Clergy weighs in on same-sex marriage ruling

Churches tend to make changes at a glacial pace. Yet, in two watershed decisions, the U.S. Supreme Court has validated movement toward same-sex marriage that only began to register with American society little over a decade ago.

The Defense of Marriage Act was declared unconstitutional granting full federal benefits to same-sex couples in 11 states — including Rhode Island, the most Catholic state per capita — and D.C., which recognizes same-sex marriage. It also declined to rule on California’s Proposition 8 thus phasing out the decade that overturned the ban on same-sex marriage there.

In effect, a third of the county’s population lives in states where same-sex marriage is legal. What are churches to do?

In Hudson County, the reaction to the Supreme Court was as predictable as the denomination’s stand on homosexuality in general. “I am very supportive of the decision,” said Rev. Gregory Perez, Rector of Trinity Episcopal Church in Bayonne. “For my church, we are at the forefront of supporting this.”

While Episcopalians have formally adopted a national policy on performing same-sex marriages in their churches, they have allowed or refused to bless same-sex unions. A lot will depend on their General Convention that will convene in July.

Currently, Episcopalians ordain gay clergy and have welcomed gays for several decades, though it has caused significant rifts in the international Anglican Communion as well as in the U.S., especially after New Hampshire consecrated the first openly gay bishop, Gene Robinson, now retired.

Rabbi Debra Hachen, one of the two women rabbis in Hudson County, said, “Our congregation like the Reform movement, is thrilled with the two rulings.” She leads Temple Beth-El in Jersey City. She said the Union for Reform Judaism supports marriage equality along with respect for clergy to make their own decisions whether to officiate.

“We have many LGBT couples, several with children, in our congregation and look forward to the day they can legally marry in N.J. as well as under the chuppah in the temple.” She added, “Personally I was thrilled to serve in Massachusetts a decade ago and officiate at such weddings.”

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has ordained clergy in lifelong committed relationships since 2009 and individual churches are performing blessings of same-sex couples where it is legal, said Rev. Jessica Lambert of St. Paul’s Lutheran Church on Five Corners in Jersey City. She expects that when all 65 synods — geographical regions — in the U.S. convene next month, they will adopt a liturgy that can be used uniformly throughout the country. She has not performed any at St. Paul’s.

And if Rev. Gary Kugler has his way, he never will. The longtime pastor of St. John’s Evangelical Lutheran Church in Union City is a leader of pro-gay marriage. “Marriage is the union of one man and one woman, even where states fail to do so.”

He calls his N.J. Synod “pro-gay marriage.”

Rev. John Fencik said that gay marriage is never an issue in the Orthodox Church because “marriage is a sacrament validated between a man and his wife.” It is certainly not an issue in his small congregation in Bayonne, St. Mary’s, where he said most of the people are elderly or married with children.

He also said that their theology is based on the Gospels and questioned what would happen to the world if we did not have marriage. That sentiment was echoed by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

“The Supreme Court has dealt a profound injustice to the American people by striking down in part the federal Defense of Marriage Act. The Court got it wrong. The federal government ought to respect the truth that marriage is the union of one man and one woman, even where states fail to do so.”

The Catholic bishops appealed to “the common good of all” and called for “a society that strives to uphold the truth of marriage.” The Supreme Court of the land, however, has expanded the notion of common good and an expansive view of marriage.

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Rabbi Debra Hachen

Rev. Gregory Perez

Rev. Jessica Lambert

Rev. John Fencik

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His calling: Meet the needs of those with HIV

On the plane trip from Brazil, Pope Francis uttered the most quoted words of his brief pontificate in regard to gay priests, and gays in general, “If they accept the Lord and have good will, who am I to judge them? They shouldn’t be marginalized. They’re our brothers.”

Those words resonated with Rev. Robert Kaeding, who has lived them through the four decades of his priesthood.

When the AIDS crisis broke in the early 1980s and there was blatant prejudice towards gays, Kaeding rallied volunteers to meet the needs of people with HIV who led to the founding of the Center. Years later, he formed a support group for gay teens at his parish in Wayside, suburb of Asbury Park.

There is no clergy person of any denomination in the entire state who has done more for the gay community than Kaeding. Sitting with the 69-year-old priest in the spanking new headquarters, Kaeding said of the church, “We have to be inclusive and it means to have a home for everybody.”

Right now, Center House next door to the headquarters consists of 25 studio apartments for men and women with AIDS. Each studio is fully furnished with a full bath and kitchenette and there is also a common dining room where the residents may take meals. A full-time chef is on staff so that the nutrition needs of the residents are met.

Since these apartments opened in 2006, Kaeding says some 60 people have lived there – all of whom were homeless before they moved in. Most are in their 40s or 50s. Recently, a resident from Franciska Residence in Jersey City, next to St. Lucy’s Shelter, moved in.

There is a committee that screens applicants and chooses from a long waiting list. Some leave, like a recent 19-year-old who was born with HIV, to marry or find other housing. Their rent is usually subsidized in some form. The Center next to the residents provides counseling, programming and assists the residents with daily living. Each resident has a case manager who makes sure the resident gets primary medical care, transportation, legal services and mental health counseling among other services.

The Center is a separate nonprofit with a board of directors and is not affiliated with any church. Kaeding is the executive director of a staff of five with some 75 volunteers. It operated out of a storefront from 1992 until it raised the $6 million needed to construct the Center, which is located in a commercial section of the grittier part of Asbury Park far from the ocean.

In fact, the commuter train from Bay Head to Hoboken literally runs right next to the Center. Asked if it is tough to be right next to a major rail line, Kaeding said the building was constructed with that in mind.

Kaeding spends at least two days a week at the Center and pastors Precious Blood Church in tony Monmouth Beach the rest of the time. He has only been there for two years after working full-time for the Center, and his parishioners support his work at the Center.

He spent 21 years at St. Anselm’s in Wayside and made it one of the most progressive parishes in the Diocese of Trenton with scores of ministries and a historic outreach to the gay community and especially gay teens.

From there, Kaeding linked parishioners with mental health professionals from Jersey Shore Medical Center to begin meeting the needs of HIV positive people from the surrounding area.

For all that he has accomplished, Kaeding is a quiet, holy man. His priesthood has inspired so many parishioners and people to make the church more welcoming.

“In some ways, the pope was saying nothing new. We live the Gospel and all are welcome,” said Keeding, who recalled that the U.S. bishops issued a pastoral letter in 1997 titled, “Always Our Children.” Kaeding has brought those words to life, “They are all our children.”

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Churches advocate for immigration reform

I arrived at the parking lot in Manasquan around 7:25 last Friday morning to find perhaps a dozen men scattered around the edges of the lot. Within moments, a commuter bus pulled up across the street and twice as many mostly Hispanic men — predominantly Mexican — disembarked and joined their confreres.

Some went to the adjoining 7-11 or crossed the street to the Exxon Tiger Mart for coffee and a roll before settling down. They came to find jobs as contractors and landscapers pull up and pull a couple or several into their trucks and then head for their work site.

Sometimes a homeowner comes by in his car to hire a man, which made my driving around so confusing. Some waved me down hoping I would hire them while others weren’t so quite. Understandably, most of these men are undocumented and afraid.

The local community of Manasquan did all it could 10 years ago to stop their gathering in the center of town, to no avail. Now, they also gather daily in Freehold, Long Branch and Lakewood.

The plight of the some 11 million undocumented in the U.S. has prompted the U.S. Catholic Bishops to mount a campaign for immigration reform this Sunday. Building on their long tradition of supporting and protecting immigrants, large Catholic dioceses like New York and Los Angeles — meccas for immigrants throughout U.S. history — will join others like Newark to preach and enlist the support of the people in the pew to advocate for reform.

Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI struck that chord when he addressed the bishops of the United States in 2012: “With great generosity continue to welcome waves of new immigrants, to provide them with pastoral care and charitable assistance, and to support ways of regularizing their situation, especially with regard to the unification of families. A particular sign of this is the long-standing commitment of the American Bishops to immigration reform.”

Last Friday, the men were just hoping to get hired for usually $10 to $12 an hour. The three men I spoke with were not comfortable with me using their real names so I will refer to them as Carlos, Juan and Jose.

Carlos has been in the U.S. only three years and speaks English with some difficulty. He knew the ropes and was happy to earn $10 to $12 daily and preferred this daily shape-up with the uncertainty of finding work better than steady work in a restaurant, say, where the pay is not as good, he said. Asked whether being in the States is better than Mexico, he did not hesitate. “In the States, it is 100 percent better.”

A sad sight is passing by the lot around 10 a.m. or noon and seeing a dozen or so men still standing there. They will probably not get work that day. Often they will go play a scratch-off lottery and just head home. I wonder how the can survive.

Manasquan borough council did everything it could to prevent the men from gathering when the gathering first started. Each time, federal law trumped local xenophobia and they threw in the towel because all their local laws an litigation would simply waste resources. But the hatred some residents had for these undocumented was chronicle in the weekly newspaper for months.

I have noticed that the men are orderly, do not congregate in groups of more than six or eight and bother no one. The: do not make noise, litter or ca attention to themselves except when a pick-up truck pulls in the lot. Throughout the U.S. businesses cannot attract the laborers to do the kinds of work these men want to do. We need to reform immigration laws so these men can get hired, pay taxes and further boost the economy.

Jose misses Mexico and said the problem there is that “the are no jobs or money.” At 43, is quite Americanized in dres looks and lingo. He simply said, “Life here is good.”

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**RELIGION NOTES**

**GRACE LUTHERAN CHURCH SUMMER HOURS**

Grace Lutheran Church in Bayonne will hold its summer hours until Sunday. Services now start at 10 a.m. with choir practice at 9 a.m. Morning Bible Study on Sundays begins at 9:45 a.m. The public is invited to attend.

**ST. ROCCO’S CHURCH FLEA MARKET**

St. Rocco’s Church will hold an indoor flea market this Sunday from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. at the parish social center, 42nd Street and Kennedy Boulevard, North Bergen. Admission is free and vendors are needed. For information, call (201) 854-6507.

**OLG FLEA MARKET/BOOK SALE**

Our Lady of Grace Church, 400 Willow Ave., Hoboken, hosts its 8th annual Flea Market and Used Book Sale this Sunday from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. The event will take place in the Willow Ave. parking lot between Fourth and Fifth streets. Vendor space is still available at $30 per table. Please call (201) 659-0369 for reservations and more information.

**MOUNT PIGAH FAMILY AND FRIENDS DAY**

Mount Pisgah A.M.E. Church will hold its Family and Friends Day this Sunday at 10 a.m. at the church, 354 Forrest St., Jersey City. The theme is “Lives Rooted in God’s Unchanging Grace Can Never Be Uprooted.” For information, call (201) 435-3680.

**JERUSALEM MISSIONARY BAPTIST CHURCH**

The Jerusalem Missionary Baptist Church, at 106-108 Atlantic St. See Religion Notes page 17.