

## Mail Order Ministers

By Melissa Rooney

Published: August 17, 2010

*Viewpoints*, The Durham News

I recently had the pleasure of talking to one of my favorite DPS kindergarten teachers, we'll call him Mr. K, about something other than education. When we broached the separation of church and state, Mr. K politely informed me that he was a reverend, himself. I was stunned, as he didn't seem the type to go to church, much less lead it.

He explained that he was a mail-order reverend. It happened when his best friends called him to announce their engagement. Though they were getting legally married by the Justice of the Peace, they planned a ceremony and celebration with friends and family, and they asked Mr. K to stand with them before all their guests and say a few words to commemorate the occasion. While still on the phone, Mr. K surfed the Internet and quickly found a website enabling him to become a legally ordained minister simply by completing an online form. Before the phone call finished, Mr. K excitedly informed his best friend that he would be getting married by a bona fide minister.

I was stunned again. I thought legal religious leaders had to acquire some sort of formal education with regard to religion, spirituality, or at least how to financially manage a church. On the contrary, a plethora of Internet businesses like Universal Ministries "will ordain anyone for life." Universal Ministries further ensures that "all ministers of legal churches have the same authority in the laws of this nation." TheMonastery.Org guarantees that "within 24 hours after your submission, you will receive an email to confirm your ordination." Rose Ministries (OpenOrdination.Org) says you can "Choose your own title: Minister, Reverend, Pastor, Cleric... you decide." They further inform that ordination allows you to "qualify for tax free status as religious order"; "legally charge for the religious rites you perform"; and receive "preferred treatment, even price discounts, as a show of respect towards legally ordained religious leaders."

Some may think it's cool that anyone can become a legal minister to officiate at loved ones' weddings and funerals. But it is disturbing that someone with a title implying they are qualified to influence the opinions, beliefs and lives of so many others can obtain that title by simply completing an online form. Even more disturbing, this title brings government protections and financial benefits, as such ordained ministers can easily form 501(c)(3) nonprofit organizations, which exempts them from income and property taxes.

Wikipedia defines 501(c)(3)'s as "Religious, Educational, Charitable, Scientific, Literary, Testing for Public Safety, to Foster National or International Amateur Sports Competition, or Prevention of Cruelty to Children or Animals Organizations." People all over the country are incorporating home businesses and nonprofits and can just as easily abuse the privileges granted as a make-shift minister. But most don't hold the trump card that religious organizations do: church-office confidentiality.

LDS (Latter Day Saints) Tech states that "The records of the Church are confidential [for church approved purposes only], whether they exist on paper, in computers, or in other electronic media. These include membership records, financial records, minutes of meetings, official forms, and notes made from private interviews. Leaders and clerks are to safeguard Church records by handling, storing, and disposing of them in a way that protects the privacy of individuals" (<https://tech.lds.org/wiki/index.php/Confidentiality>).

So if a legally ordained minister were to be suspected of financial abuse, church-office confidentiality rights make it exceedingly difficult to obtain related financial records in order

to substantiate suspicions.

Furthermore, these religious leaders don't have to report income (church donations) either. According to LDS Tech: "Only the stake or ward clerk, assistant clerks, and the stake president or bishop and his counselors should know the amount of tithing and offerings paid by a donor or other organization." So if improper donations were made to a religious leader or church, say in exchange for secular favors, it would be near impossible to ascertain.

It seems to me that true separation of church and state requires that the church receive *no* special treatment, at least with regard to finances. A religious leader or church should be treated like any American citizen or organization, subject to the same taxes and disclosure. At the very least, churches should be treated like all nonprofits, which means no protection of confidentiality. Surely, as long as these exceptional financial benefits and protections exist, a person shouldn't be eligible for legal ordination simply because (s)he can click a mouse.