

Good afternoon Mr. Frosh, chair and member of the Committee. And special greetings to Mr. Brochin who represents the district in which the church that I pastor is located. I am Bruce Swanson, pastor of First and St. Stephen's United Church of Christ in Towson. I am also here representing the Central Atlantic Conference of the United Church of Christ which includes Maryland.

I come to strongly support the Religious Freedom and Civil Marriage Protection Act. SB 290. The United Church of Christ has a long history of being advocates for fairness and equality for all people in a variety of settings. This includes being advocates for equality in marriage which is a stand taken by our national setting in 2005.

I also come as a pastor of a local congregation seeking that religious freedom and fairness of the church is recognized.

I come to support Shannon and Suzanne whose marriage I officiated on August 11, 2006, and who are now preparing for their first child to be born in their home. They have had extra hoops to go through and costs associated with this long thought-out decision to become parents.

I come in support of Steve and Doug, and now Domingo, who entered their lives and home as a son a year ago. Domingo has already experienced being told that his parents aren't really his parents because they are not married.

I come in support of Jodie and Melissa who have gone through the tragedy of losing a child and now are the mothers of Olivia. We view their relationship and commitment to one another as truly a gift of God as they sustain one another for better and for worse.

I come in support of Brian and Sharon and their children John and Linda. The parents seek to raise their children in an environment where diversity is welcomed and all children including children of single parents and of gay and lesbian parents are a part of the community with equal justice.

Only some of the marriages that we recognize and at which I officiate are recognized by the state of Maryland. The marriages that are recognized as covenantal relationships and honored by our religious community need to be recognized by the state. We do not ask that what we honor and bless in our religious community necessarily be recognized by all religious communities though we will seek to honor theirs. We simply ask that WE not be discriminated against by not recognizing all of our marriages.

We seek the marriages that we bless are blessed by God.

We do not ask everyone to agree with us. Our understandings of our relationship with God can vary, and this is a hallmark of the constitution. We are about discerning our theology as others are called upon to do their own discernment. But we do ask that the state of Maryland honor and respect the marriages of all of its people equally, including those that are part of our religious community as a matter of civil law and justice.