

NBC axes provocative Book of Daniel: Conservative critics claim victory

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Conservative critics have claimed victory over the pulling of a fledgling prime-time TV program depicting an Episcopal priest with a host of family problems who held long conversations with a seemingly hip Jesus.

NBC officials said that they aired just four of the scheduled eight shows because of viewership problems. Speaking to television critics, Kevin Reilly, president of NBC Entertainment, said the network anticipated “tough-sledding” with advertisers—which it would have been “willing to weather if the audience in fact embraced the show.”

The Book of Daniel, which debuted January 6, provoked protest from groups such as the American Family Association, which orchestrated a campaign against the series. NBC received 678,000 angry e-mails from AFA supporters, prompting advertisers to pull out and a number of NBC affiliates to refuse to run the show.

Ed Vitagliano, an AFA official, said the series mocked Christianity, and he criticized the Daniel character. “I don’t know anybody this dysfunctional in my over 20 years in the ministry,” he said to the *Los Angeles Times*. Vitagliano said the series was “not a realistic portrayal of a minister’s life. This was so far beyond the pale, it was almost a comic-strip version.”

The series featured Aidan Quinn as Episcopal priest Daniel Webster, who sought advice from Jesus on his sometimes troubled marriage and his rocky relationship with his three children—one gay, one sexually promiscuous and one dealing drugs.

Addiction was a serious problem in the clergyman’s household, with Webster himself dependent on pain-killers, while his wife “really likes her martinis,” as one Texas TV critic wrote. Webster frequently locked horns with his diocese’s first female bishop, Beatrice Congreve, played by Ellen Burstyn.

Facing criticism after the first broadcasts, series creator Jack Kenny defended the show, saying that “most everyone seems to understand that this is not any kind of attack or mocking of Christianity, but rather simply a fictional story in which the characters happen to be Christians.”

As controversy grew, Kenny pleaded with fans to lobby the network and called the “bullies” who sought to kill his show “unchristian and un-American.” *-Ecumenical News International*