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## Southern Poverty Law Center 'hate group' label hit in evangelicals' lawsuit

By: Elizabeth Llorente

A prominent evangelical ministry has filed a federal lawsuit against the left-leaning Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), saying it defamed the Christian organization as an "active hate group" because it endorses the biblical view of homosexuality.

The clash marks the latest chapter in a growing feud between those who embrace historic monotheistic beliefs, whether Christian, Jewish or Muslim, and progressive activists who have begun targeting mainstream Christian groups that hold traditional beliefs about sex and other issues.

Officials of the D. James Kennedy Ministries, based in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., accuse the SPLC of deceptive practices, saying that it wrongly asserts that some organizations breed or fuel hate because of their religious positions on such things as same-sex marriage and other social issues.

"It's completely disingenuous to tag D. James Kennedy Ministries as a hate group alongside the KKK and neo-Nazis," Kennedy Ministries spokesman John Rabe said to Fox News. "We desire all people, with no exceptions, to receive the love of Christ and his forgiveness and healing. We unequivocally condemn violence, and we hate no one."

"It's ridiculous for the SPLC to falsely tag evangelical Christian ministries as 'hate groups' simply for upholding the 2,000-year-old Christian consensus on marriage and sexuality," Rabe said. "It's nothing more than an attempt to bulldoze over those who disagree with them, and it has a chilling effect on the free exercise of religion in a nation built on that. We decided not to let their falsehoods stand."

Kennedy Ministries filed the lawsuit Tuesday in the U.S. District Court in Montgomery, Ala., where the SPLC is headquartered.

The SPLC did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

SPLC critics say its original mission was a commendable one, setting out in 1971 to fight the Ku Klux Klan. The SPLC went after several Klan leaders, driving them into bankruptcy after court losses.

But increasingly, especially since Donald Trump's victory in the presidential election, both liberals and conservatives say that SPLC has grown overzealous – bringing down its huge and very high-profile "hate-group" hammer on not just people and organizations that actually encourage hate and violence against certain groups, but also on those who simply don't fall in line with liberal positions on hot-button social issues.

"They deserve praise because they used the law to hurt the Klan -- a lot," said Scott Walter, president of Capital Research Center, a conservative think tank that monitors nonprofits. "But as often happens in the charity world, it concocts new ways to keep donations flowing."

"Hate is the issue here," Walter said. "When you talk about hate groups, you're talking about a group that is a threat because of its violent tendencies and racism. If you go up to somebody on the street and ask 'What is a hate group?' that is what they would take it to mean."

"It's an outrageous lie that some mainstream Christian group is a threat in terms of violence and racism," Walter said.

In a statement after the lawsuit was filed, the Kennedy Ministries president wrote: "These false and illegal characterizations have a chilling effect on the free exercise of religion and on religious free speech for all people of faith. After having given the SPLC an opportunity to retract, we

have undertaken this legal action, seeking a trial by a jury of our peers, to preserve our own rights under the law and to defend the religious free speech rights of all Americans.”

Members of other religious groups – including non-Christian groups – that embrace biblical views on sexuality are also feeling pressure from the SPLC.

In recent weeks, British Muslim activist Maajid Nawaz said on Bill Maher’s television show that he was considering suing SPLC for putting him on its list of “anti-Muslim extremists.”

SPLC has said that Nawaz has been a supporter of intelligence-

gathering efforts in the name of fighting terrorism that ensnare people who have not been proven a threat to national security.

Nawaz, a former Islamist who says that many liberals overlook the growth of jihadism, thinks the SPLC made him a target for violence.

“We know what happens when you list heretics,” Nawaz said. “They end up dead.”

Maher responded with dismay and said he would support a lawsuit against the SPLC.