

Gays outraged over Obama invite to Warren

By Lisa Keen
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President-elect Barack Obama set off a firestorm of criticism this week when he invited anti-gay evangelical Rick Warren to deliver the invocation at his inauguration ceremony.

At least one gay San Francisco man told the *Bay Area Reporter* that he has sent back his inaugural invitation and is refusing to attend the swearing-in ceremony January 20.

The selection of Warren, which was announced Wednesday afternoon, was further compounded Thursday, December 18 by the realization that Obama did not appoint an openly LGBT person his cabinet.

"Every gay person who paid attention to this today felt like we were kicked in the stomach," said longtime lesbian Democratic activist Hilary Rosen. Rosen, who is a regular political commentator on CNN, told Anderson Cooper Wednesday night that the invitation to such a "divisive figure ... on a day of bringing the country together" is an "outrageous mistake."

Rosen was not alone in her condemnation. **National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Executive Director Rea Carey called the invitation a "direct affront" to the nature of the Obama campaign's theme of inclusivity.** Human Rights Campaign President Joe Solmonese called it a "genuine blow to LGBT Americans."

"By inviting Rick Warren to your inauguration," said Solmonese in a letter to the president-elect Wednesday, "you have tarnished the view that gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender Americans have a place at your table."

Both **Carey** and Solmonese urged Obama to rescind the invitation, though that is unlikely to happen.

Warren, the senior pastor at Saddleback Church in conservative Orange County, California, was a strong proponent of Proposition 8, which eliminated the right of same-sex couples to marry.

A *Washington Post* reporter asked Obama Thursday about the decision. Obama said that, while he considers himself a "fierce advocate for equality for gay and lesbian Americans," he wants to "create an atmosphere" of a nation coming together despite the differences among people.

"I would note," said Obama, "that couple of years ago, I was invited to Rick Warren's church to speak despite his awareness that I held views that were entirely contrary to his when it came to gay and lesbian rights, when it came to issues like abortion. Nevertheless, I had an opportunity to speak, and that dialogue, I think, is part of what my campaign has been all about, that we're not going to agree on every single issue. But what we have to do is be able to create an atmosphere when we – where we can disagree without being disagreeable and then focus on those things that we hold in common as Americans."

Obama also noted that his inauguration ceremony will include the Reverend Joseph Lowery, a civil rights leader who supports equal rights for gays. Lowery is scheduled to deliver the closing prayer.

But that is not enough for Geoff Kors, executive director of Equality California. Kors returned his invitation from California Senator Barbara Boxer to attend the inaugural due to Obama's selecting Warren. He called the choice of the anti-gay marriage preacher a "slap in the face" to the LGBT community.

"If Rick Warren is giving the invocation, a man who has waged war on our community, I have too much self-respect to sit there through that," said Kors. "It is hard enough for Obama opposing our full equality but having the invocation, at the start of a new day in America where we don't put one group up against another, given by someone who actively worked to take away our rights and encase that in the state constitution is too much to bear."

Within 24 hours 10,000 people had signed on to a petition EQCA circulated asking Obama to rescind his invitation to Warren. Kors said he has heard from those still planning to attend the inaugural they plan to turn their backs to Warren when he speaks.

He said Obama's decision is an inauspicious start to what he had hoped would be an LGBT-supportive presidency.

"It is time we were treated as full and equal Americans and I expected a lot more out of our president-elect," said Kors. "I think people are extremely angry and extremely hurt and feel this is a major slap in their face."

Rapid response

The rapid response from Obama Thursday was reminiscent of his reaction in 2007 when the LGBT community expressed anger of his campaign's invitation to an anti-gay gospel singer, Donnie McClurkin, to highlight his gospel tour of South Carolina. Despite the community's calls to remove McClurkin from the lineup, Obama kept him on the program and added an openly gay minister to deliver a statement.

"During the course of the entire inaugural festivities there are going to be a wide range of viewpoints that are presented," Obama said Thursday. "And that's how it should be, because that's what America is about. That's part of the magic of this country is that we are diverse and noisy and opinionated. And so that's the spirit in which we have put together what I think will be a terrific inauguration, and that's hopefully going to be a spirit that carries over into my administration."

Openly gay Representative Barney Frank (D-Massachusetts) issued a statement Thursday saying he, too, is "very disappointed by President-elect Barack Obama's decision to honor Reverend Rick Warren with a prominent role in his inauguration."

"Religious leaders obviously have every right to speak out in opposition to anti-discrimination measures, even in the degrading terms that Reverend Warren has used with regard to same-sex marriage," said Frank. "But that does not confer upon them the right to a place of honor in the inauguration ceremony of a president whose stated commitment to LGBT rights won him the strong support of the great majority of those who support that cause."

Frank said Warren's participation is not as one in a series of people presenting various views but rather "a mark of respect and approval by those who are being inaugurated."

Log Cabin Republicans sent out an action alert Thursday, saying that Obama's invitation to Warren "is part of a pattern we've seen from Obama since Election Day."

Log Cabin also noted that of 21 senior staff positions in the White House, not one went to an out LGBT person.

Obama said his support for equal rights for gay people is something he has been "consistent on ... and something that I intend to continue to be consistent on during my presidency."

That support, however, is not translating into a cabinet-level appointment. Gay leaders have made clear in their meetings with transition officials that the LGBT community would very much like and "expect" an openly gay person to be "at the table" in an Obama cabinet. Many lobbied heavily for National Zoo Director John Berry to be interior secretary; Obama chose Senator Ken Salazar (D-Colorado). Others have been lobbying strongly for Mary Beth Maxwell, head of American Rights at Work, a pro-employee rights group, to head up the Labor Department. But on

Thursday reports began circulating that Obama's choice – to be announced Friday – will be Representative Hilda Solis (D-California).

Chuck Wolfe, head of the Gay and Lesbian Victory Fund that has led much of the effort to secure openly gay appointments in the Obama administration, posted a statement on a Victory Fund blog Thursday saying LGBT people, under the Obama administration, "still will not have a place at the table at the highest reaches of their government."

So far, one openly gay person has been appointed by Obama – Los Angeles deputy mayor Nancy Sutley will chair his White House Council on Environmental Quality. And the Lesbian and Gay Marching Band will perform in the presidential inaugural parade on January 20.