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Jewish group OK's same-sex marriage

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By Michael Paulson, Globe Staff, 1/16/2004

The Jewish Community Relations Council, the major public policy voice of the Jewish community in Greater Boston, has voted overwhelmingly to endorse same-sex marriage.

The endorsement, by an umbrella organization representing 42 Jewish groups, is part of a growing effort by liberal religious voices to counter the strong opposition to same-sex marriage voiced by the state's Catholic bishops. The bishops of the state's four Catholic dioceses today plan to announce a major campaign to defeat same-sex marriage.

"This is a critical time, and there are a lot of faith groups lining up on the other side, but we will now have the authority to speak in support of the Supreme Judicial Court decision," said Nancy K. Kaufman, executive director of the Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Boston. "We would oppose any effort to compel religious leaders of any faith to perform ceremonies they don't condone, but as long as marriage is recognized as a civil institution, we feel that to deny the right to civilly marry is an act of discrimination against same-sex couples."

Several Jewish organizations had already endorsed same-sex marriage, including the largest Jewish denomination in the country, the Union for Reform Judaism, and the Northeast region of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, the association of Reform rabbis that voted unanimously this week to support same-sex marriage. But same-sex marriage is opposed by leaders of Orthodox Judaism, a denomination that makes up a small minority of Greater Boston's 250,000-member Jewish community. The board of trustees of the Jewish Community Relations Council, made up of Jewish religious and social service organizations and prominent Jewish individuals, on Wednesday night voted 51-5 in favor of the resolution endorsing same-sex marriage.

"The Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Boston urges our elected officials to enact legislation providing for same-sex marriage, in accordance with the recent ruling of the Supreme Judicial Court in the Goodridge case," the organization said. The group said it also "opposes any effort to amend the state Constitution to bar same-sex couples from marrying, or to deny legal benefits to same-sex couples and their families." One supporter of the resolution said she believes same-sex marriage will strengthen the institution of marriage, contrary to the arguments put forward by opponents.

"The Jewish community has been in support of civil liberties because we understand that discrimination against one group leads to discrimination against all," said Rabbi Barbara Penzner of Temple Hillel B'nai Torah, a Reconstructionist Jewish congregation in West Roxbury. "I have officiated at wedding ceremonies for gay couples for 15 years, and I believe that gay marriage will do more for stable families and will not harm one single heterosexual marriage."

Same-sex marriage has become a hotly contested issue in Massachusetts because of a ruling by the state Supreme Judicial Court in November declaring that "barring an individual from the protections, benefits, and obligations of civil marriage solely because that person would marry a person of the same sex violates the Massachusetts Constitution." Gay rights advocates say the state must now issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples; opponents are pushing for a constitutional amendment that would bar same-sex marriage, and the state Senate has asked the Supreme Judicial Court if civil unions would satisfy its ruling.

The leader of the Orthodox opposition to the Jewish Community Relations Council vote, Rabbi Gershon C. Gewirtz of Young Israel synagogue in Brookline, declined to comment. The Coalition for Marriage referred calls to Rabbi Chaim Schwartz of Agudath Israel of New England, an Orthodox advocacy organization, who said, "This is an issue we believe is bringing about decadence in society." "It's not that we do not believe in the civil rights of gay couples – we believe each person should be able to live in this great country – but we don't believe in calling it marriage," Schwartz said. "It's morally incorrect, and what's next? Bestiality? Marrying a

dog? Marrying your cat?"

The resolution was welcomed by the leaders of the Religious Coalition for the Freedom to Marry, a multifaith organization.

"This is hugely important, and it reflects the broad base of support for civil marriage within the Jewish community," said Rabbi Devon A. Lerner, coalition cochairman. "It has been difficult for us to counter the large voice of the Catholic Church, but our supporters represent thousands of people, and we believe there's a very large constituency of people of faith who are in support of civil marriage."

The Religious Coalition for the Freedom to Marry is supported by 500 clergy and congregations from a variety of religious denominations who endorse gay marriage. Among the most prominent supporters are the Unitarian Universalist Association and the president of the Massachusetts conference of the United Church of Christ.

But the religious voices of supporters of gay marriage have been overshadowed by a chorus of opposition to gay marriage from leaders of the state's largest religious denomination, the Catholic Church, as well as from evangelical and African-American Protestant leaders.

The Catholic bishops of Massachusetts today plan to unveil an aggressive strategy to defeat same-sex marriage. They plan to outline steps they will take in trying to persuade lay Catholics to urge legislators to pass an amendment to the state Constitution that would define marriage as a union of one man and one woman.

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