

FROM THE PASTOR

January 19, 2012

When the church receives a letter from a law firm it usually makes my heart skip in anticipation, for it often means that some one of our faithful souls has remembered the church in his/her will. That was not the case last week.

The letter from Anthony & Middlebrook of Grapevine, Texas, was to inform Second Church of the legal trouble in which the church could find itself if we gathered signatures on a petition calling for a ballot initiative to set a cap on payday loans. What kind of trouble, you ask?

First, they advised me (**in bold print**) of strict statutes carrying criminal penalties that apply to the collection of signatures for such petitions. What they failed to mention is that the penalties are not for gathering signatures, but for falsely signing someone's name or for knowingly signing the name of a non-resident to a petition. Did they really think that the church would be about the business of gathering false signatures?

Second, they advised me (**again in bold print**) that the congregation could lose its tax-exempt status by working to change the law as it relates to payday loans. That, of course, would mean that all donations to the church would no longer be tax deductible. Pretty strong scare tactics—and not an ounce of truth!

Federal tax law does prohibit churches from supporting or opposing specific candidates. But nothing in any law prohibits churches from speaking out on important issues or working to change public policy. In addition, individual church members are free to participate in political and issue campaigns as much as they wish.

The law firm of Anthony & Middlebrook was hired by a group that calls itself “Missourians for Equal Credit Opportunity.” The letter I received was sent to many pastors and religious groups in Saint Louis and Kansas City. As the enthusiastic support for payday loan reform has grown, the efforts of those who want to continue these practices that prey on the most vulnerable has grown more desperate.

Missouri is one of the top five states in the country for most payday lending stores per capita and, when it comes to Saint Louis, most of these outfits are located in the poorest parts of the city. These stores spring up in neighborhoods where people have fewest resources and where people often do not understand things such as *compound interest*. The average annual rate paid on a payday loan is 445%. The proposed ballot initiative would cap it at 36%.

Our session has given support to Nancy Quigley, who has participated in an instructional workshop with MCU, to gather signatures for a petition seeking to put a payday reform initiative on the ballot. She will be collecting signatures on Sunday morning in Niccolls Hall.

As for Anthony & Middlebrook of Grapeville, Texas—I think Second Church best stick to the advice and wisdom of our in-house counsel.

Grace and peace,
Mary Gene