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Group takes on religion, state ties

WALTER CRONKITE, CHURCH LEADERS ATTEND S.J. EVENT

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SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT (publ. 02/27/07)

An article in Saturday's local section misidentified the name of a new national campaign to defend the separation of church and state. It's called First Freedom First.

Faith-based initiatives. Intelligent design. Gay marriage. Terri Schiavo.

Alarmed by what they see as religious groups' growing influence on government policy, a consortium has launched a public awareness campaign to defend the First Amendment's vow that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

"That cherished freedom is under severe attack," the Rev. Welton Gaddy said before an audience of about 700 people in San Jose. Friday's Commonwealth Club of California meeting also included an appearance by journalist Walter Cronkite, who endorsed the new national campaign called First Amendment First.

It calls for houses of worship to stop endorsing political candidates and for tax dollars not to go to any charity that discriminates in its hiring or requires people to hold a certain faith to receive services.

It also says that science and health policies should be based on scientific data, "not religious doctrine," and that schools shouldn't promote any religious preference.

So far, 103,000 people have signed a petition calling for America to commit to such practices. The campaign hopes to deliver that petition to the policy-makers for the 2008 presidential candidates, said Ari Geller with First Amendment First.

Americans are conflicted about the interplay between faith and politics, according to a 2006 poll by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life. Half of Americans polled think it's appropriate for churches and worship houses to express political views; 46 percent want them to "stay out of political matters."

Religious leaders have long been involved in political causes, but some experts say the nature of today's political work has fundamentally changed.

Churches then, now

Historically, faith leaders had been involved with social movements that had political implications -- such as the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. with civil rights or the sanctuary movement of the 1980s, said Charles McDaniel with the J.M. Dawson Institute of Church-State Studies at Baylor University in Texas.

Today, some churches are more overtly political, he said, literally passing collection plates for candidates, which has gotten them investigated by the Internal Revenue Service.

King's crusade promoted a universal value and pressured government leaders to live up to the ideals promised by the U.S. Constitution, Gaddy told the Mercury News.

In contrast, some of today's religious leaders are asking the government to impose a particular biblical view, said Gaddy, president of the Interfaith Alliance, created in 1994 to challenge the religious right.

"I want a nation where people can think for themselves and choose to have a religion or not have a religion," he said, "and know that the rights and privileges are protected no matter where you are on that spectrum."

On the other hand, politicians should consider religious interest, just as they do business and labor interests, said Larry Pegram, president of the San Jose-based Values Advocacy Council, which describes itself as "a voice for Christian values."

The group, which sued San Jose to prevent it from recognizing same-sex marriage, creates a voters guide every year asking candidates their stance on issues such as abortion, domestic partner benefits, school prayer and promoting abstinence in sex education classes.

"I'm disturbed by people driving out all reference to religion and Christianity," he told the Mercury News by phone. "We don't talk about Christmas; we talk about happy holidays. We don't talk about Easter; we talk about spring break. We've done as much as we can to sanitize society and clean Christianity out of it."

"This is a Christian country," he said, "or was."

Influence downside

The Rev. Barry Lynn says it's neither. Yes, some founders were Christian, he told the Commonwealth Club audience Friday, but they never intended Protestantism to be the nation's faith.

Lynn is executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State. He recounted how tax dollars have been used in some faith-based initiatives, such as the job applicant who was rejected for being Jewish, or the inmates offered perks if they enrolled in a conversion program.

Religious groups have promoted laws to undermine the teaching of evolution, he said, and to allow pharmacists to refuse to fill prescriptions for contraceptives.

Such laws inherently impose certain religious beliefs on everybody, he said, ignoring that Americans belong to 1,500 faith groups and a growing number consider themselves atheists, humanists and secularists.

"We're all first-class citizens in America," he said.

Religion and politics are both important, Cronkite said, but "we ought to be able to concentrate on each of those without crossing the two of them."

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