

Mormons face flak for backing Prop. 8

Matthai Kuruville, Chronicle Religion Writer

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David Paul Morris / The Chronicle

(10-26) 14:40 PDT OAKLAND -- Christine Alonso's body trembled and her lips quivered as she walked up and spoke to a few of the 50 protesters in front of the Mormon Temple in Oakland on Sunday.

"Don't think they're all against you," said Alonso, 27, explaining that she was Mormon and that despite her religious leaders' support of a ballot measure banning same-sex marriage, she was actively opposed.

As she walked away, she said, "I'm afraid that a gay or lesbian friend might hear that I'm Mormon and think that I want to tear their marriage apart."

Alonso's solitary act came as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and its members are increasingly under fire for their support of Proposition 8, which would take away the right of gays and lesbians to marry. In addition to increased protests, online campaigns seek to identify and embarrass Mormons who support the ballot measure.

The church largely stays out of politics. But in this case, the Salt Lake City-based church has sent letters, held video conferences and in church meetings asked for volunteers to support the campaign. In response, some church members have poured in their savings and undertaken what may be an unprecedented grassroots mobilization for the effort.

Prop. 8 is on pace to be the costliest race in the nation, except for the billion-dollar presidential election. The Yes on 8 campaign estimates that up to 40 percent of its donations come from Mormons. Some others estimate that Mormons account for over 70 percent of donations from individuals.

All of California's Catholic bishops have all come out in favor of the measure. So have many evangelical Christians and Orthodox Jews. Yet it is Mormons, who account for 2 percent of the state population, who are catching the most heat.

"We seem to be the symbol of the Yes on 8 campaign," said Rand King, 60, a Walnut Creek resident who is Mormon and who was watching Sunday's protest from inside the temple's gates.

Prop. 8 opponents are increasingly narrowing their focus on Mormons, harnessing technology and open-records laws in their efforts. One Web site run by a Prop. 8 opponent, Mormonsfor8.com, identifies the name and hometown of every Mormon donor. On the Daily Kos, the nation's most popular liberal blog, there is a campaign to use that information to look into the lives of Mormons who financially support Prop. 8.

It has led some Mormons to question why other religious groups in the coalition aren't being targeted.

"I don't think it's politically expedient to point the finger at the Catholic Church," said Dave Christensen, 52, a Mormon and an Alamo resident who donated \$30,000 to the Yes on 8 campaign. "You don't get the mileage criticizing a church that has more clout."

Nadine Hansen, who runs Mormonsfor8.com, said the church decided to enter politics and can't excuse itself for the ramifications.

"Any group that gets involved in the political arena has to be treated like a political action committee," said Hansen, 61, a Mormon who lives in Cedar City, Utah, and has stopped going to church. "You can't get involved in politics and say, 'Treat me as a church.'" Hansen said she focused on Mormons because she is one. She said Mormons have contacted her to shut the site, saying it was being used by the Daily Kos campaign in a "witch hunt."

"I didn't think there were any witches on the list, so I wasn't worried," said Hansen, whose site is "neutral" on its views, though she is opposed because she views it as "divisive."

The person who initiated the Daily Kos campaign to look into the lives of Mormon donors is Dante Atkins, an elected delegate to the state Democratic convention who said he's the vice president of the Los Angeles County Young Democrats.

Atkins said his goal was to "embarrass the opposition by pointing out and publicizing any contributors they may have." He said focusing on Mormons made sense. "If one religious group is putting close to the majority of the money and the effort into passing this proposition, it is fair to single them out."

The Mormon church hasn't taken the same level of interest in Arizona or Florida, which also have constitutional amendments banning same-sex marriage.

But California is a bellwether, said LDS spokesman Mike Otterson. "If same-gender marriage is approved in California... other states will follow suit."

Several Bay Area Mormons said they would support the right of gay and lesbian unions to have all the rights of married

couples. But the word marriage was sacred, pivotal to their concept of families, who can be "eternally united" in the afterlife. A key church document - "The Family: A Proclamation to the World" - says that "marriage between man and a woman is essential to His eternal plan." They also believe that children are entitled to be raised by a father and a mother.

Those words speak for Michele Sundstrom, 47, of San Jose, who has been married for 18 years and has five children.

She and her husband gave \$30,000 to the Yes on 8 campaign and put a sign on their home. But in response, two women parked an SUV in front of their home, with the words "Bigots live here" painted on the windshield.

Sundstrom believes such responses must come from deep places of pain - and that gays and lesbians are entitled to the same rights as heterosexuals, just not the word marriage. Any animosity toward gays or lesbians is wrong, she said.

"There must be such deep, deep, deep hurt; otherwise there couldn't be so much opposition," she said. "They've lived with this. I guess we're getting a taste of where they live."