

Baptists launch drive to retain military gay ban

By Larry Witham
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Southern Baptists will go on alert tomorrow to write Congress to oppose lifting the military's homosexual ban, a campaign promise made by fellow church member President Clinton.

In the public policy newsletter of the Christian Life Commission (CLC) of the Southern Baptist Convention, pastors and laity are urged to put the "alert" in church bulletins, weekly newsletters or church foyers.

"Votes will be taken throughout the summer on this issue," says the alert, which hopes to reach many of the denomination's 15 million members. "It is critical [that] members of Congress hear from their constituents in order to overcome the powerful homosexual lobby."

Tanya Domi, director of the Military Freedom Initiative at the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, said her group probably is not a powerful lobby, "but if they want to say that it must help rouse support."

"This is a temporary coalition, and we're talking about not even 20 lobbyists," she said. "Politicians are beginning to understand that this is a minority of Christian denominations, though the evangelicals have large memberships."

Mr. Clinton has directed Defense Secretary Les Aspin to prepare a ban-lifting plan by July 15. Meanwhile, opponents in Congress are rallying behind the proposed Military Readiness Act to retain the ban.

The Southern Baptist alert is published in reproducible form in the newsletter Salt, which comes out six times a year and is sent to 80,000 readers, among them pastors of the convention's 38,400 churches.

This alert is the first major policy initiative of this kind by the CLC, although two smaller alerts were issued as pilots, said James A. Smith, the commission's director of government relations.

Christian citizens have "an unfortunate and unnecessary notion" that

writing to Congress is either difficult or ineffective, Mr. Smith said.

Liberal groups such as the United Church of Christ, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the Unitarian Universalists and the American Hebrew Congregation have called for an end to the ban.

So has Bishop Herbert Chilstrom, head of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

However, Roman Catholic Archbishop Joseph Dimino, head of the Archdiocese for the Military Services, wrote Mr. Clinton to oppose lifting the ban.

Mr. Smith said that a few Southern Baptists have complained that using an official church organ to prod political involvement breaches the separation between church and state.

But he noted that regulations by the Internal Revenue Service let churches weigh in on social issues as long as those efforts are not a "substantial" part of what churches do.

The CLC was set up in Washington in 1987 as conservatives took control of the denomination's leadership. The Salt newsletter began publication in spring of 1991.

"We just did an alert on the Freedom of Choice Act," Mr. Smith said. "That was part of the rationale for this new one. It was so well received."

A less prominent alert was included in Salt in 1991 calling for opposition to changes in Title X laws, which under Republican administration barred federal funding to clinics that gave abortion advice.

The CLC, Mr. Smith said, is charged by the Southern Baptist Convention to lobby Congress on its moral positions adopted by convention vote.

"Our other responsibility is to speak to Southern Baptists," he said. "We want to alert them to controversial issues when they are under imminent consideration."

• New study on gays goes beyond compromise policies being discussed on Capitol Hill. Page A4.

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