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## Christian Minister Fights Against LGB Discrimination, Narragansett Times

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I am writing to encourage all people of conscience to support the bills to prevent discrimination based on sexual orientation. I write as a Christian minister, and my views on the pending legislation come straight from my religious faith. Christianity teaches that all people are created in the image of God and are worthy of respect and dignity. Christianity teaches that God loves all people equally. Christians are also called to love all people. This means that, according to some of the most basic beliefs of Christianity, to make fun of homosexuals, to put them down, to make them the brunt of jokes, to condemn them, ridicule them, carry out violence against them or to **discriminate against them in any way** is to act **unlovingly** toward them and is **wrong**. In my role as chaplain at the University of Rhode Island I know of many instances of such hatred and harassment directed toward gays and lesbians. And I find myself asking how long people who call themselves Christian will continue to focus more on condemning homosexuality than on condemning the many acts of harassment, violence, and discrimination that are committed routinely against homosexuals.

As religious people and people of conscience we must be concerned to treat all people with justice. Failure to do so is wrong. But where is justice when 30 percent of teenage suicides are committed by gay and lesbian youth who cannot bear to face the hatred and stigmatization of homosexuals by this society? Where is justice when 80 - 90 percent of gays and lesbians have been verbally harassed during their lives? Where is justice when 20 - 25 percent of gays and lesbians have been physically assaulted? Where is justice when many gay and lesbian students and faculty at this university live in constant fear of being harassed if their sexual orientation were made public? Where is justice when last year, in Texas alone, eight people were murdered merely because they were gay? Where is justice when the state of Rhode Island has repeatedly refused to pass legislation that would merely prevent discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in the areas of housing, employment, credit, and public accommodation? And where are the people of conscience who should be working to achieve justice? Many are silent. Some actively oppose it. To do either is to let injustice prevail and is **wrong**.

The facts regarding the currently pending civil rights bills are as follows.

1. There are no special rights granted. The bill merely adds "sexual orientation" to the list of classes protected from discrimination in housing, credit, employment, and public accommodation. Since everyone has a sexual orientation, the bill covers everyone and does not single out gays and lesbians for special treatment.

2. The bill does not imply state approval of homosexuality. Consider the civil rights bill currently in effect. It includes marital status as a class protected from discrimination. Does this mean that the state approves of divorce?

3. Religious organizations are exempted. Of course this includes religious schools as well as churches, synagogues, etc.

4. Owner occupied rental housing of less than three units is also exempted. Thus, no one who rents one or two extra rooms in the house will be forced to rent to a homosexual.

5. This bill does not include teaching homosexuality in the public schools, nor does it have anything to do with homosexual marriages, etc. To argue against the present bill because of what some future bill **might** contain is ridiculous. With that line of reasoning one could argue against any bill on any subject whatsoever.

6. The bill does not in any way undermine the family, nor would the failure to pass it in any way protect the family. Gays and lesbians will not suddenly become heterosexual and get married if the bill does not pass. Neither will heterosexuals suddenly become gay and get divorced if the bill does pass.

The facts are that homosexuals face injustice and discrimination on a daily basis. For over ten years now efforts have been made in Rhode Island to pass legislation to end such discrimination based on sexual orientation. Unfortunately, these bills have been defeated because the politics of prejudice have won out over the politics of principle; the politics of fear have triumphed over the politics of fairness.

As people of conscience we must speak out against this blatant injustice in our society. We must criticize this failure of nerve in our politicians. And we must condemn the hypocrisy of those who consider non-discrimination a fundamental right when applied to themselves, but a "special" right when applied to homosexuals.

It is time for all Rhode Islanders to realize that discrimination based on sexual orientation is real, widespread, and dangerous. It is time to recognize that such discrimination is not only harmful to its victims, it is also an affront to any society that calls itself free. It is time to heed the prophet's call to "let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream." It is time to pass the anti-discrimination bill. The House has already done so; the fate of the bill now lies with the Senate. I urge you to call your senators and ask them to pass S-900.

-- Rev. William J. Bartels, Protestant Chaplain, URI, and chair of the Committee to Eliminate Heterosexism and Homophobia.

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The Editor, The Narragansett Times  
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April 17, 1995

To the Editor,

The April 5th editorial in the Narragansett Times entitled *Gay Rights Need Protection* was enlightened and timely as was Karen Gavin's reporting, in the same issue, on a student panel at the lesbian, gay and bisexual studies Symposium of the University of Rhode Island.

As you reported, the Sexual Orientation Civil Rights bill has been passed in the state House of Representatives and is now before the Senate. Of course, passage by itself will not immediately undo a pervasive prejudice but it is important for the State to take a stand against this destructive and unjust form of discrimination.

Although the University has a policy of non-discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, strongly supported by its president, the need for broader legislation against this kind of discrimination was underscored by student speakers at the recent Symposium.

Along with your reporter, faculty members, students and other visitors to the campus, I listened to the panel where students described destructive and vindictive acts of physical and social harrasement perpetrated by fellow students and others, a small minority one hopes, against individuals simply for being perceived to be lesbian or gay. In addition, the frequent incomprehension of parents and friends, caused by ignorance as well as fear, was described in extraordinarily candid and painful detail.

Actually, the various panels of the Symposium, sponsored by the University's Committee to Eliminate Heterosexism and Homophobia, many including both faculty and student viewpoints, went well beyond problems of discrimination and stereotyping.

There were enlightening discussions of psychology and literature. The importance of self-awareness and self-expression were illustrated with many examples. There were inspiring stories of personal fortitude and human sympathy. There were also frequent, unexpected occasions for humor and laughter.

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The Symposium was an occasion for appreciating the meaning and value of diversity. Beyond all academic considerations of sexuality, it made one aware of the rich human resources to be found in the University and in this southern Rhode Island community. But those who attended will not wonder that a non-discrimination law is needed.

As your editorial stated, the Ocean State, because of its history, should be a haven of tolerance where discrimination against people, because of their sexual orientation, is not practised. However, principle may be easier to practise when it is also law.

*Benjamin de Brie Taylor*  
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