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Mormons Tipped Scale in Ban on Gay Marriage

By Jesse McKinley and Kirk Johnson

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SACRAMENTO Less than two weeks before Election Day, the chief strategist behind a ballot measure outlawing same-sex marriage in California called an emergency meeting here.

“We’re going to lose this campaign if we don’t get more money,” the strategist, Frank Schubert, recalled telling leaders of Protect Marriage, the main group behind the ban.

The campaign issued an urgent appeal, and in a matter of days, it raised more than \$5 million, including a \$1 million donation from Alan C. Ashton, the grandson of a former president of the Mormon Church. The money allowed the drive to intensify a sharp-elbowed advertising campaign, and support for the measure was catapulted ahead; it ultimately won with 52 percent of the vote.

As proponents of same-sex marriage across the country planned protests on Saturday against the ban, interviews with the main forces behind the ballot

measure showed how close its backers believe it came to defeat and the extraordinary role Mormons played in helping to pass it with money, institutional support and dedicated volunteers.

“We’ve spoken out on other issues, we’ve spoken out on abortion, we’ve spoken out on those other kinds of things,” said Michael R. Otterson, the managing director of public affairs for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, as the Mormons are formally called, in Salt Lake City. “But we don’t get involved to the degree we did on this.”

The California measure, Proposition 8, was to many Mormons a kind of firewall to be held at all costs.

“California is a huge state, often seen as a bellwether this was seen as a very, very important test,” Mr. Otterson said.

First approached by the Roman Catholic archbishop of San Francisco a few weeks after the California Supreme Court legalized same-sex marriage in May, the Mormons were the last major religious group to join the campaign, and the final spice in an unusual stew that included Catholics, evangelical Christians, conservative black and Latino pastors, and myriad smaller ethnic groups with strong religious ties.

Shortly after receiving the invitation from the San Francisco Archdiocese, the Mormon leadership in Salt Lake City issued a four-paragraph decree to be read to congregations, saying “the formation of families is central to the Creator’s plan,” and urging members to become involved with the cause.

“And they sure did,” Mr. Schubert said.

Jeff Flint, another strategist with Protect Marriage, estimated that Mormons made up 80 percent to 90 percent of the early volunteers who walked door-to-

door in election precincts.

The canvass work could be exacting and highly detailed. Many Mormon wards in California, not unlike Roman Catholic parishes, were assigned two ZIP codes to cover. Volunteers in one ward, according to training documents written by a Protect Marriage volunteer, obtained by people opposed to Proposition 8 and shown to The New York Times, had tasks ranging from “walkers,” assigned to knock on doors; to “sellers,” who would work with undecided voters later on; and to “closers,” who would get people to the polls on Election Day.

Suggested talking points were equally precise. If initial contact indicated a prospective voter believed God created marriage, the church volunteers were instructed to emphasize that Proposition 8 would restore the definition of marriage God intended.

But if a voter indicated human beings created marriage, Script B would roll instead, emphasizing that Proposition 8 was about marriage, not about attacking gay people, and about restoring into law an earlier ban struck down by the State Supreme Court in May.

“It is not our goal in this campaign to attack the homosexual lifestyle or to convince gays and lesbians that their behavior is wrong the less we refer to homosexuality, the better,” one of the ward training documents said. “We are pro-marriage, not anti-gay.”

Leaders were also acutely conscious of not crossing the line from being a church-based volunteer effort to an actual political organization.

“No work will take place at the church, including no meeting there to hand out precinct walking assignments so as to not even give the appearance of politicking at the church,” one of the documents said.

By mid-October, most independent polls showed support for the proposition was growing, but it was still trailing. Opponents had brought on new media consultants in the face of the slipping poll numbers, but they were still effectively raising money, including \$3.9 million at a star-studded fund-raiser held at the Beverly Hills home of Ron Burkle, the supermarket billionaire and longtime Democratic fund-raiser.

Frank Schubert was the chief strategist for Proposition 8, which defines marriage as between a man and a woman in California.

Jim Wilson/The New York Times

It was then that Mr. Schubert called his meeting in Sacramento. “I said, ‘As good as our stuff is, it can’t withstand that kind of funding,’ ” he recalled.

The response was a desperate e-mail message sent to 92,000 people who had registered at the group’s Web site declaring a “code blue” an urgent plea for money to save traditional marriage from “cardiac arrest.” Mr. Schubert also sent an e-mail message to the three top religious members of his executive committee, representing Catholics, evangelicals and Mormons.

“I ask for your prayers that this e-mail will open the hearts and minds of the faithful to make a further sacrifice of their funds at this urgent moment so that God’s precious gift of marriage is preserved,” he wrote.

On Oct. 28, Mr. Ashton, the grandson of the former Mormon president David O. McKay, donated \$1 million. Mr. Ashton, who made his fortune as co-founder of the WordPerfect Corporation, said he was following his personal beliefs and the direction of the church.

“I think it was just our realizing that we heard a number of stories about members of the church who had worked long hours and lobbied long and hard,” he said in a telephone interview from Orem, Utah.

In the end, Protect Marriage estimates, as much as half of the nearly \$40 million raised on behalf of the measure was contributed by Mormons.

Even with the Mormons’ contributions and the strong support of other religious groups, Proposition 8 strategists said they had taken pains to distance themselves from what Mr. Flint called “more extreme elements” opposed to rights for gay men and lesbians.

To that end, the group that put the issue on the ballot rebuffed efforts by some groups to include a ban on domestic partnership rights, which are granted in California. Mr. Schubert cautioned his side not to stage protests and risk alienating voters when same-sex marriages began being performed in June.

“We could not have this as a battle between people of faith and the gays,” Mr. Schubert said. “That was a losing formula.”

But the “Yes” side also initially faced apathy from middle-of-the-road California voters who were largely unconcerned about same-sex marriage. The overall sense of the voters in the beginning of the campaign, Mr. Schubert said, was “Who cares? I’m not gay.”

To counter that, advertisements for the “Yes” campaign also used hypothetical consequences of same-sex marriage, painting the specter of churches’ losing

tax exempt status or people “sued for personal beliefs” or objections to same-sex marriage, claims that were made with little explanation.

Another of the advertisements used video of an elementary school field trip to a teacher’s same-sex wedding in San Francisco to reinforce the idea that same-sex marriage would be taught to young children.

“We bet the campaign on education,” Mr. Schubert said.

The “Yes” campaign was denounced by opponents as dishonest and divisive, but the passage of Proposition 8 has led to second-guessing about the “No” campaign, too, as well as talk about a possible ballot measure to repeal the ban. Several legal challenges have been filed, and the question of the legality of the same-sex marriages performed from June to Election Day could also be settled in court.

For his part, Mr. Schubert said he is neither anti-gay his sister is a lesbian nor happy that some same-sex couples’ marriages are now in question. But, he said, he has no regrets about his campaign.

“They had a lot going for them,” Mr. Schubert said of his opponents. “And they couldn’t get it done.”

Mr. Otterson said it was too early to tell what the long-term implications might be for the church, but in any case, he added, none of that factored into the decision by church leaders to order a march into battle. “They felt there was only one way we could stand on such a fundamental moral issue, and they took that stand,” he said. “It was a matter of standing up for what the church believes is right.”

That said, the extent of the protests has taken many Mormons by surprise. On Friday, the church’s leadership took the unusual step of issuing a statement

calling for “respect” and “civility” in the aftermath of the vote.

“Attacks on churches and intimidation of people of faith have no place in civil discourse over controversial issues,” the statement said. “People of faith have a democratic right to express their views in the public square without fear of reprisal.”

Mr. Ashton described the protests by same-sex marriage advocates as off-putting. “I think that shows colors,” Mr. Ashton said. “By their fruit, ye shall know them.”