

When Love is No Longer Legislated
Reverend Kent Hemmen Saleska
and Ralph Wyman, Director of MUUSJA
UU Church of Minnetonka
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Introduction

By Reverend Kent Hemmen Saleska

When my wife Heidi and I got married in August 2004, the two of us walked to the front of the sanctuary, turned around, and welcomed our family and friends who had gathered to witness our marriage. In our words of welcome we also acknowledged the inherent privilege and inequality of the fact that our religious marriage ceremony was at the same time a legally binding union in the eyes of the state of Minnesota and the Federal government. We finished our welcome by saying that we looked forward to the day when love would no longer be legislated.

2004 was a good year for the expansion of marriage rights in the United States. After being sworn in as Mayor of San Francisco on January 3, 2004, Gavin Newsome (who is Roman Catholic) gave an executive order to the city clerk to begin issuing same-sex marriage licenses on February 12, 2004. As we saw earlier on the video clip [from the 2004 documentary movie, *Freedom to Marry*], it was beautiful to see the free, open and legal expression of love after decades of oppression. And on May 17, 2004, the first same-sex marriages began to be legally performed in the state of Massachusetts.

Unfortunately, it was also a very bad year for the expansion of marriage rights. Very likely as a reaction to these two spring events, during the November elections that year eleven other states approved state constitutional amendments prohibiting same-sex marriage. But young people are growing up these days more familiar and comfortable with people who are bisexual, gay, lesbian and transgender, and have few problems with same-sex marriage. As a matter of fact, according to recent studies, if same-sex marriage policies were set by state-by-state majorities of people who are 65 or older, no state would allow same-sex marriage. If people *under* 30 set policies, however, only 12 states currently would *not* allow same-sex marriage!¹

October 11 was National Coming Out Day, but because of a variety of scheduling reasons, we were not able to celebrate people who are bisexual, gay, lesbian and transgender until today. Today we are talking about the fundamental human emotion of love, an emotion that is also *the* foundational quality of the best in every religion or faith in the world. It is ironic that such a basic guiding love is trammled daily by people who claim deep religious faith, and that their God divides and condemns such love. Those of us who believe in the unifying and transcendent power of love have our work cut out for us. Signs are good, but our voices need to be heard as a collective voice of liberal religion. Today, Ralph Wyman and I welcome you into a place of both contemplation and action as we address the ways we may align our behaviors with our beliefs.

¹ http://www.stat.columbia.edu/~cook/movabletype/archives/2009/06/future_trends_f_1.html; accessed 10/24/09

A Social Justice Component of Same-Sex Marriage

By Ralph Wyman

Good morning. I am delighted to be here with you today. As Kent said, I'm Ralph Wyman, and I am the director and organizer for the Minnesota Unitarian Universalist Social Justice Alliance. Mostly we call ourselves "Moose Jaw" – M.U.U.S.J.A. – since the full name is a mouthful.

At MUUSJA we say that we are "a public voice for UU values." Other times we might say, "We are Minnesota's collective voice for UU values."

We were formed almost a decade ago out of a multi-congregational response to the affordable housing crisis in the Twin Cities. Since then we've taken on several issues that have roots in our Unitarian Universalist traditions and our assembled statements of conscience: we've marched to protest the Iraq war, we've stood vigil for women's health, door knocked for renewable energy, urged State Fair-goers to "go green." We organize for racial and economic justice, register people to vote, lobby for comprehensive sex education, and cast light on threats to fair and accurate elections.

MUUSJA engages in *systemic* social change campaigns, and we are firmly grass roots. Other than my part-time hours, we are a volunteer organization. We exist because we know that while each UU voice is unique and valued, we have more power when we are together. And we know that while social service is the hallmark of a compassionate society, social change is the way to move towards fulfillment for each person and the collective good.

Working groups arise when Unitarian Universalists from 3 or more Minnesota congregations get fired up enough to organize their passion into an issue campaign. That's how I got involved in MUUSJA. A board member recruited me – and yes, as we talk here on BGLT Sunday, we recruit! A board member called me up, met with me, chatted over sweet rolls and I volunteered to co-chair the 2005-2006 MUUSJA campaign against an amendment antithetical to UU values. That amendment, a "gay marriage ban," if it had passed, would have made this morning's service very different in tone and scope. MUUSJA, UUs, LGBT people, allies, and many coalition partners successfully turned away that constitutional same-sex marriage ban – at a time when many thought it was most likely to pass.

I recall several very productive meetings in the room just to my right here. A team, including several UUCM members, put together a package of information and action steps that resulted in 18 out of 26 Minnesota UU congregations taking a public stand against the amendment. And, as part of that larger faith coalition, we turned out dozens and dozens of Unitarian Universalists and UU clergy to a huge, peaceful, and – according to a 2006 MUUSJA newsletter – a very boisterous and good-natured interfaith rally in the Rotunda of the State Capitol.

Lawmakers told us later that that moment was the turning point in this divisive debate. The "other side" had been angry, strident, and frankly uncivil, despite also being led by faith communities. We won the day, and the session, with a transformative message of love and hope.

So, that was 2006. Where are we now?

MUUSJA's lead partner on this issue, OutFront Minnesota, tells us that the time is ripe for a positive, pro-active campaign for civil marriage equality. Some top legislators tell MUUSJA that full civil equality may be winnable within three years. So we're gearing up.

And we are connected to a larger movement. Of course, living here, we're keenly aware of how our neighbors in Iowa have leapt ahead of us. Vermont and Maine affirmed marriage equality without court action earlier this year- though voters in Maine may yet undo such critical progress.

And the Unitarian Universalist Association has launched a national campaign called "Standing on the Side of Love." At MUUSJA's fall membership meeting one week ago, the Reverend Victoria Safford of White Bear UU Church spoke about the campaign for equal civil marriage:

If our campaign now is called "Standing on the Side of Love," our method might be called, "Go Ahead and Ask. Go Ahead and Tell." Like all civil rights movements, this one requires up front, out loud, outspoken public presence. There is nothing about this work that can go without saying. We need to speak and *we need to speak as religious people*, grounded, each of us in our conviction, in something deeper than an elevator speech. We are called to *testify*.

Whenever any person, whenever any one of us, comes out and speaks our truth, truth in the world is expanded, and the ideal of Truth is honored and defended. Coming out, speaking out for marriage equality is not a job only for the particular percentage of Minnesotans who happen to be gay, or the even smaller number who might be wanting to get married; it's everybody's job to protect our constitution, and it is our job uniquely to preach a more glad gospel, about family values, family life, human life, human love, moral life, civic life. This is religious action, more than it is political – to interrupt a conversation at your workplace, or with your extended family, or your neighbors, or at the children's soccer game, or school conferences, and say, "In my creation myth, we are all created equal, with certain inalienable rights." Or to say, when the question arises (or even when it doesn't, which it may not, if you stay silent), "The law as it stands and the premises that underlie it – theological, ideological premises – is unethical, unconstitutional, and wrong." Or to just come out and say, "It seems to me that what we're needing nowadays is more courage and more love in the world, not less; less fear and less hate in the world, not more."

Go ahead and ask. Go ahead and tell.

You can't come out *half-way*, or live by your convictions *partially*, or be *kind of* outraged or *sort of* concerned or *vaguely* passionate. We have to decide what story we are living in, what sacred story we are living by, and live it out, out loud.

So MUUSJA is here to help us in Minnesota start living our values out loud. When we say we are a public voice for UU values, we mean that we are a voice at various tables of power. Lobbying legislators, participating in interfaith press conferences, writing op-eds and letters to our local papers. We've even launched a postcard campaign to remind President Obama that he said "gays and lesbians will have somebody who will fight for equal rights for them" while he was on the campaign trail.

We're asking all 26 UU congregations – 27, really, if you count Fargo Moorhead – we're asking you to pass public resolutions in support of full civil marriage equality. And we're asking

you, here, to be in active relationship with MUUSJA on this issue. Come be part of the grass roots, as we proudly proclaim our message of equality in the public square.

To further quote Victoria Safford:

When people say this is a “legacy issue” for Unitarian Universalists, I think what they mean is that this is one issue on which, in fifty years, a hundred years, our descendants will be able to look back with pride, and gratitude and say, “Here is the evidence of our faith in action.” They will look back at us, at our work now, and say, “Here is embodied, in the hard work of our predecessors, the Unitarian insistence on the dignity and worth of persons; here is manifest the glad gospel of Universalist love.” This work will bear a lasting theological impression.

I look forward to talking with you in coffee hour, I hope you’ll sign up to receive our e-news, that you’ll sign a postcard to the President, and perhaps some of you can attend our next marriage campaign meeting in Bloomington – on Monday, November 9th.

I hope we can again have some of our MUUSJA marriage campaign meetings in that room over there. We did good work together towards our legacy, and I know we shall again.

Our Religious Convictions about Same-Sex Marriage By Reverend Kent Hemmen Saleska

These days when I officiate at weddings, I offer each couple the same opportunity my wife and I took to make a short statement during their marriage ceremony – either from them or from me – that they look forward to the day when love is not legislated. This lets the couple know where I stand on the issue of same-sex marriage, and it also offers them an opportunity to express what may be a deeply held conviction of their own.

Some Unitarian Universalist ministers I know have decided to conduct religious wedding ceremonies for both heterosexual and homosexual couples, but as a protest against state discrimination toward homosexual couples, they will not sign state-sanctioned marriage licenses for the heterosexual couples.

I admire and respect this conviction and dedication in my colleagues to civil rights, and I know they did not come to their decision lightly. But I disagree with this approach. Rather than create additional steps for those who already have marriage rights, I feel it is more important to eliminate the discrimination for those who do not have marriage rights.

And in reality, my disagreement is not with my colleagues, but with the entanglement we ministers currently have with the political state. If we are, in fact, a nation where church and state are truly separate, than we clergy ought not be the stewards of state or federal laws. The power vested in us to perform religious rites and ceremonies does not come to us from the state. It comes from the people in our congregations who call us to serve them, and from all the traditions and forces in the universe that transcend mere political affiliation.

So rather than fight over what is religious or what practice is correct, I believe that the only thing the state should recognize or sanction, whether a couple is heterosexual or homosexual, are civil unions, which would include all the legal and political benefits and privileges of that civil union. In this way the state will disengage itself from the entire marriage

issue, and in turn, each particular religion may decide for itself whether to provide a couple with the religious ceremony of marriage according to each of their own religious traditions.

This distinction, however, may be too difficult for a majority of the people of the United States to grasp. So until that time comes, rather than not officiate at weddings for people who are heterosexual, I want to work toward marriage equality for people who are homosexual. I prefer to follow the message from Reverend Victoria Safford that Ralph Wyman quoted earlier, that, “Like all civil rights movements, this one requires up front, out loud, outspoken public presence. There is nothing about this work that can go without saying. We need to speak and *we need to speak as religious people*, grounded, each of us in our conviction, in something deeper than an elevator speech. We are called to *testify*.”

So I invite us to enter into a congregation-wide conversation, a conversation that arrives on the coattails of our Social Justice Empowerment workshop we held four weeks ago in which we decided on three areas of focus for this congregation: health care, the environment, and issues that relate to people who are Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian or Transgender. Ralph Wyman outlined for us a number of issues on which we can join both MUUSJA and OutFront Minnesota regarding BGLT rights.

So rather than have only the sole action of your one minister in private weddings (and certainly not as the only “congregational” effort), I would like to see this entire congregation engage in acts of “up front, out loud, outspoken public presence” in which we testify to the wider world. I can imagine this congregation acting on Ralph’s request for us to pass a public congregational resolution in support of full civil marriage equality. I can imagine this congregation, like our Unitarian Universalist headquarters in Boston prior to 2004, hanging a banner outside the building that says, “Civil Marriage is a Civil Right” (our UUA headquarters directly face the State Capitol building of Massachusetts, so every day when lawmakers went in and out of *their* building, they could see our UUA banner hanging on *our* building). I can imagine this congregation, like the UU congregation in Portland, Oregon, way back in 1992, wrapping ourselves in a huge red ribbon and declaring ourselves a “Hate-Free Zone.”

In his talk, Ralph referred to the new campaign from the Unitarian Universalist Association called “Standing on the Side of Love.” This campaign grew out of the 2008 attack from a gunman on the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church in Knoxville, Tennessee, because the gunman objected to the church’s liberal views, and it’s affirmation of people who are bisexual, gay, lesbian and transgender. A powerful testament of faith and love poured out of Unitarian Universalists across the country in the wake of that event, including this current initiative. Our “Standing on the Side of Love” campaign has two goals:

1. To elevate and focus Unitarian Universalism’s voice in the public square, to influence public attitudes about the worth and dignity of all; and
2. To mobilize quick and effective responses to incidents of exclusion, oppression, or violence based on intolerance of people’s identities.

As powerful and as catchy as this motto is, however, we also need to examine its inherent challenges. As my colleague, the Reverend Mark Stringer, from Des Moines, Iowa, says, “If *we* are ‘Standing on the Side of Love,’ what are those who aren’t with us doing? Is ‘Standing on the

Side of Love' a boast or an invitation? ... The side of love, to me, is not the side for arrogant posturing, declarations of unequivocal truth, or the refusal to consider, welcome, and be informed by the full spectrum of humanity's experiences and understandings. The side of love is the side that is curious about difference, committed to greater understanding and forgiveness, and courageously willing to take the risk to be in relationship, even with people each of us, in our own ways, may perceive as different. *Especially* with them [my emphasis]. This is what church is for, I think. To stand up for justice and equality when we see it has been denied, yes. But also to teach us the disciplines of loving despite all the reasons not to."²

The issue of same-sex marriage is not a religious argument and it is certainly not about the "sanctity" of marriage. People who are bisexual, gay, lesbian and transgender have religious wedding ceremonies available to them with ministers like me who will marry them, and many of them even have families who will recognize their commitments. Same-sex marriage *is* about recognizing and honoring human love in the context of state-sanctioned legal rights.

But even though same-sex marriage is not a religious issue, we are still called as *religious people* by our sense of justice that arises from our *religious convictions*. Yet in the midst of this work, in the midst of the hate, in the midst of posturing and the self-righteousness – even that self-righteousness contained in the belief and the motto that we are the *only* ones "standing on the side of love" – we are called into an attitude of humility by our church which teaches us "the disciplines of loving despite all the reasons not to."

"The disciplines of loving" is what challenges us to move forward; "the disciplines of loving" is what opens the path before us and offers us the saving grace of a way through; and it is "the disciplines of loving" that will ultimately guide us toward the justice we seek.

² Reverend Mark Stringer; <http://www.ucdsm.org/sermons.php>; accessed on 10/12/09