

Prop 8 involvement a P.R. fiasco for LDS Church

The campaign offered fuel for critics

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LDS Church President Thomas Monson waves to the audience after speaking during the closing...

Although they live a continent away from California, LDS Church members Gregory and JaLynn Prince, of Washington, D.C., still have felt the backlash from their church's involvement in the traditional marriage initiative known as Proposition 8.

Their daughter, Lauren, a Boston University student, has lost friends over the issue, while their son, an LDS missionary in San Bernardino, Calif., has had a disproportionate number of potential converts cancel appointments.

About two weeks ago, during a first-ever class on Mormonism at Wesley Theological Seminary, where the Princes have built bridges for years, students pointedly asked them: "What was your church thinking?"

"We are not taking sides on the issue, but the way this was done has hurt our people and the church's image," JaLynn Prince said. "It reminds me of the naive public relations strategy we had regarding the Equal Rights Amendment."

In some minds, the so-called "Mormon moment" heralded at the start of 2008 has stopped short.

Just 10 months after the death of LDS President Gordon B. Hinckley, who spent nearly 70 years burnishing his church's public image, goodwill toward Mormonism that culminated during the 2002 Winter Olympic Games seems to have faded in a haze of misunderstanding and outright hostility.

Mean-spirited critiques of Mormonism during Mitt Romney's unsuccessful presidential campaign were followed by persistent news-media reports linking Latter-day Saints to the FLDS polygamous sect raided by Texas authorities. Now, angry opponents of Proposition 8 are demonstrating at Mormon temples, accusing the church of being anti-gay.

New President Thomas S. Monson faces a daunting public-relations challenge. He follows the well-respected Hinckley, who observers say had an intuitive gift for balancing the church's need to speak out on moral issues with the need to avoid appearing too extreme.

"The Olympics had this nice afterglow for Mormons and, boy, is that gone," said Sarah Barringer Gordon of the University of Pennsylvania, who studies LDS history and culture.

LDS Church apostles declined to be interviewed for this story, but the public affairs office did respond to questions.

"All in all, 2008 has been a particularly good year for the church," LDS spokesman Scott Trotter said. "The church dedicated four temples and announced eight more. Membership topped 13 million worldwide with over 52,000 missionaries in the field. While some of the protest activity we have seen has been

deplorable, there are others who have taken the time to fully understand the church's position on marriage and home to respect this principled stand."

Gary Lawrence added his own optimistic view.

"These protests will help us. It puts a spotlight on us," said Lawrence, a leader in the Proposition 8 campaign and author of *How Americans View Mormonism: Seven Steps to Improve Our Image*.

"Which is worse -- antagonism or apathy? I believe apathy is our bigger enemy."

Following the pattern » In a 1997 memo about the LDS Church's involvement in the campaign against gay marriage in Hawaii, the late Loren C. Dunn, then a general authority, noted that Hinckley approved Mormon participation but said "the church should be in a coalition and not out front by itself."

In the case of the Proposition 8, which supported a constitutional amendment to define marriage as solely between a man and a woman, the LDS Church only joined the Coalition to Protect Marriage in June after being asked by Catholic Archbishop George H. Niederauer of San Francisco, who presided over Utah Catholics for 11 years. The LDS First Presidency in a letter urged all California Mormons to give their time and money to the effort.

Ostensibly just part of a broad-based coalition, the Mormon faithful soon led the drive. They donated nearly half of the \$20 million raised by Yes on 8, canvassed neighborhoods and staffed phone banks. Because the LDS Church routinely asks its members to give time and money, Mormons are "uniquely situated to be mobilized into politics," said David Campbell, a political science professor at the University of Notre Dame. "But they only get mobilized when a match is lit, and that doesn't happen very often."

The Mormon push for Proposition 8 reinforces what people already think of Mormons, he said, "that they have a lot of money and are willing to work for a socially conservative cause."

That image may hurt the LDS Church with a wide swath of the American public.

Mark Silk, professor of religion in public life at Trinity College in Hartford, Conn., thinks the visceral opposition to Proposition 8 is much more consequential for the LDS Church than either the Romney campaign or the perceived association with polygamy.

LDS officials decided to inject themselves in the fight to protect traditional marriage "in a big money way," Silk said. "That raises the specter not just of Mormon weirdness but also Mormon power as far as cash on the barrel."

Mormons could be forgiven for underestimating the opposition, he said. They likely thought they were on the winning side. After all, marriage initiatives have passed in about 30 states. But California is not an average state.

"People expect anti-gay referendums to pass -- and they do -- but it's California, for crying out loud," Silk said, ". . . not Zion."

Benefits of battle » On the opposite side, are observers such as Kirk Jowers of the University of Utah's Hinckley Institute of Politics, who think the LDS Church actions may help it win friends among Evangelicals.

"Other members of this coalition may realize the significant role that LDS Church members played," and see that it took a disproportionate share of the opposition's arrows, he said.

The Rev. Jim Garlow is one of those evangelical allies.

Last week, Garlow, of Skyline Church in San Diego, was so outraged by the protests against Mormons that he e-mailed 7,200 California pastors urging them to "speak boldly" in defense of the LDS role in passing Proposition 8.

"We were not going to stand by and be silent while there was anti-Mormonism in the streets," Garlow said Friday. "Our theological differences with Mormonism are, frankly, unbridgeable, but these are our friends and neighbors and attacks on them are unacceptable."

The Proposition 8 campaign deepened his relationship with Mormons, he said, and the protests have solidified it.

It is not clear, however, whether the LDS Church will soon jump into another political fray.

"Politics is a tough game, especially at this visceral level where one side is talking about religion and the other about rights," said Gordon, the Penn scholar. "I would be surprised to see them do this again. They really need to heal some wounds."

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