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# Views: Same-Sex Marriage for a Diverse Society

American history has always been characterized by diversity, and the strength of new ideas from each wave of immigrants enriched our culture and society. Diversity dominates modern politics as a free society seeks to be inclusive of everyone, regardless of their differences. Diversity has not arisen as an issue of any single group or class, but has emerged as the U.S. has experienced a dramatic change in demographics. Diversity includes all differences of all individuals, including sexual orientation.

*We live in a society that purports to offer freedom and civil rights to everyone regardless of their diversity.* The last century has been a time of recognizing the need to realize the dream to live in a country where all people are equal. Many government bodies, such as the Hawaii Supreme Court, have engaged in debates on same-sex marriage. The Vermont Supreme Court ruled in 2000 “that the Vermont marriage statutes unconstitutionally discriminate against same-sex couples who seek to establish a permanent, stable family relationship.” The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) stated that “the struggle for legal equality for lesbians and gay men rests on several fundamental constitutional principles ... equal protection of the law is guaranteed by the Fifth and Fourteenth Amendments ... freedom of speech and association ... is guaranteed by the First Amendment.” Freedom and civil rights belong to everyone regardless of sexual orientation, and these rights include the right to marry.

*We live in a society guided by secular principles of government and not religious principles or standards.* Gay and lesbian lobbying groups have sought to gain civil and legal rights. Religious and conservative political groups defend their “moral superiority” and oppose these groups. Ultimately, the separation of church and state must win out over this “morality play.” A religious group cannot be allowed to make state policy that defines another group as immoral; such behavior leads to divisiveness, violence and discrimination.

Five countries – Denmark, Greenland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden – allow gays and lesbians to register their partnerships. These couples gain some of the same rights and protections as do married individuals. The Court of Appeal in Ontario, Canada has ruled that limiting marriage to one man and one woman illegally discriminates against – and “offends the dignity of” – same-gender couples. The Vermont legislature passed the Civil Union bill, in 2000, and Governor Howard Dean signed the measure into law. The legal issue is being passionately debated on both sides of the argu-

## david m. price

ment. The right to marry means not only the right to legitimize one's relationship but also states publicly that homosexual unions are equal to heterosexual unions.

*Marriage has many definitions and is not limited to a narrow definition of a heterosexual man and heterosexual woman who seek to procreate.* Definitions of marriage and family have changed a great deal in the past century. In the 2000 Census married couples represented 52% of households, or 54.9 million. Cohabiting couples who were not legally married made up 5.2%, or 5.5 million couples, up from 3.2 million in 1990. The majority of these unmarried couples had partners of the opposite sex (4.9 million), but 1 in 9 (540,000) had partners of the same sex. Of these same-sex couples, 301,000 had male partners and 293,000 had female partners. These data certainly reveal the magnitude of same-sex relationships, as over half a million couples publicly acknowledged them. Many homosexual couples define their relationships as marriage, and they have the same desire to commit to partners as their heterosexual counterparts.

*Morality and normality cannot be limited to heterosexuality, as this perception limits human sexual expression.* Just like many heterosexuals, gays and lesbians seek and create long-term committed relationships. Their relationships improve the quality of their lives and their communities. The legality of marriage also supports their decision to remain committed, to live openly, and to raise families. Legal recognition of same sex relationships does not threaten heterosexual marriage and simply supports existing same sex couples. Chief Justice Jeffrey L. Amestoy of the Vermont Supreme Court stated that “the extension of the Common Benefits Clause to acknowledge plaintiffs as Vermonters who seek nothing more, nor less, than legal protection and security for their avowed commitment to an intimate and lasting human relationship is simply, when all is said and done, a recognition of our common humanity.”

*Increased acceptance and decreased prejudice benefits everyone, regardless of their sexual orientation.* Diversity has become a pressing and emergent issue in all areas of our work,

community and social life. Demographics have shifted and Black, Hispanic and Asian individuals are becoming a more prominent part of American life (U.S. Census Bureau 2000, United States Department of Commerce). Our world has become smaller with the advances of information exchange, and we must learn to integrate our diverse backgrounds. There is also a great advantage to diversity as many differences allow for increased possibilities and creativity. The challenge is how society will harness this great potential of diversity so it allows the society to grow rather than self-destruct.

*A decision about same-sex marriage should be made using rational arguments, not emotional or tradition-based arguments.* Only a rational decision will lead to a greater understanding of sexual minorities and same-sex marriage. The American

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Psychological Association concluded homosexuality was neither a mental illness nor moral depravity but an expression of human love. The incidence of homosexuality is unrelated to moral codes or social mores. The American Psychiatric Association called for repeal to legislation that penalized homosexual acts by consenting adults in private. A rational discussion will be the only vehicle toward change as we seek to understand our differences. The U.S. Supreme Court recently made a rational decision to overturn existing sodomy laws and supported the right for consenting adults to engage in sexual behavior.

*A Call for Equality.* Utilizing our diversity as a society is the greatest challenge we face today. Like Martin Luther King Jr., “I have a dream,” and in my dream, all people can live with the same rights and privileges, regardless of their sexual orientation. Same-sex marriage is symbolic of the right to live a life of dignity and equality. I am very

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