

5: Conclusions and Recommendations

This study of Bay Area welcoming congregations reveals a vitality as well as strong potential for further growth among local religious communities that incorporate LGBT people into full membership and make available to them congregational positions of leadership. Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered people of faith are finding both welcome and inclusion in local Christian, Jewish, and Unitarian congregations in the Bay Area; they are often active members who serve as influential lay (and sometimes ordained) leaders within their chosen churches and synagogues, and many LGBT people of faith see their local congregations as important promoters of diversity within society at large.

Three main areas of focus make up the final chapter of this report: (1) brief summaries and descriptions of the views of the individual LGBT people who took part in this study; (2) a discussion of those elements common to local religious congregations that have built programs of welcome; and, finally, (3) recommended strategies that the Haas Jr. Fund might pursue in order to support religious congregations in the Bay Area that are affirming of LGBT people and to promote the efforts of gay-affirming congregations with strong potential for reducing the negative effects of conservative religious groups with homophobic agendas and policies.

I. LGBT PEOPLE OF FAITH IN THE BAY AREA

Based on the surveys and interviews conducted for this study, the following attributes characterize a solid majority of the individual LGBT people of faith who took part in this project.

Characteristics Common to Most Respondents:

- ◆ **High Levels of Education:** Respondents are highly educated individuals who present themselves as well-informed on matters affecting LGBT people. A high percentage of respondents were aware of denominational statements regarding homosexuality and were knowledgeable about the structure, policies, and programs of their local congregations. An important finding of the survey (which was strongly supported in several of the follow-up interviews) is the fact that a third of respondents believe that their local congregations need to provide better religious education for LGBT individuals. Clearly, even congregations with strong programs of welcome and inclusion for LGBT people are not doing as well as they might in providing educational opportunities that are tailored, at least in

some respects, to the needs of a group that demonstrate high levels of attendance and commitment.

- ◆ **Years in Bay Area:** Nearly three quarters of respondents have lived in the Bay Area for ten or more years, and almost a third of respondents had been members of their current religious congregations for a similar length of time. This is a group made up of many people who have made the Bay Area home for many years. Given the rootedness of these individuals and their strong connections with local faith communities, they have the potential for working as effective collaborators in faith-based projects that are inclusive of LGBT people and witness to the power of progressive religious people and their congregations to promote positive social change for LGBT people in society at large.
- ◆ **Prior Religious Affiliation:** As mentioned above, this group of individuals is made up of many who have actively chosen their current religious and congregational affiliations. Not surprisingly, many of them have left behind more traditional denominations with clearly enunciated stands against the acceptance of homosexuality and homosexual and bisexual persons who live non-celibate sexual lives. While many LGBT people have chosen to live outside of religious congregations (and for good reasons, it might be added), these individuals have chosen to be active members of congregations and denominations even when these institutions officially espouse anti-LGBT teachings and strongly urge governmental leaders to enshrine homophobic policies in civil laws.
- ◆ **Partnership Status:** A large percentage of survey respondents (64%) live in partnerships and provide an important witness within their respective congregations that committed same-sex relationships are an important value to many LGBT persons. It is unclear whether partnered LGBT people are more apt to become members within religious congregations or whether the teachings of the congregations studied are particularly friendly to individuals in relationship. Whatever the case, such individuals might be enlisted in faith-based programs which not only advocate publicly for same-sex marriage within society at large but also serve to counteract the powerful voices of conservative religious groups active in the USA today.

Levels and Intensity of Congregational Commitment and Involvement

- ◆ **Spirituality and Church/Synagogue Attendance:** Very high priority is placed by most of these individuals on developing and cultivating their spiritual lives. Most respondents stated that they appreciate the emphases placed on spiritual development within their congregations and nine out of ten individuals are satisfied with the worship experiences provided by these congregations.

One of the ways in which survey respondents demonstrate their level of congregational commitment is in the high rates of attendance at religious services: on average, 58% of these individuals attend four or more such services per month. Congregational involvement outside of worship is also significantly high: more than seven out of ten individuals surveyed spend three or more hours per month serving on parish/synagogue committees, in educational and outreach programs, and/or assisting with social events. Moreover, 51% report that they have increased such involvements in recent years. What emerges from these statistics is a highly-motivated group of individuals who demonstrate their commitment to congregational life and activities by not only attending worship service but also by committing their time and talents to the larger projects of the synagogue/church.

- ◆ External Programs and Ministries: This project survey also queried LGBT people of faith on their local congregational commitment to external programs and ministries. 88% of respondents agreed that their congregations currently dedicated sufficient resources to help their members reflect upon and act upon the relationship of their faith to social, political, and economic issues, and almost 65% of respondents rated their congregations as having a high involvement with the outside community.

Virtually every one of the congregations studied support rather extensive programs of charity for those in need, and many of by respondents emphasized the importance that they place personally on social justice and programs of social welfare which their congregations support. One particularly interesting finding of the survey was that nearly 42% of Unitarian-Universalist and Christian respondents believed that their congregations needed to place more emphasis on external religious ministries.

- ◆ Importance of religion: Finally, it is not surprising that a high proportion (73.8%) of respondents characterize religion as very important in their own lives. These are LGBT people who have chosen to express their personal spiritualities and beliefs within the traditional structures of church and synagogue. Quite contrary to the image of LGBT people as enemies of established religion (promoted by more than a few religious conservative in the USA), these individuals reveal a relatively invisible phenomenon: “out” LGBT who live as active and dedicated members of synagogues and churches.

II. CONGREGATIONS WITH SUCCESSFUL LGBT-AFFIRMING PROGRAMS

What characterizes successful congregational programs of welcome and inclusion for LGBT people? This question, which is the central focus of this report, can be answered by returning to the ten hypotheses drawn up in preparation for the development of Survey 2; additional features

of congregations with successful programs of welcome and inclusion are discussed following these guiding hypotheses:

1. “Meaningful integration of LGBT people into membership and leadership (ordained and/or non-ordained) of a religious community.”

Synagogues and churches, it is clear, need to do more than simply state that LGBT people are welcomed into their communities of faith. Time and again in this survey (both in written and oral commentary) respondents stated they required more than basic statements of welcome to feel at home in any local religious community. While certainly pleased to know that official statements of welcome for LGBT people had been adopted or drawn up by their local congregations, respondents were clear in their opinion that genuine “welcome” entailed a variety of features from educational offerings for LGBT people and their allies to LGBT presence in all areas of congregational and denominational life. In those congregations which belong to more conservative denominations many respondents believed firmly that their local congregations had much to teach other congregations and larger denominational structures about creating meaningful inclusion of LGBT members.

2. “Sponsorship of productive dialogue between LGBT persons and non-LGBT persons on a variety of topics.”

This is an element that only the most progressive congregations sponsor in any real detail. For instance, both Unitarian Universalist congregations included in this study have undertaken ongoing educational programs that bring together LGBT people and non-LGBT people as a way of fostering discussion among both groups. For several years now the Unitarian Universalist Association has officially sponsored a well-developed program for congregations that desire to effectively integrate LGBT people into their communities and provide safe arenas for discussions on biblical attitudes toward homosexuality, present-day societal fears of LGBT people, and what it means to be a congregation that is welcoming to LGBT persons.¹

The First Presbyterian Church of Palo Alto included in this study provides another example of the effectiveness that programs of education and dialogue can have on LGBT and non-LGBT persons in a congregation. By sponsoring an annual week of talks and other events on homosexuality, religion, and related topics (entitled “The New Visions Project”), this local church becomes an important center for the exchange of ideas

¹See Unitarian Universalist Association, *The Welcoming Congregation Handbook: Resources For Affirming Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian, And/Or Transgender People*. Second Edition. (Boston: UUA Office Of Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian, And Transgender Concerns, 1999).

between LGBT people and non-LGBT people on various topics relating to faith and sexual orientation.²

3. “Existence of committees specifically devoted to LGBT persons and their concerns.”

78% of those Bay Area congregations included in this study have groups or committees that are devoted to LGBT persons and their concerns. The presence and activity of these groups and committees is absolutely key to the building of effective programs of inclusion for LGBT people because they ideally (and very often actually) provide avenues of education and discussion on matters important to LGBT people who most often live as sexual minorities within their congregations. Such groups can take the form of support for LGBT members and/or provide a conduit for communication between LGBT persons themselves, LGBT people and other congregational members at large, and the congregation’s LGBT community and congregational leadership.

4. “Educational offerings for LGBT persons and their allies.”

As mentioned above, this is a value for many LGBT people surveyed for this study. Moreover, this is an area in which many Bay Area congregations with LGBT-affirming ministries need to improve. Perhaps one reason for the lack of sufficient educational offerings in this area relates to the need for congregational leaders and members to be trained in issues regarding homosexuality and religion. Too often only negative theological assessments of LGBT people and homosexuality are known to those in positions of leadership at local congregations. Moreover, the effectiveness with which conservative religious American leaders put forth their homophobic messages in the media only serves to drown out progressive religious voices working to dismantle homophobia. Members and leader of Bay Area congregations with LGBT-affirming ministries would benefit greatly from informal but well-structured educational offerings on religion, sexuality in general, and homosexuality in particular.

5. “Ministry to LGBT persons both inside and outside of the religious community.”

This is another area of potential growth for Bay Area congregations with significant LGBT presence. While internal ministries to LGBT people receive generally high marks from the survey respondents, almost half of those surveyed believe that their congregation are not engaging sufficiently in ministries among LGBT people outside of their congregations. Such external ministry need not be proselytizing in nature; rather,

²For information on The New Visions Project of The First Presbyterian Church of Palo Alto, see their website: <http://www.newvisionsproject.org/>.

like many congregation-sponsored HIV/AIDS programs that have long been serving many LGBT people, such ministries could focus on those particular needs of the LGBT community that are not addressed by governmental and civic entities.

6. “Involvement in larger religious LGBT caucuses and/or movements.”

It can be argued that a major initial force behind the appearance and subsequent growth of LGBT-affirming congregations in the United States has been denominational LGBT caucus groups which have worked to change the policies of these larger religious structures so that the particular needs of LGBT people might be addressed at the local congregational level. Such caucuses and movements have proven to be remarkably effective and long-lasting in all denominations, from Roman Catholic groups like Dignity and New Ways Ministry to the Open and Affirming organization within the United Church of Christ.

What is missing, however, is an LGBT organization, caucus, or movement that attempts to bring together LGBT individuals of faith and their religious congregations (from a variety of religions and denominations) within a specific geographical area in order to build a coalition of progressive LGBT people of faith. Such a coalition could offer an effective voice within the Bay Area, with its culture of diversity and historic embrace of LGBT people, on matters relating to homophobia, the enfranchisement of LGBT people within society as a whole, and as a proactive voice for inclusion from the Religious Left.

7. “Involvement in local and/or national civic LGBT observances and events.”

Many of the congregations included in this study take part in such observances and events. Pride parades and AIDS Day memorials are two such examples of participation, and the potential exists for Bay Area welcoming congregations to come together and advocate for change with respect to other issues such as marriage rights for same-sex couples.

8. “Development of theological statements of welcome and inclusion for LGBT persons.”

Theological statements of this sort may seem merely academic but they are important items that demonstrate a religious foundation for welcoming and including LGBT people of faith in local congregations. In fact, many survey respondents revealed a sophisticated understanding of the theological statements of the denominations regarding homosexuality and LGBT people. Sometimes a local congregation may issue a theological statement of welcome and inclusion in opposition to those issued by the denomination in an effort to affirm the LGBT people within their congregation and also

to challenge the denomination to renounce homophobic theological statements and become denominations of inclusion for everyone.

9. “Production of sermons, pamphlets, and other publications pertaining to LGBT persons and their concerns.”

Another effective tool for congregations building a reputation and ministry of LGBT inclusion is the development of publications designed for LGBT persons. Such publications can serve to explain denominational and congregational stances and disagreement over homosexuality; they can let current and potential members know of offerings which might be of particular interest to LGBT persons; and they can help to educate members on topics relating to homosexuality, homophobia, religion, and LGBT persons. 90% of respondents reported that their congregations do publish such materials, only 8% stated that their congregations did not produce such publications, and only 1% did not know of any such publications. In the current society-wide debates over homosexuality, gay marriage, and the adoption of children by LGBT people, publications of items on LGBT topics by a consortium of congregations from various denominations could become an effective organ for dialogue, debate, and change within the Bay Area.

10. “Advocacy of debate and positive change within larger religious organizations (e.g. denominations, national or regional alliances of religious communities) around issues affecting LGBT persons and LGBT-affirming ministries.”

As stated previously, local congregations in many denominations can exercise a profound influence on larger debates regarding homosexuality and related issues. In fact, several of the Bay Area congregations in this study have taken historic positions with regard to the full inclusion of LGBT people in the life and ministry of their congregations and these congregations have required larger religious structures to address LGBT issues. For instance St. Francis Lutheran Church in San Francisco has been removed from its formal affiliation with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America because of a congregational decision several years ago to ordain two lesbians. Likewise, other congregations have risked reprimand and censure for their decisions to fully include LGBT people in their life and work.

11. In addition to the ten features listed above, survey respondents have provided further information which adds three important features shared by congregations with successful programs of welcome and inclusion for LGBT people:
 - a. The congregations in this study are characterized by their LGBT members as communities of faith with a remarkable degree of openness to contemporary ideas and trends. Perhaps this is to be expected of congregations that are seen to be welcoming to LGBT people, but it is worthwhile to keep in mind that for nearly

all of these congregational stances of LGBT inclusion do not stand apart from progressive attitudes toward other social justice issues which result in an eagerness to broaden the diversity of membership and to sponsor and/or support address external ministries of care to those in need.

- b. When asked to describe their congregations as serving primarily their own membership or serving primarily the world beyond their congregations, four out of ten chose the latter, and a similar 40% reported an even split between the two descriptions. Once again, it is apparent that these communities of faith place a high value on work beyond the confines of the synagogue/church; indeed, most respondents appear to link their own experiences of welcome and inclusion in local congregations with their own commitment to serving people outside of their congregations.
- c. Finally, most respondents characterize their congregations as placing more emphasis on an “activist approach to social action” than on a more traditional approach which provides educational resources on social issues but leaves social action to congregants as a matter of individual conscience. These are communities of faith for whom involvement in matters of social concern is a shared responsibility and a common project that directly links religious faith with issues that affect society in general. Moreover, a clear majority of the LGBT individuals surveyed involve themselves eagerly, as people of faith, in matters of social justice and are not content to leave debates over religion and sexuality to conservative people of faith.

III. STRATEGIES FOR THE PROMOTION OF BAY AREA LGBT PEOPLE OF FAITH AND THEIR CONGREGATIONS

The Haas Jr. Fund and other individual and institutional funders could provide important support to Bay Area congregations with successful LGBT-affirming ministries in the following ways:

1. Enable religious communities to move from the necessary stages of simply welcoming LGBT people to levels of deeper integration of LGBT people in all aspects of community life and ministry:
 - a. Through the sponsorship of a **Bay Area Coalition of Welcoming Congregations (CWC)** which would link such congregations of various religious traditions and denominations throughout the nine county region;
 - b. Such a coalition could build itself into an effective voice of progressive religious persons and congregations that demonstrates the ways in which churches, synagogues, mosques, and other communities of faith might work together to strengthen legal protections for LGBT people and their family members; provide a religious rationale for supporting civil marriage for lesbian and gay people; and initiate public dialogue on a myriad of issues that conservative religious groups so effectively control and manipulate today.
 - c. To launch this coalition, representatives (of all ages, including young adults) from 40 Bay Area congregations, local LGBT Religious Caucus groups, and northern California seminaries would be invited to a planning conference. Perhaps structured along the lines of other religious advocacy groups (such as Pax Christi), this coalition would provide a voice for societal change that comes from LGBT people of faith.
 - d. This coalition would need to form strong alliances with non-religious LGBT activist organizations in the Bay Area not only in order to increase its own effectiveness but also to serve as a useful ally to such organizations that are dedicated to reducing the harmful effects of homophobia within our society and countering the harmful effects of well-funded conservative religious organizations in the Bay Area and in California as a whole.
2. Build alliances between LGBT people and their allies within various faith traditions, and initiate programming to foster creative change and dialogue among religious communities interested in developing or improving the integration of LGBT into their communities:

- a. Local Bay Area conferences and trainings that draw upon the experience of welcoming congregations and offer valuable advice for congregations just beginning to recreate themselves as LGBT-affirming congregations is a need that is currently unmet;
 - b. Support of seminary-based programs that work to educate journalists, activists, policy makers (as well as ministers, rabbis, and people of faith) on LGBT in religious life;
 - c. Bay Area county-based, city-based, and neighborhood-based groups of support for LGBT people of faith and their allies are another possible means of effective alliance-building that could foster positive change for LGBT people within Bay Area cities and towns.
3. Document and disseminate models of gay-affirming, faith-based programs:
- a. Though the publication of studies such as their report on Bay Area LGBT-affirming ministries;
 - b. By supporting a Bay Area speakers bureau of LGBT people of faith who would be available to speak to public media, local religious and civic organizations, and in schools about religion, homosexuality, homophobia, and related issues;
 - c. A simple print or web-based publication on the work of LGBT-affirming congregations in the Bay Area could prove to be an effective means of documenting and disseminating such information and serve as a means of communication among LGBT people of faith and their allies;
 - d. Through support of projects that explore the intersections between race and ethnicity for LGBT people of faith and their allies.
4. Encourage the influence and connection of gay-affirming congregations with other faith communities that are interest in welcoming LGBT persons:
- a. Given their strong commitment to a variety of social justice issues, congregations with LGBT-affirming ministries and programs might be well positioned to serve as models for other religious congregations that have strong social justice commitments but that currently lack of realized commitment to LGBT inclusion;
 - b. Once again, a Bay Area Coalition of Welcoming Congregations could provide such a means of connecting like-minded congregations and encourage other local congregations to explore ministries of welcome and inclusion for LGBT people.

5. Build the public face and voice of LGBT-affirming interfaith communities:
 - a. Through the sponsorship of a Bay Area media campaign that highlights the work of LGBT people of faith and their congregations in dismantling homophobia; in countering the negative effects of anti-gay religious doctrines from conservative religious organizations; and in providing communities of faith for LGBT people;
 - b. By supporting creative programming (such as a speakers series, roundtable discussions, and/or interactive meetings) on topics of important to LGBT people of faith at Bay Area venues such as LGBT community support centers.

6. Promote educational programs on LGBT concerns in religious communities (including seminaries which have such a large impact on religious leadership in local congregations):
 - a. Through support of LGBT-education and LGBT-advocacy centers located at Christian and Jewish seminaries and centers of religious study;
 - b. Support for the creation of alliances of welcoming, synagogues, welcoming mosques, and/or welcoming Buddhist sanghas in the Bay Area to promote and support LGBT-welcoming religious communities from traditions other than the dominant Christian denominations;
 - c. Educational programming tailored to the needs of a particular ethnic groups is an especially needed item since religious congregations with predominantly African American or Asian American members approach issues relating to religion and sexuality differently than many congregations with a predominantly European membership. Such programming would be on the cutting edge of the LGBT-welcoming movement, and the Bay Area, as a location with historic and ongoing struggles for LGBT inclusion, would be a natural location for such pioneering work.