“A Call for a New Conversation on Marriage”

— AN APPEAL FROM SEVENTY-FIVE AMERICAN LEADERS
It’s time for a new conversation on marriage.

Why marriage?

Because families are the seedbeds of civil society, and marriage is the basis of the family. Marriage creates kin. Marriage is a wealth-producing institution. And because marriage is the main institution governing the link between the spousal association and the parent-child association, marriage is society’s most pro-child institution.

Marriage is fracturing in America. While the nation’s attention is riveted by a debate about whether a small proportion of our fellow citizens (gays and lesbians) should be allowed to marry, marriage is rapidly dividing along class lines, splitting the country that it used to unite. While marriage is stable or strengthening among our college-educated elites, much larger numbers of Americans, particularly in middle and working-class America, are abandoning the institution entirely, with harmful social and personal consequences.

This hollowing out of marriage in mainstream America is among the most consequential social facts of our era. It’s contributing to the growth of inequality, harming countless children, and weakening, perhaps fatally, our formerly strong middle class. And amazingly, if you listen to political leaders of both parties and opinion leaders from both the left and right, you’ll discover that very few of them appear even to have noticed what’s happening.

Why a new conversation?

Because the current conversation is at a dead end. And because we won’t renew marriage without fundamentally reforming the way we discuss marriage.

Let us tell you the differences between the dead-end conversation of today and the new conversation we propose.

1. The current conversation is almost entirely a culture war over gay marriage, pitting traditionalists opposed to gay rights against gay rights leaders and their allies.

We propose a new conversation that brings together gays and lesbians who want to strengthen marriage with straight people who want to do the same. The new conversation does not presuppose or require agreement on gay marriage, but it does ask a new question. The current question is: "Should gays marry?" The new question is: "Who among us, gay or straight, wants to strengthen marriage?"

2. The current conversation treats marriage decline as primarily a problem of the poor and minorities.

We propose a new conversation on marriage decline, focusing on the startling fact that marriage trends in middle America, particularly among the nearly 60
percent of Americans who’ve graduated from high school but do not have a four-year college degree, are more and more resembling the historic marriage trends in poor and low-income America.

In short, in the current conversation, marriage policy is mostly seen as a welfare topic. In the new conversation, marriage policy is an inequality topic.

3. The current conversation on heterosexual marriage focuses largely on the young, especially on teenagers at risk of getting pregnant and on parents of young children.

We propose a new conversation involving all Americans on marriage across the life cycle. If unwed child bearing is not good for teens, is it good for twentiesomethings? Thirty-somethings with good jobs? As the huge Baby Boom generation (the generation that led the divorce revolution) heads toward retirement and old age, does marriage matter for older and empty-nest Americans, and if so, why?

4. The current conversation on middle-class marriage is largely therapeutic and psychological, focusing on gender roles and on “soul mate” issues.

In the wake of the Great Recession and in the midst of severe and possibly long-lasting economic challenges to our society, we propose a new conversation that re-establishes the link between marriage and money, the nest and the nest-egg. What economic policies strengthen marriage? What marriage policies create wealth? In the new conversation, marriage and thrift, the two great engines of the American middle class since the nation’s founding, stand best when they stand together.

In short, the current conversation on middle-class marriage presupposes affluence. In the new conversation, marriage helps to rebuild affluence.

5. Finally, and possibly most importantly, the current conversation on marriage decline is rooted in the belief that nothing can be done.

The conventional wisdom seems to be that marriage – except possibly for gay marriage – is something that can’t be fixed. It’s about personal choices. People are voting with their feet. Nothing can be done to stop or reverse the trend. The only thing we can do is ignore the problem, change the subject, or passively wring our hands in sadness.

The new conversation rejects this premise entirely. This is an American conversation. Like our forebears, we assume that what happens in the future will be the result of our ideas and choices today. No trend in our society, including the marriage trend, is preordained, or immune from human decision-making, and no problem we face – this is America, after all – is so large that we must become passive and servile in its face.
The current conversation is at a dead end.

But the new conversation is just getting started.

To this new conversation, we pledge our time, money, and best ideas. We are eager to face the challenge. We invite you to join us.

SIGNED,

- Joanna M. Adams  
  Morningside Presbyterian Church (Pastor Emerita)

- John Atlas  
  National Housing Institute

- Robert N. Bellah  
  University of California, Berkeley (Emeritus)

- Jay Belsky  
  University of California, Davis

- Elizabeth Berger  
  George Washington University School of Medicine

- David Blankenhorn  
  Institute for American Values

- Margaret Brinig  
  University of Notre Dame Law School

- Jill Brooke  
  Huffington Post

- Jason Byassee  
  Boone United Methodist Church

- Dale Carpenter  
  University of Minnesota Law School

- Obie Clayton  
  University of Georgia

- Bill Coffin  
  Healthy Marriage Consultant

- John Corvino  
  Wayne State University

- Reid Cramer  
  New America Foundation

- John Crouch  
  Coalition for Divorce Reform Family Law Attorney

- John Culhane  
  Widener University School of Law

- John Demos  
  Yale University

- William J. Doherty  
  University of Minnesota

- Susan Dutton  
  Smart Relationships

- Lanny Ebenstein  
  California Center for Public Policy

- David Eggebeen  
  Pennsylvania State University

- Jean Bethke Elshtain  
  University of Chicago Divinity School

- Robert E. Emery  
  University of Virginia

- Martha Erickson  
  University of Minnesota (Emerita)

- Caitlin Flanagan  
  Author
Robert Michael Franklin  
Presidential Emeritus of Morehouse College  
President Emeritus of the Interdenominational Theological Seminary, Stanford University

Francis Fukuyama  
Stanford University

William A. Galston  
The Brookings Institution

Claire L. Gaudiani  
New York University

Neil Gilbert  
University of California, Berkeley

David Gray  
New America Foundation

Jonathan Haidt  
New York University

Ron Haskins  
The Brookings Institution

Alan J. Hawkins  
Brigham Young University

Kay Hymowitz  
Manhattan Institute

Michael Ignatieff  
Harvard University Kennedy School of Government  
University of Toronto

Kathleen A. Kovner Kline  
University of Pennsylvania

Alicia La Hoz  
Family Bridges

Robert I. Lerman  
The Urban Institute

Charles Lipson  
University of Chicago

Glenn C. Loury  
Brown University

Linda Malone-Colón  
Hampton University

Howard J. Markman  
University of Denver

Elizabeth Marquardt  
Institute for American Values

Will Marshall  
Progressive Policy Institute

Daniel H. Martins  
Bishop of Springfield (Episcopal Church)

Lawrence M. Mead  
New York University

Richard J. Mouw  
President of Fuller Theological Seminary

David G. Myers  
Hope College

Ted Ownby  
University of Mississippi

Mitch Pearlstein  
Center of the American Experiment

Marline Pearson  
Madison Area Technical College

John Podhoretz  
Editor of Commentary Magazine

David Popenoe  
Rutgers University (Emeritus)

Stephen Post  
Stony Brook University

Jonathan Rauch  
The Brookings Institution
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Edited by W. Bradford Wilcox and Elizabeth Marquardt
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A team of family scholars offer a fresh set of family recommendations
on tackling the striking, yet little-discussed decline in marriage among
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completed high school, but do not have a four-year college degree.