

# Homosexuals Take Over Arkansas Town While The Pastors Sleep

## Perspectives: Eureka! Exclaim gay activists



Ed Vitagliano - Guest Columnist [OneNewsNow.com](http://OneNewsNow.com) November 13, 2007

**Vitagliano**

It's a little town in Arkansas with a name connected to Christian traditions by virtue of events like The Great Passion Play, and places to visit such as Christ of the Ozarks, the Bible Museum, and Thorncrown Chapel. Now, however, the name of Eureka Springs is also connected to controversy over the homosexual agenda.

### Corridor

If that sounds incongruous, it also came as a surprise to the Rev. Philip Wilson, pastor of First Christian Church in Eureka Springs, when he found out what the city council had done. In May the town's leadership unanimously approved an ordinance that allows homosexual couples to register as domestic partners, making Eureka Springs the first city in Arkansas to have such a registry.

Rev. Wilson has led an effort to resist the council's decision. "This is an issue of City Hall, the city council with six votes making a moral decision for an entire city," he told KTHV, the CBS affiliate in Little Rock.

### 'We deserve civil rights'

Those in favor of the domestic partner registry, like Mayor Dani Wilson, have lauded the council. "It was an historic day for the city of Eureka Springs and the state of Arkansas," she told the *Carroll County News* as 18 gay couples signed up at city hall on June 22, the day the registry officially opened. "And I'm proud of what we have accomplished."

What is it that supporters of the registry think has been accomplished? Although *The Morning News*, a newspaper in northwest Arkansas, said Mayor Wilson and other members of the city council did not consider the registry a gay issue -- cohabiting

heterosexual couples could also register -- other supporters of the vote clearly did.

One lesbian couple that registered, Maria Howard and Trella Laughlin, told KTHV, "Gays and lesbians are good people and we deserve civil rights just like everybody else."

However, the domestic partner registry doesn't actually grant anything in the way of civil rights. Mayor Wilson admitted that the certificate of registration "means nothing legally. It holds no legal boundaries or connotations at all."

By virtue of the city council's vote, homosexual couples can go to Eureka Springs and register their partnership and receive a certificate. While some companies like AT&T, Cisco Systems, and Kraft Foods will extend domestic partner benefits on the basis of that certificate, the registry does not confer any legal standing that, for instance, would force other Arkansas towns to recognize the relationship.

"It is just a piece of paper that says these two people are in a relationship and are committed to each other," Mayor Wilson said. "That's all."

### **The church's 'prophetic voice'**

In the opinion of those opposed to the city council's decision, however, that's not all the piece of paper says. It represents a promotion of the homosexual lifestyle.

Rev. Wilson said, "God wants everybody to have the best possible life. Anything that deteriorates from the quality of life, God would like to call us away from that, and I put homosexuality in that context."

It was the church's responsibility, he added, to take a stand against the promotion of homosexuality. "What I've learned out of this is the importance of the prophetic voice of the church," he told *OneNewsNow*. "God calls us as a prophet occasionally, and our job is to speak the words and the message of God -- even, if necessary, in a hostile environment."

There's little doubt that homosexuals play a huge role in the life of Eureka Springs. KTHV said that, of the roughly 2,000 people who live there, about 400 are homosexual. That's a whopping 20 percent of the population -- far in excess of the approximately 2-3 percent of the U.S. population as a whole who are gay or lesbian.

The website [EurekaSprings.com](http://EurekaSprings.com) considers the gay-friendly atmosphere a positive thing. "Sometimes people ask us, 'Is it true that Eureka Springs is a haven for gays and lesbians?' Well, yes," the site says. "Eureka Springs is also a haven for families, church groups, astrologers, lawyers, artists, musicians, accountants ... we're a *diverse* community in every sense of the word." (*Emphasis in original.*)

The website promotes the city's "gay-friendly lodging" as well as locations and even churches which would allow a gay couple to experience a "commitment ceremony" or

"holy union."

### **Tourism threatened**

But that gay-friendly reputation is one of the things that bothers Rev. Wilson. "My sadness is Eureka Springs is being marketed more and more as a homosexual destination," he told KTHV.

Of course, no one is arguing that homosexuals shouldn't be allowed to congregate in a small town and create a gay-friendly culture, as is apparently happening in Eureka Springs. However, that reality is putting the resort town on a collision course with its huge Christian tourism base. For example, for almost 40 years some seven-million people have come from all over the world to see the nation's largest and arguably most popular outdoor drama, the Great Passion Play, which covers the last two weeks of the life of Christ.

Will Eureka Springs' decision to create the domestic partner registry cause that flow to become a trickle?

On July 12, Eureka Springs publicist Ken Rundel told KHBS/KHOG, the ABC affiliates in Fort Smith and Fayetteville, Arkansas, that he had been getting pounded with e-mails protesting the registry -- at least 6,600 of which came from Arkansans who had heard about the vote from the American Family Association (AFA), a family advocacy group based in Mississippi.

"There are people making statements that they're not coming back," Rundel said. "Church groups, youth groups are not coming back because of the activities that we now promote in Eureka Springs."

The EurekaSprings.com website is a perfect example. What it describes as a sign of the city's presumably progressive attitude would make many parents very uneasy: "Walk through Eureka Springs and you'll not only see diversity, but also tolerance and respect for the differences among us. Envision a place where a gallery displaying erotic art and a Bible store stand side by side. Imagine a group of bonneted Quakers parting company politely to pass around two men kissing on a corner."

That's the kind of stuff that will scare away many tourists, according to Rev. Wilson. "The problem is that Eureka Springs is a tourist destination. And our three greatest sources of income are religious groups, families, and weddings," he said. "And not only is this a moral issue and a marriage issue, it's an economic issue."

### **What now?**

Rev. Wilson tried to keep the city council from making what he considers both a moral and an economic mistake. He took out ads in two local newspapers protesting the domestic partner registry and spoke out against it before the city council itself. He also tried to get other churches in Eureka Springs active in the battle. With the exception of one other

church, none of the pastors wanted to get involved.

Rev. Wilson attempted to get voters involved by helping to gather signatures on a petition. That would have made the registry a matter that voters could decide in a referendum, rather than leaving it in the hands of a mayor and city council who were clearly enthusiastic for the gay-friendly measure. However, both petition drives were rejected on technical grounds by Mary Jean Sell, the city clerk.

Rev. Wilson admitted that he'd had difficulties with such matters. "I'm a preacher, not a politician nor an attorney," he said.

But AFA founder and chairman Don Wildmon said concerned citizens in the community could have and should have done more to help Rev. Wilson prevent the council's action.

"This is basically the result of a community refusing to do anything [or to] get involved because this has been going on -- it's been in secret, but it's public knowledge now," Wildmon said. "So it's going to be up to the individuals in Eureka Springs and the surrounding area to try to resolve this situation."

His suggestion? Christians should take the issue to the ballot box. "If they want to preserve their city and what it's known for and the way it's been viewed for scores of years now, I would suggest they get busy replacing the mayor and the city council," he said. "Or at least [call for] a referendum to override this sanctioning of [what is], in essence, civil unions."

John McAteer, sales and marketing director for The Great Passion Play, said there was nothing his organization could do about the council's decision, and he hoped that Christians would not hold the Passion Play responsible.

"We are a shining light in a community of darkness," he told *OneNewsNow*. "And the best thing that a Christian can do is come and support and help us, and what a great mission field we have here." ([See related article](#))

McAteer suggested that Christians could make their voice heard by supporting God-honoring businesses and events in Eureka Springs. "If everyone stays away, this shining light in this community will go out."

*Ed Vitagliano, a regular contributor to OneNewsNow.com, is news editor for [AFA Journal](#), a monthly publication of the American Family Association. This article, printed with permission, appears in the October 2007 issue.*

*Editor's Note: The American Family Association is the parent organization of the American Family News Network, which operates OneNewsNow.com. Opinions expressed in 'Perspectives' columns published by OneNewsNow.com are the sole responsibility of the article's author(s), or of the person(s) or organization(s) quoted therein, and do not necessarily represent those of the staff or management of, or advertisers who support the American Family News Network, OneNewsNow.com, our parent organization or its other affiliates.*

