

Christmas wars enrich some advocacy groups: Merchandise sales support conservative organizations

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For conservative Christian groups, the hot gift last month was a weapon for fighting back in the “War on Christmas”—be it a button, a bumper sticker or a legal memo with information on the topic.

The Mississippi-based American Family Association said shortly before Christmas that it had sold more than 500,000 buttons and 125,000 bumper stickers bearing the slogan “Merry Christmas: It’s Worth Saying.”

The Alliance Defense Fund, a Christian legal aid group that boasts a network of some 900 lawyers standing ready to “defend Christmas,” says it has moved about 20,000 “Christmas packs.” The packs, available for a suggested \$29 donation, include a three-page legal memo and two lapel pins.

Liberty Counsel, a conservative law firm affiliated with fundamentalist Jerry Falwell, says it has distributed for free 16,000 legal memos on celebrating Christmas.

Leaders say demand for the goods—which are pitched online and through e-mail to supporters—is driven by resistance to what they view as a coordinated effort to secularize Christmas.

The Alliance Defense Fund, the American Family Association, James Dobson’s Colorado-based Focus on the Family and Concerned Women for America banded together for a 2006 Christmas Project. Chief on its agenda was distribution of a list of “nice” retailers that use the word *Christmas* in their stores and catalogues and “naughty” ones that do not.

“It’s a way to fight back against the secular progressives and promote the real meaning of Christmas,” said Tim Wildmon, president of the American Family Association. “They make a statement to anyone who looks at them and reads them

that the person wearing them wants to keep Christ in Christmas.”

Because public debates over decorations and celebrations attract media attention, Christmas is a good time for Christian advocacy groups to attract potential supporters, said Anita Staver, president of Liberty Counsel.

“When it’s an issue affecting Christmas, people will sit up and take notice,” Staver said. “Then they may look at the other issues we’re involved in,” including church-state disputes, gay marriage and abortion.

Critics, however, say the advocacy groups are profiting from a divisive and unnecessary brouhaha.

“It’s just a fund-raising scam,” said Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United for the Separation of Church and State. “And it’s a scam in the worst sense—it’s fighting something that doesn’t even exist.”

The value of the “goods and services” included in the Alliance Defense Fund’s \$29 “Christmas pack” is \$4, receipts show. The rest of the money goes into ADF’s general fund, ADF spokesperson Greg Scott said. A majority of the packs were sold for less than the suggested \$29 donation, he added, though he declined to provide details.

By the organization’s own accounts, 2006 was a very good year for the American Family Association. Through mass e-mails and other forms of public pressure, the Mississippi group says, it “forced Wal-mart . . . to stop donations to homosexual groups.” AFA also says it convinced the television network NBC to pull “the anti-Christian program *The Book of Daniel*” and to cut a scene from a televised concert in which pop star Madonna sings while hanging on a crucifix.

AFA raised the flag in the “Christmas wars” in August by criticizing “holiday” catalogues. Benefiting from the early start, the association also sold more than 100,000 magnets encouraging supporters to “be an unspoken witness for Christ’s birthday.” The “Merry CHRISTmas” magnets were available for a \$3 suggested donation; buttons were \$7 for a pack of 10. Bulk rates also were offered.

Wildmon, while declining to give specifics, said the products brought in a “slight profit.” The project was so successful, he said, that he plans to make Easter buttons this year. “It’s a pleasant surprise,” he said. “It allows us to do a few more things.” – *Daniel Burke, Religion News Service*