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Religion News Service

WASHINGTON (RNS)—Conservative Christian groups are criticizing a multicultural children's video featuring SpongeBob SquarePants and other TV characters, claiming it promotes acceptance of gay and lesbian families.

Nile Rodgers created the video, "We Are Family," based on his 1970s disco hit of the same title. After 9/11, Rodgers formed the New York-based We Are Family Foundation to promote tolerance and diversity.

Rodgers said his video, featuring more than 100 children's characters—including Arthur, Barney and Clifford the Big Red Dog—will be sent to 61,000 public and private elementary schools across the country in March to affirm diversity.

Newhouse News Service/Photo by Jon Naso
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“Cooperation and unity are the most important values we can teach children,” Rodgers said. “We believe that this is the essential first step to loving thy neighbor.”

The video does not explicitly mention homosexuality, but some Christian groups allege it promotes different kinds of families in singing “We Are Family.” The video encourages children to go to the We Are Family Foundation's website to sign a tolerance pledge.

“If you look at the website, it becomes pretty clear that a part of the agenda is to change the definition of family to include virtually anyone who chooses to be called a family, including homosexual couples and homosexual couples raising children,” said Peter Sprigg, senior director of policy studies for the Washington-based Family Research Council. “Much of what they have is coded language that is regularly used by the pro-homosexual movement such as 'tolerance' and 'diversity.'”

“Ultimately, we feel that this is being used as propaganda to indoctrinate very small children to accept a different definition of family.”

Sprigg said the companies behind SpongeBob SquarePants and the other cartoon characters may not endorse gay and lesbian families but are being employed to give that message legitimacy.

The pledge was written by the Southern Poverty Law Center—a civil rights group based in Montgomery, Ala.—as part of its National Campaign for Tolerance. The pledge advocates respect for differences between individuals—including differences of culture, belief and sexual identity.

The New York Times reported that James Dobson, founder of the Colorado-based Focus on the Family, said the popular cartoon figure SpongeBob SquarePants would appear in “a pro-homosexual video.” Dobson made the comment while speaking at a congressional dinner in Washington.

“We see the video as an insidious means by which the organization is manipulating and potentially brainwashing kids,” Paul Batura, an assistant to Dobson, told the newspaper.

Ed Vitagliano, a researcher for the Tupelo, Miss.-based American Family Association, said he was the first to raise public concern about the video after receiving word it would be sent to schools.

“We are concerned that children who go to the website might encounter a moral message about homosexuality that their parents might not approve of,” said Vitagliano.

In addition to the pledge, he said he was alarmed by a teacher's guide produced by the Anti-Defamation League that was “aggressive in its message about normalizing homosexuality.”

The We Are Family Foundation website says the video will arrive at schools by March 11, the same day the video will air on Nickelodeon, PBS and the Disney Channel.

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