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Separation of church, state not that easy

By Dana Ailer
Contributor

In her book, "When Johnny Doesn't Come Marching Home," Stuarts Draft resident Rhonda Winfield explained how she saw her son Jason's death while fighting in Iraq as part of God's plan.

At her son's funeral, Winfield wrote that she realized, "Jason was now a part of that flag and all that it stood for ... God put Jason exactly where he needed to be that day for the plan that he has."

Although the First Amendment separates church and state, local religious leaders say it isn't that easy.

The Rev. Paul Nancarrow of Trinity Episcopal Church in Staunton said it would be difficult to achieve a clear separation of church and state because many take faith with them in their daily lives.

"Because a person who is active in their faith is so strongly influenced and shaped by their faith, it's impossible to imagine that they don't bring their ideals and values — gotten from their faith — into community life," he said. "Their decisions will ultimately come from their faith because their faith is such an important part of who they are."

Congregations such as Liberty Baptist Tabernacle in Rapid City, S.D., are pushing the envelope — strongly endorsing specific political views and candidates from the pulpit — in an attempt to force a Supreme Court hearing on the constitutionality of the current interpretation of the First Amendment.

Voters and politicians alike can hold strong religious convictions that they bring with them into the voting booth as well as government chambers.

The Rev. Reed Hopkins of Loch Willow Presbyterian Church in Churchville says he agrees with this concept.

"I vote based on my Christian convictions; I have no other basis for what is right and wrong."

Because they are aware parishioners look to the church to provide moral guidance in daily life, both Hopkins and Nancarrow see a line they won't cross — dictating their political views to parishioners.

"While I have my political opinions, I am careful in the pulpit. Where the right or wrong of an issue is clear, I will speak out strongly," he said. "Where it is less clear, I seek to give guidance, again trying to instill in my hearers a sense of the importance of Christian love in shaping all our opinions."

Hopkins said he shares a similar view of "preaching politics" and handles potentially controversial issues by not taking sides in the debate.

"With the oil spill in the Gulf, nobody thinks that's a good thing. It's not controversial to say the spill is bad; but it is controversial to say that all off-shore drilling is bad. So I wouldn't say that. What I would say is that in the Bible, God says we should be good stewards to the earth," he said.

While the subject of keeping church out of government is often debated, the importance of the flipside of the issue — keeping government out of church, isn't often questioned.

Retired Marine Staff Sgt. Edwin Flesher of Augusta County said he understands the importance of maintaining this division, even if he doesn't like it.

"I feel that a separation of church and state is an unfortunate, necessary evil ... It prevents others in power, that may be of another religion, from telling us Christians that we must change the way we believe or worship," he said.

Likewise, Hopkins said he strongly supports the separation.

"The separation means that churches are free to teach according to their convictions," he said.
"Individuals are free to follow their religious convictions, free of government coercion"

Nancarrow said he can imagine the potential pitfalls of a breakdown of the separation.

"If the government started to tell me what I could and couldn't talk about from the pulpit, and what groups of people I could and couldn't meet with, that would be a huge problem," he said.
