

Faith-Based Initiative Conference Protest

February 18, 2003

by Dave Kong

The city of San Diego is known as a bastion of conservative politics. Nevertheless, five bold American Atheists members joined state director Dave Kong outside the San Diego Concourse to demonstrate against the Faith-Based Initiative Conference on February 18.

The conference was the fourth in a series of events set up by the Bush Administration to encourage faith-based and community organizations to apply for federal money to run their social service programs, and to outline the procedures to obtain these funds. Opening with a videotaped message from President Bush, participants were assured that they can apply for federal funds "without losing their religious identity."



"This is a blatant attempt to bring religion into government-funded programs" Mr. Kong told reporters. "It's unconstitutional, and it's outrageous."



Mr. Kong continued. "The phrase 'faith-based' means that religion is at the core of these programs. With the grant rules before Bush began implementing this initiative, religious groups could already apply for funds. They just had to set up a separate nonprofit organization that was completely separate from their religious mission, and could not discriminate in their hiring practices. But these groups are unable or unwilling to separate

their religion from the social work - and that's the problem.

"For example, if a drug rehab program says that the only way to live a drug-free, healthy, viable life is through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, it's essentially teaching participants that my lifestyle is invalid and unhealthy because, as an Atheist, I can't possibly have a relationship with Jesus Christ. Such groups are certainly entitled to their opinion, but to have my tax dollars support a program that denigrates me is unconscionable."

Mr. Kong and the other protesters handed out flyers at the Concourse entrance to participants and passers-by, and displayed signs and a blue banner that read "Their Religion - Our Money - No Way!" which caught the attention of oncoming B Street traffic.



Reaction to the demonstration was mixed. Some refused to accept the flyer. Some said they supported the initiative. One woman called the protesters "weirdos." At one point, football legend and minister Rosie Grier stopped and chatted amicably with the protesters. One man, a city worker, blamed "the atheists" for causing the 9/11 tragedy.



However, a surprising number of people fully supported the protest. Those that stopped to learn more about the issue usually concluded that they were against the initiative once they understood its implications. One woman even stopped by on three different occasions to say that she supported the group, would have joined the protest if she had known about it, and plans on becoming a member of American Atheists.

The demonstration was covered by the San Diego Tribune, the local NPR

station, Fox News, and ABC affiliate Channel 10. In addition, Channel 10 conducted a follow-up online poll, in which 66 percent were against the initiative because of First Amendment concerns. Perhaps San Diego isn't that conservative after all.

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*Photos by **Ralph Edington***