

Austin CoR First to Use New Billboard Design



In Texas, the Austin Coalition of Reason was the first to use UnitedCoR's new billboard design. The bright sunrise image—featuring the words "Don't believe in God? Join the club"—appeared June 28 on I-35 just north of the city and ran for four weeks. The billboard also marked the public launch of Austin CoR, made up of six area groups in the local community of reason.

The media response was gratifying. The city's lead newspaper, the *Austin American-Statesman*, gave the story prominent coverage, with excellent quotes from Austin CoR Coordinator Don Rhoades. Other print media followed suit, together with broadcast media. There was also significant buzz in the blogosphere. And most of the media coverage was strongly positive. For more details on the Austin campaign, go to www.AustinCoR.org.

“Message” Billboard and Bus Ads Growing in Media Prominence

Highway billboards and bus ads, both secular and religious, philosophical and political, are suddenly stirring up the media landscape as this form of advertising grows in newsworthiness. Atheists and Christians, Muslims as well as their critics, and proponents of death with dignity have all been getting into the act. The stories of these ad campaigns follow on the next page.



Independently of each other, and even without each other's knowledge, two groups erected billboards the same day, June 22, coincidentally bearing the same slogan, "One nation indivisible," emblazoned against an American flag background. In Florida the group behind it was Atheists of Florida (Tampa Bay Region), a member of Tampa Bay CoR. In North Carolina it was the North Carolina Secular Association, an independent statewide coalition of local community of reason groups organized by UnitedCoR Webmaster Joseph Stewart. The Florida campaign involved five billboards clustered in the Lakeland area. The North Carolina campaign involved six billboards scattered across the state, "from the mountains to the sea." Both campaigns intentionally had their advertising continue through Independence Day.

Of the two campaigns, the one that garnered the greatest media attention was that of North Carolina, which enjoyed multiple rounds of publicity due to significant religious pushback.

The first round began when the billboards went up in the cities of Asheville, Charlotte, Greensboro, Raleigh, Wilmington, and Winston-Salem. Coverage appeared in the print and broadcast media of each city as well as on CNN and MSNBC websites. Even the Christian Broadcasting Network devoted airtime. The story was also picked up by the Associated Press, McClatchy, and United Press International wire services, resulting in coverage by local news outlets across the country—which in turn generated phone calls and e-mails from all over the United States as well as from Canada and the United Kingdom.

Then the billboard in Charlotte was vandalized (see photo on the right), leading to the second round. Not only was the story local again but there were new treatments on the CNN site, on CBN, and through AP. In addition, the *Washington Post*, *Washington Times*, and *Yahoo! News* covered the vandalism. This latter coverage generated e-mails not only from the United States, Canada, and the UK but also from countries like Australia, Germany, and the Philippines. When the vandalized billboard was replaced before July 4th, the *Charlotte Observer* covered the story again and that city's free entertainment magazine ran a picture of the billboard on its cover for a week. There was also additional print and broadcast coverage elsewhere in the state.

The third round came when a religious group in Asheville announced its counter campaign with billboards saying "One Nation Under God." Now the story was about "dueling billboards." That coverage went all over the state. Then on July 19 *ABC World News* ran the story nationally, causing Joseph Stewart and Jennifer Lovejoy to spend six hours answering e-mail responses, almost all of which were positive. Fuller details can be found online at www.NCsecular.org.

The effects of all this on the local North Carolina groups, themselves, have varied dramatically. For example, only one new member resulted in Wilmington while over 200 were gained in Charlotte. Now UnitedCoR National Director Fred Edwards has been invited to come to North Carolina in late August to organize the now-energized groups across the state into local coalitions in the UnitedCoR network.



In another case of “message” ads, a religious and legal conflict erupted back in April when Refuge from Islam ran the above ad on buses in Miami, Florida. Miami-Dade Transit took the signs down after complaints from the Council on American-Islamic Relations. But the signs went back up after legal moves were taken by the advertiser. The signs then appeared in New York City and elsewhere. Almost in response, ads that read: “Muslims for Peace. Love for All - Hatred for None,” started appearing on 90 buses in New York City on July 1, directing people to MuslimsForPeace.org (see below, left). According to the sponsor, one intent of the campaign is to serve “as a gentle reminder to all those who wonder, ‘Where are the moderate Muslims?’”



Photos: AHMAD CHAUDHRY/MUSLIMS FOR PEACE and FINAL EXIT NETWORK NEWSLETTER

Meanwhile, on June 28, the Final Exit Network, a national right-to-die organization, put up the above, right billboard in Hillside, New Jersey, located just outside New York City, as well as in San Francisco, California. The stated goal was to raise awareness of the organization and the services it offers, which, according to the website, include “guidance and the most current information known for self-deliverance when the person is ready to choose.” As with other

controversial campaigns, the reactions have run hot to cold. Some people have responded with gratitude while others have shown hostility, saying such things as, “You are a bunch of atheists and you ought to be put in jail.” The Roman Catholic Church and suicide prevention counselors have also complained.

UnitedCoR’s Work to Be Part of German Exhibit

On June 3, UnitedCoR was contacted by Olga von Schubert, assistant curator of the Deutsches Hygiene-Museum in Dresden, Germany. This museum features exhibits that explore the human condition. It also serves as a forum for dialogue between science and society and between art and culture. Specific to social and cultural issues, the museum is mounting a temporary exhibition on the topic of “Faith,” which will examine the relevance of religion in the 21st century.

The exhibition will bring together historical and contemporary objects of religious practice and objects of art and science; it will encompass media installations as well as interactive elements. With this very diverse range of exhibits it will offer visitors the possibility of approaching this complex topic from very different angles. The exhibition will investigate how people believe but also how positions of non-believers manifest themselves in contemporary societies.

Ms. von Schubert added, “A central section of the exhibition will deal with criticism of religions from the enlightenment until now and we find your campaign an extraordinary, well designed, and smart example. We like the way it points to questions of an ethic beyond religion.” So she asked for a photograph or image that could be included in the exhibit and/or in an accompanying book of photo essays.

Since the UnitedCoR national website, as well as those of the affiliated local coalitions, offers a wide range of hi-res images to choose from, she was encouraged to take her pick. And on July 5 the museum had made its selection: the 2009 Big Apple CoR subway kiosk poster bearing the words: “A million New Yorkers are good without God. Are you?” It was designed by Mark Bednar. The exhibit will run from October 2010 to June 2011.

Tulsa CoR Participates in Letter-writing Campaign to Jimmy Carter

The Tulsa Coalition of Reason in Oklahoma has joined with the Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia in writing to former President Jimmy Carter, requesting that he resign from his advisory position with the Boy Scouts of America because of BSA discriminatory policies.

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E-mail news items to Fredwords@UnitedCoR.org – visit the website at www.UnitedCoR.org .