

## *A Threat to Religious Liberty*

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The decision by NBC and CBS to refuse to air a paid ad by The United Church of Christ is deplorable. While searching for words to express my outrage at the decision of the two networks to deny the 30-second spot airtime while the airwaves are filled with so much trash in programming and commercial advertising, I came across a statement by the Rev. Dr. C. Walton Gaddy, President of the Interfaith Alliance, that I think sums up my feelings and that of many others with whom I have spoken:

Everyday the networks broadcast programs of prurience and violence, divisive messages-of-the-day from partisan organizations and political and corporate advertisements that deceive and divide people. Indeed, cable networks, including one owned by NBC, regularly invite guests onto their political talk programs whose sole purpose is to provoke controversy and increase ratings. Shame on NBC and CBS for now rejecting an ad from a religious denomination which proclaims love and acceptance of all people. The United Church of Christ should be commended, not rejected, for upholding and encouraging positive religious values.

The UCC commercial featured two muscle-bound "bouncers" standing guard outside a church and letting only certain persons attend Sunday services. An announcer says, "Jesus didn't turn people away. Neither do we. No matter who you are, or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here." To see the ad, go to [www.stillspeaking.com](http://www.stillspeaking.com). The controversy arises from the fact that gay couples are among those turned away from traditional churches.

CBS offered as an explanation its refusal to allow the ad:

Because this commercial touches on the exclusion of gay couples and other minority groups by other individuals and organizations and the act the Executive Branch has recently proposed a Constitutional amendment to define marriage as a union between a man and a woman, this spot is unacceptable for broadcast on the [CBS and UPN] networks.

NBC called the spot "too controversial."

In a state that gave birth to the protection of religious freedom with the passage of Jefferson's Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, we should be concerned that a Church's statement that it is open to all people is considered too controversial or that political posturing on the part of the President can interfere with the Church's message.

I am a member of the United Church of Christ as one of the four denominations that make up the United Christian Parish. I would be equally as concerned if this kind of action was taken against another religious organization or denomination. Stifling the message of one is a threat to the message of all.

The Rev. John H. Thomas, UCC's general minister and president, is reported as saying, "It's ironic that after a political season awash in commercials based on fear and deception by both parties seen on all major networks, an ad with a message of welcome and inclusion would be deemed too controversial. What's going on here?"

Please join me in expressing opposition to the networks' actions. CBS can be reached at [www.cbs.com](http://www.cbs.com) and click on "feedback." Contact NBC at [letters@msnbc.com](mailto:letters@msnbc.com).