

What We Wish We Had Known

(The Blue Book)

Breaking the Silence, Moving Toward Understanding

Thirty years ago, acknowledging one's homosexuality in public required exceptional courage and posed extraordinary risks.¹ Gay people had reason to remain silent: they wanted to survive.

Today, many people are identifying themselves as gay. The percentage of the population that is gay has not grown, but our awareness has.

Whether we realize it or not, everyone knows people who are gay.

They may be our friends or colleagues, our employers or employees, our siblings, our neighbors, our patients, clients, customers or stockholders, our fellow parishioners, our teachers or our students, our political representatives, our aunts, uncles or cousins, our children or our grandchildren.

Until recent years, if you were growing up as a gay person, you probably would have been convinced that you were the only gay person in your particular world. Discussing your identity with a single other person would have been exceedingly difficult, and public disclosure unthinkable.

If we are heterosexual, we can try to imagine what it would be like to grow up not knowing a single other straight person. This terrible isolation and the constant, critical need to dissimulate, avoid and evade were the hallmarks of existence for gay people for most of recorded history.

Today, the interplay of new scientific information about sexual orientation, increased political advocacy, the speed and universal access to information through the Internet, personal courage and the deeply human desire to connect has allowed gay people to reach out to others and to feel less alone.

Increasingly, gay people have the support of each other and the love and support of their families and friends.

The media, the military, corporations, churches, schools, legislatures and families have begun talking about what it means to be gay.

However, in a twist on Lord Alfred Douglas's famous description of homosexuality as "the Love that dare not speak its name," some people complain that homosexuality has become "the love that won't shut up."²

Some people believe: “We never had to deal with this subject before and everything was fine.” But everything wasn’t fine. Lives were diminished or cut short by prejudice and self-hatred, and families were silently destroyed. Careers were ended. Basic human rights were denied. Alienation and estrangement abounded.

All of this continues today, but it is being openly discussed throughout the world.

Gay people are now, always have been, and always will be an integral part of our communities. The age of silence and invisibility is inexorably and undeniably passing away in our lifetime, before our very eyes. How will this affect our lives and the lives of those in our communities?

This resource book is designed primarily as a starting point to encourage thought and dialogue. It is certainly not meant to be definitive. It is meant as a step toward breaking the silence in families.

In learning more about the subject, a largely untapped resource for communities consists of gay people themselves. We hope that religious and cultural institutions will create an environment (such as the one in our own congregation) in which it is safe for gay people and those who love them to tell their stories. It is very important to put a human face on this issue. It is difficult to understand *any* great religious, civil or social struggle without a human face.

We have found that when families can deal openly with this issue, they become stronger and closer than ever before.

Our gay loved ones are very important to us, not only for who they are, but also for what they have taught us. We honor those who have survived and we remember and honor those who have not. We are inspired by their courage and never take it for granted.

History and Dedication

This manual is a gift to the congregation of The Presbyterian Church, Mt. Kisco, New York, in recognition of the love and support that our church members have given to individuals and families whose lives have been touched by the issue of homosexuality.

Most of us grew up with very limited factual information about sexual orientation. It was not a topic which was discussed in public forums or within the family. Some of us within the congregation who now realize that we have gay or lesbian loved ones struggled a great deal as a result of this lack of information and because of the myths and sensationalism associated with homosexual orientation. As a result of our concerns, we met together for mutual study and support.

When we learned that this issue had affected our lives, we had many fears and questions. Scientific fact sheets, though excellent resources, did not address our concerns about our faith. Theological discussions often ignored scientific understanding. At risk were our family relationships and our relationship with the church. Some of us were accepting and supportive of our loved ones. Others experienced pain and alienation when we related to family with fear, silence and denial. We struggled a great deal. We were well meaning, but ignorant of basic facts.

We began our study. While we looked at prejudices against gay people, we soon learned more about the nature of *all* prejudice and its subtle and overt power. We learned more about ourselves and those we love the most. Our faith deepened. Instead of feeling defensive and diminished, we felt the world opening up to us. We hope this resource guide will help others in our congregation whose welcome and support has meant so much to us.

Frequently Asked Questions

This resource is designed to address the most frequently asked questions about homosexual orientation.

Experience has taught us that not everyone is interested in the same aspects of this issue, so a “Question and Response” format is used. Most of us were concerned initially with the survival of our families. Some wanted to know more about the scientific perspective or social issues; others wanted to know exactly what the Bible said. Some of us did not quite understand why a gay person would “come out” or what sexual orientation is.

The Question and Response format allows readers to refer quickly and directly to those questions that most interest them. The subject matter is divided into sections including scientific, social, family life and theological perspectives.

These questions cover areas that we wish we had understood before our loved ones disclosed their identity. Like any organized society, families with information, openness and love can heal and be transformed. We hope that our experience and search will be useful to others and will open dialogue, reduce fear and estrangement among families and help in the healing of broken relationships.

The common perception that gay people are marginal, identifiable and rare is untrue. Our loved ones lead productive and happy lives. They work, live, love, pay taxes, have friendships, interests, contribute to the world and are honored by their families. Their lives are just as special and just as ordinary as ours.

Many of us grew up with the idea that homosexuals are a visible enemy from whom we must protect ourselves and our families. The reality is that most gay people are invisible because the world is unsafe for them and they are among the people we most love and respect.

*The Presbyterian Church
Mt. Kisco, New York*

A Note on Authorship

This resource is primarily the work of members of The Presbyterian Church of Mt. Kisco, New York. **Some passages, however, are based, to varying degrees, on other resources on the subject.** These resources are listed in the endnotes. **An endnote beginning with the phrase “Adapted from . . .” indicates that we may have borrowed the structure and/or some of the wording from the original source.** We have limited the language borrowed directly from other sources, however, in order to protect the copyrights of the original authors and publishers. Readers with concerns regarding citation or copyright issues are asked to contact us immediately at The Presbyterian Church of Mt. Kisco, P.O. Box 429, Mt. Kisco, NY, 10549.

For more information on the issues discussed in this booklet, we strongly recommend referring to the cited sources. Works by the following authors – who are cited in the endnotes – were particularly useful in the development of The Blue Book: the American Psychological Association; Bruce Bawer; Howard Bess; Keith Boykin; Ann Thompson Cook; Annette Friskopp and Sharon Silverstein; Peter Gomes; Jim Hill and Rand Cheadle; Kevin Jennings; Arthur Lipkin; Eric Marcus; Richard D. Mohr; William Pollack; B. A. Robinson; C. Ann Shepherd; Erin Swenson; Andrew Tobias; Jessica Xavier, Courtney Sharp and Mary Boenke; and Kenji Yoshino.

A Note on Terminology

The word “gay” is often used in this manual to refer to gays, lesbians, and bisexuals, even though many lesbians and most bisexuals do not use the word to describe themselves. We use the word “gay” only for the sake of consistency and simplicity; we do not mean to exclude or offend.

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Responses to Frequently Asked Questions

1. What is sexual orientation?

- *an enduring emotional, romantic, sexual or affectional attraction to individuals of a particular gender*
- *orientation may or may not be expressed in behavior*
- *refers to an individual's feelings and self-concept*

Sexual orientation basically refers to the part within each of us which determines whom we are drawn to and with whom we fall in love.

The American Psychological Association defines sexual orientation as “**an enduring emotional, romantic, sexual or affectional attraction to individuals of a particular gender.**”³ It “differ[s] from sexual behavior because it refers to feelings and self-concept.”⁴ People do not necessarily express their sexual orientation in their behavior.⁵

Most people are *heterosexual*, which means that they feel attraction to individuals of the opposite gender. Some people are *homosexual* (that is, gay), which means that they feel attraction to individuals of the same gender. *Bisexual* people feel attraction to members of either gender.

Heterosexual people normally come to recognize their sexual orientation long before they are involved in any kind of heterosexual relationship. As they mature, they understand that they enjoy the company of, develop crushes on and are drawn to others of the opposite gender.

We know that heterosexuals are not attracted to *every single person* of the opposite sex, but only to particular people. We also know that being heterosexual is not something one *does* in the privacy of one's own home. It is something one *is* all day, every day.

These same concepts are true for homosexual orientation. Gay people realize they are gay as they mature, they are only attracted to particular people, and they are gay whether or not they are in a relationship. As with heterosexuals, attractions are not just sexual, but emotional, affectional and romantic.

2. *What causes homosexuality?*

- *studies suggest a biological component*
- *orientation is established early in the life cycle*
- *orientation is discovered rather than chosen*
- *homosexual orientation is not a developmental flaw*
- *homosexual orientation is not caused by parents or family*
- *in males, homosexuality is associated with being later born*
- *gay people are entitled to respect and inclusion regardless of why they are gay*

Though scientists do not yet fully understand how one's sexual orientation develops, a large body of research suggests that sexual orientation is in place "very early in the life cycle, possibly even before birth."⁶ Studies suggest that sexual orientation has a biological and genetic component, and may also be influenced by prenatal factors, such as endocrinological levels in the womb.⁷ The extensive research on the roots of sexual orientation includes studies of brain anatomy, animal studies, finger print studies, hormonal (androgen) studies, cochlea studies, DNA studies, and studies of twins, siblings, and extended family.⁸

Like heterosexuals, gays and lesbians do not choose their orientation, but rather discover it in the process of maturing.

Acceptance of gay people and information about homosexuality do not cause heterosexuals to become gay. Oppression of and discrimination against gay people do not cause them to become heterosexuals.

Previously held theories that homosexuality is a developmental flaw or is caused by poor parenting have been discarded by the scientific community. (The most famous of these theories was the belief that homosexuality was caused by a dominant mother and a weak or absent father.) The psychoanalytic community was the group which originally formulated these theories. The American Psychoanalytic Association has now extended a public apology for the pain caused to gay people by its previously held views and has banned discrimination against gay people within its own organization.⁹

While homosexuality can occur in any family, there is an intriguing association with birth order. Research has suggested that homosexuality among males is associated with being later born.

According to this research, each previously born brother raises the possibility of a man's being gay. (Previously born brothers are not necessarily older brothers, because studies have also counted brothers who died before study participants were born.) Having elder sisters does not correlate to an increased probability of homosexuality, nor does having younger brothers. The crucial factor seems to be the number of completed male pregnancies of the mother. One researcher explained that the "results support a prenatal origin to sexual orientation."¹⁰

Investigation of the effects of neurobiology, endocrinology and genetics on the development of sexual orientation is ongoing.

While a deeper understanding of the biological roots of sexual orientation may encourage social acceptance of gay and lesbian people, many human rights advocates have noted that arguments focusing too heavily on the cause of homosexuality obscure a more important point; namely, that gay and lesbian people are entitled to inclusion and respect regardless of why they are gay.¹¹

3. *What type of person has a homosexual orientation?*

- *all types of people*

Any and every type of person can be gay. As the American Psychological Association notes, gay people “are of all ages, cultural backgrounds, races, religions, and nationalities.”¹² They grow up in all types of homes with all types of families. They come from all socioeconomic backgrounds and work in every type of occupation. According to the 2000 United States Census, gay and lesbian couples live in 99.3% of all counties in the nation.¹³

By citing unbalanced marketing surveys rather than controlled scientific studies, antigay groups sometimes claim that gays and lesbians are disproportionately wealthy. These claims are inaccurate. Gay people do not earn more income than heterosexuals, and some studies suggest they earn less.¹⁴

Gay people have existed throughout history. Numerous scholarly works discussing homosexuality during various historical periods – from Ancient Greece to the Middle Ages to the modern gay rights movement – are available from the New York Public Library, www.nypl.org.

4. *Is sexual orientation a choice?*

- *no*
- *it is not the result of a decision or ongoing daily effort*

No. Professional mental health organizations, including the American Psychological Association, have issued statements explaining that sexual orientation is not a choice and cannot be changed.¹⁵ (See also Question #6.) Most people discover (rather than choose) their sexual orientation before or during early adolescence, and before any sexual experience. Many people who realize they are gay attempt unsuccessfully to suppress or change their sexual orientation.¹⁶

Most heterosexuals recognize that their own sexual orientation is not the result of a decision or an ongoing daily effort. The same is true for gay people.

Heterosexuals recognize that their own sexual orientation is a core part of who they are. They know that they are heterosexual even if they are not involved in a relationship. They are

heterosexual if they are virgins, if they choose to be celibate, if they are incapacitated, if their spouse is incapacitated, or if they lose their partners. Their heterosexual orientation does not go away. Heterosexual orientation is not defined by what you do; it makes up a part of who you are. This same concept is true for homosexual orientation.

5. *Is homosexuality a mental illness or emotional problem?*

- *no*
- *the label of “mental disorder” was removed by the American Psychiatric Association in 1973*
- *the American Psychological Association and the World Health Organization agree that homosexuality is not a disorder*
- *rejection by family and society can be stressful*

No. Prominent medical and mental health associations have long rejected the idea that homosexuality is an illness, disorder or mental problem.

The **American Psychological Association** states: “Over 35 years of objective, well-designed scientific research has shown that homosexuality, in and of itself, is not associated with mental disorders or emotional or social problems.”¹⁷ The Association explains that homosexuality “is simply the way a minority of our population expresses human love and sexuality.”¹⁸

The **American Psychiatric Association** removed homosexuality from its official list of mental disorders in 1973. The Association states that “homosexuality per se implies no impairment in judgement, stability, reliability, or general social or vocational capabilities.”¹⁹

Both the **American Psychiatric Association** and the **American Psychological Association** call on “all mental health professionals to help dispel the stigma of mental illness that some people still associate with homosexual orientation.”²⁰ The **World Health Organization** has also removed homosexuality from its list of disorders.

According to the **American Psychological Association**, medical professionals previously considered homosexuality to be a disorder because early research on homosexuality focused primarily on gay people who were in therapy, as well as gay people who were incarcerated. When experts began to analyze information about gays and lesbians more generally – including information about gay people who were not undergoing treatment for mental health problems and who were not incarcerated – they found no basis for the previously held view that homosexuality was an illness or disorder.²¹

There is no difference between the mental health of heterosexuals and the mental health of homosexuals *based on sexual orientation itself*. **As numerous mental health organizations have explained, however, the isolation, discrimination and social stigma faced by many gay people can cause substantial emotional stress.**²² Rejection by one’s family, friends and faith community can be devastating.²³

The **American Psychological Association**, The **American Psychiatric Association**, and The **National Association of Social Workers** have explained that “[a]lthough homosexuality is not a mental disorder, . . . societal prejudice against gay men and lesbians can cause them real and substantial psychological harm. . . . [R]ejection, discrimination, and violence [are] associated with heightened psychological distress These problems are exacerbated by the fact that, because of anti-gay stigma, gay men and lesbians have less access to social support and other resources that assist heterosexuals in coping with stress.”²⁴

The **American Academy of Pediatrics** states that psychological and social problems among gay youth result primarily from “societal stigma, hostility, hatred and isolation.”²⁵ The **American Medical Association** similarly has concluded that “[m]ost of the emotional disturbance experienced by gay men and lesbians around their sexual identity is not based on physiological causes but rather is due more to a sense of alienation in an unaccepting environment.”²⁶

6. *Can homosexuality be cured?*

- *there is no disorder; therefore it cannot be “cured”*
- *professional, scientific and medical organizations condemn “reparative” or “conversion” therapy as ineffective and psychologically harmful*

Since homosexuality is not a disease or disorder, it cannot be “cured.”

Therapy aimed at changing sexual orientation is referred to as reparative, conversion or aversion therapy.

The **American Psychiatric Association** states that “[t]here is no published scientific evidence supporting the efficacy of *reparative therapy* . . . to change sexual orientation,” and that there is “no evidence that *any* treatment can change a homosexual person’s deep seated feelings for others of the same sex.”²⁷

Those who seek conversion therapy, the Association explains, may do so because they have internalized antigay social biases.²⁸ **Gay people “who have accepted their sexual orientation positively are better adjusted than those who have not done so.”**²⁹

A position statement unanimously approved by the Association’s Board of Trustees further warns that so-called “reparative therapy” may cause “depression, anxiety and self-destructive behavior, since therapist alignment with societal prejudices against homosexuality may reinforce self-hatred already experienced by the patient.”³⁰

The **American Psychological Association** concurs that there is no scientific evidence to support the effectiveness of any therapies that attempt to convert homosexuals to

heterosexuals. The Association has issued various statements condemning “conversion” and “reparative” therapy:

“Groups who try to change the orientation of people through so-called ‘conversion therapy’ are misguided and run the risk of causing a great deal of psychological harm to those they say they are trying to help.”³¹

“The incidence of homosexuality in a population does not appear to change with new moral codes or social mores. Research findings suggest that efforts [to change] homosexuals are nothing more than social prejudice garbed in psychological accoutrements.”³²

“[Homosexuality] does not require treatment and is not changeable.”³³

The **American Academy of Pediatrics** similarly condemns therapy aimed at changing sexual orientation, noting that such treatment “can provoke guilt and anxiety while having little or no potential for achieving changes in orientation.”³⁴

The **American Medical Association** states: “[A]version therapy . . . is no longer recommended for gay men and lesbians. Through psychotherapy, gay men and lesbians can become comfortable with their sexual orientation and understand the societal response to it.”³⁵

The **American Counseling Association**, the **American School Health Association**, the **National Association of School Psychologists**, and the **National Association of Social Workers** have also condemned therapy aimed at changing sexual orientation.³⁶

7. What attempts have been made in the past to change gay people into heterosexuals?

- *historically, a wide variety of attempts have been made to change sexual orientation*
- *“conversion” therapy is condemned by scientists as ineffective and potentially harmful*
- *individuals may become hopeless and despondent when attempts to change their orientation fail*

Besides confining gay people to mental wards and prisons, many “therapeutic” attempts have been made to change gay people into heterosexuals. These attempts include electroshock, hormone therapy, surgery, cauterizations, acupuncture, rest, marriage, psychotherapy, hypnotherapy, behavior therapy, encounters with prostitutes, bicycling, psychoanalysis, primal screaming, lobotomy, and “chemically induced convulsive therapy.”³⁷

Currently, “conversion” therapies are offered by fundamentalist Christian groups who claim to change people by means of prayer. The most famous of these groups is Exodus International. This group was co-founded by two gay men who later fell in love with each other, became a couple and repudiated the organization’s approach.³⁸ In June 2007, three

former leaders of the organization apologized for the “isolation, shame, fear and loss of faith” that the ministry’s message has caused.³⁹

In April 2001, Jeremy Marks, the founder of Courage, a group in England previously dedicated to changing gay people into heterosexuals through prayer, renounced the mission, stating that after fourteen years he had not been able to change a single person. “None we’ve counseled have changed no matter how much effort and prayer they put in.”⁴⁰

“Reparative therapy,” Marks says, “sets [gay] people up for failure from the outset because it teaches them to see themselves as deviant and as a menace to society. It sets up a huge amount of self-hatred.”⁴¹

When individuals in “conversion” therapy sense no change in orientation, they may feel that God has abandoned them. They may blame themselves; they believe they simply can’t pray “hard enough” or that God has turned against them. This may create a potentially dangerous circumstance in which the individual feels worthless and hopeless.

The moving book *Prayers for Bobby* is a mother’s true account of her struggle and that of her son Bobby when the family learned that Bobby was gay. Mary Griffith and the family were Presbyterian and deeply religious. Mary encouraged Bobby to ask God to change him into a heterosexual. Bobby prayed and tried very hard, wanting to change and feeling intensely the pain his family was experiencing about his being gay. Sensing no change in his orientation, he came to hate himself.⁴²

The young man wrote in his diary about his feelings of worthlessness: “I’ve heard [my family members] lots of times talking about gay people. They’ve said they hate gays, and even God hates gays, too. Gays are bad, and God sends bad people to hell. It really scares me when they talk that way because now they are talking about me.”⁴³

Bobby wrote this passage when he was sixteen. He continued his struggle for four more years, becoming increasingly desperate. A few days after he turned twenty, Bobby threw himself from a highway overpass into the path of an oncoming truck and was killed instantly.

As discussed in Question 6, the scientific community condemns attempts to change orientation as ineffective and potentially harmful.

8. *How many gay people are there?*

- ***oppression and discrimination make exact numbers difficult to determine***
- ***a significant minority of the population is gay***

It is difficult to determine what percentage of the population is homosexual, primarily because so many gay people fear identifying themselves publicly. Some studies suggest that the number is about ten percent. Organizations opposed to gay rights often claim that the number is much lower.⁴⁴

An often-cited study by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago states that “the best way to discuss homosexuality is to report several numbers.”⁴⁵ The authors present three ways to define homosexuality: by desire, by behavior, and by self-identification. When all three of these measures are considered in determining homosexuality, 10.1% of men and 8.6% of women are found to be gay or lesbian. The survey participants were guaranteed anonymity.⁴⁶

The Battelle Institute study, often cited by those who wish to diminish civil rights protections for gays and lesbians, states that only 1% of surveyed males in their 20s and 30s are exclusively homosexual in behavior. The authors did not study desire or self-identification. Most importantly, this study did not provide for anonymity. The participants were required to name their place of employment, give references, and provide their social security number. (!!) It is unlikely that many gay individuals would feel safe enough to participate in such a study. The study also fails to address the fact that most gay people, especially in their youth, date the opposite sex, in an effort to convince others (and perhaps themselves) that they are heterosexual.⁴⁷

Political polling also provides clues regarding the percentage of the population that is gay – or at least regarding the percentage of the population that is willing to self-identify as gay when approached by pollsters and news organizations. The Voter News Service and CNN have found that between four and five percent of voters in the last three presidential elections self-identified as gay, lesbian or bisexual.⁴⁸

9. Does the number of gay individuals matter?

- ***most of us know gay people whether we realize they are gay or not***
- ***in America, equality does not depend on the numbers of citizens in a group***

Gay people are largely an invisible minority. The debate over how many people are gay will likely continue until the stigma attached to homosexuality disappears and gay people feel safe at work, at school and on the street. It is safe to conclude, however, that virtually all of us regularly interact with gay and lesbian people, whether we realize it or not.⁴⁹

It is important to remember that the right to be treated fairly does not depend (at least in America) on a head count.⁵⁰ Those who insist that the size of a minority group determines the amount of protection they may receive under the law do not fully understand the principles on which our country was founded.

10. *Are humans the only animals that engage in homosexual behavior?*

- *no*
- *homosexuality has been scientifically documented in more than 450 species of animals*

Scientists have documented homosexual behavior in over 450 species, including dolphins, whales, deer, buffalo, sheep, giraffes, antelopes, geese, ducks, sandpipers, chimpanzees, zebras, elephants, koalas, swallows, warblers, lions, penguins, and monarch butterflies.⁵¹ Yet, as author Eric Marcus humorously points out, no one has suggested that homosexuality among animals results from “a passive father and a domineering mother.”⁵²

Dr. Bruce Bagemihl, a biologist and researcher, provides a comprehensive analysis of scientific evidence of animal homosexuality in his widely acclaimed book, *Biological Exuberance: Animal Homosexuality and Natural Diversity*.⁵³ The “full range of homosexual activity in the animal world,” Bagemihl explains, includes same-sex “courtship, affection, sex, pair-bonding, and parenting.”⁵⁴ Lifelong homosexual bonding has even been observed in species that do not demonstrate lifelong heterosexual bonding.⁵⁵ The Kirkus Review describes Dr. Bagemihl’s work as “[a] scholarly, exhaustive, and utterly convincing refutation of the notion that human homosexuality is an aberration in nature.”⁵⁶

Dr. Bagemihl also reports that, historically, there has been widespread discomfort among scientists with respect to their observations of animal homosexuality. He quotes primatologist Linda Wolfe: “[Several primatologists] who have told me that they have observed male and female homosexuality . . . [have been] reluctant to publish their data . . . either because they feared homophobic reactions (‘my colleagues might think that I am gay’) or because they lacked a framework for analysis (‘I don’t know what it means’).”⁵⁷ Primatologist Paul L. Vasey notes that even though homosexuality among primates was first documented over 75 years ago, “virtually every major introductory text in primatology fails to even mention its existence.”⁵⁸

Because scientific literature has so rarely included accurate and objective information on animal homosexuality, Bagemihl explains, “many zoologists are themselves unaware of the full extent of the phenomenon.”⁵⁹

Sometimes those opposed to equal rights for gay people insist, inaccurately, that humans are the only animals that engage in same-sex behavior. (Although exactly what the existence or non-existence of “lesbian seagulls” would have to do with insuring equal rights for mankind is unclear.)⁶⁰

11. Why are there different sexual orientations?

- ***difference is a defining characteristic of creation***
- ***to assume that difference is a negative rather than a positive is limiting***
- ***our understanding of difference will have great legal and religious implications in the future as society develops the capacity to change and control genetic make-up.***

Why there are different sexual orientations is not fully understood.

Difference is a defining characteristic of creation, part of the basic design of life.

Every single person who has ever lived is unique in his or her DNA makeup. We are unique within our very cells, in who we are and in what we can contribute.

Sexual orientation is just one area where differences occur. Most people are straight and some people are gay.

Various evolutionary theories have been proposed to explain homosexuality, including theories based on “kin selection” and alliance formation. As Nicholas D. Kristof of the New York Times explains, some scientists believe that many different genes are “loosely linked to homosexuality.”⁶¹ When these genes come together in one person, “perhaps in conjunction with other factors, like unusual androgen levels in the womb,” they may cause the person to be gay.⁶² Ordinarily, however, “only one or two of these gene variants are present,” in which case they produce not gays but heterosexuals “who are relatively sensitive, conciliatory and empathetic – qualities that help them find a mate.”⁶³ Thus, heterosexual people carrying genes associated with homosexuality would be likely to reproduce.⁶⁴

It is very important to counter the negativity and extreme rhetoric that is characteristic of today’s political climate – a climate in which gay people are publicly referred to as “unnatural,” “biological errors” and “genetic defectives.”

Some of the most gifted people in the world were known to be gay. For example, in recent times and to name only a few: James Baldwin, Hans Christian Anderson, Cole Porter, E.M. Forster, Aaron Copland, Henry James, Gertrude Stein, Bessie Smith, Somerset Maugham, Marcel Proust, Peter Tchaikovsky, Langston Hughes and Walt Whitman all enriched the world with their voices.⁶⁵

This is not to say that all gay people are creative or fit a certain mold, or that one must be gifted to be valuable. But to assume that difference is a negative rather than a positive is limiting.

Our understanding and appreciation of difference has great ethical, legal, social and religious implications. It will become even more important in the future, when we live in a world of “genetic surgery” and may be able to tell, during pregnancy, which babies will have traits that will make them different from the majority.

We do not always know why differences exist, but we know that they are an essential and vital part of humanity and of creation.

12. What does “transgender” mean?*

- *gender identity is an internal sense of being male or female*
- *gender expression describes how a person communicates gender through personal appearance, mannerisms, etc.*
- *transgender persons are those whose gender identity and/or expression differs from conventional expectations for their physical sex*
- *many scientists believe that gender identity is rooted in complex, biological factors*
- *see also Question #13 and Question #43*

Everyone has a *gender identity*. Gender identity is a person’s internal sense of being male or female.⁶⁶ Most people identify either as a man or a woman; a boy or a girl.⁶⁷

Gender expression is the term used to describe how people communicate and express their gender through physical appearance (clothes, hairstyle, etc.), mannerisms, and public self-identification.⁶⁸ A related term we may also hear is “gender-variant,” that is, all those people who transgress conventional gender norms in this expression.

The term *transgender* is an umbrella term used to describe people whose gender identity or gender expression does not conform to conventional expectations for their physical sex.⁶⁹ The term may refer to “several distinct but related groups of people who use a variety of other terms to self-identify.”⁷⁰ In fact, some people who fall under the common definition of “transgender” may not actually self-identify as transgender.

Transsexuals are “individuals who have a gender identity (the sense of being a man or a woman) different from their anatomical sex.”⁷¹ They may or may not have undergone medical treatment and a transition so that their appearances and bodies match their internal gender identity. In instances of transition, there are important and comprehensive ethical guidelines and careful medical standards for treatment.⁷² Some people who complete a physical sex transition no longer consider themselves transsexual or transgender.

Crossdressers (or the archaic *transvestites*) are individuals who maintain a gender identity consonant with their anatomical sex, but who occasionally enjoy, for a variety of reasons, the “opposite” gender expression.⁷³ Unlike transsexuals, crossdressers do not ordinarily wish to change their physical sex or permanently alter their everyday gender expression. Although people of all genders and sexual orientations may crossdress, most crossdressers are heterosexual men, many of whom are married with children. Most keep their transgender status a secret.⁷⁴

* Much of the discussion of transgender issues in Questions 12, 13 and 43 is quoted or adapted from the following useful resources: *Transgenderism: The Basics*, Connecticut Outreach Society; Ann Thompson Cook, *Made in God’s Image* (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton United Methodist Church, 2003); Dr. Pauline Park, Dignity for All Students Coalition Steering Committee, *Gender Identity & Expression in the Dignity for All Students Act*; Reverend Dr. Erin Swenson, *More Light on Transgender*, More Light Presbyterians; and Jessica Xavier, Courtney Sharp & Mary Boenke, *Our Trans Children*, Third Edition, Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians And Gays, 2001. We recommend consulting the original sources for additional information on gender identity issues.

Intersexed (hermaphroditic) individuals are those “born with chromosomal anomalies or ambiguous genitalia.”⁷⁵ Often, well-meaning surgeons and parents encountering this situation attempt to choose a sex for the baby and make a “correction” in infancy. Some of these procedures have had an unfortunate result, leaving the individuals unfulfilled in their personal life or feeling that an essential part of themselves has been taken away without their consent.⁷⁶

It is important to note that many intersex individuals do not identify themselves as transgender, which is why intersex may be viewed as a topic different from transgender, rather than just a category of trans expression.⁷⁷

Other people (straight or gay) may express themselves, to varying degrees, outside of the stereotypical, cultural norms for their biological sex. These *gender-variant individuals* (male or female) may consider themselves transgender or they may not.

Gender-variant individuals, whether or not they self-identify as transgender, are often subject to ridicule, discrimination, harassment and violence, often by the same people who target gays and lesbians for mistreatment. Men are especially subject to scorn if they do not conform to gender norms. Much employment discrimination against gay and lesbian people is really discrimination on the basis of gender variant expression, such as placing a picture of a same-sex partner on a desk or not wearing makeup or skirts like other women.⁷⁸

Cultural stereotypes do tend to change over time, however. What is “variant” at one time may later become the norm. The reverse may also occur. For example, throughout most of modern history, it was considered inappropriate for women to wear slacks or pants in public. And certainly, men in the eighteenth century who wore powdered wigs, heels, and bright, velvet clothing would be considered quite unusual were they to appear on Main Street today.⁷⁹

Being transgender does not mean one is mentally ill, and transgender citizens fill a variety of roles within our communities.⁸⁰ Transgender people have formed “part of every culture and society in recorded human history.”⁸¹

Gender identity likely has biological and genetic roots. In October 2003, researchers at UCLA reported finding genes that “may help determine sexuality in the early days of prenatal life, weeks before hormones begin to ‘kick in.’”⁸² At six weeks, hormones force the development in the fetus of the male or female sexual anatomy. “In some cases, the genes may go one way – affecting the development of the brain – while the hormones head in the opposite direction.”⁸³ The fact that the brain and the hormones can act at “cross-purposes” could help explain why transgender people experience a gender identity that is at odds with their anatomical sex.⁸⁴

In summary, *transgender* is a broad term used to refer to a diverse group of individuals who do not conform to current, conventional gender norms.⁸⁵

See also Questions #13 and #43.

13. Are transgender people gay?*

- ***transgender people may be straight, gay, bisexual or asexual***
- ***many people automatically (and incorrectly) assume that transgender people are gay***
- ***there is a difference between gender identity and sexual orientation***
- ***see also Question #12 and Question #43***

Sexual orientation varies among transgender people just as it varies among the population as a whole.⁸⁶

*Many transgender people, including transsexuals and gender variant individuals, are heterosexual.*⁸⁷ Transgender people may also be gay, lesbian, bisexual or asexual.⁸⁸

Many people assume that transgender people are gay. Because transgender persons are so often ostracized by the straight community, they sometimes (but not always) find more acceptance with gay people. That does not mean that they are gay.⁸⁹

People will also sometimes assume that a transgender person is gay because of that person's appearance, which may be that of a "feminine" man or a "masculine" woman.⁹⁰

It is important to understand that gender identity is not the same as sexual orientation. These are different concepts.

Gender identity is a person's internal sense of being male or female. *Sexual orientation* refers to "an enduring emotional, romantic, sexual or affectional attraction to individuals of a particular gender."⁹¹

The difference is between "who I am" (*gender identity*) and "whom I am attracted to" (*sexual orientation*).⁹²

Many transgender people also initially confuse their feelings regarding their gender with their feelings regarding their sexual orientation. It can take a long time for some transgender people to recognize and acknowledge their gender identity.⁹³

* See Footnote: Question #12: What does "transgender" mean?

14. What is the “gay lifestyle”?

- *gay people are a diverse group*
- *the lives of gay people are as varied as the lives of heterosexuals*
- *condemnation of a “lifestyle” sounds better than condemnation of loving, committed relationships or condemnation of equal opportunity*

As author C. Ann Shepherd writes, “[j]ust as there is no such thing as a single *heterosexual lifestyle*, there is no such thing as a single *gay lifestyle*.”⁹⁴

The rich diversity of interests, occupations, affiliations, activities, and family relationships that exists among heterosexuals exists as well among gays and lesbians. Some gay people choose to marry or form other kinds of long-term committed relationships, while others remain single. Some have children, some do not.⁹⁵

Some antigay activists use the terms *gay lifestyle* or *homosexual lifestyle* to suggest that all gay people are similar and that the lives of gays and lesbians are fundamentally different from those of heterosexuals. The term *gay lifestyle* is also often used to suggest that gay people’s lives are defined primarily by sex and sexuality, or to suggest that gay people are promiscuous. Gay people are just as offended by these offensive stereotypes as heterosexuals would be. Promiscuity is not the result of any particular sexual orientation, but is rather a reflection of individual desires, beliefs, values, and personal standards.⁹⁶

The term *gay lifestyle* is a common phrase and many people who use the phrase certainly do not mean it in a manipulative, disrespectful or hurtful way.

However, some antigay organizations *do* use the term consciously to make discrimination seem socially acceptable. They hold the view that gay people are human beings unworthy of experiencing the love of a partner and believe that “the pursuit of happiness” should be limited to heterosexual people only. Some (not all!) are unwilling to state these positions so bluntly. In this case, disapproving of a *lifestyle* certainly sounds better than disapproving of love or equal opportunity.⁹⁷

15. Are gay and lesbian people more likely to molest children than heterosexuals are?

- *no*
- *historically, other minorities have also been slandered as sexual predators*

Absolutely not.

The notion that gay men are more likely than heterosexual men to sexually molest children is, in the words of the American Psychological Association, a “myth.” The Association explains

that “[t]here is *no* evidence” to support the “mistaken belief that gay men have more of a tendency than heterosexual men to sexually molest children.”⁹⁸

Studies of child abuse and molestation consistently refute the notion that gays and lesbians pose a risk to children. The *Journal of Psychology and Human Sexuality*, for example, published a study in 2000 concluding that “a gay man is no more likely than a straight man to perpetrate sexual activity with children,” and that “cases of perpetration of sexual behavior with a pre-pubescent child by an adult lesbian are virtually nonexistent.”⁹⁹ A study published in the journal *Pediatrics* found that a child’s risk of being molested by the *heterosexual* partner of a family member “is over 100 times greater” than the risk of being molested “by someone who might be identifiable as being homosexual, lesbian, or bisexual.”¹⁰⁰ In a study published in the *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, none of the 175 convicted male child molesters examined were found to be homosexual.¹⁰¹

Historically, portraying minorities as predatory has been used as a technique to demonize those who are different and to characterize them as immoral and dangerous. Jews were once accused of using Christian children in secret religious rituals. Racists portrayed black people as lacking in sexual self-control and black men as sexual predators who were a threat to white women. This was an often-cited argument in favor of segregation.

The belief that gay people molest children is one of the ugliest myths about homosexuality.

16. What is the “closet”? What is meant by “coming out”?

- *the closet is a metaphor used to describe how some gay people keep the truth about their sexual orientation hidden or shut away from the world*
- *the closet is oppressive and confining, yet it seems safe*
- *the main reason for staying in the closet is survival*
- *friends and loved ones of gay people are also in a type of closet*

The closet is a metaphor used to describe how some gay people keep the truth about their sexual orientation hidden or shut away from the world.¹⁰² “To be in the closet” is to hide or deny one’s sexual orientation. A person may be closeted completely, or may “come out” to some people and remain “in the closet” with others.

People may deny their orientation even to themselves. The process of recognizing and accepting one’s own homosexuality or bisexuality is sometimes referred to as “coming out to oneself.” However, coming out of the closet almost always refers to making one’s sexual orientation known to others.

Andrew Tobias, author, financier, journalist, and current Treasurer of the Democratic National Committee, grew up in Bedford and came out when he was 23. He describes his experience:

“[Coming out] had only taken me a dozen years from the time I realized – instinctively, at age 10 or so – that that *word* my father and his friend were using with such distaste as they walked through the TV room applied to *me*. . . . I wasn’t stupid, so I never told anyone about this. But it was the very essence of who I was. There wasn’t a moment growing up that I wasn’t consciously compensating for it. It was as if I had been a secret agent in a foreign country. Everything I said, every glance . . . it all had to pass through the censor.”¹⁰³

Living in the closet seems safe, but it can also be tiresome, frightening, confining and infuriating.¹⁰⁴

When a gay person who lives in the closet confides his or her identity to a single other person, that person enters a type of closet as well. Even in the face of antigay remarks, friends and family members may remain silent. (Otherwise, people might wonder: “What’s it to you? Why do you care so much?”) Often, they do not feel free to fully express themselves.

There is a saying: “*When children come out of the closet, the parents go in.*” When a child or loved one is out very selectively, friends and relatives may be fearful of unintentionally outing the person completely. They also may fear that they themselves will be subject to antigay criticism, discrimination and harassment. They often remain silent.

What does the parent of a gay person look like? What does the brother, sister, or grandparent of a gay person look like? It is impossible to say. What is important is to remember that not only are most gay people invisible, but so are their loved ones.

Gay people often come out first, not to their families, but to another gay person. Unlike other minorities, most gay people, as they grow up, do not have others to talk to about their feelings and their inner life. Talking to someone else who can relate to them about their identity can be an important first step. It is a safe environment. It is helpful to know that one is not totally alone.

17. Since heterosexuals don’t discuss their sexuality, why do gay people need to discuss theirs?

- *expression of heterosexuality is an integral and basic part of our everyday lives*
- *our words and actions over time let everyone know we are heterosexual*
- *what is seen as “flaunting” by gay people is “everyday” behavior for straight people*
- *it is difficult to go through life monitoring every thing you do or say*

Author Bruce Bawer: “In a twist on the famous line in which Lord Alfred Douglas described homosexuality as ‘the Love that dare not speak its name,’ some have complained in recent years that homosexuality has turned into ‘the love that won’t shut up.’”¹⁰⁵

As Bawer and many others have noted, however, “‘the public expression of heterosexuality is such an integral and basic part of our everyday lives that it goes unrecognized.’”¹⁰⁶

Heterosexuals express their sexual orientation when they mention (or introduce) their boyfriend, girlfriend, husband or wife to another person; when they place a family picture on their desk at work; when they give their significant other a kiss goodbye at the airport; when they talk about a celebrity whom they find attractive; when they tell others they are celebrating a wedding anniversary; and when they hold hands on the street.¹⁰⁷ As Eric Marcus writes, “[t]hey have no need to let people know in a specific way what their sexual orientation is, because their actions and words over time let everyone know they’re heterosexual.”¹⁰⁸

Gay people who do precisely the same things, however, are often accused of “flaunting their sexuality” or of “throwing their private lives in other people’s faces.” They are viewed as “radical” or “militant homosexuals” attempting to make a political statement. They may be scorned, harassed or attacked.¹⁰⁹

As C. Ann Shepherd observes, “most gay people are not out to make a statement. They simply want to be able to incorporate the many aspects of their lives the way heterosexuals are permitted to do.”¹¹⁰

Keeping one’s sexual orientation secret can be difficult and exhausting. When closeted individuals are asked innocent questions about their family, home, social life or weekend plans, they often cannot give spontaneous or straightforward answers. They must be on constant guard, monitoring every word they say.¹¹¹

The **American Psychological Association**, the **American Psychiatric Association**, and the **National Association of Social Workers** have explained that attempts to avoid “social stigma” by concealing one’s sexual orientation “can be seriously damaging to the psychological well-being of gay people. . . . Being able to disclose one’s sexual orientation to others . . . increases the availability of social support, which is crucial to mental health.”¹¹²

18. Why do some gay people come out?

- *people want to be honest and comfortable with those they love and trust*
- *coming out is a recent phenomenon*
- *coming out is intensely personal and unique to the individual*
- *the average age of coming out has dropped dramatically*
- *an individual must first come out to themselves; this may take many years*
- *some people come out selectively, quietly, to only a few people important to them*
- *coming out is an ongoing process, for the individual and for their loved ones*

People normally come out because they do not want to hide who they are or whom they love. They want to be honest with other people, particularly those they care about and trust.

Coming out is a relatively recent phenomenon. Before the modern gay rights movement, acknowledging one’s homosexuality in public was dangerous and extremely uncommon.

Coming out is a *very* individual experience. Every coming out is unique.

Hiding one's identity over a lifetime can be exhausting and frightening. It can be personally destructive to have to pretend each day that you are someone else. It is difficult to be close to people if they don't know who you are. The need to evade and avoid important issues takes a heavy toll; always watching what you say is draining.

Some people come out when they can no longer bear the isolation and fear connected with living in the closet; some people just slowly develop a need to be themselves, no matter what; some people decide to come out when they fall in love; some choose to confide in a few trusted people because they need *someone* to know who they are and how they feel.

The average age at which gay people come out has dropped dramatically over the last decade. Today, it is not uncommon for teenagers to recognize their homosexuality.¹¹³ Some people know for years that they are gay before confiding this to a single other person.

Coming out first requires coming out to one's self – a process which may take many years. Some gay people are not thrilled when they realize they are gay, especially if they are raised in an environment in which antigay attitudes are common and antigay remarks are acceptable or go unchallenged. It may take many, many years for them to accept and love themselves and to be willing to reveal their identity to even the most trusted people in their lives.

Coming out does not mean making a public announcement (although this also occurs occasionally). It may mean telling just one other person, such as an understanding sibling or a close friend. Some gay people are selective in disclosing their identity.

Many people wait until they feel a degree of emotional and financial security. Some service providers for runaway and homeless youth estimate that up to 40% of their clients are gay kids.¹¹⁴ These are children who have either been kicked out of the house by their families or have run away because they feel unloved, angry or hurt.

Another terrible scenario, of course, is being “outed” by another person against one's will. It can be one of the most devastating experiences for a gay person.

For gay and lesbian people who choose to live out of the closet, coming out is an ongoing process. As Eric Marcus writes, “coming out is not something you do just once There are all kinds of chance encounters and conversations that force gay people to decide whether or not to answer honestly.”¹¹⁵ Law professor Kenji Yoshino expresses a similar thought in his 2006 book *Covering*: “When I came out, I exulted that I could stop thinking about my orientation. That celebration proved premature. It was impossible to come out and be done with it, as each new person erected a new closet around me.”¹¹⁶

Many gay people who do choose to disclose their identity to someone else feel that coming out was the most empowering and deeply rewarding experience of their lives, but it can be *very* difficult, requiring patience, tolerance, emotional stamina, spiritual strength and tremendous resilience. Coming out can be an act of courage and an act of love.

19. Why do some gay people prefer not to come out?

- *to protect themselves*
- *to protect those who depend upon them*
- *to avoid prejudice and hurt*
- *an individual may not be completely “in” or completely “out”*
- *openness about identity is a luxury reserved, by and large, for heterosexual people*

People remain closeted for a wide variety of reasons. Often, the decision to stay in the closet is the result of a realistic appraisal of the unrelenting and institutionalized prejudice that gay people face on a daily basis.

Gay people and their families may be in the closet because they want to protect themselves from prejudice and discrimination, or because they want to protect those who depend on their ability to earn a livelihood.

There is a widely held and inaccurate belief that one is either “in” or “out.” In reality, a gay person may be “out” to only a few people. Being cautious in discussing one’s sexual orientation is understandable. Many gay people (as well as straight people) are selective when sharing information that could expose them to mistreatment. There is nothing sinister about this secrecy.

Unfortunately, in our present American culture, openness about one’s identity is a luxury reserved, by and large, for heterosexual people.

Coming out is not a contest. The number of people to whom a gay person may or may not be out is not a measure of bravery or character. Nor should a straight person ever feel diminished because a friend or loved one did not say to them the exact words: “I want you to know that I am gay.” Coming out is a delicate, complex issue. Sometimes gay people recognize that others already know, respect and comprehend their situation and so feel it is not necessary to say the words.

It is important to honor all those who have had the courage to survive, to overcome tremendous obstacles, and to do creative, productive work, regardless of the number of people they might choose to tell about their orientation. It is remarkable to witness the ability of some gay people to move forward in the face of crushing rejection that most of us could not tolerate, even for a single day.

20. Where do gay people most likely work?

- *everywhere*

The gay population is diverse in its employment. Gay people work in every field and occupation; they are social workers, politicians, police officers, firefighters, writers, farmers,

teachers, clergy, bankers, sanitation workers, fashion designers, entrepreneurs, directors, actors, computer specialists, military servicemembers, and postal and construction workers.¹¹⁷

In some industries and areas of employment, there is an open and inclusive environment that allows gay people to feel safe. In other industries, misinformation and prejudice against gay people abound, causing many gay workers to stay in the closet. As discussed in Question #32, employment discrimination against gays and lesbians is legal in most areas of the United States.

21. Do gay people usually come out at work? How might my business and professional relationships be affected if I assume employees and co-workers are heterosexual?

- *in the past, coming out was unthinkable for professional and business people*
- *increasingly, gay people do not attempt to hide who they are*
- *sensitivity and fairness to all minorities can enhance professional opportunities*

Before the 1970s, coming out at work was unheard of in any white-collar profession. Even fifteen years ago, the freedom to come out at work was a luxury enjoyed primarily by the self-employed and those in gay-friendly industries. Most gays and lesbians hoping to pursue successful careers as business professionals had no choice but to stay in the closet.¹¹⁸

Increasingly, however, gays and lesbians have felt safe coming out at work. This is due not only to changing social attitudes, but also to changes in corporate policies. The number of companies with policies against discrimination and harassment based on sexual orientation and gender identity has skyrocketed over the last decade, even in the many areas of the country where such discrimination remains perfectly legal.¹¹⁹ (Unfortunately, however, company antidiscrimination policies can be difficult, and in some cases impossible, to enforce, which is why legislative protections are crucial.)

Gay people with supportive family and friends are particularly likely to come out at work. One survey of Harvard Business School alumni found a striking correlation between parental acceptance and willingness to come out to colleagues.¹²⁰

The way in which people come out at work may vary widely. Some use the simple declarative statement, “I am gay.” Others rely on the ability of their listener to infer meaning from oblique statements and conversation. Some place pictures of loved ones in their office; wear wedding or commitment rings; or invite their partner to corporate events. It is common for gay professionals to “test the waters” before fully coming out.¹²¹

Staying closeted at work sometimes feels like the safest option. The costs of the closet, however, are many. They include stress and fear of exposure, vulnerability to blackmail and other forms of harassment, discomfort with socializing and the lack of a strong support system. The closet means less networking with other gay people, strains on personal relationships and lower self-esteem. It can undermine self-confidence and productivity.¹²²

Gays and lesbians are not the only people who pay the price for hostile work environments. Authors Friskopp and Silverstein note that “where homophobic jokes or comments go unchecked, other forms of discrimination (against racial minorities or women, for example) are also likely to take root. In contrast, companies that are consistent in stamping out discrimination on every front are the most likely to have loyal employees. They are also the most likely to tap into profitable opportunities in a diversity of markets.”¹²³

Research has also found that communities open to diversity are more likely to thrive economically. Richard Florida, economics professor at Carnegie Mellon University, states: “[New] ideas and cutting-edge industries that lead to sustained prosperity are more likely to exist where gay people feel welcome. . . . [Studies] also show innovation and economic vitality closely associated with the presence of gays and other indicators of tolerance and diversity, such as the percentage of immigrants and the level of racial and ethnic integration.”¹²⁴

22. *When the subject of homosexuality comes up, we usually focus on our feelings about gay people. What are gay people feeling? Why are some gay people angry or depressed?*

- *gay people have many different feelings about being gay and about how they are perceived and treated*
- *anger and depression are common responses to rejection*
- *almost every cultural organization institutionalizes discrimination; governments deny gay people equal protection; and families reject gay people*
- *in many environments, it is considered socially acceptable to malign gay people*
- *the anger gay people feel is often turned inward*
- *though some gay people experience anger or depression, many gay people thrive emotionally and lead happy, productive lives, despite the challenges they face*

Gay people have many different feelings about being gay and about how they are perceived and treated by others. The literature is rich with examples of the breadth and depth of their feelings.

One common feeling that many gay people have is anger.

Anger is a natural surge of energy that occurs when we are confronted with injustice. Gay and lesbian people are condemned, harassed, punished and ostracized for their inherent sexual orientation – an orientation they did not choose and cannot change. They are taught and told to experience their sexuality, not as a gift, but as a cruel life sentence, something to be denied or changed.¹²⁵

Almost every cultural organization institutionalizes discrimination and then defends itself with declarations of moral superiority. Some organizations recognize discrimination as

destructive, but they look the other way and do nothing. Governments deny gay people equal protection, many businesses discriminate, and elected officials and political action committees malign gay people in order to get votes and raise funds. Parents reject their gay children.

Depression is another common response to these injustices.

Anger is often turned inward. Because of the hopelessness they feel, gays and lesbians may suffer depression or consider or attempt suicide. Some make bad decisions about relationships or about drugs and alcohol, substances which may temporarily help them to feel the pain of rejection less acutely. Decisions about coming out can be wrenching. At stake are family relationships, employment security, business opportunity, political viability, choice of residence, and personal safety.

Ed was a local gay man who began his career as a player with a National Football League team. Distraught by doubts about his identity, he became overwhelmed with anxiety and despair. He went to the Kensico Dam, lay down at the top, said a prayer and plunged to the bottom. Though he suffered a spinal cord injury that left him paralyzed, he survived. For the following twenty years, he dedicated his life to helping other disabled people live fully productive lives. His ability to overcome tragedy and to inspire and help others is a testament to the strength of the human spirit. Sadly, Ed passed away in 2005 due to a heart condition.

A sense of isolation is another common feeling among gay people.

If you are heterosexual, imagine growing up not knowing a single other straight person. After writing a book about her son Bobby's suicide (see Question # 8), Mary Griffith received a letter from a young man signed, merely, Corey.

“Everything that Bobby believed is what I believe. I have never told my family or friends the truth, and I never, ever will. I want to fit into this society so badly and I never will be able to as gay. All I want to do is to be able to function as a normal straight man. But I cannot and I hate myself for it. I do not fit in anywhere.

I was brought up in a semi-religious household. I was told that God thinks homosexuals are bad. . . . Why . . . did he create them then?! Every single day I pray about ten times for God to make me straight.

I sit here and think, Why couldn't Bobby and my paths have crossed? We could have shared our fears with each other, shared our dreams. I could have been the friend he needed – he could have been the friend I need. . . . I have considered suicide but . . . I couldn't do that. But there have been times when I've wished someone else would do the job.”¹²⁶

Many gay people do not survive this type of isolation and self-hatred. The words of the world-renowned psychiatrist, Dr. Erik Erikson: “Someday, maybe there will exist a well-informed . . . public conviction that the most deadly of all possible sins is the mutilation of a child's spirit.”¹²⁷

The miracle is that so many gay people not only survive, but also live happy, productive lives. It is somewhat surprising that gay people who came of age without any of the gay-friendly support systems that now exist, are still alive, still creative and productive, still hopeful and happy, and still participating fully in life. It is a very humbling experience to know such people.

23. Why is homophobia sometimes called “the last socially acceptable prejudice?”

- ***rhetoric used to demean ethnic, religious, and racial minorities is unacceptable***
- ***rhetoric used to demean gay people is often considered acceptable, and sometimes considered commendable and patriotic***
- ***antigay comments within families are common***

Rhetoric used in the past to demean ethnic, religious, and racial minorities is no longer considered appropriate language in a public forum. Not so with rhetoric directed at gay people. Antigay statements and antigay letters to constituents are one of the most effective fund-raising techniques of all time for those who use them.¹²⁸

No one can imagine saying to a person of another race, nationality or ethnic background: “*I know it’s not your fault that you’re (whatever...) You were born that way and you can’t help it. But do you have to mention it? You’re making us all uncomfortable. We’re not used to being around people like you. In fact, in our ideal world, people like you wouldn’t even exist.*” No one can imagine adding: “*I’m broad-minded and I forgive you. Have you ever considered prayer as a ‘solution’ to your ‘problem?’*” We can imagine the hostility that would result from such comments.

These kinds of statements, in one form or another, are directed at gay people all the time. In fact, the above statements are considered so acceptable that the remark – “It’s not your fault that you’re gay” – is seen by many as a nice thing to say. Many of us in our support and educational group, before we began to learn about the subject, said (or at least thought) some of these very things. Though not uncommon, these remarks are extremely offensive to gay people.

Here are six real-life examples of statements made within the families of people in our support group. The remarks vary from frightening to downright silly. All of the following statements were made by parents to children *not knowing* that their children were gay (though at the time this was little comfort to the individuals involved).

“All fags should be rounded up and shot.”

“Homosexuals should *never* be allowed to occupy positions of importance or power.”

“Gay people are all right, unless they get together and try to *assert* themselves.”

“Your gay friend is intelligent: eventually he’ll realize it’s a mistake to be gay. Tell him not to worry . . . it’s just a phase.”

“I can’t believe Rock Hudson was gay. He seemed like such a nice guy.”

“I can’t believe Rock Hudson was gay. What a waste!”

Politicians, religious leaders and other public figures frequently use vicious and outlandish rhetoric in their attacks on gay people. A well-known senatorial and presidential candidate declared in 1997 that “the notion that is involved in homosexuality . . . leads to ‘totalitarianism,’ ‘Nazism’ and ‘communism.’”¹²⁹ In 1998, one of the nation’s most famous religious leaders warned that sponsorship of a gay pride event in Orlando, Florida would cause “terrorist bombs . . . earthquakes, tornadoes and possibly a meteor.”¹³⁰ Another prominent religious leader declared on national television in 2001 that gays and lesbians were partially to blame for the September 11 terrorist attacks.¹³¹ In early 2007, a bestselling political author publicly referred to a presidential candidate as a “faggot.”¹³² In May 2007, a politician opposing equal rights for gay couples in New Hampshire stated that allowing gay couples to marry would be like allowing convicted felons to vote.¹³³

Needless to say, if a public figure made the above comments about any other minority group, his or her career would be over.

The very fact that equal inclusion of all citizens is seen as so controversial in America in the year 2007 is itself distressing to most gay people and those who care about them.

24. Why are the words “faggot” and “dyke” offensive and what do they mean?

- *the word “faggot” is typically used as a slur to insult and demean gay men; the word “dyke” is typically used as a slur to insult and demean gay women*
- *gay people generally see the terms as threatening as well as insulting*
- *antigay slurs are particularly devastating to young people*
- *antigay slurs are just as ugly and hurtful as racial and ethnic slurs*
- *the origin of the words is debated*

The word “faggot” is a pejorative word used to refer to gay men. The word “dyke” is used primarily as a pejorative reference to gay women. Both words are insulting and in some cases threatening.

Because the words “faggot” and “dyke” have been used for a long time to insult and demean gay people, the use of the words today almost always communicates prejudice against or disrespect for gays and lesbians, even when the speaker does not intend to communicate such a message. By using such words, people send the message that they are homophobic, and that they do not respect the feelings of gay people or the feelings of those who have gay friends or family members. They also communicate that gay people should not feel comfortable coming out to them, and that they are not conscious of the effects of homophobia.

People who use words like “faggot” or “dyke” often do so without intending to refer specifically to gay people. The term is common among young people as a generic put-down and many who use the slur assure others that they are not homophobic. However, regardless

of whether the speaker intends to insult gay people specifically, gay people who hear the word (as well as those who have gay friends and family) are likely to interpret it as an insult and a threat. Like racial and ethnic slurs, antigay slurs do not cease to be offensive merely because the person using the word may not *mean* to offend the listener.

Throughout history, societies have created highly negative images of minority groups, sometimes with a political motivation and sometimes out of fear and ignorance. The negative image of gay people that has been created in our society has been so powerful that a study by the American Academy of University Women showed that *among boys, actual physical assault was preferable to being called gay.*¹³⁴

Antigay slurs can be just as ugly and hurtful as racial and ethnic slurs.

The origins of the words “faggot” and “dyke” are widely debated. In old English, a “faggot” referred to a bundle of sticks, especially those that were used to burn heretics. Some people believe that the contemporary meaning of the word “faggot” derives from the historical practice of burning homosexual men. Others believe that this theory is merely “an etymological urban legend.”¹³⁵

The origins of the word “dyke” are also debated. One theory is that the word is a shortening of the word “morphadike,” which was a “dialectal garbling” of the word “hermaphrodite.”¹³⁶

Regardless of the origin of these words, their modern use as antigay slurs is unquestionable.

Some gay people have attempted to “reclaim” certain antigay words, like “queer” and “dyke,” by using the words themselves. By using traditionally offensive words to describe themselves, they hope to strip the words of their negative connotations and thereby deprive antigay people of insulting terms to use against them. Many gay people, however, do not believe that this strategy is useful or productive.

To avoid offending people, it is best not to use traditionally offensive words, even if one hears gay people using them.

25. What is the relationship between antigay rhetoric and attitudes and antigay violence?

- ***antigay rhetoric puts the safety of gay people at risk***
- ***perpetrators of hate crimes believe their actions are justifiable***
- ***hate crimes against gay people are not new, but they are increasing***

Antigay rhetoric creates an atmosphere in which the safety of gay people is at risk. If individuals feel that gay people are predators, a threat to society and condemned by God, these beliefs may lead to attacks and to the belief that such attacks are justified. Constant condemnation by politicians and religious leaders and the exclusion of gay people from major cultural institutions reinforce these beliefs.¹³⁷

The physical safety of gay people is at risk in American society. Reports issued annually by the FBI demonstrate that gay people are frequently the victims of hate crimes.¹³⁸ Crimes motivated by hate and prejudice, moreover, tend to be more violent than other crimes.¹³⁹

The shocking 1998 torture and death of Matthew Shephard, beaten and left to die on a fence post in Wyoming, led many Americans to face the reality of antigay hate for the first time. The nation reacted with horror, confusion and disbelief. The strength and courage of Matthew's parents have been an inspiration and a call to address this age-old problem. Judy Shephard, Matthew's mother, has contributed enormously to the national debate over hate crimes and antigay bigotry by speaking publicly and candidly about her son's tragic death.¹⁴⁰

These violent attacks on gay people *are not new*, however; they are newly *reported*.

In 1984, in Bangor, Maine, Charlie Howard was beaten and thrown off a bridge by three local teenage boys because they knew that Charlie was gay. These young men, knowing Charlie could not swim, watched him as he drowned.¹⁴¹ *There was no national outcry*. It is only recently that the public has become more aware of the many gay people who have had their lives and those of their families damaged and destroyed by hate.¹⁴²

Antigay murders are often characterized by extreme viciousness. Studies show "extraordinary and horrific" violence in crimes against gay people, as well as transgender people.¹⁴³ The victims often have no chance at all to defend themselves. We remember Private First Class Barry Winchell, a young soldier who, because of his perceived sexual orientation, was bludgeoned to death with a baseball bat in 1999 while he slept in his army barracks.¹⁴⁴ We also remember Gwen Araujo, a seventeen year old transgender woman who was beaten and strangled to death in 2002 at a house party to which she had been invited, and Sakia Gunn, a fifteen year old lesbian who was stabbed to death on the street in New Jersey in 2003 after she rebuffed the sexual advances of a young man by telling him she was gay.¹⁴⁵

Violence toward gay people occurs on many levels. Physical violence, experienced through attacks by others or directed inward through suicide, results when a group is targeted as undesirable and defective. Violence to the human spirit and irreparable damage to the emotional development of gay youth occur daily when messages that define a group as substandard go unchallenged.

Some rhetoric is overt, suggesting that gay people are dangerous and a threat to society. Some is more subtle, limiting the visibility of gay people by pretending no one in the audience (or congregation) is gay. Some rhetoric is ludicrous. The most famous is the Reverend Phelps "God Hates Fags!" campaign. A few preachers have also warned their followers against reading the King James Version of the Bible, since most historians now agree that King James was a gay man.¹⁴⁶

Much antigay rhetoric has religious belief as its basis.

We also see daily the efforts of groups to use homosexuals in their fundraising efforts. Maligning gay people as the enemies of society is the backbone of many campaigns. Efforts to raise funds by appeals to fight racism and poverty or to reduce the divorce rate have just not been as successful from a financial point of view.

It is not only gay people who are harassed or attacked. Straight citizens who are *perceived* to be gay are also at risk.

A special note: We wish to pay tribute to the family of James Byrd, Jr.

The members of the Byrd family are exceptional people who are role models for all Americans. James Jr. was dragged to death, a victim of an horrific racial hate crime in Jasper, Texas. His parents, Stella and James Byrd Sr. and his nephew Darrell Varrett have become powerful voices in condemning hatred of minorities and the painful division that it brings. They say that speaking out has helped in the healing of their family. They have consistently offered tremendous support to the gay community, speaking out on its behalf and appearing in solidarity with gay people to honor all our families. Their grace, dignity and power and their willingness to testify and speak out for *all minorities* are compelling.¹⁴⁷

26. If it were understood that one's sexual orientation is not a choice, would that significantly reduce prejudice against gay people?

- *it would help*
- *it would not solve the problem*
- *many people are prejudiced against racial and ethnic minorities, fully realizing that these characteristics are innate*

One of the reasons that some people cling so desperately to the idea that sexual orientation is a choice may be to avoid responsibility for discrimination. If one believes everyone can simply “decide” to be heterosexual, much of the discomfort about discrimination disappears.

But the fact that sexual orientation is innate will never stop prejudice. As racial minorities can readily attest, an understanding that race is inherent has not prevented ongoing and virulent discrimination against people of color.

Ethnic, religious and racial minorities sometimes suffer more than one kind of prejudice. In his brilliant work, “One More River to Cross: Black and Gay in America,” Keith Boykin describes the experiences of hundreds of black lesbians and gay men. He describes his own coming out, as a 25-year-old Harvard Law School student, and examines the experience of those who struggle with racism *and* homophobia.

Mr. Boykin, who served as the principal liaison and spokesperson between the White House and the minority (including African-American and gay) media, writes: “One of the most enduring qualities of oppression is not only that it teaches the oppressed to hate themselves

but also that it teaches them to hate one another, pitting minority against minority in a senseless contest to replicate the oppressor. Remarkably, the oppressed absorb and accept the values of the oppressor.”¹⁴⁸

A constant barrage of negative images about oneself can damage one’s self respect. In *Letter from the Birmingham Jail* Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. referred to this inner turmoil as “forever fighting a degenerating sense of ‘nobodyness.’”¹⁴⁹ Racial, religious and ethnic minorities who are also gay have to fight difficult battles on many fronts, from within and from without.

27. Why should we grant civil rights protection on the basis of behavior?

- ***homosexuality is not defined by behavior***

Opponents of civil rights protections for gays and lesbians often claim that unlike innate and immutable characteristics such as race and sex, homosexuality is defined by “behavior,” and therefore does not provide a proper basis for civil rights protections.

These arguments are misguided, however, because homosexuality is not defined by behavior. As explained earlier, sexual orientation refers to “an enduring emotional, romantic, sexual or affectional attraction to individuals of a particular gender.”¹⁵⁰ It is “different from sexual behavior because it refers to feelings and self-concept.”¹⁵¹ (See Question #1.) Extensive research suggests that it is innate and immutable. (See Questions #2 and #6.) Gay people are gay regardless of whether they are in relationship, just as a straight person who is celibate remains a heterosexual.¹⁵²

Moreover, those who attempt to distinguish gay people from other minority groups by focusing on “behavior” fail to recognize that racism, sexism and other prejudices can also be expressed as oppositions to someone else’s behavior. For example, interracial marriages, racially integrated schooling and women working outside of the home are all “behaviors” that some groups have viewed as unfavorable, or even “immoral.” The law nonetheless protects against racial and gender discrimination in marriage, in education and in the workplace. The law also bars discrimination based on religion, even though religion is a mutable characteristic that often manifests itself in behaviors.

28. What are “special rights”?

- *gay people do not have the same civil rights as heterosexuals do*
- *antigay organizations claim that protecting citizens on the basis of sexual orientation would only benefit gay people; hence, the term “special rights”*
- *antidiscrimination laws protect white people, men and heterosexuals just as they protect racial minorities, women and gay people*
- *in the pivotal 1996 case, Romer v. Evans, the Supreme Court of the United States rejected the argument that gay-rights laws are “special rights”*

Many people are unaware that in most states and cities a gay person can legally be denied housing, public accommodation, and employment because of his or her sexual orientation.

Organizations opposed to laws that would prevent discrimination claim that everyone is already protected equally. (The argument appears to be that because *no one's* rights are protected on the basis of sexual orientation, we have achieved equality.) They state that laws designed to protect citizens on the basis of sexual orientation would only benefit gay people; hence the term “special rights.” *Laws prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation, however, do not favor gay people over straight people. Though often referred to as “gay rights” laws, the laws actually prohibit discrimination against heterosexuals as well.*

Certainly, gays and lesbians may benefit more from these laws than heterosexuals, but that is only because gays and lesbians are more likely to face discrimination. Similarly, racial minorities are more likely to benefit from laws barring race discrimination than white people, because racial minorities are more likely to encounter discrimination. This does not mean, however, that the great civil rights laws of 1964 and 1965 – which ensured that people could not be discriminated against on the basis of race – provided “special rights” to people of color.

None of the major civil rights organizations dedicated to achieving equality for gay and lesbian Americans have sought to obtain “special rights” for gay people. Nor have they sought laws that would authorize affirmative action programs, preferential treatment or quotas.¹⁵³

In the pivotal 1996 case *Romer v. Evans*, the Supreme Court of the United States rejected the argument that gay-rights laws constitute “special rights” for homosexuals. *The Court clearly stated that protecting citizens from discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation does not create “special rights.”*

The case came about because the state of Colorado had passed a state constitutional amendment in 1992 that prohibited civil rights protections for gay people throughout the state. (The denial of protection was called Amendment Two.) This denial was challenged and the case went to the Supreme Court. The Court held that Amendment Two violated the federal Constitution’s guarantee of “equal protection,” and was therefore invalid.

The Supreme Court wrote: “[Colorado’s] principal argument in defense of Amendment 2 is that it . . . does no more than deny homosexuals special rights. This reading of the

amendment's language is implausible. . . . We find nothing special in the protections Amendment 2 withholds. *These are protections taken for granted by most people either because they already have them or do not need them: these are protections against exclusion from an almost limitless number of transactions and endeavors that constitute ordinary civic life in a free society.*"¹⁵⁴

(Colorado has made great strides toward equality for gays and lesbians since enacting Amendment Two. In 2007, Colorado became the twentieth state to bar discrimination in employment on the basis of sexual orientation.)

29. What was the landmark 2003 Supreme Court case, Lawrence v. Texas? Why was it important?

- *prior to the summer of 2003, the Supreme Court did not recognize gay people's right to privacy, even within their own homes*
- *gay people in America could be branded as criminals because of their intimate, personal relationships*
- *police entered the home and bedroom of two gay citizens, Lawrence and his partner, who were arrested, fined, imprisoned overnight and convicted of a crime*
- *the couple appealed their case to the Supreme Court*

In the infamous 1986 case, *Bowers v. Hardwick*, the Supreme Court held, by a 5-4 vote, that the right to privacy did not extend to consenting, adult same-sex relationships, even within the privacy of a citizen's own home.¹⁵⁵

The ruling did tremendous damage to the civil rights of gay and lesbian people.

Many legislators, judges and other government officials used the Court's decision in the *Bowers* case to justify discrimination against gay people in employment, custody disputes, relationship recognition, education and other areas.¹⁵⁶ The reasoning of the antigay government officials was simple: If the Supreme Court said gay people could be branded as criminals, then surely gays could be denied other rights as well.

In *Lawrence v. Texas*, the Supreme Court was given an opportunity to reconsider its ruling in *Bowers*. The *Lawrence* case was the result of the following incident:

Until 2003, private, consensual sexual intimacy between gay adults was still illegal in several states, including Texas.

In 1998, the police pushed open the door and entered the bedroom in the home of Mr. Lawrence in response to a false report of a disturbance made by an unfriendly neighbor. (The neighbor was later convicted for knowingly making the false report.)¹⁵⁷

Mr. Lawrence and his partner were arrested in their bedroom, fined, imprisoned overnight and convicted of violating Texas's "Homosexual Conduct Law." Their conviction would have

barred them from holding several types of jobs in Texas. They were now labeled as convicts. They also would have been required to register as sex offenders should they have moved to several other states.

Their five year legal battle ended before the Supreme Court in 2003.¹⁵⁸

30. How did the Supreme Court rule in the Lawrence case?

- *private, sexual intimacy between consenting adults has now been recognized as a constitutionally protected liberty*
- *gay people are no longer branded as criminals in the United States because of their intimate, personal relationships*

In *Lawrence*, the Supreme Court, in a 6-3 vote, reversed the convictions of the two men who had been arrested in the privacy of their own bedroom. The Court overruled its previous decision in *Bowers v. Hardwick* and held that the Texas law deprived gays and lesbians of their constitutional rights.

Regardless of whether it takes place between homosexuals or heterosexuals, private sexual intimacy between consenting adults has now been recognized by the Supreme Court as a constitutionally protected liberty that the government may not prohibit.

The Court wrote: “[Gays and lesbians] are entitled to respect for their private lives. The State cannot demean their existence or control their destiny by making their private sexual conduct a crime. Their right to liberty under the Due Process Clause gives them the full right to engage in their conduct without the intervention of the government. It is a promise of the Constitution that there is a realm of liberty which the government may not enter.”¹⁵⁹

In effect, the Supreme Court de-criminalized and protected the private lives of gay people.

The Court further stated:

“[The authors of our Constitution] knew times can blind us to certain truths and later generations can see that laws once thought necessary and proper in fact serve only to oppress. As the Constitution endures, persons in every generation can invoke its principles in their own search for greater freedom.”¹⁶⁰

The *Lawrence* decision was a sweeping victory for human rights and changed the legal landscape for gay people in the United States. States may no longer justify antigay discrimination using the rationale that gays and lesbians are criminals.

The advocacy group More Light Presbyterians signed an amicus brief submitted to the Supreme Court on behalf of religious groups that supported Mr. Lawrence and his partner.

It is interesting to note that this historic decision was rendered by what is widely viewed as a conservative Court.

Laws criminalizing intimate relationships between gay persons were abolished in most other Western countries long before the United States Supreme Court issued its decision in *Lawrence*.¹⁶¹ In some parts of the world, however, homosexuality is still illegal, and sometimes punishable by death. Laws in some of the most oppressive countries prohibit much more than intimate conduct; in at least one developing country, gay people are prohibited from hugging or holding hands with one another.¹⁶²

31. What is the legal status of civil marriage for gay couples in America?

- ***regardless of the law of the state where they reside, gay couples do not have access to the over 1,1000 federal rights and benefits granted to heterosexual married couples***
- ***only one state in the U.S. currently recognizes same-sex marriages***
- ***several states recognize “civil unions” or “domestic partnerships” between persons of the same sex***
- ***granting civil marriage rights to gay citizens does not require faith traditions to perform or recognize same-sex marriages***

Most Americans grow up considering relationship rights to be a “given.”

In most parts of the country, however, these rights are available only to heterosexual spouses.

In most places, gay couples are total strangers under the law, even though they may have been together for decades.

Life is very different for citizens denied the protections of relationship rights. The following are just a few ways in which the law of most American jurisdictions treats same-sex couples differently from married heterosexual couples:

- Same-sex partners can be denied the right to visit a sick or injured partner in a hospital or emergency room.
- Same-sex partners can be denied the right to participate in medical decisions for an incapacitated partner.
- Gay people are not entitled to family leave to care for an ill partner or to family leave because of bereavement.
- Same-sex partners receive no survivor Social Security benefits, despite a lifetime of paying payroll taxes.
- In the unusual event that an employer offers health care insurance to the partners of gay employees, the gay employees must pay federal income tax on the value of the insurance.
- Gay individuals must pay estate tax on assets inherited from a partner.
- Elderly gay people do not have a legal right to live together in nursing homes.

- Laws that protect married elderly people from being forced to sell their homes to pay nursing home bills do not apply to gay and lesbian seniors.
- Gay and lesbian partners are excluded from pension benefits in cases where pension plans cover only married spouses.
- Gay people pay (up to 70%) tax on IRA accounts of a deceased partner.
- Gay partners, unlike married heterosexual couples, can be forced to testify against a partner in a trial.
- Same-sex couples have no legal standing to bring a wrongful death suit.
- In the event of a loved one's death, gay couples do not have the authority to consent to an autopsy, organ donation, or to make funeral arrangements.
- Under federal immigration law, American citizens may not petition for their same-sex foreign partners to immigrate.¹⁶³

Very few of the rights denied to same-sex couples can be secured through private contracts.

One state – **Massachusetts** – currently recognizes same-sex marriages. The federal government does not recognize these marriages.

Several other states recognize gay and lesbian relationships but do not call them marriage.

In **Connecticut, New Jersey, New Hampshire*** and **Vermont**, gay couples may enter into “civil unions,” which provide all of the legal rights, protections and responsibilities of marriage that a state government (as opposed to the federal government) may provide. In **California** and **Oregon***, gay couples may enter into “domestic partnerships,” which are similar to civil unions. **Hawaii, Washington D.C.** and **Washington State** provide more limited recognition to gay and lesbian couples.

Many people believe that “civil unions” will protect gay couples and provide them with all the protections that heterosexuals have. This is inaccurate.

*Federal law currently provides over 1,100 rights and benefits to Americans who are **married**.*¹⁶⁴ State “civil unions” or “partnerships” cannot provide these rights, because the federal government limits the rights to heterosexual married couples.¹⁶⁵

Thus, gay couples (who might join in a union, marriage or partnership created at the state level) do not have the same rights as heterosexual married couples for purposes of federal tax benefits, immigration rights, and other federally granted rights.

Many states have amended their state constitutions specifically to ban government recognition of same-sex relationships. Due to inaccurate media coverage and misleading antigay campaign materials, voters who vote in favor of these amendments often do not realize that the amendments may bar recognition not only of same-sex marriages, but also of same-sex civil unions and domestic partnerships.

* The law in New Hampshire will take effect in 2008. The law in Oregon is scheduled to take effect in January 2008; however, implementation in Oregon may be delayed or even thwarted altogether if antigay organizations are successful in their repeal efforts.

Some members of Congress are pushing for an amendment to the federal Constitution that would forever prohibit same-sex marriages, civil unions and domestic partnerships in every state. If approved, it would be the first time in the nation's history that the Constitution was amended to deny rights to a class of people.

Five foreign countries currently permit gay couples to marry: Belgium, Canada, the Netherlands, Spain and South Africa. In many other countries, including the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Portugal, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Croatia, Slovenia, Switzerland, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and New Zealand, gay couples may obtain legal recognition in other forms.¹⁶⁶

The above information is accurate as of August 2007, but legal change is rapid and unpredictable in the area of civil marriage rights.

Currently, in America, the discussion of civil marriage rights for gay people is ongoing. Conversations are now taking place regarding both the tangible and the intangible benefits of marriage, including benefits both to the individual and to the society in which we all live.

Increasing media coverage of gay marriages and civil unions has allowed our society to witness the great diversity that exists within the gay community.¹⁶⁷ Elderly couples, young couples, couples with supportive families in attendance, couples with children, couples just starting out in life, couples of every ethnicity, every race and every socio-economic group have come forward to publicly celebrate their relationships.

The political debates surrounding marriage pertain to civil marriage, not religious ceremonies.

Granting civil marriage rights to same-sex couples would not require any faith tradition to perform or recognize same-sex marriages. Each and every religious community would be free to decide for itself what constitutes a marriage in the eyes of God.¹⁶⁸

The *intangible* benefits of marriage are well understood; they are powerful and deeply personal. Marriage, for most people, is a uniquely treasured human relationship. To many people, spending one's energy and resources (or that of the nation's) to deny to others what is so indispensable in one's own life, seems regrettable and unjust.

It is also more than a little ironic, that after years of being portrayed as hedonistic and shallow people, gay citizens must now be subject to such outrage at the thought that they may be allowed to form lasting legal commitments.

32. *What other rights do gay people lack?*

- *Gay people lack legal protections in the areas of:*
 - *Employment*
 - *Housing*
 - *Public accommodations*
 - *Education*
 - *Child custody and adoption*
 - *Military service*

In addition to fears of social and family rejection, gay people lack legal protections against discrimination in a wide variety of areas.

Employment, housing, and public accommodations

In most places in the United States, there are no laws that protect against discrimination based on sexual orientation.

In these places, it remains perfectly legal to fire somebody for being gay, to evict somebody from his or her rented home for being gay, and to exclude gay people from public accommodations such as theaters, stores, restaurants and hotels. There is no legal recourse.

An increasing number of states do provide protections, however.

As of August 2007, twenty states have enacted laws prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation in private employment, public accommodations, and/or housing. Thirteen of these states have also enacted prohibitions on discrimination based on gender identity and/or gender expression.¹⁶⁹

Over 170 localities (cities, counties, etc.) also prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation, and over 80 prohibit discrimination based on gender identity and/or expression. These local protections, however, often do not have the same force as state protections.¹⁷⁰

Though federal civil rights laws covering employment and public accommodations have long prohibited discrimination based on race, nationality, sex, religion, age, disability and other factors, there is no federal statute prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity.¹⁷¹

Sometimes people express the belief that gay rights laws provide protections that are not available to the general public. But, in fact, laws that would ensure equality on the basis of sexual orientation would do so equally for *everyone*. Though often referred to as “gay rights” law, the laws prohibiting discrimination do not single out gay people as a special class. On the contrary, they prohibit discrimination based on *heterosexual* (and bisexual) orientation just like they prohibit discrimination based on *homosexual* orientation.

The fact that gay people, women or racial and ethnic minorities may need civil rights protections more than other citizens, moreover, does not mean that such protections are “special rights” for that particular group.

Equal opportunity and civil liberty protections do not *remove rights* from any citizen or *provide extra rights* to any citizen.

Religious organizations are generally exempt from antidiscrimination laws covering sexual orientation and gender identity.¹⁷²

Education

Gays and lesbians face severe discrimination and harassment in schools, and very few states provide legal recourse.

Large numbers of gay and transgender students endure discrimination, harassment, physical violence and verbal abuse from their classmates, and teachers often do not intervene. In fact, teachers themselves may make disrespectful comments or feel free to express their own contempt for homosexuals.

In a 2005 survey, over 75% of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) students reported hearing antigay remarks “frequently” or “often” at school, and over one-third reported that they experienced physical harassment or assault because of their sexual orientation.¹⁷³

The hostility and isolation experienced by LGBT youth at school can have serious, sometimes devastating, effects on the students’ education and health. LGBT youth are more likely than their peers to miss school due to safety concerns, and those who face frequent harassment report lower grade-point averages and are more likely to say that they do not intend to complete high school or go to college.¹⁷⁴

Studies consistently demonstrate that gay and lesbian youth are more likely than their non-gay peers to suffer from depression and other adverse reactions linked to harassment.¹⁷⁵

Despite these problems, very few states have taken steps to protect LGBT youth from discrimination and harassment. As of August 2007, only ten states (plus the District of Columbia) have laws that address harassment and discrimination based on sexual orientation in schools. Only five states have enacted safe-school laws addressing harassment and discrimination based on gender identity and/or expression.¹⁷⁶

Failure of the school to actively counter bias and officially declare it unacceptable creates a pervasive dynamic in which students can be seen as targets at all times, anywhere within their social community. School buses are a nightmare for these young people.

Harassment is epidemic and nationwide, even in communities seen as progressive on inclusion.

Reverend Ray Bagnuolo reports attending a local conference for gay youth in which a young woman confided her fears and prayers to the group:

“One quiet young woman from a public school in New York City revealed to the group that she believed in God. She told us that she prayed one prayer to God each morning. It was a prayer that she would get to school safely. All she wanted from God was to not get beaten up on her way to school.”¹⁷⁷

Children of gay and lesbian couples also face discrimination. In one highly publicized case in 2003, a seven-year child of a lesbian woman in Louisiana was disciplined at school for explaining to his classmate that his mother was gay. The school compelled the child to attend a special behavioral clinic at 6:45 in the morning, where he was forced to repeatedly write “I will never use the word ‘gay’ in school again.”¹⁷⁸

Child custody and adoption

Child custody and adoption laws vary widely by state. It is not at all uncommon for gays and lesbians to be discriminated against in adoption and custody cases, even cases involving the gay person’s own biological child.

In one widely publicized case, a Florida court ruled that a child was better off with her openly racist father, a convicted murderer, than with her biological mother, because the mother was gay.¹⁷⁹ In a famous 1995 case, the Supreme Court of Virginia affirmed a lower court’s decision to deny a woman custody of her biological child because of the woman’s homosexual orientation.¹⁸⁰ The lower court had concluded that the mother’s “lesbianism” was “illegal” and “immoral,” and granted custody to the child’s grandmother. (The heterosexual father expressed no interest in the child and paid no child support.)¹⁸¹

The state with the most restrictive law is Florida, which bans both gay and lesbian individuals and couples from adopting, even if the child they wish to adopt has no other home available to him or her. (And unfortunately, thousands of children await adoption in Florida.¹⁸²)

Florida permits gay people to be foster parents, but does not allow gay foster parents to adopt the children.

In 2004, a sharply divided federal appeals court rejected a gay couple’s constitutional challenge to the Florida law.

The men who brought the lawsuit, Steven Lofton and Roger Croteau, have five foster children. The oldest three children have been living with the couple since infancy; the couple’s home is the only one the children have ever known.¹⁸³ At the state’s request, Lofton left his job in order to care for the children full time. He later received an Outstanding Foster Parenting award from a child placement agency licensed by the state.¹⁸⁴ Florida law nevertheless prohibits Lofton and his partner from adopting their foster children.

One of the children, Bert, was previously considered “un-adoptable” because of his HIV status at birth. Recently, however, Bert has “sero-converted” (which children can do) and no longer tests positive. This is in large part due to the excellent care he has received from his foster parents.¹⁸⁵

The state’s response to the change in the child’s health status – Bert is now considered “adoptable” – is to now actively search for a *heterosexual* family to adopt him. In fact, the state has had the audacity to ask the foster parents for suggestions.¹⁸⁶

The Florida law prohibiting Lofton and Croteau from adopting their foster children is unusually broad. As one federal judge noted in a dissenting opinion, the law “accords everyone other than homosexuals the benefit of an individualized consideration that is directed toward the best interests of the child. Child abusers, terrorists, drug dealers, rapists and murderers are not categorically barred by the adoption statute from consideration for adoptive parenthood in Florida. On the other hand, individuals who take children into their care, including unwanted children, such as those who are HIV-positive, and who have raised them with loving care for years are categorically barred from adopting if they happen to be homosexual.”¹⁸⁷

The nation’s leading medical and professional organizations have issued position statements explaining that sexual orientation is irrelevant to being a good parent.¹⁸⁸ The American Psychological Association, the American Psychiatric Association, and the National Association of Social Workers, for example, have explained that “[o]ver the past two decades, research about children of gay parents has yielded the consistent conclusion that these children demonstrate no deficits in intellectual development, social adjustment, or psychological well-being as compared to children of heterosexual parents.”¹⁸⁹ Organizations issuing similar statements include the American Academy of Family Physicians, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Bar Association, the American Psychoanalytic Association, the Child Welfare League of America, and the North American Council on Adoptable Children.¹⁹⁰

Military service

Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people have served with distinction in militaries around the world throughout history.

However, the U.S. military has a policy of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” for gay servicemembers. Military employees are generally not supposed to be asked about servicemembers’ sexual orientation. If these employees are gay however, they must not reveal that fact, or they will face discharge. Thus, a heterosexual person may freely discuss his or her significant other or husband or wife, but a gay person must not give any hint of his or her sexual orientation, lest he or she be fired.

From 1994 – when the current Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell policy took effect – through 2001, an average of approximately 1,000 people *per year* were fired from their military jobs for being

gay, lesbian or bisexual.¹⁹¹ Millions of tax-payer dollars have been spent on the high costs of these discharges.¹⁹²

A 2007 report from the Williams Institute found that the number of troops lost to the Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy is actually much higher than government figures suggest, in part because the numbers released by the government do not take into account the troops that choose not to re-enlist due to the military's antigay policies. The report concludes that since 1994, "an average of nearly 4,000 [lesbian, gay, and bisexual] military personnel each year on active duty or in the guard or reserves would have been retained if they could have been more open about their sexual orientation."¹⁹³

The military continues to discharge servicemembers who possess what it considers to be essential skills. For example, though the federal government has recently lamented the shortage of government translators fluent in Farsi and Arabic, dozens of translators fluent in those languages have been fired in recent years under Don't Ask, Don't Tell.¹⁹⁴

"Don't tell" means don't tell anyone. And, as a general rule, even conversations between servicemembers and their military doctors, psychologists and other mental health care providers are not confidential. Chaplains have also been known to report servicemembers who are struggling with their orientation or with harassment.¹⁹⁵

An increasing number of nations do not discriminate against gay citizens who wish to serve in the military. At least *twenty-two* of the nations that have sent troops to serve side by side with American soldiers in recent military conflicts abroad allow openly gay people to serve. These nations are Germany, the United Kingdom, France, Spain, Austria, Italy, Ireland, Belgium, Canada, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Finland, Sweden, Estonia, Slovenia, Switzerland, Luxembourg, Australia and New Zealand.¹⁹⁶ Israel and South Africa also allow openly gay people to serve in the military.¹⁹⁷ In June 2007, the United Kingdom's Ministry of Defense apologized to British armed forces personnel who experienced discrimination under its former antigay policies.¹⁹⁸

33. What is meant by heterosexuals "coming out"? What can I do?

- ***heterosexuals and institutions may go through a kind of 'coming out' process of their own when they decide to openly support gay and lesbian loved ones***
- ***what we can do as individuals***

Increasingly, straight people "come out" as allies in support of equality for gay citizens. Institutions do this as well. In these cases, a similar process of anxiety, angst, soul-searching and trepidation may come into play. Coming out is not easy, whether one is a gay person, a parent, a sibling, a concerned straight citizen, or an institution. It may require much internal inventory, dialogue, research, questioning and prayer.

One can never underestimate the power, difficulty, anxiety and joy of coming out.

One's sexual orientation has nothing to do with the desire to see all people treated equally. As columnist Randy Cohen notes, “[i]t is not just Jews who should resist anti-Semitism, or only African-Americans who should oppose racism: these are ethical obligations for everyone.”¹⁹⁹ Increasingly, straight people are speaking out for the equal inclusion of gay people.

What can we do as individuals? A good start is to acknowledge that we care about gay people. Homophobia harms someone we love.²⁰⁰ When we hear antigay aspersions and jokes, we can point out to the speaker the hurtfulness and destructiveness of their words.²⁰¹

We can meet one another in our daily lives with the recognition that not everyone is heterosexual. We can keep open the channels of communication and the flow of ideas. We can block attempts to silence gay people. We can respect their need to speak about being gay when, where and with whom they choose.²⁰²

We can include our gay relatives so they do not become ghosts at the periphery of our lives.²⁰³ We can know that some children, ours or other people's, will be gay. We can remember that justice will save and strengthen the lives of some of these children as they grow and mature.

We can support local and national organizations that seek equality for all people. We can be aware of which social or political action groups demean or support gay people. We can be aware of the policies of groups to which we belong.²⁰⁴

We can acknowledge the many rights, privileges, opportunities, benefits that we receive because of our heterosexual status, and we can recognize that others are not treated equally.²⁰⁵

Straight and gay people can work on joint projects that do not directly address issues of sexual orientation. Studies have found that use of such projects – as has been done with racial tensions in the military – helps people find common ground.²⁰⁶

Each of us can reexamine our past beliefs and seek out accurate, current information. We can talk to gay people about their lives. We can begin to insist that all people be able to exercise the same rights to freedom and equality. We can point out the harm done to innocent people by exclusion and prejudice.²⁰⁷

Among the most important and easiest things straight people can do is to speak openly and in an affirming way with friends, colleagues and family about their feelings and beliefs about gay people. When we remain silent in the face of disparaging remarks, people assume that we agree with them.

Gay people and those who love them are very sensitive to language and listen for subtle messages that they are in a safe or an unsafe environment. When we let others know that we realize not everyone is straight and that we respect all people, we can begin to open doors.

34. *What is life like for gay youth?*

- *gay youth suffer from high rates of depression and suicide*
- *most gay youth are extremely isolated*
- *gay youth are often quite homophobic*
- *gay youth do not have family support that other minority children have*
- *school is not a safe place for gay teenagers*

Depression is very common among gay teens, and gay adolescents are two to three times more likely to attempt suicide than heterosexual young people are. It is estimated that up to thirty percent of the completed youth suicides are committed by lesbian and gay youth.²⁰⁸ Most gay teenagers do not feel safe in their own homes with their own families. They are not safe in their schools. Most are at risk in their communities, including their faith communities.

The pain of feeling ostracized or of feeling that one does not fit the mold is universal. It is particularly painful for young gay people. Even gay teens who are in therapy for depression may not confide in their therapists for fear that the therapist will reject them.

Unfortunately, even the love of parents is not enough to protect young gay people.

Mother Leslie Sadasivan has written about the suicide of her gay son, Robbie: “When my family and I realized that Robbie was gay we let him know immediately that we loved, supported, and accepted him. . . . But our efforts could not protect him from the rejection and harassment he experienced [at school] and his overall perception of how society and religion view homosexuality.”²⁰⁹

Robbie knew he was gay by age 10. He suffered tremendous abuse and rejection during his short life. Eventually, he simply could not go on. On January 2, 1997, four months into the ninth grade, Robbie shot himself in the head. He was found by his nineteen-year-old sister. In a suicide note, Robbie wrote: “I hope I can find peace in death that I could not find in life.” He asked his family to remember and pray for him.²¹⁰

Kate Stone Lombardi, feature writer for the New York Times, describes the struggle on a local level: “Sixteen year old Cat B. was walking out of White Plains High School on a recent afternoon when the verbal assault began. ‘There was a group of guys, all football players,’ Cat said, adding that the name caller used words that alluded to her sexual orientation and yelled, ‘Don’t hit on my girlfriend!’ and ‘If you sleep with me one night, you’ll change!’ The experience is not uncommon for the sophomore, who is a lesbian, but it is one that never loses its sharp jab of pain. ‘You want to die,’ said Cat, whose large brown eyes were suddenly downcast. ‘You want to crawl under a rock and die.’”²¹¹

Respect and consideration for all people is a message that is appropriate at any age. Surveys show that *the second most common insult* among second-graders is “That’s so gay!” (The most common insult is “That’s so stupid!”)²¹² Though children in second grade may not know what “gay” means, society has already begun the process of teaching them that the term is insulting and negative.

Gay youth very frequently hear homophobic remarks in school. In a 2005 survey, over 75% of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) students reported hearing antigay remarks “frequently” or “often” at school. Almost a fifth reported hearing homophobic remarks from faculty or staff. Over one-third reported that they experienced physical harassment or assault because of their sexual orientation.²¹³ (See Question #32.)

Gay youth often have little or no information about sexual orientation. The **American Psychological Association** states that accurate information about homosexuality is especially important to young people struggling with their own sexual identity. The fear that accurate information about homosexuality will cause more people to be gay, the Association explains, has “no validity.”²¹⁴ Educating young people about homosexuality will not make them gay or straight.²¹⁵

It is not uncommon for gay teenagers to be – or at least to appear – very homophobic. Recognizing and rejecting a part of themselves, gay young people may often make antigay remarks and harbor strong prejudice against gay people.

Gay youth hear politicians and religious leaders condemn and exclude gay people. Many parents may make antigay remarks at home, blind to the fact that they have gay children who are listening to them in fear and despair. Many young people experience tremendous isolation, feeling it is too big a risk to discuss their identity with a single other person.

It is particularly damaging for gay youth to hear the nation’s leaders suggest that equal inclusion of citizens like themselves will lead to the disintegration and moral decline of our society. (This is another common and socially acceptable remark.) It is not a good idea for *any* young person (gay or straight) to hear this type of statement made about *any* minority group. Messages that some groups are condemned and some groups are superior are messages that young people hear and carry for a lifetime.

Young people may hear their friends and relatives express their disappointment when learning that someone is gay, especially if that individual is attractive: “What a shame! What a waste!” It is difficult to develop self-respect under these circumstances and some children feel they are worthless. These are the words of Ellen Stewart, explaining why her A’s and B’s had slipped to C’s and D’s: “I didn’t care. I was completely out of it. I felt . . . so degraded as a person that anything else I did had no value. It was kinda like nothing really mattered.”²¹⁶

It requires an exceptionally strong core of personal strength for a young person to develop as a whole, healthy person, living in such a hostile world. *Any young person* who learns very early that they are singled out and hated will be profoundly affected in their growth and self-concept. A greater issue is not only the presence of any specific prejudice, but the impact of any prejudice on human development.

It is very rare for a young gay person to report antigay abuse or slurs to his or her parents. Normally, if a child (from another minority) faces racial, ethnic, or religious prejudice at school or elsewhere, this is recognized as unacceptable and damaging to everyone, and the

parent immediately takes action. The child who is the target or who has just overheard a hurtful remark is protected, his or her worth is reaffirmed, and they are reminded how precious and valuable they are. This is not the case for gay teenagers. Fearing rejection, they are silent and struggle on alone. Many are permanently damaged by self-hatred and the hatred of others. Many do not survive.

Fortunately, an increasing number of gay and lesbian young people are finding support at home and in school. According to the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network, there are now over 3,000 student “gay straight alliances” in schools nationwide. (In 1987, there were fewer than 100.²¹⁷) These student groups provide crucial support to gay teenagers and play an important role in reducing homophobia in communities. Sadly, however, school districts and politicians around the country often attempt to block the formation of these gay-supportive groups.

35. Do gay teenagers always deal directly with their orientation?

- **no, many gay teenagers postpone dealing with their orientation**

Many adolescents who are gay postpone dealing with their natural orientation as long as possible. It requires enormous ego-strength within adolescents to be different from their peers and many do not find this strength until later adolescence or adulthood.

Additionally, many children and teenagers who are gay have a clear sense of any hostile environments around them, such as their peer group, family, school, or church, so that they exhaust their energies trying to satisfy and impress these forces in their lives. This means postponing any serious efforts towards understanding their sexual orientation until they have gained sufficient strength to do so or until their environment changes.

The most courageous thing a parent can do is to face their fears or questions that one of their children might be gay and seek out ways to reinforce them as human beings. It is important to speak in loving and inclusive ways so that, even on a vague and generalized level, a young child or adolescent will know that if they should turn out to be gay they are loved and valued within the family.

36. Do families know if their children are gay?

- *this varies from family to family*
- *gay people normally do not disclose their identity unless they feel safe*
- *sometimes families sense that a loved one is gay, but avoid discussion*
- *sometimes antigay remarks are used by parents and siblings as a warning that it's not O.K. to be gay in that particular home*

In the experience of our group, most parents of gay teenagers have no idea that their children are gay. To parents, most gay adolescents appear to be heterosexuals (just the way adult gay people do). Many gay people will disclose their identity to a close friend or sibling when they are younger, but wait until they become adults to tell parents, if in fact they ever do.

The vast majority of gay teenagers have been raised in all-heterosexual households with no information whatsoever about homosexuality. They have no role models or people to give courage, comfort and guidance. Children who belong to racial, religious or ethnic minorities have parents who are very aware of the challenges their children may face because of their identity and are prepared to help them. In contrast, gay people growing up are *very* isolated.

Sometimes parents who have always considered themselves very “open-minded,” who have gay friends and colleagues, can be surprised by their intensely negative reaction when they learn that their *own* child is gay. This is not unusual at all. Everyone realizes that the future of one’s own children is not a theoretical construct. Everything takes on new meaning when it affects your own children. Also, most of us were raised with the idea that gay people were “somebody else.”

Some families believe that overt and vocal disapproval of homosexuality will prevent their children from being gay. This is counterproductive. One cannot promote or discourage something which is not a choice. Some children do not recover from damage that results from growing up in a hostile environment. Even subtle or unspoken disapproval is difficult when it is unrelenting.

Other families wonder about a child’s orientation, but they may not acknowledge it. This can create a distance between parent and child which can last for decades.

Arthur Lipkin writes: “[F]amily members express interest in the child’s life but are careful not to make inquiries that could bring an avalanche of truth telling. . . . [They] do not engage in . . . intentional delusion to be hurtful. On the contrary, they probably think they are doing what is best for all: sparing feelings and dodging conflict that would threaten family unity. . . . [But] the self-esteem of homosexual adolescents is ultimately harmed, as they conclude they cannot be loved for who they really are, but only for the person they pretend to be. . . .

The casualties in this kind of family conflict are both sad and pathetic. . . . [A]dolescents in pretending families waste energy in self-monitoring and self-protection.”²¹⁸

Unfortunately, silence about important topics teaches children that avoidance is an effective life skill.

Most people are painfully aware of the emotional energy needed to pretend *any* given reality does not exist within the family.

37. *What happens to families initially when children come out?*

- *some families handle this news well, but most do not*
- *those who are coming out are emotionally vulnerable*
- *those who are receiving the news are often upset and overwhelmed*

Though some families handle news about a family member's homosexual orientation calmly, most do not.

When children, whatever their age, decide to come out to families, they are in a very vulnerable state because they are risking *everything*. Parents are upset, overwhelmed and frightened. This is a very emotionally charged situation.

Family members may be in shock, may be angry, may withdraw or stop speaking. Parents may "blame" themselves or each other. The parents' marriage can be under stress. Some parents become depressed. When some family members take different views than others, conflicts can arise within the family unit.

Sometimes rejection is more subtle: families insist they are understanding, yet keep the gay relative only on the periphery of their lives.

Gay people may eventually remove themselves emotionally (and sometimes geographically) from a painful family situation.

Most families need and benefit from conversation, support and guidance during this time.

38. *What happens when well-meaning parents initially reject their children?*

- *some families hope that rejection will lead gay relatives to become heterosexual*
- *long-term damage may be done to the individual and to the family unit*

Dr. William Pollack, social researcher, a specialist in childhood development and the author of *Real Boys: Rescuing Our Sons from the Myths of Boyhood*, relates the story of an adult patient, Evan, whose parents kicked him out of the house at age 15 upon learning that he was gay.²¹⁹ Though Evan's parents let him come home a few months after forcing him out, Evan says that "things were never the same."

“My father,” Evan explains, “never talked to me and my mother told me over and over again that in her mind I was just a ‘boarder,’ that I was no longer her son. I never got over this and felt bad about myself for years. The only way I could cope was to stop seeing my parents at all.”

He continues: “My parents are old now . . . and sometimes they leave a message on my answering machine begging for me to come home to see them. But as much as they want to see me now, I just can’t get myself to do it. . . . [I]t hurts a lot.”

Pollack writes: “While it might be easy to think of Evan’s parents as having been thoughtless or uncaring, the reality is that they probably believed that if they withheld their love and affection from their son, somehow he would ‘decide’ he was no longer homosexual. But sexual orientation is . . . not a ‘decision’ that we can control or that can be changed by or for our parents.” Because children may be especially vulnerable by the time they raise the courage to discuss their sexual orientation, Pollack believes “it is critically important to convey” to them, immediately upon learning of their feelings, that they are “still loved through and through, that [their] sexual orientation will not in any way diminish how much [they are] admired and respected.” This is what a child “needs most to hear.”

“To refrain from saying [these things] is to risk placing a [child] in serious emotional – even physical – jeopardy. And to risk losing him, in one way or another.”²²⁰

While Dr. Pollack’s research deals specifically with boys, its message applies to families of all young people.

We recognize the power of the need for a family to conform and fit into society, not to be too different from others. People who have gay loved ones may initially fear that others will have less respect for them or consider them inadequate in some way. These feelings can be very powerful. However, the decision to avoid the topic for fear of “what the neighbors will say” can be devastating to the family unit.

From *Loving Someone Gay*, by psychologist Don Clark: “Once upon a time, people selected the most beautiful and talented youths of the community and ceremoniously threw them into boiling volcanoes as an offering to appease the angry gods Some parents are still willing to sacrifice their beautiful gay offspring to appease the god of conformity. . . . [I] feel compassion for the parent who breaks the sacred bond and turns away from the outstretched arms of a son or a daughter”²²¹

While Evan’s family situation was a dramatic rejection, other types of rejection can be equally powerful.

Gay children may begin to live as second-class family members; less importance is attached to their life, to their future and to their presence (or absence).

Antigay remarks may continue. The subject may be avoided or considered “off limits” and completely dropped. The child’s friends or partner are never mentioned and never included in

family gatherings. Parents may withdraw emotionally or wonder aloud what they did “wrong.” Gay children are frequently advised not to tell grandparents. The reality that the child is gay may be carefully avoided in the parents’ social circle.

The wounds from outright rejection are painful and so are those feelings that arise from the fact that one’s very existence is an embarrassment to the family.

39. Can these initial wounds be healed?

- ***absolutely***
- ***many, if not most, families are very resilient***
- ***families can become closer and stronger than ever before***

When children finally acknowledge their orientation, they often express anger and resentment toward those persons and situations that earlier caused them to feel rejection, fear and shame for something they never chose. But by acknowledging these experiences and honoring the reactions of all concerned, by learning more about the issue of sexual orientation and discussing it openly, a family can be transformed, no matter how many years have elapsed.

Many families receive help, either formally or informally, from other families, friends or supportive clergy.

Dealing with this issue is not easy because it usually requires the confrontation of denial, silence and fear on everyone’s part. It requires patience and openness to work toward healing. But openness works more successfully than defensiveness.

Like all healing processes, family healing takes time. It does not happen overnight.

Those who unintentionally inflicted pain during the young person’s formative years have a chance to apologize for their remarks and behavior. They will often want to acknowledge their former lack of information and understanding. The member of the family who is gay has an opportunity to extend generosity and forgiveness. Everyone may have said and done things which wounded the other. Acknowledging and becoming accountable for this can lead to healing and renewed strength for the family.

Healing and reconciliation can occur even after many years of estrangement. No one should feel that their situation is hopeless.

40. What does it mean when a married person announces that he or she is gay? Isn't that a type of change in orientation?

- *it is a myth that marriage to a member of the opposite sex is “proof” that one is heterosexual*
- *some gay people marry before they come to terms with their orientation*
- *some couples may marry for companionship rather than romance*
- *some gay people marry hoping this will help them become straight*
- *marriage may protect gay people from the hostility of society*

Some gay people do marry people of the opposite sex, and it is a common misconception that to be married is “proof” that one is heterosexual.

Some people may marry before they come to terms with their homosexual orientation.

Some adults, one gay and one straight, may form a couple to provide for mutual support and loving companionship rather than for romance. Respect and mutual regard sustain these relationships. No change in orientation occurs.

Some gay people, who have tried to blend in and appear as heterosexuals for most of their lives may stop trying to accommodate themselves to the expectations of others and begin to live openly. No change in orientation occurs.

A gay individual may also, under intense family or social pressure, decide to attempt living as a heterosexual and marry. Antigay groups applaud such attempts. However, even among families who promote so-called “conversion” therapy, it is unlikely that an announcement from a heterosexual child that he or she is planning to marry someone who “used to be gay and now is straight” would be met with much enthusiasm.

Those who marry in an attempt to assure themselves (and society) that they are straight often hope that marriage will help them become heterosexual. This hope is not uncommon among individuals who have been taught that gay people are marginal people and a disappointment to their families. Those who enter into such marriages are *not* manipulative people who are purposely being deceptive. They are trying *very* hard to do what society has told them is necessary to do in order to be acceptable.

Sometimes a gay person will marry another gay person of the opposite sex in an attempt to satisfy society's expectations of marriage. These are known as “lavender” marriages.

Arranged marriages between gay and straight people also exist, especially among those in the public eye. These marriages protect the gay partner and help him or her to develop a career free from rejection and condemnation.

Bisexual individuals may appear to change their orientation over a lifetime because of a change in a life partner. In fact, there is no change; the person continues to be bisexual.

There are many reasons why people join their lives together in marriage and it is difficult to make generalizations.

41. What does the issue of sexual orientation have to do with Christian education or Christian family life? What about family values?

- *every gay person is a member of a family*
- *for some young people and adults in our churches, sexual orientation is an important issue in their lives*
- *many young people postpone dealing with fears about sexual orientation until after their schooling*
- *many feel rejected by their church and God if their religious education denounced them or taught that they were inherently less worthy*

Every gay person is a member of a family. The long-held societal perception that there are *families over here in this group* and *homosexuals over there in that group* is wildly inaccurate. Gay people are our children, our grandchildren, our brothers and sisters, our cousins, our aunts and uncles. We are all family together.

The average age at which gay people come out to themselves has dropped dramatically over the last decade. Today, it is not uncommon for teenagers to recognize their homosexuality.²²² Some people know for years that they are gay before confiding this to a single other person.

Previously, when homosexuality was a taboo subject, the idea that a student in a Sunday school class or a youth group would know (or later come to know) that he or she was homosexual was unheard of. It was believed that teenagers were “too young” to understand themselves. At the same time, we believed that teenagers were not “too young” to understand that they were heterosexual.

We now know that some young people, especially teenagers, understand that they are gay and that their homosexual orientation will inevitably be an important issue in their lives. This means that gay teens are quietly and acutely aware that they will not participate on an equal basis within the life of most churches. They feel diminished and unwelcome. Their inner spiritual life will likely be damaged as a result. Young people who do not disclose their identity are still acutely aware of their second-class status.

It is very common for gay youth to pray to God to make them heterosexual. There is a widespread belief among gay youth that there is no legitimate place for them within the institutional church (which, to many young people, *represents* God).

Bruce Bawer, author and journalist, states: “[O]n the night of the day I realized I was gay, I didn’t say the prayers that, until then, I had recited faithfully at bedtime since earliest childhood. Nor did I say them the next night, or the next; as it turned out, I didn’t say them again for almost a decade. That’s how sure I was that being Christian was not consistent with being gay.”²²³

The majority of gay people within most churches remain silent and invisible because they realize, and with good reason, that they are not safe or welcome. Of course, which of God's children are gay has always been known to the Creator. But within the institutional church that truth (and honesty about it) becomes a liability.

Antigay groups characterize gay people as a threat to "family values." Threats to family values are divorce, domestic violence, infidelity, child abuse, children having children, dead-beat dads, empty or stressed relationships, lack of time together and substance abuse. These are problems that we have as heterosexuals. Nothing is uglier than using the term "family values" as a weapon against gay people. Discrimination is bad for young people and it is bad for families.

42. What are the public perceptions of gay and straight people which gay individuals and their families find offensive and/or ironic?

- ***gay people and their loved ones are bombarded with unfair, ironic, and offensive remarks and assumptions***

Negative behaviors of gay people are frequently attributed to their sexual orientation, while negative behaviors of heterosexuals are *almost never* attributed to sexual orientation. A somewhat confused double standard exists.

- Though divorce, substance abuse, control issues, infidelity and domestic violence are continuing problems affecting the breakup of the family, it is gay people who are commonly portrayed as the major threat to family values.
- In spite of the tremendous support marriage receives from society, the divorce rate is alarming. Yet it is gay people who are commonly perceived as unable to maintain stable relationships.
- Many who emphasize the crucial role of truth and honesty in society and the life of the individual also insist that gay people lie about or conceal their identity.
- We never read or hear the statement: "Mr. So-and-So, the heterosexual rapist with life-long ties to the heterosexual community" In contrast, anti-social behavior of *any* kind concerning a gay person will almost inevitably mention sexual orientation as an implied cause.
- Talk shows and magazines often feature heterosexual couples in all sorts of illicit relationships. Yet gay people are seen as promiscuous.
- Convicted axe-murderers on death row have the freedom to marry. Law-abiding gay couples do not.
- Gay people are disdained by many as one-dimensional and self-involved at the same time that their desire to serve in the military and die for their country is rejected.
- Some antigay groups become quite confused and self-contradictory when stereotyping gay people. Sometimes gay people are described as miserable, destructive, marginal

people at the fringes of society. Other times, they are described as powerful, wealthy, influential people who are taking over society.

- People who would be appalled at the suggestion that people of color should “pass” as white or that Jewish people should “pass” as Gentiles are startled or angered when gay people refuse to “pass” as heterosexuals.
- The “defense” of traditional marriage (the idea that the stability of marriage depends on denying legal protections to gay people) is supported by politicians who have themselves been married and divorced more than once. Which marriage they are “defending” is unclear. Why the presence of committed gay couples would cause them to divorce is also unclear.
- Heterosexuals know in the depths of their soul that they did not choose their sexual orientation. Yet many insist that gay people have chosen theirs.
- It is a common belief that heterosexuals are well adjusted and that gay people, who presumably lead unhappy lives, should be pitied and forgiven. Evidence that gay people are happy and that they forgive their oppressors results, not in gladness, but in anxiety and confusion.
- Extremists who quote Leviticus and picket the funerals of gay people do not picket restaurants serving shellfish and pork or strike against shopping centers which are open on Sundays.
- Many people who feel that one can always “tell” when a person is gay also feel it is inappropriate for a gay person to tell anyone.
- Gay people are portrayed as promiscuous and hedonistic. Yet their desire to permanently and legally commit to one another is often greeted with outrage.
- Heterosexuals have a life; gay people have a “lifestyle.”
- Those who believe sexual orientation is a choice do not clearly explain why gay people would choose a life in which they were maligned, denied civil rights, subject to bias crimes and treated with contempt. They do not explain why a young gay person would commit suicide because of his or her sexual orientation rather than just decide to be a straight person.²²⁴

These ironies are not meant to disparage straight people or to call attention to the human frailties that we all experience. They only underscore how myths and stereotypes often go unquestioned, even if they are inconsistent with reality or common sense. Myths about minority groups take on a life of their own. We have been told all our lives that gay people are marginal, predatory, sex-obsessed, shallow, self-involved, promiscuous, and a threat to society. Only recently have these sensational claims been challenged.

43. How can we interact with transgender people and their families in a sensitive way?* (See also Questions #12 and #13)

- *in some ancient cultures, transgender people were respected; now they are often scorned or hated*
- *it is polite to refer to a transgender person in a way appropriate to his or her expressed gender*
- *every transgender person is unique*
- *transgender persons who are not “out” may suffer severe consequences if they are publicly identified*
- *families of transgender people may experience confusion and fear and are in need of support*

In some ancient cultures individuals whose gender was different from the norm were recognized as special people. Often expressing the characteristics of both the masculine and the feminine, these individuals were respected as having keen insight into the deeper matters of life, and so were often given positions of great respect within their communities. Modern gender variant individuals have lost this status within the larger communities. They are often treated with scorn and hate, even within the very faith communities from which they were reared.²²⁵

Social attitudes about gender identity are evolving. As a result, an increasing number of transgender individuals are coming out and making their true identity known.²²⁶

If a person is clearly presenting him or herself in a particular gender role, it is polite to use gender references congruent with the gender presentation. You should use names and pronouns appropriate to the *expressed* gender. Even if you know or you think you can “tell” that a person is transgender, it is insensitive and disrespectful to refer to the person by his or her former or birth gender. When writing about transgender people, quotation marks should never be used around names or pronouns.²²⁷

It goes without saying that it is not considered appropriate to ask a transgender person (or anybody else, for that matter) about their very personal life experiences, unless they clearly invite such questions. Try not to stereotype or generalize. The lives of transgender people are very diverse; a transgender person may have had experiences very different from other transgender people of whom you are aware or whom you have met. Always remember that many transgender persons want their transgender status to remain a secret. The consequences

* Much of the discussion of transgender issues in Questions 12, 13 and 43 is quoted or adapted from the following useful resources: *Transgenderism: The Basics*, Connecticut Outreach Society; Ann Thompson Cook, *Made in God’s Image* (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton United Methodist Church, 2003); Dr. Pauline Park, Dignity for All Students Coalition Steering Committee, *Gender Identity & Expression in the Dignity for All Students Act*; Reverend Dr. Erin Swenson, *More Light on Transgender*, More Light Presbyterians; and Jessica Xavier, Courtney Sharp & Mary Boenke, *Our Trans Children*, Third Edition, Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians And Gays, 2001. We recommend consulting the original sources for additional information on gender identity issues.

of “outing” a transgender person without his or her permission can be severe for that person.²²⁸

Parents and families of transgender people may experience the same confusion, denial, grief and fear for their loved ones that families of gay people initially do. However, because the experience of being transgender is less common and more complex, those families may have more difficulty and are in need of much ongoing support.²²⁹

An excellent resource for faith communities regarding the topic of gender difference is a booklet by Ann Thompson Cook, entitled *Made in God’s Image*. In introducing the moving chapter “Voices of Hurt and Hope,” in which transgender people speak about their lives, the author writes: “Children and adults who are transgender or intersex, or live outside the stereotypes of what society says is ‘normal,’ live in our communities; are found in every ethnic/racial group; attend public and private schools; teach Sunday School, sing in the choir, and serve as clergy; conceive and raise children; are poor, middle class, or affluent; are someone’s child, parent, grandchild, grandparent, sibling, or friend; are frequent victims of hate crimes; and have basic legal protections in only a very few jurisdictions.”²³⁰

“If you don’t consider yourself ‘differently gendered,’” she writes in another section of the book, “it may be difficult for you to imagine what it’s like. For just a moment, try to imagine the horror of sensing, from a very early age, that there’s something wrong or shameful about your body; that you can never be fully known and accepted just as you are; . . . that if you express yourself fully, you’ll be criticized, punished, or rejected [; and] that who you are is a deep disappointment to those you love and depend on.”²³¹

Cook reminds us that, like many gay people, transgender people often face condemnation and rejection from their friends and family, isolation, harassment, discrimination in education, and discrimination in the workplace.²³²

Made in God’s Image is a publication of the Dumbarton United Methodist Church in Washington, D.C. It is available at www.dumbartonumc.org or www.madeinimage.org.

There are also community organizations and several national organizations devoted to education and outreach. PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) has a Transgender Network. The advocacy group More Light Presbyterians also has resources and information through the Liaison for Transgender Concerns. No one has to be alone in their search for understanding.

44. Are religious people antigay?

- ***many religious leaders and congregations support equal inclusion of gay people***
- ***many gay people are deeply religious***
- ***most fundamentalist religious leaders do not support inclusion of gay people***

The idea that all religious people are antigay is inaccurate. An increasingly large number of Jewish and Christian congregations, religious leaders and organizations support gay people and dedicate themselves to the principle of full and equal inclusion of all human beings. Other religious groups are also increasingly supportive and inclusive of gay people.

Like heterosexuals, gay people come from families that range from deeply religious to non-religious. Like individual heterosexuals, individual gay people hold beliefs that can range from deeply religious to non-religious.

It is true that many gay people, raised in congregations or denominations that reject them often may avoid connection with all organized religious groups.

The Reverend Peter Gomes, the much loved Preacher to Harvard University and the Plummer Professor of Christian Morals, is an openly gay, African-American pastor. He is a Republican with a conservative religious background. His decision to come out in 1991 was prompted by antigay religious bias on campus. He was invited to speak at a rally, along with other administrators and faculty, to calm the crisis situation. His openness helped many to understand that religious people and conservative people may also be gay.²³³

Dr. Gomes is the author of *The Good Book: Reading the Bible With Mind and Heart*, which deals not only with the issue of homosexuality (just one chapter) but with discussions of the Bible and race, anti-Semitism, women, the good life, suffering, joy, evil, temptation, wealth, science, and mystery. In it we can see that the issue of acceptance of gay people is an issue which embodies questions about the authentic meaning of the Gospel itself.²³⁴

Within almost every Christian denomination there is a formal organization that strives for the equal inclusion of gay people within that denomination. A list of these groups appears at the end of the manual. Our congregation is a member of More Light Presbyterians.

Increasingly, the public understands (in spite of what some religious leaders might present to us) that ‘Christian’ and ‘antigay’ are not synonyms.

45. How does new information about sexual orientation affect church policy?

- *sexual orientation is innate and inherent in each individual*
- *to treat gay people differently, we must believe God wants a category of human beings to be denied equality*
- *to state that some human beings are inherently less worthy is a radical departure from the authentic message of the Gospel*
- *the church has yet to confront the issue that it creates or sustains a second-class category of believers*

Discrimination is not a new issue for the church; the church's history of discrimination in matters of gender and race is easily documented. Before such practices were abandoned, the institutional church maintained that its policies of discrimination carried out the will of God and used the literal interpretation of the Bible to condone and justify its position. It uses the same approach now in its exclusion of gay people.

Most people grew up with the idea that gay people are simply heterosexuals who have gone astray or who are emotionally ill or confused. In reality, gay people are inherently homosexual. *Current scientific understanding of human sexuality means that to treat gay people differently than others, we must now adopt a new theology: that God created a separate category of human beings who must, by definition, be denied equality of opportunity.* The church has yet to confront this issue from this perspective.

Did God create a separate sub-standard category of people who should be denied equality and a fully integrated life? This view (currently held by most institutionalized churches, though usually not stated in these blunt terms) is currently being challenged.

One of the main functions of any institution is to sustain itself. There is a great desire in many denominations to emphasize unity and avoid controversy and tension. We know that confronting any controversial topic not only causes personal anxiety and stress; it also causes institutions to fear losing members and needed contributions.

Many mainstream Protestant churches, including The Presbyterian Church (USA), publicly and clearly condemn society's discrimination against gay people in housing, public accommodations and employment. This has been the official policy of our national church since 1978.²³⁵ Yet, while our denomination condemns discrimination against gay people *outside* the church, it requires discrimination against gay people *inside* the church.

Gay people who are in loving relationships may not serve as elders, deacons, or ministers of the Word and Sacrament. Any person, straight or gay, who is single, must be living in chastity in order to hold these leadership positions. The Book of Order serves as a reminder to gay youth and adults that, should they find someone with whom to share their lives, they will be considered morally unfit to serve the church. It goes without saying that heterosexuals in loving relationships always have the freedom to marry.

Some Presbyterians are confused as to why the church condemns discrimination in other organizations but at the same time maintains employment and service discrimination within its own institution. (Those who are not Presbyterians question this as well.)

However, many Presbyterians and local congregations decline to treat other human beings in this way. These churches, ours among them, continue to ordain all persons, known and elected by the congregation, who are called to Christian service.

The ugliness, cruelty and absurdity of all discrimination are antithetical to the life and teaching of Jesus Christ and the church's call to support the worth and dignity of all people. So many faith communities continue to struggle with the issue, because they realize that, in the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: *"True peace is not merely the absence of tension; it is the presence of justice."*²³⁶

46. How do gay people and their families feel about the church?

- ***those in supportive churches feel they have found a safe haven***
- ***in many churches, gay people (and those who love them) feel estranged and rejected***
- ***since this population is invisible, the reasons gay people and their families leave may go unnoticed***

Gay people and those who love them tend to be very torn about staying in an institution which dishonors them. It is intriguing to talk to people who do stay. In local churches, where families feel the support of a welcoming congregation, there is a profound sense of having found a home and a sanctuary in a hostile world. There are none of the feelings of estrangement, isolation and rejection found in churches which avoid the topic or actively discriminate.

Just as patriotic Americans who deplore racism usually do not consider leaving the country because racism continues to blight the nation, families of gay people may choose to stay and help move the church to a more loving place. Everyone hopes for a brighter future. People who stay in an institutional church that has discrimination as a basic tenet often do so because they hope to contribute to the dialogue.

Yet, other gay people and their loved ones do leave the church just as others who reject discrimination would not consider joining in the first place. Families, learning that they have gay loved ones, who may not have questioned discrimination before, may now experience a deep sense of betrayal by the institution. But because this population is so invisible, much of this angst of coming and going goes unnoticed. It is not acknowledged publicly.

Because of the invisibility of gay people, many Christians are not aware of how much the policies of exclusion have impoverished the church. Christians with great gifts and much to give do not feel welcome. In fact, they are clearly not welcome on an equal basis.

As more and more people disclose their identities to loved ones, more families will begin to seek information about the subject and increasingly question the church traditions which dishonor those they care about the most.

47. *In what ways have societies used different interpretations of the Bible to “prove” a point?*

- *in countless ways*

The Bible can inspire and strengthen us; it can provide us with wisdom and hope. Throughout history, readers of the Bible have relied on it to stand up to injustice, to defend the weak and oppressed, and to fight for equality.

The Bible has also been used, however, to maintain political power and wealth, wage wars, oppose science and persecute minorities.²³⁷

The following is a partial list of ways the Bible has been used historically to maintain a particular position:

- To justify slavery
- To call for the abolition of slavery
- To argue the superiority of white Protestants
- To argue for the civil rights of African-Americans
- To persecute the Jews
- To define a subservient role for women
- To provide sanctuary to political refugees
- To empower and liberate the poor
- To accuse and execute women as witches
- To support the ordination of women
- To oppose the ordination of women
- To support the marriage of priests
- To oppose the marriage of priests
- To condemn remarriage after divorce
- To condemn masturbation
- To justify the physical punishment of children
- To regulate clothing and hairstyles
- To condemn the wearing of jewelry (for women)
- To impose dietary laws (restricting pork and shellfish)
- To assign guilt for disease
- To argue the inferiority of black people
- To justify discrimination against gay people
- To support the inclusion and acceptance of gay people
- To support capital punishment
- To oppose capital punishment
- To condemn dancing

To mistrust and persecute Catholics
To argue that Catholicism is the only true church
To define the terms of marriage
To condemn the consumption of alcohol
To permit the consumption of alcohol
To forbid work and commerce on the Sabbath
To permit work on the Sabbath
To justify prayer in school
To oppose prayer in public schools
To embrace medical science
To oppose medical science
To increase the political power of the church
To proclaim that the Kingdom of God is within
To justify war
To oppose war
To prove that the earth is the center of the universe (i.e. to oppose Galileo)
To prove that God created Man and the universe in six days
To exploit the environment
To protect the environment
To predict that the end of the world is at hand²³⁸

Some believers may use the Bible to condemn and oppress whole groups of people, but many of those traditionally oppressed people have found their deepest redemption in the pages of the same book.²³⁹

48. What did Jesus say about homosexuality?

- ***Jesus had nothing to say about homosexuality***

Jesus said nothing about the subject.

Those who use the Bible to condemn homosexuality cannot quote from the teachings of Jesus or cite a single word spoken by Christ because Jesus never spoke about the issue.

Jesus never hesitated to teach and comment on the world of His day.²⁴⁰ He took strong positions on divorce, remarriage, adultery, material possessions, hypocrisy, oppression, greed, selfishness, class structure and the accumulation of wealth. Jesus never mentioned homosexuality. Many believe that if God had something to say about the matter, Jesus would certainly have said it.

Many Christians think it is ironic that some religious leaders focus so *little* on some of the issues that deeply concerned Jesus and talk so *much* about an issue which He never mentioned.

For Christians, nothing in the Scriptures supersedes the teachings of Jesus. There is not a single word in the four Gospels, even by inference, about same-sex relationships.²⁴¹

Exclusion of gay people is not based on the ministry or teachings of Jesus.

49. Does the Bible condemn homosexuality?

- ***some believers feel homosexuality is condemned in the Old Testament; many others do not***
- ***those who use the Bible to condemn gay people use a literal but very selective interpretation of Scripture***
- ***historically, the Bible has been used to exclude and oppress many groups of people seeking equal treatment***

Christians differ widely in how they interpret the Bible to apply to many issues, including birth control, the role of women, the right to remarry after divorce, the necessity to serve in the military if asked, the role of individual conscience as opposed to church law, etc. In this same way, some believe that the Bible condemns homosexuality; others do not.²⁴²

Some denominations (our own among them) reexamine and change church doctrines over time. Many denominations are examining the issue of full equality for gay people.

Most people who use the Bible to condemn homosexual people rely on a literal interpretation of the Scriptures. This literal interpretation is *very* selective. Passages which call for the stoning of unruly children or death for all women who are not virgins on their wedding day or giving away all one's belongings to follow Christ are usually not taken literally. The Torah alone (what we Christians refer to as the Pentateuch) contains 613 commandments, hundreds of which contemporary Jews and Christians no longer follow because they reflect the limited knowledge and understanding available thousands of years ago.

The Bible has been used to justify many forms of injustice throughout history, including slavery, racial and religious discrimination, the annihilation of native peoples, the subordination of women and, most recently, exclusion of gay people and apartheid. As C. Ann Shepherd notes, "Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. used Scripture to inspire those struggling to overcome racism at the same time others used the Bible to promote racial segregation and violence."²⁴³ Today, some Christians use the Bible to promote respect and inclusion of gay people, while other Christians use the Scriptures to exclude gay people and limit their civil rights.

Many great theologians have pointed out that it is not necessary to take the Bible literally in order to take it seriously.

50. *If Jesus never mentioned it, what does the rest of the Bible say about homosexuality?*

- *almost nothing*
- *it is not mentioned in the 10 Commandments*
- *it is not mentioned in the Summary of the Law*
- *it is not mentioned by any of the prophets*
- *it is not mentioned in the four Gospels*
- *it does not seem to be an issue in the early churches*
- *there are two references in the Holiness Code (in Leviticus): this Code maintains religious rituals and contains the ancient laws that separated Jews from Gentiles.*
- *remaining references to homosexuality include those to same-sex rape and prostitution*
- *these references to homosexual relationships do not speak about loving, committed same-sex relationships just as other references to rape and prostitution do not speak about heterosexual relationships*
- *sexual orientation is never mentioned in the Bible*

“Given the appeal to the Bible in the case of homosexuality,” writes Dr. Gomes, “one would assume that the Bible has much to say on the subject. It has not.” As Gomes observes, neither the Ten Commandments nor the Summary of the Law mention homosexuality; nor does any prophet discuss it. Jesus does not mention it, “and homosexuality does not appear to be of much concern to those early churches with which Saint Paul and his successors were involved.”²⁴⁴

Biblical references to same-sex activity that *do* exist include: condemnations of same-sex rape, condemnations of temple prostitution and sexual abuse and the regulations in what is called the “Holiness Code” that are designed to maintain the ritual purity of ancient Israel. The meaning of these verses in the context of our current understanding of sexual orientation and in the context of loving, committed relationships is now being examined. Many believers feel that these references do not shed much light on the issue of equal inclusion of gay people.

Dr. Gomes: “The biblical writers never contemplated a form of homosexuality in which loving, monogamous and faithful persons sought to live out the implications of the gospel with as much fidelity to it as any heterosexual believer. All they knew of homosexuality was prostitution, pederasty, lasciviousness, and exploitation.” As Dr. Gomes notes, such vices exist among heterosexuals as well; *to define modern-day gays and lesbians in these terms “is a cultural slander of the highest order.”*²⁴⁵

Sexual orientation is never mentioned in the Bible.

51. *What do we know of references to same-sex activity in the Bible?*

- *same-sex rape is mentioned in Sodom and Gomorrah*
- *temple prostitution is mentioned and condemned by Paul*
- *sexual abuse of slaves is mentioned and condemned by Paul*
- *the importance of “nation-building” is emphasized throughout the Bible*
- *Israel was a small, tribal, desert community. Any and all sexual activity that did not produce offspring was strictly forbidden.*
- *loving relationships between persons of the same sex are not discussed*
- *a Quaker perspective*

During Biblical times, invading armies would attempt to humiliate the men (and kings) of the conquered tribes by raping them.²⁴⁶ Homosexual rape was also a way of dominating and degrading visitors and strangers. (See, for example, the story of Sodom and Gomorrah.) We see vestiges of these brutal practices today in American prisons. These brutal acts of violence have nothing in common with consensual intimacy between gay people.²⁴⁷

Same-sex sexual activity is also mentioned in the context of temple prostitution. To the horror of ancient Israelites, some non-Jewish tribes during Biblical times had male and female prostitutes working in their temples. Paul later condemned these practices rigorously in the New Testament.²⁴⁸ However, the subject of prostitution has nothing to do with loving relationships between heterosexuals or homosexuals. Same-sex prostitution has as much to do with homosexuality as opposite-sex prostitution has to do with heterosexuality. Prostitution, regardless of what kind, is about exploitation and the selling of self.

Male adults in the Roman Empire commonly kept boy prostitutes, often as slaves. In modern times, of course, this is rightly considered a criminal offense and an egregious form of child abuse.²⁴⁹ This type of abuse was witnessed by Paul. It has nothing to do with religious and cultural inclusion of gays and lesbians. (See also Question #15.)

In the beginning of the Old Testament, condemnation of same-sex activity was linked to the desperate need of ancient Israel to increase its size and power. The Israelites were a very small and rather defenseless agrarian group, surrounded by war-like tribes. “Nation-building,” the effort to propagate and become larger and less vulnerable, was one of the most important goals of the people. At risk was the survival of Israel. This is written into the Scriptures: “Be fruitful and multiply.” It is unsurprising that anyone who did not produce offspring would be considered less valuable.

For gay people, very selective literal Biblical interpretation, removed from its historical context, has been devastating. It is still being used to justify the denial of equality and human rights. Equally disturbing, it has been used to make some gay individuals hate themselves and has blighted their relationship with God.

The Quakers use the Bible in a powerful way to examine same-sex relationships. In a December 1999 statement a Quaker group explains: “We believe that sexuality is governed by the same New Testament ethic that guides every other conduct choice for faithful Christians.

Responsibility, mutuality, love, justice, non-violence, non-domination, and non-exploitation characterize what Jesus called the ‘Kingdom of God.’ How will sexual expression of love be judged? ‘By their fruits you shall know them.’ (Mt 7:20) Does this relationship create an environment of love and justice? Does it further the creation of loving and sustaining community?”²⁵⁰

52. *Were Sodom and Gomorrah destroyed because of homosexuality?*

- *the story has been used throughout the ages to condemn gay people*
- *the sex in the story is about rape*
- *Ezekiel later clearly identifies the sin of Sodom as pride, idleness and failure to help the poor and needy*
- *many scholars (and Jesus himself!) believed that the sin of the city was a lack of hospitality to strangers, a life-threatening sin in Biblical times*

Here is the story of Sodom and Gomorrah:

Sodom was a city that God intended to destroy. It was filled with greed and materialism. As the prophet Ezekiel later proclaimed: “Behold, this was the iniquity of thy sister Sodom: pride, fullness of bread, and abundance of idleness was in her and in her daughters, neither did she strengthen the hand of the poor and needy!” (Ezekiel:16:49)

Two angels were sent to Sodom by God to warn Lot of the impending doom. Lot invited the divine travelers to stay in his home. Ancient Judaic hospitality codes required people to offer food, shelter and protection to people who were traveling. The people of Sodom did not obey this code; they were afraid their possessions would be stolen by strangers staying inside their city gates.

After the angels ate and were preparing for bed, the men of Sodom converged on Lot’s home, demanding that the angels come out so that they might know (rape) them. Rape was an ancient way to subdue and humiliate enemies. Protecting his guests, Lot did not allow the crowd to rape them, but instead offered his two virgin daughters to the angry mob. (!!)
“Behold now, I have two daughters which have not known man: let me, I pray you, bring them out unto you.”

The townspeople refused and charged at Lot. The angels pulled him back inside the house and rendered the angry crowd blind. The angels warned Lot and his family to leave the city. The family was saved except for Lot’s wife who, according to the story, looked back and was turned into a pillar of salt.

Shortly thereafter, the two daughters, fearing that they would never have children because the world had been destroyed, tricked their father into becoming drunk and sleeping with them. They each became pregnant and each bore a son.²⁵¹

Some people want to believe that the message of this story is that God hates homosexuality and plans to destroy gay people. This tradition is so strong that even the word “sodomy,” which technically means anything but very traditional sex between persons of the opposite sex, is derived from this story about the city of Sodom.

But to the extent this passage is about sexual activity at all, it is about rape, not homosexuality.²⁵² It also raises questions about the value placed on women.

Scholars believe that the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah was inhospitality (refusing to take in strangers, which was a life-threatening sin in Biblical times). The people of the town were concerned mainly with themselves and their property, closing their doors to strangers traveling through the desert.

Three thousand years later, when Jesus talked about the destruction of Sodom, He indicated that it was destroyed because it was a place lacking hospitality. Dr. Gomes: “In the New Testament, Jesus himself is under the impression that Sodom was destroyed because it was a place lacking hospitality; we find him saying as much in Matthew 10:14-15 and in Luke 10:10-12.”²⁵³ In neither passage does Jesus mention the topic of homosexuality when He refers to the cities; rather, he speaks about the lack of welcome and rejection of strangers.

Dr. Gomes: “*What is revealing about all this is that nowhere in the Old or New Testaments is the sin of Sodom, the cause of its sudden and terrible destruction, equated with homosexuals or homosexuality.*”²⁵⁴

53. What is the Holiness Code?

- ***a set of specific rules and guidelines for religious behavior in ancient Israel***
- ***the Code was designed to promote cultural identity within Judaism***
- ***most contemporary Jews and Christians no longer follow most of this Code***
- ***Jesus set new standards for what it means to be holy***

The Holiness Codes of the Old Testament, in which the two verses against homosexual activity are found, were “rules designed for a very particular purpose in a very particular setting.”²⁵⁵ They were a guide for the ancient Jews to help them build their nation and distinguish themselves from the Canaanites, whose land they had been given by God. The context was a listing of rules for ritual purity which would promote cultural identity, protection, procreation and the advancement of Judaism.

The Codes contain hundreds of commandments which contemporary Jews and Christians no longer follow or which prescribe behavior which is illegal in today’s society. For example, the Codes mandate the death sentence for non-virginal brides, the stoning to death of unruly children, the death sentence for adultery, etc.

As Reverend Howard Bess notes, “[b]iblical scholars agree that the Holiness Codes include material that is cultural and cultic.” Workers must be paid wages on the day of their labor. A

cloth must never contain two types of yarn. Tattoos are forbidden. Horoscopes and mediums are forbidden and use of them is named an abomination and punishable by death. An unbetrothed woman raped by a man must become his wife and stay with him forever. Bigamy is acceptable. Handicapped persons may not approach the altar of God. Those who shave their beards or wear round haircuts are condemned. Slavery is endorsed, but not tolerance or mercy for the vanquished.²⁵⁶

In addition to a verse calling same-sex behavior an abomination, there are verses which term other behaviors abominations as well. It is an abomination for women to wear clothing which is traditionally worn by men. Eating pork and shellfish is an abomination. People who even touch the skin of a pig (a football?) are condemned.²⁵⁷

It is the admonition found in Leviticus: “You shall not lie with a male as with a woman.” that is used to condemn gay people. The context of the prohibition (to separate the Jews from the practices of neighboring peoples, to propagate and build up the nation of Israel, to have as many children as humanly possible) is not taken into account. Nor is the fact that hundreds of other commandments and prohibitions are quite naturally disregarded by Christians and Jews today.

As observed by Bess, Christians “give priority to the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth over the Old Testament. Jesus set new standards for what it means to be holy.”²⁵⁸ He followed particular Old Testament laws and openly rejected and defied others, “rais[ing] justice, mercy, kindness, and love to new heights.”²⁵⁹ He taught that we should examine ancient laws as to their continual purpose. For example, it was against the Law to heal on the Sabbath. When Jesus healed on the Sabbath, his “sin” outraged the legalistic religious leaders.

To selectively choose to interpret literally a passage from Leviticus in order to condemn a minority group, while ignoring hundreds of other passages, seems designed more to hurt gay people than to seek the truth for all humanity. Many people find such selective interpretation to be theologically unsound, intellectually indefensible and reflective of a prior prejudice.

54. What about the teachings of Paul regarding homosexuality?

- ***the only references in the New Testament to same-sex behavior are found in the writings of Paul***
- ***there are no references to the subject by Jesus or others who knew Jesus.***
- ***Paul wrote some of the most beautiful passages in the Bible***
- ***however, some of Paul’s teachings regarding slavery, marriage, and women are deeply rooted in the culture of his time and his legalistic Judaic upbringing***

The only references to same-sex behavior in the New Testament are found in the writings of Paul. Dr. Gomes notes that the only form of homosexuality of which Paul was aware had to do with “pederasty and male prostitution.”²⁶⁰ He continues: “All Paul knew of homosexuality was the debauched pagan expression of it. He cannot be condemned for that ignorance, but neither should his ignorance be an excuse for our own.”²⁶¹

Paul infused Judaic teachings into his own writings in the New Testament. Paul believed Jesus would come again during his lifetime so he advised Christian men not to marry because the end of the world was at hand.

He perpetuated the ancient place of women in the church, admonishing them to cover their heads and keep silent. To some people, Paul's writings serve as "proof" that women should not hold office in churches today. He taught that women must obey their husbands.

Paul also wrote in Ephesians that slaves must obey their masters and do so cheerfully. The obedient slave, Paul wrote, will find his or her reward in heaven. (These are the famous passages quoted so often during the Civil War to justify slavery.) Slave owners were not defensive about owning slaves. On the contrary, they believed that the Bible (and Paul) taught that slavery was part of God's plan for mankind.

Dr. Gomes: *"Those who wished to challenge the morality of slavery found that they had to challenge both the authority and the interpretation of scripture. They found also that it was not as easy as it might appear, for . . . the biblical case for slavery was both strong and consistent."*²⁶²

Although in other passages Paul writes some of the most beautiful and empowering words in the New Testament, he also carried with him much of the culture and legalistic Judaic teachings of his day. Paul, the great Apostle, was a man of his time.

55. When reading the Bible, how does one use the historical perspective? (More thoughts to ponder about the Holiness Code and the teachings of Jesus)

In our group we found that the need to examine our own beliefs and our search through the Bible brought into great relief what we did and did not know about the Scriptures. This was one of the most compelling and enjoyable parts of our journey.

We found that, in seeking isolated verses as "proof" that the Bible supports a particular opinion, one can find verses to support any view on almost any topic. We learned about the importance of reading the Scriptures with an understanding of their historical context.

Commandments in the Holiness Code at one time served a vital function. All have their origin in the early years of Judaism more than 5,000 years ago. They were deemed necessary for the physical survival and propagation of the small religious community. The proper cooking and storage of foods was not well understood; leprosy and contagious diseases were common and lethal; any sexual activity that did not produce children threatened their very survival. It is hard for us to imagine how difficult life must have been for these early tribal people.

Contemporary Judaism has become one of the world's most ardent proponents of equality for all people. Tradition informs the religion, but interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures (what we call the Old Testament) is not taken literally or out of historical context. The Convention of the Central Conference of American Rabbis stated in 1996: "Consistent with our Jewish commitment to the fundamental principal that we are all created in the divine image, the Reform Movement has been in the vanguard for the full recognition of equality for lesbians and gays in society."²⁶³ Conservative Judaism has also taken steps toward the recognition of gay and lesbian equality by allowing for the ordination of openly gay rabbis and by permitting same-sex commitment ceremonies.²⁶⁴

To underscore the importance of using an historical perspective, we list the following as just a few examples of commandments from the Holiness Codes which are *not* taken literally by most contemporary Jews and Christians. In terms of our society's current understanding of the world, we recognize that many of the following are not only personally upsetting, but they call for activity which is illegal in today's culture.

On plundering and pillaging neighboring tribes:

These early laws included the rules of war for taking land and possessions from other tribes, granting Israel the same rights as their neighbors to loot and plunder the homes and villages of the vanquished.

It was unlawful to show mercy or kindness to those defeated in battle.

Slavery was endorsed.

On women and children:

Any woman found not to be a virgin on her wedding day had to be stoned to death.

Any woman caught in adultery met the same fate.

Hebrew parents were instructed to bring unruly children to the Temple where the religious Elders were to stone them to death in public view.

Bigamy was acceptable as long as all the wives of Hebrew men were also Hebrew.

Women were not allowed to participate in worship.

It was an abomination for women to wear the same type of clothing that men wore.

A woman who was raped had to marry her attacker and could not be divorced from him.

On daily life:

Men who shaved their beards were condemned.

Anyone bearing a physical handicap could not approach the altar of God.

Anyone with a rash on their skin was to be expelled from the community.

It was unlawful (and punishable by death) to seek a prediction of the future from a medium or by observing the movement of the stars (today's horoscope).

It was unlawful to weave two types of yarn into the same cloth (today's blended fabrics).

It was unlawful (an abomination) to eat shellfish and pork and it was against these same religious laws to touch anything made from the skin of a pig (today's football).

Commerce or work of any kind on the Sabbath was strictly forbidden.

The Holiness Code can be seen in the context of helping to sustain and increase the small nation of Israel in a difficult and hostile world.

It was into this context, 3000 years later, that Jesus was born.

Ancient religious leaders felt that the observance of these laws was the only means of salvation for a people of God. As a young Jewish rabbi, Jesus felt otherwise. He taught that the Kingdom of God is within and that salvation comes through the grace of God.

Jesus taught about love, fidelity, forgiveness, mutual honor, and the qualities of the Spirit which sustain and nurture all human relationships and our relationship with God.

56. How might families feel when their full acceptance of gay loved ones conflicts with an exclusionary church policy?

- *affirming families see no conflict between the Gospel and equal inclusion of all people*
- *affirming families are optimistic about the future*

Discrimination against gay people is not based on the teaching and example of Christ, but on misinformation, *very* selective literal interpretation of the Bible and the antigay bias of society. We see no conflict between the Gospel and the full and equal treatment of all human beings.

On the contrary, we believe that those who reject others in the name of a religion based on love *do* face a serious ethical dilemma. Intolerance hurts us all. When even a single person must deny his or her identity or live a diminished life in order to be treated equally, we are all diminished.

Silence, denial and exclusion are not our traditional Presbyterian values. They are certainly not remotely connected to the message of love that Jesus taught us. As Christians we are called to help the oppressed, not to lead the attack against them. Currently, gay believers are often treated as merely “tolerable” second-class citizens; they may be invited to worship, but are denied equality and wholeness. We have seen in our own families the effects of such exclusion. They are deadly, far-reaching and long-lasting.

We believe that God’s invitation and grace come freely and directly from the Creator and are not dependent upon committees, task forces or consensus within denominations.

It is very powerful to witness the age-old oppression endured by gay people break apart in our lifetime before our very eyes. Typically, gay friendly religious people are much more worried about the future and legacy of the church than their own future which, in spite of a considerable struggle ahead, seems very bright.

We close with a favorite passage from Isaiah:

Is not this the sort of fast that pleases me
—it is the Lord God who speaks—
to break unjust fetters
and undo the thongs of the yoke,

to let the oppressed go free
and break every yoke,
to share your bread with the hungry,
and shelter the homeless poor,

to clothe the man you see to be naked
and not turn from your own kin?
Then will the light shine like the dawn
and your wound be quickly healed over.

Your integrity will go before you
and the glory of God behind you.
Cry, and God will answer;
call, and He will say, “I am here.”

If you do away with the yoke,
the clenched fist, the wicked word,
if you give your bread to the hungry,
and relief to the oppressed,

your light will rise in the darkness,
and your shadows become like noon.
God will always guide you,
giving you relief in desert places.

He will give strength to your bones,
and you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water
whose waters never run dry.

You will rebuild the ancient ruins,
build up on the old foundations. (58: 6-12)

Welcoming and Affirming Religious Groups Within Christian Denominations:

Presbyterian

More Light Presbyterians: www.mlp.org
The Covenant Network: www.covenantnetwork.org
That All May Freely Serve: www.tamfs.org
The Witherspoon Society: www.witherspoonsociety.org

United Methodist

Reconciling Methodist Congregations, Affirmation: www.umaffirm.org

Episcopalian

Integrity: www.integrityusa.org

Lutheran

Lutherans Concerned: www.lcna.org

Catholic

Dignity: www.dignityusa.org

Baptist

Welcoming and Affirming Baptists: www.wabaptists.org

Seventh-Day Adventist – Seventh-Day Adventist Kinship International, Inc.
www.sdakinship.org

Unitarian Universalist An inclusive denomination.

www.uua.org

United Church of Christ (Congregational)

United Church of Christ also administers – the Open and Affirming Program
An inclusive denomination. www.ucc.org

Mormons (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints)

Affirmation: www.affirmation.org

United Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Church

An inclusive denomination. www.ufmcc.com

Christian Science

Emergence International www.emergence-international.org

Brethren/Mennonite

Brethren/Mennonite Council for Lesbian and Gay Concerns
www.wbmclgbt.org

Quakers

Friends for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Concerns www.quaker.org/flgbtqc

Evangelicals Concerned with Reconciliation www.ecwr.org

Within Judaism:

Conservative Judaism supports equal rights for gays and lesbians; welcomes them at synagogues; allows the ordination of openly gay rabbis; and permits congregations to hold commitment ceremonies for same-sex couples.

Reform Jews do not discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation and accept gay and lesbian rabbis. Reform rabbis may bless unions between same-sex couples.

Affirming Resources Within the Secular World

The following resources have information for individuals and families.

For Support and Advocacy for Families and Allies:

Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays: www.pflag.org

PFLAG has resources for gay people of African descent, Asian Pacific people, Latino/a people, Native American people and people of Japanese descent.

For Support, Advocacy and Educational Resources:

Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network: www.glsen.org

For Support, Education, Public Awareness and Human Rights Advocacy:

Human Rights Campaign: www.hrc.org

National Gay and Lesbian Task Force: www.nglftf.org

Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation: www.glaad.org

Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund: www.lambdalegal.org

Servicemembers Legal Defense Network: www.sldn.org

The Anti-Violence Project: www.avp.org

Amnesty International: www.amnesty.org

Southern Poverty Law Center: www.splcenter.org (monitors hate groups which target minorities)

Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network, www.glsen.org

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