

Unitarian Universalists of Sterling

Box 1632 • Sterling, VA 20167-1601 • 703-406-3068 • <http://www.uusterling.org>

Services Sundays at 10:30 am

October 7, 2006

An Open Letter to the People of Loudoun County from the Unitarian Universalists of Sterling:

On November 7 you will be asked to vote on Ballot Question #1, popularly known as the Marshall/Newman Amendment or the Virginia Marriage Amendment. We respectfully ask you to consider the reasons why we are opposed to this proposed change to our state's Bill of Rights.

The Marshall/Newman Amendment, in addition to repeating what is already Virginia law, adds language to the Bill of Rights that would eliminate legal status for *all* unmarried couples. An unintended consequence of this sweeping language will be to endanger existing local or state laws protecting those couples. In Ohio and Michigan, where similar amendments were recently passed, unmarried men and women in committed relationships are threatened with the loss of health benefits, hospital visitation rights, child custody, and other legal protections. Courts in Ohio have even ruled that women whose abusers are not their husbands are no longer entitled to seek protective orders.

Last year, our legislature voted to let private businesses in Virginia extend health benefits to employees' unmarried partners. That was good news for our economy, since most large corporations offer domestic partner health benefits. By threatening to block these private benefit plans, the Amendment would encourage companies to move to neighboring states where their workplace fairness policies are welcomed. This would clearly damage our state's economic standing.

It is often assumed that all religions agree in their basic teaching on marriage and relationships. But that is not the case today, nor has it ever been the case. Many faith traditions, including Unitarian Universalism, oppose branding same-sex couples with a second-class status. This past June, as Congress was preparing to vote on a similar, but less sweeping, federal marriage amendment, 2,300 clergy from around the country signed a petition opposing it.

Virginia's Bill of Rights is a national treasure, having inspired both the United States Declaration of Independence and Bill of Rights. It is a bill of *rights* because it protects each of us from being bullied by our government or by majorities of any kind. Changing this historic document to favor one social, political or religious tradition sets a dangerous precedent, turning what should be a shield in our constitution into a weapon and destroying its basic intent.

Please join us in opposing this amendment. If you agree with any of the arguments raised here, please be sure to vote on November 7, and VOTE NO on Ballot Question #1.

Yours in Faith,

Rev. Matthew McNaught and the UUS Board of Trustees on behalf of the Congregation