

Clergy seek IRS probe of D.C. boarding house

Daniel Burke Religion News Service | Feb. 23, 2010

WASHINGTON -- A group of 13 Ohio clergy is asking the Internal Revenue Service to investigate a Washington boarding house used by conservative members of Congress that claims a tax exemption as a church.

The C Street Center, a red brick townhouse on Capitol Hill, came to public attention last summer after the disclosure of its ties to several Republican politicians who had admitted to extramarital affairs.

The three-story townhouse is less a church than an "exclusive club for elected officials," the Ohio clergy charged in a statement on Tuesday (Feb. 23).

The group, called Clergy VOICE, also filed IRS complaints in 2006 and 2008 against conservatives for allegedly running afoul of tax laws that require nonprofits to remain neutral in political elections.

Clergy VOICE includes pastors from a variety of mainline Protestant denominations.

The C Street Center's tax exemption was partially revoked last year after an investigation by Washington, D.C., officials, who found that 66 percent of the house was taxable and the rest exempt. The house's estimated worth is \$1.8 million.

Clergy VOICE, whose legal counsel is the former head of the IRS's exempt organizations division, say none of the house should be tax-exempt.

"An organization whose chief activity is providing room and board to members of Congress is not a church," Clergy VOICE said in a letter to IRS Commissioner Douglas Shulman.

The C Street Center is affiliated with the Fellowship Foundation, also known as the Family, a secretive international group of Christian powerbrokers. The foundation's president, Richard Carver, told *The Washington Post* that "we have no direct connection in any way with their status or what goes on at C Street."

South Carolina Gov. Mark Sanford and Sen. John Ensign, R-Ariz., both of whom admitted to extramarital affairs last year, have ties to the C Street Center -- Sanford as a spiritual seeker, and Ensign as a resident.

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