

# Opinion

by Rev. Debra W. Haffner and Timothy Palmer

## It's time for the rest of America to catch on

### Many branches of religion in the U.S. already offer same-sex marriages

Two years ago, for a brief few months, marriage equality seemed like it would become a reality across the United States. In response to the 2003 decision in Massachusetts, brave local officials and clergy began performing wedding ceremonies from San Francisco to Oregon to tiny New Paltz, N.Y.

One of us had the privilege of performing weddings in New Paltz, under the watchful eyes of police and pro-bono attorneys. The importance of religious marriage rather than civil unions became clear that day. Two men in their 60s who had been together more than 30 years stood before a minister on a cold March day and exchanged marriage vows. One of their mothers — a woman well into her 90s — stood beside them, softly crying. "I've waited my whole life to see my son married," she said.

In those extraordinary days in 2004, when same-sex couples responded by the thousands to the opportunities to have marriages performed for them, Americans learned that the movement for marriage equality is about more than securing legal rights and recognition for same-sex couples. There is no question that civil protections are essential, but there is also a soul-pressing need for equal access to religious rites of passage. The reli-

gious call for marriage equality is an appeal for justice, rooted in both our innate desire for right relationship and our scriptural mandate. As a holy covenant, marriage lies at the heart of our religious responsibility to encourage faithful, loving relationships, strengthen families, promote social stability and ensure the well-being of the communities we serve.

Opponents argue that same-sex marriage defies biblical tradition. But depending on which book you read, the biblical standard for marriage embraces polygamy, forbids divorce, allows surrogacy, forbids interfaith unions, regards women as property and makes adultery punishable by death. Much more relevant to today's debates, both the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Scripture call us to "love our neighbor as ourselves" and be just and compassionate. Scripture neither commends a single marriage model nor commands all to marry, but rather calls for love, integrity and justice in all relationships.

Fortunately, growing numbers of religious leaders and denominations are answering this call. A few denominations — the Central Conference of American Rabbis, the Unitarian Universalist Association, the United Church of Christ and the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches — have

passed resolutions supporting marriage equality and their clergy perform marriage rites for all. Others, including the American Baptist Churches, the Disciples of Christ, the Episcopal Church and the Presbyterian Church (USA), leave the decision to perform same-sex unions to their clergy, congregations and local governing bodies. Many clergy in other denominations bravely risk their credentials to solemnize the relationships of same-sex couples.

Each religious group must surely have the right to discern who is eligible for marriage in its own tradition. But equally important, all clergy should be free to perform marriages without state interference or second judgments on the right to form a family acknowledged by the faith community.

Two years ago, the Religious Institute on Sexual Morality, Justice and Healing published an open letter to Religious Leaders on Marriage Equality, outlining the religious foundations for securing the freedom to marry for same-sex couples. Created by a group of theologians from the Christian, Jewish and Unitarian Universalist traditions, the letter argues that "good marriages 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." The open letter has been endorsed by hundreds of faith leaders, and

many more continue to sign on.

It is time that these religious voices are heard in public debates about marriage equality. It is time for states to recognize that many religious traditions already perform marriages



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and unions for same-sex couples and to recognize those rites. It is time for relational justice for all. ■

— *The Rev. Debra W. Haffner is co-founder and director of the Religious Institute on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing and a member of the steering committee of the National Religious Leadership Roundtable.*

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