



News Brief • April 2005

■ **ICON Educational Blitz – The Results!**

Seven Indiana Senators and Representatives now see the world a little differently. It's not that the heavens opened and they suddenly changed their minds about the plight of gay and transgender Hoosiers. But they did have quiet, thorough conversations with key religious leaders about the need to halt discrimination against gay and transgender people.

Over the winter months, teams of ICON volunteers — people of faith from across the State, both clergy and laity — sat down to meet with their own legislators in key swing-vote districts.

For example, in Goshen, Indiana (near the Michigan border), a group of six ICON volunteers met with Senator Marvin Riegsecker at Assembly Mennonite Church. They walked the Senator through ICON's eight-part presentation. They noted that, in Indiana, it is still lawful to fire someone simply for being gay or transgender, and pointed out that about 20% of all gay and transgender Hoosiers have lost at least one job for this reason — and more than 70% fear losing their jobs.

They also directed Senator Riegsecker's attention to strong religious support for protecting the basic civil rights of gay and transgender people, citing ICON's letter with 250 signatures from clergy across the State and official statements from many religious groups.

Noting his "traditional Mennonite upbringing," Senator Riegsecker talked about how hard it can be to represent a diverse electorate, while remaining true to his core beliefs. He said he realized it was important to make that distinction, then shared some recent life-changing experiences from participating in a Mennonite program called "walking in the shoes of the peacemaker." He acknowledged that his views on issues of diversity have been evolving and expressed an openness to learning more,

without making any commitment regarding how he would vote.

This is the kind of conversation that can create change in the world! In the past, ICON has focused on mass educational events during legislative session. Although these events are important, they provide only fleeting contact with our legislators, as they run from vote to vote. Sit-down conversations provide an opportunity for genuine exchange.

Another group of ICON volunteers met with Senator Gary Dillon of Huntington (north-central Indiana) at the Manchester Church of the Brethren. Senator Dillon expressed his view that job discrimination wasn't a problem for gay and transgender people. Stating that society was trending away from such discrimination, he said this problem would solve itself. ICON's volunteers responded with both data and personal stories, and reminded him that many of his constituents care about this issue as a matter of basic justice.

Another group of ICON volunteers met with Rep. Michael Murphy of Cumberland at his Statehouse office. Rep. Murphy expressed surprise that people could still be fired for being gay or transgender. He was under the impression that the Equal Protection Clauses of the U.S. and Indiana constitutions prohibit such firings. ICON's volunteers shared several real-life stories of actual firings. Rep. Murphy expressed concern, but said he needed further study before deciding how he would vote on this issue. We are grateful to First Baptist Church of Cumberland for providing logistical support for the meeting.

Other groups of ICON volunteers held similar meetings with Senator Luke Kenley (Noblesville), Senator Gregory Server (Evansville), Rep. Phillip Pflum (Richmond), and Rep. John Ulmer (Elkhart). ICON members should be aware that Senator Teresa Lubbers, who represents an Indianapolis district with a significant gay and

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ICON volunteers who met with Sen. Riegsecker: Merritt Gardner, Sandy Fribley, Rev. Gordon Gibson, Mary Gilbert, Pastor Karl Shelly, and Glenn Gilbert. All are from the Goshen/Elkhart area.

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trans population, refused to meet with ICON voters from her district. She said she already had enough information about discrimination against gay and transgender people.

To each volunteer who participated in this Educational Blitz, each group coordinator who invested so much time and effort, and each congregation that hosted training events or the actual meetings with legislators, **ICON wants to say a very big thanks!** You are heroes in one of our generation's greatest civil rights struggles!

Incidentally, just a few months ago, one of our neighboring states (Illinois) enacted legislation that now protects its gay and transgender citizens from job discrimination. May it soon happen in Indiana!

■ Into the Fray?

Even as ICON volunteers met with legislators to talk about job discrimination, the political landscape was shifting dramatically. Several state courts have ruled that laws denying marriage to same-sex couples violate their state constitutions' guarantee of equal protection under the law. This has provoked a powerful backlash from the religious right, which is now trying to enact constitutional amendments prohibiting same-sex marriage.

On March 22, Indiana's legislature passed just such a measure. The bill, known as SJR-7, would amend our constitution to specify that marriage is reserved for opposite-sex couples. But the bill doesn't stop there. It goes on to make it unconstitutional to allow civil unions or domestic partnerships for gay couples in Indiana.

Absent these rights, gay couples face numerous legal hurdles that straight spouses take for granted. Gay couples have no legal right to visit each other in the hospital, no legal right to inherit their spouse's estate, no legal procedure for determining custody of children in the unfortunate



Rep. Michael Murphy chats with ICON volunteers in his Statehouse office.

event of a divorce, no legal right to sue if their spouse dies due to medical malpractice, no legal right to Social Security death benefits, no legal right to file a joint income tax return — and the list goes on and on. A straight couple married for one day has more than 1,000 legal rights, while a gay couple together for fifty years has none.

The gay and trans community has responded vigorously to SJR-7. A group of over a thousand rallied at the Statehouse on March 8. A group of almost 200 staged acts of nonviolent civil disobedience at the March 14 House Hearing on SJR-7. At the House Hearing, opponents of SJR-7 wore pink triangles (in remembrance of Nazi persecution of gay people), went to their knees in prayers for justice, and then chanted "SHAME! SHAME!" when legislators voted in favor of SJR-7.

The question now arises whether ICON will stand with the gay and trans community on SJR-7. ICON's bylaws state that its purpose is to "create positive change through education and social action, so that [gay and transgender people] will be able to live in peace and equality." Historically, ICON has focused on job discrimination. With the passage of SJR-7, however, the constitutional marriage question will dominate the civil rights landscape for the foreseeable future.

The passage of SJR-7 launches a three-year process. Two years from now, the legislature must vote again on

These pictures show part of the crowd that came out to protest SJR-7 at the Rock Indiana! Rally on March 8. The group was estimated to be over 1,000 strong, despite the cold and snow.



Photos Courtesy: TheQuotableQueer.com

SJR-7. If it passes a second time, then Hoosier voters must vote on SJR-7. Only then will the constitution be amended.

ICON's Steering Committee believes SJR-7 constitutes unacceptable discrimination and should be vigorously opposed. *We have always agreed, however, that ICON will never tackle a significant new issue without consulting with its membership.* Therefore, to assist the Steering Committee in making a final decision, we ask all our readers to please complete and return the survey below. If you do not return

the survey, the Steering Committee will assume you concur in its recommendation to oppose SJR-7.

Provided our members and friends affirm the Steering Committee's recommendation, ICON will become a powerful force in the struggle against SJR-7. ***Because the impetus for SJR-7 is entirely from the religious right and based on religious arguments, ICON's faith-based identity puts it in a unique position to present an alternative point of view.***

House actions: Protesters pray; Rev. Jeff Miner (seated, center) is ejected from the hearing; Caskets symbolize the "Death Amendment."



Photos courtesy Wilson E. Allen.

Please return this survey **by April 15** to ICON, 2950 E. 55th Place, Indianapolis, IN 46220. If you require more time to respond for your congregation, just let us know. We will inform you of the survey results as soon as tabulated.

Survey

1 Neatly print your name/s and current contact info.

N a m e

Address _____

Phone _____

Email _____

2 If you are submitting this survey as the official representative of a congregation who is a member of ICON, please neatly print the name of your congregation.

3 If you are submitting this survey on your own behalf, please check off any that apply:

- I am an individual ICON member
- We are Household ICON members
- I have signed past ICON clergy letters advocating civil rights for GLBT people
- I am an interested clergy person
- I am an interested individual
- Other (please specify):

4 Should ICON actively oppose SJR-7 (which would constitutionally ban same-sex marriage, as well as civil unions and domestic partnerships)?

Yes No Undecided

5 If you answered "No" to Question 4, please answer this question: if ICON does decide (based on survey results) to oppose SJR-7, would you (or your congregation) likely withdraw your support from ICON?

Yes No Undecided

6 If you answered "Yes" to Question 4, please answer this question: if ICON decides (based on survey results) *not* to oppose SJR-7, would you (or your congregation) likely withdraw your support from ICON?

Yes No Undecided

7 Currently, ICON is organized as a 501(c)(3) corporation, i.e., we pay no income taxes and donations to us (other than membership fees) are tax deductible. If ICON decides to oppose SJR-7, it may need to reorganize into a different form of nonprofit corporation. We would still pay no income taxes, but donations would no longer be deductible. If ICON reorganizes, how would you (or your congregation) respond:

- Reorganize if necessary
- Opposed to reorganizing
- Undecided

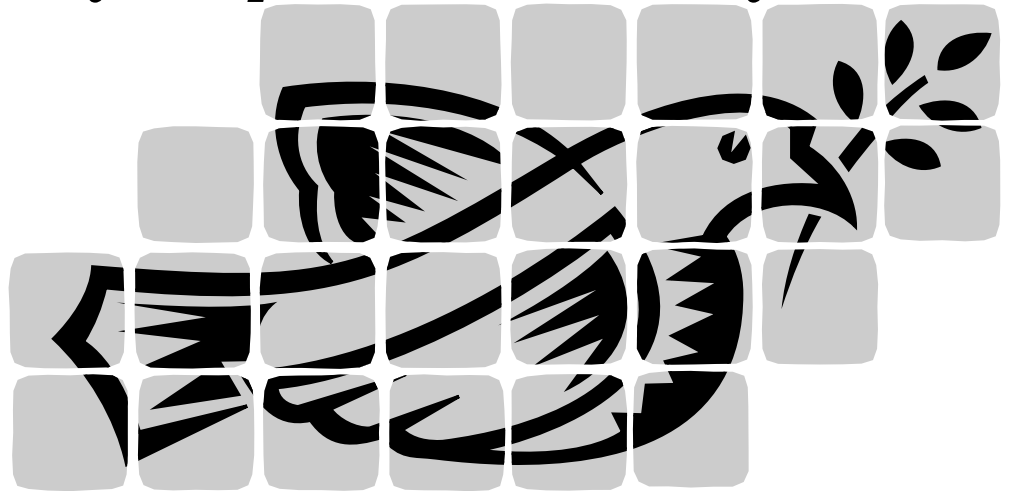


ICON

*Interfaith Coalition on
Nondiscrimination*

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- ***Educational Blitz Results Report***
- ***We need your opinion: ICON Survey***



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