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## United Church of Christ Gives Blessing to Same-sex Matrimony Alameda church to vote to adopt resolution affirming equal marriage rights

By Suzanne La Barre

United Church of Christ (UCC) formally endorsed same-sex marriage last Monday, giving Christian and non-Christian gay rights activists additional cause for celebration on Independence Day.

Local pastor, the Rev. Laura Rose of First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ (FCCA) took part in the historic July 4 decision in Atlanta, Ga., where UCC representatives convened to adopt a resolution in affirmation of marriage equality. The resolution endorses same-sex unions and calls on local and state legislatures to follow suit. UCC is the first major Christian denomination to officially sanction the controversial stance.

"I'm thrilled," Rose said in a phone interview last Tuesday, heady with victory, following the close of the five-day convention, which assembled more than 800 General Synod delegates, who comprise the UCC's voting body.

Approximately 80 percent of the representatives voted in favor of same-sex marriage.

"If anybody was going to do it, it was UCC," said First Congregational office coordinator Neil Genson. The 1.3 million member-strong denomination, formed in 1957, was the first to ordain a female pastor, an openly gay minister and to appoint a black leader to an integrated church, he said.

The resolution adds the caveat that individual UCC congregations are not bound to the General Synod's decision. Instead, the resolution urges members to consider marriage equality; adoption of the policy is optional, according to conference notes.

Rose is fairly certain it will pass in her 125-member Alameda congregation with flying colors. Members will be invited to engage in dialogue about the issue in multiple roundtable discussions. By early fall, in synch with pride week, they will take a vote.

The congregation formed as First Congregational Church in 1879. It added the United Church of Christ ethos in 1961.

In 1986, FCCA became the 15th parish in the nation to adopt UCC's "Open and Affirming" covenant, which embraces lesbians and gay men. It has since openly recognized same-sex marriage. The first commitment ceremony was performed seven years ago, Rose said.

Of UCC's 3,000 congregations nationwide, however, just 500 openly support gays and lesbians in the church and fewer are expected to adopt the marriage equality edict.

"They (UCC) are really going out on a wire because they're going to lose some members and that's even locally (in the Bay Area), I'm sure," Genson said.

Pastor Jack Buckley of First Presbyterian Church in Alameda admits that it takes guts for a religious institution to endorse same-sex marriage. The Presbyterian Church has struggled with the issue for more than 30 years, he said, but ultimately, he supports the move.

“The United Church of Christ has done what I’ve been hoping and praying for many years that we Presbyterians would do to help our churches be a generous and just as God’s grace has been to us,” he said in an e-mail last Tuesday.

The Sun attempted to contact several local parishes often associated with traditional marriage viewpoints. They did not return calls for comment. Rose pointed out that the conservative contingent in Alameda is not especially vocal.

Denominations in other parts of the country have voiced opposition to the church’s endorsement, however. One Midwestern leader of the Bible Witness Fellowship insisted the resolution would lead to “disorder, chaos and confusion,” while a Nebraska reverend called the move, “sad.”

But proponents of same-sex marriage say they welcome the dialogue galvanized by Monday’s decision. Rose hopes UCC’s foray into the national limelight will rouse others to consider the compatibility between faith and same-sex marriage rights.

“It will cause us to go into discussion for what we can do politically and legislatively for marriage equality,” Rose said. “It’s a movement of faith that has political ramifications.”

Alameda’s First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ invites those with questions to visit [www.fccalameda.org](http://www.fccalameda.org).

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