

Interview with Rev. Bill Sinkford
January 30, 2017
Rev. Linda Simmons

Rev. Bill Sinkford, current minister of the First Unitarian Church of Portland, was at the forefront of the gay rights movement within the Unitarian Universalist denomination both as a minister and then as the President of the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) from 2001-2009. Rev. Sinkford, as the first black man to become president of a mainline, primarily white denomination, thought the issue that would define his presidency would be race. It was not. It was gay rights and gay marriage.

Rev. Sinkford explains that the UUA was an early advocate for affirmation of gay and lesbian rights. Support for gay and lesbian folks was one of the first Actions of Immediate Witness at the Unitarian Universalist (UU) General Assembly (the yearly annual meeting for our denomination) in the 1960s. Actions of Immediate Witness profess convictions grounded in the values of Unitarian Universalism and are used as basis for public statements and UUs are urged to act on them.

In 1996, a Resolution of Immediate Witness came to the UUA: Support of the Right to Marry for Same Sex Couples. Many in the UU world thought marriage would be too hard to achieve, that we should focus on something more attainable. The gay and lesbian community was clear that this is where they wanted denominational support. As Rev. Sinkford notes, "We had to learn to be good allies."

There were cases moving through the MA courts around this time. In 2003, beyond all expectation, MA handed down a ruling in favor of marriage. Unitarian Universalists pulled together after 2003, demonstrating, writing, making calls, being counted, to ensure that the MA legislature complied with this ruling, which they were not initially inclined to do.

Rev. Sinkford had the privilege of marrying Hillary Goodridge, the lead plaintiff in the Massachusetts marriage case (*Goodridge vs the Dept of Public Health: [Legal at Last](#)*), which paved the way for marriage equality in other states. Hillary and her wife were married in 2004 at the UUA Headquarters at 25 Beacon St at that time.

Rev. Sinkford commented, "For a long time we were the only mainline denomination to affirm marriage equality (since 1996). We were out in support of the queer community before anyone else. The United Church of Christ was second in 2005.

"It is a proud chapter in our history. We came together in sound ways to make our values real. It became an essential identity for us. Our support of gay marriage and the LGBTQ community gave us a center."

This center still guides us today as we continue to stand for the rights of all people to be treated with equality and dignity.