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Christian Right frustrated by lack of political progress

By Mark O'Keefe

Religion News Service

WASHINGTON (RNS)-With such fellow believers as President Bush and Attorney General John Ashcroft in office, religious conservatives never have had more friends in high places.

But a growing sense of frustration is enveloping the leadership of the political movement that began nearly 25 years ago when Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority burst onto the national scene. A generation later, most Americans don't stand with the Christian Right. Its big agenda items have fizzled.

And as the impact of the recent sweeping Supreme Court ruling that legalized gay sex sinks in, the movement stands at a soul-searching crossroads.



National Day
of Prayer
Chairwoman
Shirley
Dobson and
her husband,
religious
broadcaster
and political
activist
James
Dobson, bow
their heads
with
President
and Mrs.
Bush during
a May
ceremony in
the East
Room of the
White
House.(White
House photo)

“Obviously, in some ways Christians are losing the culture war, certainly on this issue (gay rights),” said James Kennedy, head of Coral Ridge Ministries in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., and a religious broadcaster with a national following. “The time has come for us to re-examine the situation we're in.”

Some see opportunity in a new battle arising from the June sodomy ruling-gay marriage. Handled correctly, strategists say, it could re-energize

religious conservatives, putting them in a posture of defending heterosexual marriage instead of attacking gay rights.

A consensus appears to be growing that the movement must find a way out of its current predicament—being dissatisfied with the status quo but reluctant to criticize it because allies control the White House and Congress.

“They're at a moment where they have to reinvigorate themselves or reinvent themselves, or they'll just slowly fade away,” said John Green, a professor at the University of Akron and co-editor of a new book, “The Christian Right in American Politics.”

Most social movements do better rallying against enemies than helping allies govern, Green said. Many Christian Right organizations thrived when Bill Clinton was in the White House.

With gay rights marching on, abortion an established right, no return to teacher-led school prayer in sight and public vouchers for private schools a messy proposition at best, the Christian Right has learned over time that it's easier to fulminate than to legislate. Even when laws are passed, the courts can and do overturn them.

Some see history repeating itself, as when President Reagan spoke the language of religious conservatives but wasn't able or willing to deliver on key policy goals.

A handful of national leaders, such as outgoing Family Research Council President Ken Connor, advocate a more demanding tone, even if it means criticizing Bush for not doing enough.

That appears unlikely, however, because Bush remains immensely popular among the white evangelical Protestants and conservative Catholics who make up the movement. It's a constituency that makes up as much as 18

percent of the entire electorate, according to surveys, but it has no realistic place to go outside the GOP.

In a dozen Gallup surveys over the last five years, the share of Americans identifying themselves as “born-again” or “evangelical” ranged between 41 percent and 49 percent. That grouping is much larger than the Christian Right because it includes blacks, who vote strongly Democratic, as well as some Catholics, mainline Protestants and non-voters who may identify with those spiritual terms but not the same political agenda.

Connor, who left the Family Research Council this summer, says fellow leaders of the Christian Right have been used, accepting rhetoric instead of results and confusing access with influence.

“They go to an East Room ceremony or a Rose Garden signing or to the White House Christmas party and say, 'Look at all the influence I have,'" he said. “In reality, they've been bought off cheap.”

Paul Weyrich—head of the Washington-based Free Congress Foundation, co-founder of the Moral Majority and a man some call the father of the Christian Right—shares some of Connor's frustration, without criticizing Bush.

“The president is a religious conservative. The Senate majority leader is a religious conservative. The speaker of the House and the House majority leader and the majority whip are all religious conservatives,” Weyrich said. “Yet we make only marginal, incremental progress. We really have to rethink our strategy.”

Justice Antonin Scalia, in his blistering dissent in the recent sodomy case, said the court's majority had decreed “the end of all morals legislation” and made gay marriage the logical next step.

Meantime, an appeals court in Canada ruled in June that a gay marriage

ban was unconstitutional. Pending court decisions in Massachusetts and New Jersey could sanction gay marriage in this country as well.

“I don't think the bomb has gone off yet. It will go off and go off soon. It's the marriage bomb,” said Matt Daniels, president of the Alliance for Marriage, a Washington-based group promoting a constitutional amendment defining marriage as solely a union between a man and a woman.

Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, R-Tenn., has endorsed the effort, saying “Western values” and the “sacrament” of marriage must be protected.

In Michigan, legislators are working to rewrite the state constitution in a similar manner. Gary Glenn, president of the American Family Association of Michigan, predicts gay marriage will become the ultimate wedge issue, with every 2004 candidate forced to answer where he or she stands.

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