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Longtime Allies Move to Heal Rifts After Gay-Marriage Fight

By TAMARA AUDI

Gay-rights and black and Latino groups in California are working to repair the fractures caused by this month's vote that outlawed same-sex marriage in the state.

Californians voted 52.3% in favor of the measure, which amends the state constitution to define marriage as being between one man and one woman, ending what had been a brief period when same-sex marriage in the state had been legal. Shortly after the Nov. 4 vote on the measure known as Proposition 8, exit polls indicated black and Latino voters strongly supported the ban, which has led to a complex and, at times, bitter debate among communities that have considered themselves allies on such issues as discrimination, education and social justice.

After the vote, anger in the gay and lesbian community spilled into the open at protests in Los Angeles, San Francisco and elsewhere. At some, blacks and Latinos said they were called racial slurs, and some online debates have degenerated into racially charged confrontations, even though critics have since discredited many of the exit polls and argued that the minority vote wasn't powerful enough to swing the vote.

Two weeks ago, 16 leaders in the gay, black and Latino communities issued a statement calling for unity and for an end to the divisive comments, particularly ones directed at blacks. The Anti-Defamation League, a Jewish group that fights bias, issued a statement calling for people "to channel their frustration and disappointment in productive and responsible ways."

Many black and Latino figures were taken aback by the severity of the response in the gay community. "The relationship is greatly strained," said the Rev. Samuel Rodriguez, president of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference in Sacramento. Mr. Rodriguez campaigned to pass Proposition 8. He says he doesn't believe in same-sex marriage but supports civil unions for gay

couples.

"Marriage is not a civil right. It is an extension of our religious faith," he said, adding, "This [gay and lesbian] community that preaches love and tolerance is so intolerant to my religious faith."

The brunt of the outrage in the gay community over Proposition 8 has been directed at the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Mormons were the most prolific fund-raisers for Proposition 8, contributing millions of dollars to the campaign. Gay and lesbian activists have since held rallies outside Mormon churches in the Los Angeles area. The Mormon Church has issued a statement saying the outrage has "no place in civil discourse," and it has called on those with "honest disagreements on this issue to urge restraint."

But it was the anger toward black and Latino communities that caught many off-guard. A blogger on the Web site Mollygood.com posted a map of Los Angeles showing the voting trends on Proposition 8. "Here's your handy-dandy visual representation of LA's homophobia...Conclusion: Another way to look at this map is as a guide to show you where Los Angeles ethnic minorities and old people live. Sad but true."

Rod McCollum is a 37-year-old gay black man who writes commentary and a blog on gay issues on his Web site Rodonline.typepad.com. Mr. McCollum said he received a posting to his Web site from a gay black student who said white protesters shouted racial slurs at him during a protest at a Mormon church. "It was like being at a klan rally except the klansmen were wearing Abercrombie polos and Birkenstocks," the young man wrote.

Several religious leaders from the black and Latino communities said that during the campaign, gay and lesbian activists framed the marriage issue as a civil-rights battle, and they assumed black and Latino voters would support their cause. But that message didn't necessarily resonate.

"There was an assumption there would be a lot of empathy from the black community, and that wasn't necessarily the case," said Mr. McCollum. "There is a danger that gay activists face when they embrace the civil-rights mantle," he said. Though Mr. McCollum said that he sees the gay-marriage fight as "an extension of the civil-rights issue," he said not everyone agreed.

Some black community leaders said the gay-marriage campaign didn't spend time or money courting the black community. Meanwhile, those in favor of banning gay marriage worked hard to get their message out through black and Latino churches.

"It was a miscalculation that we would see it as a civil-rights issue," said the Rev. Eric Lee, an African-American and president and chief executive of the Southern

Christian Leadership Conference of Los Angeles, who supports gay marriage.

"Whatever the vocabulary is to describe the struggle, I don't think there's anyone in our leadership who would equate what we're going through with the black experience," said Darrel Cummings, chief of staff for the L.A. Gay & Lesbian Center. But, he added, "Our community members are being denied fundamental rights that are afforded heterosexual people."

The issue is far from settled. The California Supreme Court plans on ruling on the legality of Proposition 8 some time next year.

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