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Watchdog group files 'Pulpit Freedom' complaints with IRS

by Adelle M. Banks by Religion News Service

A Washington-based watchdog group has filed six complaints with the Internal Revenue Service after dozens of clergy participated in a challenge to rules that ban politicking from the pulpit.

At least 31 pastors took part in "Pulpit Freedom Sunday" (Sept. 28), according to the initiative's organizers at the Alliance Defense Fund, a conservative Christian law firm based in Arizona.

"These pastors flagrantly violated the law and now must deal with the consequences," said the Rev. Barry W. Lynn, executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State.

Pastors endorsed Sen. John McCain for president in five of the six churches, Lynn said.

Gary McCaleb, senior counsel with ADF, said: "It's not a matter of separation of church and state when you've got the IRS in the pew. That's oppression of free speech."

McCaleb said 31 pastors who agreed to participate in the plan preached on Sunday. The ADF has asked the pastors, most of whom are evangelical, to send their sermons to the law firm, which plans a court challenge of the IRS rules against partisan politicking by tax exempt organizations.

Asked if all the participating pastors had endorsed a candidate for president, McCaleb said, "I think some had a pretty direct statement." He said the goal was to find a group of pastors who supported an "exercise of faith" that could lead to a Supreme Court case.

Americans United's complaints were filed against: Calvary Chapel on the King's Highway, Philadelphia; Bethlehem First Baptist Church, Bethlehem, Ga.; Fairview Baptist Church, Edmond, Okla.; Warroad Community Church, Warroad, Minn; New Life Church in West Bend, Wis., and First Southern Baptist

Church, Buena Park, Calif.

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