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Gay marriage's effect on society debated at forum

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If society allows gays to wed, it will destroy the institution of marriage — or rescue it from a fundamental injustice that denies its benefits to people in same-sex relationships.

Two local speakers staked out those opposing positions in a debate held yesterday by the Louisville Forum, a nonpartisan public-affairs group.

Sam Marcossan, a University of

Louisville law professor and advocate for gay civil rights, said allowing gays and lesbians to marry would encourage them to develop stable relationships, which would benefit society and provide stable homes for those who choose to raise children.

"There is no moral superiority of the relationship of an opposite-sex couple over the relationship I have with the partner to whom I have been pledged in the last 13 years in a monogamous, loving, devoted relationship," he said.

But R. Albert Mohler Jr., president

of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, said that heterosexual marriage comprises the "basic molecular structure of human existence" and that civilizations always have sought to regulate sexual relationships.

Asked if a child weren't better off being raised by a committed gay couple than living in a broken home, Mohler said, "The fact that one thing is better than some even worse thing doesn't mean that thing should be normalized in society."

Louisville Forum moderator Jeff Barr said officials decided on the topic

of the debate, held at Vincenzo's restaurant, because of the national controversy unleashed by a Massachusetts court decision last year requiring the legislature to legalize gay marriage.

Canada, Belgium and the Netherlands also have moved toward legalizing gay marriage, and Vermont allows same-sex couples to have civil unions.

Despite their differences, Mohler and Marcossan debated politely as the audience of several dozen people listened quietly.

But listeners grilled the panelists

through pre-written questions on such issues as whether gay marriage could open the door to polygamy (Mohler said yes, Marcossan no) and whether all religious people oppose homosexuality (Mohler acknowledged that they do not but said that Christianity traditionally has regarded it as sinful).

Mohler said the debate reflects a wider breakdown of family identity that he attributed to a 100-year process, ranging from the disruptive ef-

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fects of the industrial revolution to the liberalization of divorce laws.

"The definition of family is now so much up for debate that there are many children who genuinely don't know who they belong to and why," he said. With gay marriage, "marriage will not be redefined, it will be destroyed."

But Marcossan said gays are raising children already, and allowing

them to marry will benefit those children.

He said those citing the welfare of children to prevent gay marriage are using a standard they don't apply to heterosexual couples. State law allows even a repeat felon to marry and have children "so long as he has one qualification — the person he wants to marry is a member of the opposite sex," he said.

Marcossan also dismissed claims that allowing gay marriage would

lead to allowing group marriage or polygamy. He said the only issue at stake is equal access. If society allows one person to marry another, the gender of those two should not matter, he said.

Mohler disagreed, saying that the justification used for homosexual marriage is that consenting adults should do what they want. "People in Utah" also have "different designs on marriage," he said, referring to polygamy.