

Isle clergy are eager to perform civil unions

Many have sought training as the state nears recognition of same-sex couples

By Pat Gee

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Within the first minutes of the new year, clergy and judges may register online to perform civil unions, and within a short time will be able to unite same-sex couples in a legal relationship that grants them the same rights as married couples for the first time in Hawaii.

That's according to Alvin Onaka, state registrar of vital statistics, who conducted the Department of Health's first online training Dec. 5 for "performers" of civil unions, most of them clergy eager to conduct ceremonies on Jan. 1, when Hawaii's new law allowing civil unions goes into effect.

"Many clergy are chomping at the bit to perform civil unions because it is one more step toward marriage equality," said the Rev. Kyle Ann Lovett of the Church of the Crossroads, who is spearheading the effort to sign up religious leaders for training. Lovett, a United Church of Christ minister, is on the DOH task force studying how best to implement the law.

"The DOH has worked hard to make the system work at 12:01 a.m. on Jan. 1, so by 12:30 a.m. or so, those who go through the (required) four or five steps could celebrate their civil unions immediately," said Lovett. "It will be a great day ... when Hawaii takes yet another step toward cherishing the relationships of loving couples."

Onaka said the streamlined computer system also can be used to perform traditional marriages of opposite-sex couples. For months the state has been developing the online system, which he called more "accurate, effective and timely," to replace the time-consuming paperwork process of granting marriage certificates, he said.

As soon as a clergyman or judge fills out an online application, they will receive their license to perform civil unions by email moments later, he said.

"If all works out as planned, within 15 minutes or less, they will be able to perform a civil union; it can be performed as quickly as they can enter the couple's information," said Onaka, chief of the Office of Health Status Monitoring. "That's the beauty of what we've done. Some have waited 20 years for civil unions."

Additional online "webinar" sessions will be held in the coming weeks because DOH has received "many more" inquiries from clergy and judges, he said. Of the maximum 25 computer lines available for the first webinar, 23 were connected to clergy; two were connected to judges.

The 25 trainees were given preference because they were anxious to perform civil union ceremonies the first day of the year, a Sunday, and "we've only got positive feedback" on the new system, Onaka said.

No one can pre-register for a license to perform civil unions before Jan. 1, he said, emphasizing that those who want to perform them on that date must contact his office for training first.

The Rev. Jonipher Kwong of First Unitarian Church of Honolulu said some of his lay ministers who went through the training have been making arrangements with a few couples to perform civil unions Jan. 1.

"We're very excited about it actually going to start," said Kwong, who also attended the DOH task force meetings. "It's about time government caught up with us to honor same-sex couples. ... The new law is still somewhat unequal, designating them as civil unions instead of marriages."

Unitarian ministers have been conducting "holy unions or commitment" ceremonies for same-sex couples since the 1970s, whether or not they were recognized by law, as they believe in the justice and equity in human relationships, he said. It's one way of making sure long-term relationships and families are honored no matter what the couples' gender, he added.

Lovett and Kwong said they don't expect that civil union ceremonies will be much different from traditional marriages.

Kwong said, "I personally don't treat same-sex or opposite-sex couples differently," as long as the relationship is healthy and mutually honors and respects both parties. "As a minister I'm obligated to treat everyone fairly and give them the same rites of passage as anyone, including marriage."

The Rev. Kevin Kuniyuki of Wahiawa Hongwanji Mission, who is also president of the State Ministers' Association of the Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii, performed a ritual ceremony, as opposed to a legal ceremony, for a same-sex couple two years ago. He said the vows he has used for years to marry heterosexual couples can be said for same-sex couples, except that one would "have to work on the terms they want to call the other partner, which would not necessarily be 'husband' or 'wife,'" Kuniyuki said.

Kuniyuki said the Jodo or Shin Buddhist sect believes "everybody is equal," and that most of his Hongwanji colleagues are as liberal as he. Last year the Hongwanji headquarters passed a resolution on behalf of its 36 statewide temples declaring its support of equal rights for homosexuals and transgenders.

"In Shin Buddhism everyone is accepted by Buddha — no exceptions," said Kuniyuki. "With that as a basic fundamental, how can we say people of different sexual orientations should be excluded? ... Our religion is not judicial. There are not laws, but spiritual guidelines about developing self-awareness, how to be compassionate, what makes life better for ourselves and others."

Patrick Downes, spokesman for the Catholic Diocese of Honolulu, said Bishop Larry Silva released a letter to priests and deacons Nov. 2, saying, "I simply want to remind you that no priest or deacon is authorized to preside over a civil union ceremony, whether for a same-sex couple or a heterosexual couple. ...

"In the Catholic Church, we only recognize and bless a true marriage, which is a life-long, faithful commitment of life and love between one man and one woman, open to the gift of new life. ... Our priests

and deacons are only authorized to officiate at marriages that are true marriages in the eyes of the Catholic Church."

A survey released last July by the national Pew Research Center listed the official positions of 16 religious groups on same-sex marriage. Generally against it are Catholics, Muslims, Lutherans, Methodists, Evangelicals, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, American Baptists and Southern Baptists.

There is division over the issue in the Episcopalian and Presbyterian churches. In Judaism the Orthodox movement is generally against it, and Reformed and Reconstructionist congregations are supportive of gays, the Pew survey says.