



AN OPEN LETTER TO RELIGIOUS LEADERS ON MARRIAGE EQUALITY

As religious leaders, we are committed to promoting the well-being and moral and spiritual integrity of persons and society. Today, we are called to join the public discussion about marriage equality. There are strong civil liberties arguments for ending the exclusion of same-sex couples from the legal institution of marriage. Here we invite you to consider **religious foundations** for securing the freedom to marry for same-sex couples. Marriage equality is about more than gaining equal access to the legal protections and responsibilities of marriage. It raises fundamental questions about justice and power, intimate relationships, sexuality and gender, respect for diverse families, and the role of religion as well as the state in these matters.



AFFIRMING SEXUALITY AND THE CENTRALITY OF RELATIONSHIP

Our religious traditions celebrate that humans are created in and for relationship and that sexuality is God's life-giving and life-fulfilling gift. We affirm the dignity and worth of all persons and recognize sexual difference as a blessed part of our endowment. There can be no justification for discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity. As religious leaders, we believe that **all** persons have the right to lead lives that express love, justice, mutuality, commitment, consent and pleasure, including but not limited to civil and religious marriage.



AFFIRMING MARRIAGE AND FAMILY

From a religious perspective, marriage is about entering into a holy covenant and making a commitment with another person to share life's joys and sorrows. Marriage is valued because it creates stable, committed relationships; provides a means to share economic resources; and nurtures the individual, the couple, and children. Good marriages benefit the community and 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. Moreover, as our traditions affirm, where there is love, the sacred is in our midst.



ALWAYS REFORMING

*M*arriage is an evolving civil and religious institution. In the past, marriage was primarily about property and procreation whereas today the emphasis is on egalitarian partnership, companionship, and love. In the past, neither the state nor most religions recognized divorce and remarriage, interracial marriage, or the equality of the marriage partners. These understandings changed, and rightly so, in greater recognition of the humanity of persons and their moral and civil rights. Today, we are called to embrace another change, this time the freedom of same-sex couples to marry.



SCRIPTURE AND TRADITION

*T*he biblical call to justice and compassion (love neighbor as self) provides the mandate for marriage equality. Justice as right relationship seeks both personal and communal well-being. It is embodied in interpersonal relationships and institutional structures, including marriage. Justice seeks to eliminate marginalization for reasons of race, gender, sexual orientation, or economic status.

We find support for marriage equality in scripture and tradition in their overriding messages about love, justice, and inclusion of the marginalized. Even so, we cannot rely exclusively on scripture for understanding marriage today. For example, biblical texts that encourage celibacy, forbid divorce, or require women to be subservient to their husbands are no longer authoritative. At the same time, there are also many biblical models for blessed relationships beyond one man and one woman. Indeed, scripture neither commends a single marriage model nor commands all to marry, but rather calls for love and justice in all relationships.



MARRIAGE EQUALITY SUPPORTS STRONG FAMILIES

*I*n our nation, families take many forms. All families should be supported in building stable, empowering, and respectful relationships. Marriage equality is a means to strengthen families and is especially beneficial to children raised by same-sex couples. The state should not deny same-sex couples access to civil marriage. Many such couples are in long-term committed relationships and yet remain without legal and, in many cases, religious recognition. Conversely, because the emotional and spiritual bond of marriage is precious, the state should not compel anyone to marry (e.g., in order to qualify for public assistance).



RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

The United States is one of the most diverse religious countries in the world. No single religious voice can speak for all traditions on issues of sexuality and marriage, nor should government take sides on religious differences. Therefore, religious groups must have the right to discern who is eligible for marriage in their own tradition. In addition, all clergy should be free to solemnize marriages without state interference. We also note that many religious traditions already perform marriages and unions for same-sex couples. We call on the state neither to recognize only certain religious marriages as legal nor to penalize those who choose not to marry. The benefits and protections offered by the state to individuals and families should be available according to need, not marital status. The best way to protect our nation's precious religious freedom is to respect the separation of church and state when it comes to equality under the law.



A HIGHER STANDARD

We call on religious and civic leaders to promote good marriages based on responsibility, equity, and love, without restrictions based on the biological sex, procreative potential, or sexual orientation of the partners.

Good marriages:

- are committed to the mutual care and fulfillment of both partners
- increase the capacity of the individuals to contribute to the common good
- assure that all children are wanted, loved, and nurtured
- are free of threats, violence, exploitation, and intimidation.



IN CLOSING

The faiths we affirm challenge us to speak and act for justice for all who seek to express their love in the commitment of marriage. Some people of faith differ with us; others may be undecided. To each and all, we reach out and seek to promote what is best for individuals, couples, families, children, and society. Our commitment is not only for the legal rights of some, but relational justice for all.

The Open Letter was developed at a colloquium of theologians sponsored by the Religious Institute on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing and funded by Freedom to Marry. Participants included Rabbi Dr. Rebecca Alpert, Temple University; Rev. Steve Clapp, Christian Community; Rev. Marvin Ellison, Bangor Theological Seminary; Rev. Dr. Larry Greenfield, Protestants for the Common Good; Rev. Debra W. Haffner, Religious Institute; Dr. Mary Hunt, WATER; Rev. Barbara Lundblad, Union Theological Seminary; Rev. Michael Schuenemyer, United Church of Christ Wider Church Ministries; Rev. Dr. Traci West, Drew University.

The Open Letter was funded by a grant from Freedom to Marry. For ideas on how clergy can actively promote marriage equality, see the Action Kit, www.freedomtomarry.org/taking_action.asp

RELIGIOUS SUPPORT FOR MARRIAGE EQUALITY

Many denominations are considering their policies on marriage, holy unions and the legal right to marry. As of August 2008:

- Several religious denominations and institutions have policies that support full inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) persons, including marriage for same-sex couples. These include: Alliance for Jewish Renewal, Central Conference of American Rabbis/Union for Reform Judaism, Ecumenical Catholic Church, Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association/Jewish Reconstructionist Federation, Unitarian Universalist Association, United Church of Christ, Unity Fellowship Churches, and Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches.
- The American Baptist Churches USA, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the Episcopal Church USA, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Presbyterian Church USA, and various Quaker groups allow clergy to perform union ceremonies for same-sex couples. Authority is not denomination-wide but rests with individual clergy, congregations or local governing bodies. In the Episcopal Church and Presbyterian Church, ceremonies for same-sex couples must not reference or use the word “marriage.”
- Several denominations have endorsed the rights of same-sex couples to legally marry. In 1996, the Unitarian Universalist Association passed a resolution in support of marriage equality. The same year, the Central Conference of American Rabbis passed a resolution supporting the “right of gay and lesbian couples to share fully and equally in the rights of civil marriage.” In 2005, the General Synod of the United Church of Christ voted overwhelmingly to endorse full civil and religious marriage equality for same-sex couples.
- Many religious institutions have publicly opposed federal and state efforts to deny marriage equality. In 2004, over two dozen denominations and religious groups signed a joint letter to Congress urging the defeat of the Federal Marriage Amendment, which would have written marriage discrimination into the U.S. Constitution. Among the signatories were the Alliance of Baptists, American Friends Service Committee (Quaker), American Jewish Committee, Central Conference of American Rabbis, Episcopal Church USA, Jewish Reconstructionist Federation, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, National Council of Jewish Women, National Sikh Center, The Interfaith Alliance, Union for Reform Judaism, Unitarian Universalist Association, and United Church of Christ.
- More than 2,800 religious leaders have endorsed the Religious Declaration on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing, which calls for full inclusion of sexual minorities, including ordination and performance of same-sex unions.

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