

## Article of faith: Love, integrity, and justice for all

February 7, 2007

By the Rev. Debra W. Haffner and Timothy Palmer

Two years ago, for a brief few months, marriage equality seemed like it would become a reality across the United States. In response to the 2003 decision in Massachusetts, brave local officials and clergy began performing wedding ceremonies from San Francisco to Oregon to tiny New Paltz, N.Y.

One of us had the privilege of performing weddings in New Paltz, under the watchful eyes of police and pro-bono attorneys. The importance of religious marriage rather than civil unions became clear that day. Two men in their sixties who had been together more than 30 years stood before a minister on a cold March day and exchanged marriage vows. One of their mothers - a woman well into her 90s - stood beside them, softly crying. "I've waited my whole life to see my son married," she said.

In those extraordinary days in 2004, when same-sex couples responded by the thousands to the opportunities to have marriages performed for them, Americans learned that the movement for marriage equality is about more than securing legal rights and recognition for same-sex couples. There is no question that civil protections are essential, but there is also a soul-pressing need for equal access to religious rites of passage. The religious call for marriage equality is an appeal for justice, rooted in both our innate desire for right relationship and our scriptural mandate. As a holy covenant, marriage lies at the heart of our religious responsibility to encourage faithful, loving relationships, strengthen families, promote social stability and ensure the well-being of the communities we serve.

Opponents argue that same-sex marriage defies biblical tradition. But depending on which book you read, the biblical standard for marriage embraces polygamy, forbids divorce, allows surrogacy, forbids interfaith unions, regards women as property and makes adultery punishable by death. Much more relevant to today's debates, both the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Scripture call us to "love our neighbor as ourselves" and be just and compassionate. Scripture neither commends a single marriage model nor commands all to marry, but rather calls for love, integrity and justice in all relationships.

Fortunately, growing numbers of religious leaders and denominations are answering this call. A few denominations - the Central Conference of American Rabbis, the Unitarian Universalist Association, the United Church of Christ and the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches - have passed resolutions supporting marriage equality and their clergy perform marriage rites for all. Others, including the American Baptist Churches, the Disciples of Christ, the Episcopal Church and the Presbyterian Church (USA), leave the decision to perform same-sex unions to their clergy, congregations and local governing bodies. Many clergy in other denominations bravely risk their credentials to solemnize the relationships of same-sex couples.

Each religious group must surely have the right to discern who is eligible for marriage in its own tradition. But equally important, all clergy should be free to perform marriages without state interference or second judgments on the right to form a family acknowledged by the faith community.

Two years ago, the Religious Institute on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing published An Open Letter to Religious Leaders on Marriage Equality<sup>[1]</sup>, outlining the religious foundations for securing the freedom to marry for same-sex couples. Created by a group of theologians from the Christian, Jewish and Unitarian Universalist traditions, the Open Letter argues that "good

marriages express the religious values of long-term commitment, generativity, and faithfulness. In terms of these religious values, there is no difference in marriages between a man and a woman, two men, or two women." The Open Letter has been endorsed by hundreds of faith leaders, and many more continue to sign on.

It is time that these religious voices are heard in public debates about marriage equality. It is time for states to recognize that many religious traditions already perform marriages and unions for same-sex couples and to recognize those rites. It is time for relational justice for all.

The Rev. Debra W. Haffner is co-founder and director of the Religious Institute on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing and a member of the steering committee of the National Religious Leadership Roundtable. Timothy Palmer is an intern minister with the Religious Institute.

Responses from National Religious Leadership Roundtable Members

"Someone wise once said that marriage is the intersection of society and the soul. It is not just a certificate or a quest for benefits. Marriage is a right of two hearts made one. It is a spiritual recognition and a state confirmation. Therefore, the Religious Affairs Program of the National Black Justice Coalition strongly supports equal marriage between committed couples. We believe that marriage rights should be extended to lesbians and gay men as a simple matter of justice. We support this Article of Faith, because we believe in equal justice for equal souls."

- Sylvia Rhue, Ph.D.

Director of Religious Affairs and Constituency Development

National Black Justice Coalition

"Marriage is a covenant between two people embodying and reflecting their love and commitment to each other irrespective of gender, race, class or sexual identity. The nadir of ecclesiastical responsibility are those churches and clerics who refuse to consecrate the nuptials of same-sex couples. The concept of marriage as solely a heterosexual enterprise is antithetical to Jesus' mandate in both Matthew 19:6 and Mark 10:9 that says, 'What God has joined together, let no one put asunder.' And handcuffing marriage to a one-woman, one-man family values platform not only chokes its possibility of ever flourishing and lasting, especially as we are coming to understand the fluidity of gender expressions and sexual identities, but it also desecrates the wonderfully different and diverse configurations of God's human family."

- Rev. Irene Monroe

Harvard Divinity School

"At least five synods (regional units) of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America have passed formal statements approving blessings of same-gender relationships by clergy in those synods. As the author of the first two of those resolutions, it has been a joy to see more and more Lutheran congregations move toward not only blessing those relationships, but affirming the equality of couples who worship and live faithfully within those relationships in Lutheran churches."

- Bob Gibeling, Lutheran

National Religious Leadership Roundtable Member

"As an openly gay imam of the Islamic faith and provider of religious services for the LGBTQ Muslim communities worldwide, I support this Article of Faith. As a scholar of Islamic Law and Quranic Interpretation, marriage equality is strongly supported by Quran because the Quran calls for all Muslims and members of the Book (Jews, Christians and other faiths) to have their 'comfort and cloak,' meaning each person has both a need for sexual intimacy and protection from the ravages of society.

"Though some Muslims will publicly state that marriage equality, as it relates to Muslim women, is an important legal concept covered by the Quran, even to the extent that women have certain inalienable rights within a marriage that cultural adaptations cannot ignore or deny. Yet, few

Muslims are willing to publicly state that this standard holds true for LGBTQ Muslims. Why this is so, is because many are unsure of what Quran says or does not say about same-sex marriages. Some believe the Quranic stories about Lut/Lot is definitive on same-sex relationships, while others believe the Quran is allegorical and that each person has the right to have a monogamous marriage regardless of their sexual orientation. I say to those who believe and hold that LGBTQ Muslims should be denied marriage equality are misguided, shortsighted and misunderstand human rights tenets with the Holy Quran. Further, to apply such narrowly-proscribed tenets within the context of American society - where they are able to manifest an Islamic life free of legal, political and cultural restraints - definitely falls short of the freewill Allah/God provides all of His creation to live happy and meaningful lives as Muslims. I therefore call upon all Muslims to support marriage equality for all."

- Imam Daayiee Abdullah

Board Member, Al-Fatiha, Washington, D.C.

"It is time for people of faith and society to come to terms with the truth that gender is not a defining characteristic for whether a couple is able to live the vocation of marriage, and that same-gender-loving couples are equally able to live the vocation of marriage as are heterosexual couples. Marriage is about relationships and the movement toward marriage equality has come in large measure because same-gender-loving relationships have been made increasingly real and visible.

"What moves us forward in this movement toward equality are those who are willing to make clear who is bearing the cost of marriage discrimination in the U.S. The stories of how this form of discrimination affects our families, friends, colleagues, neighbors and their children make a difference. Through these stories more and more people come to know that marriage discrimination is not only costly and unfair, it is unjust and inconsistent with the values of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness that we hold dear as a nation and project to the world. These stories help all of us to realize that those of us who are struggling for equality are right to be impatient. Regardless of where you are on the political continuum - conservative, liberal, progressive - there are good, strong and compelling grounds to support marriage equality now."

- Rev. Mike Schuenemeyer

Minister for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Concerns

Wider Church Ministries, United Church of Christ

"It is significantly important that the truth of longstanding recognition and support of same-sex couples by religious leaders and their denominations be included in the dialogue. Furthermore, an appreciation for the ongoing discussion within denominations and their various approaches to honoring sincere differences can only advance broader understanding instead of stilted thinking. This Article of Faith is a welcome addition to the resources available for thoughtful consideration by each person of faith."

- Rev. Cedric A. Harmon

Washington, D.C.

"Marriage is a legal act by which certain civil privileges accrue. In religious terms, it is a way communities of friends and family affirm and bless love relationships. In a legal democracy and in religious traditions that affirm human equality there is no justification for preventing any two consenting adults from marrying. While marriage is not necessarily the best or only way to organize a society, as long as it continues to be legally and religiously normative it must be available across the board or not at all."

- Mary E. Hunt, Ph.D.

Co-Director, WATER

Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics and Ritual

"Survey after survey shows that in the Catholic Church, people in the pews are eager and willing to bless same-sex relationships. Catholic theologians, similarly, have no problem with the idea of extending the sacrament of matrimony to same-sex couples. Catholic bishops need to listen to the call of the Holy Spirit, which is busy in the hearts of millions of Catholics and the discerning minds of the church's theologians."

- Francis DeBernardo

Executive Director

New Ways Ministry

"Marriage matters. I am blessed that I am part of a denomination (Reform Judaism) that has struggled with the question and said that yes, same-gender-unions are holy and should be recognized as such with the appropriate religious ceremony performed by our clergy. I met my son when he was four and a half years old. He called me Joel and his father was Papa. When he was seven years old, I married his father in a large religious ceremony that he had an active part in. About a week before the ceremony, he started calling me 'Dad' and it was Dad this and Dad that in every sentence and question. A few days after the ceremony, as we sat around the table, he said, 'Dad, remember when I used to call you Joel?' as if it was years ago and not just two weeks. I said yes and asked what had brought about the change. He looked at me as if it were the most obvious thing in the world and said, 'You got married to Papa.' I smiled and thought about what had created family for my young son. Marriage matters."

- Joel L. Kushner, Psy.D.

Director

Institute for Judaism and Sexual Orientation

Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion