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## Homosexuality and the Black Community, a Church Minister's Perspective: Interview with Rev. Richard Richardson

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## Homosexuality and the Black Community, a Church Minister's Perspective: Interview with Rev. Richard Richardson

### Cover Page Footnote

Reverend Richard W. Richardson, is the President and CEO of Children's Services of Roxbury (CSR), Inc., a multi-service Child Welfare agency located at Dudley Square, Roxbury, MA. A native of Cambridge, MA, Richardson received his Masters Degree in Education from Cambridge College. Reverend Richardson serves as the Chair of the Political Affairs committee of the Black Ministerial Alliance of Boston. In that capacity he monitors all state, city, and local activities that have an impact on the faith-based communities in which the Black Ministerial Alliance member churches are located. He is an ordained Local Elder and also serves as Church Administrator at Saint Paul African Methodist Episcopal Church in Cambridge, MA.

# Homosexuality and the Black Community, a Church Minister's Perspective: *Interview with Rev. Richard Richardson*

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Castellano Turner, Ph.D.

*In this interview, Rev. Richard Richardson asserts that the Black church has always been the foundation on which the Black community has built its values. While not condoning the "sin" of homosexuality, Richardson maintains that the church does not turn away homosexuals and instead embraces them and attempts to teach them what God wants of them.*

**T***urner: A lot has been said about the Black community and its "aversion" to homosexuality. Is it your sense that Black people in this country are indeed less tolerant of homosexuality than the White people?*

**Richardson:** I think aversion is too strong a term to use when you talk about the Black community's views toward homosexuality. I cannot speak to the tolerance of White people vs. Black people because it is not a

subject that I engage in with White people to get their views. As far as Blacks are concerned, however, it is my opinion that we are a pretty closed people and we don't discuss homosexuality openly or express our feelings freely. Sexual orientation and gay and lesbian lifestyles, I think, are subjects that only recently most Blacks have become comfortable to even discuss. Our parents and grandparents rarely discussed the issue; they became evasive when the question was raised and they quickly changed the subject. Homosexuality was considered a personal subject and individuals were left to their own beliefs and upbringing to address the issue. Even individual families that may have had a child that was homosexual didn't discuss it with others and in most cases they dealt with it within the confines of their family or with close friends.

It is my opinion that Blacks are no less tolerant of homosexuality than any other group of people. I think what we do have are moral values that we espouse, and strong individual opinions around homosexuality. We express those opinions more as individuals rather than a community or a race so I think to say Black people are averse to homosexuality is an exaggeration.

*Turner: So "aversion" is too strong a word?*

**Richardson:** Right I think Black people may discuss homosexuality as individuals but I don't think there is any evidence of a strong aversion to it. We are not any less tolerant than anybody else.

*Turner: Is your description of the experiences of the way sexuality was handled during your childhood applicable to homosexuality specifically or sexuality in general?*

*Blacks are in general not as open to discussing homosexuality*

**Richardson:** Well I think it is actually around all of those issues. Most Blacks as young children are raised in the church and there is a certain set of values that are instilled starting at a

young age. It is not until recently that sex started being discussed openly. I think up until just maybe 10-15 years ago you never heard a lot of talk about it in the Black community, and even though I am sure it was discussed, it was never done in an open forum like it is being done now. I guess to some degree the discussion is healthy, but I think it is now being swayed by the wave of what is going on in the gay and lesbian community. I think Blacks are just in general not as open to discussing homosexuality or even drawing opinions on this issue.

*Turner: A common reason that is given for this alleged intolerance in the Black community is the role of the Black church in actively condemning and preaching against the homosexual lifestyle. Do you agree with that as an assessment?*

**Richardson:** Well, as I said, the Black church has always been the foundation on which the Black family has built its moral values. I am glad the question is phrased “the alleged intolerance” because I don’t think there are any hard facts that say Black preachers condemn the homosexual lifestyle. The church has always been a respected entity within the Black family and the recent accusations that the Black church and Black pastors are condemning the homosexual lifestyle are not true. Most mainline denominations have stated over and over again that, as you know, it is our belief that homosexuality is a sin. But most churches are structured in such a way that we embrace the sinner but not the sin. I think that is important -- that we are all saved by grace and so we should therefore not reject or cast out anyone because of his or her sexual orientation.

*We embrace the sinner  
but not the sin*

I believe our job as ministers of the Gospel is to save souls, not pass judgment on their character because all of us would be in serious problems if people were judging us by our past in some cases. But it is also our job to reject any sins that the individual may encounter, and I think homosexuality is, in the teachings of the church, an abomination

before God. I think we have churches that open their doors to everybody regardless of their addiction, lifestyle or sexual preference because they want to attempt to help the individuals with their struggles regardless of their circumstances.

There are many churches like the United Methodist Church in Boston, which are reconciliation churches, which have many gay and lesbian members. The role of the church is not to condemn them but to bring them in and talk about a lifestyle that is not in keeping with what the Bible teaches. The Bible is clear on homosexuality, I mean, there is no way you can get around it. Religious institutions, if they are founded on what the Bible says, must continue to maintain that homosexuality is not an accepted practice in the church. But it doesn't mean that we reject the homosexual individual, what we do is bring them in and try to teach them that biblically it's not what God would want of us as human beings, and try to show them that there is a better way. At our church in Cambridge too, we have members who are homosexuals; we embrace them but let them know clearly that it's the sin we reject, not the sinner. I think that is the key. For people to say we are condemning the homosexual lifestyle is simplistic and untrue.

*Turner: Well, that's important. I am glad you made that distinction in terms of whether or not individuals or people are being condemned as opposed to what they actually do or homosexuality itself. The next question is as follows: Supporters of gay marriage have argued that it is not a religious issue, but a legal issue; and that left with no legal argument, opponents use the church to justify legislation against gay marriage. How do you justify the church's involvement in the ability of homosexuals to partake in civil marriages?*

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*The covenant of marriage is a religious rite and not a right from a legal standpoint*

**Richardson:** Well I think there are two issues wrapped up in that question. First, there is no way you can say marriage is

not a religious issue. Christians believe that marriage is a covenant

relationship between a man and a woman, and this covenant relationship is not only documented in the Bible where it says that marriage is a union between one man and one woman, it also predates any constitutional law that has been adopted by states just for the benefit of establishing a social order. I think that is where the conflict arises in the debate on whether marriage is a religious or legal issue. I think it is clear, marriage is a religious issue and it was established long before any legal claims or parameters were established. The Bible clearly establishes that marriage is and was meant to be between one man and one woman. The covenant of marriage is therefore a religious rite and not a right from a legal standpoint. States have come along just for their own social and societal regulations, and started issuing licenses for the purpose of establishing a union between a man and a woman for legal purposes. But that doesn't change the fact that the idea of marriage comes from a religious standpoint.

I believe therefore that states do not have the right to change a law when they had nothing to do with its origin. The argument that supporters of gay marriage use claiming that opponents use the church

*A civil union has some semblance of marriage and I would say that we are certainly not in support of that*

to justify legislation doesn't cut the mustard with me since many churches are in fact supportive of gay marriage. You just cannot

paint with a broad brush and say all churches are against gay marriage. There are several churches since this law was passed in Massachusetts that have said "fine we'll marry people if they come before us," and they have done that! I think that the jury is still out on civil unions. There are many churches and many religious people that believe that civil unions are OK and many legislators believe that civil unions are the way to go. I don't think the church has addressed the issue because we stand on what the Word says; marriage is supposed to be between one man and one woman, so therefore anything beyond that is not acceptable. A civil union has some semblance of marriage and I would say that we are

certainly not in support of that. I think you just can't have the freedom to marry anybody that you want.

*Turner: Are you saying that you may be against marriage of gay people in the sense of a religious rite but not against an arrangement that allows, for instance, civil unions that are short of marriage? Are you basically acknowledging that there are some legal rights that same-sex people who are together ought to have?*

**Richardson:** I think when you start talking about civil unions you are talking about boundaries outside the church.

*Turner: I see.*

**Richardson:** I think the church has no issue around that, because that is not and has never been something that has been established as a religious covenant or a religious issue. When they say to recognize them for other purposes such as benefits or things of that nature, that's not a religious issue. Clearly that is a legal issue, and if that is what they will allow civil unions to be, a legal issue, then I don't think you will find the church speaking out one way or the other against it. That is why many churches said they are not dealing with the issue of civil unions because it is not a religious issue.

*Turner: I see. People who are against homosexual rights being equated with civil rights give reasons such as: homosexuality is "foreign" to Black culture; homosexuality is a lifestyle choice, race is not; homosexuals are not "oppressed," Black are. What is your opinion on civil rights and gay rights – are they one and the same?*

**Richardson:** Well, I don't think they are one and the same. I know that many established Black legislators as well as clergy take opposite positions. I don't think there is any one road that everybody can agree on. You have people like John Lewis in the legislature and Coretta Scott



King that say “we think these are civil rights violations.” I don’t know the thinking on that because it is a stretch as far as I am concerned – that gay rights are a civil rights issue.

I don’t believe that homosexuality is foreign to any culture. My opinion is that civil rights were born out of the struggles that Blacks went through fighting to be treated like human beings and not to be classified as 2/3 of a person. Civil rights came from struggles resulting from being brought over on slave ships and sold as property to the highest bidder, being torn from our families, suffering murders, lynching and rape, all because of the color of our skin! Blacks can’t disguise themselves so they are not being recognized for who they are, in every day living people see you coming they know what you are.

Homosexuals can fit in anywhere they want, and not be branded as that, excluding those that are Black. They can exist in any society or any environment without being subjected to abusive treatment because there is no way of identifying a person as gay or lesbian unless they self-disclose it. Even then, there is a greater chance that acceptance of a White person who may be gay or lesbian is a lot greater than that of a Black person in this Eurocentric society that we live in. I think the gay rights movement is trying to force its lifestyle upon the rest of the world.

*I think the gay rights movement is trying to force its lifestyle upon the rest of the world*

I don’t think you can force anyone through legislation or anything else to accept something that they don’t believe in. The passing of the Civil

Rights legislation has not brought about the elimination of racism and prejudice, or respect towards Blacks. I feel that the gay rights movement consists of people who are trying to gain recognition and are using civil rights as a comparison. I don’t believe there is a comparison. We as Blacks cannot begin to say that our struggle is the same as the gay and lesbian population; it is all together different. I just don’t see how gay activists can even compare gay rights with civil rights. But they do; they wrap civil rights around everything that they can to gain points. I think

when you really look at it, gays are not exposed to any of the suffering we have had to go through to establish where we are today. I think that if you take a cross-section of the gay and lesbian population from the White community, you'll find that many of them are upper and middle class folk. They are not from the struggling lower class. They are in many cases from very affluent families and sitting in high positions. All of a sudden it's in vogue for gay people to come out and say, "I am gay (or lesbian)" – to come out of the closet and force people to recognize them then call it a civil rights issue. I am not saying that gay people have not been exposed to some things, but their suffering pales in comparison to what we have gone through as a people. I just don't think that the two issues are comparable.

*Turner: Just not justified?*

**Richardson:** Not in my eyes. I don't speak for everybody but there are a lot of people that feel that way.

*Turner: There are those that feel that the Black community has serious and real issues that it is dealing with such as lack of educational achievement, access to health care, housing and employment, and there is no place for an issue such as homosexuality. Do you think the Black church's preoccupation with the issue of homosexuality takes away from the real social issues?*

**Richardson:** Again, I think that the perception that the Black church is preoccupied by the issue of homosexuality is really blown out of proportion. I don't think we are preoccupied with it. During the peak of the debate when the legislature talked of passing legislation, we might have been in the middle of a lot of the controversy. Once the law was passed, however, it was no longer high on our agenda. We certainly talk about it, but anybody that knows what is going on in the Black community or the Black church knows that homosexuality is not the number one issue. The Black church and community have made their

position clear on the subject of homosexuality. It is something that we

*The Black church is clear on homosexuality – we accepted it since it is the law and we are moving on*

have accepted since it is the law and we are moving on. If anyone has really followed the work of the Black church and Black community, he or she would know that fighting homosexuality is not

high on our agenda. What are we interested in? The Black Church particularly through the Black Ministerial Alliance, the Ten Point Coalition, and other community groups is focused on social issues that are going on in our community: fighting for education, housing, and healthcare; and fighting crime, homelessness and unemployment. We are involved in economic development which no one seems to want to address. Those are the things at the forefront of the Black church and Black community. We are actively involved with state and local authorities around these issues including talking with the governor of the Commonwealth and the mayor of Boston. We are not talking about homosexuality anymore with legislators, the mayor, or representatives of state government. We are now discussing issues in our communities and what is happening there.

I think that the Black church is now becoming a force to be reckoned with and in some cases people don't want to acknowledge that. But we have become the safety net for our community. People, businesses and politicians come and go but the church is the one stable thing in our community that we can say is not going anywhere. It is our job to take care of the flock and do the job God expects us to do; and that is to make sure that everything is fair and equitable for every human being on this earth regardless of color. Just recently the newspapers focused on the field of education – why are Black charter schools being looked upon negatively and closed like there is something wrong? I don't see White charter schools being scrutinized as closely. There is an inbred feeling, I think, that we are still not equal; that we can't run a good charter school. Yet given the opportunity I know we can do the job.

We are fighting about those issues. We are not fighting homosexuality any more, that issue is gone! For anyone to say we are preoccupied with the issue of homosexuality shows their lack of knowledge about what is going on in the Black community.

*Turner: There has been no lack of attention to the usual social issues?*

**Richardson:** We are fighting everyday together with the few Black legislators we have on Beacon Hill and the city council, about all the social issues affecting our communities.

*Turner: A number of gay writers and those who support gay people point out that while many Black Church ministers openly condemn homosexuality as a sin, and use the Bible to justify that assertion, the same ministers are not as hard on sins committed by heterosexuals including promiscuity. What is your reaction to this?*

**Richardson:** Again, the gay right activists put their own spin on this. I don't believe, and this is based on my dealings in my church, that we single out homosexuality. We condemn sin regardless of what it is! Homosexuality, adultery or whatever, a sin is a sin; there is no big sin or little sin, sin is sin. That is the way the church deals with sin. For anyone to say that we are not as hard on other types of sin is just not true. We openly condemn all types of sins. If you go to the Black church enough, you'll see this. What happened is that people came to our churches particularly during the campaign when this issue was at the forefront, looking for support from the Churches. Now that the law has been passed, come to the Black church and hear what we are talking about; we are not talking about homosexuality exclusively. We are talking about premarital sex and adultery. All these things are sins and we don't categorize them in any order. News editors publish what sells papers and we can't control that, but I think that someone needs to step back

and say, if you are going to write a story then write the truth. During the campaign, many reporters called me and I would tell them to be sure to quote me accurately. I told them that they should not change my words if they wanted to interview me. Some papers agreed but some did not, particularly when what I had to say did not fit with what they wanted to print. I do not listen to a lot of the gay right activists or read the gay press because they are only looking for support for their cause. They take pieces and try to make a whole story out of it.

*Turner: I see. The final question is: Homosexuality has also been condemned as a threat to the Black family, yet the major problems that threaten the family arise from heterosexuals or heterosexual interaction: rape and violence against women, drive-by shootings, drug dealing and use, child neglect, teenage pregnancies etc. How do you respond to homosexuals and their supporters in their assertion that using homosexuals as scapegoats does not solve the issue of the broken Black families but actually diverts attention from possible solutions to this problem?*

**Richardson:** I think anything that projects something different from the traditional nuclear family is something we need to take a position on. I don't agree that we are using anybody as a scapegoat. However, I do maintain that the nuclear family as we have known it for thousands of years and not just here in this country but across the world, must be defended. My wife and I were foster parents for twenty odd years, and

*Gay activists should not use problems in the traditional family to bolster the argument for same-sex marriage*

we took kids into our home that didn't know their own sexual identity because they had been in situations that were not husband and wife situations. There is total

confusion in the child's mind. When they go to school and there are parent-teacher meetings at school, what happens when there are parents who are same sex couples? We are saying the breakdown of the family

comes about because this is not what the nuclear family was ever intended to be. Right from the beginning we were supposed to go out and multiply; can two men or two women have children? I don't think so. That is what we mean about the family break down. Gay activists want to throw in the issue of heterosexual families, but I think that that is largely irrelevant. Yes, there is shooting and killing; we acknowledge that - we are not saying there aren't any problems within the traditional family. But that doesn't give gay right activist the legitimacy to turn around and say it's healthy for children to be raised by parents of the same gender. I don't see how there can be a balance. I read a story during the campaign that a kid was ashamed to have his same-sex parents come to school because he didn't know how to explain it. Young kids are innocent and ask questions that push you to the brink. What answers do you give them? What do you say to a child who has two

*What do you say to a child who has two mothers? ... there has to be a balance in a family*

mothers? That men are not valued? That a man is not important? The same follows for a relationship with two fathers. Are women

not important? I know that there has to be a balance in a family. At one point I had to be Mr. Mom to five girls, trying to braid hair and get kids off to school - the girls needed a woman to be home! At some point a man just doesn't know how to do some things. How does a man sit down with his daughters and talk to them about the changes going on in their bodies when he hasn't experienced such changes? We are not making homosexuals scapegoats. What we are saying, though, is that the lifestyle is not natural, and attempting to make a comparison between the problems of traditional families and the upbringing of children by same sex couples is absurd. Homosexuals have a right to live with whomever they want, but you cannot change the definition of marriage to satisfy a particular group. When it comes to family - a family is family; for years everyone said the nuclear family is the man, wife, two kids and a dog! Now all of a sudden we want to change the family

structure. All across the world this is seen as the best structure. Can it be improved on? Sure, no question. Gay activists also try to use the single mom comparison. It is true that kids suffer. They need a father just like the kids of a single father need a mother. You can't say it's not important to have both sexes involved in raising a child. One sex cannot raise a child without the child experiencing problems in the future, and gay activists should not use problems in the traditional family to bolster the argument for same sex marriages.

*Turner: Do you have any additional comments?*

**Richardson:** I just think that this whole thing about homosexuality has been overplayed and whether we like it or not this thing [gay marriage legislation] that happened in Massachusetts happened. I think we should respect the law until it changes. I don't think, however, that respecting the law means we should change our beliefs. I think the Black church and the Black community have the right to maintain their beliefs and not have a lifestyle be forced upon them. Passing a law in support of gay marriage has no merit. You can pass all the laws you want but the people in the long run will play it as they see fit. The gay and lesbian movement is still pushing the issue, but in our communities we are not addressing it because we have bigger fish to fry. It is not an issue, it has been addressed, we had our day in court so to speak, and since it didn't go our way that doesn't mean we are going to change. I have seen some churches say, "well, if it's legal then you can do it [gay marriage]." I will not say whether they are right or wrong. When the time comes to answer they are going to have to stand before their God and justify their

*The gay and lesbian movement is still pushing the issue, but in our communities we are not addressing it because we have bigger fish to fry*

actions. We can't do that for them or get into a dialogue. All I can do is maintain my beliefs. We just need to move on and see what the end will be.

*Reverend Richard W. Richardson, is the President and CEO of Children's Services of Roxbury (CSR), Inc., a multi-service Child Welfare agency located at Dudley Square, Roxbury, MA. A native of Cambridge, MA, Richardson received his Masters Degree in Education from Cambridge College. Reverend Richardson serves as the Chair of the Political Affairs committee of the Black Ministerial Alliance of Boston. In that capacity he monitors all state, city, and local activities that have an impact on the faith-based communities in which the Black Ministerial Alliance member churches are located. He is an ordained Local Elder and also serves as Church Administrator at Saint Paul African Methodist Episcopal Church in Cambridge, MA.*