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Christian Coalition goes back to core principles

New president calls politics secondary

By Ralph Z. Hallow
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The new head of the Christian Coalition said yesterday that it will put principle over politics from now on.

"It is more important for us to re-establish, without question, that we are focused on our main mission, and that we stand on certain

basic values than it is to say we have to win the next election," coalition President Donald Hodel explained.

"If we abandon our philosophy, then we're just another political organization trying to win the next election," he said at a luncheon meeting with editors and reporters at The Washington Times.

He acknowledged that the 1.9-

million-member organization has suffered financial and membership losses since its informal alliance with Bob Dole's 1996 presidential campaign and its pragmatic support of candidates who disagree with its position on abortion or other core issues.

"If Bob Dole had won, we'd have a bigger problem on our hands than we have," he said. "Judging from the positions he has taken on issues, our problems would have been compounded. You would have conservative control of the White House and Congress, and people would be saying, 'If this is what conservative governing means, we want no part of it.'"

Until now, the coalition had

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tended to avoid criticizing Republicans in Congress and to play down its stance on some social and moral issues for fear of appearing extremist, but at the cost of disappointing its own activists.

The new management of the Christian Coalition is out to take a harder line on both Republicans and what many Republicans consider as "socially sensitive" issues.

Referring to legal adoption of children by homosexual couples, he said: "It is imperative that we make plain that we do not hate homosexuals. What we oppose and will fight to the bitter end is efforts to make that lifestyle normal, to make the agenda that we perceive to be there part of the training of our children.

"We will oppose that as vigorously as we know how. If they accuse us of bigotry, so be it, but it is not that," he said.

Neither the GOP leadership in Congress nor the Clinton presidency speaks to Americans who adhere to traditional values, he said.

The former secretary of commerce and of energy in the Reagan administration estimated that the Christian Coalition has a potential constituency of up to 60 million Americans.

"And that's if we are identified as a hard-core Christian group on the right," he said. "If we want to be mainstream, we can expand the constituency, but we will lose the activists on this end of the spectrum."

In another indication of a break with the strategy of former Executive Director Ralph Reed, who became a media star, Mr. Hodel said the coalition would strive less for national recognition and more for a quieter, grass-roots approach.

"You can have a lot of influence and not be perceived as having it in Washington," he said. "If I don't say anything about our impact to a member of Congress, but when Randy Tate [the coalition's new executive director] talks to him and then people in his district tell him the same thing, he doesn't have to see a picture of me on the cover of Time magazine to understand something important is happening in his district," he said.

"A group like ours may in fact have greater impact if it is not visible," said. "One of the strengths of a grass-roots campaign is that it doesn't show up on a radar screen."

The coalition's new principle-over-politics theme is the motto also for a new organization, the National Federation of Republican Assemblies, which unlike the Christian Coalition is avowedly partisan.

Mr. Hodel acknowledged that



Photo by Karen Ballard/The Washington Times
Christian Coalition President Donald Hodel says the group will refocus its attention on principles.

Christian Coalition for whatever reason. They have a very parallel interest with us, but they are identified with the Republican Party.

He said that, to the extent that the Christian Coalition was also identified with the GOP, it "has not helped. It has hurt the Christian Coalition with our constituency. But he saw "no reason" why the coalition can't work with the NFRA.

From its inception, the coalition has felt itself demonized by liberals in the media and the Democratic Party, as well as by some old-guard Republicans.

Mr. Hodel argued, however, that such demonization has helped the coalition recruit the kind of committed activists who volunteer to pass out the millions of voter guides that the coalition publishes for local and national elections.

In President Clinton and Vice President Al Gore's speeches and appearances on behalf of homosexual activists, Mr. Hodel saw the intentional glamorization of homosexuality.

"What should parents who are concerned about what their children are being taught assume the president and vice president are trying to do?" he said. "By glamorizing homosexuality, are they saying they think kids should do more of it?"

some of the NFRA's state chapter heads are former coalition members or sympathizers who grew disaffected with the coalition's willingness to compromise in trying to win a seat at the table of national political powerbrokers.

"There is a big lesson for us in the Republican assemblies, no question about it," he said. "They are building an organization with people, some of whom left the