

WASHINGTON STATE CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

GUIDELINES FOR PARISHES AND AGENCIES

ON POLITICAL ADVOCACY

The Bishops nationally in their 1996 document - POLITICAL RESPONSIBILITY: Proclaiming the Gospel of Life, Protecting the Least Among Us, and Pursuing the Common Good - call individuals and the organizational Church to a ministry that inevitably involves political consequences. This excellent teaching statement while encouraging political involvement maintains a distinct role for the Church in the political order which includes the following:

- educating the faithful regarding the teachings of the Church and their responsibilities;
- analyzing issues for their social and moral dimensions;
- measuring public policy against Gospel values;
- participating with other concerned parties in debate over public policy;
- speaking out with courage, skill, and concern on public issues involving human rights, social justice, and the life of the Church in society.

WHAT WE CAN DO

Appropriate Church Political Activity

Catholic Church officials and organizations have the right to make comments and provide moral guidance on political issues. The Washington State Catholic Conference (WSCC) encourages the following political activities as appropriate for Church involvement:

1. Encourage Catholics to vote and to become involved in political activities.
2. Use parish bulletins to publish and distribute materials on public issues as approved by the WSCC.
3. Express the Church's teachings as applied to public issues.
4. Organize voter registration campaigns and "get-out-the-vote" campaigns including assistance to the handicapped/elderly, (e.g.; rides to the polls, information on how to obtain absentee ballots) the non-English speaking, and the disadvantaged.
5. Organize committees for political education/involvement in issues.

*The Catholic Church is committed to the value of being non-partisan. In addition, the Church and its many organizations maintain a tax-exempt status under 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Tax Code which dictates the political activities that a 501(c)(3) organization can and cannot do.

Guidelines

6. Develop a legislative network to review legislative activity and advocate for the Church's public policy agenda.
7. Conduct issue and/or fair and balanced candidate forums and make Church facilities available. Candidate forums can be hosted by the Church or by a neutral organization.
8. Distribute questionnaires or voting records of all candidates on a wide range of issues provided the structure and content of the material has an educational purpose and avoids bias toward any candidates.
9. Organize visits to the legislature and letter writing campaigns on legislative issues and initiatives in concert with Catholic Church positions.
10. Allow the use of parish facilities to organizations to discuss issues that are in accord with Catholic Church teaching.

WHAT WE CANNOT DO

Inappropriate Church Political Activity

Catholic Church officials and organizations can not be involved in candidate races or the activities of any political party. The Washington State Catholic Conference judges the following political activities as inappropriate for Church involvement:

1. Endorse or oppose candidates or political parties, or actively engage in political campaigns for or against any candidate or party (e.g.; through homily, newsletter, flyer, bulletin, or by providing a mailing list).
2. Permit the distribution on Church premises, including parking lots, of any printed materials, including voter guides that favor or oppose a candidate or promote the agenda of a political party.
3. Allow Church bulletins to promote candidates through announcement or advertising.
4. Evaluate candidates in writing or in speech. Types of objectionable evaluations include:
 - a. Labeling a candidate, e.g. "pro-school aid" or "anti-life."
 - b. Comparing or rating candidates, e.g. a scale of plus (+) or minus (-) or otherwise saying "X is right",
"Y is wrong."
 - b. Issuing any "marked" sample ballots that tell people how to vote.
5. Give Church money, in-kind services, or any funds arising from church related sources to candidates for political office or holders of political office or political parties.
6. Allow the use of the Church itself or its facilities for commenting on a candidate for public office or allow a candidate to use these facilities to make public statements during an election campaign.

(Facilities may be used to hold public informational forums presented by elected officials at times other than during an election campaign.)

7. Permit the distribution of political materials that have not been reviewed by WSCC.
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Guidelines

Limitations on partisan political activity apply to organizations and persons acting in an official role as church leaders (bishops, clergy, pastoral religious leaders, religious, diocesan agency directors, etc.). Pastors and parish leaders must be especially careful not to use their position to promote candidates. Inappropriate promotion would include:

- a) Commenting on candidates from the pulpit, including introductions as members of the parish during an election campaign.
- b) Allowing your name with title to be used on candidate campaign literature.

Church leaders acting as private citizens have a First Amendment right to support or oppose political candidates or parties. However, they must take care to insure that no mis-understanding arises as to whether they are acting as individuals or as Church/organizational representatives. The use of official Church titles and stationery must be avoided.

INITIATIVES AND REFERENDUMS

The WSCC reviews all proposed initiatives and referendums. After appropriate consultation, the WSCC supports, opposes or takes no position on each measure.

Given the current popularity of the initiative process in Washington State, individuals and groups may seek to gather signatures on Church property or at Church activities. The gathering of signatures is not encouraged or appropriate unless specifically authorized by the local Bishop. When neither the WSCC nor the Diocese has taken a public position on a specific initiative or referendum, granting the use of Church facilities to groups either supporting or opposing the issue should rarely be allowed. The local Bishop may have specific instructions for the diocese. The WSCC should be consulted for background information on the issue.

USE OF PARISH PROPERTY

Many individuals and organizations seek support from Catholic parishes and individual Catholics for their causes. Some may want to distribute information to parishioners or place flyers on cars in parish parking lots. Recent Washington State Supreme Court rulings hold that free speech rights do not give individuals or organizations the right to distribute information on church property against the desires of the parish.

Pastors, parish administrators, and pastoral life directors have the right to allow or prohibit the following activities on parish property:

- Distributing information to parishioners
- Gathering signatures for petitions
- Placing leaflets on car windshields in parish parking lots

If permission is granted for any of the above activities, it must be subject to the restrictions on political activity described in the section titled "WHAT WE CANNOT DO." The distribution of any political material is to be reviewed by WSCC.

The WSCC is available to address any questions regarding political activity.

Phone (206) 301 0556.

These guidelines were developed, after consultation with the General Counsel of the United States Catholic Conference and attorneys for the Washington dioceses, and have been approved by the Washington State Catholic Conference.