

Civil unions seen as marriage

By Pat Gee

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After advocating for same-gender marriage and gay rights for 41 years, Tim Earhart, president of [Dignity USA-Honolulu](#), said the final passage Wednesday of the civil-unions bill by the state Senate was an unequivocal victory.

"No doubt about it, it's the equivalence of marriage," said Earhart, whose gay rights advocacy group pushed for the bill. Even though the wording of the bill did not include "marriage," he said "we have to be practical. This is a huge win. It gives us all the benefits and responsibilities of marriage."

Senate Bill 232 gives same-sex couples virtually all of the rights of married couples after contentious controversy the past few years. Gov. Neil Abercrombie is expected to sign the bill into law on or about March 3, making Hawaii one of seven states to allow civil unions without authorizing same-sex marriage itself.

"I came to Hawaii to minister to gay people" in 1971, Earhart said, as pastor of the Metropolitan Community Church of Honolulu. It closed its doors in 2005 after other churches "picked up the banner" in welcoming gays, said Earhart, an elder of First Christian Church of Honolulu.

"This is what's been missing for gay people," he said of the civil-unions legislation. "We've never had this dimension of a relationship. If we could get married, that's so valuable and encouraging for gays and lesbians to do the hard work" of being committed to a long-term relationship. "Many couples sell out for second best by hooking up on a very temporary basis because there's no protection under the law.

"Marriage is a metaphor for our relationship with God. God put it in our hearts to be bonded to another human being so we could see what it is like to have a relationship with a deity, with God.

"We are asking for ratification and validation" by society that the feelings gay people have toward each

other are the same feelings heterosexual couples have, he said.

In response to opponents who are worried that same-sex lifestyles would be taught to public school students with no option for parents to remove their child, Earhart said homosexuality should be part of sex education because some don't see where they fit into a largely heterosexual society.

"It's not going to be one or the other. Now there's only heterosexual relationships (taught). At least 10 percent of us are being left out. It's making us feel bad because it leaves us out of the equation."

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