

WHAT'S IN A WORD?

A Religious Perspective on Civil Marriage Equality



Some gays and lesbians, craving a religious community and moral grounding for their families, find a spiritual home in a variety of denominations that have made public statements supporting their LGBT people as full members of their congregations, such as the Metropolitan Community Church, United Church of Christ, Unity Fellowship, Unitarian Universalist Church, Friends Meeting (Quaker), or Reform, Conservative and Reconstructionist branches of Judaism. Others find a home with denominations still grappling with ways to address same-sex couples, such as Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Evangelical Lutherans, Methodists, and American Baptists. And others still go to individual Catholic, Southern Baptist, or Lutheran congregations whose official teachings are opposed or largely silent on the issue.



Charles Blackburn (right), ordained a Unitarian Universalist Minister, and his partner, Glen Dehn of Baltimore.

WHAT'S IN A WORD?

Lately, it seems that the issue of homosexuality has been catapulted to the forefront of both our political and religious dialogues, and many Americans hold conflicting feelings about what to make of the same-sex marriage debate.

On the one hand, no one wants to be seen as justifying discrimination against a group of people. On the other hand, many individuals accept religious teaching which condemns homosexuality and counts it as a serious sin. They remain unconvinced that these teachings should be abandoned. Furthermore, many gays and lesbians, rejected by the religious organizations they grew up with, view religion with fear and suspicion. They may be angry that they are perceived as “immoral” by some people just because of their sexual orientation. They may reject the notion that they live a “lifestyle” or choose to be gay, especially when all mainstream medical and mental health organizations in the country say one cannot change sexual orientations. And many wish people would stop using their religious beliefs to attempt to deny them what they believe is their legal civil right to marry.

This brochure was produced by a group of clergy who support legal, or civil, marriage for same-sex couples and who come from a variety of religious traditions. It is not designed to change anyone's religious beliefs. Rather, we as a group have come to believe through our commitment to our religious traditions and our intimate knowledge of families headed by same-sex couples, that granting equal civil marriage rights for gays and lesbians is the right thing to do. Some of us belong to religious groups that bless the unions of gay couples. Others of us belong to groups that do not, though we are working for change within our denominations. And others of us belong to groups that do not bless same-sex unions, a position consistent with our own theological understanding and teaching. Nonetheless, those of us in the latter group do not believe our personal, religious faith should dictate whom the State of Maryland will or will not allow to legally wed.

We appreciate you taking the time to read this brochure and hope you will consider our perspective with an open mind.

With blessings,

Religious Coalition for Civil Marriage Equality

PROFILE

GITA DEANE AND LISA POLYAK

Gita Deane and Lisa Polyak were the lead plaintiffs in an ACLU & Equality Maryland lawsuit against the state of Maryland challenging the constitutionality of denying marriage licenses to same-sex couples. Gita is a learning specialist at Goucher College. Lisa is an environmental engineer for the U.S. Army Medical Department. They live in Baltimore and have been together for 26 years. They are raising two daughters.



PHOTO: YUSUF NAJAFI / METRO WEEKLY

Gita and Lisa met their freshman year at Trinity College in Washington, D.C.

As a citizen of India, Gita was in the United States on a student visa. When they fell in love and wanted to build a life together, it was apparent immigration laws would force them apart. Had Lisa and Gita been recognized as spouses, they could easily have remained together. Because they couldn't marry, the couple embarked on a years-long odyssey to establish residency for Gita. There were many anxious moments — like a deportation notice and a tearful goodbye at JFK airport — when the distraught couple did not know if Gita would ever be able to return to the United States. Fortunately, Gita received a work sponsorship and was granted full U.S. citizenship in 1994. But Gita and Lisa want marriage rights to further protect their relationship and children from other harms, and to ensure that no loving couple will have to be torn apart because of political borders.

The family attends Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church in Baltimore, where Gita and Lisa teach Sunday school, and where both of their daughters were baptized.

RELIGIOUS MARRIAGE VS. CIVIL MARRIAGE

Will my house of worship be forced to bless same-sex unions?

Even if marriage becomes a legal option for same-sex couples, places of worship will always decide for themselves whether to perform or recognize any marriage, just as we already do for every couple. Some clergy refuse to marry interfaith couples. Other clergy refuse to marry a couple if one member has been divorced. No court decision or legislative mandate can change these fundamental tenets of freedom of religion, which are guaranteed in both the U.S. and Maryland constitutions.

Fortunately, no one has proposed that churches or religious institutions be forced to perform marriages for same-sex couples. The decision to bless any union should, and will always, rest with the clergy involved. Gay and lesbian advocacy groups strongly agree.



PHOTO: YUSEF NAJAFI, METRO WEEKLY

WHY EXPAND MARRIAGE?

Marriage, as a civil institution, has changed greatly over time. This is not the first time our country has struggled with exclusion from and discrimination in marriage. Previous struggles have ended race discrimination in marriage and granted women equal partnership in marriage with their husbands. The ability to be married by a judge or clerk of the court, and not clergy, was another crucial evolution. In the same ways that these events have not changed the concept of marriage as the building block of stable relationships and healthy families, neither would ending the exclusion of gay people from marriage. It would merely remove a discriminatory barrier from the path of people who have made a personal commitment to each other and are now ready and willing to take on the responsibilities and legal commitment of civil marriage.

PROFILE

ALVIN WILLIAMS AND NIGEL SIMON

Alvin is a dentist in private practice after retiring from the U.S. Army where he was a dental officer. Nigel is a program manager for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Nigel previously served in the U.S. Army National Guard as a military police specialist.



They live in Upper Marlboro in Prince George's County and have been together for almost ten years. They have adopted three children who were wards of the state.

Both Alvin and Nigel are active in community service, serving on the board of directors of "Us Helping Us" — an HIV/AIDS service organization committed to reducing HIV infection in the African-American community. Alvin and Nigel also attend worship services at Covenant Baptist Church, and have the full support of their pastors. They met at a discussion group for black gay men. "It was love at first sight," Alvin says.

"I have long felt as married as anyone who loves and lives with their spouse, raises kids, owns a home, and drives a truck," Nigel says. "Although we are a family in every way imaginable — a family with one military veteran and one federal employee — we are not fully protected as a family under the law."

WHY DO GAY COUPLES WANT TO MARRY?

Good question. The best answer is...why do straight couples want to marry?

Gay couples love each other and form families in every sense of the word. The only difference is the gender of the two people involved. Gay people crave the stability and security of legal marriage. After all, they can already have the public recognition of a ceremony — even a religious one, if their clergy person will perform the union. However, without the ability to legalize their union with a marriage license, they are left without any legal relationship and safety net when they most need it — in times of financial hardship, illness, death, or a sad dissolution of a relationship.

Without the ability to secure a marriage license, same-sex couples have no automatic legal right to:

- > Take Family and Medical leave to care for a sick partner
- > Receive Social Security benefits in the event of the death of a partner
- > Sponsor a foreign-born partner to stay in the country
- > Take advantage of health benefits (without taxation) and COBRA benefits through an employer
- > Inherit jointly owned property without incurring crippling tax penalties
- > Roll a partner's pension into their own
- > Make burial decisions
- > Have the security of continued insurance coverage after the death of a spouse
- > Take advantage of social services provided to help families cope with catastrophe, poverty, homelessness, or abandonment
- > Right to file joint income taxes
- > Right to sue for wrongful death of a spouse

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“ I am in the valley of prayer on the issue of gay marriage, and I will err on the side of inclusiveness and not exclusion. I'm going to follow Jesus and say, Whosoever will, let them come. And I'm going to extend rights to all of God's children and if I am wrong, God will have to judge me. ”

—Rev. Joseph Lowery
Founder of Southern Christian Leadership Conference

PROFILE

JOHN LESTITIAN

John Lestitian, the chief code compliance officer for the City of Hagerstown, lost his partner of 14 years quite suddenly. Jim died in 2003 at 33. The home John and Jim shared in Hagerstown was in Jim's name. Although Jim had a will leaving his entire estate to John, it was legally invalid because it was signed by only one witness and Maryland requires two.

As a result, John had no rights to his partner's property. Had John and Jim been able to marry, John would have automatically inherited the home under state inheritance laws that protect family members. Because John could not afford to purchase their home from Jim's estate, he was forced to move out of his own home in his time of grief.

Jim's wishes were to have his body cremated and his ashes scattered. He did not want a gravesite. Jim's family desired interment in his birth state. Because the will, which named John as executor, was defective and because they were not married, John was treated as a legal stranger to Jim and had to negotiate a compromise.

Both John and Jim were devout Catholics. They had a holy union commitment ceremony in St. Margaret's Episcopal Church in Washington D.C. in 1991, presided over by a Catholic priest. In the years since Jim's death, John has continued the healing process and has found love again. John worries that without the protection of marriage his newly formed family lacks the safeguards that only marriage can bring.

WHY CAN'T COUPLES BE HAPPY WITH CIVIL UNIONS?



Civil unions are legal relationships created by the legislatures of Vermont, New Hampshire, New Jersey and Connecticut. Civil unions do not confer the full security and range of tangible and intangible protections as marriage itself, are not recognized by the federal government, and end at the state line. In fact, formal commissions that have studied whether civil unions are working have shown inequality and disparity. Frank Vespa-Papaleo, who is chair of the commission in New Jersey, said the law is not as effective "as if the word 'marriage' were used." For instance, an electrician told the commission that her labor union informed her she could not get health benefits for her partner of nine years under the civil union law. She proceeded to inform the union that she and her partner had married in Massachusetts and — voila — the partner got covered.

Marriage is about love and is universal; civil unions are a separate and unequal institution that send a message to children of same-sex couples that society does not value their families as much as those headed by different-sex couples. By inventing a separate institution aimed at withholding marriage from for same-sex couples, civil unions send a negative message: setting gay families apart and denying them access to the same license all other families receive.

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“You can believe whatever you want to believe but marriage is a civil affair, and you don't have a right to impose your rights on the civil society. If you want to say gay people can't be married in your church, OK. But you can't say they can't be married in City Hall because of something you read in the Bible.”

—Julian Bond
NAACP Chairman

PROFILE

DRS. DONNA BOURASSA AND PATTY PERILLO

Drs. Donna Bourassa and Patty Perillo had been together for several years when Donna was diagnosed with ovarian cancer. As an employee of the state of Maryland for 15 years, Patty could not insure Donna on her health plan, so Donna was forced to work throughout her illness or risk losing health benefits. When Donna died at the age of 49, Patty was ineligible for bereavement leave. And, when Donna's last will and testament left Patty the house they had shared, the State initially assessed \$30,000 of inheritance tax against the value of the house because same-sex partners are not entitled to exemptions from inheritance taxes for bequests of property to a spouse.

If Donna and Patty's legal rights as a couple were recognized, Donna would not have had to work through her terminal illness — and Patty could have taken bereavement leave and would have received the financial and inheritance protections afforded a grieving spouse.

Instead, she was forced to contend with the prospect of losing her home and had to engage in an extended legal battle in an attempt to reduce the inheritance tax assessed. No one should ever have to face such hardship in the process of grieving the loss of a loved one.



“Marriage is “sanctified” — or made distinct and holy — not by civil law but by religious ceremony...Like most faith communities, the Jewish community does not and will not look to civil authorities to determine which relationships merit sanctification under Jewish law and I expect the same is true for Christian and other faith traditions as well. That religious freedom allows for these differences is an asset and a strength of our system, which embraces civil marriage as distinct from religious marriage.”

– Rabbi Sarah Meytin
Assistant Director

Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Washington

“All the arguments that I’ve heard in favor of putting this kind of discrimination into our Constitution are religious arguments. I’ve seen a lot of Bibles in these halls and heard a lot of biblical quotes. I love the Bible. In many ways, I have dedicated my life toward the interpretation of its pages. But the beauty of our government is that when we walk inside these walls, we are assured that no one interpretation will win the day over others. That is why the founders of our American system believed in the institutional separation of church and state. Biblical interpretation is the job of churches and other religious communities. It is not the job of state legislators. The irony for me today is that it was religious people who fought for the separation of church and state because they did not want the government to interfere in the affairs of the church and they did not want a particular religious viewpoint to be codified into law, thus restraining the rights and consciences of others with different beliefs.”



PHOTO: FRANK KLEIN

—Pastor Andrew Foster Connors
Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church



Whatever my personal feelings may be about gay and lesbian marriages, unless you are prepared to say gays and lesbians are not human beings, they should have the same constitutional right of any other human being."

– Rev. Al Sharpton
*founder of the Harlem- based
National Action Network*



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