

Testimony of
The Rev. Mary Anne Osborn & The Rev. Joanne Neel-Richard
In Support of HB 7395: An Act Concerning Marriage Equality
March 26, 2007



Thank you for this opportunity to testify in support of An Act Concerning Marriage Equality. I am Mary Anne Osborn. My life partner, Joanne Neel-Richard, and I live in New Haven, and we are both Episcopal priests serving in the Diocese of Connecticut.

Today we call upon you, our public servants committed to serving the common good, to enact marriage equality for all people in Connecticut. Joanne and I, and many others like us, are committed to each other for life, and we ask you to grant us the same dignity and opportunity that are afforded other Connecticut citizens.

Joanne and I have been together for 24 years. Our love came to us both unexpectedly and powerfully, and it has sustained us through many joys and sorrows: the birth of grandchildren, the deaths of family members, personal illnesses, and challenges in professional life. Country singer Kathy Mathea sings a song that says, "You don't choose love; Love chooses you." I am forever grateful that love chose to take root and flower in the life Joanne and I share.

We have always made the deepening of our relationship a priority in our lives, and this has been despite the discriminatory laws of the state, which exclude us from the institution of marriage. When the societal and legal support is not there, it creates an undue burden on a relationship, especially in the realm of finances, which are always a challenging issue in any relationship.

Without the rights of marriage, we face an unwanted financial inequality in our partnership that is not addressed by Civil Unions. One of us has more assets than the other, but we cannot share them equally without it being counted as a gift toward which taxes have to be paid if it exceeds the lifetime limit, something married couples do not face.

Other financial inequalities, like inheritance taxes also exist, and without legal marriage, they continue to present unnecessary strain. While federal law must be challenged for same-sex couples like us to access many of these rights, with civil unions no challenge is possible.

In our culture, the word “marriage” is a powerful one. This is the one institution that legitimizes a lifelong commitment between two people. It is a time-honored status that speaks of the permanent and intentional devotion shared by two adults over a lifetime.

As priests in the Episcopal Church, we have each presided at many, many weddings. However, it is important to remember that when we officiate at a wedding, we are acting not only as officiants in the church but as agents of the state. We sign a legal document in accordance with the State of Connecticut. The sacramental function we exercise in weddings grants no legal rights or privileges to the couple.

The understanding of marriage gets easily mistaken because of both its legal and religious dimensions. So let us not confuse the two. You are not being asked to make a decision about whether religious institutions should grant marriage to same sex couples. You are being asked to make a decision about a legal status, not a sacred one. You do not have the power to make a relationship holy. You do have the power to make a relationship equal in the eyes of the law. That is your challenge and your opportunity.

Thank you.

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