

Same-Sex Marriage Hits the Bible Belt as Arkansas Lifts Ban

Hundreds of same-sex couples, some hoisting rainbow flags, crowded the county courthouse of Little Rock, Arkansas, on Monday morning to receive marriage licenses after a judge last week struck down the state's 10-year ban on **gay marriage**.

Arkansas is the first state in the U.S. South—where every state has a law banning same-sex marriage—to issue marriage licenses to gay and lesbian couples, adding to the momentum for allowing same-sex marriages in the country.

The rush to wed came ahead of a state Supreme Court ruling as early as Monday on an appeal by the attorney general seeking a stay, which would halt the issue of marriage certificates. The appeal also seeks to overturn the decision to end the **same-sex marriage** ban.

"I didn't think it would happen, not in Arkansas," said Thomas Baldwin, 37, a train engineer, who was first in line at the courthouse so that he could marry his partner.

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

Pulaski County Circuit Judge Chris Piazza on Friday ruled the state's constitutional amendment approved by voters in 2004 defining marriage as being only between a man and a woman was unconstitutional because it denied equal protection under law to same-sex couples.

Some lawmakers in the deeply conservative state have called

for Piazza's impeachment and for the Supreme Court to strike down the ruling they say flies in the face of the will of the state's residents.

Only two people were on hand at the courthouse to protest. Inside the courthouse, thunderous cheers could be heard each time someone said, "I do."

Larry Crane, the court clerk for Pulaski County, the state's most populous county that includes Little Rock, said he felt obliged to register the marriages because he was named as a defendant in the suit before Piazza.

The courthouse registered more marriages in 30 minutes on Monday morning than it did in all of the previous week, he said.

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