

Danforth gives views on gay issues

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Retired U.S. Sen. John C. Danforth made clear Thursday that while he agrees that marriage is only between a man and a woman, there should not be a constitutional amendment banning gay marriage.

"It's nothing more than gay bashing. There's no other reason for it," Danforth said, as he addressed members of the local Log Cabin Republicans, a gay group, at a Central West End restaurant.

Danforth, a Republican who served 18 years in the Senate, said that the constitution - on the federal or state level - was not the place to deal with social values, whether it be gay marriage or abortion rights.

For that reason, Danforth said, he was among the minority in Missouri who voted in August 2004 against the state constitutional amendment defining marriage as only between a man and a woman. That's also why, he has opposed the U.S. Supreme Court's Roe v Wade decision in 1973 that legalized most abortions, he said.

In the case of abortion, the court "took an evolving set of social values and locked them into the (federal) Constitution," Danforth said.

Danforth was critical of public displays of gay marriages, such as crowds of same-sex couples on courthouse steps. "It just looks wrong," he said, while also feeding into the fears of religious conservatives that the nation's moral fiber is fraying.

Danforth, who is an ordained Episcopalian minister, said he wouldn't perform a gay marriage but he would be open to blessing a committed gay couple.

Danforth stopped short of saying he supported civil unions for same sex couples, but said there should be some legal way to offer them protection - such as the sharing of pension and health care benefits - in recognition of long-term relationships.

There "should be some sort of method of honoring and respecting" such couples "without calling it marriage," Danforth added.

Thursday's address marked the first time that Danforth had discussed in detail his views on gay marriage, or disclosed his opinion regarding last year's hottest statewide ballot measure.

After his speech, Danforth said the chief aim was to underscore in public what he had been saying in writing in several op-ed pieces published in recent months in various newspapers, including the Post-Dispatch and The New York Times. "I'm trying to get our party back to its roots," he said.

Danforth maintains that the Republican Party has become too entwined with religious conservative agenda. "When religion and government become aligned with each other, it's inherently divisive," he said.

He also warned against Republicans embracing a "particular sectarian religious agenda as their own."

Still, Danforth said he agreed with many social conservatives that there's a "growing coarseness" in American society that is harmful. "All you have to do to go baseball games and just listen" to the talk in the stands, he said.

Overall, looking at the nation's culture - on TV, movies and the streets - many religious conservatives have justified reasons, he continued, to "believe that the wheels have come off."

But Danforth then went on to say that the Republican Party needs to stick to its basic principles of fiscal restraint, a strong military and an engaged foreign policy. "Meanness is wrong," he added, as he called on all Republicans to speak out about the dangers of "gay bashing" and other divisive behavior.

Some in Thursday's crowd, such as Edison Theatre executive director Charles Robin, said they thought that Danforth needed to show more sensitivity about the frustrations of gay couples faced with daily discrimination. But the Log Cabin Republicans' national president, Patrick Guerriero, praised Danforth's remarks as proof that "you can be a good conservative and a person of faith and still embrace equality."

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