

STATEMENT BY THE RELIGIOUS COALITION FOR EQUAL MARRIAGE RIGHTS:

An Affirmation of Diversity

1. Diversity of Religious Opinion

The Religious Coalition for Equal Marriage Rights includes representatives from liberal and traditional faith communities in Canada. The Coalition attests to the diversity of religious opinion on the question of equal marriage rights for same-sex couples, and the growing support in religious communities for equality for these couples. We include The United Church of Canada, the Canadian Unitarian Council, the Muslim Canadian Congress, the Canadian Friends Service Committee of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), the World Sikh Organization, Canadian Rabbis for Equal Marriage, Metropolitan Community Church, Ahavat Olam Synagogue (Vancouver), Church of the Holy Trinity (Anglican) in Toronto, Apostolic Society of Franciscan Communities - Canada, Saint Padre Pio Congregational Catholic Community (Toronto), and liberal and progressive members of the Bahai, Buddhist, Catholic, First Nations, Hindu, Mennonite and Muslim communities.

The United Church, Canadian Unitarian Council, Metropolitan Community Church of Toronto, and Coalition of Canadian Liberal Rabbis were interveners in support of equal marriage rights before the Supreme Court of Canada's October 2004 hearings. Since legalization in various jurisdictions, clergy from each of these groups have performed weddings for same-sex couples. One Anglican diocese now celebrates same-sex blessings. Some Quaker Meetings (congregations) have also taken same-sex marriages under their care. The Buddhist Council of Canada has issued a statement in support of equal marriage rights.

2. Religious Freedom Not to Participate

We believe Bill C-38, the *Civil Marriage Act*, upholds the religious freedom of those opposed to same-sex marriage and will not discriminate against them any more than legal recognition of divorce did in the last century. The government does not compel clergy of any faith to marry divorced persons. We unequivocally support the right of those faiths with contrary views to continue to refuse to perform same-sex marriages. The right to refuse is fully protected by Bill C-38.

3. Same-Sex Marriage As a Human Right

The law already allows civil marriage for couples that some religious groups would refuse to marry. All members of the Coalition believe that, as a matter of individual and religious freedom, anyone who wishes to participate in a civil same-sex marriage recognized by law should have the right to do so. Freedom of religion must include the right of individuals to be free from government-imposed religious beliefs.

Offering anything less than marriage, such as civil unions, would perpetuate a second-class status for same-sex couples, which is unacceptable.

Members of many of our communities are from racial and religious minority groups that themselves experience discrimination, and we understand that human rights as guaranteed in the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* must extend to everyone, including gay men and lesbians. Same-sex marriage is a human right.

We unequivocally support the right of same-sex couples in Canada to celebrate their relationships through marriage, with all of the rights and responsibilities provided in law.

4. Religious Freedom to Perform Marriages

Many members of our Coalition also wish to perform legally recognized same-sex marriages.

This issue is not a conflict between freedom of religion and secular equality values or between the lesbian and gay male communities and people of faith, but rather it is a debate between people of differing religious beliefs and values.

We reject arguments that the will of the majority must prevail over the rights of religious minorities and same-sex couples. Bill C-38 respects diversity and tolerance and grants religious freedom to clergy and religious groups to make their own choice whether to perform ceremonies equally for all loving adult couples. Given that there are religious groups who sincerely believe it is right to offer marriage to same-sex couples, the government must not support the imposition of conservative religious views that restrict marriage to only opposite-sex couples.

We support the right of clergy and religious groups to celebrate legally binding same-sex religious marriages, if they so choose. We are proud to witness to the growing number of religious communities and clergy in Canada working to ensure that lesbians and gay men are fully included and supported in their choices to form loving, lasting partnerships, build families, and contribute to Canadian society.

We are mindful that the civil liberties of any of us are of concern to all of us. As was said in Hitler's Germany:

"First they came for the Jews and I did not speak out because I was not a Jew. Then they came for the Communists and I did not speak out because I was not a Communist. Then they came for the trade unionists and I did not speak out because I was not a trade unionist. Then they came for me and there was no one left to speak out for me."

Pastor Martin Niemoeller

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