We call upon responsible citizens and officers of government everywhere to promote those measures designed to maintain and strengthen the family as the fundamental unit of society.  

—“The Family: A Proclamation to the World”

Citizens of democratic governments enjoy great freedoms, but they also carry a burden of responsibility. Balancing strong individual freedoms and rights with personal and community responsibilities is a challenging task. I learned an important spiritual principle underlying responsible citizenship recently when I was reading from the Book of Mormon. In King Mosiah’s sermon on government in Mosiah 29, Mosiah was trying to convince his people to accept a new form of government rather than rely on a monarchy. “And many more things did king Mosiah write unto [his people], unfolding unto them all the trials and troubles of a righteous king, yea, all the travails of soul for their people, and also all the murmurings of the people to their king; and he explained it all unto them. And he told them that these things ought not to be; but that the burden should come upon all the people, that every man might bear his part” (Mosiah 29:33–34).

There is a moral principle here. All citizens should bear the burden of good government. Thus, when the First Presidency and the Council of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints “call upon responsible citizens and officers of government everywhere to promote those measures designed to maintain and strengthen the family as the fundamental unit of society,” they are not just suggesting that we get involved in good causes; I believe they are asking us to fulfill a moral duty that rests on citizens of a free society. Moreover, they are inviting us to focus our citizenship in a crucial
area: strengthening marriages and families. My purpose in this article is to encourage and facilitate such efforts.

There are many causes related to family life that need our involvement. One of the most crucial, contemporary challenges is the need to strengthen the institution of marriage. The divorce and sexual revolutions have diminished the institution of marriage and distorted its God-ordained purposes. But the good news is that in the United States and many other countries, the vast majority of people still value highly a good marriage, both as a personal goal and as an important element of a healthy society. In fact, in the United States, public efforts at federal, state, county, and community levels to strengthen marriages are emerging in significant numbers. Together, these efforts constitute a marriage movement. Opportunities to be involved are around us, and our strength is needed. I can think of no greater civic service that could be rendered by Latter-day Saints right now than giving time and resources to help this marriage movement grow.

To encourage involvement, I recommend that readers obtain a valuable booklet, "Strengthening Marriages In Your Community: 101 Ideas To Get You Started." (It can be ordered from www.smartmarriages.com for about $3; a portion of the booklet is available on-line.)

In the rest of this essay, I address two common questions about involvement. My responses draw on my knowledge of the marriage movement, especially efforts related to opposing same-sex marriage and promoting divorce reform. Finally, I suggest some guidelines for involvement.

Can a Group of Responsible Citizens Really Make a Difference?

As responsible citizens come together, they can influence the direction of public policy and laws related to marriage. Groups of Latter-day Saints have influenced one of the most heated contemporary debates—same-sex marriage. In 1999, the state of Vermont changed state laws to allow all the civic benefits of marriage to be given to same-sex couples in a legal form called a "civil union." Soon after that change occurred, I asked an active, knowledgeable veteran in the debate on same-sex marriage why Vermont succeeded in making this change when previous, similar efforts in Hawaii, Alaska, and California had failed. Her response was quick and surprising to me. She said the difference was the lack of a large population of Latter-day Saints in Vermont giving their time and resources to defeat same-sex marriage proposals. Latter-day Saints were involved in large numbers in defeating these efforts in the other states. In May 2004, the Supreme Court of Massachusetts ruled that the state must issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples. Other states may follow suit (and a handful of Western countries have legalized same-sex marriages). I believe the involvement of Latter-day Saints, together with other responsible citizens, can make a decisive difference in how this legal and social debate plays out.

Same-sex marriage is only one of several important issues related to marriage, and may not be the most dangerous one. We have already seen a dramatic shift in the definition of marriage over the past 50 years with the divorce revolution. Personal happiness has become the defining purpose of marriage, replacing the traditional defining purpose of complete commitment to another and to the children produced by that union. Changing attitudes were cemented by legal change that created unilateral, no-fault marital dissolution.
divorce—one person could end a marriage at any time for any reason. But this notion of ego-centered, no-legal-strings, deregulated marriage produces weaker ties. The safety and security of an “until death do us part” commitment—in good times and bad—that vitally nourishes the kind of long-term love we yearn for, has decreased. This loss of the central pillar of marital permanence profoundly weakens marriage and works against individuals’ abilities to maintain a strong relationship. The American poet Judith Viorst put it this way: “One advantage of marriage is that, when you fall out of love with him or he falls out of love with you, it keeps you together until you fall in again.”

But there are fewer individuals and groups willing to challenge the current ideological and legal regime of divorce compared to the many who are stepping up to challenge same-sex marriage initiatives. I believe the voices of responsible, concerned citizens should be heard on this important public issue, too. Elder Dallin H. Oaks pointed at this issue in a recent address: “No society is so strong that it can support continued increases in citizen rights while neglecting to foster comparable increases in citizen responsibilities or obligations. Yet our legal system continues to recognize new rights even as we increasingly ignore old responsibilities. For example, so-called no-fault divorces—which give either spouse the right to dissolve a marriage at will—have obscured the vital importance of responsibilities in marriage.” Elder Oaks suggested that no-fault divorce laws are leading our society down a dangerous path.

Various policy and legal reforms have been proposed to help reduce divorce. For instance, “covenant marriage” legislation has been adopted in three states in the United States and proposed in many more. Couples who choose covenant marriage in these states must receive premarital counseling and disclose anything to their future spouse that might reasonably affect the decision to marry; agree to get marital counseling if problems arise that threaten the marriage; and accept limited grounds for divorce (e.g., abuse, adultery, drug addiction, imprisonment) or a longer waiting period for divorce. Current
research is exploring whether this more binding form of marriage can reduce the chances that couples will divorce in the risky, early years of marriage.

Completely reversing unilateral, no-fault divorce laws probably is not possible, and I don’t believe it would be wise to do so. But there are legal reforms that would address some of the problems created by current divorce laws and do more to reinforce marital permanence. For instance, in addition to covenant marriage, a handful of states have passed (and more are considering) legislation to encourage couples to get premarital counseling or education. Research suggests that this can increase marital quality and reduce the incidence of divorce in the early, riskiest years of marriage. These kinds of modest policy changes to reduce divorce are possible when responsible citizens work hard to support them.

Our efforts to challenge divorce need not be limited to public, legal ones, however. One prominent marriage educator, Michelle Weiner-Davis, has spoken about “guerilla divorce busting.” She argued that the common response when someone tells you he or she is thinking about getting a divorce is to offer sympathy and support for the decision to go ahead. Instead, she urges us to challenge those thoughts (except in cases of abuse and the like) and to suggest ways of reviving and saving an imperfect relationship rather than casting it aside. She believes these natural, interpersonal interventions can make an impression on many people and prevent unnecessary divorces. Research suggests that most unhappy marriages become happy again when people hold on through the bad times. In our interactions with others who are thinking about divorce, we can encourage them to take steps to revitalize their relationships.

Can Just One Person Make a Difference?
Some responsible, concerned citizens think that just one person cannot make much difference, especially if he or she is not acting in some professional capacity, or given a prominent platform from which to urge action. But consider the case of Julie Baumgartner, a citizen of Chattanooga, Tennessee, who wanted to improve her community by strengthening marriage, promoting responsible fathering, and reducing unwed pregnancies. She began as just one person talking to other like-minded individuals. Over a few years, she built a vibrant coalition of religious, corporate, and civic leaders into a community-wide organization that promotes these goals with concrete opportunities for marriage and family life education. Her organization, First Things First (www.firstthings.org), is now the premier model of how to build a community healthy marriage initiative.

The scriptures teach us “that by small means the Lord can bring about great things” (1 Nephi 16:29) and “out of small things proceedeth that which is great” (D&C 64:33). President Gordon B. Hinckley quoted the latter scripture when he said recently: “Remarkable consequences often flow from a well-written letter and a postage stamp. Remarkable results come of quiet conversation with those who carry heavy responsibilities.”

Speaking of troubling events occurring in cities, states, and nations that threaten what we revere, Elder Oaks reminds us that “we cannot afford to be indifferent or quiet. We must be ever vigilant to ask ‘Where will it lead?’ and to sound appropriate warnings or join appropriate preventive efforts while there is still time. Often we cannot prevent the outcome, but we can remove ourselves from the crowd who, by failing to try to intervene, has complicity in the outcome.”

Guidelines for Civic (and Civil) Involvement

How we get involved as responsible citizens to strengthen marriages and families makes a difference in how effective we are and how the Lord can multiply our efforts, like the loaves and fishes in the New Testament (John 6:5-14). I suggest four guidelines for effective involvement.

First, we need to be informed. Our active participation in public life will be more effective when we take the time to study the issues, learn about relevant research, and stay current. Fortunately, this is easier to do than ever before with the widespread availability of the Internet. There are many good web sites to visit to gain current information and research about marriage and family issues (see sidebar).

A second guideline is to collaborate with other like-minded individuals and groups. Sometimes we need to strike out on our own and build our own initiative, especially when there is no activity in an area. But I think our efforts usually will be more effective when we join with other initiatives, especially when these initiatives are already farther down the same or a similar road. Occasionally I have students come to me with a passion to do something to strengthen marriages and families. They usually have an idea for a new organization or initiative that they want to start up. I have seen a couple of wonderful successes blossom from these personal efforts. But generally, I encourage them at least to start by adding their energy to similar ongoing efforts, rather than duplicate or divide efforts. Of course, joining with others sometimes will require compromise. But there are ways to compromise without abandoning basic beliefs. For instance, I actively participate with an organization making an impact at the national level promoting healthy marriages. But the leader of this organization will not allow it to take a position for or against same-sex marriage. She knows that members of the organization have different opinions about this but all wish to strengthen marriage, however they define it. She does this because she does not want to divide the membership and dilute its effectiveness. Although she is getting pressure to change, I think she is making the right decision for this organization. Instead of fighting to change how this organization operates or divorcing myself from it, I have invested some energy in a different organization that is promoting passage of a constitutional amendment to prohibit same-sex marriages.
A third guideline is to strive to avoid contention and never promote it. This can be difficult when we are involved with moral principles to which we bring a lot of passion. But the Savior taught that “contention is not of me, but is of the devil . . . and he stirreth up the hearts of men to contend . . . one with another” (3 Nephi 11:29). I don’t believe this principle is limited to relations among the Saints; I think it applies widely. In Alma 1, Mormon describes how the faithful were being persecuted by nonbelievers in their communities. Most of the Saints “bore with patience the persecution which was heaped upon them” (1:25). “Nevertheless, there were many among [the Church] who began to be proud, and began to contend warmly with their adversaries, even unto blows . . . Now this was . . . a cause of much affliction to the church; yea, it was the cause of much trial with the church” (1:22–23). And in our day, President Hinckley has urged us to let our voices be heard, but he cautions: “I hope they will not be shrill voices.”

If we resort to contention to accomplish our public purposes, we risk hardening our hearts and losing that crucial, added strength that comes from the Spirit of God. When contention comes at us despite our best efforts to avoid it, the scriptures teach us to be patient (Alma 1:25), not to revile against our enemies (1 Peter 2:23), to turn the other cheek (Matthew 5:39), and to hold to the rod and ignore the mocking of the world (1 Nephi 8:27). If we shun contention, the Lord will fight our battles for us, and our efforts will be all the more fruitful for it.

I have been impressed with how Governor Mitt Romney of Massachusetts, who is a devout Latter-day Saint, has handled the struggle over same-sex marriage in his state. Based on his convictions of the sanctity of marriage, he has led his state’s effort to nullify the state’s supreme court ruling that legalized same-sex marriage. Yet the accounts that I have read and seen in the media suggest he has done this while striving to be respectful of the opposition and also respecting the constitutional processes operating in this struggle. He opened his testimony before the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee on the Federal Marriage Amendment (which defines marriage as the union of a man and a woman) with these respectful words: “Like me, the great majority of Americans wish both to preserve the traditional definition of marriage and to oppose bias and intolerance directed towards gays and lesbians.” Similarly, Senator Gordon Smith (R-Oregon), also a devout Latter-day Saint, cast his vote in favor of the Federal Marriage Amendment while at the same time affirming his respect for gays and lesbians and his strong support for certain legal protections for a group that has experienced intolerance in our society. In contrast, I have seen numerous leaders of pro-marriage groups, including Latter-day Saints, regularly speak disrespectfully and disingenuously about their opponents. All this seems to generate is media fodder; it does not advance the cause of right. The Lord is willing to bless our public efforts to strengthen marriages and families, but I believe that our civic efforts also must be civil if we are to claim that blessing.

A final guideline is that our desires to help strengthen other marriages and families in our communities should not come at the expense of our own spouses and children. Zeal has a way sometimes of overtaking our better judgment. “For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?” (Mark 8:36). I was impressed by how one young mother observed this principle. I called recently to ask her to consider accepting a
job with a significant national organization dedicated to strengthening marriages. She brought experience and the ideal combination of qualifications to the job. I knew that she would want flexibility in work arrangements and could not give her full time to the work, so I said that we would accommodate her situation as much as possible. She was intrigued and flattered by the invitation, but asked for a few days to think about it. When she called back she politely turned the position down. She said it was her time now to focus on her young family; and even with job flexibility she didn’t think she could do both jobs adequately. Although disappointed that an ideal candidate turned down the job opportunity, I deeply respected her decision. She continues to be involved in efforts to strengthen marriages and families, but she fits them into the temporal cracks of her busy family life rather than devoting herself fully to that cause at this time. “To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven” (Ecclesiastes 3:1). In another season of her life, I’m confident she will bless others with her labors to strengthen marriages and families.

When our seasons and opportunities come, we have civic and spiritual duties to bear the burden of responsible citizenship. Offering our public gifts in the service of the most fundamental units of a healthy society—marriage and family—will help to preserve our freedom.

Alan J. Hawkins is a professor of family life at Brigham Young University. He was a visiting scholar with the Administration for Children and Families, a member of the Utah Governor’s Commission on Marriage and head of research for the federal National Healthy Marriage Resource Center. He and his wife, Lisa, have two children and one grandson.

NOTES
2. Ibid.
12. M. Weiner-Davis (2002, July), Guerrilla divorce busting; keynote address presented at the Smart Marriages Annual Conference, Crystal City, VA.
18. Senator Gordon H. Smith (2004, October 14), The case for amending the constitution to defend marriage; address given at the College of Family, Home, and Social Science Honored Alumni Lecture, Brigham Young University.