

God, politics and taxes

ON OCT. 31 LAST YEAR, the Sunday before the 2004 presidential election, a former Texas legislator named Rick Green spoke before 3,500 congregants at the Calvary Chapel, an evangelical church in Fort Lauderdale, Fla. "Vote for righteousness," Mr. Green urged, and directed people to voters guides published by the conservative Christian Coalition that were on display in the hallway of the church.

Meanwhile, in St. Paul, Minn., at the Nativity of Our Lord Catholic Church, the Rev. Christopher Wenke did not mention either President George W. Bush or his Democratic challenger, Sen. John F. Kerry of Massachusetts. He simply declared that love of humanity "must begin with the protection of life, from conception to natural birth."

Across the country in Pasadena, Calif., at All Saints Episcopal Church, former Rector George F. Regas delivered a guest sermon. He said that "good people of profound faith" could vote for either candidate, but then proceeded to blast Mr. Bush's policies on Iraq and tax cuts for the wealthy.

Three churches, three sermons. The first two were reported by *The New York Times*, the third by *The Los Angeles Times*. Now one of these churches has been notified by the Internal Revenue Service that it may have its tax-exempt status revoked for violating that part of the tax code that prohibits tax-exempt organizations, including churches, from intervening in political campaigns and elections.

Guess which one? Those with suspicious, or perhaps cynical, minds will guess that the IRS has political motivations for singling out All Saints, one of Southern California's largest and most liberal congregations. "It seems ludicrous to suggest that a pastor cannot preach about the value of promoting peace simply because the nation happens to be at war during an election season," the church's tax attorney, Marcus Owens, a former head of the IRS's tax-exempt section, told the *L.A. Times*.

The number of churches getting warnings has increased in recent years, Mr. Owens said, as the IRS has delegated more authority to frontline agents, whom he says are ignorant of the law. All tax-exempt organizations, including churches, are forbidden from engaging in par-

MATSON'S VIEW



YOUR VIEWS LETTERS FROM READERS

Veteran's day parade: Where were you?

As a paralyzed veteran, this was my fourth year participating in the downtown Veterans' Day parade in St. Louis. This year we had 12 veterans in wheelchairs in the parade representing the Gateway Chapter, Paralyzed Veterans of America. Again this year there were more people in the parade than there were spectators.

We now have more than 2,000 deceased soldiers and 15,000 injured soldiers in the Iraq war, and the Veterans Administration budget is shamefully underfunded for fiscal year 2006.

I am dismayed that I continue to see an overall lack of concern and appreciation for veterans and those soldiers today in harm's way.

Stanley D. Brown | Des Peres
President, Gateway Chapter, Paralyzed
Veterans of America

More harmful

Regarding "Kid stuff? Maybe not?" (Nov. 3) about Francis Howell High School students writing on the road: How many accidents have occurred that can be linked to the graffiti? How many students have been injured while in the act?

The streets of St. Louis city are not safe. As a wheelchair user, I can attest to that. Curb cuts are often placed inappropriately. They are placed so that a wheelchair user must go off the sidewalk and into traffic to access them. This is inappropriate and dangerous.

The sidewalks that are available in the city are too dangerous for people who use wheelchairs. Some sidewalks have large gaps that are dangerous. Potholes are another hindrance to people with disabilities, whether walking or in a wheelchair. Wheelchairs can get stuck in the potholes.

I hope people understand better the trials and tribulations of disability. Ms. Bansen was a great friend, and I know she would have wanted something positive to come out of this. Let's hope it's social change.

Alison M. Chancellor | Florissant

Self-serving story

The headline "Is Jimmy Massey telling the truth about Iraq?" (Nov. 6) is embarrassing.

The self-serving conclusions and judgments were not verified. Military representatives with no information condemned Mr. Massey. There was no mention that military information is frequently full of lies, or that embedded journalists are propagandists for the military.

The American people deserve bet-

ter tax dollar fortunate bills.

Edward M.

Bottle

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risian politics. In practice, it. Owens said, this has come to mean that while religious groups may discuss values they see as important, they cannot specifically endorse or condemn candidates. This is a fair way to walk a fine line between two important First Amendment rights.

Only once in recent history has the IRS actually stripped a church of its tax-exempt status — and that was a conservative church that was punished when a Democrat became president. On the other hand, the Church at Pierce Creek in Binghamton, N.Y., clearly crossed the line when it took out a \$65,000 full-page ad in *USA Today* in 1992, calling Democratic President Bill Clinton a sinner unfit for the presidency.

In the case of his sermon at All Saints, Father Regas avoided endorsing either candidate, though his condemnation of one candidate's policies was clear. The same is true for Father Wente's sermon in St. Paul and Mr. Green's remarks in Fort Lauderdale. That the law was applied differently suggests that cooler heads at the IRS in Washington should review their agents' work before the embarrassment begins.

How many accidents and injuries have occurred in front of the school by vehicles attempting to exit the school grounds and colliding with speeding traffic on Highway 94? I'm aware of several serious accidents that have happened just in the last few years.

Francis Howell has been working with the Missouri Department of Transportation on the installation of a stoplight at the entrance of the school grounds, yet no plans or contracts have yet been completed. This is a true safety hazard for students and residents as they travel down Highway 94. Why is this issue being ignored?

A story about graffiti seems trivial by comparison. Francis Howell is a wonderful school with proud traditions; let's not focus on teen pranks.

Vivian Koester | St. Charles County

Unsafe sidewalks

Elizabeth Bansen was a vibrant young woman who used a wheelchair to do her everyday tasks and died because of it. She was killed when she was hit by an SUV on Delmar Boulevard.

Richard Worthen | Alton

Simple answer

My reaction to the question posed in the headline, "Why did the press fail to check Massey's stories?" (Nov. 6) was, "Well, duh." Many journalists are of a liberal mindset and are against the war in Iraq, thus, news stories that show the U.S. military in a bad light will often be printed first and checked later. Simple question, simple answer.

Lisa Grommet | Kirkwood

Windfall taxes

While it is true that our oil companies, energy companies and utilities have enjoyed enormous profits because of the meteoric rise in energy costs, our governmental authorities that levy taxes on gas and other forms of energy also have enjoyed windfall income. Since these taxing authorities have enjoyed similar economic windfalls as energy providers, they should set aside a substantial portion of these

OPINION

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH FOUNDED BY JOSEPH PULITZER

POST-DISPATCH PLATFORM I know that my retirement will make no difference in the lives of the poor, but I will always fight demagogues of all parties, never belong to the poor, always remain devoted to the public welfare, never be satisfied with my lot, whether by predatory plutocracy or predatory poverty. Joseph Pulitzer April 10, 1889

TERRANCE C.Z. EGGER PRESIDENT & PUBLISHER • MATT KRANER GENERAL MANAGER • ELLEN SOETEGER EDITOR • ARNIE ROBBINS MANAGING EDITOR

OUR VIEW | ST. LOUIS PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Running out of time

THE NUMBERS that tumble off the page of the state's most recent evaluation of the St. Louis schools are heart breaking — and infuriating. They tell the statistical story of failure, of promise wasted, of young lives dead-ended before adulthood.

The Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education reported this month that the St. Louis Public Schools have fallen even further behind state performance standards. The steep road ahead to full accreditation by 2008 is an almost impossible climb.

The reason the St. Louis schools are rated so badly is that they are failing to educate most of the students in middle

and high school. The sharp rise in the performance of elementary school children in math, communications and science would offer some hope for the future. But those students will be funneled into schools that are getting worse, not better.

At the time of the state's 2001 report on the St. Louis schools, the percentage of graduates scoring at or above the national average on the ACT college test was a dismal 12.6 percent. It now has sunk to 9.1 percent. In 2001, the percentage of students dropping out was 8.6 percent; now the rate has soared to a scandalous 15.7 percent. That means that 1,587 of the 10,000 students in high

school dropped out in the most recent year. The graduation rate, up slightly from 2001, is still an abysmal 58.6 percent.

Meanwhile, there has been almost no improvement in the performance of middle and high school students on the Missouri Assessment Program test. By high school, only 3.5 percent of the students test as advanced or proficient in math; 6.2 percent in communications arts and 1.4 percent in science. What chance do these children have to go on to college and to get more than a minimum-wage job?

St. Louis School Board President Darnetta Clinkscale says she is confident

that the district's new accreditation system inherited from Superintendent Robert Taylor added, "Our ongoing, comprehensive Missouri Assessment Program (MAP) of the Missouri Assessment Program) of the Missouri Assessment Program back on track."

As long as the state continues to rely on assessments that are based on rote memorization, it's a good bet that St. Louis will continue to struggle through school reform efforts that they need to