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To protest what he deems to be unjust and discriminatory laws that prohibit same sex marriage in Arkansas, Fayetteville minister Rhett Baird says he will not be "an agent for the state" and therefore will not sign marriage licenses for a year

By Dennis McCaslin

Traditionally, marriage has been the bond of a man and woman in matrimony. But one area clergyman says that love between two individuals cannot be defined by gender. His personal convictions have led him to take a stand against the State of Arkansas in the matter.

As of July 1, Rev. Rhett D. Baird said he will not sign any marriage certificates for a one year period. In his role as minister of the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Fayetteville, Baird performs marriages for heterosexual couples and services of union for same sex couples. The proclamation, which Baird calls "a thoughtfully considered private act of conscience" and "a symbolic gesture of values" declares that Baird will place a self imposed moratorium on the signing of any marriage licenses, thereby refusing to be "an agent for the state." It is Baird's protest of what he calls unjust laws and discrimination against lesbians and gays.

"I see love between individuals as the primary source of inner peace in our world," Baird said. "In these troubled times, it's hard enough to find anyone to love, especially when you take gender into consideration. I'm just trying to live out my authentic lifestyle and follow the values that shape my life." Taking such a bold stand in the heart of the Bible Belt, and receiving criticism for his stance from several evangelical ministers, Baird has no illusions of grandeur that his stance will suddenly steer lawmakers into legislation legalizing same sex marriages. Instead, he says his proclamation is a personal decision designed to reflect the views of his ministry.

"The intent of my proclamation was to be true to myself," Baird said. "I don't respond to critics, because I don't have to justify my actions or explain my behavior to anyone. It's not my purpose to try and convince any individual to change their stance on homosexuality and same sex marriages.

Lest anyone think Baird is some fringe preacher on a personal mission, a quick look at his credentials and civic contributions indicate that he is a leading member of the clergy in Northwest Arkansas. His service to community and congregation, as well as his numerous works toward various social issues, gives him a credible voice in the community.

Baird is a past president of the Fayetteville Ministerial Association and was Chairman of the Board of the Washington and Madison County

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Transitional Employment Assistance Coalition in 2000 and 2001. He has served on the board of the Seven Hills Homeless Shelter, the Rape Crisis Center of Northwest Arkansas, the N.W. Arkansas chapter of the Regional AIDS Interfaith Network, the Multi-Cultural Center of Northwest Arkansas, and the Interfaith Volunteer Caregivers a Washington Regional Medical Foundation Project. He is a member of several organizations including the League of Women Voters, the Fayetteville Rotary Club, the American Civil Liberties Union, the NAACP, the Arkansas Coalition To Abolish the Death Penalty as well as numerous religious organizations. He was also a former guest columnist for the Arkansas Democrat Gazette.

At the age of 49, Baird walked away from a lucrative business career to join the ministry. He has been married for 41 years and is the father of three adult daughters. This is his eighth year as the settled minister of the Fayetteville congregation. A native of Atlanta, Baird moved to Fayetteville in 1994 after graduating with honors from the Candler School of Theology of Emory University in 1993. Baird's ordination came after a 13-year stint as a circuit riding lay minister serving five small Unitarian churches in South Carolina, Alabama and Georgia. Baird's stance on same sex marriages adheres to a long standing acceptance of gays and lesbians by the Unitarian Church. Baird said his decision to no longer be an agent of the state came after some personal revelations back in March.

"I had prepared and delivered a series of messages based upon the three values that people consider to be the most important in the lives. The first sermon asked people to consider those three values, the second asked them to consider the three most important people in their lives that represented those values and the third asked them to think about the three institutions that was living out their values.

"When I looked up 'institution' in the dictionary, it referenced 'marriage', and having been married for 41 years. I could relate to that," Baird said. "I started thinking about the members of my congregation and even some of my peers in the church that were gay and lesbians. My gay and lesbian colleagues were good enough to sign a marriage license, but in the eyes of the state, they weren't good enough to have one of their own because they chose to form a partnership with someone of their own gender.

"That's an injustice, when you consider that some of those people have been in committed relationships with the same partner for 10 to 20 years. And that's what led to me releasing my proclamation, which is really just a condensed version of one of my sermons,

"To not be accepted by society and to be denied the basic rights that are adherent in the basic institution of marriage must be a painful thing."

"By the same token, I have gay and lesbian couples in my own church, and as their minister I have to stand in the pulpit and look them in the eye. To not be accepted by society and to be denied the basic rights that are adherent in the basic institution of marriage must be a painful thing.

"We are basically a non-creedal church that believes in the abundant worth and dignity of each individual. If we are to live our lives grounded in that value, then we need to seek justice as it pertains to all families, not just those sanctioned by the state"

The state of Arkansas is very clear on its stance on same sex marriages, and very specific in the way marriage is defined. Several clauses in the state code address marriage and each makes specific reference to same sex unions in an effort to clarify the official rules in Arkansas.

*All marriages contracted outside this state which would be valid by the laws of the state or country in which the marriages were consummated and in which the parties then actually resided shall be valid in all the courts in this state. This section shall not apply to a marriage between persons of the same sex.

*Marriage shall be only between a man and a woman. A marriage between persons of the same sex is void.

*It shall be the declared public policy of the State of Arkansas to recognize the marital union only of man and woman. No license shall be issued to persons to marry another person of the same sex and no same-sex marriage shall be recognized as entitled to the benefits of marriage.

*Marriages between persons of the same sex are prohibited in this state. Any marriage entered into by persons of the same sex, where a marriage license is issued by another state or by a foreign jurisdiction, shall be void in Arkansas and any contractual or other rights granted by virtue of that license, including its termination, shall be unenforceable in the Arkansas courts.

Focus on the Family, a conservative Christian group based in California, agrees with the Arkansas laws and devotes much of its time and resources to combating what it sees as the "immoral and repugnant lifestyle" of gays and lesbians.

Founded in 1977 by Dr. James Dobson in response to what he felt were declining moral values in the United States, the non-profit Focus on the Family produces a radio show broadcast on more than 3,000 radio stations in 12 languages in more than 95 countries.

In a recent radio address, Dobson outlined his organization's stance on what he calls "marriage counterfeits." The statement below was issued by the

organization and was part of a recent broadcast.

"Marriage is a sacred union, ordained by God to be a life-long, sexually exclusive relationship between one man and one woman. Focus on the Family holds this institution in the highest esteem, and strongly opposes any legal sanction of marriage counterfeits, such as the legalization of same-sex 'marriage' or the granting of marriage-like benefits to same-sex couples, cohabiting couples, or any other non-marital relationship. The five major world religions, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism recognize and uphold the natural, heterosexual understanding of marriage. By contrast, these religions teach that homosexual behavior is sinful or wrong."

Dobson's view is somewhat prevalent throughout Arkansas and most of the south. Hawaii sanctions and recognizes same sex marriages, while the trend in other states has been to consider adoption of some sort of "domestic partner" status that would allow same sex couples to share health benefits, tax breaks and other advantages of marriage but would stop short of fully sanctioning the relationship. Fair housing regulations are also being redesigned to accept same sex relationships when it comes to legal matters.

Baird says the response to his proclamation has run "about 50 to 1" in support of his stance.

"One of the members of the church came to me and ask that I give them a copy of the sermon I did on the subject and that's when I sat down and produced my personal proclamation," Baird said. "I gave that member a copy, and it was posted on the Internet, and within 24 hours we started receiving supportive emails from all over the world. We have published some of the comments we have received on our website www.fayettevilleunitarian.org."

"I received some negative comments from an evangelical minister, but I expected that. I'm a little like that lone voice in the wilderness around here regarding the subject, but I have to be true to who I am. I have my own values and reputation, and I'm not going to be bested in the behavior of the state when I consider it to be contrary to my beliefs." Baird said since moving to Fayetteville in 1994 he has not performed any same-sex ceremonies in his church.

"We did several when we were down in Atlanta, and our church is certainly available to any couple that would like to make an expression of love through a service of union or wedding ceremony. Just as we welcome heterosexual couples to use our facilities, we would celebrate any partnership that stepped forward to declare their love for each other.

During the one year moratorium, Baird said he hopes couples will get their marriage license signed someplace else and then come to him to perform the ceremony.

"I just cannot-based upon my experience, my well considered deliberations and the values that shape my life-be an agent of a state that says a love between two people is not valid just because the state objects to the sex of one of the partners."