

Why a Secular Humanist Group Hired a Christian Director

The Secular Coalition for America, a lobbying group with atheist, humanist and other nonbeliever member organizations, has hired a Christian as its new executive director.

Larry Decker, 40, was raised in an independent Baptist church but now identifies as a “none”—one of the 23 percent of Americans who say they are religiously unaffiliated, according to the Pew Research Center. Like the majority of nones, Decker is not an atheist; he still identifies as a Christian, albeit a nominal one.

“I was raised Christian but for years I have been unaffiliated because I cannot reconcile my values with traditional Christianity, including their concept of God,” Decker told Hemant Mehta of the Friendly Atheist blog in an interview conducted before his appointment was announced Tuesday (Jan. 12). “Right now, if I have to put a label on it, I would say that I identify as an unaffiliated Christian. And like millions of people in our country, my belief system continues to evolve and is entirely personal to me.”

That makes him specially qualified to make the Secular Coalition, an organization of 18 groups with a total of about 500,000 members, more impactful in Washington, D.C., and beyond, Decker told RNS. One of the goals of his tenure will be to reach out to nones and persuade them to throw their political weight behind an organization endorsed primarily by atheists, humanists and other nontheists.

“Throughout my career, I have had to bring together organizations that would not necessarily work together,” he said. “I can help us find that common ground and help to move

that mission forward.”

Forward is where Secular Coalition wants to go. Its recent history has been plagued by scandal, employee turnover and rumors of behind-the-scenes board wrangling. Its previous executive director, Edwina Rogers, was ousted after two employees were accused of embezzlement in 2014 and there is ongoing litigation involving her departure. She, too, was hired for her outsider status as a Republican in a community that tends to lean Democratic and liberal.

One of Rogers’ achievements was establishing state chapters of Secular Coalition to identify, encourage and support nonbelievers to run for local office. Some chapters have flourished—Arizona has a particularly strong chapter—and others have fizzled. Decker will have to deal with that.

Decker comes to Secular Coalition with 20 years’ experience in Washington, D.C., including stints at the Global Fund, an organization that works to eradicate AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria. He spent eight years at the American Red Cross, where he worked with government agencies, congressional entities and nonprofits—all of which the Secular Coalition would like to reach.

But first it has to reach the nones, if it is to achieve its overall goal of fostering a “secular values vote” with the power of the Catholic or evangelical vote. To do that, Decker said, the coalition must focus not on shared beliefs, such as the nonexistence of God, but on shared values.

“We are looking for uniting values” such as freedom, equality and inclusion, he said. “These are values we can use to unite diverse groups and help them see how our candidates can help the secular movement. If we do this right, we can become an extremely powerful voting bloc, one that will help protect the First Amendment freedoms of every single American.”

Reaction to Decker’s appointment among Secular Coalition

member groups has been largely warm. Outsiders have been confident, too.

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