

Conservative Christians fl

By Barbara French
Staff Writer

The Rev. Charles Crabtree of San Jose's Bethel Church ordinarily opposes mixing politics and religion.

But in recent months, Crabtree was involved in the successful campaign to defeat proposed gay rights ordinances in San Jose and Santa Clara County and urged his 2,500-member congregation to join his cause.

His involvement stemmed from his belief that Christians are obligated to provide leadership when the political system falters. "And in this case, the political leaders of our community did not assume the proper responsibility," Crabtree said.

Crabtree is one of an increasing number of Christians — both here and across the nation — who are getting involved in politics.

The emergence locally of this new political group is causing some concern among the area's liberal Christian leaders, as well as among liberal political activists.

Dwight Kintner, director of the Santa Clara County Council of Churches, said the new wave of Christian political activists has split the valley's religious community.

J. Clifford Harris, who oversees 38 Baptist congregations in the San Jose area and is secretary/treasurer of Concerned Citizens Against the Sexual Orientation Ordinances, said the split has existed for years. It worsened a few years ago, he said, when the Council of Churches accepted the membership of the gay Metropolitan Community Church.

Johnie Staggs, a lesbian who directed the campaign supporting the so-called gay rights measures, is concerned that conservative Christians want a theocratic dictatorship.

Dean Wycoff, head of Moral Majority of Santa Clara County Inc., a political action group for conservative Christians, said his group merely aims to elect to public office people of "like mind" and restore morality to government.

Communities across the nation are just beginning to feel the political presence of conservative Christians. Ditto for Santa Clara County.

For example, Moral Majority and Concerned Citizens directed the campaign against the proposed gay rights measures. Concerned Citizens backed candidates in seven of the 10 San Jose council races, two county supervisorial races, a Superior Court race, the special election in the state's 12th Senate District and at least one state Assembly race.

The results? The gay rights measures were overwhelmingly defeated, Dan O'Keefe — the "Christian candidate" as one minister called him — beat Rod Diridon in the 12th Senate District, four of the seven council candidates, one of the two supervisorial candidates and the judicial candidate are headed for November runoff elections.

The four council candidates are Lu Ryden (District 1), Blanca Alvarado (District 5), Jim Beall (District 9) and Claude Fletcher (District 10). Sal Bianco is the supervisorial candidate and Robert Aguilar is the judicial candidate.

The involvement of Christians in politics is not a new phenomenon. But the recent movement is

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attracting attention because its members represent the conservative, evangelical arm of organized religion — a segment which in recent years has shied away from politics.

"For a long time, we've thought it enough to pray, go to church, be a good citizen and vote once in a while," said Tom Paterson, finance director for Valley Christian Schools in Los Gatos and a member of the board of directors of Moral Majority.

But those tactics obviously haven't been sufficient, said Jay Grimstead, another Moral Majority board member.

"Everything we believe in is being destroyed," he said, pointing to society's attitudes on abortion, homosexuality, pornography and the "Planned Parenthood trip."

Wycoff said society's liberal stands on those issues are a "direct frontal attack on the church and the family unit."

That leaves conservative Christians little choice but to "come out of the closet," said Pastor Jack Trieber of Santa Clara's 650-member North Valley Baptist Church.

Christians generally are regarded as conservative if their religious beliefs are based on a strict interpretation of the Bible, said Bill Lawrence, pastor at South Hills Community Church and vice president of the Greater San Jose Association of Evangelicals. Christians who use sociological or psychological theories to aid in their interpretation of the Bible are generally termed liberal, he said.

The emergence of the county's new Christian political movement dates to last year when the so-called gay rights ordinance was being considered by the county board of supervisors and the San Jose City Council.

That was the last straw for Christians, Wycoff said. They responded by packing the supervisors' chambers and City Hall to oppose the proposed laws. When the governing bodies adopted the measures, Concerned Citizens rallied the Christian community behind a signature-gathering campaign that forced the ordinances onto Tuesday's ballot.

Concerned Citizens and Moral Majority waged the campaign to defeat the measures, collecting much of their campaign war chest from Christians.

In a recent letter addressed "Dear Pastor and Christian Friends," Concerned Citizens thanked those who assisted in a drive to raise \$15,000. The money was largely raised by churches who "gave their people the opportunity to give during the services," the letter said.

Locally, the new Christian political movement has focused much of its attention on defeating the proposed gay rights laws, but attention will soon be directed to other issues, including abor-

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tion and sex education, movement leaders have said.

"The issue of sex education (in the public schools) will cause bigger waves in this community than the homosexual issue ever did," Harris predicted.

The future of this new special interest group is uncertain.

"They have yet to prove they can pull votes on anything but the gay issue," said one liberal political activist.

Kintner of the Santa Clara County Council of Churches believes the movement has potential.

"The (evangelical) churches are probably the most rapidly growing churches in the area," he said.

There are an estimated 600 churches in the county and Concerned Citizens claims to have the support of 325 of them, and up to 100,000 Christians.

"A person has a right to do anything he wants to," said Rev. Philip Barrett of Foothill Presbyterian Church.

Others agreed, but said they disagreed with the tactics employed by the new Christian groups.

"I'm concerned because I think they are promoting a distortion of the Scriptures," said the Rev. Andrew Kille of Grace Baptist Church.

Kille considers groups such as the Moral Majority a "dangerous trend in Christian politics."

Crabtree sees otherwise.

"I believe heavily in the separation of church and state ... that's why the minute taxpayers' money is going to abortion I'll get up on my pulpit and preach against it," he said. "I know when it is a moral issue. The Scriptures are very clear on that."