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Opponents of gay marriage say they're not bigots

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They are moms and dads, authors and activists, a former police officer and a former single mom. They're black and white and Hispanic. One's a Roman Catholic archbishop, another an evangelical minister. Many have large families -- including gay members.

They are among the leading opponents of gay marriage, or as they prefer to be called, defenders of traditional marriage. And they're trying to stop an increasingly popular movement as it approaches two dates with history this week at the Supreme Court.

At times, it can seem a lonely battle. Outspent and lately out-hustled by highly organized gay rights organizations, opponents have struggled to get their story out. They're portrayed as bigots, likened to the racists and sexists of yesteryear. Some have been compared with hate groups like the Ku Klux Klan.

For men of the cloth such as Roman Catholic Archbishop Salvatore Cordileone, nothing could be further from the truth.

"Those who believe what every human society since the beginning of the human race has believed about marriage, and is clearly the case from nature itself, will be regarded, and treated, as the next class of bigots," he said. "That's untrue, and it's not kind, and it doesn't seem to lead to a 'live and let live' pluralism."

From his new post in San Francisco, a bastion of gay and lesbian activism, Cordileone chairs the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' committee on the defense of marriage. He's one of the nation's leading opponents of gay marriage and is buttressed by a diverse crowd.

At the tip of the spear is the National Organization for Marriage, led by Brian Brown, a father of eight who travels the nation speaking at rallies opposing gay marriage. He succeeded Maggie Gallagher, a renowned conservative writer and speaker who warns about "losing American civilization."

The Family Research Council, headed by Tony Perkins, has been labeled a hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Center for "defaming gays and lesbians." Perkins, a father of five, authored the nation's first "covenant marriage" bill as a Louisiana state legislator in an effort to combat no-fault divorces.

One of the nation's leading female opponents is Penny Nance, president of Concerned Women for America, founded in 1979 by Beverly LaHaye. Fighting gay marriage is the hardest issue for the group because it's so "complicated and deeply personal," she said, but adds, "We believe that we must stand for truth no matter who it offends."

Leading a group of conservative black pastors is the Rev. William Owens of Memphis, Tenn., whose eight children range from age 50 to 4 months. For him, opposing same-sex marriage is part of the battle to rebuild African-American families after decades of absentee fathers. "We already have enough problems," he said.

New York state Sen. Ruben Diaz, one of the nation's most prominent Hispanic opponents of gay marriage, is used to tilting at windmills. An evangelical minister who has compared abortion with the Holocaust, he was the lone Senate Democrat to oppose the gay marriage law signed by Gov. Andrew Cuomo in 2011.

What ties this diverse group together is a belief that legalizing more same-sex marriages will harm the family, particularly children, while encouraging homosexuality and infringing on educational and religious liberty.

Their battle will culminate Tuesday with a "March for Marriage" in the nation's capital, the same day the Supreme Court kicks off two days of oral arguments that could change the face of marriage in America. California's Proposition 8 ban on gay marriage will be addressed first in a case that could affect other states as well, followed by the federal Defense of Marriage Act's denial of government benefits to same-sex spouses.

As polls show larger and larger majorities of Americans favoring gay marriage, the opponents recognize they might be losing the battle of public opinion.

"Are we bucking the tide when it comes to cultural elites?" Brown says, before answering his own question. "Of course. We know that."

Cordileone: 'A bitterly polarized country'

No group opposing gay marriage carries as much influence as the Catholic bishops, and Cordileone is their point man. He's a baby boomer from Southern California who takes the assignment seriously.

To Cordileone, 56, the effort combines a respect for ancient civilizations as well as an understanding of modern families. He's aware many of his flock disagree with the church's teachings on the issue, particularly in San Francisco, but he sees no conflict.

"My job as an archbishop is to teach the truths of our faith and the truths of the natural moral law, and whatever challenges that entails, I embrace with enthusiasm," he said.

The modern-day version of that history lesson, Cordileone said, could be seen from his cathedral residence overlooking Lake Merritt when he served as bishop of Oakland.

"It's very beautiful," he recalls. "But across the lake, as the streets go from 1st Avenue to the city limits at 100th Avenue, those 100 blocks consist entirely of inner-city neighborhoods plagued by fatherlessness and all the suffering it produces: youth violence, poverty, drugs, crime, gangs, school dropout and incredibly high murder rates.

"Walk those blocks and you can see with your own eyes: a society that is careless about getting fathers and mothers together to raise their children in one loving family is causing enormous heartache."

Ask this San Diego native if he has gay friends and the answer is, "Of course." His views on gay marriage don't cause heartache in those relationships, he said, because his friends know him.

"It's a lot harder to be hateful or prejudiced against a person, or group of people, that one knows personally," he said. "When there is personal knowledge and human interaction, the barriers of prejudice and preconceived ideas come down."

Regardless of what rulings the Supreme Court hands down this summer, Cordileone warns that the debate is not over.

"Just as *Roe* v. *Wade* did not end the conversation about abortion, so a ruling that tries to import same-sex marriage into our Constitution is not going to end the marriage debate, but intensify it," he said. "We will have a bitterly polarized country divided on the marriage issue for years if not generations to come."

Diaz: 'This is what I preach'

In some respects, Owens and Diaz defy the common perception that African-Americans and Hispanics are overwhelmingly liberal. It's a perception these men dispute.

The 74-year-old Owens, president of the Coalition of African-American Pastors, a co-sponsor of Tuesday's march, contends blacks always have been "conservative Christians."

"I go from a biblical standpoint and a social standpoint, knowing the damage that has already been done to the black family," he said. The threat of same-sex marriage, he added, represents "another nail in the coffin for black families."

Once divorced, Owens acknowledges legalizing gay marriage won't directly affect him. Still, he says, "We just don't know where it's going."

Diaz, an ordained minister in the Church of God who chairs the New York Hispanic Clergy Organization, is bringing 25 to 30 buses with gay marriage opponents to Washington for Tuesday's rally. Four years ago, he assembled a crowd of 20,000 to protest New York's burgeoning gay marriage movement.

"The Hispanic community is more conservative than what people think," he says. "Call it whatever you want -- it's a conservative religious movement."

Diaz says he has received death threats because of his stance against same-sex marriage, but he proudly refers to his efforts as "a calling." Despite those efforts, the conservative Democrat says he gets along just fine with his gay brother, nephew and granddaughter.

"We have a very loving family," he says. "I love them. They love me. We help each other. They know that this is the Bible -- this is what I preach."

Perkins: 'Collateral damage to other freedoms'

For a man who just turned 50, Perkins has been a conservative warrior most of his adult life. The issue of gay marriage is just the latest battle.

A former Louisiana politician, police officer and TV reporter, Perkins lost a race for the U.S. Senate in 2002. He became president of the Family Research Council the following year.

In 2008, Perkins called California's Proposition 8 more important than the presidential election. In 2010, he opposed doing away with the military's "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy. Last year, a man upset by the council's stance on gay rights issues shot an employee there before being restrained. Perkins is accustomed to controversy

in the name of conservative causes.

As Perkins sees it, "there will be collateral damage to other freedoms" if gay marriage becomes more common. He cites recent cases involving parents who don't want their children to learn about same-sex marriage in school and photographers who don't want to work at same-sex weddings.

Like Perkins, Nance graduated from Liberty University, an evangelical Christian school in Lynchburg, Va., and has roots in religious conservatism. Like him, she bemoans federal data showing 42 percent of children are born to unmarried women.

And like single parents, gay couples offer only one side of the gender equation, she said.

"If this new union is to be treated in the same way as marriage, ignoring what the social data says, then you must teach it in the same manner in schools," Nance said. "And to say that children do not need a mother and a father is simply a lie."

Despite her beliefs, Nance -- like all the other opponents -- has gay friends and family. "We feel for them, and we care deeply about their well-being," she said, yet she worries that government acceptance will boost their numbers.

"When the law rewards something through licensing or benefits, there is always increased activity," Nance says. "We see this with marijuana in California, or gambling, prostitution, abortion or any vice that is legalized. Government endorsement lures people who would abstain otherwise."

Brown: 'The people are definitely on our side'

The group responsible for coordinating these and other opponents is the National Organization for Marriage, led originally by Gallagher and now by Brown.

Compared with the gay rights movement, the group is dwarfed. It spent just $150,000 lobbying in the past two years, according to the nonpartisan Center for Responsive Politics, compared with $3 million by the Human Rights Campaign and $650,000 by the group Freedom to Marry.

Even so, Brown notes, opponents helped to pass laws and voter initiatives against gay marriage in 38 states. Nine states and the District of Columbia allow same-sex marriage -- including three states where voters approved it last fall.

"The people are definitely on our side," Brown says. "The fight is not over. We have not lost the Supreme Court."

Since the Family Research Council shooting, Brown's organization has hired an armed guard in its Washington office, and hecklers are a common problem. Brown, however, says he's not intimidated.

He says he's been influenced by preachers of equality such as Martin Luther King Jr. and believes in "the profound worth of every human being." But he's had trouble maintaining past friendships with gays who don't agree with his position on the issue.

"It's definitely put a strain on the relationships," he said. "Those friendships are not the same as they were before."

Gallagher came to the issue from an unusual starting point -- as a single mother of a child born out of wedlock.

"I didn't really see why you had to be married," she says of her college years and early adulthood. What she found was that "it's extremely difficult to be an unwed mother, which is not news now."

Like Brown, she remains optimistic about banning gay marriage in the states and the courts. But even in defeat, she says, the opposition will grow stronger, much like the abortion opposition after the Supreme Court's 1973 ruling that legalized abortion.

"I don't believe in inevitability," Gallagher said. "We make the future happen, and we're in the process of making a decision."

[Richard Wolf writes for *USA Today*.]

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