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Group to rally opposition to gay marriage Romney to speak at event targeting evangelical voters

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By Michael Paulson, Globe Staff

In an attempt to motivate religious conservatives to go to the polls next month, a national organization of family values activists will join Governor Mitt Romney and more than 1,000 local churchgoers today to argue to evangelicals that the legalization of same-sex marriage here is threatening religious liberty throughout the country.

The event, dubbed "Liberty Sunday" by its organizer, the Family Research Council, will be simulcast from the Tremont Temple Baptist Church, near Boston Common, to hundreds of churches. It will also be broadcast on several Christian television and radio networks as well as over the Internet. The council, which over the last two years has staged six similar events at other sites around the country, estimates a potential audience of 79 million, but says it is impossible to measure exactly how many people really tune in.

The council-sponsored broadcasts have become influential enough that Romney, a Republican who is exploring a run for the presidency in 2008, on Friday added the event to his schedule.

"The governor recognizes that this event is an important milestone in the effort to preserve traditional marriage in Massachusetts," said Romney's spokesman, Eric Fehrstrom. "The governor will talk about the importance of marriage, and the fact that the debate over gay marriage is not so much a debate about adult rights as it is about the rights of children to be raised in a home with a mother and a father."

The event is timed with a little more than three weeks to go before the Nov. 7 mid term congressional elections, in which control of both the House and Senate is up for grabs and a new governor of Massachusetts will be elected. Republican strategists have become increasingly worried that conservative evangelicals, frustrated by a number of recent congressional scandals and a lack of progress on issues they care about, may not turn out to vote this fall in the same numbers as they have in recent elections.

Eight states -- Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Virginia, and Wisconsin -- will be voting on constitutional amendments that would bar same-sex marriage. And two days later, on Beacon Hill, the Legislature is to vote on whether to advance toward the ballot a measure that would overturn same-sex marriage in Massachusetts, the only state where it is legal.

"The governor is committed to doing what he can to get this issue on the ballot, so that people can be heard," Fehrstrom said.

The Liberty Sunday event is provoking opposition from more liberal religious groups. The vicar of Old North Church, an Episcopal parish, is objecting to the use of an image of his church's steeple in the Family Research Council's promotional materials. A gay and lesbian group at Arlington

Street Church , a Unitarian Universalist parish, will be sponsoring a candlelight vigil outside the Tremont Temple during the broadcast.

And at Trinity Church, an Episcopal parish, a previously scheduled gathering to discuss religious support of gay marriage will now include a critique of the Family Research Council, arguing that conservative religious interests are threatening religious liberty by trying to prevent the government from recognizing marriages that are sanctioned by liberal religious denominations.

“This is part of this year's crusade to get out the vote for the most conservative Republican candidates possible, and to use the imagery of religion to do so,” said the Rev. Barry W. Lynn , a United Church of Christ minister who is the executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State. “The rhetoric at their past events has been so inflammatory, it should be an embarrassment to anyone even if they're anti-gay marriage. The event is a common scare tactic to advance their anti gay agenda.”

Several other groups, including the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, the American Civil Liberties Union of Massachusetts, and the Jewish Alliance for Law and Social Action, are calling on Romney to distance himself from what they describe as bigoted statements by speakers at a previous Family Research Council event.

The council, formerly a part of Focus on the Family, lobbies Congress through an affiliate, called FRC Action. Among its policy positions are supporting measures that define marriage as a heterosexual institution, opposing abortion, and promoting the confirmation of conservative nominees to the federal judiciary. According to its website, the organization also supports “a renewal of ethical monotheism and traditional Judeo-Christian standards of morality.”

“The Family Research Council is an important focus for conservative Christians, and these events are really effective at rallying their base,” said Brett Clifton , assistant director of the Taubman Center for Public Policy at Brown University. “They are trying to rally people around the idea that religious people have rights too, and that government and society have grown increasingly secular and anti religious.”

At today's event in Boston, the speakers are planning to make the case that a homosexual agenda poses a threat to religious liberty. They will cite as examples the inability of Catholic Charities in the Archdiocese of Boston to retain a state license to provide adoption services unless it was willing to place children with gay and lesbian couples, and the experience of parents in Lexington who have been battling the local school district over its decision to read to second-graders a fairy tale in which two princes fall in love.

“The bottom line is that the religious liberties of this country, which were birthed in Boston, are now at stake of dying as a result of the advancement of same-sex marriage,” said Tony Perkins , president of the Family Research Council.

“We're going to highlight particular cases about the rights of parents to determine what their children are taught, about people who hold positions in public but have had to resign or have been fired because of opposition to same-sex marriage, and about how Catholic Charities was put out of the adoption business because they refused to go along with same-sex marriage.”

The three Boston pastors featured in the simulcast are the Rev. Roberto Miranda , senior pastor of Congregation Lion of Judah, a large, predominantly Hispanic church in the South End; Bishop Gilbert A. Thompson , senior pastor of Jubilee Christian Church, a large, predominantly African-American congregation in Mattapan; and the Rev. Ray Pendleton , pastor of Tremont Temple, which is a small American Baptist congregation.

“Our goal is to strengthen people in their stand about a traditional, Biblical view of marriage,” Pendleton said. “The Christian voice is somehow feared for some reason, which I don’t understand. It’s been marginalized and seen as right-wing ranting, but that’s just what the liberal press has done as a way of loading the issue. If the people are allowed to vote, the traditionalist view will win the day -- I don’t think there’s a question on that.”

Scholars said that the Family Research Council simulcasts are not likely to persuade people to change their minds on issues such as same-sex marriage, but are effective at motivating religious conservatives to political action.

“They’re largely preaching to the choir, sending their message into congregations of people who already think gay marriage is something that ought to be stopped and is, in the word they often use, an abomination,” said Nancy T. Ammerman, a professor of the sociology of religion at Boston University’s School of Theology. “It seems pretty clear that the politicized evangelical operatives recognize that if people are worried about gay marriage, they’re likely to go to the polls.”