

Talking about marriage

From the Editors in the [December 13, 2000](#) issue

Churches can and should affirm the moral significance of marriage without denigrating those who are not married. So we have argued before in this space, noting at the same time that such affirmations must be sensitive to the diverse experiences of the people in the pews. A dramatic illustration of how controversial affirming marriage can be was provided recently by the National Council of Churches. The NCC's general secretary, Bob Edgar, felt compelled to withdraw his endorsement of an evangelical-mainline-Catholic statement in support of marriage because of a passage in the document that defined marriage as "the holy union of one man and one woman." That definition appeared to make marriage off limits for homosexual couples—an emphasis at least one evangelical leader was eager to stress.

There are several painful ironies in the saga. One is that the document's definition of marriage, even if taken as a normative and not simply descriptive statement (and at present there is no such thing as homosexual marriage), is doubtless acceptable to the vast majority of church members who are related to the NCC. Another irony is that Edgar's reversal underscored the obstacles to forging the evangelical-mainline-Catholic partnership that he himself has been eager to champion.

Edgar admits, with admirable candor, that he made several strategic mistakes: besides not looking at the wording closely enough, he failed to attend the initial press conference to offer his own interpretation of the document.

Those failures are particularly striking in light of another statement on marriage and family forged earlier this fall by a group even more diverse than the evangelical-mainline-Catholic group. In a report on "Strengthening American Families," participants at the American Assembly held in Kansas City, Missouri, in September—which included secular scholars and community leaders as well as Muslims and Christians (including a representative of the NCC)—declared marriage the "ideal form for the raising of children." The report went on: "For the purpose of this Assembly, marriage is defined, ideally, as a committed lifelong relationship

between two individuals.”

The Assembly—a nonprofit and nonpartisan affiliate of Columbia University—acknowledged that it could not reach consensus regarding gay and lesbian couples, but it agreed that “children of such couples must not bear the burden of our social debate.”

With a little more work, the evangelical-mainline-Catholic document might have reached this kind of consensus on behalf of its larger goal: encouraging people in their marriages and supporting the stability of families. The value of reaching such a consensus is precisely to counter the tendency so evident in the NCC controversy: the tendency to regard moral pronouncements and social policy goals as a zero-sum game in which some groups win and others lose. Until that approach can be neutralized, everyone loses something.