



Staying on Mission

The obstacles of running a non-profit in today's culture

by Attorney Richard C. Baker

In the fall of 2010 I was in Nanjing, China on a Sunday so I went to a registered church to worship with the local believers. Most of the service was familiar to me. There were Bibles in the pews and Scripture passages were read and preached from the pulpit. The people prayed and sang hymns heartily. The choir and minister wore robes and there were even stained glass windows, crosses on the walls and an altar in this historic church. But one thing was not familiar to me. As we worshipped, I noticed that high up on one wall a video camera was trained on the pulpit. Later, when I asked about it, I was told that sermons are monitored by the government which prohibits the preaching of certain ideas that may challenge its authority, including preaching on the Book of Revelation.

That's China, not the United States. True, in the United States, the battle is not yet at the gates of church and there are no cameras trained on our pulpits, though some would argue that the IRS's

scrutiny of churches is moving in this direction. For now, the battle is being waged with Christian organizations whose mission calls them to live out their Christian witness outside the four walls of the church in the public square whether that be through a soup kitchen or a half-way house, a pro-life pregnancy center or an adoption agency, a hospital or medical clinic, a day care center or a classroom in a Christian school or even owners of a business dedicated to serving the Gospel such as Hobby Lobby. And so, with these changing times, it becomes imperative that Christian organizations reassess what their mission is and then chart a course to stay on that mission. In doing so, many Christian organizations are finding great challenges in "staying on mission."

So how did we get here and what do we do? As our culture embraces a secular or pluralistic orientation, Christianity has moved from being important to irrelevant and now to repugnant. With this

change, Christian organizations' status under the law has followed. Once the law, looked favorable toward religious institutions and reflected Christian values and practices. Then it moved toward neutrality –allowing for exemptions as it passed laws contrary to the values and tenets of the Bible. Now, as the memory of its Christian heritage is almost forgotten, it is becoming hostile. Regulations, particularly in the area of ever expanding anti-discrimination laws, are being enacted to force these institutions to either conform to the new values or cease operations with no room for conscientious objection. While criminal sanctions are not yet in place, Cardinal George's chilling words spoken in 2013 at a talk at the Union League Club seem more and more plausible: "I will die in my bed, my successor will die in prison, and his successor will die a martyr."

Surely, it can't be that bad. We have a Constitution that protects religious freedom. But there has been a change in the way the government understands religious freedom - that first of freedoms in the First Amendment. While the First Amendment reads, "Congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof..." that has been reinterpreted to only protect "freedom of worship," rather than "free exercise of religion." What's the difference? Free exercise guarantees that religious persons and organizations may freely practice or exercise their faith in the wide arena of our society, whether that exercise is through charity or in the market place, academia, sports and entertainment or the home. Not only

does free exercise allow Christian organizations to freely craft and spread their Gospel message, but to organize and operate within the perimeters of their conscience under the Scriptures.

Freedom of worship, on the other hand guarantees (at least for now) the right to be free from most government intrusion within the four walls of the church while ministering to those who are already within the fold. Viewing religion as a purely private matter, freedom of worship lets churches off the hook for the time being, but brings under the government's control all other religious organizations insuring that their mission and practices meet its narrow constraints.

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So what's to be done? Is it too late to change the erosion to our religious freedom? First, organizations must realize that the challenge to religious freedom is real and must act (exercise) to pre-

serve this 'first of freedoms.' They must review and clarify their policies and mission to clearly identify their religious nature and then advocate in every realm, including the political, for the protection of their rights to freely express in the world around them the truth of the Gospel. They may no longer retreat into the four corners of the church to avoid conflict. Indeed, they must stand up to the intimidation of a society turned hostile which now tells them under the banner of "separation of church and state" that they have no place in a pluralistic society. ■