

Christians Find Ally in Civil Liberties Group

Charismatic attorney David French fights for religious rights as president of secular civil liberties organization

When the new school year started, ReJOYce in Jesus Campus Fellowship hoped to again attract up to two dozen students to its weekly Bible study meetings.

Affiliated with a charismatic church in Los Angeles, the group spent most of the 2004-05 academic year fighting for official recognition after running afoul of the Milwaukee School of Engineering's (MSE) anti-discrimination policies.

The school yielded in April after intervention by the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), a Philadelphia-based organization that publicizes campus First Amendment violations.

"We're happy we don't have to have this problem again," said ReJOYce chapter adviser Daphne Wilson. "We just want to continue to do the Lord's work, have our meetings open to everyone and be there to help them and spread the gospel."

The conflict in Milwaukee is only one of numerous battles FIRE pursued in the last year. Among others:

1. Persuading Indian River (Fla.) Community College to allow a student screening of The Passion of the Christ
2. Securing recognition for Princeton University's Faith and Action student group
3. Coordinating a campaign to defend a Catholic philosophy

professor stripped of teaching assignments by Lakeland (Ohio) Community College. The professor has since sued the school.

FIRE fields more than 500 complaints annually, and leading the charge is a charismatic attorney who became the foundation's president in June 2004. "It was a providential opportunity," FIRE President David French said. "It's been a real blessing being here."

Although French said evangelicals are frequent targets of intolerant administrations, only a third of FIRE's cases involve religious liberty. He said anyone who doesn't toe a politically correct liberal line faces opposition. "They will censor anyone who is not an adherent to their ideology," French said.

FIRE was founded five years ago by history professor Alan Kors and Boston civil liberties attorney Harvey Silverglate. A professor at the University of Pennsylvania, Kors said FIRE picks up where the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) leaves off, and he faults the ACLU for failing to address free-speech infractions on campus.

Ironically, Kors and Silverglate come from opposite ends of the political spectrum. And though Kors was raised Jewish, he admires French's integrity and humility. "If anybody embodies the scriptural injunction to let your 'eye be eye and your nay nay,' it's David," Kors said. "He's a person of his word."

However, not everyone agrees with French's assessments. Roger Bowen, general secretary of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), called French's claim of intolerant administrators a generalization lacking evidence.

In addition, Bowen said anti-discrimination policies help campuses remain open to people of all faiths, ideologies, nationalities and sexual preferences.

“Christians sometimes take exception to people of different faiths or different orientations, and this causes a rub for a campus that professes openness towards all,” Bowen told Charisma. “Free speech need not be trumped by anti-discrimination.”

However, Bowen admits there are censorship problems; he said that is why groups such as FIRE, the ACLU and AAUP exist. And the fact that a group as diverse as FIRE is able to press for freedom shows how principles can rise above politics and doctrine, said Kors, who is a frequent speaker to evangelical groups.

Kors wishes other Christians would stand up for their rights in secular arenas. “When I speak to students of faith ... I tell them there may be an ultimate sense where the meek will inherit the earth, but that is not an invitation to not bear witness to one’s beliefs,” he said.

French, 36, said his joining a secular organization reflects what he sees happening lately: Christians forming broad alliances to address social problems. “We can’t try to make sure everyone arguing with us also believes in the Apostles Creed,” French said. “We can’t have a litmus test on all these issues.”

Ken Walker