



The Roundtable

on Religion and Social Welfare Policy

Government Partnerships with Religious Groups to Promote and Support Healthy Marriages

**Remarks of
Richard P. Nathan
Director**

**Rockefeller Institute of Government
Roundtable on Religion and Social Welfare Policy**

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Good morning and welcome to the National Press Club. We're glad you can join us for this timely discussion about the potential role for faith-based organizations in government efforts to promote "healthy marriages."

I'm Dick Nathan, and I am Director of the Rockefeller Institute of Government, the public policy research arm of the State University of New York, which is sponsoring this forum through our Roundtable on Religion and Social Welfare Policy. The Roundtable project is supported by The Pew Charitable Trusts, and was created to collect, produce, and disseminate independent, non-partisan research on the scale and effectiveness of faith-based social services, and the policy and legal environment in which they operate.

We are pleased to know from the feedback we've received that the Roundtable has established itself as a vital resource on these issues, and are gratified by reaction to our efforts to encourage informed debate on this important public policy. In January, The Pew Charitable Trusts recognized these efforts by renewing its support for the Roundtable until January 2007. Julie Sulc from The Trusts is with us today, and I want to personally thank her and her colleagues at Pew for the vote of confidence they have given us.

The institution of marriage is much in the news -- from courthouses and state houses around the nation to Capitol Hill, where marriage was again the topic of

hearings last week. The Bush administration prepares to invest 1.5-billion dollars into its “Healthy Marriage Initiative,” featured by the President on campaign trips through key swing states in the Midwest this past week.

The specific place for governmental interest in the private area of marriage may be a topic of some – and sometimes heated – disagreement. But the government’s general interest in marriage was articulated forcefully in the 1996 national welfare reform law, and attention to the topic accompanies renewed movement toward reauthorization of that law.

The very first statements of the 1996 law – the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act – are about marriage. The preamble of the law makes the following findings. “(1) Marriage is the essential foundation of a successful society. (2) Marriage is an essential institution of a successful society which promotes the interest of children.” The law goes on to detail the harmful effects to children of being raised in single-parent families, especially if born to unmarried teenagers.

The goal of strengthening families was a high – indeed the first – priority of the 1996 welfare reform law. Yet, little progress has been made at the ground level to promote marriage as part of welfare reform. This is in sharp contrast to the considerable, some might say surprising, progress made since 1996 in overhauling state and local human service systems to promote work and family self-support, which is the other stand-out goal of the 1996 act.

A recent study reports that every state in the nation has, to some degree, adopted a policy change or program aimed at keeping married couples together and building the number of two-parent families. But in most cases these efforts are recent, still limited in scope, and not connected directly to welfare.

A Rockefeller Institute, in-depth implementation study in 26 states shows that in the first few years of the block grants, only a small number of states paid attention to the marriage goals of the 1996 national welfare reform law. In the past three years, and especially in the past 12 to 18 months, more states have begun to develop policies and programs to strengthen families and promote marriage.

In terms of initiatives to encourage marriage, counsel new parents, and in other ways promote good family functioning for poor families, however, many states are at the agenda mobilization and policy design stage, and not the implementation stage, of the policy process.

The reasons why welfare reforms have had little impact on building families are several.

The original reforms had clearly stated workforce goals -- and job training services were already in place for the most part. But a similar infrastructure for strengthening families and reducing out-of-wedlock pregnancies *did not* exist. Researchers have concluded the reforms enacted in 1996 may have had the opposite effect -- actually decreasing incentives for single mothers to get married.

It's generally held that marriage can produce real, definable benefits. Studies by organizations like the Urban Institute and Brookings confirm that children are inclined to do better in two-parent households, that women tend to be sheltered from hardship, and that both men and women are healthier and live longer if they are married.

But the issue is a tricky one.

The ideal of stable two-parent families raising children in a harmonious household is actually alive and well in America. Some observers see such families as downright old-fashioned, may resist the notion that marriage is always

the best model, and cite, with authority, problems of domestic violence and the realities of modern life and contemporary culture as barriers to this ideal mode of child rearing. But the majority of children in the U.S. reside in married, two-parent families. According to the 2000 Census, 66 percent of the total U.S. population under the age of 18 lived in a married-couple family.

Still, the institution of marriage seems in need of buttressing. A significant number of two-parent families are unmarried, and the number of unmarried couples in the U.S. increased substantially between 1990 and 2000 while married couple families declined as a percentage of all households. Almost half of first marriages end in divorce -- and one-third of all children are born out of wedlock.

The question is how. Marriage and procreation are two areas in which there are fundamental ideas and fundamental differences about them. Both have been the long-standing focus of efforts to change values through public laws and programs. But there is no shortage of books and articles by countless experts saying that governments don't know how to do anything to promote the values underlying these issues.

There are people lined up on both sides. Opponents say the marriage initiative will keep some women in abusive relationships. Others say it's too simplistic and ignores the realities of life, especially among the poor it seeks to help.

Meanwhile, supporters say the benefits of marriage are unmistakable, producing wealthier families and better lives for children. They argue government is already very much involved in these issues because it must deal with the fall-out from failed marriages -- providing everything from welfare programs to child support enforcement services. Therefore, proponents of the marriage initiative say government has a clear role and responsibility to reverse these trends.

But this isn't to say we know how. No one can say with certainty how government can be most effective in achieving its goal of producing more "healthy marriages."

Some observers suggest the government itself may be undermining the marriage initiative before it even gets off the ground. According to the Heritage Foundation, there may be a disincentive to bringing a second wage-earner into the family -- because government benefits are generally based on a family's total income.

Other studies have produced similarly unexpected results. Researchers at Princeton and Columbia Universities -- using data developed from their Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study -- found that unmarried low-income urban parents generally have strong bonds at the time of their children's birth. And they suggest that this period may present a special window of opportunity for intervention. But these same researchers found no initial evidence that marriage had any significant positive effects on the children they studied three years after they were born.

Meanwhile, a study of poor African-American youths found most had little hope for their futures and few role models of successful, committed relationships. Most said they were not willing to postpone sex until marriage because they did not see marriage as a reality.

Clearly, factors such as these present special challenges which must be considered.

Still, researchers have generally found marriage to be perceived as a good thing -- and especially beneficial for children. But in light of the challenges they've outlined, they caution expectations for marriage promotion programs should remain realistic.

Yes, we do have some idea of the benefits marriage can bring to reducing poverty and stabilizing families -- but we don't know if these proposed programs will indeed produce the desired results. We still don't know with confidence how best to implement marriage education and promotion programs.

Will these efforts work? Will they succeed in bringing couples together, keeping them together and, in turn, improving the wellbeing of children who are involved? What should be the scope of government-sponsored marriage programs -- and how far should they go?

Then there are questions about what these should programs look like and how they should be implemented? We also need to ask who should provide these services -- and who should receive them?

Past research provides us with some insight as to who is most likely to benefit from such programs -- and which organizations may be most effective in their delivery.

For instance, a study of unmarried parents in Louisiana found most were least comfortable receiving relationship and marriage services from government agencies such as welfare offices or health departments -- or from hospitals and clinics. Instead, most said they would prefer receiving such help through a faith-based provider.

Which brings us to our primary topic for today's panel.

There is potential of a strong and sensible coming together of welfare reform, marriage and family stabilization, and the emphasis now being placed on having faith-based organizations involved in delivering social services.

Federal law establishes specific conditions for procurement of services using federal (and admixed state) TANF, Welfare-to-Work, and Community Services Block Grant funds, intended to permit religious organizations to contract with government or to accept vouchers to provide services “on the same basis as any other nongovernmental provider without impairing the religious character of such organizations, and without diminishing the religious freedom of beneficiaries.”

The 1996 welfare reform statute, since expanded to other areas noted, contains the first explicit provisions on so-called charitable choice – that is, provisions recognizing the right of faith-based organizations to participate as grantees and contractors on the same basis as other nongovernmental providers, without having to alter their religious character, provided no public funds are used for worship, religious instruction, or proselytizing, and provided service recipients have access to secular alternatives.

We need to ask about the appropriate role in all of this for faith-based organizations. What attributes of FBOs, if any, would predict they can they be more effective than secular providers? Are FBOs positioned in ways that indicate the low-income groups targeted for their services are more likely to attend and respond? And, how far should publicly-funded faith-based programs be allowed to go beyond the kinds of marriage and relationship skills taught by their non-religious counterparts?

Governments appear increasingly to turn to the faith community for help on marriage.

For example, states like Oklahoma and Louisiana are working with religious leaders to combat high divorce rates. And the federal government has launched the African-American Healthy Marriage Initiative, appealing directly to clergy in black communities to get involved.

Meanwhile -- in anticipation of TANF funding being approved for the “Healthy Marriage Initiative” -- faith-based groups all over America have begun to create coalitions and community marriage initiatives so they’ll be ready once the money becomes available.

This potential niche for faith organizations is further bolstered by a soon to be published report which indicates that marriage initiatives may be most successful when they include a religious element.

The study -- by the Utah-based Institute for Research and Evaluation -- found that divorce rates dropped faster in those communities served by the faith-based “Marriage Savers” program. It was founded on the premise that religious leaders can be instrumental in strengthening marriages, since 86 percent of all marriages take place in a church.

You will find more detail on these findings in our new publication “Marriage Promotion: Will it Work?” It’s an excellent report which was prepared by Claire Hughes of the Roundtable staff. We have copies available here today, and it is also available for download from the Roundtable web site at: www -- Religion and Social Policy -- dot -- org.

So does this mean churches are ready to partner with government and accept a role in the promotion of healthy marriages? Certainly some are -- and are already preparing to do so. However, others are likely to be far more cautious -- even wary -- of becoming involved with government-funded programs.

This may be especially true in African American communities -- where the need to stabilize families is often most critical. According to one study from Emory University, some African-American pastors believe they have not always fared well from government intervention. And while many are looking for assistance in

promoting marriage, they want it their own terms -- including the right to maintain their spiritual identities.

Again, these are challenges that are likely to have a substantial effect on the success of marriage promotion.

Clearly, we need more information on all of these points -- and that is what brings us here today. To look at where we are -- and to define the challenges that lay ahead.

To help us set our compass, we are fortunate to have a panel of experts today who are profoundly involved in these issues. They include:

- Wade F. Horn, Assistant Secretary at the US Department of Health and Human Services, who will be joining us shortly from another event;
- Professor John P. Bartkowski from Mississippi State University
- W. Bradford Wilcox of the University of Virginia, and
- Theodora Ooms of The Center for Law and Social Policy;

Welcome to you all, and my personal thanks for being with us today.

-- end welcoming remarks --

(Introductory bios)

John P. Bartkowski

John P. Bartkowski is Professor of Sociology at Mississippi State University -- and a participating scholar with the Roundtable project.

Much of his current research explores the intersection of religion, social welfare, and family life. His most recent books include *Charitable Choices: Religion, Race, and Poverty in the Post-Welfare Era* and *The Promise Keepers: Servants, Soldiers, and Godly Men*.

Dr. Bartkowski's work has been published in numerous journals, including: *the Journal of Family Issues* -- *the Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* -- *Qualitative Sociology* -- *Social Science Quarterly* -- and *Sociology of Religion*.

He is the author of *Remaking the Godly Marriage: Gender Negotiation in Evangelical Families*, and he is currently completing a book on Latter-day Saint teens.

He received his Ph.D. in Sociology from the University of Texas at Austin in 1997.

His presentation today is "**Promising Partnership or Conflicted Collaboration? Faith-Based Organizations, Government and Family Policy.**"

Please join me in welcoming Professor John Bartkowski.

Wade F. Horn

Dr. Wade F. Horn was sworn in as the Assistant Secretary for Children and Families in the Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, on July 30, 2001.

Prior to this appointment, Dr. Horn was President of the National Fatherhood Initiative, an organization which seeks to increase the number of children who grow up with involved, committed and responsible fathers in their lives.

From 1989-1993, Dr. Horn was the Commissioner for Children, Youth and Families, and Chief of the Children's Bureau in the Administration on Children, Youth and Families.

He also served as a Presidential appointee to the National Commission on Children from 1990-1993 -- was a member of the National Commission on Childhood Disability from 1994-1995 -- and served on the U.S. Advisory Board on Welfare Indicators from 1996-1997.

Prior to these appointments, Dr. Horn was the Director of Outpatient Psychological Services at the Children's Hospital National Medical Center in Washington, D.C. -- and was an Associate Professor of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at George Washington University.

From 1993 to 2001, Dr. Horn was also an adjunct faculty member at Georgetown University's Public Policy Institute, and an affiliate scholar with the Hudson Institute.

Dr. Horn received his Ph.D. in clinical child psychology from Southern Illinois University in 1981.

He is the author of numerous articles on children and family issues, including a weekly newspaper column entitled *Fatherly Advice* -- and he is the co-author of several books including:

The Better Homes and Gardens New Father Book -- and *The Better Homes and Gardens New Teen Book*. He is also the lead editor of *The Fatherhood Movement: A Call to Action*.

Very are very grateful to have him with us today to discuss the Bush Administration's "Healthy Marriage Initiative.

Please join me in welcoming Dr. Wade Horn.

Theodora Ooms

Theodora Ooms is Senior Policy Analyst at The Center for Law and Social Policy in Washington DC -- better known to some of you as "CLASP."

She joined CLASP in September 1999 to work on couples and marriage policy. She is responsible for providing information, education, consultation, and technical assistance to federal, state, and local public officials and others about emerging policy and program strategies to strengthen couples and marriage. In particular, she maintains a special focus on low-income and welfare populations.

Ms. Ooms began her professional career as a social worker, family therapist, and mental health administrator working with children, families, and community agencies in New Haven and Philadelphia.

For eighteen years, she was executive director of the Family Impact Seminar -- a nonpartisan policy institute with a national reputation for providing balanced, timely information on a wide range of family policy topics. In recent years, she has done pioneering work on two much-neglected family policy issues -- unwed fathers and marriage.

Ms. Ooms is also the editor of two books and author of numerous reports, papers, and articles.

She received her B.A. from Oxford University and a Master of Social Work from the University of Connecticut.

She joins us today to present her research on "The Involvement of Faith Organizations in State Efforts to Strengthen Marriage and Two-Parent Families."

Please join me in welcoming Theodora Ooms.

W. Bradford Wilcox

W. Bradford Wilcox is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of Virginia and Non-resident Fellow at the Center for Research on Religion and Urban Civil Society at the University of Pennsylvania.

He has published articles in *The American Sociological Review* -- *Social Forces* -- and the *Journal of Marriage and Family*. In addition, his research has appeared in *The Washington Post* -- *The Los Angeles Times* -- *CBS News* -- and on numerous National Public Radio stations.

Dr. Wilcox is also the author of *Soft Patriarchs, New Men: How Christianity Shapes Fathers and Husbands*.

His research interests include the influence of religious belief and practice on marriage, cohabitation, parenting and fatherhood.

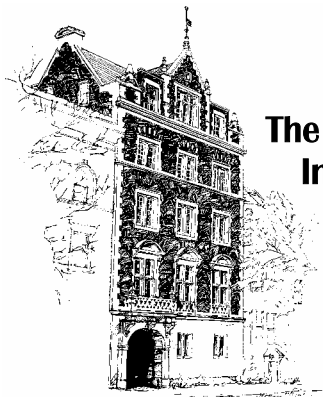
Dr. Wilcox received a Ph.D. in Sociology from Princeton University.

His presentation today is entitled "*The Ties that Bind -- Religion and Marriage in Urban America*."

Please join me in welcoming Professor Bradford Wilcox.



The Roundtable on Religion and Social Welfare Policy
www.ReligionandSocialPolicy.org
(518) 443-5014



**The Nelson A. Rockefeller
Institute of Government**
State University of New York
411 State Street
Albany, NY 12203

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