

Chick-fil-A to draw crowds -- and not for its food

by [Adelle M. Banks](#)

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c. 2012 Religion News Service (RNS) It could get pretty crowded at Chick-fil-A this week -- and not because of the fast-food restaurant's famous waffle fries.

Supporters and opponents of gay marriage plan to appear at Chick-fil-A locations nationwide after the company's president strongly denounced same-sex relationships.

The restaurant chain with Christian roots -- "closed Sunday," it proudly proclaims -- is run by owners with conservative values. Now company President and CEO Dan Cathy has sparked a nationwide food fight by saying he is "guilty as charged" for opposing same-sex marriage.

"We are very much supportive of the family -- the biblical definition of the family unit. We are a family-owned business, a family-led business, and we are married to our first wives," Cathy told the Biblical Recorder newspaper. The article was reprinted by Baptist Press on July 16.

Former Republican presidential candidate Mike Huckabee has spearheaded "Chick-fil-A Appreciation Day" and, as of Tuesday (July 31), more than 500,000 people had pledged on its Facebook page to show up or give support to the restaurant via social media on Wednesday.

"People are outraged that someone who expresses a view that is shared by most of the country is being bullied by hate speech and intolerance from the militant gay groups that are trying to disenfranchise his right to a personal opinion," Huckabee told Religion News Service in an email.

"CFA doesn't turn away people as customers or employees on the basis of sexual orientation and that's the only way this could be an issue," Huckabee added.

Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, plans to buy more than 200 of the restaurant's sandwiches for its students, faculty and staff on Wednesday and famed evangelist Billy Graham has promised to "Eat Mor Chikin" -- Chick-fil-A's catchphrase -- at one of the restaurants that day.

Meanwhile, opponents to Cathy's stance have spearheaded "National Same Sex Kiss Day at Chick-fil-A" on Friday -- the anniversary of the day the Episcopal Church elected its first openly gay bishop.

Organizer Carly McGehee said it will be up to rally participants whether to buy food or not.

"Some have said they will ask for a water, some have said they won't buy anything," she said. As of Tuesday, more than 8,400 people had signed up for the "kiss-in."

In several locations, people have planned to place kissing booths outside the restaurants, with proceeds going to local gay rights groups. Heterosexuals supporting the kissing event plan to appear and kiss loved ones, she said.

"People will simply walk into the restaurant, kiss someone of the same sex and take a picture or video, then leave and post it on Facebook for all the world to see!"

Some think the food fight is misplaced.

"Let your food disagree with you the traditional way -- after you eat it, and not before," argued blogger Alexandra Petri in a Washington Post commentary. "Mixing food with politics, as anyone who has attended a Thanksgiving dinner can tell you, is seldom a good idea."

Chick-fil-A's Cathy says his chain is not a Christian company. But its website says that the decision by his father and founder Truett Cathy to close on Sundays was "as much practical as spiritual." Dan Cathy has also said that "as an organization, we can run on biblical principles."

Dan Cathy's online bio also notes that his passion is to fulfill his company's "corporate purpose": "To glorify God by being a faithful steward of all that is entrusted to us. To have a positive influence on all who come in contact with Chick-fil-A."

Emotions are high on both sides of the gay marriage controversy.

"The hard part for me, especially, is this assumption that there are Christians and there's LGBT people and that there's absolutely no overlap between the two of them," said Ross Murray, director of religion, faith and values for GLAAD, a gay rights organization that is supporting the kiss day.

He said statements like Cathy's are "very harmful to the LGBT people who identify as Christians."

Huckabee said he doubts the event that follows his by two days will move people from one camp to the other.

"I'm not sure that a display of same sex kissing will win converts to their point of view, and they are free to do it unless they violate a law or a stated policy of a mall," he said.