

Christian vendors locked out of wedding business

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Working in the wedding business always has been stressful but now there are new worries for Christians who hold a traditional view of marriage – they could be sued, fined or even put out of business if they refuse to provide service to a same-sex couple.

Just in the last two years, dozens of cake makers, photographers, florists and even farmers have been forced by state governments to provide their services to same-sex couples wanting to get “married.”

If they refuse, they are told they must offer their services to both heterosexual and homosexual couples, or not offer them at all.

For Cynthia and Robert Gifford, owners of [Liberty Ridge Farm](#) in Schaghticoke, New York, it was an easy decision. While their main business is growing vegetables, they occasionally host marriage ceremonies in the lower level of their house and outdoors in a field. When a lesbian couple called to book the farm for their “wedding,” Cynthia politely declined.

But the couple secretly recorded the phone conversation and then immediately filed a complaint with the New York Division of Human Rights. Liberty Ridge Farm was fined \$13,000 and ordered to start serving same-sex clients or none at all.

“We have decided not to hold wedding ceremonies at all and we are not going to hold them on the farm until we are allowed to choose who we contract with,” Cynthia Gifford told WND. The couple, who are devout Christians, hired an attorney with Alliance Defending Freedom, which specializes in religious liberty cases. They are now appealing their case to state court.

Their lawyer, James Trainor, said the state of New York is stomping all over the First Amendment rights of Christian business owners.

“The end result of it, if a state agency is compelling them to host these ceremonies, it’s a form of compelled speech where the state is saying ‘you must do this’ and a casual observer (of the ceremony) would think ‘oh they must believe in this’ when in fact they don’t,” he said.

But the Giffords are not the only Christians being hauled into courtrooms because they won’t bend to their state’s new definition of marriage. Cases have popped up in Colorado, Illinois, Oregon, Hawaii, Vermont, New Jersey, Washington and several other states (see list at end of story).

Jack Phillips owns and operates Masterpiece Cakeshop in Lakewood, Colorado, and has been in business since 1993. He pours his creative spirit into each cake, which he considers a form of artistic expression.

Two local men approached him in 2012 and asked for a wedding cake, which Phillips said was against his conscience. He told them he had no problem making them birthday cakes, cookies, brownies, shower cakes — anything but a wedding cake, which he believes should be only for a man and a woman.

Phillips said he doesn’t see his decision as discriminating against the two homosexual men. Rather, he is discriminating against the event for which the men want the cake to be dedicated. He says his work is inspired by his faith in Jesus Christ.

“The most important thing I think about when I wake up and go to work is I want to know that what I’m doing is pleasing to Him,” Phillips told CBN News in a recent interview. “I want to honor Him because that’s the most important thing.”

The Colorado Civil Rights Division ordered him to reverse his policy, educate his employees on how to serve all clients equally and submit quarterly compliance reports to make sure he has

fully removed his religious views from his business decisions. The decision was upheld by an administrative law judge.

"I think the state has made it very clear. Jack's First Amendment rights, Jack's freedom to express himself or more importantly, not express himself, must bow to the complainants' message," said Nicole Martin, the ADF attorney representing Phillips. "And all I can say is what that looks like to me is something very frightening, and that's nothing more than diversity through conformity, and that's not diversity at all."

Phillips is now appealing his case to the Colorado Court of Appeals.

"In this case, we're going to find out if the First Amendment has a future in America," Martin said.

Cynthia Gifford said she felt like her family farm may have been targeted, because it is Christian-owned, by homosexual activists trying to push their agenda.

"This was the first time we'd encountered this. I didn't want to make any assumptions but, given the circumstances, with it being tape-recorded and then immediately filing a complaint, it makes me wonder," she said.

Gifford, like Phillips, also has been ordered by the judge to provide sensitivity training to her employees.

"I need to instruct my employees in the state's definition of marriage," she said. "So I have to instruct them in something I don't even believe in. No, I have not done that."

She said Liberty Ridge Farm has always hosted receptions and parties for same-sex couples but draws the line at having a wedding "ceremony" for a gay couple, which violates her religious beliefs.

The state has allowed her to hold the wedding ceremonies that she has already contracted to provide. But after that, she must shut down that part of her business unless she wins her case on appeal. Since most of her clients want to hold the ceremony and the reception on the farm, being able to only hold receptions will definitely hurt her business. The question is how much.

"I think not holding ceremonies is going to hurt the wedding business, but we're not going to know that till 2015 and 2016, we're going to wait for this to go through the courts and hopefully be able to return to doing the ceremonies," she said. "We've got God on our side."

Her attorney is more reserved in his outlook. He said the track record for those who have appealed their cases in New York has not been good.

"The way the appeals process is set up in New York with these types of administrative decisions, I'll be candid, it's an uphill battle," he said. "The courts give a lot of deference to the findings of the administrative law judges, who in this case did not even consider our constitutional rights or the Giffords' religious beliefs, so we're confident that the appellate court will give those things due consideration."

"We're hopeful they will see things our way but it will be a while, probably next summer or fall before we get a decision."

Peter Sprigg, senior fellow for policy studies at Family Research Council, said religious liberty is on the wane in a post-Christian America.

"What we see from those who deny this is an infringement on First Amendment rights is that they have a very narrow view of religious freedom," he said. "It's what I call the 'four walls view' of religious freedom."

To those who hold this view, a Christian has the right to religious liberty as long as they stay inside their church or home.

"But as soon as you step outside of those four walls you no longer have any freedom to believe what you want. You don't have the freedom to act on those beliefs," Sprigg said. "And that was not what our founders had in mind at all. The First Amendment says you have the 'free exercise' of your religious beliefs and if you're just gathering for services but not practicing your faith in your everyday life, how is that religious freedom?"

Cynthia Gifford says more and more of the wedding vendors she deals with are worried about the future.

"The other day I was driving a disc jockey out to the ceremony site because we are still holding those ceremonies we had contracted out before the complaint was filed, and he told me he read about our situation and he agrees with us. He is a Christian and works as part of a pool of DJs and he would prefer not to book same-sex weddings," she said. "I think anybody in the wedding business that are Christians hold that belief, that a marriage is between one man and one woman, and I hope they don't get in the same situation we're in because they're vulnerable."

Sprigg said same-sex couples have nothing to lose when a Christian business declines to provide a service. But the Christian business has potentially everything at stake.

"The homosexual activists will say, 'Oh you want to take us back to the way it was in the Jim Crow South.' We're not in any way saying anything like that. The cost to the same-sex people is they go to the next business down the street. There are no shortage of businesses that will be happy to take their money," Sprigg said. "But the cost for the Christian business owner is to offer their services in a way that violates their conscience or go out of business and that's a far more serious threat."

Sprigg said the dark cloud Christian entrepreneurs are seeing hovering over the wedding industry isn't likely to recede anytime soon.

"I'm afraid it is going to gain steam because the ultimate goal of the homosexual activist is not just to obtain equal legal rights but they want to obtain a society where nobody ever says anything, anywhere, that implies their relationships are different in any way from heterosexual relationships or in any way harmful," he said. "They really want to stifle any of that discussion in the public square."

Sprigg said it's ironic that in claiming to be in favor of tolerance, the activists are shutting down a whole segment of artists from expressing themselves.

"These vendors, their work involves expressive conduct, the photographer is an artist depicting the story of this couple, and even the baker is trying to create something that is unique and special to that couple," he said. "So it's not just a matter of picking something off the shelf and handing it to the customer and that's why the lawyers have tried to frame it in a context not only of freedom of religion but of freedom of speech."

In the end, Phillips says he would rather go to jail than be forced to make wedding cakes for same-sex couples.

"This is not what they taught us in civics class," he said. "They could do this in other countries. Not here."

Below is a sampling of recent cases in which Christians have been sued, fined or forced out of business for refusing to provide a service to a same-sex couple.

- New Mexico Christian photographers Jon and Elaine Huguenin were sued by two lesbians under the state's "sexual orientation" law after declining to photograph the lesbians' "commitment ceremony."
- The Ocean Grove Camp Meeting Association in New Jersey, was convicted of "discrimination" after two lesbians, Harriet Bernstein and Luisa Paster, decided to hold their commitment ceremony on the Methodist-run association's popular family friendly boardwalk. After that, Ocean Grove quit the wedding-hosting business.

- The Aloha Bed & Breakfast in Hawaii, a Christian business, was forced to “accommodate” two Southern California lesbians after a judge ruled the B&B violated state law when the owner told Taeko Bufford and Diane Cervelli she wasn’t comfortable having them stay together in her home due to her religious beliefs. Aloha has since been ordered by the state “to provide a room to any same-sex couple that wishes to stay there.”
- In Illinois, Christian B&B owners Jim and Beth Walder are being sued by homosexual activist Todd Wathen, who demands monetary damages, attorneys’ fees and “an order directing [the Walders] to cease and desist from any violation” of the state’s Human Rights Act.
- Vermont’s Wildflower Inn paid a settlement and shut down its wedding reception business after the ACLU won a \$10,000 civil penalty for two lesbians. The settlement also requires the inn’s owners to place \$20,000 in a charitable trust for the lesbians.
- Oregon’s “Sweet Cakes by Melissa” bakery shut down after declining to bake for a “gay wedding.”
- The owners of Indiana’s “Just Cookies” were charged with “discrimination” under the city’s “sexual orientation” law for refusing to fill a special order for “rainbow cookies” for an LGBT group.
- Iowa’s “Victoria’s Cake Cottage,” whose owner Victoria Childress refused to provide a wedding cake for a homosexual couple out of “convictions for their lifestyle.”
- Oregon’s “Fleur Cakes,” joined “Sweet Cakes” in refusing to bake a wedding cake for a same-sex couple and is being boycotted by homosexual activist groups.
- Washington state’s “Arlene’s Flowers,” whose owner Barronelle Stutzman declined to provide flowers for the wedding of a same-sex couple who had long frequented her shop, faces two lawsuits after refusing to fill an order because of her “relationship with Jesus Christ.”
- Texas’ “All Occasion Party Place,” a Fort Worth venue, refuses, on religious grounds, to rent out a banquet hall for same-sex wedding receptions.
- A Christian T-shirt maker in Kentucky was targeted by the Lexington-Fayette Urban County Human Rights Commission for refusing to print “gay pride” designs for a local homosexual group.
- Chris Penner, owner of the Twilight Room Annex bar in Portland, was fined \$400,000 under the Oregon Equality Act for excluding transsexual men who, dressed as women, had been alienating other customers by using the women’s restroom. According to the Seattle Times, 11 people – calling themselves the “T-girls” – “will get the money, with awards ranging from \$20,000 to 50,000.”
- The Catholic Church was forced to shut down successful adoption agencies in several states because it opposes adoption by homosexual couples.
- Christians have been kicked out of college counseling programs because they oppose homosexuality and therapists are prohibited by law from helping young people overcome unwanted same-sex attractions.