

What Next for the Marriage Movement?

American Experiment's Mitch Pearlstein was one of the originators and signers of this national statement, which was released in December.

Others, among the more than 140 signers, include: David Blankenhorn of the Institute for American Values; William J. Doherty of the University of Minnesota; Jean Bethke Elshtain of the University of Chicago; Ron Haskins of the Brookings Institution; Father Richard John Neuhaus of First Things; Glenn T. Stanton of Focus on the Family; Roland C. Warren of the National Fatherhood Initiative; and the distinguished political scientist James Q. Wilson.

For the full statement, go to www.americanvalues.org or www.marriagemovement.org/what_next.php.

We come together at a time of crisis and opportunity to declare our intention to lead a marriage renaissance in the United States.

Since our first statement of principles in 2000, the marriage movement has learned much and grown stronger. Now, four years later, we see new opportunities and emerging crises for those who wish to recreate a marriage culture.

The crisis concerns marriage law on two fronts. First, many leading voices in the field of family law, including the American Law Institute, are today calling for changes intended to blur or eliminate entirely many of the legal distinctions between married and unmarried couples. We are troubled by this trend. We know from our experience with couples and families—and we know from a large and growing body of social science research—that marriage is distinctive and that marriage is worth protecting. We know that getting married and living together are not the same thing. We know that marriage is more than a private lifestyle option. We know that healthy marriages generate important benefits for adults, children, and society as a whole. For these reasons, we believe that family law should aim to recognize and strengthen, rather than ignore and weaken, marriage's vital public purposes.

The second legal challenge is today's great debate over whether or not to permit same-sex couples legally to marry. At issue is whether it is possible, and in what ways it could be possible, to reconcile two important social values—one value being the importance of equal dignity and treatment for all citizens, and the other being the importance of marriage as a vital, pro-child social institution. From the perspective of marriage and the marriage movement, the current controversy over equal marriage rights for same-sex couples is the most important social policy debate of our generation. It is also an issue on which we in the marriage movement currently hold divergent views.

The issues in this marriage law crisis are not simple. They are also frequently emotional and divisive, in part because they touch upon core social, religious, and personal values, and in part because they concern the very existence of a fundamental social institution.

The challenge for us in the marriage movement is to model and help to lead a

deeper national conversation on possible solutions—a conversation that is civil and democratic, that emphasizes first the well-being of children, and that aims toward the renewal of marriage in the United States. We in the marriage movement do not shrink from this challenge. We embrace it.

We also come together at a time of great opportunity. For years, many leading voices in our society have insisted that the decline of marriage in the United States is inevitable and irreversible. Nothing can be done to change the trend, they told us. High and probably steadily growing rates of divorce and unwed childbearing are here to stay, they insisted. The only realistic solution, they advised us, is to get over it, to get used to it, and to help everyone learn to live with cycles of coupling and decoupling, because such is the nature of the postmodern family.

Meanwhile, something new, surprising, and quite encouraging has apparently happened in our society. A series of recent independent reports suggests that this supposedly unstoppable trend of U.S. marital decline has largely stopped in its tracks. It now seems clear that the voices of passivity and despair have been wrong, or at the very least premature, in announcing the death of the stable, marriage-headed family. Divorce rates are now modestly declining.^[I] Rates of unwed childbearing, after increasing sharply year after year for decades, have changed very little since 1995.^[II] Teen pregnancy rates have declined dramatically.^[III] Rates of reported marital happiness, after declining steadily from the early 1970s through the early 1990s, have stabilized.^[IV] Perhaps the most encouraging news is that, from 1995 to 2000, the proportion of African American children living in married-couple homes rose by about 4 percent. ^[V] Among all U.S. children, the proportion living in married-couple homes has stabilized and may be slightly increasing. ^[VI]

These changes are not large or definitive. But they are certainly suggestive. If they continue, they will change the lives of millions of U.S. children and families for the better. For the first time in several generations, those working for the renewal of marriage in the United States may have the wind at their backs.

This much we know: there is nothing inevitable about the decline of marriage in America. What will happen to this vital institution in the future is not an externally structured or preordained historical process. It is an event in freedom, dependent upon the conscious choices that we make as individuals and as a people.

The Marriage Movement

In 2000, the 113 original signatories to *The Marriage Movement: A Statement of Principles* made this public commitment:

“We come together to pledge that in this decade we will turn the tide on marriage and reduce divorce and unmarried childbearing, so that each year more children will grow up protected by their own two happily married parents, and so that each year more adults’ marriage dreams will come true.”

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tal decline has largely stopped in its tracks.

Today, four years later, are we making good on that pledge? What have we achieved? What are our main challenges for the rest of this decade? What are our goals for the immediate future?

Of course, accurately determining what is causing a particular set of social changes is notoriously difficult. But it seems plausible that today's more promising demographic news about marriage stems at least partly from value changes in the society, and that in turn, today's more pro-marriage attitudes and values stem at least partly from the work of the grassroots marriage movement. It also seems plausible that the mushrooming number of marriage support programs in our society, offering skills-based marriage education to couples who want to improve their relationships, are contributing to stronger marriages and fewer divorces.

Only a few years ago, the number of grassroots efforts aimed at strengthening marriage was extremely small. Today, there are hundreds of such efforts, in communities across the country. One sign of this growth is that the first Smart Marriages conference for marriage educators and leaders, held in 1997, drew about 400 participants. The 2000 conference drew about 1,200 participants. The 2004 conference drew more than 1,800 participants from all over the globe.

Moreover, recent research suggests that these community-based marriage education and renewal programs are achieving measurable gains in reducing divorce and strengthening marriage. For example, a recent independent evaluation of clergy-led Community Marriage Policies, presently active in 186 U.S. cities, found that, while divorce rates in matched counties without CMPs declined by an average of 9.4 percent over the course of seven years, divorce rates in counties with CMPs declined by an average of about 17.5 percent over the same period of time.^[VII]

We are heartened by these and other impressive advances in the field of marriage education. We are pleased that researchers and family scholars increasingly recognize the importance of marriage. For example, describing what it calls the emergence of a "powerful consensus" among social scientists, the New York Times reports: "From a child's point of view, according to a growing body of social research, the most supportive household is one with two biological parents in a low-conflict marriage."^[VIII]

We are pleased that policy makers on both sides of the aisle increasingly realize that strengthening marriage is one effective strategy for reducing child and family poverty and other social problems. We are pleased that the Bush administration has launched a Healthy Marriage Initiative aimed at strengthening marriage in low-income communities and improving the number and quality of community-based marriage programs. We are pleased to see bipartisan support for many state-level marriage initiatives. We are pleased that print and broadcast media journalists are paying more attention to the issue of marriage.

But our work is only beginning. The marriage movement is still being born. Our most difficult challenges lie ahead. The recent good news on marriage is tentative and faint. It could be—it might well be—soon reversed. While the research on the benefits of good marriages is definitive, much remains to be learned about improving marriage at the

population level. Moreover, the United States still has what is probably the world's highest divorce rate. The number of children living with cohabiting adults continues to climb. One-third of all U.S. children today are born to unmarried mothers, and most of these children soon lose their ties to their fathers. Millions of U.S. children, deprived of growing up with a mother and father who love their child and love each other, continue to suffer in myriad ways from this terrible social problem. So our task is great.

Whether we will ultimately succeed or fail — whether we will help to transform a divorce culture into a marriage culture — remains an open question.

What Are Our Next Steps?

Our immediate challenge is to take our fledgling social change movement to a higher level of capacity and competence. This task is complex. We are a diffuse, diverse, multi-faceted movement, bringing together conservatives and liberals, religious and non-religious people, activists and scholars. Moreover, there is no national headquarters. There is no central committee. No one person or group is in charge. Much of the vitality and creativity of our movement—much of the strength of any genuine social movement—flows from this diversity and decentralization.

But this strength can also be a weakness. Particularly now. This current period of crisis and opportunity—this vivid and precarious marriage moment that we live in—clearly calls us to a greater unity of action. It calls us to coordinate our efforts more effectively at the regional and national levels. It calls us to invest more intellectual and material resources into identifying and shaping key national issues. It requires us to begin to speak in one voice to the nation as a whole. The time we live in requires our movement to become a whole that is greater than the sum of the parts.

In that spirit, and with that goal in mind, we today commit ourselves collectively to the following course of action.

Our Mission

We unite around a vision of America where more children are raised in nurturing homes by their married mother and father, and where more adults enjoy mutually fulfilling and lifelong marriages. We unite around a vision of America where more children are raised in nurturing homes by their married mother and father, and where more adults enjoy mutually fulfilling and lifelong marriages.

Our Shared Goals through 2006

To help make our vision a reality, we will work together as a united movement in the months ahead to achieve these seven goals:

One

We will work with state legislators and our fellow citizens to win passage of new state laws across the country offering financial and other incentives, such as reduced mar-

riage license fees, tax credits, and shorter waiting periods, to couples who choose to participate in pre-marriage education.

Two

We will work with members of Congress and our fellow citizens to win passage of national legislation increasing federal funding for marriage education and support programs serving low-income communities, as a part of the reauthorization of the federal Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program, and we will work to encourage state governments to take advantage of those funds.

Three

We will work with state and local officials, educators, and our fellow citizens across the country to win passage of new policies adding high-quality marriage and relationship education to the public school curriculum.

Four

We will work with state legislators and our fellow citizens in selected states to reduce unnecessary divorce by reforming divorce laws, primarily by combining longer waiting periods for divorce with stronger provisions for family courts to refer couples to marriage education. [IX]

Five

We will work with each other, and our fellow citizens, to create forums for thoughtful examination of the various possible legal and public policy solutions to the issue of same-sex unions, evaluating each proposed solution according to whether it would be likely to bring us closer toward or take us further away from our mission. [X]

Six

To assist and guide us in achieving these shared goals, we today announce the formation of a Task Force on Marriage, composed of marriage leaders and accountable to the movement as a whole, as represented by the signatories to this Statement. The Task Force has three duties: First and foremost, to develop model legislation, direct our movement-wide legislative agenda, and monitor progress toward achieving our legislative goals; second, to evaluate and help to coordinate and improve the movement's public communications and public education strategies; and third, to encourage greater private philanthropic support for U.S. marriage programs and initiatives.

Seven

We will work with each other, and with our colleagues and fellow citizens, to expand the number of leaders and participants in the marriage movement, recognizing that a social change movement that is not getting bigger is getting weaker, and recognizing that inclusiveness and a wide diversity of philosophies and approaches are essential strengths of our movement.

Conclusion

Every child deserves to grow up with her own married mother and father who are committed for life to the child and to each other.

We come together at a time of crisis and opportunity to lead a marriage renaissance in the United States.

Why? Because we can do no other? A society in which up to half of all marriages fail, and in which millions of parents fail to marry, is a failing society.

Why? Because a renaissance is possible. For the first time in at least three decades, our society as a whole seems to be rediscovering the importance of marriage.

Why? Because we know that we must try. Most of us know in our hearts that the divorce and unwed childbearing revolutions have failed. Many of us have been a part of these trends. Very few of us want our children to be a part of them.

Why? Because the times demand it. What we do during this crucial “marriage moment” in our national life will strongly and perhaps decisively shape marriage as an institution for the foreseeable future.

Why? Because we humans are pair-bonding creatures who need and deeply desire to love and be loved—erotically, unselfishly, and permanently.

Why? Because every child deserves to grow up with her own married mother and father who are committed for life to the child and to each other.

Just as we are, pledged to our cause and buoyed by hope, we sincerely invite our fellow citizens to join us. We welcome—we need—your voices, energy, wisdom, and best ideas.

How to Join the Marriage Movement

How do you join a social movement? There are many ways, but you can start by contacting the organization from which you received this statement. They can give you information and help answer your questions. This statement was provided to you by: Institute for American Values.

For an overview of the marriage movement, you can also visit the Marriage Movement website (www.marriagemovement.org). Or you can contact any of the signatories to this Statement. Or you can contact the Task Force on Marriage’s executive secretary, Sara Butler at sara@americanvalues.org.

Please do contact us. We are only as strong as the diverse individuals—mostly volunteers—who make up our ranks. We value and need your help in changing our country for the better.

Notes

I. Joshua R. Goldstein, “The Leveling of Divorce in the United States,” *Demography* 36, no. 3 (August, 1999): 409-414.

II. Joyce A. Martin, et al., "Births: Final Data for 2002," National Vital Statistics Reports 52, no. 10 (Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics, June 25, 2003): 8-9.

III. *Ibid.*, 5.

IV. General Social Surveys, 1973-2002 (Chicago: National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago). See also Paul R. Amato, et al., "Continuity and Change in Marital Quality Between 1980 and 2000," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 65 (2003): 1-22.

V. Allen Dupree and Wendell Primus, *Declining Share of Children Lived with Single Mothers in the Late 1990s* (Washington, D.C.: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, June 15, 2001).

VI. Sharon Vandivere, Kristen Anderson Moore, and Martha Zaslow, *Children's Family Environments: Findings from the National Survey of America's Families* (Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute, 2001). Gregory Acs and Sandi Nelson, *Changes in Family Structure and Child Well-Being: Evidence from the 2002 National Survey of America's Families* (Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute, August 15, 2003).

VII. Paul J. Birch, et al., "Assessing the Impact of Community Marriage Policies on U.S. County Divorce Rates," *Family Relations* 53 (in press, 2004).

VIII. Blaine Hardin, "2-Parent Families Rise After Change in Welfare Laws," *New York Times*, August 12, 2001.

IX. As we envision this reform, longer waiting periods would not apply in cases in which there is a domestic violence protection order.

X. Our mission statement is not intended to endorse or reject particular public policy proposals regarding same-sex unions. Instead, we seek here to express as clearly as possible the broad social change goal to which we in the marriage movement are committed. How best to achieve that goal when it comes to public policies for same-sex unions poses issues on which people of goodwill can disagree, on which we in the marriage movement currently hold diverse views, and about which we believe that we, and the nation as a whole, should have civil and serious discussion. ■