News



by Sarah Salvadore

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A Catholic high school in Kettering, Ohio, did not renew the contract of a longtime English teacher, after the status of his same-sex marriage came to light.

James Zimmerman, an English teacher of 23 years at Archbishop Alter High School, was told by his principal that the Cincinnati Archdiocese made the decision after an anonymous tip-off.

"In the very beginning of January, my principal had a meeting with me, saying that someone had forwarded a copy of my marriage certificate to the archdiocese. She showed me a copy of the certificate and I confirmed it was mine," Zimmerman told NCR.

He didn't hear anything from authorities for three months until April 9. "During a phone call with the principal and superintendent of the archdiocese schools, I was told that the archbishop has decided, because of my marriage, not to offer me a contract for the next year," said Zimmerman.

The archdiocese's decision was met with protests from current and former students, who are fighting back.

An online petition started by Alter student Michael Ferguson is asking for signatures to get Zimmerman back on the job for the coming semesters.

Zimmerman's contract "was not renewed because of who he is married to: a man. This is seen as not right in the Church, but to take away someone's job for this reason is outrageous," reads the change.org petition, which has garnered more than 30,500 signatures as of May 8.



Cincinnati Archbishop Dennis Schnurr in Rome, Dec. 11, 2019 (CNS/Paul Haring)

In a letter to Alter High School families, Cincinnati Archbishop Dennis Schnurr defended his decision to not renew Zimmerman's contract.

Schnurr described Zimmerman as a "long-time and highly valued teacher," and acknowledged the "outpouring of sadness and anger."

Schnurr said Zimmerman's marriage was in violation of the teacher-minister contract that he signed. The contract contains an agreement that asks employees to refrain from any conduct that is "in contradiction to Catholic social doctrine or morals."

"Behaviors that are not regrettable mistakes but are rather confirmed life choices contrary to Catholic teaching cannot be offered to young people as a witness to the faith, no matter the many other outstanding attributes a person may possess," Schnurr said in his letter. "Sometimes, personal decisions mean that an individual and an organization are simply no longer compatible — nothing more, nothing less."

In response, another group consisting of Zimmerman's former students and alumni of Alter High School have started a movement, Cut the Clause, to get the archdiocese to amend the clause in contracts across all its schools.

Responding to Schnurr in a letter, members of the movement called on the archdiocese to "remove, in perpetuity, the contractual language included in Section 4 of its teacher-minister contract."

"The issue at stake here wasn't that Mr. Zimmerman was fired," said Rachel Woeste, a 2015 alumna of Alter and one of the three founders of the movement. "It was more the issue of the clause that allows his contract to be nonrenewed."

Calling the clause "discriminatory," Woeste said that more and more people are getting uncomfortable with the way the church treats the LGBT community. "The clause in its very structure goes against Catholic social justice teachings, and it's inequitable."

They are yet to receive a response from the archdiocese, she said.

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The diocese is meanwhile standing firm by its decision, saying if mutually agreed contracts are not to be honored, "then all contracts will be worthless."

"Even if one disagrees with church teaching, a Catholic institution must maintain integrity, and the teacher-minister ought to fulfill that which he/she agreed to, including conduct consistent with the principles of the church," Jennifer Schack, director of media relations, told NCR.

Zimmerman married his partner in July 2016. The couple has been together for nine years.

Throughout the time he was employed at Alter High School, Zimmerman's sexuality was never a secret. "I'm a private individual, but I never lied about my marriage," he said. Teachers and the principal knew about Zimmerman's marriage and had no issues with it, he said.

Zimmerman, who himself is a graduate of Alter High School, was a National Board Certified teacher until November 2019. Only 3% of teachers nationally are certified through this program, which acknowledges that an individual has met the "highest standards" in the classroom.

Zimmerman is overwhelmed by the support from his students — current and former.

"This is what I love about these kids — they are working for social justice that goes beyond me. I'm so appreciative and thankful they are going above and beyond to support me and this larger cause," he said.

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