AT THE CROSSROADS
African American Same Gender Loving Families and the Freedom to Marry
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The National Black Justice Coalition (NBJC) is a civil rights organization of black lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people and our allies. We are dedicated to fostering equality by fighting racism and homophobia. The Coalition advocates for social justice by educating and mobilizing opinion leaders—including elected officials, clergy and media—with a focus on black communities. The National Black Justice Coalition envisions a world where all people are fully empowered to participate safely, openly and honestly in family, faith and community, regardless of race, gender-identity or sexual orientation.

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Freedom to Marry is the gay and non-gay partnership working to win marriage equality nationwide. Headed by Evan Wolfson, one of America’s leading civil rights advocates and lawyers, Freedom to Marry brings new resources and a renewed context of urgency and opportunity to this social justice movement. Freedom to Marry brings the work of its partner organizations and their many approaches — litigation, legislation, direct action, and public education — into a larger whole, a shared civil rights campaign that fosters heightened outreach to non-gay allies.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There has been considerable progress made in the movement to secure the freedom to marry for same gender loving couples, yet the African American community has not been at the forefront of this movement for civil justice. Rather black attitudes have lagged behind other groups of Americans.

In the last twelve months, 5 new states have adopted the freedom to marry while numerous others have adopted provisions in their laws that grant important rights and protections to same-sex couples. Even in California, which saw a roll back of the freedom to marry, the attitudes of all ethnic groups have shown an increase in the acceptance of marriage equality.

Within the black community, significant challenges remain to moving the community further in its own journey of acceptance. A review of the data on the lesbian and gay African American community reveals it is surprisingly sizable – at least equal in population to the city of Dallas – yet remains seemingly invisible within the larger black community.

Perhaps because of the lack of understanding and information that comes with invisibility, African Americans have a complex perspective on gays and lesbians. Despite a long history of working to secure rights on behalf of other disenfranchised or marginalized groups and despite a demonstrated commitment to improved rights for gays, many African Americans still struggle with endorsing the freedom to marry for same-sex couples.

While statistically African Americans are more disapproving of marriage equality, these attitudes do not arise from simple homophobia. Rather, the experiences, opinions and beliefs of African Americans are very diverse and are influenced by factors such as geographic location, age, class and other markers of difference.

One major factor influencing the degree of opposition among blacks to the freedom to marry is religiosity – particularly as measured by the frequency of church attendance. Anecdotal and survey data reinforce that in many African American churches marriage equality is disapproved of as immoral rather than embraced as a way to strengthen black families and eliminate discrimination.

This moral disapprobation is often linked in the pulpit and elsewhere to the rhetoric of the conservative right that suggests the gay rights movement has wrongly appropriated historic civil rights messages and incorrectly equated racial oppression with oppression based on sexual orientation or gender identity.

Yet case studies from across the country suggest these issues and attitudes can be addressed and hearts and minds can be changed. Such work will require leaders from both the gay and non-gay African American community to speak out and work in tandem with those blacks who already support the freedom to marry. Using messages that reframe the debate in ways that resonate with African Americans and personal stories of how discrimination in marriage harms black same gender loving couples, these messengers can create dialogue and information that allow African Americans to confront their own prejudices and misconceptions and come to a new understanding.

Using the information and strategies contained in this report, we can all work together to improve attitudes and achieve the freedom to marry for same gender loving couples – a change that will in fact strengthen the African American community along with its lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender sisters and brothers.

“[T]here was a time when black people in this country couldn’t marry the person of their choice either. That’s why when I am asked, ‘Are gay rights civil rights?’ my answer is always, ‘Of course they are.’”
— Julian Bond, Chairman of the NAACP November 20, 2005
I. INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade, African Americans, just like all Americans, have been engaged in a broad societal dialogue that addresses the lives of the African American lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community. Together we are asking ourselves who black gay and lesbians are; how are they like us and different from us; how do they contribute to our community and what place should they rightly have in our world. This report seeks to address that dialogue and help frame the discussion, for it is in fact both a complex and often not well grounded dialogue.

Many of us often don’t even realize the extent of this community. Census data and analysis from the US Department of Health and Human Services show that 14 percent of the 8.8 million gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people across this country are African American.1 They are a community that, if concentrated in one place, would be roughly the same size as Dallas, Texas, and would be the tenth largest city in this country by population.

Yet they are often invisible – invisible in our communities, invisible in our churches and invisible in our families. Worse, this number does not tell the full story of the many ways in which the opportunities for growth and success by gay lesbian blacks has been stunted because of their race, gender, and sexual orientation. Throughout this report we interchangeably use the terms same gender loving, gay, lesbian, and LGBT to recognize that this community is very diverse. Same gender loving is a term that is commonly used exclusively within the African American community.

For each of us, there are numerous aspects of our lives that shape who we are. From the neighborhoods we grow up in and the churches we attend, to the level of education we receive, our experiences as African Americans is shaped differently because of the nuances of our own life journeys. For African American lesbians and gay men, acceptance into the African American community has historically required leaving an important part of who we are at the door. In this paper, we infuse an analysis that recognizes we can no more segment the “non visible” part of ourselves, that which is gay or lesbian (as opposed to our “visible” race or gender), than we can separate the part of ourselves that is Christian or Muslim.

When forced to leave part of themselves at the door, our gay lesbian brothers and sisters have been denied both the ability to live full and complete lives and to participate in one of its greatest joys – the freedom to marry the person of their choosing. The Freedom to Marry Movement within the African American community has grown from the need to challenge these attitudes and societal structures.

Over the last two decades, winning marriage equality has become a cornerstone to the growing movement for the rights of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community. Subsequent to the 2004 Massachusetts Supreme Court ruling that declared that the commonwealth had failed to identify any constitutionally adequate reason for denying civil marriages to same-sex couples, five states have followed suit and legalized same-sex marriage. Despite these recent advances, there remains much work to do to provide the rights, responsibilities and benefits of marriage to same-sex couples. At this writing, 29 states have constitutional amendments explicitly barring the recognition of same-sex marriage, 18 of which prohibit the legal recognition of any same-sex union. Moreover, the so-called “Defense of Marriage Act” denies a same-sex couple the 1,138 federal benefits and rights afforded to married heterosexual couples.

But we must not assume this battle is just for the benefit of white, same-sex couples. African American, same-sex couples exist in every state in the union, and over 40 percent are families raising children. Given the stress these black families face from their race, their sexual orientation and the current economy, now is an opportune time for us to reexamine the role of the African American community in making a meaningful contribution to affirming a right held now by some but that should be granted to every American — the freedom to marry.

In order to win marriage equality for same-gender loving African American families, the LGBT movement will have to mobilize diverse constituencies, craft messages that are reflective of the historic experiences and understanding of marriage by different groups, and employ strategies that reach across racial, gender, identity, and class boundaries. Building the path toward these rights is a critical role for allies of the African American lesbian and gay community.

Marriage equality has become the “public face” of the national gay rights movement, but it is only one of the first steps toward changing the lives of the African American gay and lesbian community. As a starting point, this report aims to shed light on the stories of African American men and women around the country who are creating space, opening up dialogue and building bridges within the African American church, family, and community to support the African American LGBT community. Homophobia is still a significant challenge within the African American community and as such the conversation on marriage
equality in this report includes examples and stories about challenging general homophobia as a strategy for building support. Equally as important as the freedom to marry is the deeply held desire to feel as though they have a place in the African American community, to make sure our voices are heard in the African American community.

The original report “At The Crossroads: African American Attitudes, Perceptions, and Beliefs Toward Marriage Equality,” examined the available public opinion poll data to better understand the attitudes of African Americans toward the freedom to marry. This revised version includes interviews with key stakeholders in the African American community to identify successful strategies, shared in the report’s case studies, and provide a more in-depth analysis of the causes for low support of marriage equality.

Following a brief description of the methodology used in this report in Section II, Section III provides the reader with an overview of African American perceptions on marriage equality based on recent research data and stakeholder interviews. Section IV then evaluates the role of the African American church in shaping views on marriage equality. Subsequently, Section V closely examines how messages on marriage equality are framed within African American communities. Building from this, Section VI will highlight key strategies to effectively reach out to the African American community. Case studies of organizing within this community can be found throughout the report. The final section will summarize key findings made in this report.

II. METHODOLOGY

This publication represents a revision of the original report “At The Crossroads: African American Attitudes, Perceptions, and Beliefs Toward Marriage Equality” In addition, to incorporating additional demographic research and polling results that have been completed since the original study, it includes interviews with key stakeholders and case studies of organizing within the African American community. By integrating new research and analysis that has been conducted in the wake of recent events like Proposition 8, we can paint a clearer picture of the current sentiment on marriage equality that the African Americans hold. Moreover, this new research allows provides insight for how to effectively organize within the African American community around the freedom to marry.

Seven Generations Consulting drew on a wide range of primary and secondary data resources. Sources included: interviews with key community leaders across the country, election poll data, books, newspaper and magazine articles, and other published reports. Although the methods used to collect information over the course of the research varied (including interviews by phone and in person, as well as multiple sources for articles and polling data) the breadth of the data and its sources is a critical component to the research. The sample size, while small, reflects a cross section of religious leaders, public policy advocates, student activists, and nonprofit leaders. However, it is important to note that the sample is not representative of the entire population. Through our research and findings we hope to create a platform for future research studies.

III. AFRICAN-AMERICAN OPINIONS TOWARD MARRIAGE EQUALITY

While there currently exists a limited amount of research on how homosexuality is viewed among African Americans, it is clear that there exists a higher level of homophobia among the African American community than other ethnic groups in the US. For instance the original “At The Crossroads” study stated that: a recent study that examined 31 surveys stretching back more than three decades found that “nearly three-quarters of Blacks say that homosexual relations are always wrong, and over one-third say that AIDS might be God's punishment for immoral sexual behavior. Overall, Blacks are fourteen percentage points more likely to hold both positions than are Whites.” Connectedly, African-Americans are also more likely than other groups to believe that homosexuality is wrong, that sexual orientation is a choice, and that sexual orientation can be changed.

“Gays and lesbians stood up for civil rights in Montgomery, Selma, in Albany, GA. and St. Augustine Fla., and many other campaigns of the Civil Rights Movement. Many of these courageous men and women were fighting for my freedom at a time when they could find few voices for their own, and I salute their contributions.”

-Coretta Scott King (Chicago Tribune 4/1/98)
African American gays and lesbians live at the nexus of the intersections of race, class, gender identity and sexuality. They not only experience discrimination based on their sexual orientation or gender identity but because of their race as well. According to the U.S. New York, Georgia, and California have the highest percentage of African-American same-sex couples per 10,000 adult. African-American female same-sex couples report a median income of $10,000.00 less than married African-American married couples, while African American male same-sex couples report a median income equal to Black married opposite-sex couples. The employment rate of partners in African American same-sex couples is the same as their heterosexual counterparts (66p% v. 64%), a rate lower than that of individuals of other races in same-sex couples (71%). Additionally, African American same-sex households are almost twice as likely as white same-sex households to include children.

The discrimination black LGBT Americans experience is born out by a survey of 2,645 Black LGBT individuals across the country conducted by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. 53% of those surveyed reported that they had experienced racial discrimination; and 42% reported that they had experienced discrimination because of their sexual orientation. Respondents also reported that “they experienced racism at mostly White gay events and venues; and experienced homophobia in Black heterosexual organizations, from their families of origin, from straight friends, and also in churches and religious organizations.” Black LGBT individuals not only experience discrimination based on their sexual orientation or gender identity, but because of their race as well.

Although some academic researchers have conducted research about African American same gender loving people, much of this research must be pulled out of US Census data. Many studies involve small samples that do not reflect the racial and economic diversity of the African American same gender loving community. Moreover, the available research data fails to provide the qualitative analysis needed for a deeper understanding of the social, cultural, and political influences that shape the attitudes and beliefs of African Americans on marriage equality.

African American Communities on Marriage Equality: What the Data Shows

This unique combination of factors – relative invisibility and discrimination based on race, gender, class, sexual orientation and gender identity – drives much of what African Americans believe about gays and lesbians, and there is clearly a solid connection between those beliefs and their attitudes toward the freedom to marry.

The original “Crossroads” study found that: as a group, African-Americans have been less supportive of rights for gays and lesbians than Whites, Latinos, and Asians. In a 2007 Washington Post-Kaiser Family Foundation-Harvard University poll, Blacks were less than half as likely to support marriage equality and legal recognition of same-sex civil unions as Whites. Similarly, a 2006 poll conducted by the Pew Research Center found 65% of African-Americans are opposed to marriage equality compared to 53% of Whites.

In the wake of the passage of Proposition 8 (a constitutional revision that eliminated the right of same-sex couples to marry in California) and the subsequent blame laid on the African American community there has been substantial new research into the community's support for or against marriage equality. While data shows that African Americans oppose same-sex—it does not paint the full picture. Based on most research findings, one can easily conclude that the majority of African Americans are unsupportive of marriage equality. However, most of these research studies employ a unidimensional approach that fails to control for other aspects of identity (e.g. socio-economic class, religion, and age) that may influence public opinion. In this sense, current research provides only a glimpse of African American perspectives on marriage equality without probing deeper into the complexities that exist within the community.

In the comprehensive study of the differences in attitudes toward the lesbian and gay community between blacks and whites cited earlier, Gregory B. Lewis of Georgia State University found that “Despite their greater disapproval of homosexuality, African American opinions on gay civil liberties and employment discrimination are quite similar to whites’ opinions, and African Americans are more likely to support laws prohibiting antigay discrimination.”

Once the research controls for religious and educational differences it finds that even though African Americans do not support homosexuality they tend to be slightly more supportive of same gender loving rights and substantially in favor of ending employment discrimination than whites. Accordingly, there is a strong foundation upon which to build support for marriage equality within the African American community.

Aligning the issue with the Civil Rights Movement has not always been the most successful route to garnering support among African Americans. Acquiring a comprehensive strategy to building support necessitates a more nuanced approach to civil rights, religion, and family. Adopting such an approach will not only bring more depth to existing research analyses but will also
illuminates some of the reasons why African Americans take the stance they do.

IV. THE ROLE OF THE AFRICAN AMERICAN CHURCH

Messages and actions taken by the African American church certainly have impacted the way the black community views the freedom to marry for gays. The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, Equality California and Freedom to Marry recently released a report that analyzed what impacted the votes of various constituencies there on California’s Proposition 8. The study sifted data from 5 different pre-election, exit, and post election surveys and concluded that African American support for Proposition 8 can be largely explained by religiosity – a characteristic measured by the frequency of church attendance. As a result, the evidence indicated that support for Proposition 8 was not significantly higher among African Americans than voters as a whole. The evidence indicated that support for Proposition 8 was not higher among African Americans than voters as a whole per se, but that the higher vote for Proposition 8 (58% vs. 51% from other voters) was because there was a higher percentage of African American voters who were frequent church attendees.

The African American church is arguably one of the most influential institutions in the African American community. In fact, national data indicates that about 97 percent of African Americans identify with some religious affiliation, with approximately 80 percent identifying as Protestant. Research also shows that African Americans attend religious services more frequently than whites and are less supportive of gay rights. Finally, 74 percent of African American Protestants oppose marriage equality. Reverend Byron Williams, African American pastor and syndicated columnist echoes this when he says, “I think the [most critical] institution regardless of the issue is still the church. It is such a dominant place and the church spends an inordinate amount of conversation that is against marriage equality.”

African American ministers do not speak well of gays and the freedom to marry to their congregations are routinely negative about the freedom to marry. Nearly 50 percent of all African American churchgoers reported that their clergy regularly conveyed negative viewpoints toward homosexuality. In a public opinion poll of African Americans in the city of Baltimore, Maryland, 68 percent of those surveyed reported that their minister or pastor had “preached” that homosexuality was a sin or immoral. Characterizing homosexuality as immoral or sinful behavior frequently alienates African American same gender loving people, thus silencing any potential allies or gay rights advocates within the African American church.

Reverend Edwin C. Sanders II, the founding pastor of Metropolitan Interdenominational Church, speaks of the silence and invisibility that pervades the African American church when he states, “[There’s an] unspoken message that says it’s all right for you to be here, just play your little role. You can be in the choir, you can sit on the piano bench, but don’t say you’re gay.” Rather than serving as a place for community and acceptance, the Church tends to be a source of pain and sadness and a place that is unwelcoming to members of the African American same gender loving community.

The “conservative” tilt within the African American church has provided ammunition to right - wing activism. In the 2004 Presidential Election, for example, George W. Bush nearly doubled the African American vote in Ohio by garnering support from African American churchgoers on the issue of marriage equality. In Ohio, Bush received 16 percent of the African American vote, up from 9 percent in 2000. Of those African Americans who said they attended church more than once a week, Bush received 69 percent of those votes in 2004, up from 52 percent in 2000.

Similarly, anti-gay campaigns often employ strategies that appeal to African American churchgoers, thus reinforcing homophobia. Alveda King, the niece of Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., serves as a prime example. In 1998 she played a pivotal role in a rally at Maine’s capitol to support a state-wide referendum that would overturn a gay rights bill passed earlier that year. Drawing a crowd of 300 people, King delivered a speech and claimed “God hates racism. And God hates homosexuality.” This logic, which essentially equated homosexuality with racism, framed campaign messages that eventually led to a 51 to 49 percent victory. Consequently, Maine became the first state in the nation to reject a gay rights law enacted by its legislature. The initiators of the bill, the Christian Coalition and Maine Family Policy Council of Maine (formerly the Christian Civic League of Maine), used campaign tactics that support right-wing activism nationwide.

In its rhetoric, the conservative right routinely portrays gay rights as “special rights” that threaten African American rights as can be seen in a leaflet created by the “No Special Rights” committee of the Oregon Citizen Alliance entitled “Pro-family Answers to Pro-gay Questions.” If one is asked why gays shouldn’t have the same basic rights as everyone else, the respondent is instructed to reply:

Again, homosexuals already have the same basic rights as everyone else: the right to vote, to own property, to freely
The “homosexuality is a choice” rhetoric is also preached by African American ministers in their churches. Arguing that as a result gays are not entitled to certain rights and protections in the same way African Americans are, creates a wedge between African American and gay communities. Ultimately, “those who stand with African Americans or with gays - and certainly with or within both groups - must understand the nefarious ways in which the right exploits the ‘special rights’ polemic in a divide — and - conquer tactic to do damage to both causes.” The similarities between anti-gay campaigns and anti-affirmative action movements should not go unnoticed. An organization based in California that operates nationwide to develop ballot measures that outlaw affirmative action calls itself The American Civil Rights Institute. Similarly, Equal Rights for Maine, served as the organization that worked to exclude gays from protection under the state’s human rights statutes. Through a twist of words, the anti-gay and anti-affirmative action organizations portray themselves as proponents of equality. Both of these movements are based on the same argument that no one, African American or gay, should be granted “special rights.”

As long as marriage equality is framed as an issue that threatens the moral principles advanced by the African American church, the conservative right will continue to capitalize on the opportunity to forge alliances based on homophobia with the African American community. Equally important, appealing to the religious objections of homosexuality impedes the possibility for African Americans and gays to unite under a common cause of justice for all human beings.

To achieve this end requires an alterative view of the faith - based role in the marriage equality fight. More specifically, the marriage equality debate needs to focus on how eliminating discrimination in marriage for gay couples is in fact a step toward greater human rights and social justice. Through a social justice lens, supporting marriage equality will no longer be seen as undermining the African American agenda, but rather reinforcing it. As Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” Ultimately, reframing the issues related to homosexuality will create a climate in which marriage equality can be supported within the African American community.

V. OPPORTUNITIES TO BUILD COALITION

Through this research we have identified key strategies as well as potential segments of the African American community where outreach and messaging can increase support for marriage equality. These strategies offer the opportunity to build alliances with the lesbian and gay community and educate people on other social justice issues that are important to the African American community. We have identified case studies and examples of how leaders across the country are already bridging social movements to increase the political and social power of each.

We have identified case studies and examples of how leaders across the country are already putting these ideas into practice with positive impact. There also are examples of strong messaging and efforts to craft messages that speak specifically to African Americans. Though these developments are exciting, they also reflect the consistent problem of under - resourced organizations whose primary community - based work takes place within the African American community.

In order to effectively develop new tools and resources for leaders and activists to use within their communities, polling and focus groups that test messaging with African Americans is essential. This research is being done on a small scale as part of the extensive media and messaging efforts by national LGBT groups to support the national conversation, but a concentrated effort we believe would yield tremendous benefits.

That acceptance of the freedom to marry is making inroads in the African American community is clear. In California, for instance, 42% of African Americans voted against Proposition 8 (a vote “for” marriage equality) in 2008 while in 2000 only 38% voted against Proposition 22, another state measure designed to enact marriage discrimination.

The need for more such data and understanding is reflected in the comments of Washington, DC Council member Marion Barry (D -Ward 8) who was the only council member to vote against a new law requiring the District to honor the marriage of same-sex couples who are legally wed in other jurisdictions. Despite a long history of supporting gay rights, he felt that he had to vote against the bill to satisfy the constituents of his
southeast district. “What you’ve got to understand is 98 percent of my constituents are African American and we don’t have but a handful of openly gay residents,” he said. “Secondly, at least 70 percent of those who express themselves to me about this are opposed to anything dealing with this issue. The ministers think it is a sin, and I have to be sensitive to that.”

Dr. Marjorie Hill, an African American physician and activist who is now Executive Director of the Gay Men’s Health Crisis in New York City, the oldest gay organization providing healthcare and treatment services to the gay community, underscores the need to frame the conversation around marriage equality within the context of African American lives,

“How we frame the issue is necessary for creating dialogue. If we approach this issue as a way in which to make the world a better place, then I think we can be more effective in reaching out to the African American community. I also think it is more effective to hear these messages from people we know, people who are like us [i.e. young, mature African American LGBT people].”

To date, the largest campaign to with African Americans on marriage equality within the community was the 2008 “Let California Ring” campaign. Supported by 10 foundations, the campaign was, “designed to initiate a discussion rather than react to one.”

Let California Ring staff developed and distributed images and messaging that people connected with on an emotional level because it related to their lives and communities. They did this by launching a “public education front” that focused on three key areas – people of color media, African American clergy, and “down ballot” education.

In total the campaign was able to direct $3.8 million towards messages that reached numerous communities of color, including specific targets within the African American community. For example, one of the print ads produced by this campaign included a picture of Alice Huffman, the President of California Conference of the NAACP, with the words “It’s about acceptance and respect.” Below Huffman’s photo, the ad read “At the NAACP, it’s our duty to fight discrimination wherever it happens.”

Such a message can prove to be effective not only because it appeals to values like community and justice, but also because the messenger, Alice Huffman, has played an integral role in the African American Civil Rights Movement.

A significant step forward as part of “Let California Ring” was developing commercials and print ads that did not simply have African American people in them but developing messages that would resonate with specific segments of the very diverse African American community and getting them out through the media outlets and institutions that are most important within the community according to a recent study of the campaign:

“Approximately 60 percent ($2.3 million) of the money raised for this part of the effort was devoted to a public education effort via ethnic newspapers and radio stations with the significant help of ethnic earned media firm, New American Media... Print, radio, and internet ads were designed specifically to spark conversations about marriage and to shatter the myth that “gay marriage” is a white-only issue. Under a tight timeframe in the late summer of 2008, 13 community-tailored ads were produced, featuring real families telling their stories and widely respected community leaders who support equality... The ads appeared in 69 papers and on 40 related web sites, and were heard on 42 radio stations over a 6-week period.”

“Let California Ring” also supported an effort launched by the African American Ministers Leadership Council at People for the American Way in partnership with organizations like the Jordan/Rustin Coalition, NBJC, the California NAACP, and Marriage for All. This effort was a large community education project targeting African American clergy in Los Angeles, Oakland, and San Francisco and church-based organizers in Southern California. The results showed that this kind of targeted effort has impact. Over 90 percent of the ethnic media outlets surveyed felt that, “the campaign had gotten people talking [and] of the 151 outlets approached, only 5 refused to participate in spite of the risks of riling audiences and other advertisers.”

Unfortunately much of our understanding of the attitudes and beliefs of

“Whatever my personal feelings may be about gay and lesbian marriages, unless you are prepared to say gay and lesbians are not human beings, they should have the same constitutional right of any other human being.”

- Reverend Al Sharpton, Founder of the Harlem-based National Action Network
African Americans toward marriage equality comes from sample surveys and focus groups in which African Americans are not the sole focus of the research. The surveys and polling instruments are not uniform and do not ask questions that uncover the root causes and solutions to changing perceptions about marriage equality among African Americans.35 There is still a need for a national, standardized survey of the opinions and attitudes of African Americans on marriage equality and other issues such as homophobia, masculinity, and the African American family. To supplement the national poll, focus groups should be held with identified target groups to capture a fuller picture of the challenges, gaps, and opportunities for mobilizing within the African American community. Such research will enhance future efforts like Let California Ring.

**KEY STRATEGIES**

Outreach to African American Opinion and Thought Leaders

In order to move African Americans on the issue of marriage equality, it is important to continue to recruit and engage thought and opinion leaders respected by the larger African American community. Anecdotal evidence suggests that, even though individual community members and thought leaders are reluctant to speak out on the issue of marriage equality because of the fear that they will be perceived as gay or that it will detract attention away from issues of racial justice and equality, community support for these leaders is on the rise. In order to move African Americans on the issue of marriage equality and begin to change perceptions and attitudes, African American opinion and thought leaders need to be engaged at the center of the discussion.

Identification of Clear Target Groups

Polls continue to show that African Americans who attend church frequently -- particularly African American Protestants -- are less likely to support marriage equality and gay rights.36 They also show that African American youth (compared to older African Americans), highly educated African American women, and African Americans who do not attend church regularly are more likely to support marriage equality and gay rights.

To increase support for marriage equality in the African American community and to support legislations, outreach efforts might focus on identifying these groups to play the important role of messengers while continuing to make inroads with groups that are less supportive.

Help Those Committed to Change Become Messengers to Others

“Let California Ring’s” African American toolkit points out that a powerful tool to use to speak to other African Americans about marriage equality is by writing a letter to the editor. Not only is this a tool that can share positive messages about marriage, it can be a way to celebrate those in your own life for whom you do this work. Although they are often written by an individual, letters to the editor can come from your family, a prayer group, your minister, your local NAACP chapter, a collection of unlikely allies, or even an entire church congregation. “Personal stories beat out statistics 9 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.”37

The key points to consider when writing a letter to the editor are:

- Don’t procrastinate. Write your letter as soon as you see a story you want to respond to because papers usually only publish 1 or 2 from each side of the debate.
- Use every opportunity — every sentence — to communicate your most important message so you don’t risk the chance that your key message will be left on the editing room floor.
- That said; keep it short because editors will always choose a short, pithy letter over a lengthy, rambling treatise. Standard letters are typically 100 to 150 words.
- Use your letter to respond with your key messages rather than to react to the messages of those with opposing viewpoints. Don’t do their work by repeating their messages, focus on telling your story.

Non traditional forms of media are on the rise and are becoming increasingly popular. Viral videos and social networking sites like Facebook and Myspace have become ground zero in many of the discussions on marriage equality among African American people. Theatre and performance shows are an avenue that community organizations and churches can use to help facilitate the sometimes difficult discussion around gay and lesbian rights, including marriage equality. Building opportunities for people in our community to deepen their understanding of the lives and experiences of African American gays and lesbians is critical to eroding the misinformation that fuels homophobia. “The lowest levels of prejudice [toward gays and lesbians] are manifested by heterosexuals who have gay friends or family members, describe their relationships with those individuals as close, and report having directly discussed the gay or lesbian person’s sexual orientation with him or her.”38
MESSAGING ON MARRIAGE EQUALITY WITHIN THE AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY

It’s Time to Reframe the Freedom to Marry within the African American Community

The right-wing and anti-gay religious leaders have been very effective in framing marriage equality as a religious or moral issue in the African American community. They have asserted that equal rights for gays and lesbians is a threat to the civil rights of African Americans and other “legitimate minorities.” They have also argued that the comparisons made by LGBT advocates and organizations to the struggle of African Americans to achieve equality are misplaced and disrespectful to the historic experiences of African Americans in the United States. African American religious institutions and churches have also played a significant role in defining African Americans’ beliefs and opinions toward marriage equality and civil rights. Comments like this statement from W. James Favorite, President of Pastors on Patrol, a 200-strong coalition of local black pastors in Florida, underscore how many African Americans who oppose marriage equality do not even consider that some gay Americans to achieve equality are misplaced and disrespectful to the historic experiences of African Americans in the United States. African American men and women in this country who suffered and many died for simple equality… Gay people were never denied the right to vote or to drink out of a water fountain or to sit where they pleased on a public bus. Gay people have never been hosed down with water canons or beaten back by police officers because they were denied personhood. Gay people have never been spat upon for the color of their skin or lynched like animals in the field for trying to gain their freedom.

Statements like this also deny that gay people, especially gay people of color, have experienced tremendous violence that, while it should not be “compared” to the experiences of the African American civil rights struggle, should never be trivialized. This violence still happens in the US and around the world.

Moreover, in the African American community, marriage equality has also been framed as an issue benefiting or affecting only white gays and lesbians. To create a climate of support for marriage equality in African-American communities, there needs to be a shift away from hyper-moralizing and religion-based discrimination toward recognizing the responsibility and historical legacy of African Americans to lead national discussions on civil rights and equality.

In order to diffuse and shift the conversation, reframing the issue might focus on the following messages:

- **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."

- **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 relationships, but their families and our community as a whole."

- **Civil Unions and Domestic Partnerships Don’t Provide Equal Rights**
  "The word ‘marriage’ is the gateway to the 1,138 federal protections afforded to married couples. Without it, our gay brothers and sisters do not have rights like those that allow me to inherit my spouse’s pension; the right to custody, visitation, and the financial responsibilities for my children; to sponsor my foreign born spouse to stay in this country with our family; or the ability to inherit our house if anything ever happened to my spouse — just to name a few."

- **Protecting Individual Freedom**
  "Deciding who you want to marry is an intensely personal decision. Government has no business saying who you can and can’t marry."

- **Protecting Religious Freedom**
  "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."
CASE STUDIES

The findings of this report highlight key strategies for building support and opening dialogue around marriage equality within the African American community. These case studies explore these strategies through the stories of African American leaders that have stepped into the fray to support marriage equality. While they do not represent all of the ways in which our community is being brought together around this issue, they are challenging the homophobia, and leading the way against oppression.

Leadership from the Pulpit

In the African American community, one of the most challenging places to take a stand on marriage equality is in the church. For religious leaders that do take a stand, or even remain neutral, they are often challenged by their boards and parishioners. Reverend Byron Williams shares how he experienced this challenge first hand and how it opened up a larger conversation within his congregation about addressing the needs of the African American community.

I remember once that I wrote a column on marriage equality in 2000. Right after that I had a number of people in my congregation that wanted to have a conversation about my article and support for marriage equality. They wanted to have a conversation at the church, a larger church meeting about it. I told them that I would agree to have a church-wide conversation if they would each do one thing for me. I gave them each 5x7 cards and I asked them to write the five most important things to you as an individual and the five most important issues, as you see them, to the African American community. You know, not one person put down same sex marriage, not one. My next question to them was, why do we need to have a conversation about it? We need to have a conversation about why you don’t feel safe in your own home, we need to have a conversation about the schools that you are worried about and the education your children are receiving. This raised the opportunity to talk about why they felt the need to be misdirected and why we sometimes don’t have the courage to talk about the really critical questions and issues affecting our community.

This story highlights what we know is true across the country. While some African Americans strongly oppose marriage equality, when they are asked which issues are important to the African American community, they rank marriage equality far below issues relating to the economy - job opportunities, minimum wage, education, and health care. In a poll conducted by Black Entertainment Television (BET) and CBS, black respondents identified the economy (46%), education (19%), health care (14%), and the war in Iraq (14%) as priorities. Less than 1% of African-American surveyed mentioned the issue of gay marriage as a top policy priority.

For Reverend Amos Brown, a pastor at Third Baptist Church and President of the San Francisco National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) branch, holding the balance between his responsibilities as a religious leader and his spiritual commitment to social justice has not been easy. A staunch ally of the same gender loving community, he once had significant reservations about marriage equality. Yet he also recognized that the lesbian and gay community should have all of the rights that they are entitled to as long as they are not harming anyone else. As a result of this stance, many local clergy boycotted the annual dinner and largest fundraising event for the San Francisco branch. In a show of support, Ben Jealous, President and CEO of the NAACP, flew out to attend the dinner and California President Alice Huffman helped to fundraise the difference so that the branch did not lose out. Huffman shared that in Reverend Brown, the same gender loving community gained a worthy warrior for the cause. “Every time he speaks, he really makes you stop and think. One time he said, ‘I want everyone to know that I am not here by myself, I am here as a messenger from god.’ He then picked up the King James version of the Bible and said, “You all love this bible, right? Do you all know that the man who wrote this was gay, it’s right here in the literature? Yeah, he was gay.” She recalls how he shocked the room and in doing so challenged them to think about their stance on the same gender loving community and marriage equality.
Finding the Political Voice

Understanding the nuances of how marriage equality is viewed within the African American community necessitates a close examination of advocacy efforts, or lack thereof, among prominent African American organizations. Many African American political organizations do not even list marriage equality as one their important issues, implying it is not an African American problem. The dilemma that many of these organizations face remains how to effectively address the interests of their constituents without overextending their advocacy efforts. In this respect, embracing the differences within the African American community is viewed as a threat to the solidarity political organizations aim to create. Accordingly, focusing their efforts on the “most important” issues comes at the cost of marginalizing advocates and allies of marriage equality.

Breaking new ground, a small number of African American organizations are willing to include issues gay rights as part of their agenda. The Black Radical Congress exemplifies this progress through the development of its principles of unity. The third principle reads as follows:

Gender and sexuality can no longer be viewed as a personal issue but must be a basic part of our analyses, politics and struggles.

The language of this principle underscores the importance and urgency to integrate gay rights into broader issues affecting the African American community. Moreover, the emphasis on unity blurs the line that is often drawn between civil rights and gay rights.

John Lewis, a democratic Congressman from Atlanta, Georgia, shares a similar sentiment. Dubbed as one of the Big Six Leaders of the Civil Rights Movement, Lewis speaks with authority when he declares, “I fought too long and too hard against discrimination based on race and color not to stand up and fight and speak out against discrimination based on sexual orientation.”66 Serving on the Black Congressional Caucus, Lewis has worked alongside other African American elected officials who have also taken a vocal stance on marriage equality, including Barbara Lee. Congresswoman Lee serves as the Chair of the Congressional Black Caucus as well as one of the founding members of the LGBT Equality Caucus. On her website, she posted a statement on LGBT issues that reads:

At the federal and state levels, the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community has been the focus of several attempts to limit the rights and benefits of individuals and enshrine discrimination into existing policies and laws - and even the Constitution. That is just flat out wrong, and I will strenuously oppose any such effort. Rather than seeking to divide us, our government and our leaders should be working to encourage greater tolerance and understanding.47

This moment of obligation occurred for Willie Brown Jr. shortly before he became mayor of San Francisco. It was then that former Supervisor Carole Migden passed local legislation officially recognizing domestic partnerships in San Francisco. During these early days, Willie Brown allowed his office to be used by couples to secure their union, saying:

For me, it was a concrete sign of my support and affirmation of their sacred partnership. However, in my gut, I always believed it wasn’t enough. As a civil rights leader and activist for many years, I strongly believe in equality for all individuals and groups regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity. My support and involvement in the movement to end legal discrimination in our marriage laws is shaped by my strong belief in the humanity of all of our citizens and their rights to be full and equal participants in society. That is why I have pledged to use whatever political influence I have to create an environment where everyone is able to enjoy the same rights and privileges in this country, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

African American elected officials like John Lewis, Barbara Lee, and Willie Brown who take a vocal stance on marriage equality and gay rights are critical for bridging alliances between African American and gay communities. Given that Barbara Lee is the only African American person serving on the LGBT Equality Caucus, such efforts need to continue. By positing views that support gay rights and marriage equality and do not undermine African American rights, African American organizations and elected officials will be able to dismantle the institutions that strive to pit African American and gay rights against each other.
“[T]here was a time when black people in this country couldn’t marry the person of their choice either. That’s why when I am asked, ‘Are gay rights civil rights?’ my answer is always, ‘Of course they are.'”
— Julian Bond, Chairman of the NAACP November 20, 2005

The African American community has a long legacy of working to secure and protect the rights of disenfranchised groups and oppressed minorities. Over the last several decades, the community has stood up against Jim Crow laws, marched alongside allies to end segregation to create a more equal and just society, fought for access to quality education and job opportunities, and rallied against racial profiling and police brutality. African Americans have been consistent in their rejection of policies and practices that discriminate against others, including lesbians and gays. Yet as this report identifies, the issue of marriage equality has proven to be a highly divisive topic for the African American community.

Bringing the African American gay and lesbian community back into the folds of the community is an important goal of this work. It is in fact the African American community that is hurt by the social and political “fallout” from the visceral rejection of marriage equality and the same gender loving community.

Jasper Hendricks, National Black Justice Coalition (NBJC) Director of Field Operations, recognizes the need to show that, “there are African American kids who commit suicide because they are bullied or not accepted by their families. When you don’t see homes out there for LGBT youth, like the panhandle of Florida, they end up on the streets… We [need] to talk about African American transgender people who are abused and killed.”

Recognizing marriage equality as part of this conversation is an important step forward. Sowing seeds of hatred and violence in any way has an impact that goes far beyond one’s ability to marry the person they love.

The National Black Justice Coalition (NBJC), the nation’s only African American gay civil rights organization, works toward achieving the freedom to marry nationally by investing in leadership and forging relationships to build the base of support on a whole host of issues that affect the African American same gender loving community. They recognize that the decision to invest in African American leadership around marriage equality is critical to building a successful movement.

Nowhere is this as clear as within the growing relationship between NBJC and the NAACP. Just five short years ago the NAACP did not have an official stand on marriage equality when then NBCC president Alexander H. Robinson brought greetings to the NAACP sharing, ‘We worked side by side when we buried the word nigger, and I hope to have you there by our side as we bury the word faggot.’

Now in the wake of California’s Proposition 8, this report has been commissioned and will be released at a special breakfast at the 100th annual NAACP conference in New York. NBJC will share greetings at the chairman’s luncheon and co-host the first LGBT meeting at an NAACP convention in 100 years, starting a critical conversation on race and sexual orientation.

All of this has been possible through identifying and supporting the leadership of those within the NAACP who recognize the significance of this moment. In recognizing the significance of the weight that the NAACP’s leadership would provide, NBJC built upon existing relationships with key leaders like Chairman Julian Bond and Alice Huffman, President of the California Conference of the NAACP. These relationships were forged through NBJC’s early involvement in civil rights efforts led by the NAACP.

NBJC often acted as a shield when the NAACP came under fire around gay rights by reaching out to the larger gay community. For each of these leaders there was tremendous fire from within the NAACP as well. In one such instance, NBJC created a Facebook page in which a few thousand members joined in a matter of a few hours to support the courageous stand in support of marriage equality despite the pressure not to. As Hendricks, a NAACP member for 16 years points out, “That was critical when we formed the equality board and the letter of response to Proposition 8 passing… if it wasn’t for that we wouldn’t have the LGBT equality caucus. [NBJC will] be there in the good times and the bad. We’ll take a stand with you because you took a stand with us.”

Taking a stand has meant that the NAACP has publically taken a stand for civil rights time and time again. Individual chapters in states like Maryland, Florida, California, and the District of Columbia are having marriage equality forums to create space for everyone to really talk about these issues with and among African Americans. The NAACP in partnership with NBJC did a mailing to 170,000 African American households in California on supporting same gender loving families and to much surprise, they received fewer than a dozen negative responses.

Leadership at the state level is also a critical factor in creating change. Examples include Adora Obi Nweze, President of the Florida NAACP who served as chair of the Fairness for All Families campaign where Leon Russell, a national NAACP board member, was an honorary board member for the campaign. For Alice Huffman, President of the California State Conference of the NAACP, her own leadership within her state...
was important to being able to take the stand she did on marriage equality, unpopular as it was at times.

It boils down to leadership, and we were able to provide that in California in working with our adult branches and college chapters and youth councils. Over the years we have built up a sense of trust and confidence, of them in me and of me in them. I started at the state conference level and I started at my state convention. I worked through the leadership at the state convention. We took a position on a civil liberties bill, which they didn’t raise an eyebrow at that too much because that was old hat. Then when we supported the legislation for same sex marriage that’s when all hell broke out. Local [members] were very angry, calling talk shows, spitting on me, and cancelling their memberships.

In response, Huffman and the executive committee held town hall meetings across the state to bring the discussion directly to people. These town hall meetings were held by local branches that were interested in facilitating positive dialogue and supported marriage equality but wanted honest and open conversations between members. Huffman tells members all the time, “We didn’t get where we were alone. How about the fact that gays and lesbians, who are not asking us to marry them, are asking to have their right to do what they want. How can you deny them their rights? I will never try to debate you on the bible, but I can debate you on civil laws and government. I would never ask you to do anything in your church to violate your beliefs and your values, and you should never [do] anything through government that violates someone else’s.”

The very real and exciting truth is that these conversations are working. They demonstrate that when you empower leadership so that people can create space to talk about these issues - you cut through the fiction and misinformation that prevents them from supporting marriage equality. After a recent NAACP training, Huffman received a call from a woman whose husband attended the meeting saying, “I had to call you because my husband was in that group and he said ‘I got it - I finally got the gay issue. You don’t have to worry about me anymore.’”

In order to bridge these communities and movements, LGBT and African American civil rights organizations will need to provide training and support at the grassroots and member levels. It is through change in one on one conversations where the shift will occur. This shift will in turn allow a change in the framework and analysis of the organization’s agendas for social and political support of marriage equality.

The further development of case studies like these and other tools is essential. These stories highlight how the lives of African American same gender loving people are detrimentally impacted by the lack of support from within the African American community and how providing that leadership is becoming easier with each passing day, in large part because of the groundwork that has been laid by all of the leaders whose stories are told here.

VII. CONCLUSION

The issue of marriage equality has been a highly divisive topic for African-American communities because it is still entwined in perceptions about homosexuality and feelings of homophobia. The research reviewed here indicates that the attitudes and perceptions of African-Americans toward marriage equality and gay rights are highly influenced by their religious beliefs. Our findings also show that African-American attitudes toward marriage equality are shaped by cultural beliefs and values about family, the ongoing role that the Civil Rights Movement should or should not play in advancing gay rights, the lack of genuine bridge building by the broader LGBT community in engaging around issues that have been identified as priorities for Black Civil rights organizations, and persistent invisibility of gays in the black community.

Using available data, this report benchmarks the attitudes, beliefs, and challenges to building support for marriage equality within the African American community and highlights some of the tools, resources, and messaging that are being used successfully to achieve it. While polls up to 2007 have consistently shown that a majority of African-Americans are opposed to marriage equality, there is growing evidence and that the efforts in the last two years are beginning to have a substantial impact on African American communities around the freedom to marry.

In compiling this report we also recognize that there are still significant gaps in our understanding of the depth of African American perceptions around marriage equality and see this as a starting point for furthering the conversation. This report provides a starting point for the creation of
knowledge and understanding to galvanize African-Americans on the issue of marriage equality and gay rights.

(Endnotes)

2. Connecticut, Iowa, Maine, Massachusetts, Vermont and New Hampshire have passed legislation perform and legally recognize same-sex marriage.
5. This number may be higher because the US Census most likely undercounts the population of same-sex couples because of concerns related to revealing their sexual orientation or the terms/categories used to describe their relationship. Estimates suggest that the true counts are 10 to 50 percent higher than the Census figures.
17. ibid
26. ibid
27. ibid
32. Let California Ring, pg 14
33 Let California Ring, pg 14
34 Ibid
43 Let California Ring African American Toolkit September 2008
About NBJC

The National Black Justice Coalition, www.nbjc.org, is a civil rights organization dedicated to empowering Black lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people. Our mission is to end racism and homophobia. As America’s only nationwide Black gay civil rights organization, we are the authoritative source on LGBT issues as they affect Black communities.

Headquartered in Washington, DC we offer key insight and advocacy work on the following topics and more:

- HIV/AIDS in Black LGBT communities
- Hate Crimes motivated by LGBT bias
- LGBT Youth Trends, Influences and Concerns
- Racism and Homophobia abuse of “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell”
- Religion Based Homophobia

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