



From left, House Speaker Dennis Hastert, R-Ill.; the Rev. Steven Torrance; U.S. Rep. Ileana Ros-Lenthinen, D-Fla.; and the Rev. Daniel Coughlin, U.S. House of Representatives chaplain, make history May 1 in Washington, D.C.

The House of Representatives passed legislation May 8 that would allow faith-based institutions to discriminate with taxpayer money. The Workforce Protection Act offers federal funds to charities operating job training programs.

"Taxpayers should not be subjected to funding their own discrimination," said Dave Noble, National Stonewall Democrats executive director. "This bill would allow the Bush administration to federally fund anti-gay prejudice in the guise of religion."

House Resolution 1261 was approved 220-204 on largely a party-line vote after numerous Democrats raised objections on the House floor to the legislation's discriminatory language. Historically, such exceptions have served as a back door for anti-gay bigotry.

In March, Christopher Van Hollen, D-Md., introduced an amendment that would have stripped this discriminatory provision from the bill. However, it was defeated in a party-line vote in his Republican-controlled committee.

It wasn't the first time a clergyperson opened the U.S. Congress with a prayer for justice and equality for all. What made the opening prayer before the House different May 1—the U.S. National Day of Prayer—was that it was delivered by the Rev. Steven Torrance of Metropolitan Community Churches, the world's largest church group with a primary, affirming ministry to queers.

"Torrance has had a long and distinguished career working for social justice and equality for God's gay and lesbian children," said the Rev. Troy D. Perry, moderator of the 35-year-old Christian denomination. "While gays and lesbians continue to seek full equality under the law, it is especially moving that Rev. Torrance stood in the well of the U.S. House of Representatives, where our nation's laws are crafted, and prayed for justice and equality for all of our citizens."

Torrance, former pastor of MCC of Key West, Fla., serves as a police officer and chaplain with the Key West Police Department. His prayer marks the first time an openly gay clergyperson from the denomination has delivered the opening prayer before Congress.

Torrance delivered the prayer at the invitation of U.S. Rep. Ileana Ros-Lenthinen, D-Fla. While on Capitol Hill, he met with House Speaker Dennis Hastert, R-Ill., and Colombia President Alvaro Uribe Velez.

About 74 percent of U.S. adults surveyed last month favor the U.S. Supreme Court

overturning state laws that criminalize private, consenting sexual relations between same-sex couples yet allow that same private conduct to occur between opposite-sex couples.

This was the latest finding of a national online poll released May 6 by Witeck-Combs Communications and Harris Interactive. The survey of more than 2,000 adults, of whom about 7 percent were queer, was conducted online between April 17 and 23.

The poll also reveals that U.S. citizens almost equally oppose laws regulating consenting sexual relations that occur in the private homes of opposite-sex and same-sex couples. Nearly nine out of 10 people (87 percent) oppose state statutes regulating private, sexual relations that are applied to opposite-sex married adult couples, and almost as many (82 percent) oppose such laws that are applied to same-sex adult couples in a domestic partnership.

"Even when we exclude respondents who self-identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender, support for overturning state sodomy laws does not change significantly," said Darin Johnson, Witeck-Combs vice president. "It is clear that an overwhelming majority of Americans believe the Supreme Court should overturn all state laws that interfere with private sexual relations between consenting adults, whether same-sex or opposite-sex couples."

The U.S. Supreme Court heard oral arguments March 26 testing the Texas same-sex sodomy statute. This case, *Lawrence vs. Texas*, will examine the constitutionality of imposing criminal charges on same-sex couples who have consenting sexual relations in the privacy of their home.

MICHIGAN

A Michigan civil rights organization is partnering with legislators to help bring the state into the 21st century. Triangle Foundation and state Rep. Steve Tobocman, D-Detroit, announced May 5 a new repeal package to eliminate "arcane" or antiquated statutes from Michigan law, including gross indecency.



Steve Tobocman

This is the first time legislation has been introduced to repeal the state's gross indecency laws, which many believe are unconstitutionally vague and unnecessary. The statutes punish adult, consensual, noncommercial sex as a felony punishable by up to 15 years in prison. Additional legislation would repeal several other laws that prohibit

cursing, cursing in front of women and children, blasphemy, cohabitation and cohabitation after divorce.

"Michigan is the only state in the nation that charges 'gross indecency between men,'" said Jeffrey Montgomery, Triangle Foundation executive director. "This law has been abused by law enforcement as a form of intimidation against gay men and as the pretext for profiling. It is used to ruin careers, families and smear someone's name as a so-called 'sex offender' for sexual behavior that is consensual and does not involve money, a minor or force."

Tobocman added: "As a new policymaker in Lansing, I was shocked to see that these laws were still on the books. Michigan is in financial trouble, and the last thing we need is to waste time and money enforcing laws like these."

NEBRASKA

Charging that Nebraska's constitutional amendment banning any kind of same-sex relationship recognition blocks gay people from advocating for even the most basic protections for their families, attorneys asked a Lincoln federal court April 30 to strike down the law.

"This is by far the most extreme anti-gay family law in the country," said David Buckel of Lambda Legal. "This law prevents gay couples from seeking even the most basic protections for their families—it blocks them out of the political process entirely."

Section 29 was passed in November 2000 in a heavily debated election that received the second-highest turnout in the state's history. Promoted to voters simply as protection of traditional marriage, the law goes far beyond restricting the right to marry to heterosexual couples. It specifically voids the uniting of two people of the same sex in a "civil union, domestic partnership or other similar same-sex relationship."

"States and voters can—and should—have broad discretion to pass laws, but there are some limitations that are spelled out in our nation's Constitution," said Tamara Lange of the American Civil Liberties Union. "It's clear that it's unconstitutional for a state to have a law that's only purpose is to express disapproval toward gay people or to block gay people out of the political process."



Nancy Thompson

Earlier this year, state Sen. Nancy Thompson, D-Papillion, introduced a bill that would give same-sex couples the right to make burial arrangements for their partners. In response, Nebraska Attorney General Jon Bruning issued an opinion March 10 stating that the legislation was unconstitutional because of Section 29.

KENTUCKY

Covington city commissioners voted unanimously April 28 to add sexual orientation and gender identity to the classes protected under their human rights ordinance.

The vote also expands the law to include disability, place of birth and marital, parental and familial status to the existing classes of age, sex, race, color, religion, ancestry and national origin and adds employment and public accommodations to existing housing protections. "The quality of life not just for GLBT people, but for all historically oppressed Kentuckians, is that much better due to this fair-minded vote by the Covington city commissioners," said Matt Nicholson, Kentucky Fairness Alliance organizer. [M]

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