

Will gay marriage divide Black electorate?

Written by Larry Miller
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In this photo released by The White House, President Barack Obama participates in an interview Wednesday May 9 with Robin Roberts of ABC's Good Morning America in the Cabinet Room of the White House. — THE WHITE HOUSE, PETE SOUZA

Special to the NNPA from the Philadelphia Tribune

Right on the heels of North Carolina becoming the 31st state in the Union to pass a ban on homosexual marriage, President Barack Obama announced his support of matrimony between same sex couples.

The president's public support of same sex marriage could either be a boon or a curse for his re-election campaign; it's too soon to tell, despite the fact that he's just received a million dollars in campaign contributions. But one thing is certain; the president's public stance in favor of homosexual marriage has drawn a dividing line among voters. Will it have an affect among African-American voters, some members of the Black clergy think it will.

"I think it will to some extent," said Bishop Ernest C. Morris Sr., Jurisdictional Prelate for Koinonia Jurisdiction. "A large percentage of Black Christians believe that marriage should be between one man and one woman. What he may be banking on is the African-American community's love for the first Black president but he should consider that large numbers of Black churches won't agree with this. There are too many passages in Scripture that denounce homosexuality and I can't see how to fully justify it from the Word of God. Don't misunderstand me; this is not about hatred of homosexuals because we are all sinners in need of a savior and

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God is so gracious. It is the continuous practice of this that the Bible is against. I also think that as the nation's first Black president, he's seen not just as the political leader of our country but as more than that. Many people see him as a moral and spiritual leader as well."

On Wednesday May 9 President Barack Obama took what some political experts are saying was a risky move — especially during an election year — and voiced his support of same sex marriage. Like the issue of legalized abortion, same sex marriage is one of those hot button issues that draw a clear division between those who support it and those who oppose it. Republican presidential front runner Mitt Romney said he opposes same sex marriages. "Well when these issues were raised in my state of Massachusetts, I indicated my view, which is I do not favor marriage between people of the same gender, and I do not favor civil unions if they are identical to marriage other than by name," Romney said in a published report.

A bill that would have allowed civil unions for same-sex couples in Colorado died in the legislature this week. The president's public endorsement of homosexual marriage followed a vote in North Carolina where constituents came out in favor of a ban against same sex marriage. North

Carolina is now America's 31st state to enact legislation against it.

In a prepared statement, the president said he was asked a direct question and gave a direct answer regarding same sex marriage.

"I believe that same-sex couples should be allowed to marry," the president said. "I've always believed that gay and lesbian Americans should be treated fairly and equally. I was reluctant to use the term marriage because of the very powerful traditions it evokes. And I thought civil union laws that conferred legal rights upon gay and lesbian couples were a solution. But over the course of several years I've talked to friends and family about this. I've thought about members of my staff in long-term, committed, same-sex relationships that are raising kids together. What I've come to realize is that for loving, same-sex couples, and the denial of marriage equality means that, in their eyes and the eyes of their children, they are still considered less than full citizens. So I decided it was time to affirm my personal belief that same-sex couples should be allowed to marry."

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The president also said that he respected the beliefs of others and the right of religious institutions to act in accordance with their own doctrines but he said that he believed that in the eyes of the law all Americans should be treated equally and no federal law should invalidate same sex marriages in a state that enacted it.

Reverend Clarence James, a Black minister based in Chicago said he definitely believes the president's move is going to hurt him among African-American voters, many of whom oppose same sex marriage.

"Many of us oppose this in every form and may decide to vote against the president because of this," James said. "From a medical and psychological point of view homosexuality is a mental illness; for male homosexuals anal sex is medically dangerous. The president is coming at this as a civil rights issue but there is no correlation even though the homosexual community is trying to make it one. The Civil Rights Movement was about freedom and equal rights, this is a moral issue. For the president and other elected officials it's easier to go along with popular opinion rather than to do what's right."

But some members of the African-American clergy have a different point of view regarding this issue. They believe the African-American community should find ways to address same sex relationships and that there can be reconciliation between sex and spirituality.

"If every gay person in our church just left or those who have an orientation or preference or an inclination, or a fantasy, if everyone left, we wouldn't have — we wouldn't have a church," said Bishop Carlton Pearson who heads Chicago's New Dimensions Ministries in a published report. "Homophobia is hardly unique to the African-American community. It's a social malady that's due largely to the influence of fear based-theologies, particularly fundamentalist Christianity, Islam and Judaism, all of which grow out of the Abrahamic tradition. The African-American church has traditionally used a kind of 'don't ask don't tell' approach toward homosexuality."

Dr. Janice Hollis who heads Progressive Believer's said the African-American community should look at the president's record not just on this issue but on others and determine if the quality of their lives has improved.

"I think it's an insult for the president to intellectualize on morality as if the Church doesn't already have a mandate from God on this," she said. "This is a political move and even though he may not see it, he's only a fleeting moment in history; God has always been there. I think the president is promoting a way of life that deters people away from the Word of God."

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Reverend Bill Owens, a minister with the Church of God in Christ (COGIC) and who is based in Memphis, Tennessee, said there's no doubt that the president's endorsement of same sex marriage is going to hurt him among Black voters.

"Absolutely it will and especially among the Black churches where the conviction against same sex marriage is so strong," Owens said. "I think many Black Christians feel somewhat betrayed by the president on this — this is something that Black churches have always stood firmly against."