

Testimony of  
**Rev. Dr. Ray Hammond II**

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SENATE SUBCOMMITTEE ON THE CONSTITUTION

HEARING TESTIMONY

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Mr. Chairman and members of the Senate Constitution Subcommittee:

I'm very grateful for your invitation to testify at today's hearings.

My name is Ray Hammond, and I am the senior pastor of Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Boston. I am a graduate of Harvard College and Harvard Medical School. I completed my surgical residency at the New England Deaconess Hospital in Boston and served for many years on the Emergency Medicine staff at the Cape Cod Hospital in Hyannis, Massachusetts.

In 1976, I completed my M.A. in the Study of Religion at Harvard Graduate School of Arts and Sciences. In 1988, I was called to be the founder and pastor of Bethel AME Church in the Roxbury neighborhood of Boston.

In my capacity as the leader of an African-American congregation in the inner city, I have a long history of involvement with youth and community activities. I am President of the Ten Point Coalition, an ecumenical group of clergy and lay leaders working to mobilize the greater Boston community around issues affecting black and Latino youth; especially those at-risk for violence, drug abuse, and other destructive behaviors.

I am also the Executive Director of Bethel's Youth Intervention Project; and a member of several church and community boards, including the Black Ministerial Alliance Executive Committee, the Youth Ministry Development Project Advisory Board, the Boston Plan for Excellence, Catholic Charities of Boston, Minuteman Council (Boston, MA) of the Boy Scouts of America, City Year of Boston Advisory Committee, and the United Way Success by Six Leadership Council. Finally, I am a member of the Advisory Board of the Alliance for Marriage, a diverse, non-partisan coalition composed of civil rights and religious leaders, as well as national legal experts, that is dedicated to restoring a culture of intact families founded upon marriage in America.

I'm here today to speak about an issue that transcends all political and ideological categories: The importance of marriage and families to the health of our children, the health of our communities, and the health of our society.

I find it very encouraging that most polls reveal a high degree of consensus among Americans -- regardless of race, color or creed -- about the importance of families to the health and well being of our nation.

Moreover, most Americans instinctively understand that there is an integral connection between the institution of marriage and the health of families in the United States. After all, in virtually every society on the face of the earth, marriage is what makes fatherhood more than a biological event -- by connecting men to the children they bring into the world.

But the American family is in serious trouble today. At present, a historically unprecedented percentage of families with children in our nation are fatherless. In fact, over 25 million American children (more than 1-in-3) are being raised in a family with no father present in the home. This represents a dramatic tripling of the level of fatherlessness in America over the past thirty years.

Unfortunately, there is an overwhelming body of social science research data which shows that the epidemic level of fatherlessness in America represents a disaster for children and society. In fact, many of our most serious social problems -- from youth crime to child poverty -- track far more closely with fatherlessness than they do with other social variables like race, educational level, or the condition of the economy.

As compelling as the empirical evidence may be, I do not need to consult social science research studies in order to conclude that the African-American community in particular has paid a heavy price for the modern epidemic of family disintegration.

As an African-American, as a pastor, and as a founder of the Boston Ten Point Coalition, I know that we live in a time of social crisis, and nowhere is that crisis more acute than where I live; the inner city. No group experiences that crisis more profoundly than the young urban men and women I see work and worship with. It has a profound impact on the children. Theirs is a topsy-turvy world where there is a growing number of households, struggling to make ends meet with parents, often single mothers, striving to hold themselves and their families together while they try to raise boys who will not become fodder on the killing fields called urban streets and daughters who will not grow old before their time. Theirs is a world where children face high death rates, low expectations, and a future that is cloudy at best. Theirs is a world; America; is underworld; where:

• Every 26 seconds a child runs away from home

• Every 40 seconds a child is abandoned or neglected

• Every 65 seconds a baby is born to unwed parents

• Every 7 minutes a young person is arrested for doing drugs

• Every 36 minutes someone is killed by gunfire

Of course, the problems of America's urban neighborhoods are well known. But the modern epidemic of family breakdown means that an increasing number of children in America are growing up under similarly difficult conditions. Indeed, for several decades, our nation has been wandering in a wilderness of social problems caused by family disintegration.

Tragically, as bad as our current situation may be, it could soon become dramatically worse. This is because the courts in America are poised to erase the legal road map to marriage and the family from American law. In fact, the weakening of the legal status of marriage in America at the hands of the courts has already begun.

This process represents nothing less than a social revolution -- advancing apart from the democratic process and against the will of a clear majority of the American people. If allowed to continue, this revolution will deprive future generations of Americans of the legal road map they will need to have a fighting chance to find their way out of the social wilderness of family disintegration.

Marriage as the union of male and female is the most multicultural social institution in the world; it cuts across all racial, cultural and religious lines.

Significantly, this common sense understanding of marriage as the union of male and female is so fundamental to the African-American community that over 70% of all African-Americans in the United States would currently favor a constitutional amendment to protect the legal status of marriage. Indeed, polls consistently show that the African-American community -- along with other communities of color in the United States -- lead the way in their support for a Federal Marriage Amendment to protect the legal status of marriage in America for future generations.

Of course, no one involved in the Alliance For Marriage believes that saving the legal status of marriage in America will alone be sufficient to stem the tide of family disintegration in our country. But we are convinced that protecting the legal status of marriage is a necessary condition for the renewal of a marriage-based culture in the United States.

The good news in all of this is that family breakdown is a completely curable social disease. This is one of the greatest and most prosperous nations in the world. And we can do better than accept historically unprecedented levels of youth crime and child poverty because more than one-third of our nation's children are being raised without the benefit of a married family made up of a mother and a father.

We can -- and we must -- rebuild a culture of marriage and intact families in this country while we still have time.

Thank you.