

Religious leaders: Same-sex marriage threatens religious freedom

by [David Gibson](#)

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(RNS) A coalition of nearly 40 religious leaders has published an open letter that seeks to recast the battle against same-sex marriage as a fight on behalf of religious freedom.

The religious leaders, predominantly from conservative Christian churches and Orthodox Judaism, say their concern is not that legalizing gay marriage will force their ministers to perform same-sex weddings; they say they doubt that will happen.

Rather, they wrote Thursday (Jan. 12), allowing same-sex couples to marry would wind up "forcing or pressuring both individuals and religious organizations -- throughout their operations, well beyond religious ceremonies -- to treat same-sex sexual conduct as the moral equivalent of marital sexual conduct."

"There is no doubt that the many people and groups whose moral and religious convictions forbid same-sex sexual conduct will resist the compulsion of the law, and church-state conflicts will result," they warn in the letter, titled "Marriage and Religious Freedom: Fundamental Goods That Stand or Fall Together."

The leaders include Leith Anderson, president of the National Association of Evangelicals; New York Archbishop Timothy M. Dolan, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops; and H. David Burton, presiding bishop of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

The signers note that religious adoption agencies already have been required to place children with same-sex couples and religious institutions are being told to provide insurance benefits to gay partners.

The signatories also argue that their opposition to same-sex marriage has "marked them and their members as bigots, subjecting them to the full arsenal of government punishments and pressures reserved for racists."

The thrust of the letter is to frame opposition to gay marriage in terms of a battle for religious freedom, an argument that many religious groups believe has a possibility of gaining some traction with an American public, even as Americans increasingly -- and perhaps inexorably -- grow more accepting of same-sex relationships.

The letter also represents an effort by diverse religious bodies to present a united front in opposition to gay marriage. Other signers include Pentecostal church officials and leaders of conservative Baptist, Lutheran and Anglican denominations.