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EDITORIAL**Rhonda Smith**
FEATURES EDITOR**Extending the King legacy**

Black ministers should be engaged until they see Martin Luther King's point that discrimination against some affects us all.

Friday, January 14, 2005

AMONG THE MYRIAD celebrations next week in honor of what would have been Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s 76th birthday is a musical concert in Washington, D.C., organized by the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual & Transgendered Arts Consortium.

Alvin Mayes, a black gay college professor and member of the Lesbian & Gay Chorus of Washington, came up with the idea to honor the slain civil rights leader five years ago. Last year, he said he did so because he saw similarities between the movement King began leading in Montgomery, Ala., five decades ago and the more recent public push for gay civil rights.

Despite critics who bristle at comparisons between the two movements, it not only is our right but our responsibility to point out their similarities.

Individuals opposed to gay equality justify their acceptance of African Americans and rejection of gay people, in part, by saying blacks do not choose their skin color but gays choose their sexual orientation. The scientific verdict is still out on sexual orientation, though there is evidence to support the belief that being gay (or straight) is an immutable characteristic.

Regardless, gay people are systematically locked out of certain institutions that are open to everyone else, much like African Americans once were. The most obvious in this country is the right to legally marry, which remains illegal everywhere except in Massachusetts.

On the adoption front, the U.S. Supreme Court declined this week to hear a legal case that challenged Florida's ban on letting gay people adopt children.

Patricia Logue, senior counsel at Lambda Legal, said in a written statement that no other state in this country has a law that completely bans lesbians and gay men from adopting children.

"Florida is letting anti-gay bigotry determine its adoption policies while thousands of children in the state wait years to be adopted," she said.

Gay people also are denied jobs and housing based on their sexual orientation. And like African Americans and individuals who belong to other racial and ethnic groups, gay men and lesbians are disproportionately at risk for becoming victims of hate crimes, based on other people's prejudices.

IN LIGHT OF all this, it was disappointing to learn that Martin Luther King Jr.'s youngest daughter recently marched in Atlanta in part against equal marriage rights for gay couples with members of New Birth Missionary Church in Lithonia, Ga.

Bernice King is an elder in New Birth, which claims 25,000 members. Atlanta police estimated that at least 20,000 of the church's supporters took part in the march Dec. 11 from her father's gravesite to Turner Field. About 50 gay civil rights advocates held a counter protest nearby.

New Birth organizers said they staged the march to urge black churches to speak out more about issues like reforming the education and health care systems, creating economic opportunities for

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communities of color and blocking legal marriage rights for same-sex couples.

While education, health care and economic matters affecting African Americans are all worthy causes to focus more time and attention on, why King and Bishop Eddie Long, the senior pastor of New Birth, as well as other black ministers nationwide, are choosing to focus on marriage matters is less clear.

Marriage among gay couples is not even one of the top 10 looming issues aggravating the social ills facing black America, though black religious leaders opposed to gay civil rights argue that granting equal marriage rights to gay couples would somehow weaken the family structure.

The looming challenges causing black families the most harm are primarily tied to poverty, not homosexuality. Instead of marriage matters, marchers could have better served their cause by developing strategies to counter the influx of illegal drugs and violence afflicting a disproportionate number of black communities nationwide, and the disproportionate rate of HIV/AIDS cases facing black men, women and children.

Beyond this, black religious leaders and their followers must also be challenged when they argue that their views opposing homosexuality are based on a literal interpretation of the Bible. Although it is unlikely that their views will change, a rational discussion with them about our lives could only help, though it will take time.

NOT ALL AFRICAN American leaders are opposed to gay civil rights.

Thankfully, the slain civil rights leader's widow, Coretta Scott King, has been one of our most outspoken allies. Her comments suggest that her husband, who was born on Jan. 15, 1929, would have been supportive of our struggle.

Other African-American allies, including Rev. Al Sharpton, the former presidential candidate, and Congressman John Lewis (D-Ga.), also have spoken eloquently about backing gay rights, including marriage equality.

Nevertheless, many black politicians who we should be able to count on as allies continue to take their cues from Bill Clinton, John Kerry, and other political liberals who have stopped short of supporting our push for equal marriage rights.

Incoming U.S. Sen. Barack Obama (D-Ill.), for example, has said he supports gay civil rights but not "gay marriage." At times like this, we must be comfortable making our case for full equality alone, when necessary.

"Every step toward the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering and struggle; the tireless exertions and passionate concern of dedicated individuals," King wrote during the late 1950s in "Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story."

"Without persistent effort, time itself becomes an ally of the insurgent and primitive forces of irrational emotionalism and social destruction," he said. "This is no time for apathy or complacency. This is a time for vigorous and positive action."

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