



## AN OPEN LETTER TO RELIGIOUS LEADERS ON SEXUAL AND GENDER DIVERSITY

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.

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### 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 multifaith 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

*T*here 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.

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The Open Letter 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 Inc.; Ann Thompson Cook, God Loves Each One Ministry; Rev. Dr. Marvin M. Ellison, Bangor Theological Seminary; Rabbi Sue Levi Elwell, Pennsylvania Council, Union for Reform Judaism; Rev. Dr. Horace L. Griffin, The General Theological Seminary of the Episcopal Church; Rev. Debra W. Haffner, Religious Institute on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing; Dr. Mary E. Hunt, Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics and Ritual (WATER); Rev. Dr. Jay Emerson Johnson, Pacific School of Religion; 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, Wider Church Ministries, United Church of Christ; Rev. Dr. William G. Sinkford, Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations.

## RELIGIOUS SUPPORT FOR FULL INCLUSION OF LGBT PERSONS

More than 2600 religious leaders from more than 40 faith traditions have endorsed the Religious Declaration on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing, which calls in part for full inclusion of LGBT persons in the life of the faith community and society at large.



Most denominations — from the Baptists to the Mormons to Roman Catholics to mainstream Protestants — 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 [www.religioustheology.org](http://www.religioustheology.org) for an up-to-date complete list.



The following religious denominations and institutions have policies that support full inclusion of lesbian, gay, 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 ordain openly lesbian, gay and bisexual clergy members:

- Central Conference of American Rabbis \*\*
- Episcopal Church USA
- Evangelical Lutheran Church in America \*\*\*
- Jewish Reconstructionist Federation/Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association
- Presbyterian Church USA \*\*\*
- Unitarian Universalist Association \*\*
- United Church of Christ \*\*
- United Synagogue for Conservative Judaism
- Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches \*\*

Every denomination has LGBT clergy, religious educators, musicians, and congregants.

\*\* Also ordains openly transgender clergy.

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

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RELIGIOUS  
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