

'Beyond Marriage' statement sparks dialogue

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By Zak Szymanski

It's hard to ignore the buzz surrounding the "Beyond Marriage" statement, released Wednesday, July 26. The statement – originally signed by a coalition of 260 LGBT activists, educators, public figures, and straight allies but reportedly growing by hundreds of signatures each day – calls for a new strategic LGBT vision that does not prioritize marriage over other family forms, and expresses concern that the LGBT movement's focus on marriage as a stand-alone issue has "left us isolated and vulnerable to a virulent backlash" including ballot initiatives and court rulings that dismantle existing rights such as domestic partnerships.

"If we'd been arguing all along for a wide menu of options for family recognition of all kinds, then it wouldn't have been 'a gay issue,' it would have been an issue for African American communities, for HIV communities, for labor, for women's rights organizations ... many different movements could have been behind this," said Joseph DeFilippis, executive director of the New York-based Queers for Economic Justice and a leading organizer of the statement. "Instead, it all became about 'gay couples,' and this left us isolated and vulnerable to attacks. I do believe that these [attacks] are very much about a larger conservative agenda of defunding the social safety net, but the specific format – as antigay initiatives and policies – would not have been the response to a much broader more progressive strategy."

The Beyond Marriage statement lists several committed family forms that would not benefit from marriage, including senior citizens living together, adult children caring for their parents, families with more than one conjugal partner, friends who raise children together, and single parents, all of which already have many of the same commitments and responsibilities of marriage and are also combinations reflected in LGBT households. The statement puts forth principles for an inclusive and effective LGBT movement, maintaining that healthcare reform, distribution of benefits regardless of marital status, and the separation of church and state are all equally important as marriage in the fight for LGBT rights.

Much of the national media reaction to the statement has painted two distinct camps: traditional-minded gay couples fighting for marriage pitted against sex-positive, alternative family types.

"Their no doubt well-intentioned effort really is the radical redefinition of marriage and family that the conservatives have been braying about for so long. Realizing the Right's worst fears is the last thing our movement needs to do at this critical juncture," Chris Crain, executive editor of Window Media wrote for the blogs of the *Washington Blade*, *Houston Voice*, and other gay newspapers owned by the conglomerate.

But recognizing that the majority of households in America are unmarried and that diverse families are in fact the American norm, many LGBT activists and groups said this week that they support both same-sex marriage as well as the ideas put forth by the Beyond Marriage statement, and they reject the push to characterize the dialogue as polarizing.

"Our positions are every bit about the reality of children and youth in this country, and getting recognition of all the relationships that children have to their parents and guardians," said Beth Teper, executive director of San Francisco's Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere. "We actively have been working toward marriage

equality because many of our members live in households with same-sex couples where if something were to happen their livelihood and relationship to their parents could be in danger. Also, a lot of our members don't have same-sex parents, but an uncle, or are in foster care, or have guardians who are not parents, and those relationships need to be protected and respected. Our vision is that all families are going to be valued in this country, and that all legal institutions are flexible and protective enough to give children what they need to grow and thrive in this community and society."

Prior to supporting Beyond Marriage, COLAGE also signed onto a series of advertisements in support of marriage equality that ran in 50 newspapers starting Tuesday, July 24. The \$250,000 ad campaign was organized by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, Freedom to Marry, and the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation.

Signing onto the Beyond Marriage statement did not present a conflict for Teper.

"I feel that by signing the [Beyond Marriage] statement to take a strategic position for all families is really a step in a positive direction. It does not at all say marriage equality is not still pertinent or relevant," she said.

Other notable Bay Area Beyond Marriage signatories include writer Armistead Maupin and the Reverend Dr. Penny Nixon of Metropolitan Community Church in San Francisco. Members of NGLTF, the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission, the National Black Justice Coalition, and a variety of community centers and organizations have also signed on. Many of the signatories have also done work for marriage equality.

"A lot of people agree with the general comments of the statement. It's been reported as some sort of split, but let's not lose sight of the fact that there are a lot of other issues, and I think that's what it's saying – there is more than just marriage," said Geoffrey Kors, executive director of the statewide LGBT advocacy group Equality California. EQCA was not asked to sign onto the original document, he said, and the group has not considered whether or not it would.

The trick may be in finding and funding the commonalities nationwide, thus creating a movement whose radicals can see the need for marriage, and whose marriage-minded get so accustomed to making a radical case for family recognition that the inevitable voices of diversity are seen as enriching instead of a threat.

'The way we live'

Although some marriage activists expressed concern that the statement's references to polyamory and nontraditional families play into right-wing rhetoric about a "slippery slope" of partnership recognition, DeFilippis said that a marriage movement that feels it must ignore other families sets all LGBT rights up for failure.

"The way we live is the way we live. You can try to hide it, or deal with reality," he said. "Many people live in monogamous relationships, many people have multiple lovers. Others don't live with any lovers. We're not making this up by stating it in our document. I didn't get my *Golden Girls* example [of seniors creating households together] from Bea Arthur, it already exists."

Kors, who believes that much of the LGBT movement has been inclusive of all family forms, does not think that failing to mention polyamorous couples or nontraditional families in marriage conversations is necessarily about fear or morality, but about "not allowing the right wing to steer the conversation or get off-topic."

Molly McKay, media director of Marriage Equality USA, agrees.

"I'm here as a marriage equality advocate. I'm here talking about the issue of how marriage laws discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation and gender," said McKay. "The rabid right is looking for any reason to pull people away from a simple question into a much more complicated question."

Still, what happens in a more narrow conversation also affects the broader movement, said Beyond Marriage statement signatory Kenyon Farrow.

"I remember hearing some of the earlier rhetoric of, 'Oh, well if we get domestic partnerships then roommates or friends can apply and get health insurance,' and I thought, 'well, what's wrong with that?' And why weren't some of the gay organizations and leaders of the marriage movement defending that?"

Farrow said that many potential allies in the African American community are so used to being told that their family structures are "not normal" – with women as the heads of households, for instance, or grandmothers raising children – that a message for gay equality based upon being traditional or "just like them" is less likely to resonate.

Using black civil rights rhetoric is another way to alienate a community that may otherwise support gay marriage, he said, and was part of what prompted him to write the widely distributed essay, "Is Gay Marriage Anti-Black?" in 2004.

"I wrote that for my aunt, a straight black woman who worked for a gay white man who talked to her about being a second-class citizen because he couldn't marry. She is somebody who grew up in the civil rights movement, and he was somebody who made three times what she makes, and she had a real hard time trying to deal with the racial stuff in the conversation without also appearing to be homophobic," said Farrow. "I think a lot of what happens with gay marriage discussions is the issues and struggles of the black community are positioned as 'over,' as if to say, 'You got yours already' when there is such a high unemployment rate, one million in prison, and black students in many respects aren't doing as well as they did under segregation. I think that's where the resistance comes in, rather than, ultimately, about whether gays can get married."

Civil unions for all?

A push for civil unions for everyone, said Farrow, would still grant marriage-like rights to gay couples and others, and separate religion from being tied to receiving government benefits, a strategy that would allow religious freedom in marriage policies while also embracing a separation of church and state.

But McKay said straight couples nationwide would not give up their marriage licenses for civil unions, and thus, a nationally recognized "separate but equal" system, even if it granted all the rights and benefits to same-sex couples and perhaps others, would cause her "to celebrate with my glass half full."

"Separate and equal institutions cannot stand. We've been through this as it is related to race," she said. "Even if you have two perfectly functional water fountains for 'white' and 'colored' there still is a distinction where there shouldn't be one. And this is the last bit of gender distinction in relationship laws that we need to eliminate."

Kors added that it was the push for gay marriage – and making opponents face the issue that made them the most uncomfortable – that even allowed the idea of LGBT civil unions to get this far. But he also said that EQCA and other groups often work in coalition to make sure all families are protected; the group is co-sponsoring a housing nondiscrimination bill with the NAACP that is currently in the state legislature, and he could see EQCA supporting a hypothetical effort to expand statewide domestic partnerships for LGBT and straight families of all kinds, he said.

As for LGBT groups across the country who say they already do support most of the tenets in the Beyond Marriage statement, DeFilippis said, "now I'd like to see an appropriate strategy and allocation of resources."

Beyond Marriage lists several already-existing efforts that the LGBT marriage movement can support. Arizona Together (www.aztogether.org) is building a popular campaign against marital status discrimination to defeat an upcoming antigay marriage ballot initiative that also threatens to revoke the state's opposite-sex and same-sex domestic partnerships. The South Carolina Equality Coalition (www.scequality.org) is fighting a proposed constitutional amendment by emphasizing "Fairness for all Families." Salt Lake City, Utah recently broadened benefits for domestic partners to be defined as "adult designees." While the motivation to do so was likely to avoid the appearance of sanctioning gay couplehood, many more LGBT families were protected as a result.

Demeaning rhetoric?

DeFilippis added that much of the gay marriage literature "is in direct contradiction" to LGBT groups who say they already fight for all kinds of families, because often the language in favor of marriage blatantly attacks or denigrates other family forms.

"We see groups doing the marriage work use rhetoric that denigrates domestic partnership and says it's 'unfair' or 'second-class citizenship,' and I find that appalling. It's not second-class citizenship for many people," he said. "It's an incredible arrogance ... to denigrate domestic partnership and other victories we have won that support many different variations of family."

"This is what domestic partnership gets you" was the title of a recent blog entry that detailed the discriminatory ordeal San Francisco resident Crispin Hollings endured while trying to possess, autopsy, and cremate the body of his long-term partner Eric Rofes. Rofes, an influential author and educator, died suddenly of an apparent heart attack on June 26 while on a writing holiday in Provincetown, Massachusetts.

The popular blog – written by the Daily Kos user "dmuir" – relayed the story of how several LGBT civil rights attorneys had to advocate on Hollings's behalf while he was grief stricken and trying to carry through with his partner's wishes. Rather than decry how unmarried partners are treated, many people used the story as a cry for gay marriage, stating that domestic partnerships were obviously "not enough" (though California's domestic partnership law actually was enough to eventually prove Hollings's legal rights). Yet the fact that these incidents happened in Massachusetts, where gay marriage is legal, might actually be more indicative of the need to make sure the gay marriage movement does not leave legal recognition of other partnerships behind.

"Ironically, I think the fact that Massachusetts recognizes same-sex marriage made it harder to explain my rights as his non-married DP," Hollings told the *Bay Area Reporter*. "Also, Eric was clearly for democratizing marriage on a broader scale than what many are advocating."

Rofes and Hollings were married at San Francisco City Hall in 2004, and the political momentum behind that event prompted Rofes to become active with www.PerfectUnion.net, a pro-marriage effort that advocates more grassroots community involvement, and opposes "a hierarchy within queer communities that honors relationships focused on financial stability, longevity, children, and monogamy while shutting out the wide range of ways queer people organize our relationships, families, and sex lives."

McKay, who befriended Rofes over a debate about marriage strategies and quickly began having regular lunch meetings with him, said the two did agree on the need to limit some conflicts and conversations to "internal dialogue," and that what bothers her about the Beyond Marriage statement is that the LGBT community's more nuanced understanding of relationships does not always translate accurately to the outside world.

"We have a complex understanding of gender and sexuality, and where we might be able to have more complicated discussions internally, as we go out and we're talking to the broader audience we have to keep it simple," said McKay. "We can have ongoing conversations and critiques. I'm not closed-minded. But I am concerned that we keep a unified message when we have those external conversations. Otherwise it's very confusing for non-gay allies. And it gives some people who otherwise might support gay marriage an easy out to say, 'your own community doesn't support this issue.'"

On the other hand, if more LGBT groups spent more time and money advocating for all committed family forms, said some Beyond Marriage signatories, the conversation may not be that confusing to the outside world at all.

"I don't know how to make it more explicit" that the statement is in favor of marriage equality, said DeFilippis. But "marriage shouldn't have to be the only way for everyone to get these rights."