



## **Churches, others take sides on civil unions**

House bill would expand gay rights

BY LAURA GIRRESCH – Belleville News-Democrat  
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Some metro-east churches and other organizations are taking sides on a proposed bill that would give gay couples the right to form civil unions.

The Illinois Religious Freedom Protection and Civil Union Act, House Bill 2234, would allow civil unions, through which gay couples would have the same legal obligations, responsibilities, protections and benefits recognized by the law of Illinois for spouses. It passed a House committee 4-3 Thursday and next will go to the House floor.

Members of Metro East Gays and Straights, a Belleville-based advocacy group, are working quickly to educate the public on the bill and work with state legislators from the metro-east to get it passed, a group spokesman, Amy Wiser said.

"We aren't looking for preferential treatment, we are simply seeking equality as granted by our constitution," Wiser wrote in a statement. "I am proud that Illinois is taking responsibility to ensure equality for all its citizens."

State Rep. Tom Holbrook, D-Belleville said he doesn't support the bill but he thinks its chances are "probably 50-50."

He thinks civil unions raise a lot of legal questions, but he reminds people: "You can't outlaw love, it's gonna happen. We need to be a much more compassionate society, a much more tolerant society than we have in the past."

Reps. Jay Hoffmann, D-Collinsville and Eddie Lee Jackson Sr., D-East St. Louis, could not be reached for comment.

The bill's sponsor, Rep. Greg Harris, D-Chicago, last month introduced House Bill 178, which would have legalized same-sex marriage and called the current marriage law discriminatory and harmful to same-sex couples. But he said before it came to a vote in committee, he decided there wasn't enough support in the legislature, so he re-introduced it as a civil unions bill.

But the Catholic Church doesn't see the difference, according to Bob Gilligan, executive director of the Catholic Conference of Illinois, the church's legislative arm in the state. The Diocese of Belleville referred questions to him.

"This is a ruse and an attempt to get same-sex marriage passed in the state of Illinois," Gilligan said.

Harris said one of the bill's strongest opponents is the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, which also has worked to thwart efforts to legalize gay marriage in California.

Joseph Logan, bishop of that church's Shiloh ward, affirmed the church's opposition to the bill, but he said the church has not yet organized efforts against it.

Gary Huffman, the pastor of Calvary Baptist Church in Belleville, said Baptist church leaders have pushed legislators to protect the church's right to not perform the ceremonies. While his church opposes same-sex unions, he said, he is pleased that the bill's language may protect his church from having to perform them.

"We don't want it to be called a hate crime to say no to a marriage that would not be, in our opinion, biblical," he said.

The United Church of Christ in 2005 passed a resolution affirming same-sex marriage, but the decision to perform the marriages can be made on a local level.

Jerry Bennett, pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ in Belleville, said his church hasn't yet made a decision. But personally, he is pleased with the bill's passage through the committee.

"I think it just recognizes the civil rights that all persons in our country are due," he said.

The establishment of civil unions in Illinois would not only benefit same-sex couples, Harris said, but also, for example, those straight seniors who are widowed and want to have hospital visitation rights for a new partner without having to remarry and thereby lose a pension remaining from a lifelong marriage.

**Civil unions are legal in Vermont, New Jersey, California and New Hampshire, according to the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. Oregon, Washington and the District of Columbia issue domestic partnerships, and gay couples can marry in Massachusetts and Connecticut.**

The California Supreme Court last week heard arguments on whether to overturn that state's ban on gay marriage.