

Faith In America

Religion-Based Bigotry... Let's End It Now And Forever

DIM THE SPOTLIGHT & RAISE THE HOUSE LIGHTS:

*Religion-Based Bigotry Lurking in the Shadow
of the Obama/McClurkin Controversy*
by Jimmy Creech, Executive Director

The controversy sparked by presidential candidate Senator Barack Obama's Gospel Concert South Carolina Tour has focused the national spotlight on the Senator and the Reverend Donnie McClurkin. The problem with a spotlight is what it does best: highlight a small bit of the stage, leaving everything else in the shadows. To see what's really going on, let's dim the spotlight and raise the house lights.

The Reverend McClurkin is an extraordinary gospel singer. And, as the world now knows, he says he once was gay but now is not, Amazing Grace! He says homosexuality is a choice and a curse, and with God's help gay people can escape from it. If Senator Obama did not publicly respect the integrity and human dignity of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender citizens and was not a strong proponent of their full and equal civil rights (with the exception of marriage equality – an important exception, indeed), his invitation to gospel singer McClurkin to join the tour would barely stir a yawn. Because of their contrary positions regarding gay citizens, however, Obama and McClurkin make an odd campaign couple. Hence, the controversy.

To be sure, if any of the Republican presidential candidates included a celebrated ex-gay gospel singer in their campaigns, few would notice or care. Everybody knows they share the Reverend's mind on gay matters. No controversy there.

Had any of the other Democratic presidential candidates included Reverend McClurkin in their campaigns, there also would have been controversy, but one not quite as intense. Because they are African Americans, this controversy deceptively portrays all African Americans as exceptionally homophobic, intensifying and complicating the controversy.

Senator Obama's campaign staff blundered terribly when they brought together their champion of unity with an ex-gay apostle. No question about it. But, let's not exaggerate the significance of this pairing. Senator Obama hasn't changed his mind about what gay citizens deserve. He's said he disagrees with the Reverend McClurkin about gay people, even while keeping him on the tour. Continuing to spotlight them alone for this campaign blunder lets all the rest of us hide in the shadows.

When we dim the spotlight and raise the house lights, what do we find lurking in the shadows? A virulent religion-based bigotry pervasive throughout American society! It's not peculiar to any particular political party, race or religious tradition. It has been used by Republicans and Democrats, people of all races, religions, ethnicities, economic groups, and every other social category to justify violence, intolerance and/or legalized inequity against various minority groups.

It was used to justify slavery, the massacre of Native Americans, the maintenance of rigid racial segregation and the persecution of immigrants. It was used to define women as second class citizens, making them legally dependent on men and without the right to vote. It was used to persecute Roman Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Mormons, Muslims and other religious minorities. The great majority of Americans understand this historic use of religion to be misguided, morally wrong and unconstitutional.

However, this unfortunate history is being repeated today and the Obama/McClurkin controversy should not divert our attention from this larger fact. Once the spotlight leaves them and everything is in the light, it's clear that religion-based bigotry has been and continues to be used to demonize lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender American citizens and deny them full and equal rights. None of us are innocent of this. No group is more culpable than another. For every black minister preaching biblical condemnation of homosexuality, there are dozens of white ministers of all denominations doing the same. Likewise, for every white minister preaching respect and dignity for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, there's a black minister doing the same.

The civil rights movement for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender citizens has been stymied by the influence of religion-based bigotry in politics. Many religious leaders and politicians ignore the growing scientific consensus that sexual orientation, whether heterosexual, bisexual or homosexual, is essential, natural, normal and healthy, and justify their anti-gay posturing with archaic religious teachings that define same-gender sexual intimacy as sinful, immoral and perverse.

Using religion to justify discrimination not only hurts gay citizens, it hurts American democracy. Our Constitution guarantees all American citizens full and equal rights, without exception. To allow the religious beliefs of some people – even of a majority – to deny any group of citizens their rights undermines the Constitution and hurts us all.

It's time for all presidential candidates and religious leaders to stand together in the public light and repudiate religion-based bigotry in order to serve democracy and uphold the Constitution for all citizens. The politics of fear and division are neither religious nor patriotic. They offend the sanctity of religion and true American values.

Keeping the spotlight on the Obama/McClurkin controversy distracts from the larger reality of religion-based bigotry. Piling on Obama for his campaign's blunder allows the real bigots to hide in the shadows. Let's put light and attention on the larger reality and make religion-based bigotry history.

Faith in America Inc. is a civil rights advocacy organization whose mission is to end legal and spiritual discrimination against gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) people in America and to gain full and equal rights for those citizens. Faith In America is not a religious organization but works to educate Americans about the harm caused by religion-based bigotry against GLBT individuals. The organization in April announced a series of grassroots campaigns in five cities across America. In June, the organization lead a campaign in Washington, D.C. that included numerous other civil rights advocacy groups in honoring the 40th celebration of the Loving v. Virginia Supreme Court Decision that struck down all remaining bans on interracial marriage. More information can be found at www.faithinamerica.com.