

Op-ed: The Religious Folks *Are* With Us

Why faith communities are one of the most important groups to win over when it comes to winning marriage equality.

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I get asked a lot by progressive friends, who know my long involvement in the fight for marriage equality, “How are we going to beat the church folk?”

Here’s the thing: The “church folk” are with us. In fact, we couldn’t have gotten this far without them. And we aren’t going to win full equality nationwide unless we meet them where they are and bring them with us.

I have spent years organizing around marriage equality, previously as executive director of the Empire State Pride Agenda and now as CEO of Bend the Arc, a national progressive Jewish coalition. In that time I have learned that the angry talking heads on cable news who claim to be religious leaders, condemning marriage equality as ungodly, are not speaking for all or even most people of faith.

Let me start with the people I know best, my own people, American Jews. At Bend the Arc we’ve been mobilizing American Jews in support of gay marriage for years and have seen tremendous turnout at our marches and vigils and through our online campaigns. It’s not surprising when you realize that 81% of American Jews support marriage equality — that’s higher than any other single constituency in America, with the exception of gay and lesbian people themselves.

It wasn’t always the case. Only in the last decade have we seen this remarkable, historic shift in the nation’s attitude toward marriage equality and gay rights. That shift extends into our churches and synagogues, and there too it began at the grass roots. First, people ask their rabbi to marry their gay son to his partner. Then that gay couple comes in two years later with a child and asks the rabbi to perform the blessing. These everyday acts of humanity and faith build until faith leaders cannot ignore them. Changes happen first in congregations, and then congregations move rabbis.

When I was organizing for marriage equality in New York, I saw this happen in real time. We started a program called Pride in the Pulpit to organize people of faith. We started with one lone organizer and just a handful of clergy. In a few short years, we had 1,000 ministers, rabbis, and priests involved, engaging thousands of people across the state at 800 different congregations. The church folk were with us.

The progressive movement has traditionally stayed away from organizing people of faith. We automatically assume they’re not with us. We don’t have a vocabulary to talk to them. We are, in short, afraid.

But the marriage equality movement has realized that marriage — an institution that, for better or worse, is inextricably linked with religion — can’t win without them. Marriage equality advocates made a conscious decision to reach out to people of faith and engage them on the legal and legislative fight around the Defense of Marriage Act. Dozens of faith organizations, including Bend the Arc, joined to submit a friend of the court brief to the Supreme Court in the DOMA case in support of equality. We argued that the law, which barred the federal government from recognizing the legitimacy of same-sex marriages, in fact interfered with religious liberty. Faith communities wanted to recognize these unions, bless them as holy — and who was the federal government to interfere?

Roberta Kaplan, the lead attorney on the pro-equality side, said at a Morgan Stanley Pride event that the brief was the most important document submitted to the Supreme Court in the case other than her own.

And while I know many of my gay brethren have at times suffered tremendous abuse at the hands of faith leaders who are not acting in the spirit of their faith, my own experience as a gay man in a bi-religious marriage has been full of nothing but joy. My partner, Matt, is a lifelong Catholic, and we attend both synagogue and Mass regularly, now often in the company of our 20-month-old son. People at both houses of worship know we are a gay couple raising a child together, and they are unfailingly kind. They want to hold and bless our son as much as the son of any other couple. It does not matter what some far-off religious authority figure tells them to believe — they know, in their hearts, that we are part of their community.

The church folk are with us, my friends, and we must meet them where they are — in their houses of worship, in their communities, in their own belief systems. We can’t talk down to them, and we can’t demonize them. When I met recently with the leader of a large Orthodox Jewish group, he told me that he remains personally opposed to same-sex marriage. But he had no intention of opposing the drive for equality. More than anything, he told me, he just didn’t want people to think he was a bigot.

Organizing people of faith is not about eradicating their beliefs. It’s about finding common ground. That Orthodox leader was not a bigot — he was a good man, with strong personal religious beliefs. That’s something we can and should respect, just as he is respecting our right to live and love who we will.

In the end, the one thing we should remember is that the heart of all our faith traditions is love. Love for self, love for our neighbors, and love as something divine, to be cherished. That deep well of love is at the heart of the faithful’s support for our community in this fight. The least we can do is love them back for it.

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