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OVER 400 RELIGIOUS LEADERS, FAITH ORGANIZATIONS SUPPORT RIGHT OF SAME-SEX COUPLES TO MARRY

Friend-of-the-Court Brief Submitted Today in California Supreme Court

SAN FRANCISCO, CA – Representatives from a wide range of religious and faith organizations, representing millions of Methodists, Lutherans, Unitarian Universalists, Reform and Conservative Jews, Episcopalians, Muslims, and Buddhists, are announcing the historic submission of an interfaith “friend of the court” brief today in the California Supreme Court. The brief argues that marriage is a fundamental civil right that cannot be denied to same-sex couples and that the current law infringes upon religious freedom. The announcement is being made at statewide news conferences in Sacramento, San Francisco, San Luis Obispo, North Hollywood and San Diego. The amicus brief is being filed in support of six marriage cases consolidated under the title *In re Marriage Cases*.

The California Council of Churches, the Union for Reform Judaism, the General Synod of the United Church of Christ, the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations, the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches, Soka Gakkai International - USA, and hundreds of other religious associations, churches, synagogues, sanghas, ministers, and rabbis across California and the nation signed the brief. California Faith for Equality and the Unitarian Universalist Legislative Ministry California organized, coordinated, and led the interfaith effort.

“Today we are representing millions of members who believe that same-sex couples have a civil right to marry in California,” said Rev. Rick Schlosser, Executive Director of the California Council of Churches. “Every week, I see gay and lesbian couples who are building families together and taking responsibility for each other, and yet, they are denied the same kind of legal protections and dignity married couples enjoy. This is unfair and wrong, and that is why we are urging the California Supreme Court to recognize the civil right of same-sex couples to marry.”

The interfaith brief argues that it is a violation of the California constitution equal protection guarantees and the fundamental right to marry to bar same-sex couples from marriage. The brief also notes that while many religious organizations welcome the opportunity to marry same-sex couples, both the U.S. and California Constitutions guarantees that religious organizations will never be forced to marry or recognize marriages to which they are opposed. Today’s brief states it violates religious freedom and the separation of church and state to incorporate as state law some faith traditions’ views regarding religious marriages and impose those views on people of other faiths or of no faith.

“We oppose discrimination against all individuals, including gays and lesbians, for the stamp of the Divine is present in each and every human being,” said Rabbi Linda Bertenthal, Senior Associate Director of the Pacific Southwest Council of the Union for Reform Judaism. “Thus, the Union unequivocally supports equal rights for all people, including the right to a civil marriage license.”

In arguing that the Court must interpret California's marriage laws neutrally without favoring one narrow religious tradition and without discriminating against others, the brief cites many faith traditions that endorse marriage for same-sex couples. Even churches dating back to the Mayflower Pilgrims endorsed marriage for same-sex couples in what is now the United States.

The General Synod of the United Church of Christ, which comprises more than 5,700 congregations nationally and represents more than 1.3 million members, formally endorsed marriage equality on July 4, 2005. The Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations, whose 1,000 or so congregations include that of the Mayflower Pilgrims and the first churches in Boston and Salem, officially endorsed marriage for same-sex couples in 1996. These denominations' churches regularly celebrate the weddings of their committed same-sex couples.

"For over three decades, clergy from a number of different faith traditions, including clergy from some of the oldest churches in this country, have been performing weddings for same-sex couples," said Rev. Lindi Ramsden of the Unitarian Universalist Legislative Ministry of California. "It's time for California to recognize that all people, regardless of sexual orientation, have the civil right to marry the person they love. The law should not impose the beliefs of some religions on the lives of people of other faith communities."

The Ministers Association of the Buddhist Churches of America, with 21 temples and fellowships in California, has been performing weddings for same-sex couples for at least 30 years. And Soka Gakkai International-USA, one of the country's largest Buddhist organizations, representing more than 300,000 members, has been marrying same-sex couples since at least 1995.

The Rev. Neil Thomas, Co-Chair of California Faith for Equality said the brief "bears witness to our highest religious values, honoring love, equality and commitment in human relations. This is an important day. We are telling the California Supreme Court that many religious leaders and congregations in California and across the country support equality of all persons under the law."

Civil rights groups, including the California Conference of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, are also filing amicus briefs today in support of marriage equality.

On October 16, responses to amicus briefs are due, which concludes the briefing process. Oral argument will be set by the Court at the conclusion of the briefing.

For a copy of the brief visit www.eqca.org.

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