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by **Matthew S. Bajko**

m.bajko@ebar.com

Campaign argues for LGBT families

A new campaign focused on the rights enshrined in the First Amendment could be a boon for LGBT families. One of eight tenets in the First Freedom First campaign is respect for all families.

The campaign's backers argue that federal and state initiatives that seek to ban same-sex marriage are, in fact, violating the rights of those religious denominations that condone and bless same-sex unions. Their campaign is a counterattack to those religious leaders and politicians who, they contend, want to use the government to define marriage in a way that favors some religious traditions over others.

"I think a lot of people, even in very conservative traditions, need to be challenged to think about whether or not they want the federal government telling them what rites and rituals they can perform in their houses of worship," said the Reverend **C. Welton Gaddy**, president of the Interfaith Alliance. "I don't want the federal government telling me as a minister and the congregation I pastor whom we can marry."

Backers of gay marriage have long pushed the notion of the separation of church and state in their fight. California Assemblyman **Mark Leno** (D-San Francisco) refers to it in the official name of his pro-gay marriage bill AB43, the Religious Freedom and Civil Marriage Protection Act. Leno expanded the bill's title to signify that those church leaders opposed to consecrating same-sex ceremonies would not be coerced by the state into doing so.

Backers of the new initiative argue pro-gay marriage ministers deserve the same protections. As outlined at <http://www.firstfreedomfirst.org>, "Respecting the rights of those in our diverse communities of faith who deem same-gender marriage to be consistent with their religious creed ensures that the United States will continue to protect the religious liberty of all Americans."

Not doing so, claims the campaign, is "not the American way."

"Americans value families in which love and commitment, not politics, define the

home. Happy, healthy families deserve respect and should be free to live according to their own beliefs," states the Web site. "As responsible adults, it is our freedom to make personal choices about family life and raising our children, without coercive politics invading our homes and privacy."

The campaign is a joint initiative of Americans United for Separation of Church and State and the Interfaith Alliance Foundation and the Interfaith Alliance Inc. While their Web site has been live for months, the two groups are publicly unveiling the initiative in San Jose Friday, February 23 at a Commonwealth Club forum headlined by former CBS News anchor **Walter Cronkite**.

"We are living in a time where the First Amendment of the Constitution might not even pass if put to a public vote. That's kind of behind the urgency with which we have gone about this First Freedom First campaign," said Gaddy.

Along with gay marriage, the campaign seeks to separate out religious beliefs from policies on end of life care, reproductive rights, teaching of science and employment nondiscrimination. Backers are collecting signatures online that they can deliver to politicians.

Gaddy acknowledged that pushing "religious freedom" within the LGBT community is a challenge after two decades of the anti-gay rhetoric from the "religious right."

"If you hear **James Dobson** and **Jerry Falwell** say how much they believe in religious freedom and you are a member of the LGBT community and someone asks you to preserve religious freedom, you probably aren't going to give that three seconds of thought," he said. "In our nation different religions hold very different points of view, not only about the presence and identity of the LGBT community, but certainly about same-sex unions and gay marriage or whatever the term is. You don't have to hold a particular position on that issue in order to believe in religious freedom. But you do have to say there is credibility in people who may hold a different opinion than you do."

02/22/2007