

Gay advocates angry about Mormon political activism: LDS raised money to defeat gay marriage in California

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Angered by the Election Day passage of Proposition 8, which reversed California's same-sex marriage ruling by amending the state's constitution, gay rights activists have taken their battle to the blogosphere and to the streets, targeting the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints for encouraging Mormons to bankroll the Yes on 8 campaign.

Discontent over passage of Proposition 8 resulted in clashes and protests outside LDS temples from Los Angeles to New York—and some non-Mormons have rushed to defend the church from what they call bigoted attacks.

The Mormon hierarchy did heavily support overturning a California Supreme Court decision granting gay marriage rights, but Mormons make up less than 2 percent of California's population. According to exit polls, most of the 52 percent of California voters who approved Prop 8 were white evangelical Christians, Catholics or African-Americans.

Nevertheless, numerous Web sites venting anger over Prop 8 have focused on Mormons, arguing that their church violated its tax-exempt status by urging its national membership to contribute to California's Yes on 8 campaign.

According to Mormonsfor8.com, a Web site founded by Utah attorney Nadine Hansen to match campaign records to church membership rosters, about half of the \$36 million raised by the Yes on 8 campaign came from Mormons—a figure the Yes on 8 campaign has neither confirmed nor denied.

"Their members put the lion's share of the money into it," said Ron Oliver, 48, of Palm Springs, California, who launched a "Mormons Stole Our Rights" Facebook page. "On a fundamental level—and I don't use that pun lightly—they continually

say they're for goodness and wholesomeness and love, and it strikes me that it's a tad hypocritical that it's 'except if you're this,' or 'except if you're that.'"

Oliver admits that getting the Mormons' tax-free status revoked is a long shot—churches are allowed to lobby on social issues and are only prohibited from endorsing individual candidates—but argues that the larger principle of separation of church and state warrants further discussion.

In response to the online petitions and protests outside LDS temples and meetinghouses in California and other states, Catholic bishop William K. Weigand of Sacramento, who once headed the Salt Lake City diocese, said the Protect Marriage coalition behind the ballot initiative included Catholics, Latinos, Jews and members of other faiths and ethnicities.

"Bigoted attacks on Mormons for the part they played in our coalition are shameful and ignore the reality that Mormon voters were only a small part of the groundswell that supported Proposition 8," he said in a statement.

Mormon bloggers have also hastened to defend themselves, arguing that they have the same rights as any other American citizens to volunteer, vote and give money to a political campaign.

Street protests in California drew a profusion of signs, borne by both supporters ("No More Mr. Nice Gay") and opponents ("Read the Bible for Details") of same-sex marriage.

Los Angeles police estimated the city's downtown crowd November 15 at 10,000 to 20,000, well below the 40,000 expected. About 7,500 marched in San Francisco and 1,500 in Sacramento.

Three days earlier in New York, demonstrators brought traffic to a stop in a rally outside the Mormon temple in midtown Manhattan. Among the marchers was entertainer Whoopi Goldberg.

As the crowd chanted "2-4-6-8, Separate the church and state," Goldberg said she felt that Mormon leaders should not have used religious beliefs to encourage members to donate to a political cause.

"If it's against your religion, I understand that—then, you should not marry a gay person," she said, as she walked down Broadway. "But, if you really separate church

and state, then your religious beliefs should not interfere with [a gay couple's] ability to be married."

[A number of cities, civil rights groups and gay organizations have mounted a court challenge to Prop 8, and on November 19 the California Supreme Court announced that it would take up the case to determine whether the same-sex marriage ban is constitutional. However, the court did not suspend the ban.

The challengers contend that the ban denies equal protection under the law and that such a major revision of the state's constitution requires approval of the legislature.]
-Religion News Service