

A Plea for Equality-  
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My name is Jen Walters and I am a minister of the gospel at Benjamin's-Krider's United Church of Christ in Westminster, MD. I am a straight, married, Christian woman and am deeply passionate about justice and peace and equality.

I was born and raised in the United Methodist tradition and hadn't heard of the United Church of Christ until I began seminary. Many of the other students at Pacific School of Religion (Berkeley) were UCC and couldn't understand why I was a Methodist. I learned a lot during seminary. One of things that I learned was that the UMC was not a good match for me any longer. I spent 6 years in discernment about leaving the denomination of my youth and becoming UCC. 6 years. And the issue? Gays and lesbians in the church. I had a deep & long spiritual struggle about remaining affiliated with a denomination that did not treat gay & lesbian people fairly- that asked gay and lesbian clergy to remain celibate, that discouraged holy unions for same sex couples, that had a certain set of rules for some people- and another set of rules for others. After 6 years of discernment, I finally found peace and made my decision to begin the ordination process over, that time with the United Church of Christ, a denomination that has a long history of loving kindness and doing justice and taking risks & living in accordance with the gospel teachings of Jesus! It was a memorable day when I got on line to find a UCC church to join! I had 2 criteria- I wanted to get involved in a relatively small and diverse religious community & I wanted it to have a gay or lesbian pastor! That was one small way I could show my support of openly gay and lesbian clergy.

There's something else you should know about me. I have a brother that is two years younger than me. A brother I have always dearly loved and respected. His name is Mark Rupp. Mark and his soul mate, Chuck, love each other. Not only do they love each other, but they have committed their lives to one another. They pay bills together, they worry about money together, they grocery shop and watch movies and eat and cry and help make the world a better place together- just like straight couples. And, because they don't have the legal/civil right to be married, they live with more anxiety than me and my husband, Chris. I know that if Chris ends up in the hospital that I will have the legal rights needed to be there and to make decisions & advocate for Chris. I know that when it comes time for Chris or me to die, that the other will have legal rights to our home and our car and our belongings. What a blessing to have this peace of mind. What an injustice that same sex couples do not have this peace of mind. And it's much more complex and anxiety producing, as you know, when children are involved in the equation: with unique health care needs and complexities and legalities.

I am not going to say too much about the Bible today, other than that as a pastor with profound faith in the God of love and mercy and the way of Christ, I find it totally offensive when people use the Bible as a weapon- a tool to oppress, judge, marginalize and harm others. Worse yet, the Bible is used to justify all these behaviors.

It is not easy to be a pastor in Westminster, MD, a theologically conservative area. And it's not easy for folks in my congregation to have a pastor that is theologically progressive! But somehow we manage to keep loving one another and worshiping together. I was open & honest from the start and so were they. That helps! The folks in my congregation know where I stand and what I believe about same sex relationships. In fact, during one of the interviews I was asked, directly, where I stand on gay marriage. And here's what I said- "I believe that love is a gift from God. Period. I believe that all people are equally worthy to receive this love and to live in this love. Period. If a same sex couple comes to me and asks me to officiate for their marriage- I will go through the very same procedure with them that I have for every other couple. I will ask them the same questions. I will prayerfully accompany them through the planning and execution of their marriage vows and prayerfully offer them love and support as they begin the journey of a life of commitment together." It is important for me to say that it has always been the state that "legalizes" marriage. It has never been the church. When this act, House Bill 351, is passed, the United Methodists can continue down their path of not blessing or otherwise supporting same sex couples and the UCC can continue to offer a home (and equal treatment) to same sex couples. No one is being forced to act against their own judgment by passing this bill. That is part of the justice in it- religious freedom. We can all keep our own beliefs, and live according to our own faith, values & choices, even though these remain so diverse.

It is not easy to be a pastor in a theologically conservative area and of a fairly conservative church. But I respect my parishioners beliefs and most of them respect mine. Although we are different, and even though it is not easy to be this different, we worship & participate in ministry together.

I am convinced that same sex couples have a much heavier burden to bear than I or the people of Krider's do. In fact, there are gay and lesbian people that still believe they have to hide who they are and who they love! Same sex couples are being discriminated against by the language in the law as it stands now that says marriage is "between a man and a woman." I am convinced that this is unfair and unjust & I will keep speaking up about it until same sex marriage is legalized. I am convinced that love is a gift freely given by God and that love, not fear, will win in the end. I hope you will vote to support religious freedom and the civil marriage protection act (House Bill 351) & in so doing, vote for equality. Thank you.