

Whosoever Believes: LGBT Inclusion in Christian Communities

Kathryn Baxter

Honors Capstone

Advisor: Professor Robert Connelly

Spring 2011

University Honors in Public Communications (School of Communication)

Background

June 28, 1969 is a landmark day in the history of gay rights. This date marks the Stonewall Uprising, a moment when lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) Americans stood up in the face of police brutality and – symbolically – a broader societal oppression to assert their identities as just as valuable as their heterosexual, cisgendered peers. In the decades that followed, LGBT people fought for their equality on a number of fronts, including non-discrimination laws, federal employment, recognition in the media, resources during the HIV/AIDS epidemic and more. But they didn't do so without opposition.

With Stonewall came increased visibility for the gay rights movement. Gays and lesbians became more public with their identities and their demands for equality. But as in physics, every reaction has an equal and opposite reaction. With the visibility and outspokenness of the emerging movement, came a counter-movement that matched it almost move for move. This counter-movement was conservative, religious, and often Republican. It was a powerful force that would stymie LGBT progress for years and in fact still continues to this day.

The tension between organized religion – specifically Christian religions – and LGBT people is nothing new. From the beginning of American history, religion has shaped people's attitudes to believe homosexuality was unnatural and a sin. It was not viewed as an orientation similar to heterosexuality, but rather as a singular act that could be avoided or forgiven (if it was not avoided). (Steele) In more recent years, right-wing Christian leaders have stood as ardent opponents to equality for LGBT Americans. The Moral Majority founded in 1979 by Jerry Falwell is perhaps the epitome of organized opposition to LGBT equality motivated by religion. The group was successful in both coalescing and politicizing otherwise scattered efforts into a

considerable force that fought against LGBT equality on a triple front: socially, religiously, and politically. (Bull and Gallagher)

Although fighting LGBT equality was not the sole purpose of Falwell's organization, the group lobbied for a number of issues important to evangelical Christians, including anti-homosexual stances. In a 1981 letter, Falwell wrote, "Please remember, homosexuals do not reproduce! They recruit! And, many of them are out after my children and your children..." (Adam) With Falwell and his colleagues like James Dobson of Focus on the Family and Pat Robertson of the Christian Voice as spokesmen, it is no wonder the public face of Christianity is one of virulent homophobia.

Anita Bryant was one powerful Christian individual working against gay and lesbian equality whose efforts were multiplied by the formation of the Moral Majority. In the 1970s, Bryant's "Save Our Children" campaign sought to keep gay teachers out of schools, worked to end anti-discrimination protections for LGBT people, and opposed homosexuality across the country. Bryant made her born-again Christian beliefs an obvious aspect of her identity and used these beliefs as one of her rationales for opposing anti-discrimination measures. She once said, in reference to her anti-equality work, "This is not my battle. It's God's battle." (Steele)

In more recent history, ex-gay ministries are another disturbing symptom of the toxic relationship between Christians and LGBT individuals. These programs claim they can produce a "sudden, radical, complete change" in turning people from gay or lesbian to straight. Exodus International is one of the largest ex-gay ministry groups in the country with a million dollar annual operating budget and over 100 affiliated ministries or counselors. Exodus and other organizations like it use methods such as prayer, hypnosis, drugs like Prozac, reparative

therapy, and “sports therapy” to “turn” clients heterosexual. (Truth Wins Out) On the Riddle homophobia scale, these actions of needing to change gay and lesbian individuals to act straight rank on the highest degree of homophobia: “repulsion”. (Riddle)

Introduction

Because the topic of LGBT inclusivity in Christian communities is so broad, this capstone will focus on three main case studies of efforts different denominations have made to make their institutions more welcoming. Each case study will provide a brief historical analysis of the denomination in reference to LGBT issues, a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis of the denomination and where it stands in its current capacity to change, and finally, an analysis of one effort the denomination has made to improve its inclusion of LGBT individuals. Finally, the conclusion will draw upon these three case studies to create a list of “best practices” that activists can use to transform their own Christian communities, based on successes and lessons learned from these three denominations’ past efforts.

Explanation of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force’s guide to welcoming churches

While some churches and Christians still espouse homophobia – either on a personal or on an institutional basis – others are beginning to embrace LGBT Christians as a valuable part of a diverse congregation. These efforts have varied in scope, size, geographic location, cost, and many more factors. The study of how churches can foster congregations that are welcoming and affirming is not entirely new. In fact, in order to help guide these faith communities towards an LGBT-inclusive culture, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force’s Institute for Welcoming Resources has released a guide called “Building an Inclusive Church: A Welcoming

Toolkit.” The process, as laid out by this toolkit, includes fourteen steps in two major categories. First, the toolkit makes recommendations for “laying the groundwork”. This section outlines steps advocates should take before ever “going public” to the entire congregation, including things like gathering background information, choosing a frame for the conversation, and outlining how the process should work. The second major phase is “taking it public” which means exactly that – bringing the idea of LGBT inclusivity to the entire congregation and building support and momentum from there. The steps for this phase range from building relationships within the congregation to celebrating and publicizing. (Voelkel) Rather than repeating the findings of this Toolkit, this capstone will use the Toolkit as a blueprint for understanding how to analyze past efforts to build LGBT-welcoming churches and offer insight to churches who want to implement these plans in the future.

Case study: Baptist communities in Tennessee

Historical background of the Baptist Church

The Southern Baptist Convention was formed in 1845 when its members split with Northern Baptists over the issue of slavery. The SBC is the second largest Christian denomination in the US (after the Catholic Church) with over 16 million members. (“About the Southern...”)

A root factor in why the Baptist church is so opposed to LGBT equality is that they believe there is a Biblical basis for their anti-equality beliefs, due to the Baptists’ belief in a literal interpretation of the Bible. The belief in a strict, literal interpretation of the Bible is a core part of the Baptist doctrine. Similar to the way that some Supreme Court justices view the Constitution as a living, breathing document while others believe it should be interpreted

exactly as written centuries ago, different Christian denominations have different beliefs about how the Bible should be interpreted. Therefore, unlike some other denominations that prefer to read these certain conservative passages as appropriate for their time but now defunct, the Baptists read these verses as relevant, every bit as applicable today as the time period in which they were first written. ("About the Southern...")

Christians who oppose homosexuality based on religion and Scripture usually reference about five or six passages in the Bible that refer to or have been interpreted to refer to homosexuality. One of the most prominent is a passage from Leviticus 20:13, which says "if a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination, they shall be put to death, their blood is upon them." This passage is perhaps the reason the word "abomination" has become such a cornerstone of the way some Christians discuss LGBT issues. (Chellew-Hodge)

Another passage from the Bible often used to condemn homosexuality is the story of Sodom and Gomorrah from Genesis 19. In fact, the lesson of this passage has been linked to homosexuality for so long that the word "sodomy" used to describe anal or oral intercourse derives from the city in this story. There are four or five other passages that obliquely sexuality and have consequently been used to oppose LGBT people, but these two passages are the most prominent parts of the Bible that LGBT opponents point to in defending their viewpoints. (Chellew-Hodge)

Beyond just denouncing gay and lesbians in sermons and in Bible discussion groups, the Baptist opposition to LGBT people is actually written into the Southern Baptist Church's official policies. Any SBC church "is disqualified from being a member if it '[acts] to affirm, approve or

endorse homosexual behavior.” (Riley) This became an issue when the SBC board had to decide how to deal with Baptist churches that were members of “The Alliance of Baptists” – a pro-LGBT Baptist group that advocates on progressive issues, including support for same-sex marriage. The eventual decision was to not remove all member churches from the SBC but rather to judge each church on a case-by-case basis. This decision was made in late February 2011 and as of yet, no decisions have been made about how many churches will be removed from the SBC for their affiliation with the Alliance.

The Baptist Church is no stranger to political involvement; in fact, as mentioned above, Baptist individuals and institutions were some of the first Christians to take part in the intermingling of religious and political beliefs. That tradition continues to this day. For example, just last year the Southern Baptist church passed a resolution at its annual meeting decrying the possible repeal of Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell. The resolution stated, “The Bible describes homosexual behavior as both a contributing cause and a consequence of God’s judgment on nations and individuals” before continuing on to list secular reasons for opposing the repeal, such as “unit cohesion and combat readiness.” (Smietana)

This case study specifically looks at efforts by pro-equality activists in Tennessee, working mostly in Baptist communities. According to analysis from the Pew Research Center, Tennessee ranks fifth in the nation in terms of how many citizens consider religion “very important” in their lives, sixth both in terms of people who attend religious services once a week and how frequently they pray, and fourth in terms of people who express a belief in God.

(Pew Research Center) Comparatively, Tennessee has a constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage.

SWOT Analysis

Strengths:

While some denominations believe that politics and religion should remain entirely separate spheres, the Baptist church is not one of them. As mentioned above, the Baptist church has a long history of involving itself politically on issues it feels are relevant to theology. Baptists are commonly referred to and refer to themselves as “Evangelicals”. The primary definition of this word is “of or according to the teaching of the gospel or the Christian religion”, but the secondary, more general definition (“zealous in advocating something”) is also applicable to the Baptist faith. (Oxford Dictionaries)

The Baptist Faith and Message demonstrates that the belief in sharing one’s views on faith is not just a cultural norm, but rather a cornerstone of the Baptist faith. It says, “It is the duty and privilege of every follower of Christ and of every church of the Lord Jesus Christ to endeavor to make disciples of all nations... it is the duty of every child of God to seek constantly to win the lost to Christ by verbal witness...” (“The Baptist Faith...”)

Another strength for LGBT activists in the Baptist community is that there is a group, albeit small, that questions and directly contradicts some of the principles of the Baptist church on the issue of homosexuality. This group still encompasses the Baptist tradition of political action, but is a self-described “movement of progressive Christians”. They take on issues such

as the death penalty (also linking it to racism and class issues), environmental issues such as the Gulf oil spill and climate change, travel restrictions to Cuba, and same-sex marriage (in favor). Specifically, in their statement regarding same-sex marriage, the group says, "We specifically reject the proposed amendments to the constitution of the United States and state constitutions that would enshrine discrimination against sexual minorities and define marriage in such a way as to deny same-sex couples a legal framework in which to provide for one another and those entrusted to their care." ("Statement On...") As previously mentioned, the group has not been welcomed with open arms in the mainstream Baptist community as their membership in the SBC has been called into question. However, the group's very existence is a challenge to the seemingly heterogeneous beliefs of the SBC and its member congregations. (Riley)

Weaknesses:

The Baptist church's opposition to LGBT people is not just cultural or historical, but is in fact clearly written into the official Southern Baptist philosophy. Their position statement on sexuality states that "Homosexuality is not a 'valid alternative lifestyle.' The Bible condemns it as sin." ("SBC Position...")

Another challenge to the possibility of LGBT inclusion in the Baptist church is that the church's conservative views are slow to change, particularly when connected to social issues. For example, women are still barred from being pastors in the Baptist faith. By comparison, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America made the change to ordain women in 1970, the

Episcopal Church made the change in 1976, and some United Methodist churches began ordaining women as early as the 1920s. (Robinson)

All of these changes in the doctrines of other denominations coincided with societal changes on the issue of women's rights (i.e. suffrage in the 1920s and general women's rights in the 1970s). These churches transformed in response to the social movements of the time and these same denominations are showing their continued responsiveness by reconsidering positions on LGBT issues in light of the modern gay rights movement. However, other denominations – such as the Baptists – have a history of resisting change in the face of social reform that works against LGBT activists working to reform the Baptist church.

Opportunity

White Evangelical Protestant (non-Catholic) Christians are significantly less likely to think they know a gay person than White “mainline” Protestants. Increased coming out of community and family members could lead more Baptists to shift their views on gay rights issues. There is certainly evidence to demonstrate that knowing a person who is gay correlates with pro-equality views on LGBT issues. For example, a 2008 Pew Research Center study shows that support for firing gay teachers (a holdout issue from the Anita Bryant days of the 1970s) is as high as 38 percent among people who say they do not have a gay family member or friend, but less than half of that (15 percent) among people who do. Similarly, support for gay marriage is more than double for people who know a gay person compared to those who say they don't (55 percent versus 25 percent). This evidence strongly suggests that Baptist church members'

knowledge that neighbors, friends, and fellow parishioners are LGBT-identified could indeed be a factor in shifting viewpoints towards equality. (Neidorf and Morin)

Threats

As has been mentioned several times before, the connection between conservative politicians (usually Republicans) and the Baptist church is so great that at times it is almost impossible to separate the two. Conservative politicians count on using social issues (such as same sex marriage) to drum up the support of a large voting bloc on election day and Baptists and other conservative Christians in turn count on these politicians to legislate according to this group's religious values. The power and influence that comes from the connection between these two groups means that any shift in the Baptist community on LGBT issues will resonate in a much wider way than simply in the pews and the pulpit.

The geographic location of the majority of Baptist churches and, more specifically, the social values prevalent in these areas mean that Baptist reformers face challenges not only in the pews, but also in the neighborhoods right outside their church's doors. Although SBC has churches in 41 different states, it still has a major concentration of members and congregations in the South. These states tend to have strong religious views and politically tend to lean more Republican (a party to that is rarely friendly to LGBT rights and issues.) According to research from the Pew Center, of the top ten states whose citizens say that religion is very important in their lives, nine are states in the Southeast United States. (Mississippi ranks at the top with 82% saying religion is "very important" in their lives.) ("How Religious Is...") This social atmosphere in which Baptist churches often operate means that aversion to LGBT people can extend

beyond a church's walls and into the greater community. A church is less likely to feel the push to change, and in fact may be more likely to keep its practices the same, when it observes little to no pressure from the wider community to do anything differently.

Religion and political opposition to LGBT rights can be linked in several different ways. For example, sixty percent of people who oppose same-sex marriage say that religion is the most important influence on their opinion. Furthermore, among white Protestants, there is a considerable gap between evangelicals and mainline Protestants on gay rights issues like same-sex marriage and gays and lesbians in the military. On the latter issue, 47 percent of evangelicals oppose an inclusive military while less than half (21 percent) of mainline Protestants say the same. Similarly, 71 percent of white evangelicals oppose same sex marriage while only 38 percent of white mainline Protestants do. ("Mainline Protestant...")

LGBT progress in Baptist communities

Needless to say, there is no denomination-wide effort to build more inclusive Baptist churches for LGBT people, given the challenges presented above. However, this has not stopped some individual activists from taking action. Their strategy depended on building a network of other people and churches that cared about social justice. For example, in Tennessee, Baptists who wanted to reform their churches relies heavily on input and support from non-faith affiliated LGBT rights groups. These individuals were most successful when they tied the idea of LGBT inclusivity to other, less controversial, social issues. For example, these individuals gained ground in historically African-American churches by making the connection to black economic justice (both as examples of social justice based on a distinguishing

characteristic.) These reformers also worked with church groups that were active on the issue of HIV/AIDS. By relying on networks of social activists, it's likely these leaders managed to tap into the already more liberal pockets of the Baptist church, thereby finding the most likely allies to LGBT equality. Because of the Baptist church's opposition to LGBT equality, this work was done on a congregation-by-congregation basis and still was not entirely successful in yielding results. (Thistlethwaite)

Case Study: The Evangelical Lutheran Church of America

Historical background of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America

The Evangelical Lutheran Church of America was formed in 1988, bringing together three formerly separated, but similar, Lutheran denominations. The ELCA is now composed of over 4.8 million members in over 10,500 congregations across the country. The largest synods (regional organizations that serve as an intermediary between individual congregations and the church-wide organizations) are located in Minnesota and the Midwest. ("History of...")

In recent years, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA) has taken a number of significant (though not uncontroversial) steps to change its overarching policies that once limited the full participation of LGBT people in the denomination. For example, in 2008 the ELCA voted to allow openly gay and lesbian people to serve as clergy. This decision came down to a narrow vote and since then, a number of congregations have left the ELCA in protest of the outcome. Despite this opposition, in 2010 the ELCA went further to reinstate clergy who had been removed due to their sexual orientation or for blessing same-sex unions, to allow people in gay or lesbian relationships to serve in other rostered positions, and to add same-sex partners and families to ELCA pension plans. Following these decisions the ELCA issued a

statement saying, “These actions are important because they are a major milestone along the journey of full inclusion... what some people have dismissed as a narrow issue has both opened up and profoundly deepened our moral and theological life.” (Love) These policies are similar to LGBT-inclusive policies include the Episcopal Church of America, the United Church of Christ, the Metropolitan Community Church, and the Presbyterian Church of America.

Despite this progress in breaking down institutional barriers to LGBT participation in the Lutheran church, the decision did not come without consequences. Following the 2008 decision to allow gays and lesbians to openly serve as clergy, some congregations were so upset by the verdict that they chose to leave the ELCA altogether and create a new organization – the North American Lutheran Church (NALC). Since the church became official in August 2010, almost 200 congregations have voted to leave the ELCA and join the NALC. (Rowley)

Even in the face of conflict and losing certain churches, the ELCA has continued to push for progressive policies that support LGBT individuals and their families. For example, the church has gone on to extend financial benefits to partners and same-sex spouses, similar to efforts that corporations and the government have been taking to update their policies in the face of legal recognition for some LGBT partnerships. (Love)

Lutherans are among the more moderate Protestant denominations that interpret passages from the same Bible that the Baptists use in slightly more open-minded ways. For example, when the Leviticus passage which calls homosexuality an “abomination” is considered in context, other “abominations” that are now acceptable in most Christian churches include tattoos, eating pork, wearing clothes made from more than one type of fabric, or planting a

field with more than one type of plant. Similarly, while Christians with conservative views tend to see the tale of Sodom and Gomorrah as a lesson about homosexuality, an alternative interpretation regards the story as a lesson about hospitality. (Chellew-Hodge) These alternative interpretations suggest that it is possible for a Christian to support LGBT equality while also believing in the teachings of the Bible.

SWOT Analysis

Strengths

One strength of this movement in the Lutheran church is that LGBT issues are being proactively discussed, rather than shoved issues under a rug. It's difficult to create change if no one even wants to talk about the topic, but LGBT issues have become a very acceptable topic of discussion in Lutheran circles. Any activist who is afraid to raise the issue in their own faith community must only turn to the national ELCA leadership to see that the conversation has already started.

A related strength is that not only is the Lutheran church talking about LGBT issues, but the trend of its policy changes in recent years have been swaying towards LGBT equality.(Love) These changes build up a momentum that make it easier to push for inclusive policies with each pro-equality decision the church makes.

Weaknesses

Although these changes in policy are certainly good for LGBT people who can now work and participate in faith environments in a more inclusive way, there is a risk that since LGBT

issues have already been addressed on the national scale in the Lutheran church, that there is no need to do it on a congregation-by-congregation basis. The pro-LGBT Lutheran group Lutherans Concerned shares this fear and therefore encourages churches to affirm their support of the national ELCA's actions by becoming a Reconciling in Christ congregation. (Murray)

Opportunities

Although the creation of the North American Lutheran Church is evidence of a divide in thinking within the Lutheran church, the new denomination purges anti-equality Lutherans from churches, meaning there may be less resistance if the churches that remain in the ELCA choose to pursue pro-LGBT initiatives. If people or congregations who are opposed to LGBT inclusion are presented a legitimate (still Lutheran) alternative to their now pro-LGBT church, they may choose to defect rather than stay in a church with which they disagree and argue the issue.

Threats

Of course, the creation of the North American Lutheran Church does lend legitimacy to the idea that anti-LGBT sentiment is still welcome in Christian communities. It also builds a stronger counter-movement as churches and individuals move to this new denomination, mostly based on the issue of LGBT policies.

And although the first letter in ELCA stands for "Evangelical", Lutherans do not have a culture of social activism or loudly expressing their beliefs to others. Instead, they tend to

remain relatively quiet about their views and generally hold a “to each is/her own” attitude.

This means that even if Lutherans do hold pro-LGBT views, they are not likely to bring up contentious issues and are less likely to try to persuade people of other opinions.

The Reconciling in Christ movement

The Lutheran process to becoming a church that is recognized by the synod as an LGBT-inclusive body is through a program called “Reconciling in Christ.” This process is a flexible one that asks only one requirement of churches wishing to officially be considered an LGBT-welcoming church—the church must adopt the “affirmation of welcome.” Even this affirmation of welcome is not a universal text, but rather the ELCA provides eight different sample texts that can be used word-for-word or modified to fit an individual church’s needs. The only requirement of this affirmation is that it specifically mentions that the congregation welcomes people of all sexual orientations and gender identities. A sample affirmation of welcome reads:

“ [Church name] is a community of the people of God, called to minister to all people. We believe that the Gospel is God’s gift to all people, to be shared unconditionally, without regard to sexual orientation, gender identity, cultural or ethnic background, physical or mental abilities, socio-economic or family status, gender or ages. We welcome gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people, their partners and their families. Christ calls us to reconciliation and wholeness. We are challenged by the Gospel to be agents of healing within our society. We affirm, with the apostle Paul, that in Christ, “there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male or female. Christ has made us one.” (Galatians 3:28) We pledge to ourselves and to all the others, that we will strive to live as a reconciling people in our life together and in our outreach to the world.” (“Sample Affirmations...”)

Seven of the eight sample affirmation texts provided by the Reconciling in Christ movement choose to list the church’s welcoming of LGBT members in the context of its welcoming of people of different races, economic backgrounds, ages, etc. (“Sample

Affirmations...”) This choice of wording frames the issue of LGBT inclusion as no different than the inclusion of people of different races or ages. While the Bible certainly comments on issues like race and class, these groups are not excluded from the Christian community for that reason. Making the connection between LGBT people and other groups that face discrimination can help church members understand what their exclusion might feel like.

Case study: The Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations

Historical background of the Unitarian Universalists

The Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations was formed in 1961 when two denominations – Universalists and Unitarians – consolidated into one church. The UUA is made up of 1,041 congregations with almost 200,000 members. (UUA: About the Unitarian...)

A glance at UUA’s seven guiding principles make it easy to see why LGBT-inclusion and, more than that, social activism on issues of LGBT inclusion fit so fluidly into this denomination. The first of these principles explains that the church believes in “the inherent worth and dignity of every person”. Another encourages “acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations.” Looking at these two principles alone, it is obvious that the very values system of UUA is significantly different from the Baptists or even the Lutherans. And a third principle explicitly institutionalizes the church’s culture of social activism and concrete action on these issues, espousing “the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large.” (UUA: Our Universalist...) Reading this principles it is obvious that a UUA congregation working to make pro-LGBT reforms would be in line with the denomination’s principles and values.

But the church's institutional support for these issues does not end with a list of guiding principles. UUA has an entire Office of Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian and Transgender Concerns, which both supports LGBT inclusion and programming within congregations and advocacy in the rest of the world. One example of this is the church's strong work on the issue of gay marriage. In an example that is both relevant and recent, UUA President Rev. Peter Morales and former UUA President Rev. Bill Sinkford were the first leaders in the faith community to sign the letter to President Obama supporting the freedom to marry. ("Say, 'I Do'...")

This denomination has a long history of progressive policies regarding LGBT individuals, making positive strides for these groups decades before other Christian denominations. For instance, since 1970 the UUA has passed resolutions on issues like non-discriminatory hiring based on sexual orientation and education on LGBT issues. (To put these actions into a historical perspective, this was only a year after the Stonewall Uprising and the same decade that conservative Christians became organized in a political way to oppose LGBT rights, culminating in the founding of Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority.) In the midst of the HIV/AIDS crisis in the 1980s, the UUA took part in advocacy concerning this health crisis. And in 1996, eight years before Massachusetts would become the first state in the United States to legalize same-sex marriage, the UUA would become the first Christian denomination to publically come out in support of legal recognition of these partnerships in the form of marriage. ("UUA: Office of...")

SWOT Analysis

Strengths

Similar to the way that opposition to homosexuality is a written part of the Baptist church's beliefs, the UUA has maintained its support for LGBT people in its official written documents. Their official church statements assert "We believe that our first statement, respecting "the inherent worth and dignity of every person," applies equally to people of all sexual orientations and gender identities/ gender expressions." ("UUA: Our Unitarian...")

Furthermore, the culture of the UUA is centered around social activism. As mentioned above, one of the religion's principles firmly asserts that involvement in the democratic process is a responsible way to act out the desire for social change.

Weaknesses

The UUA is not an entirely recognized Christian denomination because it does not regard the Bible as the *only* holy book. In terms of mainstream Christian denominations, the UUA is seen as slightly outside the mainstream. As a result, this denomination does not necessarily have the same clout among religious groups that another, more traditional denomination may have in shifting the debate.

Opportunities

LGBT issues are coming up now at both the state and federal levels, especially the question of marriage, making the UUA's Standing on the Side of Love campaign (which supports same-sex marriage) both timely and capable of producing some change. It is not as if this campaign strives to lobby on an issue that is too forward-thinking that no one is even talking about it yet. Same-sex marriage and civil union legislation have been slowly building

momentum in the past few years. The UUA is working in a political climate that has same-sex marriage on its radar, giving these activists an opportunity to shift the debate.

Threats

The Standing on the Side of Love movement is only a couple of years old (officially founded in 2009) which means it may not have the institutional strength and organization to take on some conservative Christian movements that have been around for much longer. While Unitarian Universalists have a sort of “head start” on the use of activism to push for social change (because it has been a part of their institutional culture for so long), the UUA’s work on the specific issue of same-sex marriage is relatively new. Therefore, the infrastructure is not yet built up to the degree that it could take on the same-sex marriage issue on a multi-state front.

Standing on the Side of Love

There is no official or unofficial process for UUA congregations to be deemed LGBT inclusive simply because the entire denomination is so openly and universally supportive of this group; therefore there is no need to affirm that commitment on a community-by-community basis. However the denomination has taken LGBT inclusivity to the next level by pledging to use employ its activism to work towards marriage equality.

The advent of this initiative was actually a tragic one. In 2008, there was a shooting at a UUA church in Tennessee, which was later discovered to be targeted due to its pro-LGBT stances in an otherwise conservative town. Instead of responding with fear, the congregation reasserted its support for LGBT equality with love and forgiveness. This event was the beginning

of a campaign that is now just a bit over a year old. In addition to year-round activism, the campaign is a platform for awareness events like “Re-imagining Valentine’s Day” and “Transgender Day of Remembrance”. (Furmansky)

The campaign is very much focused on changing the outside world to look more like the inclusive and welcoming environment found in UUA congregations. It encourages members to reach out to the media, lobby elected officials, and utilize social media to push for marriage equality for LGBT individuals.

Best Practices

As recommended by NGLTF's toolkit, it is critical before engaging in any organized plan to make a congregation more welcoming to analyze the situation of the congregation and the denomination. The three case studies outlined above demonstrate that churches are not homogenous institutions that all face the same struggles in their welcoming inclusion of LGBT people. They all have their own unique backgrounds, histories, strengths, and challenges. However, despite these diverse situations, here are eight recommendations that can be universally adapted church by church to provide a framework for individuals and institutions seeking to change.

Recognize your denomination's/church's/community's historical, cultural, and social background.

As demonstrated through the SWOT analyses above, no individual church or even an entire denomination has the same background, and therefore, no two institutions will want to approach the issue of LGBT inclusion in the same way. The varied styles in the three different case studies alone prove that there is no one right way to go about this process.

However, success does mean relying on an honest and accurate analysis of your community's background. Figuring this out will probably require a deliberate process, such as forming a committee or holding town halls. Congregations may want to consider questions like:

- What experience do we have with LGBT individuals? What attitudes do we already hold about these issues?
- How have we dealt with difficult or controversial topics when they have come up in the past?
- What is our surrounding community or neighborhood like? Do we live in an area that is generally supportive of LGBT people?
- What are some major events that have happened in our church's recent history? (ex. a transition in a pastor, a financial crisis, a move to a new building) How do these events affect the approach we should take in our LGBT inclusivity process?

Allow for flexibility in the plan based on the findings of the initial analysis of your church community.

No single plan of action will work for every single faith organization. Each congregation will need to take into account its individual circumstances (which can be more clearly defined by answering the questions above) and modify a plan that worked in another region or church or denomination based on the unique character of your congregation. The Lutheran case study's "Affirmation of Welcome" is a prime example of this; it provides eight sample texts so that congregations can choose the one that fits them best, or congregations can write their own affirmations to get a unique fit. Mandating a single affirmation of welcome to be used by all Lutheran churches in all states in all circumstances may have created a barrier to all groups taking part if the text wasn't an appropriate match.

Change cannot be carried out alone.

While one person can be the impetus for starting such a process, one person cannot successfully carry it out alone. This group can come in many forms, again, depending on the initial reflections on your church climate. Each of the three case studies above includes explicit instructions to activists to build a broad base of support with members in the church community. The Tennessee Baptist Church case study encouraged collaboration between LGBT activists and faith allies. The "Reconciling in Christ" movement recommends holding discussions and involving either a representative body (like a church council) or the whole congregation in the decision process. The Standing on the Side of Love campaign encourages leaders to find allies both within the church (such as ordained leaders, religious educators, and congregational leaders) and the wider community (such as other multicultural groups that fight for equal rights.)

Find frames that work for your community.

Framing is a key element of public communication that involves the selective inclusion and exclusion of information to present an issue in a particular way. NGLTF's Welcoming Toolkit suggests possible frames for the issue of LGBT inclusion in the church, including hospitality, justice, church growth, The Good Samaritan, and welcoming the stranger. On the topic of framing through exclusion, the Toolkit also suggests avoiding the topics of homosexuality as a sin, same-sex marriage, or what the Bible says about homosexuality. These frames may be harmful not because they are unimportant or not legitimate sources of disagreement, but rather because they put the congregation into a dynamic of debate. Instead, the framing should strive to put the congregation in a place of exploration and education.

Personal stories matter.

Carol Langner of the Lutheran Church of Honolulu (a Reconciling in Christ congregation) explained the impact of just one beloved member on the church's views on LGBT inclusion:

"In the late 1980s, Walter, respected council member, long-time choir member—and closeted gay man, came out to the congregation. He wrote a devotional that was included in the church's annual Lenten Booklet written and compiled by members. I suppose he was forced "out" because he had AIDS... I think this confession helped to heal Walter's divided spirit. He could become whole again, the full person he was. In that wholeness he was able to receive the love and care that the congregation could and did offer him... As much as our care for Walter helped to heal his spirit and prepare him for his death, so did he help the congregation heal from a malaise we didn't even know we had. He did this by raising to our consciousness the historical tension within the Christian tradition regarding the place and role of gay and lesbian persons." (emphasis added) ("How LCH Became...")

There is a considerable amount of research that suggests that people who know an LGBT person are more likely to support LGBT equality. The value of personal interaction cannot be underrated. Although it certainly takes courage to share one's own story – especially if a congregation has not proved to be open in the past – the significance of putting a personal face on this issue can be an invaluable tool. "Hostility toward gays and lesbians often arises when there are no personal connections or friendships—when they are seen as 'other.' When lesbian and gay people are part of faith communities, however, they go from 'other' to 'us.'" (Thistlethwaite, 6)

Provide education.

Any person learning something new goes through a process of education. Members of the congregation will probably hold varying levels of knowledge about LGBT issues – ranging from those who are well-versed in these issues to those who may not even know what "transgender" means. The purpose of an education campaign is to give every member equal opportunity to get on the same basic knowledge level. Furthermore, some people may be basing their ideas about homosexuality and its place in the church based on misinformation or one-sided interpretation of Biblical scripture. Education provides an opportunity to explore these ideas and provide accurate information, which could lead some individuals to change their views.

All three of these case studies employed education techniques in the early stages of their campaigns, albeit in different ways. The Tennessee case study utilized public information campaigns that reached an audience of both Baptists and non-Baptists. The Lutheran "Reconciling in Christ" movement provides an introductory video called "It's About Being Church" which explains some of the basic ideas and answers some of the initial questions about LGBT inclusion in a church. The Standing on the Side of Love campaign offers main talking points when beginning a group at one's church. Perhaps understandably, the UUA group offers the fewest number of educational materials on basic LGBT issues, most likely because its congregations are already quite progressive on LGBT issues.

Change is most effective when it comes from within.

Although there are many ways that LGBT organizations and/or welcoming churches can serve as resources and supports to congregations taking on the LGBT inclusivity process, the initial drive for the change should come from the congregation itself. The guidebook from Tennessee's efforts advises: "Pastors are usually more responsive to a parishioner than to an outsider." (Center for American Progress, 17) LGBT activists looking to foster change in faith communities that are not their own can be more effective by providing educational tools, offering to find an LGBT family to speak at a panel discussion, or by working on equality efforts in the general community that may supplement progress within the church. For example, in Tennessee, the Memphis Gay and Lesbian Community Center ran a billboard campaign with certain faith themes concurrent with inclusive efforts in nearby churches so that the message was pushed in two different venues.

Plan for the fact that being a welcoming congregation is not a one-step process.

Once a church has successfully gone through the process to transform itself into an inclusive community, there is still work to be done. Most of these case studies, and the NGLTF's Welcoming Toolkit advise for ongoing work on the issue. The Lutheran church provides a guide for all Reconciled in Christ churches called "Your church is RiC: Now What?" It contains concrete ideas for creating a more welcoming environment for LGBT individuals, families, and clergy, from hanging a rainbow flag in a visible place to taking action at the synod level to create policies that promote LGBT equality. The Toolkit also provides a checklist for continuing action on these issues including steps like incorporating lessons about LGBT inclusion in youth Sunday School lessons, providing gender-less bathrooms, and changing forms to say "parent 1" and "parent 2" instead of "mother" and "father" and "spouse" instead of "husband/wife".

Positive Outcomes for Welcoming Churches

The prospect of engaging LGBT Christians in a faith community may be an intimidating process for a church leader, or even a church member, to undertake. Congressional leaders may fear division in the church over such a divisive issue. As evidence by the breaking off of churches from the ELCA mentioned above, this fear is not unfounded. And it is true that when a church chooses to be accepting and affirming of LGBT individuals, the entire congregational life is affected. However, the 2008 study "To Do Justice: A Study of Welcoming Congregations"

reveals that these changes to the church committee are *positive* ones; these churches tend to engage more on other justice issues and they tend to experience relatively little conflict.

In a survey of 364 pastors of welcoming churches, over half reported that their congregation had become more active on issues of social justice as a result of their work on LGBT inclusivity. The issues that these congregations chose to tackle were varied; almost twenty percent said their churches worked on other human rights issues, fifteen percent said their members tackled homelessness, and about twelve percent took on immigration reform. The pastors also reported increased social action on issues ranging from racial justice to AIDS awareness to substance abuse to disability justice. One pastor shared, "We now work with a homeless day shelter... it was through working with a young man with AIDS that the church found a face that they could reach out to and now are reaching out to homeless people." (Voelkel, 9)

These pastors also reported that proactively taking on LGBT issues did not cause significant conflict or division within the church. Less than a third (29%) of the pastors who responded reported a significant conflict(s) in their congregation in the two years. Perhaps even more importantly, congregations that have not taken part in a welcoming process are more likely to identify the issue of homosexuality as an area of conflict. For example, 36 percent of clergy from non-welcoming congregations agreed with the statement "Our congregation risks losing many members by talking too much about homosexuality" compared to 14 percent of clergy from congregations that had gone through a welcoming process.

Furthermore, taking up an issue that may be contentious or elicit disagreement can provide a church insight into how it handles conflict – lessons that can be applied to any number of issues of conflict that arise in a congregation, including finances, changes in leadership, and challenges in the community.

These findings demonstrate that while the process of moving forward with some of the suggested best practices listed above may be intimidating, there are concrete advantages to taking on the issue of LGBT inclusivity. Indeed, the process of challenging the culture of a non-welcoming church may cause some significant doubts. At times, progress may seem naïve, even impossible. In these instances, churches may benefit from the Biblical guidance: “I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.” (Matthew 17:20)

Works Cited

"About the Southern Baptist Convention." Southern Baptist Convention - Reaching the World for Christ. Web. 20 Apr. 2011. <<http://www.sbc.net/aboutus/default.asp>>.

Adam, Barry. *The Rise of a Gay and Lesbian Movement*. (Boston: Twayne Publishers; 1987), 113.

"The Baptist Faith & Message." *Southern Baptist Convention - Reaching the World for Christ*. 1999. Web. 10 Apr. 2011. <<http://www.sbc.net/bfm/bfm2000.asp>>.

Bull, Chris and John Gallagher. *Perfect Enemies: The Religious Right, the Gay Movement, and the Politics of the 1990s*. (New York: Crown Publishers; 1996).

Chellew-Hodge, Candace. "The Bible and Homosexuality." *Whosoever: An Online Magazine for GLBT Christians*. Web. 10 Feb. 2011. <<http://www.whosoever.org/bible/>>.

Furmansky, Dan. "About Standing On The Side Of Love." *Standing On The Side Of Love*. Web. 25 Apr. 2011. <<http://www.standingonthesideoflove.org/about/>>.

"History of the ELCA." *Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*. Web. 20 Apr. 2011. <<http://www.elca.org/Who-We-Are/History.aspx>>.

"How LCH Became an RIC Congregation." *LCH—A Reconciling in Christ Congregation*. Lutheran Church of Honolulu, 2008. Web. 10 Apr. 2011. <<http://www.lchwelcome.org/home/ric.html>>.

"How Religious Is Your State?" *Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life*. 21 Dec. 2009. Web. 10 Apr. 2011. <<http://pewforum.org/How-Religious-Is-Your-State-.aspx>>.

Love, Rev. Dr. Cindi. "The Lutheran Church Embraces the LGBTQ Community!" *The Huffington Post*. April 19, 2010. <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rev-dr-cindi-love/the-lutheran-church-embra_b_543142.html>

"Mainline Protestant Public Opinion on Homosexuality." *Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life*. 19 Mar. 2009. Web. 10 Apr. 2011. <<http://pewforum.org/Gay-Marriage-and-Homosexuality/Most-Mainline-Protestants-Say-Society-Should-Accept-Homosexuality.aspx>>.

Murray, Ross. "Reconciling in Christ." *Lutherans Concerned/North America*. 2010. Web. 15 Mar. 2011. <<http://www.lcna.org/ric>>.

Neidorf, Shawn Shawn, and Rich Morin. "Four-in-Ten Americans Have Close Friends or Relatives Who Are Gay." *Pew Research Center*. Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 23 May 2007. Web. 15 Apr. 2011. <<http://pewresearch.org/pubs/485/friends-who-are-gay>>.

Oxford Dictionaies. "Evangelical". 2011. <<http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/evangelical?view=uk>>

- Pew Research Center for People and the Press, "Religious Beliefs Underpin Opposition to Homosexuality" (Washington; 2003), <http://people-press.org/report/?pageid=764>.
- Riddle, D. (1985). "Homophobia Scale." Opening Doors to Understanding and Acceptance. ed. K. O'bear and A. Reynolds. Boston: Unpublished essay.
- Riley, Jennifer. "SBC Committee Decides against Expelling Members of Pro-Gay Baptist Alliance, Christian News, The Christian Post." *Christian News*. The Christian Post, 25 Feb. 2011. Web. 20 Mar. 2011. <<http://www.christianpost.com/news/sbc-committee-decides-against-expelling-members-of-pro-gay-baptist-alliance-49169/>>.
- Robinson, Bruce A. "Women as Clergy." *ReligiousTolerance*. 29 Mar. 2011. Web. 10 Apr. 2011. <<http://www.religioustolerance.org/femclrg13.htm>>.
- Rowley, Terry. "Congregations." North American Lutheran Church. North American Lutheran Church, 21 Apr. 2011. Web. 21 Apr. 2011. <<http://thenalc.org/congregations.php>>.
- "Sample Affirmations of Welcome." *Reconciling in Christ*. Lutherans Concerned North America, Dec. 2010. Web. 10 Apr. 2011. <http://www.lcna.org/images/stories/downloads/resources/046_sample_affirmations.pdf>.
- "Say, 'I Do' Mr. President." *Freedom to Marry*. Web. 20 Apr. 2011.
- "SBC Position Statements - Sexuality." *Southern Baptist Convention - Reaching the World for Christ*. Web. 15 Mar. 2011. <<http://www.sbc.net/aboutus/pssexuality.asp>>.
- Smietana, Bob. "Baptists: Keep 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell'" *Tulsa World* (19 June 2010). *Tulsa World*. 19 June 2010. Web. 20 Mar. 2011. <<http://www.tulsaworld.com/news/article.aspx?subjectid=18>>.
- "Statement on Same Sex Marriage." The Alliance of Baptists, 17 Apr. 2004. Web. 15 Feb. 2011.
- Steele, Richard and Tony Fuller. "God's Crusader" in "Battle Over Gay Rights". *Newsweek*. 6 June 1977.
- Thistlethwaite, Susan Brooks, and Marta Cook. Keeping the Faith: Faith Organizing for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Moral and Civil Rights in a Southern State. Rep. Center for American Progress, 1 Feb. 2011. Web. 10 Feb. 2011. <http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2011/02/pdf/tennessee_faith.pdf>.
- Truth Wins Out. "Exodus International" Learn About Ex-Gay Ministries. 2009. <http://www.truthwinsout.org/ministry-exodus-international/>
- "UUA: About the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations." UUA: Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations. 22 Mar. 2011. Web. 23 Apr. 2011. <<http://www.uua.org/aboutus/index.shtml>>.

"UUA: Office of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Ministries." *UUA: Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations*. 22 Mar. 2011. Web. 25 Apr. 2011.
<<http://www.uua.org/aboutus/professionalstaff/multiculturalgrowth/lesbiangay/index.php>>.

"UUA: Our Unitarian Universalist Principles." *UUA: Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations*. 21 Mar. 2011. Web. 20 Apr. 2011. <<http://www.uua.org/visitors/6798.shtml>>.

Voelkel, Rebecca, Vicki Wunsch, and David Lohman. Building an Inclusive Church: A Welcoming Toolkit. Publication. Institute for Welcoming Resources (The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force), 30 Apr. 2009. Web. 10 Feb. 2011. <<http://www.welcomingresources.org/welcomingtoolkit.pdf>>.

