

Friday, April 10, 2009 12:11 PM CDT

## Most local churches won't perform gay marriage rites

By MARY STEGMEIR, Courier Staff Writer

EVANSDALE --- When Stacilyn Chananie-Hill learned last week that Iowa same-sex couples would be able to apply for marriage licenses at the end of the month, she immediately began planning a re-commitment ceremony with her partner, Ruth.

The Evansdale pair pledged their love in 2006 at a church in southern Illinois. In May, they will renew their vows, this time with an Iowa marriage license.

"Although our original ceremony came with a great deal of joy and celebration, the fact that we are (now) recognized brings a sense of peace and finality to the table," Chananie-Hill said. "We finally have the legal protections. This is a peace-of-mind issue."

It's also a spiritual one.

Like many of her heterosexual counterparts, Chananie-Hill wants her nuptials blessed by a higher power. And even though the state has sanctioned same-sex marriage, most churches have yet to open their doors to gay and lesbian partnerships. Cedar Valley pastors expect the recent court ruling to renew discussions about their marriage policies at the local and denominational levels.

For many ministers, navigating the "I do" question is tricky. St. Timothy's United Methodist Church in Cedar Falls accepts members of all sexual orientations and gender identities but will not sanctify same-sex unions.

"The official stance of the church is that homosexual acts are not compatible with the teachings of Jesus," said the Rev. Dick Clark.

"We openly declare that we welcome and affirm gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender persons, but unfortunately we are still not able to participate in their wedding ceremonies," Clark said.

The Rev. Maureen Doherty, of St. Andrews Episcopal Church in Waverly, finds herself in a similar situation. Her faith's tenets prevent her from performing marriage rites for gay couples, even though Doherty, a lesbian herself, seeks to include gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered individuals in all other aspects of her worship community.

"In this diocese, we have permission to do a blessing," she said. "But I won't be doing same-sex marriages because, as a priest in the Episcopal Church, I'm bound by canons of my church."

Changing church policy is a slow process. Some Christian denominations, like Catholicism, have long renounced gay marriage, while other religions have been debating the issue for more than a decade. In a few instances, the decision falls on the shoulders of individual pastors or congregations. For example, the parent institution of First Congregational United Church of Christ in Waterloo supports gay marriage, but the Rev. Timothy Ensworth said he is not comfortable performing same-sex unions at the local sanctuary.

"At this point, I don't think I'll be changing my position, but I think it's something that the congregation may want to revisit," he said. "Certainly, if and when we were ever asked to perform a same-sex marriage, we'll have discussion."

There will be no deliberations at the Unitarian Universalist Society of Black Hawk County. The faith has performed commitment ceremonies for more than 20 years, and the Rev. Eva Cameron is excited to bless the marriages of same-sex couples.

"Oftentimes, in past weddings for couples who are gay or lesbian, we mentioned the fact that it was not considered a legally binding ceremony in society," she said. "You had to look that pain in the eyes. ☹ It's a very painful thing to have in the midst of a day that's supposed to be joyful."

The Supreme Court's decision will change that reality for Chananie-Hill and her partner. The pair is one of roughly 5,800 same-sex couples who call Iowa home. In May, they will celebrate their love with a local faith community.

"Neither of us are very religious, but we are spiritual, and it's important to us to be able to have our union consecrated in that particular environment," Chananie-Hill said. "We're not asking churches to change their stance, but this time around, it's nice to have some more options."

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Close Window