

Suing Starbucks: When Company Inclusion Leads to Christian Exclusion

Betsy Fresse is suing coffee giant Starbucks, alleging she was fired for not wanting to wear a gay-pride T-shirt at work. Fresse, a Christian, worked at two different New Jersey locations for Starbucks.

When first working in Hoboken, she said her managers were aware of her religious beliefs and she was assured they would not be an issue. She later transferred to Glen Ridge, where she said she received mixed messages about the company expectations.

After seeing rainbow "Pride" shirts in a box near her manager's desk during a staff meeting in June of 2019, she stayed afterward to ask whether she would be expected to wear the shirt, noting that it would be "tantamount to forced speech" because she believes marriage is defined by the Bible as between "one man and one woman only." The manager said she would not have to wear the shirt.

A few weeks later, she was contacted by the company's compliance helpline and questioned about her request to be exempt from wearing the Pride T-shirt. The barista explained to the compliance representative that she didn't want to wear the shirt because "her religious beliefs prevented her from doing so," according to a lawsuit filed Nov. 19 in the U.S. District Court for the District of New Jersey.

A district manager informed Fresse on Aug. 22 that her employment was terminated.

The lawsuit seeks back pay with interest, compensation for emotional pain and suffering and punitive damages.

For years, Starbucks has produced a series of gay-pride T-shirts, for employees and for sale to the public. The shirt designs are presented on the company's website as a timeline.

June is gay pride month. The new shirts were created prior to the annual pride celebrations.

"Fans in the Starbucks Reddit thread began speculating that the collection will be rolling out widely sometime this month, with some lucky shoppers already showing off their purchases on Instagram."

A Commitment to Inclusion

On its website, Starbucks promotes "our commitment to inclusion, diversity and equity."

"We are on a journey to advance racial and social equity for our partners (employees), our community and our society. And we have made progress. Almost 50 years ago, we set out to be a different kind of company—with a third place community where everyone is welcome and respected at its core. But now, today, in this moment, we know there is much more to do. Bold actions that we must take as our journey continues, to act with intention, transparency and accountability."

Starbucks has cited in a filing that Fresse was fired for violating the company's "core values" and that she said her colleagues "need Jesus" when she was given the T-shirt, according to a termination notice. "We enforce these values when we embrace inclusion and diversity, and welcome and learn from people with different backgrounds and perspectives," the notice read.

Starbucks is just the newest in a growing list of employers requiring gay pride symbols and clothing for employees, which are resulting in dismissals as Christians refuse to promote LGBTQ lifestyles. {eo}