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Gay-Marriage Fight Finds Ambivalence From Evangelicals

By DAVID D. KIRKPATRICK

GRAND RAPIDS, Mich., Feb. 27 — Prominent evangelical Christians in Washington have been warning the Bush administration for months that conservative Christians may not have enough motivation to vote this November if the president failed to vigorously support their effort to amend the Constitution to ban same-sex marriage.

But down in the pews of Western Michigan, a major center of evangelical Protestantism, not everyone is sure that the proposed amendment matters so much.

"For me personally, even though I have a strong religious belief, who am I to say?" said Grant Reed, a police officer, a Republican and a member of the nondenominational evangelical Ada Bible Church in Ada, a suburb of Grand Rapids. "I know my wife would say, 'a marriage is between a man and a woman, and sin is sin,' " Mr. Reed said, but he has a good friend from college who is gay.

"I think we have bigger things to worry about than whether two men or two women want to get married," he said.

Now that the president has joined the calls for an amendment banning same-sex marriage, the response from conservative Christian voters like Mr. Reed is a subject of keen interest in Washington. Some conservative strategists close to the White House have warned that pushing for the amendment could turn off some moderate swing voters who might consider it bigoted or intolerant.

But Karl Rove, the president's political adviser, has made increasing Christian conservative turnout a top priority this election, saying that he believes the president nearly lost the election in 2000 because about four million conservative Christian voters failed to go to the polls.

Grand Rapids, the center of what amounts to a small Northern Bible Belt, is the kind of place where evangelical turnout might make a difference — the conservative counterweight in a perennial swing state that Al Gore carried by fewer than 218,000 votes four years ago. Michigan has 17 electoral votes, making it the eighth largest trove of electoral votes in the nation.

Conversations with dozens of evangelical voters and a half a dozen pastors in Western Michigan, however, suggest that the political payoff may not be so clear. Almost all who identified themselves as conservative Christians immediately objected to gay marriage on biblical grounds. But most said they were already deeply committed to Mr. Bush's re-election. Several people said their admiration for Mr. Bush had grown since the last election, mainly because they had learned more about his personal faith as a born-again Christian. Some pastors said they had been preparing since 2000 to rally their parishioners to get out the vote in support of Mr. Bush, regardless of his stance on the amendment.

More striking was the minority of evangelical churchgoers and even pastors who expressed

ambivalence about the amendment. Some mentioned friends who are gay. The Rev. Henry Schenkel, the 30-year-old founder of the Monroe Mall Ministry who was leading a church group to the opening of Mel Gibson's film "The Passion of the Christ" on Wednesday night, acknowledged some hesitation on the issue, despite what he said was the Bible's clarity on the question.

Mr. Schenkel said the issue was unlikely to determine his feelings about Mr. Bush. "This is one issue, and there are 30 other issues I will consider," he said.

Jan Herreman, who was attending the film with her nondenominational evangelical church, called Mr. Bush's support for the amendment "awesome." "I don't want my grandchildren growing up thinking that two men or two women is a normal marriage," she said.

But her husband, James, another church member, disagreed. "I am not sure that the Constitution needs an amendment for marriage," he said.

Their responses suggested that as large, evangelical churches have flourished in places far from the Bible Belt, the viewpoints in the pews have become more diverse, even on the issue of gay rights. In a survey of 4,000 voters by the University of Akron around the time of the last election evangelical Christians were closely divided over whether gays should have the same rights as other Americans.

"Evangelicals don't march in lock step," said Corwin E. Smidt, a professor of political science at Calvin College here who helped conduct the Akron study.

Of course, Grand Rapids is a long way from the traditional Bible Belt in the South. Conservative Dutch Calvinists settled the region in the mid-19th century and founded the evangelical Christian Reformed Church here. The evangelical culture they imparted always placed a greater emphasis on education than similar evangelical denominations like the Southern Baptists, said James Guth, a political science professor at Furman University in Greenville, S.C. "I think in the Christian Reformed Church you are going to find more people who are a little quieter on these issues," he said in a telephone interview, noting that many Baptist congregations near his home in Greenville were praying for passage of the amendment.

But the churches of Grand Rapids are still not all that different from evangelical congregations elsewhere, Mr. Guth said. "There are more evangelicals in the South, but if you look at the evangelical Protestants around the country they look pretty much alike."

Several Christian conservatives here said they identified closely with their Southern counterparts in what they saw as a common battle to save the Christian foundation. David Huizenga, pastor of the Sunshine Community Church, the largest Christian Reformed Church in the area with about 2,000 members, said he kept abreast of the issue with publications and e-mail messages from Christian conservative groups like the American Family Association. "If we allow this, then marriage is in danger in our country," he said. "I think marriage would be a joke in this country. It would further the breakdown of our society and our schools."

But Mr. Huizenga said he had already planned to do everything he could to remind his congregation to vote this fall. Two weeks before the 2000 election, he said, he began gathering 50 to 100 parishioners each week for a meeting to pray about political issues. The group has continued for four years. He and others from his congregation have recently joined a larger inter-denominational citywide prayer group as well.

"We communicate to the rest of the congregation how God leads us in prayer," Mr. Huizenga said. "This week we will certainly be praying on the marriage issue and the amendment that he is calling for," he said.

If Mr. Bush had not taken a stand on same-sex marriage, it would have made little difference to the church's effort to get out the vote, Mr. Huizenga said.

At a school trip to an ice skating rink in downtown Grand Rapids, three mothers said they, too, were cheering for the amendment. "Gay marriage goes against God's plan for a man and a woman to join together," said Jan Scott, a mother of six and a member of the Ravenna Baptist Church. "Homosexuals are disillusioned by lies from Satan."

Still, Ms. Scott said, she was fully committed to voting for Mr. Bush even if he remained silent on the subject. "I would have been disappointed, but I still would have supported him," she said, adding, "I know what Bush is like behind the scenes, things that don't get in the press, because I read Christian publications." She recounted an episode she had read about the president touching the injured arm and kissing the forehead of an amputee returning Iraq. "That is the kind of love that comes from God."

But other strictly conservative, evangelicals expressed doubts about treating sexual behavior as a political issue. "Though the church, and though I, have firm convictions about sexuality, our ministry is primarily about people's spiritual life and not about pushing a political agenda," said Jeff Manion, pastor of Ada Bible Church, with about 3,000 members.

Many conservative churchgoers, including Mr. Smidt of Calvin College, said they felt clear in their opposition to gay marriage but divided on the subject of a constitutional amendment. "I don't like to see it used as a political hammer," he said. "Pushing for an amendment doesn't really energize my support." He added, "It may be that when you add up the votes on this issue, it is not going to add as much as it takes away."