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African-American Clergy Urge Immediate Passage of Marriage Equality Legislation in Illinois

Pastors, Faith Leaders Call on General Assembly to Act Now in Approving the Religious Freedom and Marriage Fairness Act

CHICAGO – April 4, 2013 – As the final vote in the Illinois House of Representatives approaches, African-American faith leaders gathered today to urge legislators to pass the Religious Freedom and Marriage Fairness Act, saying “we should treat all families with equity and respect and the Illinois legislature should act now.” The clergy present today represent a range of faiths and a diverse community of congregations, including gay and lesbian parents who are raising children in loving families.

“Our representatives in the House will be deciding whether loving gay and lesbian couples get a marriage license down at the courthouse – not a church. While there is a diversity of theology on the boundaries of religious marriage, this is about civil marriage,” said Rev. Dr. Richard Tolliver, St. Edmund’s Episcopal Church. “We are more than a one-issue community, and we represent many different religious views, but we can all recognize the fundamental value of the law of the land applying equally to all citizens. “

“My life teaches me that discrimination is dead wrong, no matter whom it may target. Gay and lesbian couples believe in family and commitment and this legislation is about equal treatment under the law,” said Rev. Dr. B. Herbert Martin, Progressive Community Center, The People’s Church. “This is a continuation of the civil rights I have worked for all of my life. It is the right thing to do and in keeping with my faith.”

The faith leaders’ encouragement comes at a time of strong support for marriage equality in Illinois, especially within the black community. A December 2012 Public Policy Poll showed that in Illinois, 60% of African Americans surveyed supported same-sex marriage. A recent *Crain’s/Ipsos* poll shows Illinoisans supporting marriage equality, with 50 percent in favor and only 29 percent opposed. Of the 50 percent in support, 37 percent “strongly” support the freedom to marry.

“I am a sister, aunt and grandmother devoted to God and I support this legislation.” said Rev. Phyllis Pennese, Pillar of Love Fellowship Church. “People are changing their minds and I know

marriage equality is the next step in what's necessary for human rights and justice. Thank god for how far we've come."

"This is a teaching moment for all our children and for our country. We must stress that we are all created equal. If we don't stress that, then there will be discrimination based on personal opinion," said Rev. Jacques Conway, Neighborhood United Methodist Church. "We must treat everyone with respect and equality."

The clergy also stressed the importance of passing the Religious Freedom and Marriage Fairness Act now, rather than later.

"This law does not infringe on my rights to preach or to marry anyone in my church. Everyone has the right to a committed and legal marriage," said Bishop Carlton Pearson. "I embrace this and we encourage our legislators to pass this bill. This is a win-win situation."

"It is important that people of faith come together and be thankful for this legislation. It stands to ensure that all people have equal protection under the law," said Rev. Booker Vance, St. Stephen's Lutheran Church. "We will keep on fighting until the work is done."

"We are working with our coalition partners to do visits to our representatives. There is a diversity of perspectives, but there is growing consensus that this bill will pass," said Rev. Macarthur Flournoy, Deputy Director of Religion & Faith Programs for the Human Rights Campaign. "Illinois will be the first state in 2013 to recognize marriage equality and we trust our legislators will do the right thing."

Illinois Unites for Marriage – a coalition led by Equality Illinois, Lambda Legal and the ACLU of Illinois – is continuing its statewide campaign in support of the bill, marshaling support and urging allies to step up contacts with their legislators as the House vote approaches. The coalition supporting the freedom to marry for all loving, committed couples – already strong with business, labor and community leaders, civic organizations, faith institutions and members of the clergy, African-American leaders, Republicans and Democrats – continues to grow.

Information about the legislation is available at www.illinoisunites.org, along with information about how citizens can make their voices heard.

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