

**Pulpit Editorial - delivered 10-16-05 to the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Stanislaus County by Stephanie Stolte, resident of Turlock California, co-chair of the Welcoming Congregation Task Force for the UUFSC and team leader for California Faith for Equality.**

Good morning.

In March of this year, San Francisco Superior Court Judge Richard Kramer declared the State of California's ban on same-sex marriage to be unconstitutional. In a 27 page ruling, Kramer said the marriage law violates fundamental rights, discriminates on the basis of gender and lacks any rational justification. A discriminatory law "cannot be justified simply because such constitutional violation has become traditional," Kramer said.

Judge Kramer is a Roman Catholic and a registered Republican who was appointed to the bench by then-Governor Pete Wilson. Even so, conservative fundamentalist groups across the country reacted immediately and angrily to Kramer's ruling, calling for his removal from the bench and vowing to amend the constitution of the state of California in order to enforce their unjustified discrimination.

Over the course of the summer, organizations as diverse as the United Church of Christ, the American Psychological Association, the United Farmworkers of America, the NAACP and the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Stanislaus County declared their support for marriage equality. In August and September of this year, after extensive soul searching and deliberation, the California State Senate and Assembly concurred with Judge Kramer and wrote a new chapter in Civil Rights history when they voted to pass Assembly Bill 849, the Religious Freedom and Civil Marriage Protection Act.

Under intense pressure from conservatives, Governor Schwarzenegger vetoed the decision of the elected representatives of the people of California with this message: "I support current domestic partnership rights and will continue to vigorously defend and enforce these rights and as such will not support any rollback." Meanwhile, true to their word, anti-gay extremists are attempting to qualify, for the June 2006 statewide election, a total of three ballot initiatives designed to do away with domestic partnerships and enact a statewide constitutional ban on same-gender marriage.

These ballot initiatives aim to deny your family members and fellow citizens access to health insurance, child custody and visitation rights, access to life insurance, social security and unemployment benefits, the rights and responsibilities of adoption, as well as the ability to invoke spousal privilege and file wrongful death claims. They further aim to deny us fairness in tax and inheritance law. They even aim to deny us the right to bury our dead.

In my life I have endured mockery, condemnation, discrimination, alienation and threats of physical violence due to my sexual orientation. I have had my fill. I am here today to ask you to help me, my partner Paula, our family and all of our people who are threatened by this draconian attempt to desecrate the equality enshrined in our state constitution. We

will not silently endure the blistering smear campaign that is ramping up to assassinate our character and deny us civil rights.

I am an American citizen. Liberty and justice are my birthright. I love my country and my family. I am not the enemy. The enemies of my country, my family, my partner and me are the same: fear, ignorance, bigotry, and greed. America protects its citizens from these enemies through enacting civil rights legislation. The smear campaign claims that civil rights and responsibilities should be subject to the approval of conservative fundamentalist religious organizations. In America, religious affiliation is a choice. Every citizen has the right to limit and organize his or her personal life according to specifically chosen principles of faith. However, no citizen has the right to force other citizens to adhere to these same limitations and principles of faith against their will.

These proposed ballot initiatives are battering rams designed to destroy the separation between the conservative fundamentalist church and the Democratic State. They are designed to force my people to live by the rules of a faith we do not believe in; a faith that condemns us without knowing us, banishes us from the human family and denies our right to full American citizenship.

A coalition is forming to raise public awareness about these ballot initiatives called Equality for All. It includes Equality California, PFLAG, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, California Faith for Equality and UU Congregations around the state. We need your help. We are mobilizing state-wide action by holding house parties. At these gatherings we will provide information and talking points about the ballot initiatives, plan strategy and, most importantly, raise funds for educational advertising. Each of you will soon receive an invitation to the UUFSC house party planned for Nov. 19<sup>th</sup>. We are also initiating a voter identification and registration campaign. Please stop by the Welcoming Congregation Task Force table before you leave today to find out how you can help us in our efforts.

These proposed ballot initiatives must be defeated. Make no mistake. This is not merely a “gay” issue. This is part of a nationally orchestrated attempt to divide and conquer the perceived enemies of conservative fundamentalism. Over and over again, conservative fundamentalist leaders list the same enemies: gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered persons, feminists, those who support a woman’s right to choose, those who respect the separation of State and Church and progressive liberal persons of faith. My people have been targeted as the smallest and most vulnerable group. Indeed, we are, but only if we are abandoned by our fellow citizens who share our belief in freedom, justice, and Democracy. Now is the time for like-minded people to rally together. Because now, more clearly than ever, United We Stand, or Divided we Fall.

Thank you.