

Danforth concerned Republicans too closely tied to religious right

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Retired Republican Sen. John Danforth expressed concern Thursday that his party is too closely aligned with the religious right.

Danforth, 68, who represented Missouri for three terms in the Senate and resigned earlier this year as U.N. ambassador, spoke during a lunch sponsored by the St. Louis chapter of the Log Cabin Republicans, a national gay Republican group.

Also an ordained Episcopal minister, Danforth told the group that he believes marriage is only between a man and a woman.

"On the question of civil unions, I believe that we should attempt to work out some kind of method of honoring, respecting and realizing the rights of committed people without calling it marriage," he said.

Danforth said concerns of conservative Christians, like the high divorce rate and family disintegration, deserve attention, but added, "There is something about a political party adopting a particular religious agenda, a sectarian religious agenda, as its own, that is divisive.

"The purpose of American government, the purpose of our Constitution, is to hold together all kinds of diverse interests in one country," Danforth said.

Danforth's comments echoed those he has made in recent op-ed pieces. He said he has heard back from people, including many Democrats, who share similar concerns.

Danforth said he remains a committed Republican and believes the Democrats are "floundering right now.

"The only thing that holds them together is that they hate George Bush. That's the only thing they're for," he said.

Danforth said the issue of same-sex relationships should not be locked into the Constitution because it is "a matter of community values and social values and needs to be worked out in society."

Images of dozens of same-sex couples racing down courthouse steps in front of television cameras looked wrong, because "it didn't look like anything is being honored," he said.

After Danforth's remarks, several Republicans said they agreed with his point of view.

"The Republican party needs this particular voice heard," said Log Cabin member Bill Jenkins, 45, of Kirkwood.

Gail Elble, 55, of St. Louis, a Democrat who has been in a committed relationship for more than two decades, spoke about how she would like her partner to be able to receive her benefits if Elble should die. She found his speech bigoted against any marriage that didn't fit his own mold of what it should be.

"I don't believe he offered any solutions," said Elble, president of the Gateway Stonewall Democrats, the local branch of a gay Democratic organization.

Danforth left the Senate in 1994. He acted as special counsel leading the 1999 investigation into the 1993 siege at the Branch Davidian complex in Waco, Texas.

President Bush also appointed Danforth as special envoy to Sudan to mediate peace in the civil war. He was named ambassador to the U.N. in 2004.