

Anti-Obama black pastors group has conservative ties

by [Aamer Madhani](#) in the [September 5, 2012](#) issue

Since William Owens launched his national campaign in May calling on African Americans to withdraw their support of President Obama because of his stance on gay marriage, the minister has claimed the backing of 3,700 black clergy and touted his organization as predominantly Democratic.

But Owens and his group, the Coalition of African-American Pastors, are drawing criticism from black leaders and the political left who note Owens's long-standing ties to GOP politicians. They charge that CAAP misrepresents itself as a nonpartisan grassroots organization when it is actually backed financially by right-leaning conservative groups.

"He is the poster person of conservative evangelicals . . . who are trying to use this as an emotional wedge issue to divide the black community," said Amos Brown, pastor of the Third Baptist Church in San Francisco and a protégé of civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr.

Owens has become an outspoken critic of Obama since the president announced in May that he was switching his position on gay marriage. The pastor has railed against Obama in cable news network interviews and has held a series of news conferences warning that Obama is in danger of losing black voters' support.

He has also vowed to collect 100,000 churchgoers' signatures in support of "traditional" marriage and made plans to hold an August 16 rally in Memphis, his hometown, to focus attention on the issue.

The coalition describes its organizers on its website as a "nonpartisan group of truthfully mostly Democrats." But interviews and a review of tax documents reveal deep connections with the right:

- Owens was appointed this year as the African-American liaison for the National Organization for Marriage, a Washington-based group opposed to same-sex

marriage that has endorsed Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney.

- Frank Cannon, head of the American Principles Project, a group opposed to same-sex marriage, confirms that his group's political action fund is paying the public relations firm Shirley & Banister to assist CAAP's communications strategy.
- CAAP received loans totaling \$26,000 in 2004 from the conservative Family Research Council, American Family Association and Mississippi Tea Party activist Ed Holliday, according to its IRS filings.

Owens, who didn't respond to requests for comment, endorsed 2008 GOP presidential contender Mike Huckabee and Ohio GOP gubernatorial candidate Ken Blackwell.

"CAAP bears all the hallmarks of a front group," said Michael Keegan of the liberal People for the American Way. "Owens presents himself and his group as nonpartisan or, if anything, leaning in the direction of the Democrats. That makes him more useful to religious-right groups and easier to book on cable news."

NOM set out to find African-American spokespeople to develop "a media campaign around their objection to gay marriage as a civil right" and "provoke the gay marriage base into . . . denouncing these spokesmen and women as bigots," according to internal documents unveiled earlier this year in a Maine lawsuit.

Maggie Gallagher, cofounder of NOM, called the language in the internal documents "regrettable" but denied that the group's alliance with Owens reflects a wedge strategy. "The belief that this is somehow a front group, I think, is unfair to the majority of black pastors that have appeared with Reverend Owens."

Polls show black voters are deeply divided on gay marriage. Still, "this idea that there are going to be black voters coming out against a candidate or coalescing for a candidate on one issue is simply not true," said William Barber, president of the North Carolina chapter of the NAACP. —*USA Today*; Ray Locker contributing