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Palin church promotes converting gays

By RACHEL D'ORO

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ANCHORAGE, Alaska -- Gov. Sarah Palin's church is promoting a conference that promises to convert gays into heterosexuals through the power of prayer.

"You'll be encouraged by the power of God's love and His desire to transform the lives of those impacted by homosexuality," according to the insert in the bulletin of the Wasilla Bible Church, where Palin has prayed for about six years.

Palin's conservative Christian views have energized that part of the GOP electorate, which was lukewarm to John McCain's candidacy before he named her as his vice presidential choice. She is staunchly anti-abortion, opposing exceptions for rape and incest, and opposes gay marriage and spousal rights for gay couples.

Focus on the Family, a national Christian fundamentalist organization, is conducting the "Love Won Out" Conference in Anchorage, about 30 miles from Wasilla.

Palin, campaigning with McCain in the Midwest on Friday, has not publicly expressed a view on the so-called "pray away the gay" movement. Larry Kroon, senior pastor at Palin's church, was not available to discuss the matter Friday, said a church worker who declined to give her name.

Gay activists in Alaska said Palin has not worked actively against their interests, but early in her administration she supported a bill to overrule a court decision to block state benefits for gay partners of public employees. At the time, less than one-half of 1 percent of state employees had applied for the benefits, which were ordered by a 2005 ruling by the Alaska Supreme Court.

Palin reversed her position and vetoed the bill after the state attorney general said it was unconstitutional. But her reluctant support didn't win fans among Alaska's gay population, said Scott Turner, a gay activist in Anchorage.

"Less than 1 percent of state employees would even apply for benefits, so why make a big deal out of such a small number?" he said.

"I think gay Republicans are going to run away" if Palin supports efforts like the prayers to convert gays, said Wayne Besen, founder of the New York-based Truth Wins Out, a gay rights advocacy group. Besen called on Palin to publicly express her views now that she's a vice presidential nominee.

"People are looking at Sarah Palin as someone who might feasibly be in the White House," he said.

(This version CORRECTS that Palin has attended for about six years.)

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