

**Congress of the United States**  
**House of Representatives**

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND GOVERNMENT REFORM

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**Opening Statement**

**Ranking Member Gerald E. Connolly (VA-11)**  
**Subcommittee on Government Operations**  
***“Examining a Church’s Right to Free Speech”***

**May 4, 2017 – Rayburn 2154**

Let me be clear: I support a church’s right to free speech – and I am sure all of my colleagues do too.

And although they are not named in the title of today’s hearing, I support the right to free speech of synagogues, temples, mosques, chapels, meeting houses, cathedrals, and all other religious congregations.

There is no evidence proving that any houses of worship are unable to exercise free speech – or that any member of a house of worship, including clergy, are unable to speak freely on any social or moral issue they want to address.

In fact, despite what the misleading title of today’s hearing is meant to suggest, the issue before us *is not* one of free speech.

Under current law, churches and pastors can speak freely and even engage in partisan political activity. That is under current law. This hearing is not about free speech, but about money.

Under current law, churches do not pay taxes. Individuals who donate to churches can claim tax deductions for their donations. Churches do not have to reveal publicly who has donated to them.

If the Johnson Amendment were to be repealed, as some of my colleagues are suggesting, 501(c)(3) tax exempt entities and their contributors would be allowed to participate in political campaigns with tax deductible donations.

Under their new status, America would have more than 340,000 new political “PACs.”

The new “PACs” that self-identify as houses of worship could maintain the anonymity of their donors and the size of each donor’s contribution would remain a secret.

The repeal of the Johnson Amendment would not change the tax deductibility of donations to houses of worship. This means taxpayers would be subsidizing partisan political contributions. In other words, my colleagues are proposing to allow tax deductions for political contributions.

Congress has examined this issue before and ultimately decided to rescind the tax deductibility of political contributions. That was during the Reagan Administration.

Under Republican proposals, billionaires like Sheldon Adelson or the Koch brothers could give unlimited contributions to houses of worship to be directed toward Republican candidates, and Democratic-leaning billionaires could do the same for Democrats. And all those billionaires could claim tax deductions for their political contributions.

Of course, this would also put the ministers and leaders of houses of worship in untenable positions.

They would be clergy members – and, simultaneously, the treasurers of PACs. They would be faith leaders and political operatives– soliciting, managing, and distributing millions of dollars to political campaigns. As a former seminarian and candidate for public office, I do not wish those dual hats on our faith leaders.

How would clergy members balance these competing roles? And how would churches, mosques, temples, synagogues, meeting houses, and cathedrals balance their members' interests in questions of faith and questions of campaign donations? Would they self-select into Republican and Democratic houses of worship, much like some churches split into northern and southern branches during the Civil War?

What we are really discussing is opening the flood gates to allow the flow of unlimited amounts of tax-deductible money from anonymous donors into political campaigns through houses of worship and diluting the mission and purpose of those religious institutions.

I believe we should keep these flood gates firmly closed. According to a February 2017 Pew Research Study, thousands of houses of worship, as well as the public at large, agree.

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