

# Marriage seminar sparks Chick-fil-A boycott

by [Diana Fishlock](#)

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HARRISBURG, Pa. (RNS) Amy Goropoulos' stomach and her ethics do not agree on Chick-fil-A. She used to visit the restaurant with her husband and coworkers, but she recently quit the chicken cold turkey.

The Christian-owned fast-food chain has become the center of a national maelstrom for supporting a recent (Feb. 11-12) marriage seminar in central Pennsylvania sponsored by the Pennsylvania Family Institute, a conservative research and education organization associated with Focus on the Family. Both groups have advocated against gay marriage.

Gay and lesbian groups are calling the Georgia-based chain anti-gay and are calling for boycotts.

"They have to know they stand to lose business," Goropoulos said. "Hopefully, they'll change their minds, and I can have my chicken nuggets back."

Nearly 18,000 people have signed an online petition spearheaded by the Human Rights Campaign urging Chick-fil-A to stop working against gays and lesbians.

Equality Pennsylvania suggested that people not go to Chick-Fil-A, said Executive Director Ted Martin. "The Pennsylvania Family Institute is putting on an event that I can guarantee you does not say anything about the loving relationships LGBT people are in."

To some, the Chick-fil-A brouhaha is a donation, not a national issue.

"It's absolutely, categorically blown out of proportion," local franchise owner Brian Gibson said. "We donate food all the time. We certainly don't take into consideration anyone's political affiliations or anything like that. We just like to feed people."

Gibson hasn't seen a drop in business, and company spokesman Mark Baldwin could not comment on whether business has increased or decreased since the controversy started.

At Chick-fil-A, faith is part of the company's brand. The company operates more than 1,540 restaurants in 39 states, and they all are closed on Sundays, one reason the chain has been recognized as one of Fortune magazine's 100 best places to work. The company website states its corporate purpose is, "To glorify God by being a faithful steward of all that is entrusted to us."

President and CEO Dan Cathy said his company is not anti-gay.

"While my family and I believe in the biblical definition of marriage, we love and respect anyone who disagrees," Cathy said in a press release.

"We will not champion any political agendas on marriage and family," the company said in its statement. "We will continue to offer resources to strengthen marriages and families. To do anything different would be inconsistent with our purpose and belief in biblical principles."

Goropoulos, who lives in Newberry Township with her husband and daughter, signed the Human Rights Campaign petition and wrote a letter to the company because she thinks any couple should have the right to marry.

"I wrote in my letter to them, it wasn't long ago that this same conversation would have been happening about interracial couples. I wrote I hope my daughter's generation looks back on this the same way we look back on that."

Ray Gibney, an assistant professor of management at Penn State Harrisburg, doubts this issue will hurt Chick-fil-A much.

In markets such as San Francisco or New York, Chick-fil-A might take a beating, he said. "It will be a blip on the radar screen because everybody wants their \$1 cheeseburger or chicken sandwich," he said.

About 120 attended the couples retreat at Christian Life Assembly Church, said Michael Geer, president of the Pennsylvania Family Institute.

"It's a video marriage retreat aimed at helping couples strengthen their marriages," Geer said.

The online description said the seminar will help couples apply what the Bible teaches about marriage.

One of Geer's staff asked local Chick-fil-A franchises to donate food for the event.

"The original e-mail said 'Sponsored by Pennsylvania Family Institute and Chick-fil-A,' but all they are doing is providing lunch," Geer said. "Because some people inexplicably took offense to it, we changed our wording."

Geer said he's surprised and disappointed by the tone of the debate. He's received some e-mails about Chick-fil-A -- pro and con -- from around the country.

The Rev. Ken Mellinger, senior pastor at Living Hope Church in Susquehanna Township, said that if a restaurant donated to a gay pride festival, most Christians wouldn't boycott it.

"Christians by and large are a tolerant bunch. I'm surprised gays are not a more tolerant bunch."

Like Goropoulos, Judy Chambers feels conflicted about Chick-fil-A.

"I eat there at least once a week," she said. Chambers, a 55-year-old resident of Lower Paxton Township, is a lesbian.

Chambers struggles with the issue of boycotts against companies that seem discriminatory toward gays and lesbians, she said. A client gave

Chambers a \$60 Chick-fil-A gift card for Christmas. Once the card runs out, she'll probably boycott the restaurant for awhile, she said.

"I will just have to start packing my lunch," she said.