



## PR promotes tolerance in debate over gay marriage

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By Aric Caplan

As we enter a New Year, the dangers of politicizing religion are in full view once again. Some religious leaders use their pulpits to call for policies that recycle entrenched intolerance and hate.

Perhaps no other issue bears this more than that of the freedom to marry. Throughout 2006, Caplan Communications had a view of the hostility beating at the heart of this issue during its work with the Human Rights Campaign's Religion and Faith Program.

As the firm worked to defeat the Federal Marriage Amendment--a wedge tool used to rally the conservative base--it was clear that even churches, synagogues and mosques were no longer sacred.

Many places of worship were exploited for political gain. But not all of them could be manipulated by the rhetoric and myth-making.

In fact, one only needs to look to the Institute for Welcoming Resources, a program of the **National Gay and Lesbian Task Force**, to find a vast registry of churches embracing all people of faith, regardless of sexual orientation and gender identity.

There are also exciting new tools which cast the relationship between scripture and homosexuality in a more factual light.

"Out in Scripture," HRC's weekly resource placing comments about the Bible alongside today's real life experiences and concerns of LGBT people of faith, is one that consistently reaffirms a harmony between God and all people, devoid of discrimination. While some evangelicals may dispute it, a major religious movement is underway to drive politics out of houses of worship, and to remove the stain of intolerance, exclusion and hatred from faith.

Discrimination knows no political bounds. News of Vice President Dick Cheney's daughter, Mary, expecting a baby prompted religious fervor from extremists to deny her becoming a mother.

It was alarming to see Rick Warren subjected to protest and anger after hosting Senator Barack Obama under the banner of open dialogue. Combined with numerous same-sex "scandals" which have roiled the evangelical community and the effort to block gay couples from adopting--even as the American Medical Association, the American Psychological Association and others continue to affirm that gays and lesbians are likewise to be outstanding parents as anyone else--it's clear that the fight to reintroduce inclusion back into the church must persevere.

HRC formed its own Religion Council to counter ignorance with education, and remedy fiction with facts, in order to protect equal rights and ensure justice for all. Caplan worked with the Council to advance a series of "Faith and Fairness" town hall meetings in major cities like Orlando, Philadelphia, Dallas, Chicago, New York and Cleveland to promote tolerance, empower fair-minded people of faith to take action, and to combat misinformation.

The firm advanced the Council's Rt. Rev. Bishop V. Gene Robinson in the Episcopal Church, and Rev. Susan Russell, President of Integrity USA, as formidable counterweights to injustice.

**Rev. Rebecca Voelkel, Executive Director of the Institute for Welcoming Resources, convened a Council of Bishops, Elders and other organized Christians from across the U.S. to address religious discrimination.** Meanwhile, Rev. Dr. Susan Thistlethwaite, the

President of the Chicago Theological Seminary, wrote extensively and conducted countless interviews promoting equality, as have Bishop John Selders and the Reverend Bill Sinkford.

In December, the highest legal body in Conservative Judaism voted to allow commitment ceremonies for same-sex couples and the ordination of gay and lesbian rabbis.

Rabbi Denise Eger of Congregation Kol-Ami went to New York in the weeks before the historic vote for an aggressive press tour to advocate for its passage. As past Chairperson of the Central Conference of American Rabbis Task Force on Gays and Lesbians in the Rabbinate, she was one of those responsible for ushering in this vote.

Voices of extremism may be more sensational than those of love and acceptance, which is why the media are more apt to quote firebrands rather than Thistlethwaite.

But make no mistake: a religious movement to strip politics from places of worship and return faith to the actual tenets of the Scripture is well underway, and momentum among Americans is increasing.