

United Church of Christ Sues North Carolina Over Same-Sex Marriage

A coalition of clergy members is challenging North Carolina's ban on same-sex marriages, filing the first lawsuit to claim such laws violate their religious freedom guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution.

Led by the United Church of Christ, a rabbi and ministers from Lutheran and Unitarian Universalist churches in the Charlotte area said they should not be penalized for following their faith.

The lawsuit, filed in the Western District of North Carolina, is the first to attack **same-sex marriage** bans on the grounds of religious freedom under the **First Amendment** of the U.S. Constitution, the Cleveland-based United Church of Christ said.

North Carolina law bars same-sex couples from receiving marriage licenses and makes it a misdemeanor, with a \$200 fine, for clergy who perform a marriage ceremony without the license.

"We are taking a stand for the **freedom of religion**," said the Rev. Geoffrey Black, president of the United Church of Christ at a news conference in suburban Charlotte.

The event at the Holy Covenant United Church of Christ had a banner that read "Jesus didn't reject." The church is a Protestant denomination with nearly 1 million members nationwide.

The lawsuit is among 66 challenges pending against state **gay marriage** bans across the country, according to the Campaign

for Southern Equality. Like the other lawsuits, the new case also claims the North Carolina law violates the 14th Amendment which guarantees equal protection and due process.

Seventeen U.S. states and the District of Columbia allow same-sex couples to marry. That number would increase if federal court rulings striking down bans in several states are upheld on appeal.

North Carolina Attorney General Roy Cooper and the register of deeds and district attorneys from several counties are named as defendants in the case.

Editing by Colleen Jenkins and Richard Chang

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