

**Judicial Proceedings Committee
Testimony Supporting Senate Bill 290
Rev. Kate Foster Connors
Baltimore
February 14, 2008**

I am a supporter of the Religious Freedom and Civil Marriage Protection Act and opposed to a constitutional amendment that would restrict marriage and other legal relationships to one man and one woman. As a pastor, I understand well that communities of faith differ widely on their understandings of religious marriage. Roman Catholics, for example, view marriage as a sacrament. My own Presbyterian tradition rejects this view, understanding marriage as an ordinance. These major theological differences exist within the same Christian faith. The Religious Freedom and Civil Marriage Protection Act does not define or restrict a religious community's understanding of what constitutes marriage for that community of faith. Religious communities and their leaders have always been free to choose not to marry whomever they choose for any reason they deem legitimate. This legislation in no way changes these constitutional protections for religious communities to exercise their faith free from the dictates of the state. At the same time, as a pastor who has witnessed the real harm that is done to same sex couples and their families who are denied the civil protections of civil marriage, the current civil statute is unjust. Just as the state cannot dictate who a religious community must marry, no one religious faith should be allowed to dictate how the state understands marriage.

Fairness and justice demand that same sex couples and their families be entitled to the protections that families like my own take for granted. The notion of allowing civil unions, but not civil marriage, may seem like a step toward granting rights to same sex couples. However, civil unions do not ensure that the protections my family enjoys are available to same sex couples, as well. When I hear some say that they want to give the exact same protections to same sex couples that heterosexual couples now enjoy (they just don't want to call it marriage), I immediately want to know: if civil unions really do provide protections identical to those given in marriage, why are they called something other than marriage? Separate but equal has always resulted in separate and unequal. I

see no reason to believe that this current scenario would produce any different results. States that have adopted civil unions have created a poor precedent for public policy. Practically, it is difficult to imagine a distressed parent explaining to an emergency room clerk that she has arrived to find her “civil unionized partner.”

As a woman who has been married to the same man for thirteen years, raising two children together, the protections that civil marriage affords our family are protections that I often take for granted. When we have taken our children to the emergency room I have not worried over whether I or my husband would be able to get past security to see my child. When we wrote our will, we did not worry about inheritance rights which would protect our family should one of us unexpectedly die. We have not worried about sharing healthcare, or traveling through customs, talking to teachers or doctors or insurance companies about our children’s records, or any one of the many protections that ensure that we are able to care for our children and for each other to the best of our ability. Yet these very real protections are denied to many Maryland families because the law has not been changed to meet the reality of the needs of families today.

I fail to see how denying these families real protections in any way enhances or protects the promises or the benefits of marriage for me, my husband, and our children, or any other heterosexual couple that relies on the protections that civil marriage provides.

On one issue I agree with the opponents of this legislation – married couples today need all the support they can get. But discriminating against some families does not offer support to others. Please give same gender couples the justice they deserve and the protections they need to support their families. I urge you to support civil marriage for all couples in Maryland and to favorably report Senate Bill 290.