

Testimony on LD 1020
Joint Judiciary Committee, Augusta, Maine

Rev. Mykel C. Johnson, D. Min.
April 24, 2009

My name is Mykel Johnson. I am the minister of the Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church in Portland, Maine, and I live in North Yarmouth, Maine. I am a co-convenor of the Religious Coalition for the Freedom to Marry in Maine, and wish to offer testimony in support of LD 1020.

My faith teaches that everything in creation reveals the beauty and love of God. From my childhood I heard the Christian Scriptures tell us that God is love, and all who abide in love, abide in God, and God in them. As human beings, we can hardly begin to imagine the depth and the height, and the width and the breadth of God's love. In every age and throughout every land, that Love has called human beings to walk on a journey toward greater love.

I believe that the mutual committed love between two people is holy, a sign of the presence of God. Whether those two people are of the opposite sex, or of the same sex, does not matter. What matters is how respectful, compassionate, and tender they are in expressing the love they share. What matters is how that love expands their ability to offer kindness and compassion to the wider community around them.

I first began to care about equal marriage for same sex couples because of two women in my previous congregation. These women had been loving partners for thirty-three years. They worked together as social workers, offering care and healing for emotionally distraught clients. They were kind, generous, and true pillars of our church. They wanted to get legally married so that they could be assured of taking care of each other as they grew old together. So that, for example, if one of them died, the other would not lose the home they had worked so hard to build together, or be deprived of the retirement income they had saved together. Everyone in my church was inspired by their commitment and affection. When I observe the love between two such people, I see the love of God shining in our midst. My faith tradition joyfully celebrates their union as a holy marriage.

I know that not every religious tradition blesses or honors this love. In our time, there is a passionate religious argument about the holiness of same-sex marriage and the worthiness of same-sex love. As a preacher, it is my role to preach mightily the truth of love and holiness as God gives me to understand it. Thankfully, in our country, every individual and every faith community has the legal right to follow their own conscience and their own traditions, to live out the message of God as they understand it.

Religious freedom is a hallmark of our democracy, and religious disagreement is a vital component of our freedom. But in the face of such religious disagreements, we must also ask ourselves what should be the role of our legal and civic institutions. I believe we must make a distinction between arguments over the worthiness of same-sex couples to enter into religious marriage, and arguments over the equality of every person and the legal protections and responsibilities that are contained in civil marriage. In our common civic life, and in our common legal institutions, a wide definition of inclusion and fairness must prevail.

My faith also teaches that God is concerned about fairness. That is why I am testifying on behalf of LD 1020 as a person of faith. God gives comfort and strength to those who are excluded and oppressed. God offers compassion to the suffering and lifts up the lowly. Throughout history, human beings have often drawn too narrowly the boundaries defining human dignity and equality. And yet, we keep learning. I believe we are living in one of those transformational times—a time when we have the chance to undo the limitations of the past, and widen the circle of human dignity. That is the essence of the question for me. LD 1020 honors the religious disagreements that exist among us, but also takes a long overdue step in granting full equality to all families in Maine.

Mykel Johnson is a graduate of Chicago Theological Seminary and the Episcopal Divinity School, and was ordained as a Unitarian Universalist minister ten years ago. I currently serve as minister of the Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church in Portland, Maine.