Black churches conflicted about Obama's stance on gays

by Dennis Cauchon in the June 13, 2012 issue

When the pulpits of the nation's black churches took measure of President Obama's decision to support gay marriage, the resulting comments were often conflicted.

Some churches were silent on the issue. At others, pastors spoke against the president's decision on May 10 but kindly of the man himself. A few blasted the president and his decision. A minority spoke in favor of the decision and expressed understanding of the president's change of heart.

Bishop Timothy Clarke, head of the First Church of God, a large African-American church with a television ministry in Columbus, Ohio, was perhaps typical. He felt compelled to address the president's comments at a Wednesday evening service and again Sunday morning. He was responding to an outpouring of calls, e-mails and text messages from members of his congregation after the president's remarks.

What did he hear from churchgoers? "No church or group is monolithic. Some were powerfully agitated and disappointed. Others were curious—why now? To what end? Others were hurt. And others, to be honest, told me it's not an issue and they don't have a problem with it."

What did the bishop tell his congregation? He opposes gay marriage. It is not just a social issue, he said, but a religious one for those who follow the Bible. "The spiritual issue is grounded in the word of God."

That said, he added, "I believe the statement the president made and his decision was made in good faith. I am sure because the president is a good man. I know his decision was made after much thought and consideration and, I'm sure, even prayer." Clarke asked his church "to pray for the president and pray this will not become a political football with uncivil language and heated rhetoric. We can disagree on this, as we do on many things, and still love each other."

The different sentiments within African-American churches reflect a broader struggle in the American public. A *USA Today* poll showed that slightly more than half of Americans agreed with the president's decision. A scientifically valid breakdown of African-American views was not available, but past polls have shown that blacks are generally opposed to gay marriage.

African Americans are a key voting bloc for the president this November. In 2008, exit polls showed that Obama lost to John McCain among white voters but won more than 95 percent of the African-American vote.

Dwight McKissic, senior pastor at the Cornerstone Baptist Church in Arlington, Texas, said he did not speak on gay marriage May 13 because it was Mother's Day and his wife would lead the church service. However, he planned to focus directly on the topic in the following week's sermon. "President Obama has betrayed the Bible and the black church with his endorsement of same-sex marriage," McKissic said.

On the opposite side of the issue, pastor Enoch Fuzz of Corinthian Missionary Baptist Church in Nashville, Tennessee, said recently that he understood why many pastors oppose gay marriage, but he planned to explain from the pulpit why he supports it. "I know many in the black community have trouble accepting gay marriage," he said. "But all of us have gay friends or family, and we love them."

Fuzz said he thinks the president's comments won't hurt him politically, although some African-American Christians may be upset with him. "There's really no better option. People are not going to go out and vote for Mitt Romney."

In Columbus, Mayor Michael Coleman is confident that black churches and voters will stick with the president, even if they disagree over gay marriage. The four-term African-American mayor made the same conversion himself on the issue of gay marriage—for the same reasons—this year.

"I had to evolve on the issue and think it through, too, and I came to the conclusion it was the right thing," said Coleman, a Democrat who supports Obama. "When it is the right thing to do, politics is irrelevant." Coleman discussed his change with the leader of Columbus's largest black church. "He disagrees with me rather strongly," Coleman says. Will it endanger his political support? "No. We're very close."

In North Carolina, where black churches recently helped pass a constitutional amendment banning gay marriage, Ron Gates, president of the Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance of Asheville/Buncombe County, decided not to focus on gay marriage in his Sunday sermon but instead make it "a footnote," so his continued support for the amendment was clear.

"I support my president and love my president, but I think he is wrong," said Keith Ogden, pastor of the predominantly black Hill Street Baptist Church in Asheville. "He is not God, and he doesn't speak for all black folk because he is African American." —*USA Today*