

# Most civil unions outside traditional faiths

**Nearly half of the ceremonies in Hawaii have been performed by Universal Life Church officiants**

By Pat Gee 2/25/12

Since civil unions became legal in Hawaii on Jan. 1, at least two-thirds of the 153 couples who have been joined in civil unions have opted for ceremonies outside the religious mainstream, choosing instead nondenominational officiants or judges, state data show.

Nearly half of the ceremonies have been performed by members of organizations that share the name Universal Life Church, online entities that ordain people to perform weddings and other events.

Officiants said the reasons these couples have gravitated away from mainline religions could include the fact that some traditional churches have strong stances against homosexuality, and that couples seeking a civil union do not necessarily want a religious setting.

Alan Spector, a self-described "ordained humanist celebrant" who has performed six unions as of Feb. 19, has received inquiries from people who "don't necessarily want a religious ceremony," he said. "My ceremonies are more secular or spiritual in nature, not religious.

"The word 'marriage' is not a religious term; it's a social status in our society. There is no requirement in the U.S. that you have to belong to a religious denomination or even believe in God to get married," said Spector, founder of Equality Hawaii, an advocacy group for gay, bisexual and transgender people.

Of the 153 couples joined in civil unions in the first seven weeks this year — through Feb. 17 — 118 took part in ceremonies officiated by a religious denomination, and the other 35 were in ceremonies in which a judge presided, said Alvin Onaka, chief of the state Office of Health Status Monitoring.

Of the 118 religious ceremonies, 69 were performed by officiants affiliated with the Universal Life Church. Onaka did not have a breakdown of the other 49 ceremonies by denomination.

All but eight of the 153 civil unions have been for same-sex couples, Onaka said.

Hawaii's Act 1 gives couples in civil unions the same rights as married couples. Hawaii is one of five states that allow civil unions without allowing same-sex marriage. Six states and the District of Columbia allow same-sex marriage, according to the National

Conference of State Legislatures. Two other states passed laws allowing same-sex marriage that are scheduled to take effect later this year.

The Universal Life Church is an organization that offers online licensing and ordination of ministers without requiring training in theology, enabling members to officiate weddings and other rites according to state laws.

(There are several variations of the name and ministries associated with "Universal Life Church." They are not affiliated with the Universal Life Church World Headquarters, a Christian organization based in Carrabelle, Calif., which upholds traditional marriage between a man and woman, according to the Rev. Daniel Chapin, national vice president and head pastor of the Aloha Church of Kapolei.)

Rosemary Cuccia, a Universal Life Church minister since 2002 who has performed two civil unions, said, "We have to focus more on our unity as God's creation instead of using labels, like saying I'm with this religious group or that, using them to judge someone's life. We have to embrace how people choose to live, and it may be with someone of the same gender. God is love; we are one. Who gave them these labels but mankind."

Another officiant, the Rev. Sky St. John of Unity Church of Hawaii, described his church as more of a "spiritual movement" that fits well with couples seeking a more spiritual than religious ceremony.

"And, we do not require wedding participants to be members of this or any church. I don't think God really cares about that," said St. John, who has performed one civil union and has two others scheduled in the coming months.

The Rev. Kyle Lovett of Church of the Crossroads, who officiated in the state's historic joint civil unions of four couples Jan. 1 and is planning to do more, said she declines couples who just want a quick "justice of the peace" type of officiant, preferring those who want a more meaningful, religious ceremony, including couples counseling.

The Rev. Sam Cox, a retired Methodist minister who has performed two civil unions, said, "It's sort of sad that (gay couples) don't feel aligned with any church, but I hope someday they will find an accepting, loving church where they are comfortable and feel loved."

Though the United Methodist Church members have differing opinions on homosexuality, "most of us believe we are all children of God," Cox said. "Jesus never condemned homosexuality. His two great commandments were to love your God and love your neighbor."

All the officiants interviewed said most of the couples for whom they've performed civil unions — as well as people in commitment ceremonies before civil unions were implemented — have been together a long time.

"The one other thing I have noticed is that I'm being contacted by couples that have been together for many, many years," Lovett said. "These are not the young, head-over-heels-in-love types of couples. These couples know what commitment looks like."

Cuccia said most of the 15 to 20 "commitment ceremonies" she conducted before civil unions went into effect were for longtime couples who wanted to formally become "a united family."

"These people are not just sleeping together," she said. "These people are committed to each other as any male or female would be."

The Rev. Jonipher Kwong of the First Unitarian Church of Honolulu said he was somewhat surprised more gay couples haven't entered into civil unions. He said he thinks many are holding out until same-sex marriage becomes legal in the state.

A lesbian couple, Natasha and Janin Jackson-Kleid, sued the state in December after they were denied a marriage license in Hawaii. Gov. Neil Abercrombie said the state will defend its marriage law, while acknowledging that it is unconstitutional.

"People aren't necessarily beating down our doors," Kwong said, though ministers available to perform civil unions are listed on the Equality Hawaii website ([www.equality-hawaii.org](http://www.equality-hawaii.org)). Kwong has performed only one ceremony since participating with Lovett in the first civil unions Jan. 1.

"People are either confused or waiting for the dust to settle," Kwong said, referring to lawsuits challenging Hawaii's marriage law. "People are probably waiting for marriage itself."

"Civil unions still feel like second-class citizenship. I tell them it's like you've been upgraded to business class, but you're still not in first class. People want the ultimate upgrade to first class."