

CHURCH AND STATE

Colorado Springs churches are not shy about using their political clout

BY HEIDI BEEDLE | heidi@csindy.com

COLORADO SPRINGS earned its reputation as a haven for Christian evangelicals during the '90s, when organizations like Focus on the Family supported Colorado's anti-LGBTQ Amendment 2, which prevented municipalities from enacting anti-discrimination laws protecting that population. While the power and influence of Focus on the Family may have since waned, Colorado Springs is still home to hundreds of nondenominational evangelical organizations. The November 2020 school board elections, which saw a number of districts elect a conservative majority, show that faith organizations in Colorado Springs still have significant power to sway elections. That power is drawing the attention of a group of Academy School District 20 parents, who say these churches are overstepping their authority under IRS regulations and the Johnson Amendment, which prohibits 501(c)(3) nonprofit organizations from endorsing or opposing political candidates.

Illustrating the close ties between local churches and politicians, on Jan. 12, U.S. Rep. Doug Lamborn's (R-CD5) faith adviser, Jeff Anderson, sent an email to Colorado Springs pastors with an attachment written by The Road Church senior pastor Steve Holt. "I believe we are on the edge of a mighty 'Kingdom of God Revolution' in El Paso County," read the attachment. "The amazing relationship that has developed between many of us pastors and our public officials and leaders in the county (in government, education, and health) has been powerful. In the past school board election cycle, driven by many of you and our nonpartisan Church Voter Guide, we were able to see a huge turn around in our school boards, resulting in 5 out of 6 school districts changing leadership. This then resulted in all government mandates within the schools being rescinded!"

Holt invited pastors to attend training for the upcoming caucus and assembly process. "In 2022 we have elections coming up that are complex in Colorado," he wrote. "With the combination of caucuses



Fervent Church has hosted the El Paso County GOP and FEC United, as well as a host of conservative speakers.

and the Assembly, I wanted to invite you to a special pastors and leadership gathering at The Road to explain the process and how we can use our democratic process to elect men and women of integrity into office. On Tuesday morning, January 25th, at 9am, Pastor Jeff Anderson and I are inviting pastors and leaders to join me at The Road for a special one-hour meeting to share the caucus and assembly process. It will include breakfast. If you have a heart for a Kingdom Revolution in government, please join us."

Anderson was listed as a speaker for the event alongside Holt and Chaim Goldman, director of the Church Voter Guides. According to Cassandra Sebastian, Lamborn's communications director, "Pastor Jeff, Congressman Lamborn's Senior Faith Advisor, did not attend the event on Jan. 25 at The Road. In his role, Congressman Lamborn's Senior Faith Advisor connects with a myriad of nonprofit organizations in our community on behalf of the Congressman."

In an email, Holt said of the Jan. 25 event, "As a pastor, I consider it a biblical responsibility to equip my congregation to apply their faith in every aspect of life. Last week, we hosted an event to help

other local pastors educate their people about civic processes (like the caucus) and responsible Christian citizenship. No political parties or candidates were mentioned during the event."

Goldman, in an email, also noted that his activity was within the boundaries of IRS regulations. "Church Voter Guides serves the public by providing objective research and education on matters specifically of interest to Christians, primarily through the production and distribution of 501(c)(3)-compliant, nonpartisan voter guides," he said. "Therefore we do not endorse or oppose any candidates for public office or any political party. Our voter guides cover all candidates equally by asking those running for specific office the same questions, limiting the word-count of their responses, and publishing their answers verbatim. We do not edit, revise, or editorialize candidate responses to our questionnaire; we do not even correct their typos (if any)."

While this political activity may seem odd to secularists, it is protected activity. "Churches are able to engage in political activity from the standpoint of talking about 'issues of concern,'" says Joshua Wilson, the chair of the University of Denver's Political Science Department. "What they're not allowed to do is explicitly endorse a candidate. I think that when people think of separation of church and state, there's probably a misconception amongst a lot of people that essentially churches and religious entities can't be involved in politics or governance or gov-

ernment in any way, and that's not true."

The IRS has published guidance that outlines how churches, and all 501(c)(3) organizations, can stay within the law regarding the ban on political activity, noting that "certain activities or expenditures may not be prohibited depending on the facts and circumstances." For example, the IRS states that "Section 501(c)(3) organizations are permitted to conduct certain voter education activities (including the presentation of public forums and the publication of voter education guides) if they are carried out in a nonpartisan manner. In addition, section 501(c)(3) organizations may encourage people to participate in the electoral process through voter registration and get-out-the-vote drives, conducted in a nonpartisan manner."

The IRS also clarifies that "the political campaign intervention prohibition is not intended to restrict free expression on political matters by leaders of organizations speaking for themselves, as individuals."

During November's elections, important issues of public policy included critical race theory, which was misrepresented by conservative organizations like the Heritage Foundation. Parents who erroneously believed the college-level critical theory was being taught in K-12 classrooms packed local school board meetings in District 49, Colorado Springs District 11 and Academy District 20, among others. Conservative candidates turned that outrage into successful school board campaigns, flipping boards in D49, D11 and D20.

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— STEVE HOLT

SUPPORT FROM FAITH COMMUNITIES can make a big difference in political races. "Churches are, and for quite a long time, have been really important in American politics," says Wilson. "There's quite a few different reasons for that. One of them is — think about church congregations — it's a ready-built system to access people and organize people and organize voters. Churches and their congregations are attractive spaces for those invested in politics and social movements because of the pre-existing organization, because of the pre-existing connections between people, and those various kinds of bonds. Churches are very important to look at."

A group of Academy District 20 parents — who declined to be individually identified — have been looking at churches since the November school board election and have recently filed an official IRS

complaint against Fervent Church, claiming that their connections to the El Paso County Republican Party and conservative activist groups like FEC United put it at odds with IRS rules.

Fervent Church has hosted recent El Paso County GOP executive committee meetings, which resulted in the El Paso County GOP giving the church a donation, according to Chair Vickie Tonkins, who was recently criticized by the Colorado GOP for improper involvement in primaries. The pastor of Fervent Church, Garrett Graupner, serves as the National FEC Chaplain and Pikes Peak Faith Pillar Pastor for FEC United. The IRS complaint notes that Fervent has also hosted speakers like Charity McPike of the U.S. Election Integrity Plan, a group that supports conspiracies regarding the 2020 presidential election, Priscilla Rahn, the vice chair of the Colorado Republican Party, Scott McKay,

a conspiracy theorist and noted personality in the far-right pro-Trump QAnon extremist movement, and Rick Green, a Patriot Academy Constitution Coach whose speaking fees include "a \$3,000 honorarium plus travel expenses." Patriot Academy runs programs that promise "You and your church can be the catalyst for restoring Biblical values in your neighborhood, State, and Nation," and pushes false claims that "Nazis are... just racist big-government leftists." Graupner did not respond to the *Indy's* request for comment.

Whether the IRS finds merit in the D20 parents' complaint or not, the odds are in Fervent Church's favor. "Traditionally, the IRS hasn't acted in relation to the Johnson Amendment," says Wilson. "It's a law on the books, but there's not a lot of enforcement that backs these things up. Alliance Defending Freedom, which is one of the major if not the most significant conservative Christian legal organizations, has been trying to push a case on this issue. They've basically tried to organize an activity [Pulpit Freedom Sunday] where evangelical churches really push the limits of what's allowed by the Johnson Amendment. There's very limited enforcement, and in light of that limited enforcement, there's a law on the books

but not so much a law in action from the state side. It's left up to churches to figure out what they want to do and what they're comfortable with doing."

Adding to enforcement difficulties, on May 4, 2017, President Donald Trump signed an executive order, titled "Promoting Free Speech and Religious Liberty," which instructed the IRS to back off enforcement of the Johnson Amendment. "Trump completely overstated what he did in relation to the Johnson Amendment," says Wilson in reference to Trump's claims that he "did away" with the Amendment. "What he did was sign an executive order that tried to diminish enforcement of it, but what we also know is there wasn't robust enforcement of the amendment anyways."

While many churches, like the Catholic Church or the United Methodist Church, have internal leadership hierarchies and policies for political activity, nondenominational evangelical churches like The Road and Fervent do not. "Many conservative white evangelical churches are really decentralized, and because of that there's much less control," says Wilson. "Conversely there's much more independence for each church and its church leaders to decide what it wants to do." **F**