



Time to Stop the Lies

Countering Bishop Harry Jackson's Gay Marriage Distortions

Jeff Krehely | November 19, 2009

Same-sex couples in Washington, D.C. could soon have the same full marriage rights and responsibilities that their straight counterparts currently enjoy. The Washington, D.C. city council is considering a bill that would expand its marriage law to be inclusive of same-sex couples. This bill also calls for all sections of the district's code related to marriage and family benefits to be updated with gender-neutral language. This change would ensure that married same-sex couples receive the same treatment under the district's laws as opposite-sex married couples.

An inclusive marriage law would help the 3,500 same-sex couples living in the district by giving them easier access to the many benefits that come with marriage, including hospital visitation rights, medical decision making authority for their partners, and property and inheritance rights. It would also boost the district's economy and tax revenues from new business generated by these marriages.

Yet the marriage bill is not without controversy, as a small but vocal group of religious organizations and leaders has risen up to oppose the law. Bishop Harry Jackson is driving the charge to defeat the council's current marriage bill. Jackson leads the [Hope Christian Church](#) in Beltsville, Maryland, as well as the [High Impact Leadership Coalition](#), which is closely aligned with the most conservative elements of the Republican Party. For example, Jackson has lobbied to kill efforts to reform health care using odd logic to argue that health care reform will prevent wealthy people from being able to access coverage because low-income people will consume all of the nation's health resources.¹

Bishop Harry Jackson's bogus claims

Jackson frequently claims that D.C.'s lesbian and gay community is highly affluent, and therefore does not need full legal equality:

“Many of our gay people here are professionals in this city, disproportionately educated and they have all kind of opportunities to make more money than other folk. They’re living in these new condos that are being brought to the city... The so-called persecuted gay [rights] movement... is a handful of privileged people.”²

He further asserts that if the District Council passes a marriage equality bill, it will somehow violate the political rights of the district’s residents and be tantamount to gays and lesbians bribing the Council into supporting their civil rights:

“The truth is that the gay community has ‘manipulated’ the political process through extravagant campaign contributions and strategically infiltrating the city’s Democratic Party’s hierarchy over the last five years. DC council members have ironically participated in the suppression of the citizens’ right to vote in order to advance a privileged minority’s pet issue.”³

Perhaps no one told Jackson that the marriage equality bill’s chief champion is David Catania, who until five years ago was a member of the Republican Party, before he became a political independent. Anyone who paid the smallest amount of attention to the District Council prior to the marriage debate would quickly realize that Catania does not vote in lockstep with his Democratic colleagues. Jackson also apparently missed the memo from the chairman of the District’s Republican Committee, Robert J. Kabel, who is a vocal supporter of the marriage bill.⁴

Jackson also implies that extending full marriage rights to gays and lesbians is somehow a zero-sum game, and will take something away from the district’s poorest residents:

“The unwed black mother, living on public assistance, understands true discrimination. She understands that there are privileged people in our culture and institutional barriers that prohibit whole segments of our society from experiencing the American dream. In D.C., gay activists enjoy better education, better jobs, better housing, greater access to the system, and now—legislative power. Something is wrong when the privileged feign that they are the persecuted, when the powerful posture themselves as victims.”⁵

Jackson likely does not even consider the possibility that an “unwed black mother” might be bisexual or a lesbian, and appreciate having the option to marry another woman, and thereby secure the whole range of financial benefits for her family that come with marriage.

The truth about D.C.’s same-sex couples

Recent and credible research has convincingly shown that Jackson’s views of the “privileged”—and largely white—gay and lesbian community are completely untrue and inaccurate. The Williams Institute at the UCLA School of Law has extensively analyzed

credible government data comparing families in D.C. headed by same-sex couples to those headed by heterosexual couples.

The Williams Institute researchers found that same-sex couples living in the district are diverse in terms of race and income, among other factors. There are about 3,500 same-sex couples living in the district, including 225 who are legally married and 3,300 who are not married. The district has by far the highest concentration of unmarried same-sex partners of any state—13.2 per 1,000 households in DC; the next highest is Maine at 6.8.⁶

A 2007 analysis found that same-sex couple households can be found in every part of the district, and comprise 1.5 percent of all households and 5.1 percent of all coupled households.⁷ More than a quarter of these couples are African American, as the table-figure below shows.⁸ All told, one-third of same-sex couples living in the district are not white.

And contrary to Jackson’s claims of the gay community’s privilege and ability to earn more money than straight people, yearly earnings of men in same-sex couples are actually lower than those of married men, as shown below. Men in same-sex couples in D.C. earn about \$67,000 on average each year, while men who are married to women earn \$70,000. And women in same-sex couples in the district earn \$43,000 on average, while women married to men earn \$45,000.⁹

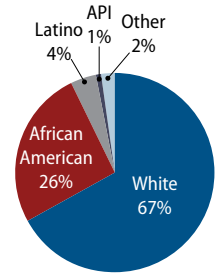
Finally, about 8 percent of same-sex couples in the district are raising children under age 18. And these households have lower incomes compared to those headed by straight married parents. Straight households have an annual income of \$115,000, while same-sex households earn \$99,000. A higher percentage of straight married couples with children also own their home—59 percent compared to 51 percent of same-sex couples with children.¹⁰

The data points above are not surprising, given the persistent discrimination that LGBT people face in the workplace, which leads to higher rates of job turnover and overall lower salaries. A lack of marriage benefits at the district and federal level also suppresses the incomes of families headed by same-sex couples.

Economic benefits of marriage for Washington, D.C.

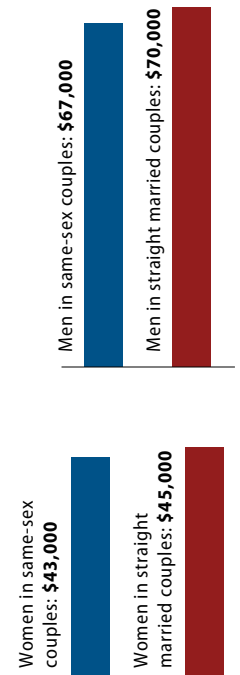
Extending full marriage benefits to all committed couples in the district will not only help families headed by gay couples. All of the district’s residents will benefit. An April 2009 report from the Williams Institute estimates that extending marriage to gay couples in the district will add \$52 million to the district’s budget over the next three years. This figure includes district residents spending money on their weddings, and tourism and wedding spending by nonresidents who travel to the district to get married.¹¹

Race and ethnicity of DC’s same-sex couples



Source: Williams Institute, 2007.

Annual earnings of same-sex couples vs. straight married couples in D.C.



Source: Williams Institute, 2007.

Wedding-related spending would generate another \$4.8 million in sales and hotel tax revenues— as well as \$650,000 in marriage license fees—over the next three years. And the Williams analysis did not include other sources of tax revenue such as property taxes, excise taxes, taxes on indirect spending—that will likely increase if marriage equality becomes law.¹²

All told, the economic boost from extending marriage to same-sex couples will generate about 700 new jobs in the district.¹³ Perhaps that “unwed black mother” that Jackson purports to care so much about would receive one of these jobs.

What’s next

Assuming Congress does not intervene, the district’s laws will soon expand to fully recognize gay couples’ relationships. Opponents to marriage equality—led by Jackson—promise to do everything they can to block or undo the law, including filing a request with the D.C. Board of Elections and Ethics to hold a ballot initiative next year asking voters to amend district law to define marriage as a union between one man and one woman.

Jackson made a similar request when the district decided this past summer to recognize same-sex marriages performed elsewhere, but the board rejected his pleas. Bishop Jackson’s new request will likely be denied as well, since referendums cannot be held on D.C. laws that violate the District’s Human Rights Act, which includes protections for gays and lesbians.

Catholic Archbishop Donald Wuerl has promised to make the district’s marriage law a national issue, saying that “This is not a local issue. People always look at the District of Columbia through a magnifying glass, and we need to be aware of that.”¹⁴ Jackson goes a step further, saying “We need people to come and talk to their congressmen and tell that D.C. is the nation’s capital... what happens in D.C. doesn’t stay in D.C.”¹⁵

It’s true that Congress has authority to weigh in on the issue, although it was silent on the bill that recognized out-of-state marriages last summer. But a law that extends full marriage equality to gay couples might be too much for conservatives in Congress to ignore, especially in an election year with vocal opponents such as Jackson and Wuerl stirring up opposition.

Any serious consideration of the economic situation of the district’s same-sex couples could be lost in this debate, including the very real financial costs of marriage inequality. The fact that gay, lesbian, and bisexual people of every race and ethnicity pay these costs should not be lied about or conveniently ignored.

Endnotes

- 1 Bishop Harry Jackson: Universal Health Care 'Reverse Classicism', available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WVROzBu_H8k&feature=player_embedded (last accessed November 6, 2009).
- 2 Bishop Harry Jackson Jr. at Values Voter Summit 2009 Part 2, available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GsbDo4kVfMY&feature=player_embedded# (last accessed November 9, 2009).
- 3 Harry R. Jackson, "Stealing Liberty," Townhall.com, available at http://townhall.com/columnists/HarryRJacksonJr/2009/09/14/stealing_liberty (last accessed November 6, 2009).
- 4 Tim Craig, "Two Republicans Stand By Same-Sex Marriage," *The Washington Post*, October 15, 2009, available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/10/14/AR2009101401594.html?sub=AR> (last accessed November 9, 2009).
- 5 http://townhall.com/columnists/HarryRJacksonJr/2009/09/14/stealing_liberty (last accessed November 6, 2009).
- 6 Gary J. Gates, *State Estimates of Same-Sex Spouses and Unmarried Partners in the American Community Survey, 2008*. October 2009.
- 7 Adam P. Romero, Amanda K. Baumle, M.V. Lee Badgett, and Gary J. Gates, *Census Snapshot: Washington, DC*. 2007.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Christopher Ramos, M.V. Lee Badgett, and Brad Sears, *The Economic Impact of Extending Marriage to Same-Sex Couples in the District of Columbia*. 2009.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Tim Craig, "Wuerl ups Opposition to Gay Marriage," *The Washington Post*, September 2, 2009, available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/09/01/AR2009090102535.html>.
- 15 Ibid.