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Marriage Amendment: Tug-of-war with values

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Whether for or against the proposed South Carolina Marriage Amendment, both sides here say it is an issue of values.

While conservative religious voters see gay marriage as an affront to the traditional institution of marriage -- a unit many already believe is under attack -- opponents of the amendment say it is an affront to civil rights.

South Carolina is one of eight states where voters will decide whether to define marriage as the union of one man and one woman.

From the pulpit to the bumper, many Christian believers are being urged to vote yes to the ballot initiative Tuesday.

At least two local congregations, however, vehemently oppose it.

They argue it tramples on the rights of gay people who simply want the more than 1,100 marital rights and privileges extended to heterosexual couples, including partners' health-care coverage and end-of-life spousal privileges.

Experts predict the amendment will galvanize conservative churchgoers to head to the polls.

"My feeling would be (the amendment) is going to help bring out a lot of church folk who because of various factors might have stayed

home this time," said Ron Romine, a University of South Carolina Upstate political science professor and a Democratic Party activist.

Laura Woliver, a University of South Carolina political science professor, also predicts conservative, religious voters will have a "big impact" Tuesday.

How big that impact will be is hard to quantify. Woliver said regular churchgoers are more apt to vote anyway because they tend to be stable and connected with their communities.

The amendment has galvanized the state's Southern Baptists, whose membership numbered almost 716,000 in 2005. The South Carolina Baptist Convention lobbied legislators to support the amendment, according to state Sen. John Hawkins, R-Spartanburg.

Hawkins introduced a bill in February 2004 to strengthen South Carolina's ban on same-sex marriage.

South Carolina passed a law in 1996 banning same-sex marriage. After the Massachusetts Supreme Court ruled that banning gay couples from marrying was unconstitutional in 2004, S.C. lawmakers hastened to ban such marriages here.

In a 2005 Herald-Journal article, Hawkins said the constitutional amendment was needed because a judge could circumvent the current ban by recognizing gay marriages from another state.

Palmetto Family Council also lobbied legislators to support the amendment and is now working to make sure it is approved at the polls.

The Christian nonprofit has distributed information supporting its position to church groups and individuals, along with bumper stickers and yard signs that read: "Yes! On Amendment 1." Pro marriage amendment information also has appeared in church bulletins and newsletters.

Heather Hackett, vice president of Palmetto Family Council, emphasized the organization was not anti-gay, but simply taking a stand on traditional values.

"Churches have recognized the importance of this issue and are being proactive," she said.

Palmetto Family Council did not have estimates on how many bumper stickers and signs have been distributed.

Encouragement also is emanating from some pulpits.

The Rev. Mike Hamlet of First Baptist North Spartanburg has urged people to vote yes.

Hamlet preached about the issue of same-sex marriage two weeks ago and has provided church members with printed materials courtesy of the Palmetto Family Council and the state Baptist Convention.

"I believe this is the most critical issue on the ballot -- I think it's more important than any office," Hamlet said. "It is not a partisan issue. It is a moral issue."

He says it is imperative that Christians "take a strong stand" in protecting traditional marriage. "It is a matter of what is best for our culture and deals with the foundation of our society."

The Rev. Donna Stroud disagrees that gay marriage will threaten traditional marriage or families.

Stroud, pastor of Metropolitan Community Church of the Upstate in Duncan, said "marriage is in trouble already."

She cites high divorce rates and domestic violence, problems, which she said, "the gay and lesbian communities have had nothing to do with."

The Rev. Meg Barnhouse, pastor of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Spartanburg, is emphatic in her opposition to Amendment 1.

"I think this is a mean-spirited, dumb, rude amendment that doesn't do what it says it's going to do."

The Unitarian Universalist Church voted to take a public stand against the amendment -- a first for the congregation.

"I want my state to move forward, not move back," Barnhouse said.

She considers the proposed amendment "a cynical attempt to harm our gay citizens in order to advance the career of right-leaning politicians.

"It's a values issues for me. Don't step on the weak to advance our politicians."

Barnhouse and Stroud say the amendment could have unintended consequences.

Barnhouse said the amendment's passage might have a negative impact on the state's economy. Stroud said it might make it more difficult to charge and prosecute an unmarried partner with domestic violence, which also would impact heterosexuals.

Stroud said a friend was unable to get a restraining order against her abusive lesbian partner because "it wasn't recognized as a relationship." According to Stroud, police simply told her friend to "move out."

Barnhouse and Stroud are both urging their congregations to vote no Tuesday.

Hamlet believes churchgoers will play a decisive role in the midterm elections.

"This is an issue I find that people are passionate about."

Hamlet has talked with a number of pastors within and outside the Baptist denomination who are speaking out in favor of the amendment.

The Rev. Richard Clark, pastor of Abner Baptist Church, said a lot of churches are concerned.

"Christians need to step forward and vote and express what we feel strongly about," Clark said. "The home is the very core of who we are."

Many churches are not taking as strong a stand on the issue, leaving political activism to laymen.

The Rev. R.E. Lybrand Jr., senior pastor of St. John's Lutheran Church, said his congregation has not taken a position on the issue.

Dennis Lee, Spartanburg district superintendent of the S.C. United Methodist Conference, said that denomination is not strongly urging members to vote one way or another.

"The official position of the United Methodist Church is marriage is defined as the union of one man and one woman," he said.

"Individuals may be as vocal about it as they wish."

Stroud expects the amendment will be approved by a wide margin but said she doesn't feel hopeless.

"The gay community wants the benefits of marriage. For that reason, it will not end," Stroud said. "The gay community will continue to fight even if we have to go into the courts."

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