

How to Deal with Street Preachers 101

By Blaise Liffick

As anyone who has ever attended a Pride festival knows, such events tend to attract protesters in the form of “street preachers,” who harangue folks as they come and go to the event about their “sinful” ways. Who are these people? Isn’t what they are doing illegal in some way? Why aren’t they arrested for their aggressive behavior? Isn’t it harassment or something? Why isn’t anyone doing anything about them?

Here are the basics.

Who they are: They may be local zealots who work basically by themselves or national extremists who are well organized and financed. In Harrisburg, Michael and Sherri Sucec fall into the former category. Michael Marcavage of Repent America from Lansdowne, PA travels all over the country to spread his message of intolerance. Many of these people make their living doing this in two main ways: contributions from supporters, and lawsuits. For instance, one street preacher won over \$87,000 from York, PA claiming his First Amendment right of free speech was infringed when he was arrested during various events. In addition, they can use such arrests as a reason to solicit money from their supporters, so they can afford to pursue the lawsuit or defend themselves from charges. For a growing number of these people, this is a full-time job!

What they believe: Obviously, the number one problematic belief is that any form of sexuality other than being entirely straight is a sin.

Why they are like this: They consider themselves modern-day prophets, in the mold of Isaiah or Ezekiel, who stood in the town square and admonished all to submit to God’s will. They are truly religious zealots.

What their rights are: The same as for everyone else, they have the right of free speech, even when that speech is considered hateful by many. They have the right to carry signs of whatever size they like. In some jurisdictions, they have the right to use amplification – although this may be restricted in some cases, it is a difficult law to enforce. They have the right to occupy public property, unless that property has been temporarily leased to someone else (e.g. like Riverfront Park in Harrisburg during PrideFest). And they have the right to approach people and offer to give them literature (but you have the right to refuse.).

What you should do: Three things...ignore them, ignore them, ignore them! The absolutely best strategy for dealing with them is to pretend they don’t exist. Silent Witness Peacekeepers Alliance will be at Pride festivals in Harrisburg, Lancaster, Reading, Allentown, and North East PA Pride Festival in Wilkes-Barre this year to help participants run the gauntlet of protesters – we’re the folks with the big rainbow umbrellas and the smiling faces welcoming you to the event. We want each of these events to be entirely safe and peaceful. You can help by simply walking past any protesters without so much as a glance or a single word.

Ignoring them is actually a kind of sweet revenge, by indicating with your entire attitude that the opinions of these people don't matter one little bit! And, as an added bonus, if they can't get themselves arrested for some reason, they lose any potential income they might have been able to obtain from potential lawsuits! If they never get arrested at these events, eventually a large portion of their income would dry up, and they wouldn't be able to afford to do this full time...there'd be fewer and fewer of them at Pride events as the years go by.

So do yourselves, your friends, and your community a favor and just ignore them. It just might put them out of business. If you'd like to learn more about becoming a Silent Witness or would like to make a donation to our cause, please visit our website at www.SilentWitnessPA.org.