

## Christian Coalition expands its reach

### Catholics and a black Democrat will work with the group in New York.

By Mark O'Keefe  
Staff writer

A civil rights leader and Democratic mayoral candidate in New York said Thursday that he will work to distribute Christian Coalition voter guides for his city's highly charged May 4 school board elections.

The candidate, Roy Innis, follows the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of New York in joining forces with Pat Robertson's Virginia Beach-based coalition. The unusual alliance in the nation's largest city and school district is the first indication that Robertson's coalition is effectively expanding its grass-roots efforts beyond white Protestants.

The Christian Coalition is also using new bridge-building strategies in Los Angeles, where 700 Korean churches, 200 Catholic churches and 50 black churches distributed voter guides for the mayoral primaries held Tuesday.

If similar alliances spawn across the country, the religious right could become significantly stronger than ever anticipated, several political analysts said. Low-turnout school board elections may be particularly fertile ground for the coalition. There, "morality issues" such as sex education could unite previously fragmented groups.

New York is a case in point.

A new "rainbow curriculum" has offended Christians from a variety of denominations and ethnic backgrounds. The curriculum teaches

acceptance of gay families with book titles like "Heather Has Two Mommies" and "Gloria Goes to Gay Pride." Others have taken offense to condom availability in schools.

"I've seen the focus shift in this school district from the three 'R's' — reading, writing and arithmetic — to a fourth and fifth 'R,' rubbers and the rainbow curriculum," Innis said in a telephone interview.

"In New York, it's not a white Protestant movement. It's Catholics, it's civil-rights leaders, it's Hispanics, it's blacks. It's a mosaic of decent people who want to see a shift back to a decent, moral education."

Innis, head of the Congress of Racial Equality, a national civil-rights group, is considered a long shot to win the November election. Mayor David N. Dinkins is the incumbent and also a Democrat.

But for a well-known black Democrat to unite with a conservative Republican like Robertson is considered significant. Innis said he planned to call a Tuesday news conference to announce his efforts.

"When people can find a decent point of common interest, they should not allow others' labels to deter them," said Innis.

Other religious leaders vehemently support the school system and feel threatened by the emergence of the new conservative alliance. On Wednesday, eight liberal clergymen held a news conference in New York announcing their own coalition backed by People for The American Way, a national group, said the New York Times. Rabbi Balfour Brickner of the Stephen Wise Free Synagogue portrayed Robertson as a dangerous, intolerant menace. In a television interview, Robertson dismissed the charges as an attempt to divert attention to him and not the issues.

Robertson's coalition and his voter guides are technically non-partisan. But they do summarize candidates' positions according to "pro-family" concerns.

Nationally, the coalition has worked for an agenda that opposes abortion, pornography and gay rights and supports school prayer, abstinence-based sex education and government vouchers so parents can choose between public and private schools.

In New York, the coalition is printing 500,000 voter guides, one-fifth of them to be distributed through the 213 parishes in the Catholic archdiocese. In Los Angeles, the coalition distributed 350,000 voter guides through 2,000 churches.

To reach the large, mostly evangelical, Korean population, the front of the voter guides were printed in

English, the back in Korean. Sarah Hardman, the Christian Coalition's state director in California, said she plans to have a Spanish version in time for the June 8 mayoral, city council and school board elections.



Roy Innis

"What we want is a coalition that looks like America," said Christian Coalition executive director Ralph E. Reed Jr., borrowing a phrase from President Clinton.

"It means the pro-family movement will get outside its white Protestant rigidity and represent all those who share their values without respect to denominational background or race. That is potentially the most significant development in the rise of the pro-family movement since it arose in the mid 1970s."

As the foremost of a network of politically conservative religious organizations, the Christian Coalition claims more than 350,000 members. While it is unlikely Roman Catholics and racial minorities will join the coalition in large numbers, even a

partial joining of forces could alter the political landscape.

In the past, theological differences such as the authority of the pope and the importance of the Virgin Mary have divided Catholics and Protestants politically. Black Protestants have been loyal Democrats and have not united with mostly Republican white evangelicals even though they view certain social issues, such as homosexuality, similarly.

"Blacks are very conservative on this," said Grant Wacker, a professor of history of religion in America at the Duke University Divinity School. "The media doesn't pick up on this. But the surveys reveal it."

For Robertson and the Christian Coalition, the new alliances may mean some compromise. Joining with Catholics may offend some fundamentalists, while aligning with black Democrats may alienate stalwart evangelical Republicans.

Said Reed: "We've always said we're non-partisan. This is evidence. You can't play ball in New York City with only Republicans on your team. You have to reach out to Democrats."

Yet until now, it hasn't happened.

New York may have triggered compromises with implications far beyond the city, said Michael Cromartie, an expert on the religious right and director of the Evangelical Studies Project at the Washington-based Ethics and Public Policy Center.

"You have to have the powder keg go off first," said Cromartie. "Then you discover you need each other. This is what coalition politics is all about."