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Religious activists galvanized

Gay union issue revitalizes groups

By **DAVID D. KIRKPATRICK**
New York Times

Last spring, the Rev. Donald Wildmon of Tupelo, Miss., decided to hold a summit meeting of the Christian conservative movement.

Wildmon felt the movement was losing the culture war, he recalled in an interview. Since plunging into political activism nearly 30 years ago, Christian conservatives had helped Republicans take control of Washington but did not have enough to show for it, Wildmon said. Meanwhile, the election of ostensibly like-minded Republican politicians had drained some of the motivation out of the constituents many advocacy groups depend on for both political clout and financial support.

So Wildmon, founder of the American Family Association and a crusader against sex and violence in the media, sent an e-mail message inviting about two dozen other prominent Christian conservatives to a meeting in Arlington, Va., last June. About 14 people turned up with no set agenda, Wildmon recalled.

"All we knew was we were going to get together and see if there were some issues of concern that we could agree on and combine our efforts," Wildmon said.

"The first thing that popped up," he said, "was the federal marriage amendment."

What began with Wildmon's e-mail message soon turned into a concerted campaign for a constitutional amendment blocking gay marriage. Christian conservative leaders say the campaign is helping revitalize their movement. It promises to reopen the flow of financial contributions to their advocacy groups that had slowed to a trickle when Republicans took over Washington.

Many politicians -- even some conservatives and notably President Bush -- have been slow to sign on, partly for fear that amending the Constitution to police gay unions might seem intolerant or bigoted, conservative strategists and pollsters say.

Richard Land, president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, which has 16 million members, said: "I have never seen anything that has energized and provoked our grass roots like this issue, including *Roe v. Wade*."