

# First gay marriage still going strong

## Manitoba couple celebrate 31st anniversary

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It was a low-key wedding with big implications. The couple, both in their 20s, wore street clothes as they stood in front of about 60 people in a Winnipeg church.

The pair spoke to each other with words taken from a Shakespearean sonnet. The minister spoke: "I now pronounce you married."

That was Feb. 11, 1974. Richard North and Chris Vogel, the first Canadian gay couple to attempt a legal marriage, are now days away from celebrating their 31st anniversary.

It happens the same week federal politicians will discuss the issue of same-sex marriage and the Liberal government's historic bill to recognize civil marriage as "the lawful union of two persons."

"The message that we wanted to convey was that homosexuals are not all criminals who molest children — the kinds of ideas that were pretty common in those days. Homosexuals fall in love and form substantial relationships, just as heterosexuals do," North said from the couple's home in Winnipeg.

"That is the essence of marriage. It's about relationships."

Marriage is just one of many gay and lesbian issues that have made "unbelievable" progress during the couple's years together, North said.

Sexual orientation has been added to federal and provincial human rights acts as a prohibited ground of discrimination. Legislation has made common-law couples equal in responsibilities and entitlements. Winnipeg became the first major Canadian city to elect an openly gay mayor.

to marry in 1970.

Vogel and North knew that such a marriage attempt would attract attention in Canada, although they had secular backgrounds and did not have big dreams of a picture-perfect wedding.

They applied for a marriage licence in November 1973. The clerk at the department of vital statistics saw the two men and called her supervisor.

"This is a joke, right?" the supervisor asked, before refusing their application.

Undeterred, the men took their idea to a civil liberties group. Rev. Norm Naylor, a member of the group and a minister at the First Unitarian-Universalist Church of Winnipeg, brought the request before his church's board of trustees.

Rev. Jane Bramadat, who was then the president of the Winnipeg church, said that although there was no real opposition to performing the ceremony — Unitarian churches had already completed various "services of holy union" between gay and lesbian couples — there were concerns about the type of publicity that would be raised by the attempt at a legal marriage.

"We decided whether we were ready or not, we just had to be. Our principles said that the respect and worth of every human is what we believe in," said Bramadat.

Naylor suggested the couple proclaim banns in church as a religious alternative to obtaining a licence. The banns were stated on three Sundays before the marriage.

Vogel and North tried to have their marriage legally recognized by taking Manitoba's registrar of marriages to court. In denying them, a judge used the dictionary definition in his ruling that marriage was between a man and a woman.

"It seems remarkably quick that it's gotten as far as it has, in comparison to the struggles of other minorities," said Vogel, 57, adding that other civil rights struggles have paved the way.

Vogel was part of the gay rights movement three decades ago, when gay marriage was a secondary goal. A fight for visibility overshadowed that for equality.

"Nobody talked about it in those days. Lots of people couldn't say the word (gay), it was considered by almost everybody to be dirty," said North, now 53.

He met Vogel in 1972, in the only Winnipeg bar frequented by gays at the time.

The pair were influenced by Jack Baker, a gay American man who attempted

Changes over the years have since created new legal precedents. Courts in Ontario, Manitoba, Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, Quebec, Saskatchewan, British Columbia and the Yukon have ruled that the current definition of marriage — a union between man and woman exclusive of all others — is unconstitutional.

"We live in a liberal democracy in which there is supposed to be separation of church and state," said North.

"Nobody is suggesting that religious organizations do anything other than what they have always done in terms of marriage within their institutions. They have no right to impose their religious values on the rest of Canadians."

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