



A TIME TO SEEK

STUDY GUIDE ON SEXUAL AND GENDER DIVERSITY

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Religious Institute on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing



RELIGIOUS DECLARATION ON SEXUAL MORALITY, JUSTICE, AND HEALING

Sexuality is God's life-giving and life-fulfilling gift. We come from diverse religious communities to recognize sexuality as central to our humanity and as integral to our spirituality. We are speaking out against the pain, brokenness, oppression, and loss of meaning that many experience about their sexuality.

Our faith traditions celebrate the goodness of creation, including our bodies and our sexuality. We sin when this sacred gift is abused or exploited. However, the great promise of our traditions is love, healing, and restored relationships.

Our culture needs a sexual ethic focused on personal relationships and social justice rather than particular sexual acts. All persons have the right and responsibility to lead sexual lives that express love, justice, mutuality, commitment, consent, and pleasure. Grounded in respect for the body and for the vulnerability that intimacy brings, this ethic fosters physical, emotional, and spiritual health. It accepts no double standards and applies to all persons, without regard to sex, gender, color, age, bodily condition, marital status, or sexual orientation.

God hears the cries of those who suffer from the failure of religious communities to address sexuality. We are called today to see, hear, and respond to the suffering caused by violence against women and sexual minorities, the HIV pandemic, unsustainable population growth and over-consumption, and the commercial exploitation of sexuality.

Faith communities must therefore be truth seeking, courageous, and just. We call for:

- Theological reflection that integrates the wisdom of excluded, often silenced peoples, and insights about sexuality from medicine, social science, the arts and humanities.
- Full inclusion of women and sexual minorities in congregational life, including their ordination and the blessing of same sex unions.
- Sexuality counseling and education throughout the lifespan from trained religious leaders.
- Support for those who challenge sexual oppression and who work for justice within their congregations and denomination.

Faith communities must also advocate for sexual and spiritual wholeness in society. We call for:

- Lifelong, age appropriate sexuality education in schools, seminaries, and community settings.
- A faith-based commitment to sexual and reproductive rights, including access to voluntary contraception, abortion, and HIV/STD prevention and treatment.
- Religious leadership in movements to end sexual and social injustice.

God rejoices when we celebrate our sexuality with holiness and integrity. We, the undersigned, invite our colleagues and faith communities to join us in promoting sexual morality, justice, and healing.

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INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of organized religion, religious bodies have wrestled with sexuality issues. The Hebrew Bible includes many chapters that focus on the goodness of sexuality in people's lives, while warning of its destructive and exploitative uses. The Talmud, the Jewish writings of the early rabbis, and the Christian ecumenical councils, starting with the Council of Nicea in 325, debated marriage eligibility, the propriety of sexual acts and sexual relationships, and the appropriate roles for women and men in religious life and society at large. The Reformation challenged a celibate clergy.

In the latter part of the 20th century, the majority of religious denominations struggled with accepting divorced people into their communities and ordaining women. It was only 30 years ago that these issues were causing schisms in denominations, local congregations, and even among friends and families. People of good faith were able to work, study and pray together about these issues, and today the majority of religious institutions in the United States now welcome and include divorced persons and many recognize women as ordained clergy.

During the past two decades, religious institutions have struggled with issues related to sexual orientation and identity. Many have taken positions to welcome and include lesbian and gay members. Some have affirmed the rights of lesbian women and gay men to serve the faith community as ordained clergy, deacons, and elders, and they also offer commitment ceremonies to same-sex couples. A few denominations have affirmed full inclusion of people who are transgender. There are many organizations working to ensure the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) persons within specific faith communities.

Other major religious institutions have been roiled by controversy over these issues. Several of the largest mainstream denominations in America are currently engaged in fierce debates about how to include LGBT persons. On a local level, congregations find themselves mirroring these struggles about how to truly welcome people of diverse orientations and identities.

We have prepared this multi-faith Study Guide to help you and your congregation seek answers to its questions about sexual orientation and gender identity. We recognize that issues regarding sexuality and gender vary among the different denominations, geographies and ethnic groups of this country. This Guide is intended to address the broad spectrum of the American faith community. We have tried to bring you the most up-to-date science and religious information. In each section, we have included resources for additional information and suggested questions for use in group discussion or individual reflection.

But, we also recognize that these are complex issues, requiring balanced information, study, discussion, reflection and prayer. Too often, ideology trumps reason in discussions of sexuality and gender; scientific findings are misrepresented, and Scriptural argument is reduced to proof-texting. We have provided full citations to sources and references so that you and your community can go further on your own with these issues.

As religious institutions continue to discover the rich dimensions of sexual and gender diversity, we hope this Study Guide will be a valuable resource in your discussions and deliberations. We pray with you for courage, respectful dialogue, and patience with one another as you seek the truth with love.

DEFINITIONS

The language used to describe sexual and gender diversity can lead to miscommunication, misperceptions, stereotypes and discrimination. This section is intended to define the terms used throughout this Study Guide and serve as a resource for discussion of sexual and gender diversity in faith-based communities.

Many of these terms are often thought of as “binary”—that is, there are only two categories that define them, such as “male-female” or “gay-straight.” When considering sexual and gender diversity, many scientists believe it is more appropriate to consider a range of possibilities. Where applicable, scales are included with the terms.

Sex. The biological characteristics that define human beings as male or female or intersex. **Biological sex** refers to physical characteristics such as external genitals, sex chromosomes, sex hormones and internal reproductive systems. **Natal sex** is the sex assigned at birth, which is typically based on the appearance of the external genitals. In cases where the genitals appear ambiguous, the chromosomes and hormones are then assessed to make the most appropriate sex assignment. Words that describe sex are female, male, and intersex. “Sex” is often, and inaccurately, used as a synonym for sexual intercourse.



Intersexual. An individual who has atypical development of physical sex attributes, including (but not limited to) external genitals that are not easily classified as male or female, incomplete development of internal reproductive organs, variations of the sex chromosomes, overproduction or underproduction of sex-related

hormones, and variant development of the testes or ovaries. Some intersex characteristics are recognized at birth; others do not become apparent until puberty or later. Intersexuals were previously known as hermaphrodites. Some individuals now prefer the term **DSD** (disorders of sexual development) to refer to intersex conditions.

Sexuality. The sexual knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, values and behaviors of individuals. Its dimensions include the anatomy, physiology and biochemistry of the sexual response and reproductive systems; gender identity, sexual orientation, roles and personality; as well as thoughts, attachments, physical and emotional expressions, and relationships.

Sexualities. A sociological term for the many ways human beings engage in physically, emotionally and spiritually intimate behaviors and relationships. The term is typically used to suggest a diversity of sexual and gender identities, rather than a single sexual norm.

Sexual Identity. An individual’s sense of self as a sexual being, including natal sex, gender identity, gender role, sexual orientation and sexual self-concept. Sexual identity may also refer to the language and labels people use to define themselves. **Sexual self-concept** refers to the individual’s assessment of his or her sexual identity. Development of sexual identity is a critical part of adolescence.

Sexual Orientation. An individual’s enduring romantic, emotional or sexual attractions toward other persons. “Heterosexual,” “homosexual” and “bisexual” are examples of specific sexual orientations, although sexual orientation falls along a continuum that ranges from exclusive heterosexuality to exclusive homosexuality.

women are called male-to-female (MTF) transsexuals, transsexual women or transwomen. Transsexuals often pursue medical procedures such as hormone treatments or gender confirmation surgery (also known as sex-reassignment surgery) to make their physical attributes conform more closely to their gender identity. Transsexuals who pursue sex-reassignment surgery may refer to themselves as pre-operative (“pre-op”) or post-operative (“post-op”) transsexuals. Others dislike this terminology and prefer to say they are in transition.

Cross Dresser or Transvestite. An individual who regularly dresses in attire associated with the other gender, either for sexual excitement or emotional release, or in some cases, for performance art. Cross dressers can be any sexual orientation, but are primarily heterosexual men. Transvestites differ from transsexuals in that they do not want to alter their bodies. In the U.S., the older term “transvestite” is considered by many cross dressers to be offensive, but the usage and connotation vary by culture.

Coming out. Short for “coming out of the closet,” the term refers to the period when LGBT persons acknowledge and embrace their sexual orientation or gender identity and begin to share this information with others. Coming out is not a one-time event, but an extended process of self-identifying to family, friends, colleagues, clergy and other significant people in an individual’s life.

LGBT/GLBT. A collective acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. Lengthier versions include “LGBTQ” to include people who identify as “queer,” and “LGBTQQIA,” to include “queer, questioning, intersex and asexual.” The “a” may also be used to refer to “allies,” heterosexuals who support justice for LGBT persons.

Heterosexism. Similar to racism or sexism, this term refers to the privileging of heterosexuality over other sexual orientations, or to the assumption or assertion of heterosexuality as the preferred cultural norm.

Homophobia. Fear, dislike, hatred or prejudice toward homosexuality and homosexual persons.

Queer. Once a negative term for a lesbian or gay man, “queer” has recently been reclaimed by some gay people as a self-affirming reference for anyone of a non-heterosexual orientation or gender identity. It is best not to use this word to refer to specific individuals without their consent.

Questioning. Some individuals do not identify with any of the current terms that define sexual orientation or gender identity; others are struggling to understand their own sexual orientation and/or gender identity. They may choose to refer to themselves as “questioning,” “third gender,” “gender queer,” or they may choose no term at all.

What’s the Right Word?

As public understanding of sexual and gender diversity evolves, so does the language. Terminology once used commonly may now be considered outdated, inaccurate, or even offensive. For example, many individuals prefer to identify themselves as lesbian or gay, rather than homosexual. References to “admitted,” “avowed” or “practicing” homosexuals are offensive, because these adjectives suggest that a homosexual orientation is shameful or chosen, or that a lesbian or gay identity is entirely sexual or erotic in nature.

This following list can be helpful in choosing language that is respectful and inclusive of all persons.

OUTMODED	CURRENT
Admitted, avowed or practicing homosexual	Openly lesbian, openly gay
Hermaphrodite	Intersexual, intersex person
Homosexual	Lesbian woman, gay man
Lifestyle, sexual preference	Sexual orientation
Sex change	Sex reassignment, transitioning
Transvestite	Cross dresser
Gay marriage	Marriage, same-sex marriage (contrasted with other-sex marriage)

Questions for Group Discussion / Individual Reflection

1. Am I familiar with these terms? Which terms are new to me? Which terms or concepts do I need more information about?
2. When did I first hear the words homosexual, lesbian, gay? When did I first hear the words transgender, transsexual, cross dresser?
3. What messages did I learn about sexual and gender diversity from my parents? My faith community? The media?
4. Why do words matter? How can the words used to describe sexual and gender diversity support the dignity and worth of all persons? How can they hurt people?
5. Are we comfortable using these words? How might we be more inclusive in language around these topics in our faith community?

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PREVALENCE

What is the percentage of gay men and lesbian women in the general population? How many people are bisexual? How many transgender people are there? There are no clear answers to any of these questions. What is clear is that same-sex attraction and sexual behaviors occurred throughout history and are found in similar percentages across a range of populations and cultures.¹

SEXUAL ORIENTATION

Many scientists believe that the human population doesn't fit neatly into discrete categories of race, sexual orientation or gender. Fifty years ago, the pioneering sexuality researcher Alfred Kinsey and his colleagues proposed a continuum for sexual orientation, based on an individual's feelings, attractions, fantasies and behaviors. In their research, Kinsey and his team labeled as a "Kinsey 0" someone whose behaviors and fantasies have always and only involved people of the other sex, and as a "Kinsey 6" someone whose behaviors and fantasies have always and only involved people of the same sex. A "Kinsey 3" was someone with equal fantasies and attractions toward males and females.

Kinsey's 1948 and 1953 research found that 4 percent of adult males were exclusively homosexual throughout their lives, and 10 percent were "more or less exclusively homosexual" for at least three years between the ages 16 and 55. Three to 8 percent of women between 25 and 35 rated themselves toward the homosexual end of the Kinsey scale.²

More recently, researchers argued for a broader research model that considers multiple aspects of an individual's sexuality. In 1992, the University of Chicago conducted the National Health and Social Life Survey, the most comprehensive random study of sex in the United States. This study explored the incidence of same-sex sexual attraction, same-sex sexual activity, and how many people self-identified as gay or lesbian. The study found that, while 2.8 percent of men and 1.4 percent of women self-identified as gay or lesbian, higher percentages said they have engaged in sexual activity with a same-sex partner at some time in their adult lives. Also, 6.2 percent of men and 4.4 percent of women reported feelings of sexual desire or attraction toward a person of the same sex.³ (*See Table 1.*)

Table 1.

	MEN	WOMEN
Any same-sex desire or attraction	6.2%	4.4%
Sexual activity with a same-sex partner since age 18	4.9%	4.1%
Sexual activity with a same-sex partner in the last year	2.7%	1.3%
Self-identify as gay / lesbian / bisexual	2.8%	1.4%
Percent of respondents who answered yes to one or more of the above	10.1%	8.6%

Source: National Health and Social Life Survey, 1994

Transgender

There are no national data on the number of people who identify as transgender. The National Center for Transgender Equality estimates that 750,000 to 3 million Americans (between 0.25 and 1 percent of the U.S. population) are transgender.⁴ According to the American Psychological Association, estimates of the prevalence of transsexualism are about one in 10,000 for biological males and one in 30,000 for biological females.⁵ The number of people in other transgender categories is unknown.

Intersex (DSD)

The prevalence of intersex or DSD (disorder of sex development) conditions is difficult to determine. Government agencies do not collect statistics on intersex individuals, and intersex conditions are not always recognized or accurately diagnosed. Approximately one in 1,500 to one in 2,000 infants are born every year with external genitals that are not easily identified as male or female. Some intersex conditions are more common—e.g., Klinefelter syndrome, in which male infants are born with an extra X (female) chromosome, occurs in one in 1,000 births. Others are much rarer—e.g., partial androgen insensitivity syndrome (PAIS), a variant response to male hormones, occurs in one in 130,000 births.⁶

Questions for Group Discussion / Individual Reflection

1. Does the number of lesbian and gay persons, bisexual persons, transgender and intersex persons make a difference in creating policies and programs for a faith-based community? Does it matter that one in 20 people self-identify as gay or lesbian rather than one in 10? If so, why?
2. Every culture in the world includes people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex. The Bible teaches that everyone is created *b'tzelem elohim*, in God's image. How does science support Biblical teaching? How might it not?
3. Was it surprising to learn that as many as one in 1,500 to 2,000 babies are born with indeterminate genitals or sex hormones? Is that reality acknowledged in Scripture and in our faith community? How would our faith community support a family with an intersex baby?

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SCIENCE ON SEXUAL AND GENDER DIVERSITY

There have been a number of scientific studies exploring the origins, or etiology, of sexual orientation during the past 20 years, particularly the origins of homosexuality. There has been little research on the causes of heterosexuality. The balance of scientific research suggests that an individual's adult sexual orientation is caused by a complex array of genetics, prenatal hormones, socio-cultural influences, psychosocial factors, or some combination of these. The research demonstrates that adult sexual orientation and gender identity, in all their complexities, are neither a choice nor a preference. All people, regardless of orientation or identity, have the responsibility to make ethical, moral choices about their sexual behaviors and relationships.

What has science revealed about the origins of sexual orientation?

Several studies have revealed that typical or atypical exposure in the uterus to androgens, the male sex hormone, may influence adult sexual orientation in both women and men and in both gay and straight persons.⁷ Lesbians, on average “are exposed to more prenatal androgens than heterosexual women,”⁸ and homosexual men may have a different androgen exposure, either through timing or concentration, than straight men. Several researchers have studied the effect of a mother's stress on prenatal hormones during early pregnancy, and the results have been mixed. In some studies, women with gay sons reported greater maternal stress during the early months of pregnancy.⁹

Research studies have found higher rates of homosexuality in families, among biological brothers, and among identical twins, indicating

“clear evidence for a genetic component to both male and female sexual orientation.”¹⁰ Geneticists have found at least four genetic regions that may contribute to male sexual orientation. A well-known study in the early 1990s reported the discovery of a genetic region—the Xq28 region on the X chromosome, inherited from the mother's side—that appeared to be present in about three-quarters of gay men (as well as some straight men). No such gene was found in lesbian women.¹¹ A 2005 study that used more sophisticated genetic mapping techniques identified three additional genetic regions that may contribute to sexual orientation in men. (Women were not part of this study.)¹² Other research has found a “fraternal birth order effect” among gay men: the incidence of homosexuality increases 33% with each older brother a man has. (A birth order effect does not appear to exist for lesbian women.) This correlation exists only among biological brothers, not among sisters, adopted brothers or step-brothers. This correlation is present even if the brothers are not raised in the same household.¹³

A variety of studies has found small but significant anatomical differences between heterosexual and homosexual populations that suggest a genetic component to sexual orientation. These studies reveal:

- differences in the size, structure, and function of specific parts of the brain between men and women and among people of differing sexual orientations;¹⁴
- differences in the neural circuitry of gay and straight men;¹⁵
- finger lengths in lesbians that are more like heterosexual men than heterosexual women;¹⁶

- an earlier average age of puberty for gay men compared with straight men;¹⁷ and
- the rate of eye blinking (human startle response) among lesbians is more like straight men than straight women.¹⁸

One researcher concluded that “sexual orientation may be laid down in neural circuitry during early fetal development.”¹⁹ However, he has also cautioned that “whether neural differences underlie sexual orientation *per se* or are the consequence of homosexual or heterosexual behavior is yet to be determined.”²⁰

No study has identified a single factor that explains sexual orientation in all people. In the words of the American Psychiatric Association, “there are probably many reasons for a person’s sexual orientation, and the reasons may be different for different people.”²¹

Is there a gay—or straight—gene?

As science learns more about genetics, many scientists believe that additional evidence will emerge that sexual orientation is predominantly genetic in nature. In a comprehensive 2002 review article in the *Annual Review of Sex Research*, the authors reported that “although precise genetic mechanisms have yet to be definitely specified, these are likely to be identified in the future.”²² However, no study has identified a single “gay gene” or “straight gene” that determines sexual orientation, and researchers believe that “given the complexity of sexual orientation, numerous genes are likely to be involved.”²³

What *doesn’t* cause an individual’s sexual orientation?

Despite long-held misconceptions, there is no peer-reviewed research to indicate that parenting style, a parent’s sexual orientation, or incidents of sexual abuse cause an individual’s adult sexual orientation. According to the American Psychiatric Association, “No psychosocial or

family dynamic cause for homosexuality has been identified, including histories of childhood sexual abuse.”²⁴ Childhood sexual behaviors do “not appear to relate to eventual adult sexual orientation” nor do parental-child interactions.²⁵

Is homosexuality a mental illness or disorder?

For more than 30 years, the major health and mental health professional organizations in the United States have agreed that homosexuality is an expected variation of sexual orientation. The American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Counseling Association, the American Psychiatric Association, the American Psychological Association, the National Association of School Psychologists and the National Association of Social Workers, together representing half a million health and mental health professionals, have all taken the position that homosexuality is not a mental disorder.

Can an individual’s sexual orientation be changed through therapy?

Homosexuality and bisexuality do not need to be “cured” or treated, although many individuals successfully seek counseling to accept their sexual orientation and for help in coming out. The American Psychiatric Association affirms that “those who have integrated their sexual orientation into a positive sense of self function at a healthier psychological level than those who have not.”²⁶

Individuals who seek “reparative therapy” to become heterosexual often do so because of personal distress, possibly caused by family or societal pressures, or by religious teachings that condemn bisexuality and homosexuality. A position statement adopted by the American Psychiatric Association in 2000 stated, “In the last four decades, ‘reparative’ therapists have not produced any rigorous scientific research to substantiate their claims of cure.”²⁷ One small

study in 2003, involving 200 subjects recruited from the “ex-gay” movement, found that highly motivated people can alter their sexual behavior or self-identity, but reversing their underlying attraction to persons of the same sex is rare.²⁸ Because of both the potential for harm and the professional consensus that homosexuality is not a disorder, professional organizations such as the American Academy of Pediatrics, American Medical Association, American Psychiatric Association, American Psychological Association and the National Association of School Psychologists have spoken out against such therapies.

What causes an individual’s gender identity?

Gender identity, like sexual orientation, is not fully understood. The diversity of gender identities among human beings argues against simple explanations or a discrete cause. It is likely that a combination of biological factors, such as genetic and hormonal differences, early life experiences and other social influences all contribute in some way to the development of an individual’s gender identity.

There is some evidence to suggest biological influences for gender identity. For example, transsexualism may be a “neuro-developmental condition of the brain.”²⁹ In one small study, a part of the brain called the “bed nucleus of the stria terminalis” was found to be the same size and neuron count in transsexual women (naturally born males) as in women in the general population, rather than as men in the general population.³⁰ It is hypothesized that hormones influence this brain development during the “fetal period, then around the time of birth, and also post-natally.”

Hormones may be affected by “genetic influences, medication, environmental influences, stress or trauma to the mother during pregnancy.”³¹

A consensus statement by 25 researchers from the United States and Europe concluded that “there is no evidence that nurturing and socialization in contradiction to the phenotype [physical attributes] can cause transsexualism, nor that nurture which is entirely consistent with the phenotype can prevent it.”³² In other words, parenting style and environmental factors neither cause a person to be transgender nor prevent it.

When does gender identity emerge?

Gendered behaviors emerge in early childhood and demonstrate the biological and genetic diversity of people. Starting as early as age three, children may exhibit gender variance – a strong, persistent preference for behaviors typically associated with the other sex, not their own. (*See Definitions, page 7.*) Many gender-variant children voluntarily hide or discontinue these behaviors by the time they start school.³³ This change usually is brought about by criticism, fear or a desire to conform. Rejection, bullying and criticism can create adjustment difficulties for gender-variant children.

Do gender-variant children grow up to be gay?

Gender variance does not cause homosexual orientation, but it can be an indicator of it in males. Nearly 70 percent of gender-variant boys later identify as adult gay men³⁴ but some will be heterosexual. Most gender-variant girls, however, grow up to be heterosexual or bisexual women.³⁵

Questions for Group Discussion / Individual Reflection

1. What difference does it make to our policies and programs if we believe that sexual orientation—whether bisexual, heterosexual or homosexual—has a biological component?
2. For those of us who are heterosexual, when did we discover our sexual orientation? Could we change our sexual orientation through therapy? Could our sexual orientation change if we met “the right person” of the same sex? People of other sexual orientations are often asked these kinds of questions; why are they not usually asked of straight people?
3. Studies have found that religious people who believe that homosexuality (or heterosexuality) is not a choice but something people are born with are more likely to oppose discrimination and affirm the rights of LGBT people. Why do you think that’s true? Does it affect how you think about these issues?

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MARRIAGE AND FAMILY

According to the 2000 census, there are nearly 600,000 households headed by same-sex couples in the U.S.³⁶ The actual numbers may be higher. A 2004 analysis by the Urban Institute, a nonpartisan research organization in Washington, DC, estimated that the census figures on same-sex households may be 25 percent too low.³⁷ More than one-quarter of same-sex couples are currently raising children, compared with just over one-third of straight couples.³⁸ Same-sex couples and their families are subject to certain legal obstacles and discrimination that most other families do not face.

What is the status of marriage equality in the U.S.?

Although marriage licensing is governed by the states, the federal Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), enacted in 1996, restricts federal recognition of marriage to other-sex couples only. DOMA defines marriage as “a legal union between one man and one woman as husband and wife” and stipulates that the term “spouse” in federal law and policy refers explicitly “to a person of the opposite sex who is a husband or a wife.”³⁹

DOMA permits states not to recognize the marriages of same-sex couples who marry legally in other states. Marriage for lesbian and gay couples is legal only in the state of Massachusetts, and even there, same-sex couples must be Massachusetts residents, intend to reside in Massachusetts, or reside in another state where marriage for lesbian and gay couples is legal. (Other-sex couples who wish to marry in Massachusetts do not have these residency requirements.)

Married couples of the same sex are not eligible for any of the 1,138 marriage benefits conferred

by federal law, including Social Security benefits, federal tax benefits, veterans’ benefits, and civilian and military service benefits.⁴⁰ Given income disparities between men and women, and between ethnic groups,⁴¹ the lack of marriage benefits creates a heavier burden on same-sex households in which both partners are women and/or ethnic minorities.

The U.S. government also does not recognize the marriages of lesbian and gay couples legalized in other countries. This prevents an American citizen who marries overseas from sponsoring a foreign-born, same-sex spouse for permanent residency.

In addition to federal legislation that defines marriage as the union of one man and one woman, opponents of marriage equality also sought to *add* this definition to the U.S. Constitution. The “Federal Marriage Amendment” which would have defined marriage as the union of one man and one woman, failed to receive sufficient Congressional support in 2004 and 2006. However, voters in 26 states have approved *state* constitutional amendments restricting marriage to one man and one woman. Nineteen other states enforce this restriction by state law, rather than by constitutional amendment.

In summary, 45 states currently have policies disallowing marriage between same-sex partners. Nine states (California, Connecticut, Hawaii, Maine, New Hampshire, New Jersey, Oregon, Vermont and Washington) and the District of Columbia recognize civil unions or domestic partnerships between same-sex couples that provide varying rights and benefits similar to marriage⁴² and as noted above, Massachusetts allows same-sex couples to marry.

What is the difference between marriage and civil unions?

Civil unions and domestic partnerships are not recognized by the federal government, and do not confer the rights and benefits of marriage guaranteed under federal law. Among other benefits, marriage enables spouses to parent legally together, make emergency medical decisions for one another and their children, petition for the immigration of a foreign-born partner, and inherit assets in the event of death—rights that civil unions and domestic partnerships do not necessarily provide.

Another important benefit of marriage is the dignity it affords same-sex couples and their families. The word “marriage” speaks to love, faithful commitment and recognition by religious institutions and civil society in a way that “civil union” does not.

Can same-sex couples marry in other countries?

Same-sex couples can legally marry in five countries outside the United States—Belgium, Canada, the Netherlands, South Africa and Spain. In the United Kingdom, a domestic partnership law grants same-sex couples all the rights and benefits of marriage, but does not use the word “marriage.” Fifteen other European countries provide some measure of legal recognition to same-sex couples. Civil unions for lesbian and gay couples also are recognized under New Zealand law.

How do marriage laws affect transgender persons?

A transgender person can enter into a heterosexual marriage after transitioning. Individuals who transition while already married may remain legally married, even though both partners are now of the same sex.⁴³

How many same-sex couples have children?

Estimates of the number of children being raised by same-sex couples range widely, from 1 million to 10 million.⁴⁴ Although the 2000 census reported nearly 600,000 same-sex households in the U.S., it did not count the number of children in those households. The 2000 census did reveal that same-sex couples reside in 99.3 percent of all U.S. counties, and that there are same-sex couples with children in 96 percent of all counties.⁴⁵

Can same-sex couples adopt children?

The ability of same-sex couples to adopt varies not only by state, but by county. County judges have the final say in adoption cases, and their opinions regarding adoption by same-sex couples often vary from one county to the next when there is no overriding state law or policy. Nationwide, adoption is generally easier for individual lesbians and gay men than it is for same-sex couples. Many same-sex couples pursue second-parent adoptions when one partner has legal custody of a child.

How do adoption laws affect transgender persons?

No state has a law that specifically bars transgender people from adopting, but there may be no legal protection from localized discrimination by adoption agencies and judges.

Are children of same-sex couples at a disadvantage compared with children of other-sex couples?

Concerns about deficiencies in the home life of children of same-sex couples have proved to be unfounded. According to the American Psychological Association (APA), “the development, adjustment, and well-being of

children with lesbian and gay [male] parents do not differ markedly from that of children with heterosexual parents.” The APA further reports that “fears about children of lesbian or gay parents being sexually abused by adults, ostracized by peers, or isolated in single-sex lesbian or gay communities have received no scientific support.”⁴⁶ Same-sex parents and their children may suffer discrimination, stigma or rejection in some communities, including religious communities. Most children are able to cope with these challenges, but such prejudice may hurt some.

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) reports that growing up in same-sex households offers certain advantages to children, who are often more tolerant of diversity and have been described as more nurturing toward younger children. At the same time, however, the AAP has pointed out that “children of same-gender parents often experience economic, legal and familial insecurity as a result of the absence of legal recognition of their bonds to their non-biological parents.”⁴⁷ The AAP and a number of other professional associations—including the American Psychological Association, Child Welfare League of America and North American Council on Adoptable Children—have endorsed adoption rights for lesbians and gay men.

But isn't a child better off with a mother and a father?

While there is research indicating that living with two parents may be preferable to living with a single parent, and that divorce may be harmful to children's development, “there is no evidence that children in general do better with a father and mother than with two mothers or two fathers,” according to an analysis by Michael Wald, professor of law at Stanford University and an expert on children's rights and welfare.⁴⁸ The AAP agrees: “More than 25 years of research have documented that there is no relationship between parents' sexual orientation and any measure of a child's emotional, psychosocial, and behavioral adjustment. Conscientious and nurturing adults, whether they are men or women, heterosexual or homosexual, can be excellent parents.”⁴⁹

Are the children of same-sex couples more likely to be homosexual as adults?

No. Following a review of the most recent social science research, the APA concluded that the children of same-sex parents develop more or less the same as children of heterosexual parents with regard to behavior, personality development, self-concept, gender identity, sexual orientation, and relationships with adults and peers.⁵⁰

Questions for Group Discussion / Individual Reflection

1. How do I feel about marriage equality for same-sex couples? Should our faith community offer commitment ceremonies? Why or why not?
2. What's the difference between civil unions and marriage for same-sex couples? Why would some people support civil unions but believe marriage is only for a man and a woman? Why do some people believe that civil unions do not go far enough? As a person of faith, what do I believe?
3. Some people say that marriage for same-sex couples would denigrate marriages for heterosexual couples. How might that be true? How might that be false?
4. Would a family with parents of the same sex feel welcome in our faith community? Would a family with a child who is lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender feel comfortable worshipping in our community? What might we do as a faith community to create a stronger feeling of comfort and welcome?
5. Some people believe that a child is better off in a family with a married mother and father. How might this be true—or false? How is it different for single-parent families, or families with two parents of the same sex? Does our faith community support diverse families?
6. What are the characteristics of a healthy and happy family? How can a family raise sexually healthy children? How can our faith community help?

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YOUTH

As young people develop their adult sense of self, their understandings of their own sexual orientation and gender identity begin to emerge. Individuals typically experience their first erotic feelings during adolescence, and many start to experiment with sexual behaviors. LGBT youth—those who are open about their sexual orientation and gender identity, as well as those merely perceived as “different”—may face a number of challenges in their homes, schools and religious communities.

When do young people recognize their sexual orientation?

Most individuals usually do not experience erotic feelings toward others before puberty. Although sexual orientation may begin to emerge in early adolescence, today’s adult lesbians and gay men generally recall that they did not self-identify as homosexual until they were 17–18 years old.⁵¹ However, many people who work with today’s adolescents report that the average age of coming out appears to be decreasing, with some young people publicly identifying as bisexual or gay even before high-school age. A study reported in the journal *Pediatrics* indicated that uncertainty about sexual orientation declines with age, from 25.9 percent of 12-year-olds to 5 percent of 17-year-olds.⁵²

When do youth come out or identify themselves as lesbian or gay?

According to a 2000 study, the mean age of disclosing a lesbian or gay orientation is just before or just after high school graduation,⁵³ with many identifying in their earlier teen years. It is important to distinguish between coming out and first sexual experience, which may not occur

at the same time. Because adolescence is the time when young people begin to develop their sexual identity, some adolescents will engage in sexual activity. However, the sex of an adolescent’s partners during this period does not necessarily indicate his or her adult sexual orientation.

How many LGBT youth are in faith communities?

A national survey by Christian Community revealed that “a surprisingly high number of teenagers who are involved in faith-based institutions self-identified as homosexual or bisexual.” The survey reported that 14 percent of adolescents in religious communities identify as something other than heterosexual:

- Five percent of adolescent females identify as lesbian, and another 4 percent as bisexual.
- Seven percent of adolescent males identify as gay and 5 percent as bisexual.
- Two percent of both females and males say they are unsure of their sexual orientation.

The vast majority (88 percent) of these adolescents have not been open about their sexuality with clergy or other adult leaders in their faith communities. Almost half (46 percent) have not disclosed their sexual orientation to their parents.⁵⁴

What are the consequences of coming out for lesbian and gay young people?

Coming out can put LGBT youth at risk of rejection, harassment, sexual abuse and violence. Although there are no national statistics on suicide rates in the LGBT population, several

studies point to higher rates of depression and suicide attempts among LGBT youth, according to the National Institute of Mental Health.⁵⁵ A 2001 Surgeon General’s report said “anti-homosexual attitudes are associated with psychological distress for homosexual persons and may have a negative impact on mental health, including a greater incidence of depression and suicide, lower self-acceptance and a greater likelihood of hiding sexual orientation.”⁵⁶ The Christian Community survey indicated that non-heterosexual teens are twice as likely as their heterosexual peers to have seriously considered suicide.⁵⁷

Families and schools may be key points of tension and conflict. Although most families are able to accept children of differing sexual orientations, a quarter to one-third of lesbian and gay teens experience physical assault and/or expulsion from their homes. As a result, between 20 and 40 percent of all homeless adolescents are LGBT youth, according to a joint study published in 2006 by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Policy Institute and the National Coalition for the Homeless. The study reported that homeless LGBT youth are especially vulnerable to victimization, delinquency, substance abuse, unsafe sexual behavior, depression and other mental health problems. It also cited widespread incidence of harassment, abuse and discrimination against LGBT individuals in shelters and residential care facilities serving homeless youth.⁵⁸

Incidents of harassment also are common in schools. According to *The 2005 National School Climate Survey*, conducted by GLSEN (the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network):

- 74% of LGBT students feel unsafe at school because of perceptions about their sexual orientation, gender identity or religion.
- 64% experience verbal harassment because of their sexual orientation and 46% because of their gender identity or expression.

- 41% experience “cyber-bullying” (receiving threatening or harassing e-mails or text messages from other students).
- 38% experience physical harassment because of their sexual orientation and 26% because of their gender identity or expression.
- 18% experience physical assault because of their sexual orientation and 42% because of their gender identity or expression.
- LGBT students who experience harassment are less likely than the student population at large to plan to attend college.⁵⁹

Where can LGBT youth go for support?

A range of resources are available in local schools, religious institutions and community groups. For example:

- Parents, Families & Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) is a national support organization with local affiliates in more than 500 communities across the U.S. and abroad. PFLAG provides help lines, support group meetings, and locally and nationally produced resources for LGBT persons and their families.
- At least 3,000 public and private high schools nationwide sponsor Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) clubs, which provide safe, supportive environments for LGBT, straight and questioning youth to discuss sexual orientation and gender identity issues.
- Some—but by no means all—of the youth development programs offered by national religious institutions, denominations and local congregations may be a resource for LGBT youth. In a 2003 survey, only one-third of nationally sponsored, denomination-based youth development programs affirmed that they explicitly welcome LGBT youth.⁶⁰

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- About 150 cities also have local support organizations affiliated with the National Association of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Community Centers.⁶¹

- LGBT youth and their families can identify local resources through QueerAmerica, an online database maintained by OutProud, The National Coalition for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Youth, <http://www.outproud.org/>.

Questions for Group Discussion / Individual Reflection

1. Does our faith community provide sexuality education for our young people? Does this education address sexual orientation and gender identity? Is it taught by trained leaders?
2. Do we think there are LGBT youth or young people with questions about their sexual orientation in our community? How would we know? Would a lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender youth feel welcome in our youth group? How might we as a faith community increase their feelings of comfort and welcome?
3. Is it surprising that most lesbian and gay youth in congregations do not reveal their sexual orientation to their clergy or youth groups? Is this the case in our faith community? How might we be more welcoming to youth with these concerns?
4. What are the resources for LGBT youth in the larger community? Do we refer our young people to these resources?

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SCRIPTURE

People of faith who disagree on matters of sexual ethics often seek wisdom from a common source—their sacred texts. The Hebrew Bible and the New Testament are frequently part of the dialogue regarding sexual ethics and LGBT civil rights. The challenge for faith communities is to discern insights and guidance from the Scriptures that can be useful in contemporary discussions of sexuality and gender.

Although the Bible has a good deal to say about sexuality, many theologians and people of faith believe that much of it does not speak to modern societies. For instance, parts of the Bible explicitly forbid certain behaviors—such as divorce, intercourse during menstruation, and re-marriage—that many faith communities now accept. Other Biblical texts permit (or tacitly approve) such practices as polygamy, prostitution and the treatment of women as property that are now prohibited. Meanwhile, the Bible is essentially silent on abortion, birth control and masturbation.⁶²

Biblical references to sexual and gender diversity are relatively rare, and focus primarily on a few verses about male homosexual behavior.⁶³ The Bible does not address such modern understandings as sexual orientation and gender identity that contribute to current thinking on human sexuality.

This section addresses the Biblical citations that traditionally have been included in contemporary discussions of sexual and gender diversity.⁶⁴ It also raises other texts pertinent to sexual and gender diversity, and to Biblical messages regarding love, justice and inclusion. Discussion questions about the possible interpretations of these texts and their relevance to 21st-century society are included at the end.

Same-Sex Behaviors

Although differences in translation can influence our understanding of the Hebrew and Greek texts, the following five passages clearly refer to certain kinds of male-to-male sexual behaviors:

- Leviticus 18:22
- Leviticus 20:13
- Romans 1:24–27*
- 1 Corinthians 6:9–10
- 1 Timothy 1:9–11

* Romans 1:26 is the only passage that mentions female sexual behavior, decrying women who exchange “natural intercourse for unnatural.”

An important consideration regarding any Biblical text is translation—from ancient languages to modern languages, and from ancient cultures to modern cultures. Many theologians believe that the Leviticus passages on male same-sex behavior refer to the rejection of foreign cults that practiced sacred prostitution during religious rites. The passages are part of what is known today as the “holiness code,” which also called for dietary laws, circumcision and other practices. The holiness code is generally thought to have originally been intended to maintain the distinctiveness of the Jewish culture during the time of the Babylonian exile (6th century BCE).⁶⁵

Similarly, the passage in Romans refers to various examples of idolatry behaviors in first-century society. The sexual activities that Paul prohibits are most likely male adult/child sexual behavior and male prostitution, and it is uncertain what specific female sexual behavior he denounces as

“unnatural.” As Harvard theologian Peter J. Gomes writes, “All Paul knew of homosexuality was the debauched pagan expression of it.”⁶⁶

In the Corinthians and Timothy texts, the Greek word *arsenokoitai* is usually translated in English as “sodomite.” However, “sodomite” did not appear in an English translation of the Bible until 1611, with the publication of the King James Version.⁶⁷ The term reflects the terminology and mores of 17th-century England. Newer translations sometimes use the word “homosexuals,” a term (and a concept) that did not exist until the late 19th century.⁶⁸ Scholars disagree whether these texts refer to homosexual behaviors, to sexual promiscuity in general, or to temple prostitution. In the times when the Bible was written, sexual relationships were based on rigid gender roles and the concept of power and dominance. The authors of these texts had no concept of an equal, loving monogamous relationship between two people of the same sex. When the texts are read today, it is important to remember that the original authors are not referring to homosexual relationships as we understand them today nor to our modern understanding of homosexuality as a sexual orientation.

In addition to the five passages listed above, the story of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19:1–29) is frequently cited as an indictment of homosexuality. However, this interpretation does not reflect the social realities of the ancient Near East or the perspective of Biblical writers. The story tells how the men of Sodom sought to force the two angels visiting Lot’s home outside “so that we may know them.” (Genesis 19:5) The townsmen were threatening Lot’s visitors with gang rape, a means of showing domination that some surrounding cultures used with their enemies. Their act was a flagrant violation of the hospitality codes of the ancient Near East. The fact that Lot offers his two virgin daughters to satisfy the mob testifies both to the sanctity of the hospitality codes and to the cultural distance between ancient and contemporary societies.⁶⁹

The Biblical writers do not identify homosexuality as the reason for Sodom’s ultimate punishment.⁷⁰ Certain Hebrew and apocryphal texts specify the sins of Sodom as pride, arrogance, neglect of the poor, and hostility to strangers (Ezekiel 16:49, Sirach 16:8, Wisdom of Solomon 19:13–15). The prophet Ezekiel says, “This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy.” (Ezekiel 16:49)

Eunuchs

Eunuchs are a prominent example of sexually atypical persons in the Scriptures. The Biblical term “eunuch” refers to a castrated man or to a man with damaged or atypical genitals. Because eunuchs often served as courtiers, political or military officials and chamberlains, the term may also refer to an individual’s position in a royal court or household.⁷¹ Today, many LGBT people identify with the eunuchs as representative of all sexual “others” in predominantly heterosexual societies.

Because eunuchs held prominent positions in many ancient Near East societies, they appear in Biblical texts. Five passages that address eunuchs in an explicitly theological context are:

- Deuteronomy 23:1
- Isaiah 56:4–5
- Wisdom 3:14
- Matthew 19:10–12
- Acts 8:26–40

Only the Deuteronomy passage is proscriptive, specifically excluding from the assembly any male “whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off.” The other texts welcome and bless eunuchs as faithful members of the community. Eunuchs and foreigners are central to the broad message of inclusion in Isaiah 56: “To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbath, who choose the things that please me

and hold fast my covenant, I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.” (Isaiah 56:4–5) In the New Testament, an Ethiopian eunuch is among the first converts welcomed by the early Christian movement in its outreach to all nations (Acts of the Apostles, 8:26–39).

Transgender

There are no explicit references to transgender people or behaviors in the Bible, although the Talmud written between the first and seventh centuries C.E., discussed people that would be described today as intersexual. Genesis 1:27 addresses the creation of males and females, but recognizes that all of humankind is created *b'tzelem elohim*, in God’s image. Deuteronomy 22:5 says that “a woman shall not wear a man’s apparel, nor shall a man put on a woman’s garment.” Scholars have offered various explanations for this prohibition—to prevent participation in pagan rites that included cross dressing; to reinforce gender segregation in the society; or to outlaw disguises intended to conceal illicit sexual activity.⁷²

There are several instances, however, in which Biblical rhetoric erases gender boundaries:

- Biblical writers employ both male and female metaphors in referring to God (e.g., God as mother, Isaiah 66:13).
- In Genesis 2, before God creates man and woman, the Hebrew word context for the first human being includes both genders, much the same way that “mankind” today includes both men and women.
- In his message of inclusion to the community in Galatia, Paul declares, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:28)

The sexual ambiguity of the eunuchs has a particular resonance with many intersexual and transgender persons. Transgender theologian Justin Tanis writes, “God’s emphasis is not on where our bodies came from or how they have been altered, but rather on the ways in which we practice our faith.”⁷³

Loving, Sexual Relationships

While the Bible recognizes the marital union of a woman and a man as one model for the expression of sexuality and love, it is not the only model. Several Biblical models are *not* part of contemporary American culture, such as concubinage and “levirate marriage,” in which a man must procreate with his dead brother’s widow. The Bible also celebrates loving, sexual relationships between unmarried adults, most notably in the Song of Songs. The Christian texts recognize celibacy and singleness as legitimate adult life patterns as well.

Although the concept of marriage between same-sex partners was alien to ancient Near East cultures, the Bible does portray emotional attachments between two women (Naomi and Ruth, in the Book of Ruth) and two men (David and Jonathan, in 1 and 2 Samuel). Although these texts are not about sexual relationships, many LGBT people have drawn inspiration from their depictions of loving relationships between individuals of the same sex. Ruth’s pledge to Naomi (“Where you go, I will go ...”, Ruth 1:1–18) often is recited at the weddings of same-sex and other-sex couples alike. In mourning the death of his “beloved” Jonathan, David says, “your love to me was wonderful, surpassing the love of women” (2 Samuel 1:26).

The Call to Love and Justice

The passages that prohibit specific kinds of sexual behaviors represent less than .03% of the verses contained in the Hebrew and Christian testaments. In contrast, there are many teachings

in the Scriptures to love one another and deliver justice to the oppressed.

The instruction to “love your neighbor as yourself” in the Hebrew Bible (Leviticus 19:18, 33–34) continues in the Christian gospels as one of Jesus’ two great commandments (Mark 12:28–31, Luke 10:27) and is reinforced in the letters of Paul (Romans 13:9–10, Galatians 5:14). This commandment also is a central theme in Jesus’ parable of the Samaritan (Luke 10:30–37). The Bible also calls us to welcome the stranger in our midst (e.g., Exodus 22:21, Exodus 23:9, Isaiah 56:6–7).

The call to justice for the poor and oppressed is one of the most prominent Biblical themes, particularly among the Hebrew prophets. Among the best-known passages are Amos’ plea to “let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:24) and Micah’s question, “what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8). In the Christian gospels, Jesus conspicuously embraces the outcasts of his society, including the impoverished, lepers, Samaritans and tax collectors.

Many LGBT people who have been rejected or marginalized by their faith communities find hope in the Biblical call to love and justice.

Questions for Group Discussion / Individual Reflection

1. How do we understand the texts that condemn sexual behaviors between people of the same sex in light of the overall Scriptural messages of “love your neighbor as yourself” and “all are created in God’s image”?
2. Why is it that texts prohibiting divorce, sex during menstruation, and remarriage, and texts supporting polygamy, slavery and women as property are ignored today, but the verses on male same-sex behaviors continue to have credence in many faith communities?
3. Read together the verses listed in this section. As a whole, what do they help us understand about LGBT people today and our role as people of faith?
4. Are particular sexual acts moral or sinful of themselves, or do they need to be judged in the context of relationship? What does the Religious Declaration on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing mean when it calls for a “sexual ethic based on personal relationship and social justice rather than particular sexual acts”?

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DENOMINATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

Religious denominations have debated and passed policies on the inclusion of LGBT persons for nearly 30 years. They range from denominations that believe that homosexuality is sinful to those that fully welcome and affirm LGBT persons, including their ordination and blessings of their marriages. In this section, we briefly present information about the perspectives of major denominations in the United States, as of June 2007.

The following religious denominations and institutions have policies that support full inclusion of lesbian, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) persons, including ordination and marriage for same-sex couples:

Central Conference of American Rabbis/
Union for Reform Judaism

Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association/
Jewish Reconstructionist Federation

Unitarian Universalist Association

United Church of Christ

Unity Fellowship Churches

Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan
Community Churches

The following denominations and institutions allow their clergy to perform marriage or union ceremonies for same-sex couples:

American Baptist Churches of the U.S.

Central Conference of American Rabbis

Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) *

Episcopal Church USA **

Rabbinical Assembly—The Worldwide
Association of Conservative/Masorti
Rabbis **

Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association

Presbyterian Church USA **

Unitarian Universalist Association

United Church of Christ

Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan
Community Churches

The following denominations ordain openly
lesbian and gay clergy members:

Conservative (Judaism)

Episcopal Church USA

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America ****

Presbyterian Church USA ****

Reconstructionism (Judaism)

Reform (Judaism)***

Unitarian Universalist Association ***

United Church of Christ ***

Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan
Community Churches ***

* *Authority is not denomination-wide but rests with individual clergy, congregations or local governing bodies.*

** *Ceremonies must not reference or use the word “marriage.”*

*** *Also ordains openly transgender clergy.*

**** *Lesbian and gay clergy must be celibate.*

Many denominations have either officially affiliated organizations or independent organizations that are working for the full inclusion of LGBT persons in the life of the faith community. See page 43 for a complete list.

The largest religious denomination in the United States—the Roman Catholic Church—states that “homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered.” But section 2358 of the updated 2005 version of the Catechism of the Roman Catholic Church also says, “The number of men and women who have deep-seated homosexual tendencies is not negligible. This inclination, which is objectively disordered, constitutes for

most of them a trial. *They must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided.* These persons are called to fulfill God’s will in their lives and, if they are Christians, to unite to the sacrifice of the Lord’s Cross the difficulties they may encounter from their condition.” Section 2359 says “homosexual *persons are called to chastity.*”⁷⁴ The nation’s largest Protestant denomination—the Southern Baptist Convention—opposes all aspects of LGBT equality, including civil rights, ordination and marriage equality.

AN OPEN LETTER TO RELIGIOUS LEADERS ON SEXUAL AND GENDER DIVERSITY

This Open Letter provides a theological framework in support of sexual and gender diversity.

It was developed at a colloquium of theologians sponsored by the Religious Institute on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing. Participants included Rev. Steve Clapp, Christian Community; Ann Thompson Cook, God Loves Each One Ministry; Rev. Marvin M. Ellison, Ph.D., Bangor Theological Seminary; Rabbi Sue Levi Elwell, Union for Reform Judaism; Rev. Horace L. Griffin, Ph.D., The General Theological Seminary of the Episcopal Church; Rev. Debra W. Haffner, Director, Religious Institute; Mary E. Hunt, Ph.D., WATER; Rev. Dr. Jay Emerson Johnson, Pacific School of Religion Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies in Religion and Ministry; Rev. Barbara K. Lundblad, Union Theological Seminary; Dr. Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, William Paterson University; Rev. Irene Monroe, Harvard Divinity School; Timothy Palmer, Religious Institute; Dr. Judith Plaskow, Manhattan College; Rev. Michael D. Schuenemeyer, United Church of Christ Wider Church Ministries; and Rev. Dr. William G. Sinkford, Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations.

As religious leaders, we affirm sexual and gender diversity as gifts people offer to their congregations and communities. We urgently call for faith-based approaches that embrace this diversity and advocate justice.

Living in a time of rapid social change challenges us all to create loving, respectful relationships and to honor the many ways that people live and love. While most of us may be accustomed to categorizing people as male or female, heterosexual or homosexual, binary thinking fails to reflect the full diversity of human experience and the richness of creation. The courageous witness of lesbian, gay, bisexual

and transgender people (LGBT), along with a growing body of social and scientific research, inspire us to affirm sexual and gender diversity as a blessed part of life.

Lamentation

Too many religious institutions have failed to embrace sexual and gender diversity. Some have mistakenly called homosexuality sinful when the real issue is heterosexism or the unjust privileging of heterosexuality. Heterosexism devalues gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people, just as sexism and male privilege devalue women. Silence, misinformation, and condemnation of differing sexual and gender identities have created despair, destroyed relationships, and led to violence, suicide, and even murder. Sexual and gender oppression can no longer be portrayed as virtuous and morally defensible.

Scripture and Tradition

At the center of our traditions is the Biblical mandate to love, do justice, seek equality, and act with compassion. The richness of our sacred texts allows for a variety of interpretations, and there is room for legitimate and respectful disagreement about the meaning of specific passages. However, using the Bible to exclude or attack people violates the very spirit of our traditions and is morally unconscionable.

Sacred texts provide moral wisdom and challenge, but some passages may also conflict with contemporary ethical insights. As we move toward a more just society, we approach our texts and traditions with fresh questions and new

understandings. For example, biblical texts that condone slavery, regard women as property, forbid divorce, or equate disease with divine retribution can no longer be regarded as authoritative. We honor instead those texts and traditions that invite us to welcome the stranger, love our neighbor as ourselves, and view all people as created in God's image. Even so, we cannot rely exclusively on scripture or tradition for understanding sexual and gender diversity today. We must also pay attention to the wisdom of excluded, often silenced people, as well as to findings from the biological and social sciences.

A Call to Religious Leaders

As religious leaders, we have an obligation to create a world that embraces the diversity of God's creation.

We urge religious leaders to:

- Educate themselves and their faith communities on the diversity of human sexualities and gender identities through age-appropriate sexuality education.
- Obtain training and support to address the pastoral needs of congregants on issues related to sexual and gender diversity, such as the birth of an intersexed child, the coming-out process of a youth or adult, or an individual who is transitioning genders.
- Use the pulpit and public podium to acknowledge the complex realities of personal experience, including family and relational diversity, and to condemn discrimination and violence.

- Encourage their congregations to engage the formal welcoming program of their denomination.
- Work within their denominations and multi-faith organizations for sexual justice and the full inclusion of LGBT persons, including ordination, family recognition and rites of passage.
- Publicly advocate for the civil rights of LGBT persons, including anti-discrimination laws, marriage equality, and access to health care.
- Develop partnerships with community and national organizations that promote justice and health for LGBT persons.
- Acknowledge and support religious leaders, individuals, and communities who have, at great cost, embraced the diversity of sexualities and gender identities.

In Closing

There can be no turning back from the goal of the full participation of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people in our faith traditions and communities. We recognize that this work may challenge beliefs and unsettle relationships, but it goes to the heart of our mission as faith communities: to create the conditions so that each person can flourish. Loving, just communities embrace everyone; they are strengthened when all people are able to live fully and express their gender and sexuality with holiness and integrity. We celebrate sexual and gender diversity as a blessing that enriches all.

RESOURCES FOR MORE INFORMATION

Articles

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Media Resources

All God's Children (1996). Through the voices of politicians, religious leaders, academics, families and activists, this documentary by Dee Mosbacher, Frances Reid and Sylvia Rhue analyzes sexual orientation within the context of the traditional African-American church. (Study guide available.) <http://www.woman-vision.org/children.htm>.

The Believers (2005). Documentary about the world's first transgender gospel choir. The film portrays the choir members' dilemma—how to reconcile their gender identity with a widespread belief that changing one's gender goes against the word of God. <http://cart.frameline.org/ProductDetails.asp?ProductCode=T642>.

Call Me Malcolm (2005). Feature film by Filmworks, Inc. and the United Church of Christ about a transgender seminary student and his struggle with faith, love and gender identity. (Study guide available.) <http://www.callmemalcolm.com/>.

De Colores (2001). Bilingual documentary featuring Latino families and their efforts to break cultural barriers and replace homophobia with love and acceptance. (Study guide available.) <http://www.unlearninghomophobia.com/decolores.htm>.

Fish Can't Fly (2004). Documentary by Tom Murray featuring lesbians and gay men who recall their journeys to integrate their sexuality and spirituality. The film includes the stories of individuals who have participated in “ex-gay” ministries. <http://www.fishcantfly.com/index.html>.

God and Gays: Bridging the Gap (2006). Documentary by Luane Beck features interviews with prominent religious leaders, authors and performers who discuss how sexuality and spirituality come together in their life and work. (Transcript available.) <http://www.godandgaysthemovie.com/>.

Hineini: Coming Out in a Jewish High School (2005). *Hineini* (Hebrew for “here I am”) chronicles the story of a student's effort to establish a gay-straight alliance at a Jewish high school in Boston and the transformative impact of her campaign. The documentary was directed by Irena Fayngold. (Study guide available.) <http://www.boston-keshet.org/hineini/index.html>.

I Exist: Voices from the Lesbian & Gay Middle Eastern Community in the United States (2003). Documentary traces the journey of lesbian and gay Middle Eastern people learning to reconcile their sexual identities with their cultural heritage. <http://www.unlearninghomophobia.com/exist.html>.

In God's House: Asian American Lesbian and Gay Families in the Church (2006). Documentary by Rev. Deborah Lee and Lina Hoshino tells the stories of three families to illuminate the experience of LGBT Christians, their parents and clergy in Asian-American churches. (Study guide available.) <http://www.ingodshouse.com/>.

In My Shoes: Stories of Youth with LGBT Parents (2005). Documentary by Jen Gilomen and the COLAGE Youth Leadership and Action Program features five young people and their views on marriage and family. <http://www.colage.org/inmyshoes/>.

A Jihad for Love (working title, in production). Feature-length documentary by gay Muslim filmmaker Parvez Sharma, filmed in 12 different countries and in nine languages, explores the hidden lives of LGBT Muslims, <http://www.inthenameofallah.net/>.

Saint of 9/11 (2006). Documentary directed by Glenn Holsten that chronicles the life of Father Mychal Judge, a gay Franciscan priest and chaplain of the New York Fire Department, who died outside the World Trade Center as he attended to victims of the 2001 terrorist attacks. <http://www.saintof9-11.com/saint/>.

Trembling Before G-d (2001). Documentary by Sandi Simcha DuBowski built around the stories of lesbian and gay Hasidic and Orthodox Jews who are seeking to reconcile their love of Judaism with traditional prohibitions against homosexuality. <http://www.tremblingbeforeg-d.com>.

Organizations

Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies in Religion
and Ministry
Pacific School of Religion
1798 Scenic Avenue
Berkeley, CA 94709
800-999-0528
www.clgs.org

Christian Community
6404 South Calhoun Street
Fort Wayne, IN 46807
219-744-6510
www.churchstuff.com

Family Pride
P.O. Box 65327
Washington, DC 20035-5327
202-331-5015
info@familypride.org
www.familypride.org

Freedom to Marry
116 West 23rd St, Suite 500
New York, NY 10011
212-851-8418
info@freedomtomarry.org
www.freedomtomarry.org

Gender Identity Research & Education Society
(GIRES)
Melverly, The Warren, Ashted, Surrey KT21
2SP, U.K.
Tel: 01372 801554
admin@gires.org.uk
www.gires.org.uk/

Gender Public Advocacy Coalition
(GenderPAC)
1743 Connecticut Avenue NW
Fourth Floor
Washington, DC 20009
202-462-6610
gpac@gpac.org
www.gpac.org/

GLAAD
(Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation)
248 West 35th St., 8th Floor
New York, NY 10001
212-629-3322
www.glaad.org

GLSEN
(Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network)
90 Broad Street, 2nd Floor
New York, NY 10004
212-727-0135
glsen@glsen.org
www.glsen.org

Human Rights Campaign
1640 Rhode Island Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20036-3278
800-777-4723
hrc@hrc.org
www.hrc.org

Institute for Judaism and Sexual Orientation
Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of
Religion
3077 University Avenue
Los Angeles, CA 90007
212-747-6128
elearning.huc.edu/jhvrc/index.php

Institute for Welcoming Resources (a program
of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force)
810 West 31st Street
Minneapolis, MN 55408
612-821-IFWR (4397)
Info@WelcomingResources.org
www.welcomingresources.org/index.htm

Intersex Society of North America
979 Golf Course Drive #282
Rohnert Park CA 94928
www.isna.org

Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund
120 Wall Street, Suite 1500
New York, NY 10005-3904
212-809-8585
members@lambdalegal.org
www.lambdalegal.org

LGBTQ Religious Studies Center
Chicago Theological Seminary
1164 E. 58th Street
Chicago, IL 60637
773-752-5757
www.ctschicago.edu/academic/lgbtq.php

National Association of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual
& Transgender Community Centers
1325 Massachusetts Avenue NW, Suite 700
Washington, DC 20005
202-824-0450
www.lgbtcenters.org/

National Black Justice Coalition
700 12th Street NW, Suite 700
Washington, DC 20006
202-349-3755
info@nbjcoalition.org
www.nbjcoalition.org

National Center for Transgender Equality
1325 Massachusetts Ave., Suite 700
Washington, DC 20005
202-903-0112
NCTE@NCTEquality.org
www.nctequality.org

National Gay and Lesbian Task Force
1325 Massachusetts Ave. NW, Suite 600
Washington, DC 20005
202-393-5177
www.thetaskforce.org

National Youth Advocacy Coalition
1638 R Street, NW, Suite 300
Washington, DC 20009
202-319-7596
nyac@nyacyouth.org
www.nyacyouth.org/

Outreach Program for Gender-Variant Children
and their Families
Children's National Medical Center
111 Michigan Ave NW
Washington, DC 20010
202-884-2504
pgroup@cnmc.org
www.dcchildrens.com/gendervariance

PFLAG (Parents, Families and Friends of
Lesbians and Gays)
1726 M Street, NW, Suite 400
Washington, DC 20036
202-467-8180
info@pflag.org
www.pflag.org

Religious Institute for Sexual Morality, Justice,
and Healing
304 Main Avenue, #335
Norwalk, CT 06851
203-841-1148
www.religiousinstitute.org

SIECUS (Sexuality Information and Education
Council of the United States)
130 West 42nd Street, Suite 350
New York, NY 10036-7802
212-819-9770
www.siecus.org

Soulforce, Inc.
P.O. Box 3195
Lynchburg, VA 24503-0195
info@soulforce.org
www.soulforce.org

World Professional Association for
Transgender Health
1300 South Second Street, Suite 180
Minneapolis, MN 55343
612-624-9397
wpath@wpath.org
www.wpath.org/

Welcoming and Affirming Organizations

Affirmation (Gay & Lesbian Mormons)
P.O. Box 46022
Los Angeles, CA 90046
661-367-2421
www.affirmation.org

Al-Fatiha Foundation (LGBTQI Muslims)
P.O. Box 33015
Washington, DC 20033
202-452-5534
gaymuslims@yahoo.com
www.al-fatiha.org/

Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists
P.O. Box 259257
Madison, WI 53725
608-255-2155
mail@wabaptists.org
www.wabaptists.org

Brethren Mennonite Council for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Interests
P.O. Box 6300
Minneapolis, MN 55406
612-343-2060
bmc@bmcglbt.org
www.bmcglbt.org/index.shtml

Coalition for LGBT Concerns
United Church of Christ
2592 West 14th Street
Cleveland, OH 44113
800-653-0799
office@ucccoalition.org
www.ucccoalition.org

Covenant Network of Presbyterians
2515 Fillmore St.
San Francisco, CA 94115
415-351-2196
www.covenantnetwork.org/home.htm

Dignity USA (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Catholics)
P.O. Box 15373
Washington, DC 20003-5373
800-877-8797
info@dignityusa.org
www.dignityusa.org

Evangelicals Concerned
P.O. Box 19734
Seattle, WA 98109-6734
866-979-3297
ecwr@ecwr.org
www.ecwr.org/

Jewish Mosaic: The National Center for Sexual and Gender Diversity
P.O. Box 18743
Denver, CO 80218
info@jewishmosaic.org
www.jewishmosaic.org/

Gay and Lesbian Acceptance (GALA) (Community of Christ)
P.O. Box 2173
Independence, MO 64055
GALA@GALAweb.org
www.galaweb.org

Gay Lesbian + Affirming Disciples (GLAD) Alliance (Disciples of Christ)
P.O. Box 44400
Indianapolis, IN 46244-0400
glad@gladalliance.org
www.gladalliance.org

Integrity (Episcopal Church USA)
620 Park Avenue, #311
Rochester, NY 14607-2943
800-462-9498
info@integrityusa.org
www.integrityusa.org

International Foundation for Gender Education
P.O. Box 540229
Waltham, MA 02454
781-899-2212
info@ifge.org
www.ifge.org/

Kinship International (Seventh Day Adventist)
P.O. Box 69
Tillamook, OR 97141-0069
office@sdakinship.org
www.sdakinship.org

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and
Transgender Ministries
United Church of Christ
700 Prospect Avenue
Cleveland, OH 44115
216-736-3217
schuenem@ucc.org
www.ucc.org/lgbt/

Lutherans Concerned / North America
P.O. Box 4707
St. Paul, MN 55104-0707
651-665-0861
www.lcna.org

More Light Presbyterians
4737 County Road 101, PMB #246
Minnetonka, MN 55345-2634
505-820-7082
www.mlp.org

Office of Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian, and
Transgender Concerns
Unitarian Universalist Association
25 Beacon Street
Boston, MA 02108
617-742-2100, ext. 301
obgltc@uua.org
www.uua.org

Reconciling Ministries Network
(United Methodist)
3801 N. Keeler Avenue
Chicago, IL 60641
773-736-5526
www.rmnetwork.org/index.html

Reconciling Pentecostals International
34522 N. Scottsdale Rd. D-8, Suite 238
Scottsdale, AZ 85262
480-595-6517
www.rpifellowship.com/index.html

Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan
Community Churches
P.O. Box 1374
Abilene, TX 79604
310-360-8640
info@MCCchurch.net
www.UFMCC.com

Additional Online Resources

Bodies Like Ours. Intersex information and peer support.
www.bodieslikeours.org/forums/

Gay and Lesbian Vaishnava Association. Resources for LGBT Vaishnavas and Hindus.
www.galva108.org/

Hebrew Union College - Jeff Herman Virtual Resource Center. Resources on the intersection of Judaism, sexual orientation and gender identity.
elearning.huc.edu/jhvrc/

Operation Rebirth. Resources on religion and spirituality and religion for black lesbians and gay men.
www.operationrebirth.com

Out in Scripture. Biblical commentary geared to the lives of LGBT people of faith. A project of the Human Rights Campaign.
www.hrc.org/scripture/

OutProud. Resources for queer and questioning youth hosted by the National Coalition for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Youth.
www.outproud.org/

ReligiousTolerance.org. Sexuality and gender topics from scientific and religious perspectives.
www.religioustolerance.org/chr_sex.htm

Torah Queeries. Commentary on the Torah and Jewish holidays by leading scholars, rabbis, activists and lay leaders. A joint project of Jewish Mosaic and the World Congress of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Jews.
www.jewishmosaic.org/torah/show_torah

World Congress of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Jews (Keshet Ga'avah).
www.glbtejews.org/

Questions for Group Discussion / Individual Reflection

1. What more do we need to know? What other information can we consult?
2. Are we ready to engage the welcoming and affirming process of our denomination?
3. What changes are needed in our faith community in how we address sexual orientation and gender identity? What steps can we take?
4. How can we continue to seek dialogue and consensus about sexual and gender diversity? Who needs to be involved?

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2. Edward O. Laumann, et al., *The Social Organization of Sexuality: Sexual Practices in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 287–88.
3. *Ibid.*, 303, 311.
4. “Frequently Asked Questions,” National Center for Transgender Equality (Washington, DC, 2007).
5. Answers to Your Questions About Transgender Individuals and Gender Identity, American Psychological Association (Washington, DC, 2006), <http://www.apa.org/topics/transgender.html>.
6. How common is intersex?, Intersex Society of North America, <http://www.isna.org/faq/frequency>.
7. See: Mustanski, Brian S., Meredith L. Chivers and J. Michael Bailey. A Critical Review of Recent Biological Research on Human Sexual Orientation. *Annual Review of Sex Research* (2002); Rahman, Qazi, Veena Kumari and Glenn D. Wilson. Sexual Orientation-Related Differences in Prepulse Inhibition of the Human Startle Response. *Behavioral Neuroscience* 117, no. 5 (2003):1096–1102; Rahman, Qazi. The neurodevelopment of human sexual orientation. *Neuroscience and Biobehavioral Reviews* 29 (2005).
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9. Mustanski, et al., *Annual Review of Sex Research*, 98.
10. Rahman, *Neuroscience and Biobehavioral Reviews* 29:1058. See also: Hamer, Dean and Peter Copeland. *The Science of Desire: The Search for the Gay Gene and the Biology of Behavior*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994.
11. Hamer, Dean H., et al., “A Linkage Between DNA Markers on the X Chromosome and Male Sexual Orientation,” *Science*, New Series 261, no. 5119 (July 16, 1993):321–327.
12. Brian S. Mustanski, et al., “A Genomewide Scan of Male Sexual Orientation,” *Human Genetics* 116 (2005):273, 277.
13. R. Blanchard and A. F. Bogaert, “Homosexuality in Men and Number of Older Brothers,” *American Journal of Psychiatry* 153 (1996):27–31.
14. Mustanski, et al., *Annual Review of Sex Research* 103.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Terrance J. Williams, et al., “Finger Length Ratios and Sexual Orientation,” *Nature* 404 (March 30, 2000):455–456.
17. A.F. Bogaert and R. Blanchard, “Physical Development and Sexual Orientation in Men: Height, Weight and Age of Puberty Differences,” *Personality and Individual Differences* 21 (1996):77–84.
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