

Advocate.com exclusive - posted, March 29, 2005: [http://advocate.com/exclusive\\_detail.asp?id=14948](http://advocate.com/exclusive_detail.asp?id=14948)

## When our marriage was condemned

**In 1968 a white pastor-in-training married to an African-American woman was a flash point for bigotry in their Richmond, Va., home. In 2005 that pastor is still sharing God's message of love, now including same-sex couples**

By the Reverend F. Russell Baker, United Church of Christ

*First Congregational Church., Benton Harbor, MI*

Over the Christmas holiday of 1968 Anita Patterson and I were married in New York City. We then went to Richmond, Va., where I was a senior at Union Theological Seminary, so I could complete my seminary education in the spring of 1969.

Our living in Richmond had great historical significance because it was about a year earlier that the U.S. Supreme Court said that we could live in Virginia as a married couple. In 1967, in a suit brought by Richard and Mildred Loving—who had been married in Washington, D.C., in 1958, but were arrested and convicted of breaking state law when they returned home to Caroline County, Va. (which borders Richmond on the east)—the Supreme Court had said that the miscegenation laws of 13 Southern states were unconstitutional. This new ruling allowed married couples of mixed ethnic races to reside in these states.

The uproar our presence caused in Richmond—a white man and an African-American woman—was considerable. We learned to avoid walking along major thoroughfares because drivers would be likely to show very erratic behavior that might result in a serious accident, like running headlong into one of Richmond's concrete telephone poles. (You may laugh, but this nearly happened.)

We also discovered that cashiers suddenly couldn't count, for on one occasion we were given a much larger amount of money as change than we should have been. Anita tried to tell the cashier of her mistake, but the cashier became belligerent and even insulting as she insisted she couldn't possibly have given us the wrong change. There were still other times that tried our patience as we wondered why it was raining on a perfectly sunny day only to discover that someone had spit on us—again.

Lest I leave the impression that our stay in Richmond only created negative impulses in others, that is not the case. There were those, including many of my classmates at the seminary, who not only accepted us, but created such lasting friendships that Anita and I have considered retiring in Richmond, when that time comes in our lives.

I comment on this because I remember all the hoopla the press created at the time and the

numerous surveys that decisively showed that 80% of the nation was thoroughly opposed to anyone becoming married to a person of a different race, especially whites marrying African-Americans. This is most startling since I know for a fact that some of the stalwarts of segregation have had out-of-wedlock children by their African-American mistresses. But I also know that the nation, as a whole, has come to accept, tolerate, and even occasionally rejoice in marriages of people who are of different ethnic backgrounds. This is certainly progress.

All of this comes to mind because last year we endured one of the most negative political campaigns I have ever witnessed. Indeed, just as people were worked up by unscrupulous politicians about interracial marriage in the 1960s—politicians whose only contribution was spreading fear and mistrust and hatred so that they could solidify their political base—we had something similar occurring during this last campaign.

We had 11 states outlawing marriages between people of the same sex.

This vote was spurred on by the manipulations, once more, of politicians who easily peddled hate and mistrust for those who might be different. These politicians were joined by numerous religious leaders noted for their narrow legalistic religious traditions and their judgments on the behaviors of others, vehemently criticizing those who they could not understand. Some of the same segregationists of the past are now the enthusiastic proponents of these new anti-gay marriage laws.

As I make this statement I am reminded of the hate mail I received in 1968 by people who were “religious” leaders—these die-hard segregationists who kept insisting that because of Noah’s son Ham, who was supposedly black, the races should therefore be kept separate. In other words, scripture and religion have long been used to justify all sorts of bigotry.

On the other hand, if one listens carefully to the gay and lesbian community, one discovers that often after much turmoil, a person comes to the conclusion that they were created this way. Now I would not presume to understand how this is possible, because I, for a fact, don’t understand how I was created as I am. But I do know that God’s creation is good and that we might have to learn, with some difficulty at times, to continue the affirmation of that goodness. No one ever said understanding God’s will for us would be easy.

But then I understand a common phrase of Jesus: “You have heard that it was said...But I say to you...” which was used to counter the legalistic interpretations of the religious authorities of his day, as well as lay the foundation of love and acceptance of those who may be very different from the norm. The example of the Good Samaritan comes to mind, as Jesus said we need to accept others, care for others, and love others just as God accepts, cares for, and loves us.

Eleven states, in righteous indignation, have blocked the possibility of two people affirming and legalizing their love for each other. There will come a time when we will look back upon these actions for the shame it is. I hope it will be soon.

*This article originally appeared, in slightly different form, in The Michigan Citizen. Baker is a United Church of Christ pastor in Benton Harbor, Mich.*