

WYD chief denies church seeks to expand police powers, limit protests

SYDNEY, Australia – The chief organizer of World Youth Day in Sydney has denied media reports that the church had asked the New South Wales government to expand police powers in order to limit protesters during World Youth Day.

“The church has not intervened,” Danny Casey, chief operating officer of World Youth Day 2008, told a media briefing at St. Benedict Church in Sydney July 2. Casey refuted the claim of one newspaper that recently adopted police regulations came at the insistence of Cardinal George Pell of Sydney and were aimed at muzzling protesters.

“The church believes in free speech,” Casey said. “The church did not ask for any special powers to be given to police. Our concern has always been the efficient running of this event; these are normal powers and people are free to protest.”

Casey said the legislation, which allows police to arrest people for “causing annoyance and inconvenience,” covers streets, train stations and public areas used as World Youth Day venues July 15-20.

This type of legislation “has been used on many, many occasions,” he said.

“Police do use their discretion at other large events such as rock concerts and football games,” he added. “Bag searches at venues are to prevent risky behavior. It’s important to make the public understand that we support free speech.”

Kristina Keneally, a New South Wales government spokeswoman, said the “annoyance” provision was contained in at least 16 other state acts. She said it covered billboards “to stop ambush marketing” and protects the rights of World Youth Day corporate partners.

Given that the regulations can result in a fine of up to US\$5,300 for individuals, Casey was asked to offer an example of where this might apply.

“If someone decided to stage a protest on the Harbor Bridge in the middle of the pilgrim walk, that would be annoying,” he said.

Casey said World Youth Day events would include two or three gatherings of up to 500,000 people.