

District of Columbia Council – Committee on Public Safety and the Judiciary
Public Hearing on Bill 18-482
Religious Freedom and Civil Marriage Equality Amendment Act of 2009

Monday, October 26, 2009

The Reverend Paul Roberts Abernathy, Rector

St. Mark's Episcopal Church, Capitol Hill, Washington, DC

My name is Paul Roberts Abernathy. I am the rector of St. Mark's Episcopal Church, Capitol Hill – a community of 700 souls and many family configurations. A single mother whose adopted daughter was born in China. A gay couple, together now 21 years, who, eight years ago, adopted their son from Vietnam. A lesbian couple at whose commitment service I was privileged to preside and whose children I have been honored to baptize. Heterosexual couples, white, black, and interracial, married for years ranging from one to nearly fifty. Single people of all ages. St. Mark's is many families with one set of family values: love and respect, fidelity and stability.

Concerning equality, we believe that God, to paraphrase our national creed, endows us all with the inalienable right of life and love founded in relationships of faithful commitment, and, through such, the right to all civil liberties and legal responsibilities appertaining thereto.

I affirm the right of others to hold other views. Yet, as a Christian, I heed the biblical witness of Jesus who quoted Genesis, "From the beginning, God made them male and female," specifically in reply to a question about divorce, therefore decidedly not in response (nor do I believe it should be used today to respond) to an issue that, in his day, did not exist: same-sex marriage.

Throughout history we have changed our laws to reflect our ever deepening consciousness about what promotes a productive, stable society. This legislation addresses an issue that in our day does exist and, more importantly, acknowledges the reality that same-sex relationships are a part of the rich tapestry of life in our beloved District of Columbia. Thus, I advocate the passage of the Religious Freedom and Civil Marriage Equality Amendment Act of 2009.

I close with a very real story. John and Kevin were proud fathers of their son. John was stricken with a cerebral hemorrhage. Kevin, considered only a friend by hospital staff, even in possession of a living will and a power of attorney, initially was not allowed to share in life and death decisions. John died. Kevin received no Social Security spousal benefit. (The procurement of Social Security, as a federal benefit, is yet another element of the long journey toward equality.) Had Kevin not been gainfully employed, John's death, already devastating beyond words to tell, would have proved wholly financially debilitating.

Grave inequality makes for gross injustice, the sort of which no culture of compassion dare tolerate. I pray your benevolent consideration. Thank you.