

With Open Arms: Gay Affirming Ministries in Bay Area Faith Communities

Executive Summary

Living freely with full acceptance in a pluralistic society is a central value of The Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund. The foundation's work to eliminate discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people is one expression of this core value. In an effort to understand the experiences of LGBT people in Bay Area faith communities, the Fund commissioned a study by researcher Bernard Schlager, PhD, that speaks to some key questions:

- To what degree have LGBT people been welcomed in Bay Area congregations?
- What programs and practices support full integration of LGBT into faith communities?
- How might the largely positive experiences of Bay Area LGBT congregation members serve as a model for building greater understanding and acceptance within regional and national religious groups?
- What other activities would support creation of more gay-affirming ministries?

The study conducted in 2003 analyzes responses from 127 written surveys and additional in-depth, oral interviews with key participants from a range of faiths. Despite efforts to engage respondents more reflective of the general population, a majority of respondents in this survey were highly educated, white, employed full time and almost evenly divided by gender. The full text of the study can be found at www.CLGS.org.

Bay Area LGBT congregation members report a very high level of engagement with local faith communities.

- More than 85% reported attending services 2-4 times per month.
- Over half have taken on lay leadership roles and added involvement in congregational groups.
- Nearly three quarters of the respondents describe religion as "very important" in their lives.
- The respondents described their chosen congregations as highly inclusive and welcoming of LGBT people, active in social and political issues and charitable work, and very supportive of their individual spiritual growth.

What Constitutes a Gay Affirming Ministry?

Researcher Bernard Schlager, consultant to the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies in Religion and Ministry at the Pacific School of Religion and author of the report, offers this criteria:

1. Meaningful integration of LGBT people into membership and leadership (ordained and non-ordained) of a religious community.
2. Sponsorship of dialogue between LGBT people and others on a variety of topics.

3. Committees devoted to LGBT persons and their concerns.
4. Educational opportunities for LGBT persons and their allies.
5. Ministry to LGBT persons inside and outside the religious community.
6. Involvement in larger religious LGBT caucuses and/or movements.
7. Involvement in local and/or national civic LGBT events.
8. Development of theological statement of welcome and inclusion for LGBT persons.
9. Production of sermons, pamphlets and other materials pertaining to LGBT persons and their concerns.
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.

Next Steps

While the LGBT respondents to the survey reported that their chosen religious communities provide a largely positive experience, they also note areas with room for improvement.

- Respondents in every denomination believe their local congregations might teach other congregations and larger denominational groups much more about meaningful inclusion of LGBT members.
- Many Bay Area congregations also need to improve the educational offerings for their LGBT members.
- Increase involvement of LGBT people in their congregational programs.
- Finally, greater coordination among gay-affirming congregations such as Bay Area **Coalition of Welcoming Congregations** would provide added visibility and raise public consciousness about the contributions of lesbians and gays to faith congregations and the larger community.

Other key recommendations include:

1. Outreach to other religious communities to offer training and dialogue about developing welcoming congregations.
2. Document and disseminate information about model programs through a website, speaker's bureau, media campaigns.
3. Promote educational programs about LGBT concerns within seminaries and other religious training institutions.
4. Increase educational programming within specific ethnic and racial communities that are currently isolated from this dialogue.

The complete study can be found at www.clgs.org/5/open_arms.html.