



Communications Toolkit

Talking About Marriage in African-American
Communities

September 2008

INTRODUCTION

As African Americans, marriage means many things in our community. It is an important choice that belongs to couples in love. It links our families and provides access to a long list of legal protections and responsibilities — most of which cannot be gotten any other way. Government should not put obstacles in the path of those who are trying to make a lifetime commitment to care for their loved ones.

We thank you for your willingness to talk about marriage within our community. Whether conducting a media interview or talking with family and friends, the themes of opposing discrimination, not judging others unfairly, and respecting family will connect with the beliefs and values of fellow African Americans and help establish common ground. Bringing the conversation back to these themes will encourage them to hear your ideas with an open mind.

Thank you for being part of the conversation.

And Marriage for All

San Francisco, CA
www.andmarriage4all.org

California State Conference of the NAACP

Sacramento, CA
www.californianaacp.org

Jordan/Rustin Coalition

Los Angeles, CA
www.jordanrustincoalition.org

National Black Justice Coalition

Washington, DC
www.nbjcoalition.org

African American Ministers Leadership Council – People for the American Way

Washington, DC
www.aamlc.net

TALKING POINTS

Discrimination is Wrong

- “Discrimination is wrong no matter whom it affects. As African Americans, we have come too far not to stand against discrimination, wherever it appears.”

Judge Not

- “Regardless of my personal feelings about gay couples getting married, it doesn’t mean it should be illegal. It is not for me to judge other people — and it is especially wrong for the government to treat people differently.”

Love Thy Neighbor

- “Just as God’s love is all-encompassing, we too must show compassion to our lesbian and gay sisters and brothers.”

Welcoming Couples into the Family

- “No matter what, blood is blood and I’ll always love my [relative]. The most important thing to me is that he (she) is happy.”

Love and Commitment

- “Couples in committed and loving relationships should be able to have the honor, dignity and support that come with marriage.”

Worth Fighting For

- “Many of our gay brothers and sisters stay together for years in the face of daily discrimination, and sometimes even violence. In spite of these challenges, these couples have the courage to face the opposition and build happy lives together. Government shouldn’t pile on.”

Strong Commitments; Strong Families

- “Marriage is a bond that strengthens couples, families and communities. When our gay brothers and sisters are allowed to marry, we strengthen not only their relationship, but their families and our community as a whole.”

Protecting Individual and Religious Freedom

- “Deciding who you want to marry is an intensely personal decision. Government has no business saying who you can and can’t marry.”
- “No church will ever be forced to marry or bless any couple. Baptist churches don’t have to marry Catholics. Catholics don’t have to marry Muslims. And no minister, priest, rabbi or imam will ever be forced to officiate at weddings for lesbian and gay couples.”

CONVERSATION STARTERS

African Americans sometimes have strong views about marriage, so it can be hard to know how to broach the subject. The following tips can help you break the ice when talking with people close to you about why marriage is so important.

Before you begin:

- **Remember, too much information is hard to digest.** Before you start a conversation, think about the one thing you want your friend, family member or co-worker to know or understand about why marriage is important to you.
- **Stories stick.** Personal stories are memorable, so tell a story — either about you or someone you know — that illustrates why it’s so important that everyone be able to marry the person they love.
- **Speak from your heart.** No matter how they feel about marriage, if you’re speaking with someone close to you, you have an important piece of common ground as you start the conversation: you. They care about you. So if you start the conversation by talking about why marriage is important to *you*, you greatly increase the chance they’ll hear you out, simply because it’s something you care deeply about.

Starting the conversation:

- “I need to talk with you about something that’s really important to me.”

Or refer to a common experience, for example, a non-gay family member’s recent wedding:

- “When we were at _____’s wedding last weekend, it really made me start to think about everything that’s been in the news lately about gay brothers and sisters getting married for the first time. Can you imagine what it would have been like if she and _____ hadn’t been allowed to get married?”

RESPONSES TO TOUGH QUESTIONS

Below are examples of tough questions and how to use the talking points to steer the conversation in a positive direction.

Q #1: Why is the marriage issue so important to you?

A: Discrimination is wrong no matter whom it affects. African Americans have fought discrimination too long not to stand against it, wherever it arises.

Or:

A: When two people commit to taking care of each other for life, we should be pleased. Marriage gives them government protections, health care, Social Security and other safety nets that they and their families can't get any other way.

Q #2: The African-American community faces so many challenges these days: poverty, gang violence, kids dropping out of school. Why dedicate yourself to an issue like marriage?

A: I am dedicated to this issue precisely *because* our community faces so many other problems, and I don't want discrimination against our gay brothers and sisters to be added to the list. And I also don't want this issue to divide and distract us.

Q #3: Isn't this about white gay men? What does it have to do with African Americans?

A: Absolutely not. This is about black people — gay brothers and sisters who want to marry the person they love, and it's also about whites, Latinos, Asians and Pacific Islanders. It's about those in our families, our churches and communities who deserve to be treated with respect. There are more than 3,000 black gay couples in Los Angeles, 2,100 in San Francisco and thousands more across California.

Q #4: Do you think the initiative will pass in November?

A: I'm no pollster, but I do believe that writing discrimination into the constitution is wrong. African Americans have a long history in this country of standing up against discrimination, especially when it affects our own, and this does.

Q #5: Are you worried that this issue will create dissent or divisiveness within your congregation or church?

A: No. This is about the law, not what our church chooses to do. Besides, our gay brothers and sisters are already part of our congregations. Our congregation is stronger when we practice what we preach and act on our belief that we are all children of God who deserve love and compassion.

Q #6: Many Christians agree that gay and lesbian couples deserve equal legal rights but feel strongly that marriage is a sacred union between a man and a woman. Why not support the "middle ground" solution of domestic partnerships, which answers both concerns?

A: It's important to understand the difference between religious marriage and civil marriage. Every church can choose which couples they will or will not marry in accordance with their faith — that's religious marriage and it's protected by our freedom of religion. But our government — which is responsible for civil marriage — is by and for *all* of the people. Our constitution says that our government cannot discriminate against one group of people.

My Christian faith teaches me the same thing — to treat others as I would want to be treated. That's why I support marriage for my gay brothers and sisters. Domestic partnership is not equal to civil marriage. Domestic partnerships are separate and unequal and treat some people as second-class citizens.

Couples and Their Families

For couples:

Q #7: Was your family uncomfortable at first with having your partner join in family celebrations?

A: Once my family met my partner, a huge weight was lifted for all of us. Some warmed to her sooner than others, but in time they all came to see what I see in her.

Q #8: Are you concerned that voters will take away your right to marry in November?

A: Of course I'm concerned, but I am also very happy because after X years together, I was finally able to marry [I can finally marry] the person I love [and I'm looking forward to doing so on *WEDDING DATE*].

Follow-up, if needed:

Friends, relatives, neighbors — and even strangers — have been absolutely positive about us getting married. People who have never even brought the subject up before have offered their congratulations. And that gives me hope that other Californians, too, will agree that everyone should have the opportunity to marry the person they love.

For couples/families featured in the ads:

Q #9: What made you decide to be portrayed in this ad?

A: My family is stronger because we've all chosen to celebrate my daughter's marriage. Now we want to share our joy with the rest of our community.

For family members:

Q #10: Clearly you stand in support of your daughter now. But how did you feel the first time she brought her partner home? How does the rest of the family feel?

A: Like every mother, I want my children to be happy. But honestly, when I first met my daughter's partner, it was hard. The good news was that I could see how happy they were together. And that's what I care about most — her happiness. Now I've grown to love her partner like my own daughter.

Q #11: Do you think African Americans will vote for the marriage amendment in November?

A: As a Christian, the Bible teaches me to "judge not, lest you be judged" (Matthew 7:1). I believe most black people understand that even if some people aren't comfortable with marriage for our gay brothers and sisters, it does not mean the government should discriminate when it comes to legal marriage licenses.

MYTHS & FACTS

MYTH #1: “Churches will be sued if they refuse to allow same-sex marriage ceremonies.”

FACT: No church will ever be forced to marry or bless *any* couple — gay or non-gay. Baptist churches don’t have to marry Catholics; Catholic churches don’t have to marry Muslims, and so on. Because of freedom of religion, no priest, minister, rabbi or imam can ever be forced to recognize or officiate at ceremonies for lesbian and gay couples.

MYTH #2: The Bible says homosexuality is wrong.

FACT: We are all children of God. The Bible teaches us that despite our differences, we are “all made to drink of one spirit” (1 Corinthians 12:13) and “if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; and if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it” (1 Corinthians 12:26).

There are various references to being gay in the Bible, but not one by Jesus Christ himself concerning sexuality or homosexuality. If you read the letters of Paul, sure you can find out-of-context mentions of homosexuality. If you read the Old Testament, you can find some references there too, but not in the way we live today. Everyone knows that in the Bible you can also find other verses that have been used to justify slavery and deny rights to women.

Therefore we must look at the Bible in its totality, and in that way, the Bible is a message of love and inclusion. Jesus said the two great commandments are to love God with all our heart and to love our neighbors as ourselves. At the heart of this teaching is the Golden Rule: treat others as you would want to be treated.

MYTH #3: Domestic partnership does the same thing as marriage.

FACT: It is false to say that civil union or domestic partnership is the same as marriage. If it were the same, why would we need two lines

at the clerk's office? In fact, partnership does not provide equal legal protections and economic security. Marriage is part of the law of all 50 states, while partnership laws exist in only a few. No couple should have to worry that their family’s legal status will sputter in and out like cell phone service when they cross state lines.

And more importantly, compared to marriage, which everyone understands, who even knows what civil union or partnership means exactly? Who would trade their marriage for a civil union? Why should our gay brothers and sisters have to?

MYTH #4: Black leaders are opposed to marriage for lesbian and gay couples.

FACT: Black leaders from Florida to California are supporting marriage for gay and lesbian couples. Below are just a few of those leaders from many walks of life:

- Bishop Desmond Tutu, Nobel Peace Laureate
- Julian Bond, Chairman, NAACP
- Alice Huffman, President, California NAACP
- Coretta Scott King, civil rights leader
- Rev. Joseph Lowery, civil rights leader
- Rev. Michael Eric Dyson, minister, author, civil rights leader
- Governor David Paterson, New York State
- Governor Deval Patrick, Commonwealth of Massachusetts
- Congressman John Lewis, D-Georgia
- Willie Brown, Former Mayor of San Francisco
- Bishop John L. Selders, Jr., organizing pastor of Amistad United Church of Christ
- Reverend William G. Sinkford, President, Unitarian Universalist Association
- Charles Barkley, Former NBA Player & Sports Commentator
- Clarence Page, Journalist
- Professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Harvard University
- Dr. Jocelyn Elders, Former U.S. Surgeon General

NEWSLETTER/WEB SITE TEMPLATE

These templates can be customized for print or e-mail newsletters, organizational Web sites or event programs to put the conversation about marriage in context.

People of Faith Audience:

Just as God's love is all-encompassing, we too must show compassion to our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters. Now that they are able to get married, we must welcome new loved ones into our hearts, our homes and our community.

For some of us, this may feel like a struggle. Some people may be uncomfortable with lesbian and gay couples getting married. But just because you don't approve of something does not mean it should be illegal. It is not for us to judge other people. It is our job to show love and compassion to all God's children.

Many gay couples have been together for years, showing enduring love, commitment and courage in the face of discrimination and violence. Discrimination is wrong no matter whom it affects. We must all work together to fight against discrimination, wherever it arises. And we must find it in our hearts to offer every couple the support of family and community that comes with marriage.

We invite you to *[join in a dialogue / read more on our Web site / etc.]*.

NEWSLETTER/WEB SITE TEMPLATE

Audiences Who Care About Discrimination:

Discrimination is wrong no matter whom it affects. We must all work together to fight against discrimination, anywhere and everywhere.

Now that gay and lesbian couples are able to get married, we must welcome new loved ones into our hearts, our homes and our community.

For some of us, this may feel like a struggle. Some people may be uncomfortable with lesbian and gay couples getting married. But just because you disagree with something does not mean it should be illegal. It is not for us to judge other people, especially when it comes to taking away equal rights under the law.

Many gay and lesbian couples have been together for years, showing enduring love, commitment and courage in the face of discrimination and violence.

We must find it in our hearts to offer every couple the support of family and community that comes with marriage.

We invite you to *[join in a dialogue / read more on our Web site / etc.]*.

TIPS ON WRITING EFFECTIVE LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters to the editor — also known as LTEs — are an important way to communicate and reinforce positive messages about marriage.

The LTE section is a popular part of the newspaper. If we let those with opposing viewpoints dominate this section, it could appear that their opinion is the prevailing point of view. Therefore, we need as many people as possible to submit supportive letters to their local newspapers.

To maximize the likelihood that your letter gets printed, follow these guidelines:

Timing is Everything

Don't procrastinate. Write your LTE as soon as you see a story you want to respond to. If you wait to start writing your letter until after those with opposing viewpoints have had their letters published, you are too late.

Short is Sweet

LTE editors will always choose a short, pithy letter over a lengthy, rambling treatise. So make your letter short, punchy and to the point. Focus on keeping your letter to 100 to 150 words, and use the "Word Count" function on your word-processing program to check the length. For example, this paragraph is already 55 words long.

Short Sentences, Short Paragraphs

If you write like a journalist, with short sentences and short paragraphs, editors will be more likely to choose your letter. Pick up any newspaper and you'll notice that most paragraphs are about two sentences long, sometimes only one sentence. Long, wordy sentences send one clear message to the reader's brain: "Don't read this: It's way too long!"

Make It Personal

Personal stories beat out statistics nine times out of 10. That's why Americans rush to movie theatres — and not to college statistics courses. Our inclination is to use statistics to support our argument because we assume readers will make decisions based on facts. That is not the case. People form opinions based on emotions and values. And the best way to communicate values and emotions is by telling a (short!) personal story.

Repeat Key Messages

Use every opportunity — every sentence — to communicate your most important message. Ultimately, the LTE editor has final say over which sentences stay and which of them go. Don't risk the chance that your key message will be left on the editing room floor.

Don't Repeat Your Opponent's Message

Use your letter to respond with your key messages rather than to react to the messages of those with opposing viewpoints. If you repeat the language of those with opposing viewpoints, you are giving their voice one more opportunity to be heard. A letter that begins, "People who say marriage can only be between one man and one woman are missing the point about the real meaning of marriage," will reinforce the idea that marriage *is* defined as being between one man and one woman. You wouldn't give those with opposing viewpoints money to run a commercial against us; don't give them a voice in your letter, either.

Include Your Full Name, City and Phone Number

Your letter should always include your complete name, phone number and the city you live in. Your phone number will not be published, but many newspapers will call to verify that you actually wrote the letter.

Send by E-mail, If Possible

Although newspapers usually accept letters by fax and snail mail, many editors prefer e-mail. Why? Because it means the difference between an editor spending five to ten seconds to cut and paste your letter, compared with five to ten minutes to retype it. E-mail also

arrives faster than snail mail. When sending by e-mail, paste your letter into the body of an e-mail. Never send attachments.

Example

Dear Editor:

Thanks for your insightful editorial about why it's so important for our gay brothers and sisters to be able to marry ("Editorial Title," Date).

I can't describe how happy I am that this is now the case in California. After XX years as a couple, I can finally marry the woman that I love. California's promise of fairness and opportunity now applies to me and my partner!

Tambra Jones
Los Angeles, CA
323.555.1212

ADDITIONAL BACKGROUND

These statistics can be used to communicate a larger theme — that our gay brothers and sisters *are* a part of our community. But the numbers alone will not move people. Therefore, consider making them part of a "statistics sandwich."

That is, start by telling your personal story. Then, share a statistic or work it into your story: "As one of over 3,000 African-American gay couples in the L.A. area, we've decided to get married because..." Then go back to sharing more about your story, using the talking points in this toolkit.

The numbers behind our story:

- According to the 2000 Census, there are more than 600,000 same-sex couples in the United States, of which 85,000 include at least one African-American partner.
- There are more than 3,000 African-American same-sex couples in the Los Angeles area and another 2,100 in the Bay Area.
- These brothers and sisters are working, buying homes and paying taxes. Many have served our country in the military and work in their communities as volunteers. That's why I'm committed to creating communities where everyone is accepted and respected.