

Off the Rails by Rollin Russell

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Our state elected leaders have really gone off the rails this time. No, I am not referring to the beleaguered legislature's bizarre HB#2. This time it's Lt. Gov. Dan Forest. He has sent a letter on his official state letterhead inviting himself to churches to "share my faith story, as well as share how my relationship with God impacts my family, career, and everyday decisions." He says he has done this previously and is happy to give other churches the opportunity to hear and converse with him. It is a finger in the eye to federal law, which bars tax-exempt groups from intervening in partisan politics.

Forest goes on to suggest a format for such a visit: "invite me to attend a Sunday service at your church, . . . have me on stage side-by-side with you (the pastor) and you conduct a Q and A session." Never mind that he is running for re-election. Does he not know that to do as he suggests would place any such church in possible violation of the Internal Revenue Code and endanger its tax exemption? Doesn't he know that churches, like most non-profit groups, are forbidden to engage in partisan political activity? Of course he does. He and the church groups to which he panders want to have their tax-exempt cake and eat it too.

I doubt that any Episcopal, Presbyterian, Methodist, Mennonite, Lutheran, United Church of Christ or Unitarian churches will receive Forest's letter, much less Jewish synagogues or Islamic mosques. He is wooing a particular evangelical-fundamentalist constituency, not the majority of Christian churches or religious groups. The former all know the truth that was recently so well expressed by their national leaders in "A Statement of Faithful Obedience:"

When entering the public sphere, faith leaders must take care to avoid being used by politics or politicians, or to allow their faith to be exploited for partisan causes or their faith communities turned into mere political constituencies."

Perfectly stated. The lieutenant governor has gone off the rails and should be ashamed.

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