

Testimony of

Reverend Richard Richardson

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The Black Ministerial Alliance of Greater Boston
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Boston, MA

Chairman Cornyn, Ranking Member Feingold, and other distinguished members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to come before you today.

My name is Richard W. Richardson. I am an Ordained Minister in the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Boston, Massachusetts. I am also President and CEO of Children's Services of Roxbury, a child welfare agency. I've worked in the field of child welfare for almost 50 years. In addition, I have been a foster parent myself for 25 years.

Finally, I serve as chairman of the Political Affairs Committee of the Black Ministerial Alliance of Greater Boston. The BMA has a membership of 80 churches from within the greater Boston area, whose primary members are African American, and number over 30,000 individuals and families. I am here today to offer testimony on behalf of the BMA as well as myself.

The BMA strongly supports the traditional institution of marriage, as the union of one man and one woman. That institution plays a critical role in ensuring the progress and prosperity of the black family and the black community at large. That's why the BMA strongly supports a federal constitutional amendment defining marriage as the union of one man and one woman, and why the BMA is joined in that effort by the Cambridge Black Pastor's Conference and the Ten Point Coalition.

The BMA didn't come at this conclusion lightly. I never thought that I would be here in Washington, testifying before this distinguished subcommittee, on the subject of defending traditional marriage by a constitutional amendment. As members of the BMA, we are faced with many problems in our communities, and we want to be spending all of our energies working hard on those problems. We certainly didn't ask for a nationwide debate on whether the traditional institution of marriage should be invalidated by judges.

But the recent decision of four judges of the highest court in my state, threatening traditional marriage laws around the country, gives us no choice but to engage in this debate. The family and the traditional institution of marriage are fundamental to progress and hope for a better tomorrow for the African-American community. And so, much as we at the BMA would like to be focusing on other issues, we realize that traditional marriage - as well as our democratic system of government - is now under attack. Without traditional marriage, it is hard to see how our community will be able to thrive.

I would like to spend some time explaining why the definition of marriage as the union of one man and one woman is so important - not just to the African-American community, but to people of all religions and cultures around the world.

To put it simply: We firmly believe that children do best when raised by a mother and a father. My experience in the field of child welfare indicates that, when given a choice, children prefer a home that consists of their mother and father. Society has described the "ideal" family as being a mother, father, 2.5 children and a dog. Children are raised expecting to have a biological mother and father. It is not just society - it is biology, it is basic human instinct. We alter those expectations and basic human instincts at our peril, and at the peril of our communities.

The dilution of the ideal - of procreation and child-rearing within the marriage of one man and one woman - has already had a devastating effect on our community. We need to be strengthening the institution of marriage, not diluting it. Marriage is about children, not about adult love. As a minister to a large church with a diverse population, I can tell you that I love and respect all relationships. This discussion about marriage is not about adult love. It is about finding the best arrangement for raising children, and as history, tradition, biology, sociology, and just plain common sense tells us, children are raised best by their biological mother and father.

Let me be clear about something. As a reverend, I am not just a religious leader. I am also a family counselor. And I am deeply familiar with the fact that many children today are raised in nontraditional environments. Foster parents. Adoptive parents. Single parents. Children raised by grandparents, uncles, aunts. I don't disparage any of these arrangements. Of course I don't. People are working hard and doing the best job they can to raise children. That doesn't change the fact that there is an ideal. There is a dream that we have and should have for all children - and that is a mom and dad for every child, black or white.

I don't disparage other arrangements. I certainly don't disparage myself. As a foster parent to more than 50 children, a grandparent of seven adopted grandchildren, and almost 50 years of working with children who have been separated from their biological parent(s) and are living in a foster home, been adopted, or in any other type of non-traditional setting, I can attest that children will go to no end to seek out their biological family. It is instinct - it is a part of who we are as human beings, and no law can change that. As much as my wife and I shared our love with our foster children, and still have a lasting relationship with many of them, it did not fill that void that they experienced.

I want to spend my last few moments talking about discrimination. I want to state something very clearly, without equivocation, hesitation, or doubt. The defense of marriage is not about discrimination. As an African-American, I know something about discrimination. The institution of slavery was about the oppression of an entire people. The institution of segregation was about discrimination. The institution of Jim Crow laws, including laws against interracial marriage, was about discrimination.

The traditional institution of marriage is not discrimination. And I find it offensive to call it that. Marriage was not created to oppress people. It was created for children. It boggles my mind that people would compare the traditional institution of marriage to slavery. From what I can tell, every U.S. Senator - both Democrat and Republican - who has talked about marriage has said that they support traditional marriage laws and oppose what the Massachusetts court did. Are they all guilty of discrimination?

Finally, I want to mention something about the process. I know that the Massachusetts legislature is currently considering this issue, and I hope that they do. The court has told us that we cannot have traditional marriage and democracy until 2006 at the earliest. That is wrong, that is antidemocratic, that is offensive, and that is dangerous to black families and the black community.

But importantly, a state constitutional amendment will not be enough. I know that the Attorney General of Nebraska is here, and I am honored to share the panel with him. I am not a lawyer. But I know the lawyers who have been fighting to abolish traditional marriage laws in Massachusetts. I have been in the courtrooms and seen them argue. They are good people, and well meaning. But I can tell you this - they are tenacious, they are aggressive, and they will not stop until every marriage law in this nation is struck down under our U.S. Constitution. And every schoolchild learns in civics class knows that the only way to stop the courts from changing the U.S. Constitution is a federal constitutional amendment.

The defense of marriage should be a bipartisan effort. I am a proud member of the Democratic Party. And I am so pleased that the first constitutional amendment protecting marriage was introduced by a Democrat in the last Congress. I am honored to have been invited here to testify in front of this subcommittee of both Republicans and Democrats. I hope that each and everyone of you will keep the issue of defending the traditional institution of marriage as a bipartisan issue.

Mr. Chairman, thank you for giving me the opportunity to represent the Black Ministerial Alliance of Greater Boston, the Cambridge Black Pastor's Conference, and the Ten Point Coalition, in reaffirming our support for a Federal

Constitutional Amendment to define marriage as the union between a man and a woman. I would be pleased to take any questions.