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Catholics Argue For Right To Refuse Goods, Services

By DANIELA ALTIMARI | The Hartford Courant
March 7, 2009

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Religious protesters Kate Bartos, center left, of New Hartford and Jeanine Marcin, right, of Marlboro, hand out Family Institute of Connecticut Action stickers at the door of the General Assembly's Judiciary Committee hearing on Senate Bill 899 in the Legislative Office Building. (GEORGE RUHE / AP / March 6, 2009)

No one is arguing that a Catholic priest should have to perform a gay marriage.

But the church says that doesn't go far enough.

The Connecticut Catholic Conference is asking lawmakers to expand the category of those who don't have to comply with the state's new same-sex marriage law if their religion holds that such unions are wrong.

People such as florists, wedding photographers and justices of the peace.

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Hearing On Same-Sex Marriage Law

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"Same-sex couples have their liberties protected fully. Religious people are wondering, 'How is this going to affect me?'" said David Reynolds, lobbyist for the Catholic Church.

Reynolds raised his concerns Friday as the legislature's judiciary committee considered a bill to ensure that existing statutes comport with the landmark state Supreme Court ruling legalizing same-sex marriage.

"A situation has been created ... where state policy seriously conflicts with the religious beliefs of a large number of the citizens of the state," Reynolds said. He cited examples in other states where businesspeople

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have faced legal action because they declined, on religious grounds, to provide goods or services to same-sex couples.

The judiciary committee hearing is likely the final chance opponents will have to put up obstacles to gay marriage. But several lawmakers oppose extending the religious exemption. Sen. John Kissel is Catholic and has long shared his church's opposition to gay marriage.

"I've been with you guys all along," said Kissel, a Republican from Enfield. But, "we're at a fork in the road and I have to let go of your hand."

A law preventing a Catholic caterer from serving guests at a same-sex marriage could also be used by a Protestant baker who doesn't want to sell a cake to a Catholic father for his son's first communion, Kissel said. "It could just as easily turn against each and every Catholic in the state of Connecticut."

In October, the state Supreme Court ruled that gay and lesbian couples had the right to marry and, the

following month, Connecticut became the second state to legally recognize same-sex marriage. The legislature is now codifying the court's decision.

"I understand the feelings of the church, they don't like this decision," said Kissel, a ranking member of the committee. The battle against gay marriage was "a good fight, fought to the end. But that's the end of the road. The Supreme Court is the highest court in the land. They've made a determination; now we have to sort of live with that."

The state's civil union law, ruled unconstitutional by the court, is set to expire in October 2010. At that time, all civil unions will be automatically converted to marriages.

Peter Wolfgang, executive director of the Family Institute of Connecticut, dismissed the idea that lawmakers are merely conducting a bit of legislative housekeeping. "The negative effect of same-sex marriage on religious liberty and rights of conscience involve far more than the question of whether clergy will be forced to perform same-sex weddings," Wolfgang said in testimony submitted to the committee.

But for supporters of gay marriage, who have pressed their case at the legislature for more than a decade, the hearing had a celebratory flavor.

Rep. Beth Bye, D- **West Hartford**, stopped by to publicly thank the committee. She brought a framed copy of her marriage license; Bye and her wife, Tracey Wilson, were the first gay couple to marry in Connecticut.

Anne Stanback, executive director of Love Makes a Family, also thanked lawmakers; they are, she said, poised to close the "final chapter on the effort to end legal discrimination based on sexual orientation."

At one point, committee co-Chairman Rep. Michael Lawlor congratulated Stanback on her wedding — she and longtime partner Charlotte Kinlock recently eloped — and the audience burst into applause.

"Marriage equality is the law in Connecticut and this bill won't make it any more legal," Stanback said. But in addition to making sure that the statutes line up with the court's decision, the bill would eliminate language in the state's 1991 gay rights act that many gays and lesbians consider archaic and demeaning.

That language states that the state does not condone homosexuality and does not require teaching it as an "acceptable lifestyle."

Said Stanback: "That language was insulting to many of us when it was added 18 years ago and today it is simply unacceptable. ... Words matter, and the only thing [those] words ... do is demean gay people and our families."

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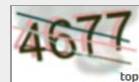
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