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Valley churches have differing opinions on performing same-sex weddings

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Pastor Steve Hammer

Pastor Steve Hammer at Esperanza Lutheran Church in Ahwatukee on thursday, Jan. 15, 2015.

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Posted: Sunday, January 18, 2015 12:15 pm

By Jeff Grant and Eric Mungenast Daily News-Sun and Tribune

Under an Oct. 17 federal court ruling, gays and lesbians have the right in Arizona to marry, but homosexual couples may still find themselves unable to wed here in the church of their choice and ahead of a pending decision on the issue from the U.S. Supreme Court.

Some denominations and individual houses of worship reserve their decision against performing the services, citing the Bible – the very source other churches use to support their decision to marry same-sex couples. As confusing as it may seem, the dueling positions are part of the landscape upon which the state is forging ahead in the new era of homosexual rights in what’s considered one of the most fundamental of those rights – that of two people who love each other to be legally united.

“We continue to live in the dichotomy of that truth,” said Debra Peevey, a retired pastor who served as faith director for Why Marriage Matters Arizona, an organization formed to promote and facilitate marriage equality prior to last fall’s ruling.

“There are plenty of churches that won’t do it. The good news is there are plenty of churches that would,” she said.

Generally speaking, churches or denominations that have more freely performed services include United Universalist, the United Church of Christ, Episcopalian and a number in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA). Roman Catholic, Mormon, Baptist, and Church of Christ (different from the United Church of Christ) churches are unlikely to conduct weddings.

But the lines do blur. Certain Lutheran churches, such as Emmanuel Lutheran Church in Tempe, don’t perform same-sex weddings.

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"The basic reason is we believe from the Bible that homosexuality is not how God lives," said Pastor Bart Brauer.

Local control

With exception of blanket policies such as those within the Roman Catholic and Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the decision whether to marry a same-sex couple appears to lie with the individual pastor or possibly with a congregation.

"You'll find that in every denomination. The local pastor has discretion on who they would or would not marry. That's the freedom in the law," Peevey explained.

The Rev. Steve Hammer of Esperanza Lutheran Church in Ahwatukee said he is willing to oversee a wedding between a homosexual couple. Hammer's church is one of several in the East Valley that are part of the ELCA, which the Human Rights Campaign stated has passed several resolutions to promote membership for gays and lesbians since 1991.

One resolution Hammer mentioned came in 2009, when the ELCA essentially gave individual congregations to choose to wed same-sex couple or to refer a couple to someone who would perform the service.

"The one thing we found in the study is there is not a consensus with human sexuality, so the decision you're bound by is your own conscience," he said.

Saying no to a couple has consequences beyond forcing them to look for another church. It can cause conflict within a couple who wants to be part of a faith community or house of worship. It may ultimately may result in them leaving, noted Terry Pochert, who married his husband, Joe Connolly, in California in 2008.

"When a church says 'we don't want you here,' what you're finding is mothers, fathers, sisters and brothers are no longer attending that church. In churches that are affirming (of same-sex couples), not just gay people are being welcomed but extended families are starting to come back to church," Pochert said.

Pochert and Connolly filed suit, Connolly v. Roche, to have their out-of-state wedding recognized by Arizona. Their case, along with Majors v. Jeanes, led to U.S. District Court judge John Sedwick to rule against the state's ban in October. The defendants in the Connolly case filed an appeal to the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit in November 2014.

That certain churches have not changed policy against gay marriage at this point is understandable, according to one voice in the gay community.

"As a society, we often see changes by statute that take time for people to morally and socially catch up with We can't expect religion to change like the push of a button. We have to wait for it to evolve, said Nathan Rhoton, co-chair of board of directors, for Equality Arizona, Inc., whose stated mission is "to achieve and maintain equal, legal rights and protections for the LGBTQ community in Arizona,"

"We have to respect religious freedoms and give people time to change where we are as a society," Rhoton said.

It is possible some churches have been waiting for the U.S. Supreme Court to weigh in on the issue. The court announced Friday it would decide this term whether same-sex couples have a right to marry everywhere in America under the Constitution. The cases will be argued in April, and a decision is expected by late June.

Proponents of same-sex marriage said they expect the court to settle the matter once and for all with a decision that invalidates state provisions that define marriage as between a man and a woman. On the other side, advocates for traditional marriage want the court to let the political process play out, rather than have judges order states to allow same-sex couples to marry.

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Broadening the congregation

A number of Arizona churches, including Unitarian Universalist Congregation, have made declarations, opening themselves to homosexuals, and by extension, same-sex couples. The Rev. Andy Burnette of Valley Universalist Congregation in Chandler said via email the church's view is that "worth and dignity are inherent among all people."

Church of the Palms in Sun City, "welcomes all people into the full life of church, including gay, lesbian and transgendered people," said interim senior minister Jim Meadows. Since enacting an "open and affirming" declaration, Meadows said a number of new individuals have come to the church, "some who are gay."

"That has been a significant outreach of this congregation," he said.

Meadows said gays and lesbians who want to be part of a church community are likely to consider marriage "a sacred act," prompting them to opt for a church ceremony rather than a simple legal procedure in an office.

Since the court ruling, Church of the Palms has been approached by "three or four couples" wanting a full ceremony, he said.

Meadows explained the basis for conducting the rites is beyond legal, it is scriptural, citing Jesus Christ, the central figure of Christianity.

"We tend to look at Jesus being accepting of all people, rather than to pick certain lessons," he said.

Pochert echoed that belief.

"Christ himself was bringing people to church. He stood on the side of hills, preaching, reaching out. Why would a church not want to bring people in? It goes against everything Christ taught. It doesn't make sense," he said.

Judaic ceremonies

Weddings also are performed within the Jewish faith. Rabbi Dean Shapiro of Temple Emanuel in Tempe has performed three same-sex wedding services thus far, citing passages from the Book of Genesis for his decision to do so. All people, he said, are born in the image of God, which he said means they are deserving of a union "sanctioned by the community and anchored by law."

"I honor people's truths, and if they are gay or lesbian, they are in the image of God and worthy of respect," he said.

Meanwhile, Peevey described both Conservative and Reform branches of Judaism as "on the vanguard of LGBT inclusion," and said that members of the Sikh community and Quakers "are supportive of marriage equality."

Churches in opposition

To those on the opposite side, the issue is equally clear.

Roman Catholic churches throughout the Valley follow guidelines set by The Vatican and Pope Francis. Diocese of Phoenix spokesman Rob DeFrancesco said in an email the church believes marriage is, "a unique institution, uniting one man and one woman in faithful and mutual love." The underlying concept is of sexual complementarities, essentially the role between men and women dependent upon physical, behavioral and emotional factors.

The Latter-day Saints, who have temples in Gilbert and Mesa, cite similar reasons for not performing same-sex weddings. Eric Hawkins, senior manager of media relations for Latter-day Saints, said Mormons, "believe that marriage is defined by God as between a man and a woman."

Couples turned away are left to find a church willing to perform the ceremony.

Peevey said she would advise the couple not to take the option lightly.

"I would not readily tell them to go outside faith. I would try to help them discern their deepest calling," she said. "If it's to be active in a congregation or church. I'd try to help figure the best way to answer that call."

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