

Religious broadcasters upset over satellite merger

A campaign by several well-known Pentecostal televangelists against a proposed merger by two satellite TV giants has come under fire from the head of the country's only Christian satellite TV company, who has criticized their effort as "misrepresenting the facts."

Led by John Hagee, the coalition of ministers—which includes Kenneth Copeland, Jesse Duplantis, Rod Parsley, Creflo Dollar, Richard Roberts, Joyce Meyer and Keith Butler—asked thousands of supporters in the spring to sign a "Letter of Petition" to oppose the planned union of satellite broadcasters EchoStar and Hughes Electronic because they say it threatens Christian broadcasting nationwide. The merger would unite the rival satellite TV services of EchoStar's Dish Network and Hughes' DirecTV, which currently have 7 million and 11 million subscribers respectively, the Associated Press (AP) reported.

In an April full-page ad in The Washington Post, the coalition issued an "Open Letter" to President Bush, Attorney General John Ashcroft and Federal Communications Commission (FCC) Chairman Michael Powell urging them to reject the merger because if approved "religious broadcasters will not be able to reach satellite viewers" and the "monopoly would dramatically affect the availability of religious programming in every rural area in America."

But Robert Johnson, founder and president of Sky Angel, a Christian organization licensed to operate a TV satellite, called the coalition's campaign "a serious misrepresentation

of the facts” that has caused damage to his company.

“In the process of opposing the merger, these ministries have created the impression that there won’t be any religious programming [anywhere],” Johnson told Charisma. “To say that creates the impression to the public that Sky Angel doesn’t exist.”

Hagee, Copeland and other ministers involved in the merger protest would not comment to Charisma. Johnson issued his own “Open Letter to the Christian Community” in a June ad in Christian magazines.

National Religious Broadcasters Chairman Glenn Plummer said the NRB is against the merger because it would create a monopoly, but he’s disappointed that the coalition neglected to inform supporters about Sky Angel.

The merger requires regulatory approval from the Department of Justice and the FCC, which has indicated that September is the earliest it might decide on the deal, the AP reported. “Sky Angel has not taken a position on the merger,” Johnson said. “Sky Angel uses the Dish Network satellite, but we’re totally independent and autonomous. We’re not going away if the merger takes place. We’ll still be here. That’s what is disturbing.”

However, Traditional Values Coalition Chairman Louis Sheldon, who is part of the coalition, defended the campaign. “The signers to the letter believe that Sky Angel shouldn’t be the only Christian broadcasting outlet, any more than they believe that EchoStar should be the only satellite television provider,” Sheldon told Charisma.

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