

Pastor defends sending pro-Blackwell e-mail

Wednesday, April 19, 2006

Joe Hallett

THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

A Fairfield County pastor granted a Good Friday request from the campaign of J. Kenneth Blackwell to distribute an e-mail boosting the GOP gubernatorial candidate.

But the Rev. Russell Johnson said he complied with Internal Revenue Service rules since he only sent the missive to a group of friends, not to his church or the nonprofit Ohio Restoration Project network he heads.

Johnson, pastor of Fairfield Christian Church in Lancaster, has been accused of improperly using his church to promote Blackwell's campaign. He acknowledged yesterday that, at the behest of the Blackwell campaign, he e-mailed "to some of my friends" a link to a promotional video of Blackwell on the candidate's Web site.

"As an individual, I still have freedom of speech," Johnson said.

Even so, the leader of a group of Columbus pastors that has filed a complaint with the IRS against two evangelical mega-churches, including Johnson's, said the e-mail is more evidence of improper coordination between the Blackwell campaign and the church leaders.

"This is very clearly partisan behavior," said the Rev. Eric Williams, senior pastor of the North Congregational Church in Columbus.

Two independent experts agreed, however, that the e-mail from the Blackwell campaign was worded to avoid getting Johnson's church and the Ohio Restoration Project in trouble with the IRS for illegal political activity by tax-exempt organizations.

"If they didn't get counsel to write it, they knew what they were doing and they knew that e-mail might get out," said Donald Tobin, an associate professor of law at Ohio State University and an expert on tax-exempt organizations.

The communication between the Blackwell campaign and Johnson was revealed yesterday, just two weeks before the May 2 Republican primary election showdown between Secretary of State Blackwell and Attorney General Jim Petro. It was another sign that Blackwell — taking a page from President Bush's successful 2004 Ohio strategy — is nurturing a network of friendly churches and "pro-family" organizations.

Jeff Ledbetter, a Blackwell campaign official, sent the e-mail to Johnson and Bill Lavelly, president of the Ohio Restoration Project, asking them to circulate the promotional video.

Johnson is founder and chairman of the Ohio Restoration Project, an organization of religious conservatives with a goal to develop a network of "Patriot Pastors" and sign up 400,000 new "values voters" for the Nov. 7 general election.

In his e-mail to Johnson and Lavelly, Ledbetter wrote:

"I am writing to you as private citizens, away from your responsibilities at Fairfield Christian and the Ohio Restoration Project. Below, I have copied a sample message that contains a link to a 2 minute video on Ken and his issues . . .

"We need to get this video out into circulation. Just as with the DVDs, this video helps people understand who Ken Blackwell is. While you can't use the Patriot Pastors list to circulate it, I am hopeful you will use your personal network to get it around."

The link connects to a video on Blackwell's campaign Web site. The reference to a DVD, according to Johnson, is from a Blackwell address last year at the Grove City Church of the Nazarene. Johnson said he handed out that DVD to "maybe a half-dozen" friends.

In response to Ledbetter's request, Johnson said he included a Web link to the Blackwell video in an e-mail to a few dozen friends. Johnson said he did not use church resources to distribute the e-mail.

"I sent it to some of my friends, not as Pastor Johnson, not as an official of the Ohio Restoration Project, but as Citizen Russell Johnson," he said.

Blackwell campaign spokesman Carlo LoParo said Ledbetter's e-mail clearly was addressed to Johnson and Lavelly as private citizens.

"He's not asking for the church to become involved, he's asking for Pastor Johnson to disseminate this through his personal network," LoParo said. "Certainly, the pastor does not lose his right to free speech."

Williams was skeptical: "It's hard to imagine any pastor having a personal e-mail list that does not include, to a large extent, members of the church and other professional contacts that are related to church work."

OSU's Tobin said that as a private citizen, Johnson "can communicate with the Blackwell campaign. The question is whether he's using church resources."

John W. Whitehead, president and founder of The Rutherford Institute, a national organization providing legal services in defense of religious and civil liberties, said it appeared Ledbetter "talked to a lawyer" in crafting the e-mail and that Johnson probably did not violate IRS rules.

"It's fine to personally endorse a candidate, but you cannot use your church resources to do it," Whitehead said. "You can write a letter to your friends."

jhallett@dispatch.com