

Gov. O'Malley will sponsor same-sex marriage legislation

ANNAPOLIS – Gov. Martin J. O'Malley said he will take a leadership role in passing same-sex marriage legislation in Maryland next year, promising in a July 22 press conference that he will sponsor legislation that would legalize gay marriage while also protecting the free exercise of religion.

“Our country’s history is an ongoing history of a people who strive for a more perfect union and who constantly improve its laws in order to protect fundamental freedoms more fully and more completely for all individuals,” O'Malley said.

O'Malley noted that Maryland has passed recent legislation that protects hospital visitation rights and end-of-life decision-making for same-sex couples. Expanding the definition of marriage is another step forward, he said.

“This is an evolution in the progress of our state,” he said, “to be able to perfect our laws so that they more fully protect the rights of every individual.”

Mary Ellen Russell, executive director of the Maryland Catholic Conference, said she was disappointed in the governor’s decision. She noted that a similar effort to pass same-sex marriage was defeated in the Maryland General Assembly this year.

“The decision still is in the hands of the General Assembly,” she said, “and, to date, they have chosen not to redefine marriage and we hope they will continue to listen to their consciences and constituents and remain with the decision they made last session.”

Russell noted that the protection of religious freedom, a point emphasized by the governor, is “not the only consideration when it comes to redefining marriage.”

“Our concern isn’t only to protect the church,” she said. “We believe same-sex marriage will have an ill effect on all of society.”

Russell said stripping marriage of its “unique connection to parenthood” disregards

the reasons why government has always elevated marriage over other relationships “as the fundamental building block of society.”

The governor said Marylanders of all walks of life want the same thing for their children.

“They want their children to be able to live in a loving, stable and committed home,” he said, “a home that is protected equally under the law.”

In a question-and-answer session, O’Malley said his Catholic schooling taught him that “there are things that churches and religions dispense” and that government shouldn’t interfere in that.

“I went to Catholic schools,” he said, “and I understood that there’s a difference between laws that are dispensed in a marriage ceremony in a courthouse and a sacrament as defined by organized religion. I think that’s what we seek to protect – both of those freedoms.”

In a recent letter to the governor, Archbishop Edwin F. O’Brien had urged O’Malley not to support same-sex marriage legislation. Wilmington Bishop W. Francis Malooly, whose diocese includes the Eastern Shore, had also sent a similar letter.

The Maryland Catholic Conference, legislative lobbying arm of the state’s bishops, will actively oppose legislation to legalize same-sex marriage, Russell said.