

Jackie Yerby

The Portland resident is rallying Catholics to defend the rights of gay Oregonians to marry, despite an opposing campaign from the local Archdiocese

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Jackie Yerby and community advocates, along with a group of Catholic Oregonians, are leading a campaign to support marriage equality in Oregon. The group titled Catholic Oregonians for Marriage Equality was developed in response to Portland Archbishop Alexander K. Sample's public support opposing same-sex marriages in Oregon. Street Roots recently sat down with Yerby to discuss the new group.

Israel Bayer: *Why did you start or feel important to be a part of Catholic Oregonians for Marriage Equality?*

Jackie Yerby: To me it boils down to two words: love and justice. I am a practicing, faithful, faith-filled Catholic. How I move through the world, and the way I try to live my faith is grounded in love. So when I think about my LGBT brothers and sisters, I feel like making sure that they have the freedom to marry is acting out of that sense of love as well as a sense of justice.

The other word I would add is respect. Right, we're Catholic, despite everything, we're Catholic. We wanted to make sure that our witness going to Ash Wednesday mass was respectful. ... It's like being a public witness to other Catholics to say we exist and it's for people who might feel isolated in their parishes and to say 'Hey, you're not in alone in this.' There are other people who support the freedom to marry for our LGBT brothers and sisters. And a witness to the broader community who tend to think of the Catholic Church and Catholics as being in this kind of monolith that we think and act alike, that we can take direction. To say, no, actually there's a different perspective here.

I.B.: *A March 2013 New York Times poll found that 62 percent of US Catholics support marriage for same-sex couples. And Pope Francis has hinted that the Church could eventually accept some forms of same sex unions. At the same time, you have an Archbishop here who has instructed his staff to work against any such initiative, calling it a top priority. Nationwide, the U.S. bishops have been advocating against it and even calling for a Constitutional amendment. How do you rectify such divergence within the structure of the Church?*

J.Y.: There was a Quinnipiac poll that came out, I think in October, that talked about how it was a similar percentage of Catholics, so more Catholics than the general public support the freedom to marry. Then we have this great new pope that many of us are excited about who in addition to saying, "Who am I to judge" has also said there is place for civil union, which is progress. It's not marriage, but it's progress. Then people have asked me, if Pope Francis is here, where are the

bishops? While a lot of the bishops and much of Church leadership have come up under more conservative popes, who were really calling for "a tighter, leaner, more obedient flock," Pope Francis seems to be saying all are welcome and let's make sure we're about love and that we're focused on issues around poverty, and less emphasis on the things that divide us like issues of sexuality and abortion.

I.B.: *Do you foresee a day when the Vatican recognizes and even embraces these unions?*

J.Y.: When the Vatican or the Church hierarchy? I think about my experience within my own parish where there are openly gay people, where there are gay couples, where there are married gay folks who are raising children, and they are active in the parish in different roles, leadership roles. So, at that level, at the level that counts, at least in my parish, and I can think of a few others around town, fully accepted, fully embraced, fully loved and welcomed.

I.B.: *But in a lot of other areas of the world, that's not the case.*

J.Y.: Yeah, which is unfortunate. The other thing I'll say about that is "fast." A priest friend told me that "fast" in the Catholic Church is you ask a question on Wednesday and they get back to you in 200 years.

I.B.: *From your personal observation, what do you see as the damage done when the Church takes this position?*

J.Y.: I have a couple of friends who used to be active members of my parish, regular members, one of which actually had a leadership role in the parish. She's no longer a member. I don't think it has to do with my church, but more because of the Church and just the language that it has used in terms of talking about LGBT folks. Another friend now goes to an Episcopal church. Part of it was that the Episcopal church had a lot more programming for kids and he has a teenage son. And part of it was that he was really sick of the homophobia of the Catholic Church. That was really hurtful.

I remember talking to my friend, the one who goes to the Episcopal church, saying "Well, that's not us. That's not our community." And he also has a really good friend that's a gay Catholic priest, but it was just kind of too much. Under Pope Benedict, and it wasn't that long ago, the language used to describe homosexuality was like "intrinsicly disordered," in other words the word "disordered" is in there.

I.B.: *Do you fear or does your group fear taking on the Archdiocese?*

J.Y.: We want to engage them in a dialogue. I think the underpinning to all of



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this is nonviolence just in terms of how we engage with each other, how we engage with other people, how we engage with the institutional Church. I'm sure that we would be perceived by other people as defiant. ... Are we worried? I'm not. I think in terms of the kinds of things that came up, some people are worried about relationships with other people. There are some strongly held beliefs, especially among older Catholics who we love and respect. So it's how to go about this work and do it in a way that doesn't harm those relationships. I feel like that was more the fear articulated than worrying about the Archdiocese.

I.B.: *How do you plan to move forward with campaign?*

J.Y.: We're trying to build the base, doing outreach, asking "who do you know?" Finding people to help us spread the word, so gathering names so that we can connect with them. Making sure that we are accessible to people in other ways. Some day we might have a website, but for the most part we are all volunteers, some of us are retired. Not a ton of bandwidth, so it's working to build it up. To get beyond some of the usual suspect churches. We want to make sure we're connecting with people in the metro area, other parishes, to make sure that it's this Oregon-wide thing and not a bunch of Portland liberal Catholics who are doing this.

I.B.: *Are you asking people to give toward marriage equality, to support the campaign?*

J.Y.: That hasn't been part of it. It's more getting the word out that we exist. And really trying to build this really inclusive movement so that it's not top-down.

I.B.: *If that's the case, how does that move marriage equality forward?*

J.Y.: I think that's a better question for the campaign. The Archdiocese, the Archbishop, has told his staff they have joined the Protect Oregon Coalition and they're going to put their energy and resources behind how they understand marriage, which is a unique relationship between man and woman. We think it's important to show this alternate perspective. In that sense, we can help. The other thing that is on the horizon is the religious exemption that would allow businesses to decline to serve LGBTs couples. I think in the case of Oregon, it's going to be around same-sex weddings, solemnizations, ceremonies related to that. So, if it's your birthday or graduation that's fine, but when it comes to weddings, businesses could say "Yeah, no, my religion." If that moves forward and they collect enough signatures for the ballot in November, then we think the Catholic voice as well as the voices of other people of faith will be an important voice in saying our faith is an important part of our lives, but we don't think that discrimination is OK on the basis of religion.

I.B.: *How are people who support gay marriage not to be complicit in giving to the Church, when the Archdiocese is giving directly to campaigns against marriage equality?*

J.Y.: Some of the money that goes to the Archdiocese comes back to the parish. So there's a real discernment that people will have to make around giving money to the Archdiocese, because as frustrated as people may be with the Archdiocese and the stand it's taking on same-sex marriage, the money can also do a lot of good. It's not like you can say OK you can do this, but you can't do that.

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