

Despite Gay Marriage Law, Christian B&B Owner Refuses Same-Sex Weddings

The owner of a bed-and-breakfast in Illinois has vowed not to allow same-sex marriages at his venue after they are legally recognized in the state beginning in June.

Jim Walder, a Christian who owns TimberCreek Bed & Breakfast in Paxton, Ill., does not allow civil unions to be performed at his venue, and he will not change his policy once the law changes.

“As long as I own TimberCreek, there will never be a gay marriage at this wedding venue,” Walder says, according to *The News-Gazette*.

A gay couple in Mattoon, Ill., filed a civil rights complaint against Walder in 2011 after he refused to host their civil union ceremony. Walder is awaiting a ruling by the Illinois Human Rights Commission and expects to face further legal troubles after Illinois legalizes same-sex marriage in June.

“I totally support exemptions for everyone doing business in the wedding industry regarding civil unions or gay marriage,” Walder says. “Our current legal predicament could be the predicament of other businesses in Paxton, as well,” such as photographers, cake bakers, caterers, DJs, floral shops and wedding planners.

The American Civil Liberties Union of Illinois is representing the couple, Todd and Mark Wathen, in their complaint against Walder. According to Walder, Mark Wathen asked him if he planned to hold same-sex civil unions but never made a request for the facility.

Walder's attorney, Jason R. Craddock, says it would be a violation of Walder's First Amendment rights if the Human Rights Commission sides in favor of the Wathens.

Craddock says if that happens, the decision would be appealed, and litigation would be the next step if the decision was upheld. He says the impending decision may set a precedent for future cases.

"So it's extremely important that we keep fighting for the rights of people like Jim Walder and others who want to exercise their liberty to do business," Craddock says.

State Rep. Josh Harms is working to draft a bill that would "protect all entities controlled by the church," specifically private schools affiliated with churches. The current law protects "religious facilities," but some churches operate schools that rent out space to the public.

"What we're trying to get done right now is just something to protect all the entities that are under the control of the church," Harms explains.

Harms says he wants business owners to be protected, but he limited the scope of his bill because it has "the highest probability for success" in passing the House and Senate, reports *The News-Gazette*.