

Leaders turn attention to fundamental human needs

By Pat Gee January 25, 2014



A coalition of progressive interfaith leaders who took a stand for marriage equality in Hawaii last year is formalizing its intention to further affect state lawmaking, now focusing on meeting basic human needs such as food, shelter and education.

The Progressive Interfaith 'Ohana was established Thursday, with about 30 leaders signing an official statement at the First Unitarian Church of Honolulu. The new group has received commitments from at least 100 leaders of religions ranging from Buddhism to Judaism, according to organizer Jonipher Kuponon Kwong, minister of the First Unitarian Church and an outspoken advocate of the

marriage equality bill that Gov. Neil Abercrombie signed into law in November.

"We progressive religious leaders are not a one-hit wonder. We're not just concerned about marriage equality; we're concerned about improving human lives. We came up with what we're calling the Historic Moments Project: Meeting Basic Needs Now!" Kwong said.

"Basic human needs impact all of us, not just progressive religious communities or conservative ones, but every single person in Hawaii. ... We will continue to help resolve other challenging social justice issues of our time. The world's religions operate out of the basic assumptions of treating others as we would like to be treated ... common spiritual principles based on the golden rule," Kwong said.

The group's priorities are "malama aina (care for the environment), healthy and local food production, affordable housing, quality accessible health care, quality affordable education, personal safety and stable ohana(family), responsible and effective governance, and economic equity."

Lending support to the coalition are four state House representatives who belong to the Hawaii Future Caucus, which aims to increase government openness and participation among young people. They include Future Caucus Co-chairman Takashi Ohno (D, Nuuanu-Liliha-Alewa Heights), Chris Lee (D, Kailua-Waimanalo), Kaniela Ing (D, Kihei-Wailea-Makena) and Nicole Lowen (D, Kailua-Kona-Holualoa-Kalaoa).

Ohno, an advocate of free early childhood education, is a former third-grade teacher at Fern Elementary School, where many of his students were immigrants from Asia-Pacific countries.

Recalling his teaching experience, Ohno said, "I found it horribly unfortunate that we live in a country in which education seems to have a cost" that many families cannot afford, such as "sending a child to preschool, living in a good district or going to college."

In addition, he said, children are less likely to learn and succeed in school when basic needs -- seeing doctors, having enough food or a stable home -- are not adequately met, he said. "That's why I'm happy PI'O started. I wish you Godspeed."

Kwong noted that with the okina the acronym is also the Hawaiian word "pi'o," which means "arc." Referring to a quote by Unitarian minister Theodore Parker, Kwong said, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."