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Lesbian answers bishop's call for dialogue on gay marriage

Tracy Simmons Religion News Service | Nov. 1, 2012
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What do you do when your spouse of 10 years -- the person you've spent a decade sharing spiritual, intimate and intellectual moments with -- is suddenly lying unconscious on her deathbed?

If you're Catholic, you make sure her body is anointed with oil. You kiss her goodbye, even if you have to force the doctors to remove the breathing tube, and you slide the wedding ring gently off her finger and whisper a promise to take care of it forever.

That's what Charlene Strong did Dec. 14, 2006, after torrential rains flooded the Seattle home she shared with Kate Fleming, leaving her partner trapped and dying in her basement studio. But first, hospital administrators had to call a relative of Fleming's to get permission for Strong to bid farewell the way the couple would have wanted.

"They were willing to take the word of someone on the phone, 300 miles away," Strong said. "Who knew her allergies? I did. Her knew what her wishes were? I did."

With the family's blessing, Strong was able to see her partner one last time. But the battle continued, she said, when the funeral director refused to allow her to make final arrangements.

That's when Strong decided she would do whatever she could to make sure other same-sex couples would have equal rights in Washington state.

It is an emotionally powerful story, and one that brought tears to the eyes of many of the 200 or so students, faculty and community members at Gonzaga University Law School where Strong recounted it Monday.

It is also a story with an immediate political resonance.

On Tuesday, six years after Strong began her campaign, Washingtonians will vote on a referendum to allow same-sex unions, which would avoid the agonizing legal obstacles Strong encountered as her partner died. Roman Catholic Bishop Blase Cupich of Spokane has called for an honest discussion about gay marriage and Referendum 74, and Strong was more than happy to take him up on his offer -- especially at a Catholic campus.

Cupich has written several pastoral letters in recent months explaining why Catholics should oppose Referendum 74, citing family structure, procreation, and his view that the legislation "would not give same-sex couples any new legal rights which they do not already have access to through the state's registered domestic partnership provision."

Strong has a different view, and has spoken at 40 universities in less than two years, reliving the flood and her unsuccessful attempts to rescue Fleming. She uses the pain to discuss inequality and social justice, which she also addresses in her documentary, "For My Wife."

Strong was influential in getting the state's domestic partnership bill passed in 2007, but said same-sex couples still aren't treated fairly.

For example, medical privacy laws often trump domestic partnership rights, she said. She cited a lesbian couple from Spokane who are registered partners but were refused equal treatment when one partner was rushed into life-saving surgery after giving birth. The healthy partner, at home with their new child, wasn't told about the surgery.

Hospital administrators, she said, cited medical privacy laws as "protection."

But Joseph Backholm, chairman of Preserve Marriage Washington -- the organization fighting to keep marriage as defined between a man and a woman -- said privacy laws can cause problems for heterosexual married couples and for families, too.

"It's not going to be solved if marriage is redefined. This is just a continued attempt to mislead people that same-sex couples are mistreated, and it's not true," he said in an interview.

According to a recent Elway Poll, support for Referendum 74 is leading 49-45 percent.

Strong said if the referendum passes, it would put added pressure on the federal government to look at same-sex marriage as a national issue rather than a state-by-state one.

"We're trying to get people to see that states don't fall into the ocean because they allow equality," she said. "Even if we're afforded the ability to marry here in Washington state, in 32 other states we're still left vulnerable, where our marriage still means absolutely nothing."

Strong says she thinks marriage equality for all 50 states is at least a decade or more away. Until then, Strong continues to fight for equality in Washington and continues to stand up for the Catholic church, even though she said teachings from church leaders have been painful at times.

She and Fleming attended a Catholic parish in Seattle together and were welcomed by other parishioners. "The church kept me from going crazy after my wife died," Strong said. "They were there to help bury her with tremendous compassion."

Copies of Cupich's pastoral letter were distributed at Strong's talk, as well as copies of "Always Our Children: A Pastoral Message to Parents of Homosexual Children and Suggestions for Pastoral Ministers," produced by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

The document states that all humans are created in God's image and should be treated with dignity and respect. And the Catholic church's call to social justice is why Strong loves her faith.

"When you leave the church you can't fix the church," she said, "you can't be part of the discussion."

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