

Ready or not...

The Nation of Islam is calling for black men to march on Washington, and black gay men and lesbians will be there

by Bob Roehr

Black gay men and lesbians will be marching in the Million Man March scheduled for Oct. 16 in Washington, D.C. The only question is: Will they be welcomed participants or will they be marching in protest to their exclusion?

The purpose of the march is "to chart...[the] future [of black men] as responsible heads of our families, to reclaim and rebuild our neighborhoods...and to save our children," says the Rev. Louis Farrakhan, leader of the Nation of Islam and inspiration for the march. His co-leader is the Rev. Benjamin Chaves, former executive director of the NAACP, who was forced out of that position when it became known that he secretly misused organization funds to settle charges brought against him of sexual harassment in the workplace.

The positive messages of the march resonate strongly within the African American community. But for many they are tempered by concerns with Farrakhan, the Nation of Islam and the exclusionary character of the event. "Farrakhan is a virtual Renaissance man of hate—whites, Jews, homosexuals—and he is not so hot on women either," wrote syndicated columnist Richard Cohen.

Controversy has swirled around the project from the start. The initial proposal was to allow only men to fully participate in the march, while women could serve in support or auxiliary roles. The Nation of Islam traditionally excludes women from many of its activities.

Some of the more extreme edges of the march have been softened, as more mainstream elements have joined in support and as the organizers have tried to attract others.

The Congressional Black Caucus and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference endorse it. Individual members of the NAACP will participate, but the body itself will not formally do so. The National Urban League is keeping an arms-length distance.

The Rev. Jesse Jackson threw his support behind the march at the end of September, and claimed that leaders of the nation's two largest black religious denominations were doing likewise. No we aren't, thundered back the Rev. Henry J. Lyons a few days later. The president of the 8.2-million-member National Baptist Convention called Jackson's statement "an absolute lie."

Gay men and lesbians are adding their concerns to the clamor. "We will be at the march, regardless. Whether we are there as full, happy participants, or whether we are going to be there in protest," said Keith Boykin, former press assistant in the Clinton White House and newly appointed executive director of the Black Gay and Lesbian Leadership Forum.

"The fact is that Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam consistently express disdain for gays and lesbians of all colors," said Alexander Robinson. He is a longtime lobbyist on gay and AIDS issues for the American Civil Liberties Union and president of the black-oriented National Task Force on AIDS Prevention. "I cannot and will not accept

that you can have an event of this magnitude as they are planning, and say it is for black men, and not have on the stage someone who is openly gay and someone who is going to address the issues in a positive fashion about how we empower black gay men."

The Leadership Forum has moved to address some of these concerns. It has been in discussion with march organizers "for several weeks," said Boykin, trying to secure an official presence in the march and speakers on the platform. The Leadership Forum would like to resolve matters at least a week prior to the event.

Another factor underlying response from the Washington, D.C., community is the Nation of Islam's local involvement providing AIDS services. The Abundant Life Clinic, run by the group's national Minister of Health, is aggressively pursuing government AIDS contracts. Many observers believe the Nation of Islam sees this as a pilot program it can roll out into other cities.

Abundant Life claims that the dominant local AIDS service organization, the Whitman-Walker Clinic, which grew out of the white gay community, cannot adequately serve black and non-gay clients. The question of how an organization that is extremely hostile to homosexuality and drug use is more capable of providing services is left unanswered.

"There are lots of questions as to whether folks are getting appropriate medical care [at Abundant Life]," says Robinson. Much of the controversy centers around Kemron, a form of alpha-interferon, which the Nation of Islam maintains is effective in

fighting HIV. Traditional clinical trials have not backed up those claims. But Abundant Life continues to prescribe the drug and fills the orders from its own pharmacy, charging about \$400 a month. That is a significant markup over the wholesale cost of the drug, which has led many to believe that the clinic is ripping off sick people and pocketing huge profits.

This combination of local and national factors led the D.C. Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gay Men and Bisexuals to first give a conditional endorsement of the march and then rescind it.

The Leadership Forum held off endorsing the march because of "its sexist and patriarchal tone and the homophobic comments made by some march organizers." But it "strongly encourage[s]" black gay men and lesbians to participate in the activities it has planned.

"This march is bigger than the Nation of Islam, it is a nation of black people, African Americans coming together. We are part of that community. And we want to be there," said Boykin. "If the march organizers believe in black unity, then we will be welcomed at the march in all ways."

The Black Gay and Lesbian Leadership Forum can be contacted through its Los Angeles office (213) 964-7820 or through its ad hoc march coordinators in St. Louis, Dennis Holmes (314) 454-1654, or Houston, Steve Walker (713) 864-2242.



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