

## Walsh: LDS stand on Prop. 8 oozes irony

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Mormons understand a little bit about getting picked on for being different.

Tales of Haun's Mill, Reed Smoot and Mitt Romney fill Sunday School and Family Home Evening lessons. Years of violence and lampooning and soft bigotry drive The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints' historical narrative. Persecution is in the psyche of the people.

But now the victims seem to have turned into the aggressors - and over, of all things, an alternative definition of marriage.

"This is a church that has been persecuted for its flavor of Christianity, for its past marriage practices, for its past religious practices. And here they are turning around and persecuting another group of people," says Jay Redd, a gay lapsed-Mormon movie director whose San Francisco marriage ceremony was featured last week in *Salon*. "I feel like it's very shortsighted, and it's not a very Christian way of treating people."

In a four-month offensive, the LDS Church has deployed its faithful as partisans for California's Proposition 8, a ballot initiative that would ban gay marriage - the largest mobilization since the faith fought the Equal Rights Amendment three decades ago. In June, members were asked to "do all you can." And they have.

As a result, the Salt Lake City-based church gets the credit and the blame for leading the cause. According to Californians Against Hate, Mormons have donated more than \$19 million to the cause - nearly four out of five dollars raised.

At the same time, wards are splitting as members' beliefs about gay rights become a litmus test of righteousness. Families are also divided between the über-faithful and the conflicted.

Church leaders insist there is a higher cause: "Freedom of religion is at risk," says L. Whitney Clayton, a member of the LDS Presidency of the Seventy.

The irony is thick here. But it seems lost on church leaders and many members.

More than 150 years ago, Mormon settlers were driven from their homes and their prophet was killed, in part, because of their polygamous definition of marriage. After years of isolation and marginalization in the desert, the church abandoned the practice to achieve statehood, political legitimacy and validation in American society.

Now, Mormons are using the same words that were used against their ancestors. It's not completely inconsistent with a history and doctrine centered on procreation.

"I don't think the church ever compromised on its sense that marriage is the institution through which families are formed and people are saved," says Sarah Barringer Gordon, a scholar of the law of church and state who teaches at the University of Pennsylvania School of Law.

Comparing polygamy to gay marriage, she says, "in many church members' eyes is comparing apples and oranges. You can't compare gay marriage to polygamy."

Still, in this electrified climate, the church can't escape legitimate reminders of its muddled history. Officially, Mormon polygamy is now a quandary for heaven. But California bloggers speculate that the church's support is really a ploy to legalize polygamy. After all, the thinking goes, the initiative language says "only marriage between a man and a woman is valid or recognized in California." But what about one man and two women?

On the other side, a whisper campaign speculates that if the initiative fails, church elders will be forced to marry gay couples in the temples. Others bring up the faith's embarrassingly tardy decision to give black men the priesthood and marry interracial couples. This scrutiny is the price of leading the campaign against gay marriage.

Apostle Dallin H. Oaks rejects the notion that the church's history of polygamy conflicts with its judgment of homosexuality. Many 19th century Mormons, he says in a 2006 interview on the church's Web site, were reluctant to live polygamy.

When a new revelation ended the practice, "I think the majority were greatly relieved and glad to get back into the mainstream of Western civilization," Oaks says. "If you start with the assumption of continuing revelation, on which this church is founded, then you can understand that there is no irony in this."

But that still seems to leave the door open. If polygamy can end with a revelation, wonders *Washington Post* columnist David Waters, what about Mormon opposition to gay marriage?

Given the LDS Church's reliance on procreation theology - the role of the traditional family in salvation - Gordon says that's unlikely.

"There's an awful lot of theology involved - the centrality of the family and the ways families are created and perpetuated," she says. "It seems a significant hurdle."

If anything, the church may be left behind as other conservative congregations soften and adapt.

Affirmation assistant executive director David Melson says the church has done damage to its own members and its reputation. "Win or lose, the actions of the church over the past 90 days will result in damage to the LDS Church in California and beyond from which it may take a generation or longer to recover," he says.

The ERA failed. But feminists still went to work.

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