

FAITH IN OUR FAMILIES:

PARENTS, FAMILIES AND FRIENDS
TALK ABOUT FAITH, SEXUAL
ORIENTATION AND GENDER IDENTITY



PFLAG
www.pflag.org



Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) is the nation's foremost family-based organization committed to the civil rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) persons. Founded in 1973 by mothers and fathers, PFLAG has grown to be a

national non-profit organization with over 200,000 members and supporters and over 250 affiliates in the United States. This vast grassroots network is cultivated, resourced and serviced by the PFLAG National office, located in Washington, D.C., the national Board of Directors and the Regional Directors Council. PFLAG is a nonprofit organization that is not affiliated with any political or religious institution.

Our Vision. We, the parents, families and friends of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons, celebrate diversity and envision a society that embraces everyone, including those of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities. Only with respect, dignity and equality for all will we reach our full potential as human beings, individually and collectively. PFLAG welcomes the participation and support of all who share in, and hope to realize this vision.

Our Mission. PFLAG promotes the health and well-being of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons, their families and friends through: support, to cope with an adverse society; education, to enlighten an ill-informed public; and advocacy, to end discrimination and to secure equal civil rights. Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays provides opportunity for dialogue about sexual orientation and gender identity, and acts to create a society that is healthy and respectful of human diversity.

About this booklet:

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BEGINNING

Learning that a family member or friend is lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT) can pose new questions about your faith and may prompt you to re-evaluate beliefs that you previously took for granted. You may wonder – as many people do – if this revelation will influence your religious beliefs or relationship with your faith community.

These questions are common, and in asking them, you are not alone. Exploring these issues may be difficult at first, since many people have been taught to not question their faith or the teachings of their faith community. But for many people, exploring their relationship with their faith and LGBT issues leads to a new understanding of their religious beliefs and even a renewed sense of faith. Widely respected biblical scholars disagree about many details in scripture, and LGBT issues are no exception. Now may be the time to respectfully consider your questions and ideas about the intersection of LGBT issues and faith, and explore a variety of interpretations of scripture.

Talk about your loved ones and talk about your faith. It is these conversations that bring transformation.

Sexual orientation and gender identity are traditionally personal subjects, but ones that have made their way into the public arena. Our society is moving forward to a time when it's not only *acceptable* to talk about these issues, but also positively *encouraged*. That's our goal in this booklet: to encourage you to examine your beliefs and talk about how they relate to your new connection to LGBT people and the issues they often face. Use your voice to ask questions, seek understanding, and have conversations. Talk about your loved ones and talk about your faith. It is these conversations that bring transformation.

Remember that your loved one is the same person that you loved and supported before you knew about their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. Sharing this part of their self with you does not change who they are, and does not need to change your relationship with them. In fact, it can be the beginning of a more open relationship as you share in this process and your spiritual lives together.

In this booklet, we have not provided textual interpretation of

scripture from the Bible, Koran, Torah, or elsewhere. Rather, we have provided personal stories that demonstrate how people from a variety of faith traditions have taken the journey to address their spiritual beliefs and the sexual orientation or gender identity of their loved ones. Our hope is that these stories will serve as a starting point for your own journey into exploring your faith, and that you will view them as the start of your own important dialogue on these issues.

DISCOVERY

“Our guidepost has always been unconditional love for our kids. We were observant Jews – Conservative, not Orthodox, not Reform. We were aware that there were lines in the Old Testament that prohibited gay relationships. At the time when our daughter came out to us, the Conservative seminaries held homosexuality as taboo. However, we didn’t have a problem reconciling these views because our kids always come first.”

~ Father of a gay son

Finding out that a friend or family member is LGBT can interrupt the path you were taking within your faith community and steer you in an unexpected direction. While the thought is frightening to many, this new direction may lead you to reflect on your beliefs and how they relate to LGBT people. The journey is ongoing, and for some it will bring them to places they never saw on their path, mourning the loss of some ideas, sometimes working to encourage change within their faith communities, and, for some, gaining a new understanding of belief and compassion.

The first step on this spiritual path for many people is to get immediate

support for the journey they’re about to make. Finding out that your child or loved one is LGBT raises many questions, and getting answers to those questions will pave the way for the spiritual issues that you’ll explore. PFLAG provides this support in communities across the country. It is there that you will find other families who are having a similar experience, as well as those who have taken this journey and are now committed to helping people who are starting theirs. PFLAG chapters host support groups that are non-judgmental, confidential, and will provide the space you need to start getting answers and having conversations about how this revelation connects to your faith.

EXPLORATION

“I had many conservative friends who were wonderful, generous people, but whom I felt had a huge blind spot when it came to gay people. This created a crisis for me when my brother came out. I became emotionally agonized by the conflict between the people I respected and loved on the conservative side, and the people I respected and loved who were gay. For the first time, I found myself asking God to help me reconcile these things and to help me seek the truth. I believe that God answered my request. I found a local church, and told the minister I needed to find a place with people who can help me seek God, and who also would accept all of my family as they are. With the help of that minister, I joined the church, and our congregation has begun a journey to becoming open and affirming of gay people.”

~Sister of a gay brother

Is it okay to ask questions, to challenge your religious leader and/or religious

doctrine? Yes. In fact, there are many scholars and religious leaders of various faith communities who encourage critical engagement with sacred texts. Still, asking questions can be scary and the answers you find may be life-altering. After all, you might be challenging or rethinking

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religious beliefs you've held for your entire life. But remember, for many people, the process of

questioning and exploring their faith tradition brings them even closer to that tradition.

Be gentle with yourself. Realize that asking questions and exploring the many possible answers is an important first step in your journey

to being a supportive person to your LGBT loved one.

A good way to begin is to make a list of what information you want to gather as you start exploring your relationship with your faith community and its views on LGBT issues. Some of the most common questions include:

- What is my religion's (or faith tradition's) teaching about being LGBT?
- Are there other people from my faith tradition who have navigated this path already? How have they reconciled religious teachings regarding being LGBT? Are these interpretations generally accepted?
- What place do LGBT people and/or their family members or friends have in my religion?
- Does my religion formally provide positive support for LGBT people and/or their family members or friends? If yes, what kind of support is offered – and is it healthy and accurate? If no, where can LGBT people, and/or their family members or friends find support?
- Are there various or conflicting views about LGBT people

within my faith community?
How – if at all – do these play out in my personal congregation?

- What are the personal views of my religious leaders on this topic?

These are some big questions, and finding the answers often takes time and personal reflection. But simply asking questions and exploring possibilities are important first steps. Allow yourself time to live without concrete answers. This period of exploration and reflection is an important part of your journey.

Remember that you don't need to go through this alone. There have been families on this path before you, and there will be ones who follow you. Find them and take the journey together. A strong support system is a powerful and necessary tool while you are asking questions and finding answers. Whether it's a friend, spouse or partner, small group of people, or an entire PFLAG chapter, it is important that you share with people who can listen without judgment. Still, even with a strong support system, you may enter a period of time where you are living without answers. This can be unsettling, but it is often part of the process, and an idea inherent in faith itself.

CONSIDER

“Rather than allowing stereotypes to interfere with our love for our children, we have chosen to seek accurate information. Rather than try to change our children, we have chosen to change our attitudes.”

~Mother of a gay son

Some families find themselves in what appears to be an untenable situation—they love their LGBT family member or friend, but their religion teaches them that their loved one is sinful, wrong, or required to “change” to be faithful. Some people feel that their only solution will be to avoid having a relationship with their LGBT loved one, or create distance. While these may seem like the only solutions at hand, they are not, and many denominations have worked to create support networks within their own traditions. Here are a few things

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to remember when facing a strong reaction:

- Many religious groups have wrestled with these issues and decided to be more welcoming to LGBT people. For example, the Episcopal Church (USA), United Church of Christ, and Unitarian Universalists welcome and affirm LGBT members.
- Many denominations, including Presbyterians and United Methodists, have welcoming

and affirming congregations (sometimes called “Open and Affirming”).

- Within most faiths, there are many interpretations of religious texts such as the Bible, Torah, and the Koran on all issues, including sexuality. While interpretations differ even among those in the same tradition, every religion has different teachings, advocates love and compassion, and emphasizes the importance of loving and intact families.

Keep in mind that coming out to family and friends is one of the most difficult and frightening experiences LGBT people will ever have. The prospect of losing loved ones because of who you are is unthinkable for most people, but is a

reality for LGBT people everywhere. Your family member or friend has come out to you with trust and love. Even if you discovered this information in another way, remember this person is the same person that you have always loved. Finding peace between this news and your faith is a way for you to affirm your unconditional love and support for them as well as treat yourself with the compassion needed to feel spiritually fulfilled.

Again, remember – you are not alone. You may feel isolated in your struggle, but you are in the company of many who know how you feel and who have found this process to ultimately be enlightening. Find them and talk about it. As always, your local PFLAG chapter can be a source of support and advice during this time.

CHOICES

“My wife and I were both raised Catholic, married in the church, and had both of our children baptized in the church as well. As young parents we began to really struggle with reconciling our beliefs with church teachings. There were several issues we thought and prayed about including homosexuality. Once we became parents, it became so much more important that we try to live a life where our beliefs and experiences were congruent with our faith. For some time, though, it felt that the choice was between staying in the Catholic fold or abandoning faith all together. After all, didn’t all Christians believe that homosexuality was a sin?”

~Father of a lesbian daughter

Many people find that the process of learning more about their religion’s position on LGBT people is rewarding. It can bring about a deeper commitment to their congregation and to their family. Others find the process to be painful. If your religion is not accepting of your LGBT family member or friend, can you comfortably stay? Would you consider leaving? What are your choices?

While each person’s experience

is unique, PFLAG members have reported facing similar themes when it came to making choices within their faith communities when their loved ones came out. In this section, you’ll find five common paths that people have taken when in a position to make a choice about their next steps. But remember there are as many paths as there are people. No matter which road you are on or which destination you choose, look for the path that best meets your needs.

STAYING WITHIN YOUR FAITH COMMUNITY

“When our daughter came out, we worried about letting people at church know. We didn’t know how they would respond. We even considered going to a new church, but we had been members for our entire lives. Our children were raised in our church. We couldn’t imagine our lives without the community created by our faith family. When we finally got up the courage to start confiding in a few people at church, it was much better than we expected. While our faith is not open to LGBT issues yet, the members of our church were very supportive.”

~Mother of a gender-variant daughter

Sometimes people have the happy revelation that the conflict they expected from their faith community doesn’t actually exist and they instead find acceptance. Other times, individuals determine that living with conflict is the easiest or most practical solution. Some people choose to avoid the potential for conflict or rejection altogether by remaining “in the closet” about the fact that they have an LGBT family member. For many, the prospect of changing religions or

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faith communities is not a viable option. Even though they may still find themselves wrestling with questions, such as how to deal with the disapproval of a faith leader or other members of the community, continuing with the familiar is where they find peace. This is a common and legitimate choice for many family members as well as LGBT people themselves. For some it will be their permanent solution, while for others it will be a stop on the journey to another place.

ENCOURAGING CHANGE WITHIN YOUR FAITH COMMUNITY

“I’m the only person in my church who says the word ‘gay.’ Even if he wants to, my priest cannot take a stand — but I can. Because of my history with the church, I have credibility and I try to use it. I have talked to the education committee, and placed PFLAG announcements in the parish bulletin. I’ve been able to raise awareness by working within the church.”

~Mother of a gay son

Rather than leaving a faith community or staying in the closet, some people choose to work to create a space within their congregation that is welcoming to LGBT people and their families. While these efforts can be very rewarding on both a spiritual and practical level, they can also be very challenging to start because people worry about what the reaction to their work will be. It is realistic to expect that as an advocate you will get pushback. Fortunately, you’re never alone.

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If your goal is to try to create change in your faith community, be sure to check out the *PFLAG Faith Field Guide* (www.pflag.org/faithfieldguide) for ways to make

your community more welcoming. Also know that many faith traditions already have specific groups working on LGBT issues. Visit www.pflag.org/faith to access a list of faith and denomination specific LGBT support and advocacy groups.

CHANGING BRANCHES OR CONGREGATIONS WITHIN YOUR FAITH COMMUNITY

“At my church in Anchorage, some people were not comfortable with my involvement in the gay rights movement. Worried that the issue was going to split the church, I eventually resigned...I found a small congregation that shared my convictions and was in need of a pastor.”

~American Baptist Minister identifying as a straight ally

Even within the same faith communities, every branch and congregation is different in how they express their faith. From very conservative to extremely progressive, faith communities offer a wide variety of ways to practice religion within the boundaries of what makes each one unique. Each religious leader has a distinctive style, and communities are full of unique personalities and beliefs. If you are uncomfortable with attitudes toward LGBT people within your existing congregation, you might consider finding another congregation where you will feel more comfortable. Although it may be awkward and difficult, finding a new branch and/or congregation

may offer a more spiritually nourishing place to worship.

In recent years, many communities of faith have developed specific congregations that are sensitive to the needs of LGBT people and their allies. These congregations are often referred to as “open and affirming” and have gone through a process to get the buy-in of the congregation on becoming more openly accepting of LGBT people and their loved ones. These congregations offer people a way to stay in their faith tradition, but in a setting more consistent with their evolving beliefs and needs. New congregations are always developing, so it is best to search online to find the one closest to you.

INVESTIGATING DIFFERENT FAITH COMMUNITIES

“I heard homophobic remarks in church from both the members and the pulpit. The minister told my family that the congregation, including him, was afraid of us. For a while the local wildlife refuge became my sanctuary, and then I heard about a small, welcoming Episcopal church. The new church’s members continue to surprise me – even offering space in their bulletin for my PFLAG literature.”

~Mother of a gay son

Sadly, some people discover that their congregation is unwilling or unable to meet their new spiritual needs, or even actively works against LGBT inclusion. For some of these people, leaving that tradition, which may have been a longtime spiritual home and refuge, can be an emotional and difficult decision.

Remember that regardless of your faith tradition, a community of faith is supposed to be a place where you

can spiritually grow and develop with love and compassion. In order to grow in your faith community, you must feel comfortable in that community, free from judgment. It may take time to find your new spiritual home, but know that there is one for you. Don’t go on the search alone – get the support that is there for you, and use the online resources that can help you get started. Visit www.pflag.org/faith for help.

FINDING FAITH ON YOUR OWN

“I was raised Catholic, went to Catholic school, taught CCD (Confraternity of Catholic Doctrine) and adult religious education. I was questioning some of the church’s teachings, but the stance on LGBT issues was the last nail in the coffin. If the church does not have a place for my son, it does not have a place for me.”

~Mother of a gay son

The idea of leaving organized religion altogether can be daunting. Some people, however, feel that their objections to the LGBT views of their faith are stronger than their ties to a particular community or tradition. Before you decide to leave your faith or organized religion altogether be sure to reach out to others who have been faced with a similar decision to find out how they navigated this choice and to get support as you make your own choices.

To find families who have been faced with similar issues of faith, visit a PFLAG chapter.

Decisions about leaving your faith community, or staying in one and seeking change, are complex and very personal. This process of discovery and exploration takes time and is different for each of us. It is important to take your time, ask questions, and remember that you are not alone. To find families who have been faced with similar issues of faith, visit a PFLAG chapter. You may find the closest PFLAG chapter by visiting www.pflag.org/findachapter.

SHARING YOUR STORY

“When we talked to our son, we asked what we could do to help. He said, ‘Tell my story. Don’t let this happen to anyone else.’ At that point we became activists, trying to educate people – good people who just don’t understand. We co-chaired a group for Mormon parents of gay children...and have worked to keep Mormon families together. People who know us well, and know our son, are now rethinking LGBT issues.”

~Mother and father of a lesbian daughter and a gay son

As you become more open about your LGBT family member or friend, you may find that some individuals in your faith community will turn to you for support. Your faith leader may come to you with questions about LGBT issues. By being a resource within your faith community and supporting others in their paths to understanding, you can help begin a dialogue and create a more welcoming

environment for both LGBT people and allies.

By being open about your LGBT loved one in your faith community, you will hear from other people who are LGBT or have LGBT loved ones, and all will find comfort in knowing that they are not alone. Being the first one to speak up may be difficult, but it can begin a process of

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education in your congregation and beyond. Sharing your story about your journey in a personal, one-on-one setting is often one of the most spiritually fulfilling and powerful experiences that people have. On both sides of the conversation – both for the one telling the story and the one hearing it – there is a unique opportunity for understanding these issues in a new personal light as well as for transforming the perception of LGBT issues. Remember that it is in compassionate *conversations* – not

confrontations – that you can change hearts and minds.

You do not have to have all the answers to be a resource! Just by sharing your story you are making a difference and showing people that faith comes in all shapes and sizes. If you're looking for additional background materials or want to get more information before you feel comfortable having a conversation, check out PFLAG's faith resource list at www.pflag.org/faith.

CONTINUING THE JOURNEY

“For anyone struggling with faith and the issue of sexual orientation, whether their own or one of their loved ones, there is much support and love and understanding in the larger community of faith. Even if the issue is one that seems impossible to resolve, the journey to explore and be open heals regardless of the outcome.”

Father of a lesbian daughter

Whether you're still at the threshold of the path, trying to peer over hills and around corners, or nearing the end of your discovery, thank you for taking this important spiritual journey. How people understand their relationship to their faith can shift over time, so we hope that you will pick this booklet up again from time to time to see what new insights emerge. Please remember to visit our website (www.pflag.org) for an updated list of resources, materials, and information. At PFLAG you will always find a committed network of organizations

and individuals who are eager to support, guide, and encourage you.

No booklet can take the place of hearing from families like yours who have wrestled with questions of faith and their child's sexual orientation and/or gender identity. Talk to families both within your faith community and in other faith communities. Ask them about their journeys to reconcile their religious beliefs and their love for their child. Share your story and especially your struggle, if you have one. Know that you are not alone.

This publication and all PFLAG National publications are available for download at www.pflag.org. Visit our website or call (202) 467-8180 for more information.



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