The other side of religious liberty and same-sex marriage

By Sarah Barringer Gordon
July 10, 2013

In the wake of the Supreme Court's marriage decisions, debates about the effects on religious groups have dominated the religious blogosphere. "Gay marriage fight now becomes a religious liberty fight," claims the headline of one *Washington Examiner* column. Behind such headlines lies a far less univocal history, and no doubt a much more complicated present reaction among religious communities. From this perspective, the fight for marriage equality has always been deeply engaged in religion.

In 1971, United Methodist minister Roger W. Lynn officiated at the marriage of Jack Baker and James Michael McConnell. The couple was already famous; in 1970, they had applied for a marriage license in Hennepin County, Minnesota. Their application was denied. They sued, but they lost at the Minnesota Supreme Court. One justice was so outraged at the object of their suit that he turned his back when the lawyer for the couple argued their side of the case.

We often forget the key role that Lynn played in this story. The wedding of Baker and McConnell changed the lives of both men, of course. Lynn's life was also changed. He determined that his vocation lay in ensuring the familial and communal support that should be available to all loving couples. These are sacred relationships, he said. Lynn never regretted celebrating the marriage, although he was fired as a result.

Other priests, ministers and rabbis have come to similar conclusions and have long struggled to deliver recognition and support to congregants, as well as to change their denominations. Often, those pushing hardest were women; in debates among Reform Jews, one opponent claimed that a "nest of lesbians" was behind the push for equality.

In many senses, the campaign for marriage equality in its modern iteration emerged from religious spaces. Across the 1970s and through the 1990s, clergy and congregants—especially but not only in "liberal" religious communities—struggled

with how to recognize and honor loving commitments between same-sex couples.

There was plenty of blood on the floor, as the open and brewing schisms in mainstream Protestant denominations demonstrate. Lawyers and lawsuits are ubiquitous; the fights long lasting and nasty.

But other significant developments have attracted less notice. In every state, groups of clergy from across the religious spectrum have formed coordinated groups. The first was the Religious Coalition for the Freedom to Marry, established in 1997 in Massachusetts. The group started with half a dozen rabbis and ministers. In just nine years, the list grew to more than 1,000 ordained religious leaders who signed RCFM's Declaration of Religious Support for marriage equality.

Their religious beliefs, they declared, required them to celebrate marriages without reference to gender. They also argued that the claim that religious believers were opposed to marriage equality was wrong—belied by the very existence of their organization. Such coalitions have participated in all major lawsuits for marriage equality, as well as in lobbying legislatures considering pro- or anti-marriage equality legislation.

In 2007, when a proposed constitutional amendment failed decisively in Massachusetts, RCFM declared victory and closed its doors. They had succeeded, they believed, in establishing that religious liberty would be promoted by marriage equality. Many have settled back into the daily work of serving religious communities.

As Rabbi Devon Lerner, RCFM's director, put it several years ago, the marriage equality movement was wary of "the religious voice" when RCFM first appeared on the scene. Equally important, opponents of marriage equality often welcomed religious voices, in large part because they claim that the "one man, one woman" marital formula is the only possible one in Abrahamic faiths. Clergy across the country and in multiple communities show that this claim is not just too simple, it's flat-out wrong.

"Religious liberty" does not reside on one or the other side of the debate over marriage. As in so much of American faith and life, diversity is the constant.

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