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As governor, Palin at times bonds church and state

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The Associated Press

Saturday, October 11, 2008; 12:59 PM

WASILLA, Alaska -- The camera closes in on Sarah Palin speaking to young missionaries, vowing from the pulpit to do her part to implement God's will from the governor's office.

What she didn't tell worshippers gathered at the Wasilla Assembly of God church in her hometown was that her appearance that day came courtesy of Alaskan taxpayers, who picked up the \$639.50 tab for her airplane tickets and per diem fees.

An Associated Press review of the Republican vice presidential candidate's record as mayor and governor reveals her use of elected office to promote religious causes, sometimes at taxpayer expense and in ways that blur the line between church and state.

Since she took state office in late 2006, the governor and her family have spent more than \$13,000 in taxpayer funds to attend at least 10 religious events and meetings with Christian pastors, including Franklin Graham, the son of evangelical preacher Billy Graham, records show.

Palin was baptized Roman Catholic as a newborn and baptized again in a Pentecostal Assemblies of God church when she was a teenager. She has worshipped at a nondenominational Bible church since 2002, opposes abortion even in cases of rape and incest and supports classroom discussions about creationism.

Since she was named as John McCain's running mate, Palin's deep faith and support for traditional moral values have rallied conservative voters who initially appeared reluctant to back his campaign.

On a weekend trip from the capital in June, a minister from the Wasilla Assembly of God blessed Palin and Lt. Gov Sean Parnell before a crowd gathered for the "One Lord Sunday" event at the town's hockey rink. Later in the day, she addressed the budding missionaries at her former church.

"As I'm doing my job, let's strike this deal. Your job is going be to be out there, reaching the people _ (the) hurting people _ throughout Alaska," she told students graduating from the church's Masters Commission program. "We can

work together to make sure God's will be done here."

A spokeswoman for the McCain-Palin campaign, Maria Comella, said the state paid for Palin's travel and meals on that trip, and for other meetings with Christian groups, because she and her family were invited in their official capacity as Alaska's first family. Parnell did not charge the state a per diem or ask to be reimbursed for travel expenses that day.

"I understand the per diem policy is, I can claim it if I am away from my residence for 12 hours or more. And Anchorage is where my residence is and I'm based from. And this trip took about four hours of driving time and time at the event, so I did not claim per diem for this one," Parnell told the AP.

Palin and her family billed the state \$3,022 for the cost of attending Christian gatherings exclusively, including visits to the Assembly of God here and to the congregation they attend in Juneau, according to expense reports reviewed by the AP.

Experts say those trips fall into an ethically gray area, since Democrats and Republicans alike often visit religious venues for personal and official reasons.

J. Brent Walker, who runs a Washington, D.C.-based group that advocates for church-state separation, said based on a reporter's account, Palin's June excursion raised questions.

"Politicians are entitled to freely exercise their religion while in office, but ethically if not legally that part of her trip ought to not be charged to taxpayers," said Walker, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty. "It's still fundamentally a religious and spiritual experience she is having."

The Palins billed the state an additional \$10,094 in expenses for other multi-day trips that included worship services or religiously themed events, but also involved substantial state business, including the governor's inaugural ball and an oil and gas conference in New Orleans.

Palin also submitted \$998 in expenses for a June trip to Anchorage that included a bill signing at Congregation Beth Shalom synagogue, the only non-Christian house of worship she has visited since taking office, according to the McCain campaign.

In response to an AP request, Comella provided a list showing that since January 2007 the governor had attended 25 "faith-based events," including funerals and community meetings held at churches. Many did not appear on the governor's schedule or her travel records.

Palin has said publicly her personal opinions don't "bleed on over into policies."

Still, after the AP reported the governor had accepted tainted donations during her 2006 campaign, she announced she would donate the \$2,100 to three charities, including an Anchorage nonprofit aimed at "sharing God's love" to dissuade young women from having abortions.

An AP review of her time as mayor, from late 1996 to 2002, also reveals a commingling of church and state.

Records of her mayoral correspondence show that Palin worked arduously to organize a day of prayer at city hall. She said that with local ministers' help, Wasilla _ a city of 7,000 an hour's drive north of Anchorage _ could become "a light, or a refuge for others in Alaska and America."

"What a blessing that the Lord has already put into place the Christian leaders, even though I know it's all through the grace of God," she wrote in March 2000 to her former pastor. She thanked him for the loan of a video featuring a Kenyan preacher who later would pray for her protection from witchcraft as she sought higher office.

In that same period, she also joined a grass-roots, faith-based movement to stop the local hospital from performing abortions, a fight that ultimately lost before the Alaska Supreme Court.

Palin's former church and other evangelical denominations were instrumental in ousting members of Valley Hospital's board who supported abortion rights _ including the governor's mother-in-law, Faye Palin.

Alaska Right to Life Director Karen Lewis, who led the campaign, said Palin wasn't a leader in the movement initially. But by 1997, after she had been elected mayor, Palin joined a hospital board to make sure the abortion ban held while the courts considered whether the ban was legal, Lewis said.

"We kept pro-life people like Sarah on the association board to ensure children of the womb would be protected," Lewis said. "She's made up of this great fiber of high morals and godly character, and yet she's fearless. She's someone you can depend on to carry the water."

In November 2007, the Alaska Supreme Court ruled that because the hospital received more than \$10 million in public funds it was "quasi-public" and couldn't forbid legal abortions.

Comella said Palin joined the hospital's broader association in the mid-1990s. Records show she was elected to the nonprofit's board in 2000.

Ties among those active at the time still run deep: In November, Palin was a keynote speaker at Lewis' "Proudly Pro-Life Dinner" in Anchorage, and the governor billed taxpayers a \$60 per diem fee for her work that day.

Palin also is one of just two governors who channeled federal money to support religious groups through a state agency, Alaska's Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. Palin has made it a priority to unite faith communities, local nonprofits and government to serve the needy, bringing her high marks _ and \$500,000 _ from the Bush administration.

In fiscal year 2008, Alaska was one of only four states to receive \$500,000 in federal grant money from the national initiative.

"The governor has a healthy appreciation for faith-based groups that serve Alaskans in need," said Jay Hein, who until recently directed national faith-based initiatives at the White House. "The grant speaks to their organizational strength, and the dynamism of Alaska's operation."

Several Catholic and Christian charities received funding, including \$20,000 for a Fairbanks homeless shelter that views itself as a "stable door of evangelism and Christian service" and \$36,000 for a drop-in center at an Anchorage mall that seeks to demonstrate "the unconditional love of Jesus to teenagers."

The state ensures all faith-based groups keep a strict separation between their work in the community and their prayer services to ensure recipients don't feel coerced, said Tara Horton, a special assistant to the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services. Though staffers reached out to nonprofits and religious groups of many faiths, mostly Christian organizations applied for funding, she said.

In June, when Alaska legislators decided to cut \$712,000 in state support for the office, Parnell sent lawmakers an urgent letter asking them to put it back in the budget. A small portion of state funding was later restored.

"Gov. Palin is motivated by the needs out there, and faith-based and community initiatives are a great way to do that," Parnell said. "It matters not to state government what religion people belong to, so long as they are serving the public and the money they receive is used appropriately."

Still, a state worker who directs an Anchorage-based group that advocates for church-state separation, Lloyd Egan, said Palin's administration hasn't done enough to assure voters that government money doesn't support ministry.

"That sort of thing is exactly what courts have said is barred by the First Amendment," Egan said.

Associated Press writers Justin Pritchard in Anchorage and Anne Sutton in Juneau contributed to this report.