

Christian activists capturing Tory races

Some in party worry new riding nominees will reinforce notion of 'hidden agenda'

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Ottawa — Christian activists have secured Conservative nominations in clusters of ridings from Vancouver to Halifax -- a political penetration that has occurred even as the party tries to distance itself from hard-line social conservatism.

At least three riding associations in Nova Scotia, four in British Columbia, and one in suburban Toronto have nominated candidates with ties to groups like Focus on the Family, a Christian organization that opposes same-sex marriage.

But organizers say many more will be on the ballot during the next federal election, a feat achieved by persuading parishioners, particularly new Canadians, to join the party and vote for recommended candidates.

Some Conservatives argue that the selection of a large number of candidates from the religious right is an unfortunate turn for a party that was accused in last year's election campaign of harbouring a socially conservative "hidden agenda."

"The difficulty, from a party perspective, is that it begins to hijack the other agendas that parties have," said Ross Haynes, who lost the Conservative nomination in the riding of Halifax to one of three "Christian, pro-family people" recommended by a minister at a religious rally this spring in Kentville, N.S.

Candidates who are running on single issues such as opposition to same-sex marriage "probably can't get elected because they certainly don't represent any mainstream population view," Mr. Haynes said.

Others within the party say they are extremely concerned and wished the party leaders had been more involved in the nominations.

But Tristan Emmanuel -- the Presbyterian minister whose endorsement at the Kentville rally aided the nominations of Andrew House in Halifax, Rakesh Khosla in Halifax West and Paul Francis in Sackville-Eastern Shore -- makes no apologies.

"It's time we stopped apologizing and started defending who we are," he said. "The evangelical community in Canada, by and large, and socially conservative Catholics, are

saying we have been far too heavenly minded and thus we have been of no earthly value for far too long, on too many fronts."

Mr. Emmanuel runs the Equipping Christians for the Public Square Centre, which teaches people of his faith to become political. He is reluctant to say how many adherents have obtained Conservative nominations because he is afraid the news media will portray the campaign as the infiltration of the party by "right-wing fanatics."

But "it's happening everywhere, especially in urban ridings and in Ontario," he said. "Even in Toronto we have incredible people from the immigrant community who are stepping up to the plate who are just awesome candidates and sincere Christians."

Mr. Emmanuel said Christians have been allowed to believe that "to be a genuine citizen of the nation we need to check our religion at the political door. And I'm saying no, that's fundamentally flawed. You may participate in the public square as a religious individual and be not ashamed."

John Reynolds, the retiring Conservative MP who ran the party's nomination process, said the fact that social conservatives have won his party's nominations is simply a function of democracy.

"I don't believe in appointments and neither does our party, so we get some real battles," Mr. Reynolds said. "People say, 'Can't you do something about these guys running?' and I say 'Hey, you can do something: go out and sign up some more people.' "

That said, Mr. Reynolds is offended by attempts to paint the Conservative party as a harbour for religious zealots.

"There were three dozen Liberals who voted with us on the same-sex thing," he said. "Nobody is going after them and saying, 'Look at these far-right Christians that got into the Liberal Party.' "

If reporters who write about Christian fundamentalists taking over his party were to "insert the word Jew everywhere you've put Christian, do you think they would let you print it?" he asked. "I doubt it."

Darrel Reid, the party's candidate in Richmond, B.C., is a past president of Focus on the Family. Cindy Silver, who will run for the Tories in North Vancouver, was the executive director of the Christian Legal Fellowship for two years in the 1990s. Marc Dalton in New Westminster-Burnaby has been the pastor of a community church in Burnaby.

Mr. Reid, a former chief of staff to then Reform leader Preston Manning, said it is easy to label a person with his background a single-issue candidate.

"But the reason I entered this nomination contest is because I am really concerned about the direction our government is going," Mr. Reid said.

"In politics, people call you names. And sometimes it's not very pretty, but in the meantime I'm going to talk about the big issues and marriage is one issue out there. I know Canadians are concerned about it, a lot of people are talking about it, but it's just one of a whole range of issues that I went into politics to discuss."

Ms. Silver, a lawyer in the federal Justice Department, objects to being labelled a Christian candidate. "That's a form of discrimination," she said. "That's putting them in a class of people and ascribing to them the characteristics of that class without ever giving them a chance to stand on their own merits."

But other candidates clearly relied on their churches to promote their nomination.

Rondo Thomas beat former Conservative MP René Soetens for the nomination in Ajax, on the eastern edge of Toronto. Dr. Thomas is a top official with the Canada Christian College, which is run by Charles McVety, a senior director of the Defend Marriage Coalition.

"The Defend Marriage Coalition engaged in a concerted effort to help pro-marriage candidates become nominated," Dr. McVety said.

"There is a desire to see pro-marriage nominees as candidates right across the country. We know that we have 141 pro-marriage MPs now and our hope is to achieve a pro-marriage Parliament."

There has been no specific drive to infiltrate the Conservatives, Dr. McVety said. Some religious Liberals have been nominated as well. But the Tories have taken the lion's share, he said, probably because of the party's opposition to changing the definition of marriage.

Like Mr. Emmanuel, Dr. McVety expresses no uneasiness with his efforts.

"The distortion of the separation of church and state has driven people of faith out of leadership and this is very wrong," he said.

And now that the government has decided to redefine marriage, faith leaders have been forced to urge their congregations to mobilize politically, Dr. McVety said.

As a result, they "are typically signing up as members of political parties, some of them for the first time in their lives. Many of them even signing up for political parties that they've never voted for in their lives before."