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North Carolina bishops push for ban on same-sex marriage

Patrick O'Neill | May. 7, 2012

Stan Kimer, right, and his mother, Fran Kimer (Marie Artale)

RALEIGH, N.C. -- In North Carolina, a drama is playing out over marriage equality. While Catholics, especially institutional leaders, are working with other churches to pass a May 8 ballot initiative that would encode into the state constitution a ban on same-sex marriage, some Catholics are working to defeat the amendment.

The state is to vote on the ballot initiative Tuesday.

Among the Christian leaders standing against Amendment 1, a measure being pushed by the Republican-dominated state legislature despite the fact that gay marriage is already outlawed in the state, is former Catholic and gay-rights activist Stan Kimer. The state's two Catholic dioceses and many black congregations have been pitted against progressives who see the amendment as a major civil rights battle in the nation's 10th most populous state.

See also:N. Carolina dioceses mail postcards supporting 'traditional marriage'[1]

If the amendment passes, the state constitution would define marriage as being between one man and one woman. Although the amendment is simply titled "Constitutional Amendment" on the statewide ballot, opponents have chosen to call the measure "Amendment 1."

A successful businessman and consultant, Kimer, 56, is also president of the North Carolina Council of Churches governing board, which opposes the amendment. Raised Catholic on Long Island, N.Y., Kimer left

the church while an undergraduate at Georgia Tech. His mother, Fran Kimer, has been a member of Raleigh's St. Raphael the Archangel Catholic Church since 1970.

Fran Kimer says she supports the church's view on marriage, but for her, freedom trumps theology. "The way I feel, a marriage should be between a man and a woman, and they have children, but I respect the lesbians and the gays, and I feel that they should be given every single opportunity and every advantage that I myself have," she said.

"I was brought up to be very broad-minded and accepting of everybody; it's my background," she said. "I believe as long as you're a good person, which my son is -- he's an excellent son -- as long as you're a good person -- you obey the laws, you don't steal, rob, kill -- to me, you should be accepted. Most of my friends are very accepting of lesbians and gays. A few them, I just don't understand how they feel. To me, they are not good Christians. They say they are, but they're not."

While many Amendment 1 backers characterize gays and lesbians as sinners, Fran Kimer said her son is, as the Catholic church teaches, gay "by no fault of his own."

"He did not make a choice. He was born that way. He tried very hard to be straight, but he just couldn't do it. He was married before, but he just couldn't do it. He tried to please us, but he was unable to do so. He's happier now ... and that's the important thing."

Both the Raleigh and Charlotte dioceses are taking a leadership role in encouraging its flocks to vote for Amendment 1. While the Catholic church holds that being gay or lesbian is an orientation, not a choice, because marriage in the church is reserved exclusively for a man and a woman, the church requires gays and lesbians to embrace lifelong celibacy in order to remain in good standing. Sexual relations are reserved for married couples, so all gay sexual relations are de facto sinful.

Catholic Voice NC, a website under the authority of the two dioceses' bishops, includes four video messages explaining the church's view on marriage and in support of Amendment 1. Pro-Amendment 1 articles have also appeared in diocesan publications. Both Raleigh Bishop Michael F. Burbidge and Charlotte Bishop Peter J. Jugis have maintained activist roles in favor of the ban.

The site includes a quote from Jugis: "Long before there was civil government, marriage existed. Marriage between a man and a woman is a basic human and social institution. Though it is regulated by civil laws and church laws, it did not originate either from the church or the state, but from God. Therefore, neither church nor state can alter the basic meaning and structure of marriage."

Kimer, who works closely with the member denominations of the state council of churches, says, "The Catholic church has been very supportive and agreeing on 90 percent of the issues that we work on. This is one of those few issues where the Catholic church does not agree with the stand of the North Carolina Council of Churches."

Kimer said he commends the Catholic leaders from not withdrawing from the council of churches over this one issue. Although, he adds, "I'm disappointed ... and I just hope that someday there'll be change in the heart of the leadership of the Catholic church."

Kimer said the church's overall views on homosexuality are "a lot better than the 'You're an awful sinner and doomed to Hell' from the fundamentalist side. It's a better position than that, but I'm still not satisfied with it."

He said he believes God creates people who are LGBT, and though a man and a woman are the norm in a relationship, "just because something is the norm in scripture doesn't mean that it actually applies to every single person."

"I think because a man and woman coming together might be the norm, I don't think it means that's the only way and the only exclusive way, and that God's intention is that 100 percent of the population end up in heterosexual relationships," he said. "I think we should be open, and I think scripture could be opened to also have same-gender committed, affirming, loving relationships."

Alan Archibald, a member of Holy Family Catholic church in Hillsborough, N.C., is an outspoken critic of his church.

"Searching for reinforcement, contemporary Catholicism has allied itself with Christian fundamentalism" without fully realizing where that road will take the church, Archibald said. He also notes that the church's moral teachings have changed over the years. Five hundred years ago, usury was "vociferously" condemned, he said, but today, charging interest for loans is acceptable, and even nuns and priests carry credit cards that bear usurious interest rates.

"In light of this changing circumstance, it is time for the church to dispatch its moral teachings on [artificial] contraception and committed same-sex unions to the same dusty storage room where usury has been retired," he said.

Last week, North Carolina's best-known evangelist, the Rev. Billy Graham, threw his support behind the amendment.

"At 93, I never thought we would have to debate the definition of marriage. The Bible is clear -- God's definition of marriage is between a man and a woman. I want to urge my fellow North Carolinians to vote for the marriage amendment," Graham said in statement released by the Charlotte-based Billy Graham Evangelistic Association.

Ryan Rowe, a son of a United Methodist minister, is director of faith outreach for The Coalition to Protect All North Carolina Families, a group working to defeat Amendment 1. Rowe says Jesus sets the bar at "love thy neighbor" and not judging others.

"Our primary Christian ethic is to love your neighbor as yourself," Rowe said. "No matter how deeply we disagree on theology, we should never harm anyone else in the name of that conviction."

If the amendment passes, Rowe said, people and families will be hurt: people, including children, could lose health care coverage, people's civil rights will be violated, even domestic violence laws will be weakened.

The Rev. Amy Laura Hall teaches ethics at Duke Divinity School in Durham, N.C. She said, "Amendment 1 as an attempt to divide neighbors, and to distinguish between families that are deserving of basic benefits for their children and families that don't deserve basic benefits for their children.

In Matthew 25, she said, Jesus instructs his followers to care for the outcast, "the least of these." Backers of Amendment 1 are engaged in a clever distortion of Jesus' injunction, she said.

"This is one of the things that is so rhetorically brilliant on their part," Hall said. "Many proponents of this amendment are trying cast it that the outcasts in North Carolina are those who are trying to hold true to traditional values. So they're trying to present themselves as representing the beleaguered few who are still trying to hold out on traditional family values, which are under siege by progressive New South Yankees who've come in. It's almost like a carpetbagger idea, like these people have come in and they're trying to force on us their values."

"I think this is quite sadly, not much about Jesus. This is about cynically trying to divide voters in a battleground state. I think Jesus wants us to have that conversation about what it means to be together and to be family. But that's not the conversation that is being promoted by Amendment 1. We're not getting to have that conversation. The proponents of Amendment 1 have us in the very divisive, politicized situation where people who ought to be in solidarity with one another are seeing one another as opponents."

Gail Phares of Raleigh is a former Maryknoll missionary and cofounder of Witness for Peace. Her daughter is gay.

"As a Roman Catholic with a beautiful daughter who is gay, I am deeply saddened to read about some of the U.S. Catholic bishops' stand against gay people and gay marriage," she said. "I believe that God loves us all more than we can imagine -- everyone. I believe that God loves people who are born gay just as God loves everyone else. Why would any church leaders take a stand against some of God's beautiful and gifted people? The Gospel is very clear -- love one another."

Kimer and his partner of 21 years, Rich Roark, are not married and have no plans to go to another state to tie the knot.

"We're waiting and hoping that we can do it one day in the state that we've both lived in for 21 years," he said.

Kimer, however, is committed to the cause of gay marriage, and says he's cautiously optimistic that Amendment 1 could be struck down by voters in May. A defeat of the amendment would be a huge victory for gay rights and human rights, he said.

"It would send a huge statement across our whole country if we defeat this thing," he said.

[Patrick O'Neill is a freelance writer living in Raleigh, N.C.]

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