

Trump limits IRS action on church politics

By CATHERINE LUCEY and RACHEL ZOLL
Associated Press



AP Photo/Evan Vucci

From left, Labor Secretary Alexander Acosta, Health and Human Services Secretary Tom Price, Housing and Urban Development Secretary Ben Carson, Veterans Affairs Secretary David Shulkin and Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross pause in the Rose Garden of the White House in Washington, Thursday prior to President Donald Trump signing an executive order aimed at easing an IRS rule limiting political activity for churches.

WASHINGTON — Declaring he was giving churches their “voices back,” President Donald Trump signed an executive order Thursday aimed at easing an IRS rule limiting political activity for religious organizations — a move that fell far short of a more sweeping order some supporters had expected.

As he marked the National Day of Prayer at the White House on Thursday, Trump signed the order on religious freedom, which directs the Treasury Department to not take “adverse action” over churches or religious organizations for political speech. The rule has rarely been enforced. Still, opponents said the restrictions have a chilling effect on free speech.

“This financial threat against the faith community is over,” Trump said. He has long promised the conservative Christian supporters who helped him win the White House that he would block the regulation, known as the Johnson Amendment, though any repeal would have to be done by Congress.

The amendment, named for then-Sen. Lyndon Johnson, was put into force in 1954. The policy allows a wide range of advocacy on political issues, but in the case of houses of worship, it bars electioneering and outright political endorsements from the pulpit.

The IRS does not make public its investigations of such cases, but only one church is known to have lost its tax-exempt status as a result of the prohibition.

Trump’s order also asks federal agencies to consider issuing new regulations that the White House says could help religious groups that object to paying for contraception under the Affordable Care Act health law. And it asks the attorney general to issue guidance on federal religious liberty protections.

The order did not match a

broader, much more detailed draft leaked earlier this year that included provisions on conscience protection for faith-based ministries, schools and federal workers across an array of agencies. Robin Fretwell Wilson, a legal scholar who advises legislators on balancing LGBT rights and religious liberty, said the language in the document was so vague, it was unclear what impact it would have.

“I’m not seeing a lot more shield around people of faith from this,” said Wilson, a professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Leaders of some faith groups condemned the order, saying it would damage congregations by politicizing them. But the American Civil Liberties Union announced late Thursday it had dropped its initial plan to file a lawsuit to prevent the order from taking effect, saying “today’s executive order signing was an elaborate photo-op with no discernible policy outcome.”

Trump spoke to religious leaders in the Rose Garden, where he also announced he’ll visit Israel, Saudi Arabia and the Vatican — including a meeting with



AP photos by Evan Vucci

President Donald Trump speaks in the Rose Garden of the White House in Washington Thursday.

Pope Francis — on his first foreign trip. In the audience were members of the Little Sisters of the Poor, who run more than two dozen nursing homes for impoverished seniors, and object to having to pay for birth control in their health plans.

Several religious leaders who supported Trump praised the order as a first step in what would be a lengthy, difficult process of reworking a web of regulations that many religious conservatives consider unfair.

Tony Perkins, head of the conservative Family Research Council, which has advocated for a repeal of the IRS restrictions on political speech, said Trump

has started “a multi-phase process” on religious liberty that will “keep the promises the administration has made to people of faith.”

But Michael Farris, chief executive of the Alliance Defending Freedom, a conservative Christian legal group that advocates for broad religious liberty protections, said “we strongly encourage” the president to go further.

“Though we appreciate the spirit of today’s gesture, vague instructions to federal agencies simply leaves them wiggle room to ignore that gesture, regardless of the spirit in which it was intended,” Farris said in a statement.

Trump and the Johnson Amendment

WASHINGTON (AP) — A look at the law in question, known as the Johnson Amendment:

WHAT IT DOES: The law prohibits tax-exempt charitable organizations such as churches from participating directly or indirectly in any political campaign to support or oppose a candidate. That means no donations to candidates’ campaigns and no public statements explicitly on behalf of or against a candidate.

WHAT IT DOESN’T DO: It doesn’t stop religious groups from weighing in on public policy or organizing in ways that may benefit one side in a campaign. Plenty of religiously grounded organizations or movements — Roman Catholic bishops, the Christian Coalition, you name it — have delved fiercely into political causes, and preachers of the left and right are not shy about exhorting their followers to political action. The law requires them to stop short of endorsing candidates, but their leanings are often not a mystery.

WHY IT MATTERS: To supporters, the law is central to the constitutional separation of church and state. To opponents, it’s a gag on the constitutional guarantee of freedom of expression.

WHAT TRUMP DID: Trump said his action is meant to ensure that people are not penalized for their “protected religious beliefs” and that religious institutions are not “unfairly” targeted for political speech. In effect, the order discourages the IRS from going after churches aggressively for their political expression. But the law stays on the books; an executive order cannot change it.

BRIEFLY

Aglow meeting features special prayers

WALLA WALLA — Dave Colby is the speaker at the Walla Walla Aglow Community Lighthouse meeting.

Colby, who ministers to the sick at the Tri-Cities healing rooms, will be praying for the ill during the special meeting. Everyone is invited to attend Saturday, May 13 at 10 a.m. at Carrie Community Center, 711 Carrie St., Walla Walla. A freewill offering will be taken for the event, which includes lunch.

Aglow, which started in 1967, is an international organization that seeks to minister to its members and share God’s word in the community. In addition to the regular monthly meetings, there are weekly prayer groups and Bible studies.

For more information, call Kathy Owsley at 509-540-2684, Lora Sykes at 509-540-0212 or visit www.ecwaglow.

Methodist church hosts Alaskan missionaries

PENDLETON — A missionary couple serving in Ketchikan, Alaska, will present a special message at the United Methodist Church in Pendleton.

Terry and Ev Erbele will share about their work Sunday at 9 a.m. at the church, 352 S.E. Second St., Pendleton. In addition, a livestream of Sunday services are available at www.facebook.com/FUMCPendleton.

Also, the Methodist Brunch Bunch meets each Sunday after church services. The no-host group meets at The Saddle Restaurant & Lounge, 2220 S.E. Court Ave., Pendleton, for food and fellowship. For those who have already eaten are welcome to have a cup of coffee and conversation.

For more information, contact 276-2616 or preachervet@gmail.com.

Worship Community

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Awana Kids Club (K-6th grade) Wed Men’s Study 6 PM
MOPs meeting the 1st Thur of the Month 6 PM

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pendletonfaithcenter.org

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Jr & Sr High Discipleship Program Wed
Overcomer’s Outreach Tuesday at 6:00pm - Annex A Christ-centered, 12-Step Recovery- Supported Group
Pastor Sharon Miller
401 Northgate, Pendleton
541-278-8082
www.livingwordcc.com

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church LCMC
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Colin Brown, Pastor

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To share your worship times call Terri Briggs 541-278-2678