

The Presbytery of Western North Carolina overtures the 223rd General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of the United States of America to amend G-3.0104 of the Book of Order to include the following statement:

“No congregation, session, presbytery, synod, or national office of the Presbyterian Church of the United States of America, nor any individual acting on behalf of or in an official capacity for the above institutions, shall publicly endorse or oppose, or otherwise encourage or discourage others to vote for or against an individual running for public office.”

Rationale:

In his letter to the church in Rome, Paul reminds believers who sometimes disagree that "each of us will be accountable to God. Let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another." (Romans 14:12-13). Likewise, the Apostle Peter urges Christians as servants of God, "to live as free people, yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil" (1 Peter 2:16). As the church seeks to learn anew how to appropriately engage with society, opportunities for growth abound as do opportunities to create more harm than good.

Since 1954 the Johnson Amendment has been a provision in the United States tax code prohibiting charitable organizations, including churches, from endorsing or opposing political candidates. This allows for charitable organizations to qualify for tax exemption and qualifies donations to these organizations as tax exempt. In recent years, there has been discussion regarding the repeal of this amendment; those in favor of repeal claim that the amendment infringes on the first amendment rights of clergy and other leaders of religious and charitable organizations while those in favor of maintaining the statute fear that a repeal would lead to religious and charitable organizations becoming safe-havens for tax exempt and un-reported political contributions.

While full repeal of the Johnson Amendment has not yet come to fruition, action has been taken to loosen the interpretation and implementation of the statute when churches and secular charitable organizations are found to be in violation.

The Presbyterian Church of the United States of America has long supported the notion of the separation of church and state. We can see this throughout our Foundations of Presbyterian Polity. F-3.0101 affirms that "God alone is Lord of the Conscience", and that "We do not even wish to see any religious constitution aided by the civil power, further than may be necessary for protection and security, and at the same time, be equal and common to all others." F-3.0105 states that "... we also believe that there are truths and forms with respect to which men of good characters and principles may differ. And in all these we think it the duty both of private Christians and societies to exercise mutual forbearance toward each other." If a council or officer aligns themselves for, or against, a particular candidate, then they risk becoming a political body, rather than a theological one. In the current hyper-partisan political climate, it is paramount that the church maintain the ability to speak with authenticity and authority to all points of the political spectrum. To publicly and explicitly endorse or oppose a political

candidate would compromise the ability of the church to do so. As is written in the Theological Declaration of Barmen, “We reject the false doctrine, as though the church could and would have to acknowledge as a source of its proclamation, apart from and besides this one Word of God, still other events and powers, figures and truths, as God's revelation.” (8.12). “We reject the false doctrine, as though the church were permitted to abandon the form of its message and order to its own pleasure or to changes in prevailing ideological and political conviction.” (8.81). And finally, “We reject the false doctrine, as though the church, apart from this ministry, could and were permitted to give to itself, or to allow to be given to it, special leaders vested with ruling powers.” (8.21).

While it is clear that the principles of this overture are present in abundance throughout the Book of Order and Book of Confessions, there is no explicit guidance offered to governing bodies or to those in leadership positions regarding endorsing or opposing candidates running for political office. This amendment to the Book of Order precludes such activity while still allowing for churches and leaders to actively engage with secular issues that touch on the life of faith, to work towards bringing God's reign of justice and peace ever closer to reality.