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Faith drives activism for gay rights supporters

by Michelle Minkoff by Religion News Service



Same-sex couple Shelly Bailes and Ellen Pontac react after hearing that California's Supreme Court upheld a ban on same-sex marriage in San Francisco May 26.

WASHINGTON -- As thousands of gays and lesbians prepare to march on the nation's capital to push for equal rights, leaders from a range of faiths say it's time to stop using religion as a weapon to oppose same-sex marriage.

What's more, advocates for gay rights say their faith and a sacred belief in justice are what actually form the foundation of their support for gay and lesbian unions.

Brent Childers, an evangelical Christian, said he once used religious tenets to support prejudice toward the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community, but "I realized those attitudes were not in keeping with my religious values by causing harm using religious teaching."

He said supporting same-sex marriage is in keeping with his faith because "what's essential is those core principals of love, compassion and respect for others."

Now, as executive director of Faith in America, Childers leads a group whose mission statement embraces the goal of "emancipat(ing) lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people from bigotry as disguised by religious truth."

Childers is among the more than 100 religious leaders who have endorsed the Oct. 11 National Equality March on behalf of gay rights. Several faith groups are planning religious events in the Washington area Oct. 9-11, including an interfaith service before the march.

The two-mile march on the afternoon of Oct. 11 will culminate in a rally outside the U.S. Capitol.

Speakers will include Judy Shepard, whose son Matthew was killed in a hate crime in 1998; lawmakers from New York City and Los Angeles; and veteran gay activists Clive Jones and David Mixner. Regional groups around the country are organizing trips to Washington, as well as events in their own cities on Oct. 11.

The march is preceded by two days of events that include workshops on lobbying tactics and media training. On Oct. 10, there will be a wreath-laying at the Tomb of the Unknowns at Arlington National Cemetery to honor gay service members discharged under the military's Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy.

"We believe all people are created in God's image. Doing anything less than fighting for equality for all is not living into our calling," said Kareem Murphy, one of the members of Washington's predominantly gay Metropolitan Community Church, which is helping organize members of various Christian denominations to attend the march and related events.

"Christ ministered to people who are considered outsiders, and we want to continue that ministry," he said.

Robin McGehee, co-director of the march, said it took years to reconcile her Baptist faith with her lesbian sexual orientation. "I finally understood I could have both uniquely and effectively and not have to choose one over the other," she said.

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Another march supporter, Faith in America founder and furniture magnate Mitchell Gold, said, "There's been a real mobilization of faith groups saying faith is equal to justice."

Several Jewish leaders also have endorsed the march, including Rabbi Eric Yoffie, president of the Union for Reform Judaism, and Rabbi Denise Eger, president of the Pacific Association for Reform Rabbis. Eger said Jewish history, from slavery in ancient Egypt to the horror of the Holocaust, has colored Jewish activism on behalf of gay rights since the 1960s.

"We've had the ultimate experience of dehumanization," she said. "What's happening now, that's alarm bells. What's next?"

The Rev. Irene Monroe, a doctoral candidate at Harvard Divinity School, likened the same-sex marriage debate to the 1960s struggle for African-American civil rights. She said there were religious teachings that supported slavery as well as a ban on interracial marriage that are now considered shameful.

"A lot of the bigotry that we as LGBT people face is based on religion," she said.

Molly Kropp, 35, who attended a recent fundraiser for the march, said her support for same-sex marriage got down to a question of morality. "It should just be about common respect," she said, "and spreading awareness of the idea of equality."

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