

Religion and Same Sex Marriage

An Interfaith Commitment to Marriage Equality

“As a straight woman and as a Protestant minister, it takes nothing away from me for people to have rights in a loving relationship.”

– *Pastor Lorraine DeArmitt Southold United Methodist Church*
Quoted in the Suffolk Times (NY), December 18, 2003

“Everywhere I look and mingle among friends, acquaintances, and colleagues, I hear from same-sex couples desires to have a home and a job, to pay taxes, raise children together, take meaningful roles in communities, enjoy mingling among their neighbors...take care of their elders, work in their welcoming churches, have dogs and cats, bake birthday cakes, take care of their lawns...the list goes on and on. The theme is clear, they want freedom to be part of the things that make for rich and stable shared life. They want what marriage, at its best, represents, a format for love, family, neighborliness, and participation in the larger community. Legal marriage for same sex couples will strengthen the social institution of marriage for everyone.”

–*Rev. Thomas J.S. Mikelson, First Church and First Parish*
of Cambridge-Unitarian Universalist Church in Cambridge, Mass.

“Each individual’s journey through life is unique. Some will make this journey alone, others in loving relationships – maybe in marriage or other forms of commitment. We need to ponder our own choices and try to understand the choices of others. Love has many shapes and colors and is not finite. It can not be measured or defined in terms of sexual orientation.”

–*From the Statement of Affirmation and Reconciliation by the Quakers*

“Change is always hard, and when it comes to something as personal and seemingly “eternal” as marriage, new ideas and practices can be perceived as threatening. Such disquiet is fed by what has become a steady assault by some religious and political leaders on gays, lesbians, our partnerships and our families. These assaults not only seek to invalidate our important relationships, but also often blame us for everything from rising divorce rates to inner-city poverty. It remains unclear to me how any loving relationship would lead to the breakdown of another person’s marriage, or why a commitment between two men or two women would cause heterosexual folks to flee their familial responsibilities. Yet this is what we are being told, day after day, even by people who profess no ill will towards gays and lesbians.”

–*Toba Spitze, rabbi at Congregation Dorshei Tzedek in West Newton, Mass.*

Many religious organizations, including some that do not recognize religious same-sex marriage, either directly support civil marriage for same-sex couples, support equal rights for same-sex couples, or are opposed to the denial of equal rights for same-sex couples. These include ALEPH: Alliance for Jewish Renewal, American Friends Service Committee, California Council of Churches, Central Conference of American Rabbis, Church of Religious Science, Ecumenical Catholic Church, Hawaii's Council of Churches, Interfaith Working Group, Pacific Congress of Quakers, Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association, Unitarian Universalist Association, and Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches.

Differences Between Civil and Religious Rituals of Marriage

“What many people seem to forget is that the rights of civil marriage and the religious ritual of marriage are two different things. Because we have freedom of religion in this country, houses of worship can always decide for themselves which rituals they will perform. Our government, however, has an obligation and a responsibility to treat all people equally regardless of sexual orientation or gender. It is not the government's task to enshrine one religious definition of marriage into the Constitution, thereby undermining the Establishment Clause and destroying our country's most basic tenet of religious liberty.”

–Laura Montgomery Rutt, Director of Communications for Soulforce

Although there are religious and spiritual elements to marriage, when we talk about equal marriage we are specifically referring to the civil aspects of marriage. Heterosexual couples have the choice of exercising both the legal and the religious aspects of marriage. However, same-sex couples do not have the choice of exercising the civil aspects of marriage and therefore do not have the legal protections and benefits that marriage can afford. This inequity relegates LGBT people and their families to a second class status. Treating marriage as exclusively a religious issue is a way to continue to deny LGBT people and their families access to the 1,138 federal benefits and legal protections civil marriage can afford. It also blurs the line between the separation of church and state. This is a violation of the First Amendment to the Constitution which protects religious liberty and freedom for all of us.

The Separation of Church and State

Unlike many countries, the United States Constitution is supposed to guarantee full religious freedom for all of its citizens. Each individual gets to decide for themselves what faith, if any, they want to follow. These principles foster religious freedom and expression in the United States.

The Federal Marriage Amendment-just as with any interference on the part of the U.S. government in matters of faith-blurs the line between the separation of church and state. Using religion as a justification to write discrimination into the U.S. Constitution puts all

of us in jeopardy and sets a very dangerous precedent. All of our civil rights efforts over the past century could be rolled back—including our reproductive rights, immigration laws and important gains in civil and human rights.

Writing Discrimination into the U.S. Constitution is a Feminist Issue

Part of living in a democracy is ensuring fairness and equality for all. Although we have come a long way in our struggles for civil and human rights, we all know that we still have a long way to go on every front.

Without a doubt, the Federal Marriage Amendment adds a new and very serious twist to our efforts to organize for justice. Writing discrimination into the U.S. Constitution puts all of us — especially women, children, people of color, disabled people, immigrants and LGBT people — in jeopardy. Much that we have fought for and still must fight for could be put at risk with this one act. The stakes for all of us are high if we do not defeat the Federal Marriage Amendment.

Action Steps Feminists Can Take

- Familiarize yourself with the facts about civil marriage for same-sex couples;
- Actively track whether your state is planning on introducing a ban on same-sex marriage. If so, work with your NOW chapter to develop a strategy for working against it.
- Organize a discussion series on same-sex marriage between your NOW chapter and local faith groups.
- Organize an equal marriage coalition meeting between your NOW chapter and local LGBT organizations. Develop collective talking points and a communitywide strategy;
- Monitor your local newspaper for opportunities to respond to any articles that are discriminatory and which use religion to relegate same-sex couples to second class status;
- Write Letters to the Editor;
- Lobby in your state capitol for equal marriage.