

point them to my heavenly Father. As Jesus commanded us, “Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven” (Matt. 5:16, NIV).

Note

1. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971).

The Political Is Personal

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As a California native, I have a stake in my home state’s politics, especially on social issues such as same-sex marriage. I was living in Pasadena, California, in 2000 when Proposition 22, defining marriage as being between a man and a woman, was roiling the political waters. And in 2008, I watched from Utah as the LDS Church’s new political machinery kicked into gear to pass Proposition 8.

As I’ve observed these two campaigns, I have questions about the effects of participating in campaigns to define marriage the same way Latter-day Saints and many other conservative religious groups do. I’m concerned about the trade-offs in Church members’ participation, particularly because there’s little discussion of the unintended consequences or human cost of these actions. I have been pained by the often insensitive behavior of Church members in their zeal to pass these measures and the interpretation of some that the Church’s position on gay marriage gives them carte blanche to proudly display their homophobia. What have Mormons sown and what will Mormons reap as a result of our fervent campaigning against same-sex marriage?

During the campaign to pass California’s first gay-marriage ballot-initiative, Proposition 22, in 2000, I was single. Because I knew what it was like to want to be married but not have the option available, I was unwilling to deny the option of marriage to anyone—straight or gay—who wanted to participate.

During the months preceding the election, I endured politicking, testimonials, and much inflammatory rhetoric at church and

in panicky forwarded emails about the dire consequences if Prop 22 didn't pass: massive school curriculum changes that would make gay sex education mandatory and families headed by same-sex couples seem *normal*. Such claims played on Church members' emotions and fears rather than making any rational sense.

My reaction was to leave in protest—temporarily. I wrote a letter to the stake presidency, my bishopric, and Relief Society president. In it, I explained that the relentless campaigning at church disturbed my spiritual equilibrium and contradicted Joseph Smith's approach of teaching correct principles and letting us govern ourselves. Since the campaigning at church was having such a negative effect, I explained that I would not attend services until after the election.

The reaction was mixed. The stake president read parts of my letter in a ward conference as an example of how *not* to approach the issue. In a one-on-one conversation that I initiated, he insisted that I could not have a spiritual confirmation that differed from the Church's official position on the issue and warned that I was on a slippery slope to apostasy. A counselor in my bishopric called to thank me for writing the letter; he had wrestled with the issue and the public position he had to take because of his calling. The other recipients did not respond.

I purchased a "No on 22" sign for my apartment window and volunteered at the phone bank for the "No on 22" campaign. When I returned to church about eight weeks later, the stake president seemed surprised to see me there, even though my letter had indicated that my hiatus from meeting attendance would be temporary.

Eight years later, the machinations surrounding the LDS Church's involvement in Proposition 8 made previous efforts to pass Prop 22 look like amateur hour, making me wonder if the Church had hired the political equivalent of a vocal coach, tutor, stylist, and agent.

The 2008 campaign was far more polished and tightly organized, though still scripted to appear publicly as a "grass roots" effort on the part of individual Church members. I didn't have the front row, first-hand experience of being in California this time, but Prop 8 was nearly inescapable in the news media, at church, and on social networking sites.

Rather than leaving in protest as I had before, this time I joined the protest. I posted attorney Morris Thurston's thoughtful, reasoned article titled "A Commentary on the Document 'Six Consequences . . . if Proposition 8 Fails'"¹ on my FaceBook page. I identified California Mormon donors (including my parents) on the Mormonsfor8.com website.

My dear friend, Marilyn, was working for the "No on 8" campaign in Los Angeles and asked me to make reminder calls to "No on 8" volunteers. I took the unpopular Saturday night shift, calling from 6:00 to 10:00 P.M., and took a bit of wry pleasure from making calls from my 801 area code land line. After Prop 8 passed, I joined thousands of like-minded folks who attended a rally and marched around Temple Square in Salt Lake City on November 7, 2008. I carried a sign that read "Every family has value."

Even though the measure passed, thanks to significant Mormon involvement and financial support, many Mormons seemed caught off guard by the public reaction after the election. Had Mormon leaders and members stopped to count the cost of taking such a high-profile role in Prop 8? As we continue to reflect on Church members' participation, what have we sown and what will we reap?

In some Church media outlets and conservative Mormon-themed blogs, opposing same-sex marriage and protecting traditional marriage were painted as the epic battle of our lifetimes. Writers and speakers intimated that those who didn't fall into step with the Church's marching order had an insufficient grasp of the gospel. They just didn't understand; otherwise they'd be on the correct side of the issue. After all, the prophet had spoken.

Sowing such seeds results in divisions and contention among Church members. Those who feel they are right express feelings of superiority. People who have a different opinion—often because of a close relationship with gays or lesbians—are demonized and treated as if they have joined the enemy if they express support for marriage equality.

This high-stakes politicking can undermine goodwill and cohesiveness among friends and family and inflict serious damage on a ward community. Some individuals used the campaign as license to vent their uncharitable feelings about gay people. In

2000, a man in my ward commented during a Church meeting that AIDS was the means by which “those faggots were getting what they deserve.” His views were challenged by other members of his quorum, thankfully. But this man was heavily involved in fund-raising and house meetings to promote Prop 22, and such incidents make it harder to believe that Church members’ political activities are not motivated by visceral anti-gay sentiment.

Even if the sentiment expressed by that man is not the norm among Church members, the Church’s position against same-sex marriage (and its tepid statements regarding civil unions) can make Mormons seem homophobic to outsiders and critics. Whether the charge of homophobia is fair, contributing huge amounts of money and time to defeat measures aimed at recognizing and giving legal structure and support to gay couples sows the seeds of a reputation for unfriendliness to the gay community.

As has been widely pointed out, Mormon involvement in promoting traditional one-man/one-woman marriage seems hypocritical given our polygamous past. The Mormon practice of plural marriage was established at great personal cost to many participants and resulted in Mormons being demonized, subjected to violence, being forcibly expelled from the Midwest, and being subjected to thirty years of steadily increasing legislative and judicial pressure from the federal government. Contemporary Mormons condemning same-sex marriage lack credibility and can come across as hypocritical.

Another area where the Church’s involvement has been problematic is promoting the idea that politicking against same-sex marriage is a grass-roots effort coming from individuals rather than one organized and maintained by the institutional Church. Given the June 2008 letter from the First Presidency encouraging members to “express themselves on this urgent matter to their elected representatives in the Senate,” it’s hard to buy Mormon involvement as a grass-roots movement.²

Most Church members comply when the leadership merely implies there is one true course of action or a right way to vote on a ballot proposition. Mormons involved in Prop 8 say loudly that the campaign is not being run by the Church, but many inside and outside the Church see such a claim as disingenuous. Technically, no, President Monson is not personally running the campaigns