

LifeWay apologizes to Asian-Americans for Rickshaw Rally

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NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP)—The head of the Southern Baptist Convention’s publishing arm apologized for a 10-year-old Asian-themed vacation Bible school curriculum critics said promoted racial stereotypes.



Thom Rainer “Ten years ago, LifeWay’s Vacation Bible School material used racial stereotypes that offended many in the Asian-American community,” [LifeWay Christian Resources](#) President Thom Rainer said in a video presentation to about 1,000 multiethnic church leaders at the [Mosaix conference](#) in Long Beach, Calif.

“I wasn’t part of LifeWay then, but I am now, and I’ve recently learned that decade-old offense is still a point of hurt for some,” Rainer said in a video apology played at the conference.

“As president and CEO of LifeWay Christian Resources, I want to apologize. I am sincerely sorry stereotypes were used in our materials, and I apologize for the pain they caused.”

LifeWay said the 2004 VBS theme of “Far Out Rickshaw Rally—Racing Towards the Son” was intended to introduce children to Jesus using Asian culture as a theme, but instead “became a lesson in cross-cultural miscommunication.”

Poor representation of Asian culture

Critics, including the Baptist Convention of New England, said focusing on the rickshaw was insensitive and a poor representation of Asian culture.

The VBS package came in a tin shaped like a Chinese-food take-out box, and the chorus to its theme song alluded to a scene in the 1984 movie *The Karate Kid*.

Teaching tips included building props like oversized chopsticks out of wood, borrowing Geisha or Samurai costumes from a community theatre or renting blow-up Sumo wrestler costumes for children to wrestle each other in.

At the time, LifeWay officials defended the material, saying that for every complaint the company received numerous compliments and those objecting were either overly sensitive or had a hidden agenda.

Resurfaced recently

The matter resurfaced recently, when more than 80 Asian-American Christians signed an open letter chastising evangelicals for “repeated and offensive racial stereotyping” of Asians, citing examples including *Purpose Driven Life* author Rick Warren’s recent use of a photo depicting a Red Guard during China’s Cultural Revolution on Facebook.

Asian-American leaders hearing the apology welcomed it as a step toward healing.

“I am so thankful for LifeWay, in their words this morning, in a public setting, to say we were wrong,” said Soong-Chan Rah, a professor of church growth and evangelism at [North Park Theological Seminary](#) in Chicago who created a “Reconsidering Rickshaw Rally” protest website in 2003.

“I am so thankful, because now the healing can begin, and the reconciliation we have not been able to have can begin.”

—*With reporting by Bob Smietana of LifeWay Christian Resources.*