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Religious leaders speak out on marriage

By by Rob Akers

Clergy members and LGBT leaders exchanged ideas on how to influence the religious middle on marriage equality and organize opposition to the proposed federal constitutional gay marriage ban during a forum held Tuesday afternoon at San Francisco's LGBT Community Center.

The March 21 event was the first of 11 scheduled programs coordinated by the Horizons Foundation to discuss issues affecting the gay community, according to Roger Doughty, executive director of the organization.

The forum facilitator was the Reverend Welton Gaddy, president of Interfaith Alliance Foundation, co-sponsor of the discussion.

Speakers included the Reverend Leonard B. Jackson, director emeritus of the IAF and associate minister at the First African Methodist Church in Los Angeles; Dr. Mary Tolbert, executive director of the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies in Religion and Ministry at Pacific School of Religion; and Rabbi Jack Moline, vice chair of IAF and rabbi of a congregation located in Alexandria, Virginia.

Respondents were: Evan Wolfson, executive director of Freedom to Marry; Jennifer Pizer, senior counsel for Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund; Shannon Minter, legal director for National Center for Lesbian Rights; and Geoffrey Kors, executive director of Equality California.

Gaddy told the gathering that despite major differences among religious leaders, "We have always been able to come together in a strong affirmation of people's rights. Most [religious] leaders do not want anyone to tell them who they can, or cannot marry in the name of their religion."

He pointed to the United Church of Christ as being the only major Christian denomination to come forward in support of same-sex marriage. "The silence and absence of all the others present a tremendous problem and we need to find a way to gain their support."

"We have to open doors and overcome roadblocks. We have to forge a common ground with some whom most of us probably would not have anything to do with," he said.

Gaddy pointed to the federal constitutional amendment set to be again discussed by Congress that defines marriage as being between one man and one woman. He then asked the three speakers if they thought the definition of marriage was a religious, political, or civil rights issue. All three

agreed that it should include considerations from all those segments of society.

When queried by Gaddy as to whether religious scriptures really matter in the marriage issue, Jackson replied: "The scriptures down through the ages have been used as a smoke screen." He said some had used scriptures to get away from the two basic commandments that involve loving God and "our neighbors."

Tolbert said, "Many people would like to help LGBT issues, but for them, the scriptures stand in the way."

"For them, we have to try and take scriptures out of the way. You can prove just about anything you want from the Bible ... you just have to be creative and take it out of context," Tolbert said.

Gaddy then asked the three speakers to take the position of defending the marriage amendment and then to critique that stand.

Tolbert said that the most common comment she heard opposing same-sex marriage was that it was "not natural."

"They point to that chapter which states God created Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve. My response to that is that the point of the story is that God created everything that exists. So what is natural? Everything that is," she said.

Moline said he felt some of those who are attempting to define marriage today are trying to rescue it from what they saw as a weakening of the institution during the counterculture movement of the 1960s and 1970s.

When defining marriage, Jackson pointed back to the Bible. "We should not reinvent the Bible, we should rediscover it. Are we going to use it as a means to uplift people as it was intended or to beat people down?"

The speakers then gave their ideas on what direction to go to seek marriage equality.

Tolbert said that all people of religious faith should be involved. She said progressive religious people, many of whom have been silent, need to start talking about the issue.

Moline suggested speaking from a religious standpoint with care to those who hold their religion as dearly as some hold their sexuality. He urged people to stand up in their community and make others take notice.

Briefly at the forum's end, Wolfson responded that he felt much more optimistic about the direction the battle for same-sex marriage was taking. "This is the way our country advances. It is our job to go out to others and engage them in conversation ... and let them know how we are harmed by the exclusion of marriage."

"The one thing that can slow us down is if we fail to engage in this communication and give people the time they need," he said.

Pizer said she felt those who are attempting to legislate this issue "have been sworn to uphold the Constitution, not the Bible." She also warned those involved in promoting same-sex marriage to be

"careful as to whom we label as being bigots," and Minter agreed.

"We want to be talking about how LGBT people fit into the core of religious groups. This does not work in anger or with accusations," said Minter. "In asking people to examine their deeply held beliefs, we must challenge ourselves and examine our own beliefs on what we may consider bigoted."

Kors said, "As we build a coalition and we move forward on this issue, we need to stand up and respect the rights of others" in order to make a difference. He pointed to polls that indicate that support for same-sex marriage in California is now in the mid-40 percentile.

"If we demonize those people who oppose us, we may never get there" to the level where same-sex marriage can gain public approval, Kors added.