization's freedom as an opportunity to seek and serve the common good (Galatians 5:13). Exactly how you will do that is a matter of your own personal prayer and discernment to be decided in consultation with your pastoral staff members. We are eager to help you in that process at **[votecommongood.com](http://votecommongood.com)**

Many of us believe that our current political situation is unprecedented in its importance and danger. We need responsible, intelligent, and informed moral leadership from our churches at this time. For that reason, we encourage you to take the following three steps as soon as possible:

1. Set up a conversation with your pastoral staff to go over the material in this letter.
2. Reach an agreement that affirms your pastor or pastor's rights and responsibilities in this regard (and record it in your minutes or in a memorandum of some sort). Require them to clarify when *they are speaking as individual Christians and private citizens, not as official representatives of your church.*



Here is a policy statement that you may wish to adapt or adopt:

As a congregation with tax-exempt status, we are free to address public issues as guided by our faith and values, but we are prohibited from using church resources to support or oppose any individual candidate or party. We respect the freedom, rights, and responsibilities of our pastors, staff, and board members to speak out as private citizens in a democracy. As they do so, we expect them to follow the law, making it clear that they are speaking as individual Christians and citizens and not as official representatives of our church. We also expect them to exemplify Christian values when they speak out, including truthfulness, kindness, and clarity.

3. Consider informing your congregation of your policy or guidelines, and take advantage of resources for integrating faith and public life as provided by reputable organizations. Here is a list of organizations we recommend at [votecommongood.com/resources-for-pastors](https://www.votecommongood.com/resources-for-pastors)



Below you will find a list of specific activities that CAN and CAN NOT be pursued from the pulpit, on a church-owned computer, on church-property, as part of paid pastoral duties, at a church-sponsored activity, etc.

In general, 501(c)(3) organizations **MAY** do the following:

- speak out publicly on issues that are important to your organization without endorsing a candidate
- lobbying, including work on ballot measures
- continue to advocate for its issues during an election year
- educate all of the candidates on issues important to the organization
- criticize sitting elected officials, especially if the organization has a history of doing so
- conduct nonpartisan public education and training sessions about participation in the political process or voting
- conduct nonpartisan get-out-the-vote and voter registration drives
- canvass the public on issues
- sponsor candidate debates
- work with all political parties to get your positions included on the party's platform



- conduct voter protection activities
- support or oppose ballot measures (and should count the cost against its lobbying limits), but should avoid tying its ballot measure messages to candidates or political parties.
- engage in individual electoral or partisan activity (off the clock, not using organizational resources)



In general, 501(c)(3)s organizations **MAY NOT** do the following:

- endorse candidates for public office in their official capacity
- make any campaign contributions (whether monetary or in-kind)
- make expenditures on behalf of candidates
- allow candidates to fundraise or otherwise campaign using your organizations resources
- ask candidates to sign pledges on any issue (for instance, ask candidates if they promise to support the DREAM Act if elected)
- increase the volume or amount of criticism of sitting officials who are also candidates, as election time approaches
- criticize sitting legislators or other elected officials by attacking their personal characteristics or attacking them in their status as a candidate, rather than focusing on a policy issue.



In 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., warned white Christians about the trap of “the white moderate” [ <https://charterforcompassion.org/images/SocialJustice/birmingham.pdf> ]. Sadly, in the decades since, too few churches have heeded that warning. That’s why we urge you to encourage your church to preach and teach boldly about the political implications of Scriptures like “Love your neighbor as yourself,” “Do not lie to one another,” “As much you have done it to the least of these,” “The Lord God . . . put the human in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it,” or “In Christ there is no Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free . . . male and female.” Encourage your pastor to teach that racism, carelessness toward the poor, and destruction of God’s beautiful creation are sins, and that we should vote not for personal interest alone, or party loyalty alone, or one single issue alone, but for the common good, as the New Testament says (Philippians 2:3-4).

It can be hard being on a church’s leadership team. But if you are willing to lead boldly, wisely, and with love, it’s a deeply rewarding calling and an opportunity to do great good.