

# THE CHURCH (

How the Southern Poverty Law Center

Ah, tolerance. Who could be against something so virtuous? And who could object to the Southern Poverty Law Center, the Montgomery, Alabama-based group that recently sent out this heartwarming yet mildly terrifying appeal to raise money for its "Teaching Tolerance" program, which prepares educational kits for schoolteachers? Cofounded in 1971 by civil rights lawyer cum direct-marketing millionaire Morris Dees, a leading critic of "hate groups" and a man so beatific that he was the subject of a made-for-TV movie, the SPLC spent much of its early years defending prisoners who faced the death penalty and suing to desegregate all-white institutions like Alabama's highway patrol. That was then. Today, the SPLC spends most of its time—and money—on a relentless fund-raising campaign, peddling memberships in the church of tolerance with all the zeal of a circuit rider passing the collection plate. "He's the Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker of the civil rights movement," renowned anti-death-penalty lawyer Millard Farmer says of Dees, his former associate, "though I don't mean to malign Jim and Tammy Faye." The center earned \$44 million last year alone—\$27 million from fund-raising and \$17 million from stocks and other investments—but spent only \$13 million on civil rights programs, making it one of the most profitable charities in the country.

The Ku Klux Klan, the SPLC's most lucrative nemesis, has shrunk from 4 million members in the 1920s to an estimated 2,000 today, as many as 10 percent of whom are thought to be FBI informants. But news of a declining Klan does not make for inclining donations to Morris Dees and Co., which is why the SPLC honors nearly every nationally covered "hate crime" with direct-mail alarums full of nightmarish invocations of "armed Klan paramilitary forces" and "violent neo-Nazi extremists," and why Dees does legal battle almost exclusively with mediagenic villains—like Idaho's arch-Aryan Richard Butler—eager to show off their swastikas for the news cameras. In 1987, Dees won a \$7 million judgment against the United Klans of America on behalf of Beulah Mae Donald, whose son was lynched by two Klansmen. The UKA's total assets amounted to a warehouse whose sale netted Mrs. Donald \$51,875. According to a groundbreaking series of newspaper stories in the *Montgomery Advertiser*, the SPLC, meanwhile, made \$9 million from fund-raising solicitations featuring the case, including one containing a photo of Michael Donald's corpse. Horrifying as such incidents are, hate groups commit almost no violence. More than 95 percent of all "hate crimes," including most of the incidents SPLC letters cite (bombings, church burnings, school shootings), are perpetrated by "lone wolves." Even Timothy McVeigh, subject of one of the most extensive investigations in the FBI's history—and one of the most extensive direct-mail campaigns in the SPLC's—was never credibly linked to any militia organization.



## TEACHING TOLERANCE

America is deeply divided.  
Now there is a unique opportunity to bridge the gap.

Dear Ms. [REDACTED],

Please use the enclosed "Tolerance Challenge" personal address labels that now afflict our nation.

You can do this by joining an exciting and successful address label campaign.

Newsweek magazine calls TEACHING TOLERANCE "the most important educational program in America."

The President's Initiative on Race recognizes "efforts that are successfully bridging racial divides."

Your free "Teach Tolerance" address labels are now using TEACHING TOLERANCE materials to educate our children.

One of the teachers who uses TEACHING TOLERANCE materials writes:

"In it she tells about a child in her classroom who that may bring tears to your eyes, she quotes the words 'If we are to reach real peace in the world, we must first reach the hearts of men.'"

Many others agree.

Bill Moyers said: "TEACHING TOLERANCE is a bold and courageous effort... Those of us who care about the future of our country should support the Center and the TEACHING TOLERANCE program."

You may know TEACHING TOLERANCE: The Teaching Tolerance video is part of an education kit, a \$325 value!

Barbara Jordan wrote: "I add my personal endorsement for the Teaching Tolerance program. This program is teaching harmony and tolerance. This program is teaching harmony and tolerance. This program is teaching harmony and tolerance."

I am sure you are well aware that our schools are in a national crisis.

Our communities are seething with racial hatred. Americans are assaulting each other. Gays are being persecuted.

In Jasper, Texas, three white men, two black men, and one white woman, beat and killed a black man to his death behind their pickup truck.

In Los Angeles, a neo-Nazi tried to kill a black man.

Experts predict things could get worse. We believe that TEACHING TOLERANCE is the answer.

A Minnesota teacher wrote: "Your TEACHING TOLERANCE materials are a godsend. They are color-blind adults of tomorrow. Not on religion, race, or creed than they are."

The idea for TEACHING TOLERANCE spread across the nation. Nationally known educators lent their assistance.

A PROJECT OF THE SOUTHERN POVERTY LAW CENTER



Morris Dees doesn't need your financial support. The SPLC is already the wealthiest civil rights group in America, though this letter quite naturally omits that fact. Other solicitations have been more flagrantly misleading. One pitch, sent out in 1995—when the center had more than \$60 million in reserves—informed would-be donors that the “strain on our current operating budget is the greatest in our 25-year history.” Back in 1978, when the center had less than \$10 million, Dees promised that his organization would quit fund-raising and live off interest as soon as its endowment hit \$55 million. But as it approached that figure, the SPLC upped the bar to \$100 million, a sum that, one 1989 newsletter promised, would allow the center “to cease the costly and often unreliable task of fundraising.” Today, the SPLC's treasury bulges with \$120 million, and it spends twice as much on fund-raising—\$5.76 million last year—as it does on legal services for victims of civil rights abuses. The American Institute of Philanthropy gives the center one of the worst ratings of any group it monitors, estimating that the SPLC could operate for 4.6 years without making another tax-exempt nickel from its investments or raising another tax-deductible cent from well-meaning “people like you.”

The SPLC's “other important work for justice” consists mainly in spying on private citizens who belong to “hate groups,” sharing its files with law-enforcement agencies, and suing the most prominent of these groups for crimes committed independently by their members—a practice that, however seemingly justified, should give civil libertarians pause. The legal strategy employed by Dees could have put the Black Panther Party out of business or bankrupted the New England Emigrant Aid Company in retaliation for crimes committed by John Brown. What the center's other work for justice does not include is anything that might be considered controversial by donors. According to Millard Farmer, the center largely stopped taking death-penalty cases for fear that too visible an opposition to capital punishment would scare off potential contributors. In 1986, the center's entire legal staff quit in protest of Dees's refusal to address issues—such as homelessness, voter registration, and affirmative action—that they considered far more pertinent to poor minorities, if far less marketable to affluent benefactors, than fighting the KKK. Another lawyer, Gloria Browne, who resigned a few years later, told reporters that the center's programs were calculated to cash in on “black pain and white guilt.” Asked in 1994 if the SPLC itself, whose leadership consists almost entirely of white men, was in need of an affirmative action policy, Dees replied that “probably the most discriminated people in America today are white men when it comes to jobs.”

And nearly half a million people like you project. I invite you to be a part of TEACHING TOLERANCE.

This is how TEACHING TOLERANCE works:

1. Top-quality teaching kits are produced by you, the text and teacher's guide.
2. These teaching kits are shipped free!
3. A journal called *Teaching Tolerance*, and spring to over 600,000 teachers.

TEACHING TOLERANCE works because it's creative, top-quality and easy to use by today's busy teachers!

In only nine years, TEACHING TOLERANCE has won:

- An Oscar for *A Time for Justice*, the 38-minute video in the field.
- Golden Eagle Award for *Starting Small*, the video in Teaching Tolerance's CINE (Council on International Nontheatrical Education).
- EdPress Golden Lamp Award for *Teaching Tolerance* magazine, the top award in its association of some 700 educational periodicals.

Also, as I mentioned at the start of my letter, the award for President's Initiative on Race.

You need to see the TEACHING TOLERANCE magazine to see why they keep winning award after award. If you will join, you will receive a copy of *Teaching Tolerance* magazine. You can join in your area or to a family member.

There is much left to do in the TEACHING TOLERANCE project. We need your help now.

So far, TEACHING TOLERANCE has produced three million kits to produce and distribute free. *Starting Small*, out now. We expect at least 60,000 schools to request free *Starting Small*.

A Texas teacher told us: “We could never have purchased the TEACHING TOLERANCE kits. They are alarmingly small. We are therefore extremely grateful for your gift of free kits.”

Our editors are also busy preparing the next issue of *Teaching Tolerance*. Each issue costs about \$376,000 to produce and mail. Any help you can give is appreciated.

Please don't sit on the sidelines while the battle for our nation's future is being fought. Join me and thousands of others in this important effort today.

Your gift of \$25, \$50, \$100 — whatever you can afford — will help the Center carry on its other important work for justice.

Sincerely,  
MD:he  
Morris Dees  
National Center for Teaching Tolerance

P.S. Ms. C. [redacted], help spread the tolerance message by using your tax-deductible contribution to help pay for all your correspondence. And remember, you will receive a free copy of *Teaching Tolerance* magazine.

Contributors to Teaching Tolerance might be surprised to learn how little of the SPLC's reported educational spending actually goes to education. In response to lobbying by charities, the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants in 1987 began allowing nonprofits to count part of their fund-raising costs as "educational" so long as their solicitations contained an informational component. On average, the SPLC classifies an estimated 47 percent of the fund-raising letters that it sends out every year as educational, including many that do little more than instruct potential donors on the many evils of "militant right-wing extremists" and the many splendid virtues of Morris Dees. According to tax documents, of the \$10.8 million in educational spending the SPLC reported in 1999, \$4 million went to solicitations. Another \$2.4 million paid for stamps.

in the effort and are providing the financial support for this nonprofit  
 E  
 s K through 12. These boxed kits contain a video,  
 d on request  
 rticles, facts, and resources, is sent free in the fall  
 kits it produces, along with the semiannual teacher magazine, are  
 umerous awards. I'll mention just three:  
 ING TOLERANCE kit, won an Oscar for Best Short  
 tion kit, was awarded a Golden Eagle for excellence by  
 ucational Press Association of America, an independent  
 CHING TOLERANCE was singled out for praise by the  
 nderstand why they receive so much praise from educators and  
 ng fund TEACHING TOLERANCE, I will see that you  
 rself its usefulness and quality, and then pass it on to a school  
 ram. It is time everyone joined in the war against intolerance.  
 -text education kits for classrooms. These kits cost over \$1  
 t, is for elementary teachers and is being distributed right  
 and we must be able to fill these orders.  
 ANCE education package because our budget is  
 ING TOLERANCE provided this material to us  
 nce magazine with its 64 pages of colorful and useful  
 subscribe free of charge.  
 ty to live in peace and tolerance is being waged. Show  
 address labels.  
 nding the most generous tax-deductible gift you can  
 EACHING TOLERANCE reach even more classrooms  
 red address labels on  
 g Tolerance magazine soon after your

In the early 1960s, Morris Dees sat on the sidelines honing his direct-marketing skills and practicing law while the civil rights movement engulfed the South. "Morris and I . . . shared the overriding purpose of making a pile of money," recalls Dees's business partner, a lawyer named Millard Fuller (not to be confused with Millard Farmer). "We were not particular about *how* we did it; we just wanted to be independently rich." They were so unparticular, in fact, that in 1961 they defended a man, guilty of beating up a journalist covering the Freedom Riders, whose legal fees were paid by the Klan. ("I felt the anger of a black person for the first time," Dees later wrote of the case. "I vowed then and there that nobody would ever again doubt where I stood.") In 1965, Fuller sold out to Dees, donated the money to charity, and later started Habitat for Humanity. Dees bought a 200-acre estate appointed with tennis courts, a pool, and stables, and, in 1971, founded the SPLC, where his compensation has risen in proportion to fund-raising revenues, from nothing in the early seventies to \$273,000 last year. A *National Journal* survey of salaries paid to the top officers of advocacy groups shows that Dees earned more in 1998 than nearly all of the seventy-eight listed, tens of thousands more than the heads of such groups as the ACLU, the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, and the Children's Defense Fund. The more money the SPLC receives, the less that goes to other civil rights organizations, many of which, including the NAACP, have struggled to stay out of bankruptcy. Dees's compensation alone amounts to one quarter the annual budget of the Atlanta-based Southern Center for Human Rights, which handles several dozen death-penalty cases a year. "You are a fraud and a conman," the Southern Center's director, Stephen Bright, wrote in a 1996 letter to Dees, and proceeded to list his many reasons for thinking so, which included "your failure to respond to the most desperate needs of the poor and powerless despite your millions upon millions, your fund-raising techniques, the fact that you spend so much, accomplish so little, and promote yourself so shamelessly." Soon the SPLC will move into a new six-story headquarters in downtown Montgomery, just across the street from its current headquarters, a building known locally as the Poverty Palace.