



Working for Equality in the Great Lakes State

Collaborations Between LGBT and Faith Groups in Michigan

Sally Steenland and Susan Thistlethwaite January 2011

Center for American Progress



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The Faith and Progressive Policy Initiative of the Center for American Progress works to identify and articulate the moral, ethical, and spiritual values underpinning policy issues, shape a progressive stance in which these values are clear, and increase public awareness and understanding of these values. Faith and Progressive Policy also works to safeguard the healthy separation of church and state that has allowed religion in our country to flourish. In all of its efforts, Faith and Progressive Policy works to promote a society and government that strengthen the common good and respect the basic dignity of all people.

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Executive summary

During the first six months of 2010, the Faith and Progressive Policy Initiative at the Center for American Progress conducted over 50 in-depth interviews with lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, and transgender advocates and allies, and with faith leaders across the state of Michigan as part of a project for the Arcus Foundation.¹ In addition to individual interviews, we conducted five on-site roundtable conversations with 8 to 10 participants each in Grand Rapids, Holland, the Ecumenical Seminary in Detroit, and Chicago Theological Seminary with Michigan-based faith leaders. Together with individual interviews, we spoke with over 90 faith and LGBT leaders.

Our goal was to assess what types of alliances, collaborations, and coalitions exist—or do not exist—between LGBT and faith groups. In addition, we sought to assess what efforts have been effective in both communities on LGBT issues, and what challenges they have faced. Finally, we sought to determine what needs to happen in order to strengthen cooperation between the two communities.

Our larger Arcus project—of which the Michigan assessment was a piece—focused on the issue of second parent adoption. Therefore, in our interviews and in the roundtable conversations we sought to discover levels of awareness and knowledge regarding second parent adoption, as well as its “winnability” compared to other LGBT issues in the state.

Here is a summary of our findings.

Faith community findings

- Faith communities are moving toward acceptance of LGBT people in measurable ways. Changes can be tracked across faith traditions and the state. Efforts range from lay-led support groups to adult education classes; clergy-led efforts; clergy support and networking groups; participation in groups such as Dignity, Integrity, Inclusive Justice, OASIS, GIFT, Room for All, B1 for Inclusion, and more.

- There is an interplay between clergy-led and lay-led activity in these efforts. Clergy play an important leadership role, setting a welcoming and normative tone that can increase the number of allies, provide support to LGBT congregants, and serve as a model for other clergy. At the same time, clergy rely upon their laity to “push them” to be more vocal and active on LGBT issues—especially in faith traditions where taking a leadership stance poses a risk for clergy. Lay people have more freedom to speak out and urge their institutions to change. While clergy come and go, people in the pews provide an ongoing presence that makes a difference over time.
- Alliances between faith and LGBT groups in Michigan tend to be occasional and informal, rather than ongoing and institutionalized. Among some LGBT groups there is general agreement that faith voices should be part of their efforts, but this sense rarely results in a plan to include faith communities as equal partners. Alliances that do occur tend to be triggered by campaigns or events where faith voices are strategically needed. For their part, faith communities tend to see collaborations with LGBT groups as insufficiently reciprocal and want a seat at the policy and decision-making table. This is not true across the board. Groups like Inclusive Justice see the creation of equal partnerships between LGBT and faith groups as a core part of their mission.
- The strong opposition of conservative religious forces in Michigan to LGBT human rights and the rejection many LGBT people experience from their own religious traditions has made alliance building challenging. Many of the LGBT advocates we interviewed were not inclined to seek out faith allies as partners in their work—nor were faith groups inclined to reach out to LGBT groups. This lack of connection leads to perceptions of a “religious-secular divide” that helps the opposition and hinders broad-based support on LGBT issues.
- A number of conservative faith groups that have begun to work on LGBT issues say that a public alliance with LGBT groups could work against them because it could “taint” their efforts in their communities. Similarly, a number of faith groups that work in social justice coalitions say they are hesitant to include LGBT issues in their agenda for fear of losing key faith partners. Despite these obstacles, the fact is that many LGBT people in Michigan are religious, and it is very difficult, and also ill-advised, to attempt to split one’s faith from core parts of one’s identity.

- Denominational, religious, racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and gender differences shape how faith communities respond to LGBT people and issues. Religious institutions that are more hierarchical and conservative face particular challenges, and it is important to know how to navigate them. Religious institutions with less centralized authority tend to have visible clergy involvement in LGBT issues, whether performing same-sex unions or advocating for LGBT human rights.
- Faith communities that have done good work on LGBT issues have no easy way to share their experiences and resources with others. With a few exceptions, there are virtually no structures to connect activists and strengthen their work. Many of those we interviewed expressed great interest in the prospect of sharing resources, having a clearinghouse of information and leaders, and getting together for support and resource sharing. Many faith leaders expressed greater interest in forming intrafaith alliances than in alliances with LGBT groups. In addition, many pastors expressed interest in a networking and support group for those working on LGBT issues.
- Some LGBT groups, such as Holland is Ready and B1, while not overtly or exclusively faith-based, include faith leaders among their founders and are infused with a religious/spiritual/moral sensibility. They have significant potential for influence and advocacy in their regions—and they blur the religious-secular divisions that exist in other groups. They are also significant because they have the potential to counteract the powerful religious right in the state that has been a fierce political and financial opponent of LGBT human rights. In addition, well-known organizations like the Michigan Roundtable for Diversity and Inclusion are now including LGBT issues as part of their agenda. This is significant, for it reflects the mainstreaming of LGBT issues and provides added resources and capacity to the movement.
- African-American communities are exploring new ways to address issues of human sexuality. African-American civic groups are offering locations where discussions can occur outside of churches, and some faith leaders are speaking out as LGBT allies and advocates.

LGBT advocacy group findings

- LGBT groups in Michigan provide much-needed services, education, and support to the community. These include HIV testing and counseling, telephone help-lines, Pride celebrations, fundraisers, conferences, safe spaces, and more. Groups raise public awareness on LGBT issues, work with other organizations on social justice issues, and with colleges and universities. A number of LGBT groups advocate for LGBT human rights through legislative activity, policy work, and community organizing.
- LGBT groups in Michigan are facing organizational and leadership challenges. In some cases, the change from long-term leadership of a founder or early executive director has created transitional difficulties. For instance, LGBT leaders in Michigan have mainly been white and male—but that is now shifting toward more diverse leadership that includes younger people, more women, and more people of color. While such changes are overdue and highly welcome, they can result in misperceptions, tensions, and difficulty in working with diverse leadership. Turnover among leaders, lack of leadership development, burnout, and ineffective boards of directors are other challenges.
- Differences in policy priorities, leadership and cultural styles; disconnects between leaders and the community; and lack of racial awareness and sensitivity has hampered the ability of LGBT groups to build a strong and unified statewide presence.
- In addition, funding limitations have strained the capacity of groups to provide services, support, and advocacy. Such limitations have stressed staff and hampered efforts to be effective.
- Racial tensions, which are pervasive throughout the state, exist within LGBT groups as well and hinder their effectiveness and ability to be authentic voices for the community. Race is also an issue in faith communities, which tend to be highly segregated. Broadening one's familiarity and comfortability with different worship styles, cultural traditions, and approaches to social-justice issues is a significant challenge.
- Efforts to address racism and racial tensions are scaling up on several fronts, including HIV-AIDs programs and activities to raise awareness within

majority-white LGBT and faith groups. Many of those we interviewed recognized the importance of engaging communities of color in LGBT coalitions. Although there are many challenges to successful collaboration, the first step is to recognize the unequal power distribution within LGBT groups—and commit to practicing true equality.

- Michigan is large, which presents challenges to state-wide organizing efforts. Geographical distance, along with cultural, ethnic, socioeconomic, and regional differences, has contributed to a lack of familiarity and trust among groups. Certain regions feel isolated, and given severe economic strains, even traveling shorter distances can be a challenge.
- Not all LGBT individuals and groups see themselves as policy advocates. Many see themselves as service, social, or affinity organizations. They are not necessarily knowledgeable about LGBT political issues or equipped to work on them. Similarly, many LGBT individuals feel a risk in coming out and/or advocating for LGBT issues, fearing that they could lose their job or children.
- Transphobia within the LGBT and faith communities presents challenges, as many transactivists feel marginalized and invisible. In response, some groups are taking action, such as the Gender and Faith trainings conducted by the Human Rights Campaign in partnership with local groups.

Additional findings

- The discouragement many LGBT groups feel seems less pervasive in faith-based groups, which appear to be more hopeful and energized. A number of those we interviewed remarked on this contrast, but there was no definitive reason as to why it was so.
- Connecting Michigan's economic revitalization to enacting LGBT human rights is becoming a persuasive argument among some in the business community, funders, LGBT advocates, civic leaders, and faith communities. According to the argument, one way to attract creative capital, decrease the brain drain, and increase the investment appeal of the state is to increase its "tolerance index." These changes are likely to attract small businesses and larger corporations, many of whom have diverse workers who, whether gay or straight, do not want to live in an intolerant place.

- The issue of second parent adoption was unfamiliar to most of the people we interviewed. When asked to rank which issues were most winnable, most said safe schools/antibullying or antidiscrimination. Race and ethnicity affected how issues were prioritized, with African-American interviewees ranking marriage equality lower than white interviewees. Some African-American interviewees were also less inclined to see second parent adoption as a high priority, saying that the matter was taken care of informally in their communities. Even so, many of those we interviewed saw second parent adoption as a potentially persuasive issue and felt there needed to be more education about it.

What's working: Activities and alliances between LGBT and faith groups

Faith communities across the state of Michigan are moving in measurable ways toward greater acceptance of LGBT people. They are working within their communities to transform religious teachings and traditions, to increase the number of LGBT allies in their midst, to support LGBT congregants, and to reach out to other faith communities in order to enhance their collective work. Their progress varies among region and faith tradition, and may sometimes seem like one step forward and two steps back. Even so, faith communities do not exist in a bubble but within the larger society where progress is being made. And so—sometimes despite themselves—faith communities are making progress too.

LGBT groups in Michigan are also undergoing change. Despite limited resources among many, they are seeking to serve the community through providing services, support, and advocacy. Larger organizations are more likely to collaborate on multiple issues and to work with faith groups as well as LGBT groups. Smaller groups tend to have a narrower focus and be more limited in scope and resources.

Collaborations between LGBT and faith groups are usually triggered by an issue campaign or event, when it becomes apparent that faith voices are strategically needed. Less formal collaborations are becoming more common, as faith groups and LGBT groups begin to reach out to each other in the course of their work. Groups like Inclusive Justice provide a model of sustained collaboration that is beneficial to both faith communities and LGBT groups.

Certain long-standing organizations, such as the Michigan Roundtable for Diversity and Inclusion, not previously known for working on LGBT issues, are expanding their agendas to include LGBT work. This expansion is important, for it reflects how LGBT issues are becoming mainstreamed. It also broadens support for these issues and adds resources to LGBT campaigns.

What's working in faith groups

Clergy-led efforts are key to faith community progress on LGBT issues. Clergy provide leadership that sets an affirming and welcoming tone that can increase the number of allies, provide support to LGBT congregants, and serve as a model for other clergy.

No matter where a congregation is in addressing LGBT issues—from just starting to address these issues to actively seeking to increase its LGBT congregants—clergy play a key leadership role. For faith communities at the start of the process, clergy can include LGBT people in prayers, welcome them to the communion table, name them in the liturgy. According to people we interviewed, such actions send a signal that LGBT people are part of the community—they are “us,” not “other.” Clergy leadership also encourages conversation and movement within the congregation.

One minister told us that he was careful to never be defensive or apologetic. “Don’t begin a sermon with, ‘well, you may have a problem with this,’” he said. “Assume it is the norm.” Another minister echoed his views. “We need to give people tools to organize within their churches. This is something to get excited about.”

Clergy-led efforts go beyond work within individual congregations to public advocacy. For several years, Concerned Clergy of Western Michigan was a visible voice on LGBT issues, including the 2004 ballot initiative campaign against same-sex marriage. Though the group no longer meets, clergy still work together on various LGBT issues, such as helping to organize lobby days in Lansing and working in larger coalitions, such as the Kalamazoo antidiscrimination campaign.

Clergy in Michigan are a valuable resource. They have access to thousands of people each week, and their moral authority and theological training give them influence when LGBT issues are debated on moral grounds. However, the work they do can be difficult, especially for those facing resistance from the hierarchy or those who are new to the area from places that are more progressive on LGBT issues.

Clergy support and networking groups are an effective response to these difficulties. One group that has recently started in Western Michigan includes clergy and faith leaders who are already welcoming to LGBT people, along with those who are just beginning to explore this realm. The group aims to do several things: identify what congregations are doing on LGBT issues, share successful strategies, collaborate on events and projects, develop a clergy database, and more.

A number of clergy we interviewed wanted to be part of a support network so that they would feel less isolated and more encouraged in their work. Clergy—and lay people—also said they wanted to participate in groups that could share strategies and resources in terms of “best practices” so that other faith communities wouldn’t have to reinvent the wheel.

Laity-led efforts are also important in faith community work on LGBT issues. In fact, clergy often rely on their laity to “push” them to be more vocal and active on LGBT issues—especially in faith traditions where taking such a leadership stance poses a risk for clergy. Lay people, especially straight allies, have more freedom to speak out and urge their institutions to change. Lay-led groups are growing in houses of worship, and include informal support groups for LGBT family members and friends, study groups, adult education classes, and dialogue groups that tackle difficult issues. Many are led by “insiders”—fellow congregants who are known and trusted, rather than outsiders coming in with an agenda.

Being an open and affirming house of worship is an effective way for faith communities to work for LGBT human rights. The structured processes of some mainline Protestant denominations—such as becoming Open and Affirming in the United Church of Christ—helps provide congregations with greater insight and knowledge regarding LGBT people and issues, especially within a religious framework. Displaying a rainbow banner is also a public sign that links religion to LGBT human rights. For LGBT people seeking a faith home, as well as for the broader public that might assume religion is hostile to gays, a rainbow banner shows that religion can be a force for justice and equality.

Being open and affirming is an ongoing process. For instance, the Unitarian Universalist group Interweave in Washtenaw County recognized that shepherding new people into the congregation was an ongoing mission. The church became a Welcoming Congregation in 1992, and since then many LGBT people have become full participants in the congregation. However, one person we interviewed said it was important to remember that new people were still coming through the door who needed guidance and support.

Many faith communities cannot become officially open and welcoming to LGBT people because of their theological and doctrinal teachings. This is the case, for instance, with Catholic churches and some conservative Protestant churches. Even so, a number have become unofficially open and welcoming, and are known as such in the community. They offer a home for LGBT people and allies, and signal that they support the larger movement.

Being a faith-inspired group that reaches beyond the faith community is a powerful model for faith and LGBT groups. Although most do not have institutionalized alliances with LGBT groups as of yet, their morally-infused messaging and religious support of LGBT issues provides much-needed resources to the LGBT movement. Members of faith-inspired groups include faith leaders, educators, LGBT advocates, business leaders, civic leaders, and others. Groups like Holland Is Ready, GIFT, B1, Inclusive Justice, and the Out Center typify this model. Several are relatively new, and many of their efforts show creativity and promise.

What's working in LGBT groups

LGBT groups in Michigan range from larger well-known organizations with paid staff and broad outreach, to smaller groups, many of which rely mainly on volunteer staff. Despite the challenges they face, LGBT groups provide much-needed services and support to the community. These include HIV testing and counseling, telephone help-lines, Pride celebrations, banquets and festivities, fundraisers, conferences and more. A number of LGBT groups advocate for LGBT human rights through legislative activity, policy work, and community organizing. In addition, they work with local colleges and universities, and with businesses and corporations to develop gay-friendly policies, support and networking groups, and outreach into the community.

Providing services, support, and education is the main focus of many LGBT groups. One of the leaders of a small group told us that the goal of her group was “a community without closets.” Her group has a contact list of several hundred people and is eager to connect them with statewide efforts and other groups’ events. “We can provide volunteers; we can put warm bodies in seats,” she said, adding that those on her contact list can make phone calls, staff phone banks, write letters, and more.

A number of people we interviewed cited the importance of building public awareness on LGBT issues so that it would be safer to come out. Before there can be legislative change, some said, “views toward gay people need to change on the ground.” Many LGBT individuals are aware of the risk of coming out, knowing that they are not protected by state antidiscrimination laws. Living with this risk takes a toll on individuals and on the community. As a result, many groups provide safe spaces and places to relax. LGBT affinity groups bring together joggers, square dancers, professionals in various fields, and more, providing connection and contacts within the LGBT community.

Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays was cited by many interviewees as a group that does crucial work not only for LGBT youth and parents, but for providing straight allies for the movement. One interviewee said that the Internet is changing the way PFLAG provides resources to parents and how youth find support in coming out. In many ways, the Internet works well, providing information easily, quickly, and anonymously, no matter where one lives. However, the Internet's anonymity can undermine traditional models of support and engagement that PFLAG pioneered—a process that generates activists. This was a source of some concern, as the need for knowledgeable allies is critical to the movement.

Providing advocacy on LGBT and social justice issues is another area in which Michigan LGBT groups are doing good work. Although many are small with volunteer and limited paid staff, they work on adoption rights, safe schools, HIV-AIDS, antidiscrimination issues, and more. In addition, they participate in coalitions on issues ranging from health care and homelessness, to aging and being tobacco-free.

The Coalition for Adoption Rights Equality, or CARE, has been working on adoption equality issues for a decade. Despite limited resources, it has gained endorsements from professional and national organizations, prepared lobby briefs, talking points, fact sheets, legislative language, coalition-building guidelines, and endorsement-letter forms. Beyond that, it has created compelling short profiles—the Faces of Second Parent Adoption—that describe the diverse kinds of families involved in second parent adoption.²

The Lansing Association for Human Rights works on LGBT legislation, is involved in political campaigns, has a PAC and a newsletter, and is a clearinghouse on legislative and political activity. Recently LAHR began strategizing how to “make the social political [and] bring activism to social networks.” According to an interviewee, “action needs to be more accessible and more relevant in social settings. It is about relationships ... and how as leaders we establish ourselves. LGBT people are pressured to be private. Politics has gotten a bad name.”

Working with business and universities

One area where there has been tangible progress has been with businesses and corporations in Michigan. Many provide benefits for same-sex partners and have created networking and support groups for LGBT employees. Some have publicly endorsed national antidiscrimination legislation, such as the Employment Non-

Discrimination Act—and despite the severe economic downturn, a number are still making contributions to LGBT organizations. According to one person we interviewed, “The big three automakers learned early on that they had to be gay affirming. They’re the biggest employers in the state, and they’ve been on board for years.”

The numerous colleges and universities in Michigan are a significant resource that provides progressive ideas and people to the LGBT and larger community. Many college and university campuses offer settings for LGBT students to come out in relative safety, explore important issues, and connect with the wider LGBT community. In addition, LGBT rights groups in universities can provide “troops” for mobilization, especially when it seems risky for community members to be visibly out. Furthermore, a number of universities have provided leadership in LGBT advocacy, succeeded in mainstreaming LGBT issues in the larger community, and offered successful models for equitable LGBT policies, such as domestic partner benefits.

A recent incident at Grand Valley State University illustrated how a university used social media to quickly organize an issue campaign that successfully challenged antigay ads on a local TV station, and then used that victory to organize a larger, equally successful effort against a homophobic campaign by Focus on the Family and the Family Research Council.

In addition, Keweenaw Pride in the Upper Peninsula is the matrix for much of the programming in the region, working with the local university. In southeast Michigan, the University of Michigan’s Spectrum Center has done programming with the Faith Action Network of Washtenaw County. And Michigan State has worked with the Faith Action Network of Ingham County, bringing skills from the Creating Change conference sponsored by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force back to the campus and local community.

Connecting economic growth with LGBT human rights

A number of people we interviewed discussed the growing efforts of business leaders, wealthy individuals, community supporters, faith leaders, advocates, and others to connect the achievement of LGBT human rights with the economic revitalization of the state. While no organized efforts seem to be underway as of yet, the approach is promising, for it addresses one of the most crucial problems facing the state—the economic crisis—and links a path to recovery with providing LGBT human rights.

Michigan is suffering from a brain drain. Its talented young people are leaving, and it is having difficulty both retaining them and attracting new creative capital that is essential to turning cities and states around. Recently, conversations have been taking place about how the state can become more inclusive. For instance, in western Michigan, the group B1 is talking with some of the region's economic development and business leaders who are working to increase business opportunities there. Some of the business leaders run inclusive businesses; others are on the path to becoming more so.

This spring a business leader told a B1 member, "Michigan needs rejuvenation. It needs young creative minds." An essential ingredient to rejuvenation is having a reputation as a tolerant place to live and work. According to experts, this is especially true when it comes to attracting new technologies and creative businesses. B1 has recently trained a number of leaders to hold guided conversations in churches, workplaces, and other spots to discuss ways to increase the state's "tolerance index" as a path to financial recovery.

In addition, in Livingston County, St. Paul's Episcopal Church, which is part of the Faith Action Network, has been working with the local Chamber of Commerce to help small businesses in downtown Brighton retain customers who might otherwise go to Ann Arbor, which is known for being inclusive. As a result, some store owners are displaying rainbow flags, while other business owners—not thought to be welcoming—have publicly stated that they welcome all people.

One source of energy for connecting economic growth with LGBT human rights might come from progressive wealthy individuals who are repelled by the heavy hand of right-wing conservative money and want to exert a more progressive influence in their state.

A final item: A number of interviewees mentioned the buying power of Michigan's LGBT community as an underutilized force. "We should be flexing our muscle with the Chamber of Commerce and developing local equality indexes," one person said. "The community needs to know which businesses are pro-gay and which ones aren't."

Including LGBT issues as part of a larger social justice agenda is an effective strategy for many LGBT groups, for it increases the number of allies, brings LGBT issues to a broader audience, and fits LGBT issues within a social justice framework. One group, Affirmations—in addition to working on HIV-AIDS and

collaborating with LGBT groups like the Jewish Gay Network, KICK, Karibu House, SPICE, and others—is a member of Tobacco-Free Michigan, works with homeless shelters, senior citizen centers, and more. Triangle—newly merged and now called Equality Michigan—has worked with the Legal Aid Society in Detroit and others to include LGBT people in their work. Likewise, the state ACLU has a staff position for LGBT issues.

Including LGBT issues within a broader agenda helps mainstream an issue that often gets sidelined. In addition, it attracts diverse constituents and provides leadership training and expertise concerning coalition work. A challenge regarding this strategy is to not let LGBT issues get diluted or subsumed within a larger coalition agenda.

Several interviewees praised a related strategy, which is to work on broader issues like health care and employment protection to ensure that LGBT concerns are reflected in advocacy work. One person said, “More gay people will be affected by health care reform than by don’t ask don’t tell. We need to focus on large initiatives and see how they affect us.”

What’s working in LGBT and faith alliances

The ONE Kalamazoo coalition offers a successful model of a broad-based coalition that includes faith communities in significant roles. From the outset of last year’s antidiscrimination ordinance campaign, a faith alliance of 26 community leaders was part of the coalition. Strong leadership by local clergy was key to successful faith involvement. Having a tangible goal and action plan was also important. “If we don’t have a goal, we are all going to drift away,” one of our interviewees said. Another said, “People have to have a shared mission” in order for coalitions to work.

Key to the Kalamazoo win, in the eyes of one interviewee, was communitywide focus and buy-in. Coalition leaders held workshops to build issue awareness and bring diverse groups together. Coalition members included labor unions, faith groups, LGBT groups, civil liberties groups, women’s groups, peace groups, local Democratic and Republican groups, educational groups, and more. According to one person, “We did particular outreach to communities of color and faith and to turning out youth votes.” Organizing with African-American churches and pastors seemed to have had mixed results, but interviewees said that the work provided

greater insight into organizing within communities of color, both African-American and Hispanic-American.

The work in Kalamazoo led to a successful vote in November and has continued in a variety of ways. The Kalamazoo Alliance for Equality, or KAFE, is still together, and its website sets out an agenda for political activism, building a grassroots network of community supporters and “relationships to create positive change.” In addition, some of the faith communities—including United Methodist, Episcopal, and United Church of Christ—that came together for ordinance work continue to meet.

Other successful collaborations include Inclusive Justice’s Together in Faith gatherings that focus on statewide faith-based organizing. TIF has provided a vehicle for more than five years for faith leaders to connect with each other and be trained on state initiatives in various policy areas. In addition, Inclusive Justice sponsors Faith Action Networks that work at the county level to host trainings and dialogue and build a base of activists and allies.

Informal alliances between LGBT and faith groups play an important role in communities across Michigan. From individual relationships to faith community support of LGBT events, such as annual PRIDE celebrations, these connections promote familiarity and trust, and provide the seeds for more established collaborations. Interfaith organizations like the YMCA and YWCA provide services and advocacy to the LGBT community, working on issues like youth homelessness and providing office space for local groups. The Out Center of Berrien County, for instance was created through the joint efforts of faith leaders and local organizations like the YWCA, and continues to play a significant role in fostering alliances in the county.

Jewish organizations and rabbinical councils also participate in informal alliances with LGBT groups and others on issues such as antibullying, HIV/AIDS, dialogue among Jewish and Middle Eastern LGBT groups, and more.

A number of counties have extensive networks of informal alliances, while others have significantly fewer. Inclusive Justice has been working to create alliances through Faith Action Networks, where it trains leaders to work successfully across differences, increases the expertise of these networks and leaders on policy issues and advocacy, and strengthens alliances by ensuring that faith voices are present at national and state LGBT events, conferences, and roundtables.

Challenges LGBT and faith groups face in working together

Despite the good work that is being done, challenges remain. These challenges include difficulties within LGBT groups, uneven progress within religious institutions, weak and unequal alliances between LGBT and faith groups, socioeconomic, gender, and racial tensions, and more.

It must be said that challenges and successes are often intertwined. As groups make progress on the challenges facing them, the balance can tip—and challenges can turn into successes. In a number of areas, the challenges described below contain ingredients of success. The hope is that with continued effort, the balance will tip toward effectiveness and success.

Challenges facing faith groups

Congregations and faith-based groups face a number of challenges that make it difficult to work on LGBT issues. These include: religious beliefs that see sexuality and identity in a narrow way, clergy fearful of taking a stand, religious hierarchies that punish those who challenge doctrine, cultural communities that condemn and reject LGBT people, lack of resources to keep momentum going on LGBT efforts, the risk of losing religious allies when including LGBT issues in larger social justice efforts, being able to share resources among faith communities, and more.

Challenging religious teachings and beliefs that condemn homosexuality is a major difficulty in many faith traditions. To question what are seen as core beliefs can be unsettling and dangerous for both the questioner and those considering the questions. Questioners risk disapproval and judgment from their co-worshippers, condemnation from their institutions, rejection from their communities, and discomfort within themselves. And those considering the questions fear that changing their beliefs regarding homosexuality might compel them to discard other religious teachings as well, and end up with no religion at all.

One of the ministers we interviewed said, “The Bible is a huge problem. So many folks haven’t been educated in how to read the Bible in a progressive way. They’re ill equipped to engage in Christian dialogue.” This inability is harmful to all. “LGBT people are so wounded by the church,” the minister went on to say. “The church needs to go through repentance and self-cleansing.”

While pro-LGBT voices in many Protestant churches face obstacles, so do those in the Catholic Church. We interviewed a number of Catholics who vividly described the challenges they faced. One said, “The institutional church has an allergic reaction to LGBT folks. It comes from a fear of dealing with themselves and from an exclusively male leadership that is chock full of gay people.”

The person went on to contrast the church hierarchy with the laity. “The resistance of the hierarchy is tremendous, and that affects attitudes,” he said. “But Catholics reflect the general population in becoming more open and accepting toward homosexuality.” He said that the majority of Catholics in Michigan were “devoutly deaf” to the bishops’ pronouncements on certain issues, especially those concerning personal behavior and sex.

He also cited a significant number of priests in the state who, in the past several years, have been resisting orders to follow the party line. During the state’s 2004 ballot initiative against marriage equality, for instance, many refused to show an antimarriage equality video from the bishops or preach on the issue. Such a refusal raised the risk that the priest would get in trouble with church authorities, but it aligned them more closely with their congregants and created opportunities for change.

One of the problems with the bishops in Michigan, according to an interviewee, is that they have a skewed view of their laity, believing them to be more conservative than they actually are. This is because they hear from conservative Catholic voices more frequently than from progressive and liberal voices. The interviewee said that liberals and progressives feel a sense of futility in complaining. They think their voices won’t make a difference, and so remain silent.

Their frustration is understandable. But it is important for liberals and progressives to speak out because it does make a difference. When the bishops tally pro and con views on particular issues, the only way they will be aware of the views of all their people is if all their people make their voices heard. Likewise, elected officials in Michigan also say that they hear from a greater number of religious conservatives opposing LGBT issues than from faith voices supporting them.

Even religious institutions that don't condemn homosexuality are often uncomfortable discussing issues of sexuality and the body. One of the ministers we interviewed who is in an open and affirming church said, "In this church the silence about sexuality is pervasive. They don't talk about intimacy or desire. There is a stiffness and general discomfort with the body."

An LGBT ally we interviewed described a large faith community that worked on a range of social justice issues. Although the congregation did not publicly condemn homosexuality, it had "hurtful ways of dealing with the LGBT community" that it wasn't aware of. After one of the pastors saw "Seven Passages"—a film featuring the voices and experiences of LGBT Christians—he approached the person we interviewed and said, "We have it wrong. But I don't know how to take 10,000 people in another direction without tearing apart the church." The minister and the ally are now discussing how to have "difficult conversations" within the congregation that—though likely to create dissonance and discomfort—might also lead to new ways of thinking

Some faith communities that are moving to be more open and welcoming to LGBT people have a fear that they could risk losing members and money. The transition can be difficult, with no sure sense of where it will lead. But once on the other side, many congregations are finding that they gain new members who have been seeking welcoming houses of worship. One person we interviewed said, "There was some push back in our congregation. But we have a 20-year history of dealing with LGBTQ issues, and by this time, anyone who was so uncomfortable with it has left. I'm the elder for membership growth and development. Four times a year we have classes for new members and when I ask, 'What brought you to this church?' at least half of the new members say LGBT openness."

While clergy leadership is crucial in moving faith communities, **some clergy express a fear of getting too far ahead of their congregations**, which can contain a range of political, social, and theological views. Of course, it is hard to know exactly where a congregation stands on LGBT issues. Some of the lay people we interviewed thought that clergy tended to be overly cautious in this regard and that parishioners were more progressive than clergy assumed. One of the people in a focus group said, "Sometimes pastors need to run to catch up—this genie is out of the bottle," and there's no turning back.

Interviewees also reminded us that being a pastor is a job—one that comes with salary, health benefits, and often a pension. Risking such security is more than

many will do, especially when they've seen colleagues lose their jobs for violating church policies or have their budgets jeopardized by offended donors. One of the people we interviewed said, "Ministers are afraid if they stick their neck out, they'll lose major donors or get in trouble." She added, "But if they see support in their congregations, they're more likely to act." One of the pastors we interviewed agreed, saying it was important for church members to push their pastor and say, "Why aren't you talking about this?" According to him, pastors have too much to do, and it's easy to skip what's difficult and controversial.

It is especially risky for clergy at churches that are more hierarchical to openly challenge official teachings and positions on LGBT issues. These clergy sometimes operate with a "don't ask, don't tell" mentality. Their congregations are quietly, rather than officially, open and affirming. They provide office space and support to LGBT-friendly faith groups. They sponsor adult education classes to discuss LGBT issues. They navigate a careful path that doesn't trigger pushback from clerical authorities.

The need for support from peers doing LGBT work is another challenge clergy face. This need seems especially apparent among clergy who have recently moved to Michigan from regions that are more progressive on LGBT issues. A lesbian pastor who came from California said it would be very helpful to be part of a clergy network to keep her spirits up and offer support. "There's a high volume of scary evangelical pastors here," she said, "and sometimes it makes me want to run back to California." Another pastor from the east coast said it felt strange to be considered a radical in Michigan, when she'd been a moderate voice in more liberal places. A third pastor voiced frustration with the slow pace of change in Michigan. Issues that had been settled decades ago in her previous congregation were being hotly debated in her new church. It was hard to have patience, she said. But even pastors who have been in Michigan for a long time said that an information-sharing, networking support group would be helpful.

Faith leaders engaged in LGBT efforts face the challenge of running groups effectively and keeping them going, despite hazy organizational structures, limited funding and staff, and changing leadership. One person who works with an LGBT support group in her denomination said that their first conference last fall, which more than 150 people attended, ended with great energy and enthusiasm. But since then it has been hard to keep up the momentum. "We need a way to keep the energy level up," the person said. She has started a Facebook page for the group and held small informal meetings at her home. Recently she went to a

national board meeting of groups like hers and encountered strong differences of opinion about whether to work within their own denomination or reach out to other faiths and secular LGBT groups. She felt an interfaith movement was needed, even as she said, “Our capacity is limited, there’s no staff. We need to have a presence in as many places as possible.”

Faith communities that attempt to work with each other must deal with the fact that they are at very different stages regarding LGBT efforts. Some, like the United Church of Christ and Unitarian Universalist Association, have long held official positions supporting LGBT human rights, while others are still navigating that terrain. Such different stages can lead to difficulties. According to one person we interviewed who has been involved in coalition building, there needs to be momentum and progress. But with faith groups at so many different stages, conversations can be quite basic. This makes some people impatient and leaves others feeling vulnerable.

A related challenge is that faith communities at some point need to go beyond supportive conversations to working on a tangible goal. “If all we do is have conversations, people lose focus and don’t engage,” one person we interviewed said. “We’ve gotten to the point where people are feeling safe and connected. That’s good. And now they are saying, ‘What can I do?’ They’re ready to become more activist. How we can extend our energy into the larger community and be effective? We need an issue. We need to find a common agenda [to work for] social justice in Michigan. I’d love to get the Unitarians organized and say, here is a project we can work on.” Challenges such as these also illustrate opportunities, showing that a number of communities are ready to commit to an issue. With the right kind of support and resources, they have the potential to be effective voices on issues such as second parent adoption, safe schools/antibullying, or antidiscrimination.

Some faith communities that work together on social justice issues have found that including LGBT issues and allies can be risky, for it means that some of their faith partners will refuse to participate if LGBT groups are at the table. Losing allies can feel like a high price to pay for faith communities that work together on poverty, immigration, the environment, criminal justice, youth violence, hunger, and other social justice issues. Even some progressive religious groups, according to an interviewee, do not see LGBT rights as a social justice issue.

Faith groups that are doing good work on LGBT issues face the challenges of sharing resources and information so they don’t have to reinvent the wheel. Lack

of coordination and limited resources make it hard to learn from each other and enhance the progress that each is making.

Interestingly, one difficulty mentioned by a person we interviewed was getting straight men in faith communities involved as LGBT allies. “They’ve got this macho thing going,” she said. “It’s how they were raised.” The LGBT group in her church has invited the men’s group to potluck suppers, with the idea that once they get to know individuals and hear their stories, they’ll be less likely to believe “stupid myths.”

Some faith groups are hesitant to work with LGBT groups because they fear the LGBT groups will come in and tell them what to do. One of the people we interviewed said, “We need to figure it out internally and do it our way. We know how fast we can go.” However, after describing a number of victories they had won in their church, he agreed that alliances with LGBT groups were essential in working on social justice issues. “It all depends on how an outside organization comes in,” he said. “Do they understand the culture? Are they being a resource and giving us tools for conversation and advocacy?”

Such challenges within faith communities can tax their effectiveness and spill into the outside world, where the public—including LGBT groups and allies—get overly simplified impressions and can come away with a negative view of religion. However, the good news is that faith groups are actively engaged in overcoming many of these challenges and are poised to make good progress.

Challenges facing LGBT groups

LGBT groups are facing difficulties that challenge their effectiveness and ability to reach out to faith communities. Difficulties include leadership problems, turf battles, lack of power sharing, communications problems, limited resources, and more.

A number of people we interviewed described **leadership changes, high turnover, lack of leadership development, and duplication within LGBT groups as unsettling and stressful.** Some criticized the lack of transparency when organizational and leadership changes are made, saying they felt like outsiders rather than collaborators in their own community. Similarly, others felt that LGBT groups needed to be more responsive to, and reflective of, the community. Still others expressed frustration at the duplication of LGBT groups. Instead of working together, people too often start a new organization that does the same thing.

One of the people we interviewed described a phase that some LGBT organizations are entering, as founders or early executive directors are being replaced by a more diverse group of younger people, women, and people of color. Most groups were founded by “strong entrepreneurial people,” he said. “They were very clear about what they wanted—that’s how you get an organization started. But they tend also to be people who don’t work well with others.” The person cited new possibilities as new leaders take their place, saying, “even though it’s a more fragile time economically, groups might start working together better.”

Other interviewees said that leaders needed training in order to become effective managers, fundraisers, and goal setters. Too often, people with skills in one area became organizational leaders, which required a different set of skills. Boards of directors also needed training in order to hold executive directors accountable and set measurable goals.

The lack of experience and training in working across differences, as well as disagreements over what issues should have priority, can create tension and stress as LGBT organizations seek to become more diverse in terms of gender, race, ethnicity, and class.

One interviewee mentioned the problem of **burnout**. “Some leaders leave but others stay,” he said, “and risk being overworked and overwhelmed. It affects the quality of the work and collaboration.” Leaders who do leave often fail to groom a replacement, which hinders the organization going forward. Some of the people we interviewed saw burnout out within themselves, citing being up against overwhelming needs with inadequate resources and support.

A number of people we interviewed cited **lack of communication among groups and an inability to deal with conflict** as serious problems. Lack of experience in building coalitions, inability to work across differences, and inadequate attention paid to building relationships were also seen as problems. One person said, “Just because you can do volunteer organizing doesn’t mean you know political strategy. We need to defer to allow people to do their job well. We need to listen to them in a coalition.” He added that coalition work also meant dealing with egos and that participants with visibly larger egos were usually less likely to be the ones who did the work.

The problem of overly large egos came up numerous times, linked to infighting and lack of political effectiveness. One person said, “I’m thinking about the women’s

movement with the same kind of schisms. We never really had any power, so we never knew how to use it. We have used power in the traditional way—we browbeat and hoard.” Another person said they thought that there had recently been some “soul searching among leaders, which has improved some of the ego and turf wars.”

A number of interviewees cited **the risk of being out** as a challenge to mobilizing the community. The fear of losing one’s job or children is strong, especially in more conservative regions, but the risk is broadly felt, given the lack of legal protection in the state. People tend to be out selectively: with friends, at church, with a few colleagues at work. Organizing for broad-based visible advocacy is a challenge.

Challenges in building coalitions

More diverse groups should have a seat at the table when coalitions are formed, according to one person we interviewed. Action groups, large groups, and small grassroots groups should all be represented—and should all have specific responsibilities. Participants should be educated as to what coalitions are, how they work, and what is expected from members. Also needed were strong coalition leaders who are good listeners, able to provide smart strategy and direction, hold everyone accountable, and keep all eyes on the goal.

A number of people echoed these views, emphasizing how important it was to get buy-in from participants on a coalition’s goals and strategies. A shared sense of mission was essential. Equally important was everyone pulling their weight by carrying out their particular tasks and responsibilities. Problems arose when there was confusion and miscommunication in these areas. Problems also arose when a coalition shifted strategy or engaged in public infighting.

People emphasized the importance of “getting things done,” rather than just going to meetings. Describing one coalition, an interviewee said, “I was frustrated. There were a lot of meetings. But there were no reports we could hand to legislators.” The person went on to say that because the LGBT community has a limited presence in Lansing, it was especially important to be able to document their needs.

One interviewee was asked what would hinder them from joining a coalition. He replied, “If I know very little about the organization. If I feel I’m being used. If my time is not valued. If my input is not solicited and included. If people are rude.” He added, “We come with something. See our strengths. We want to participate

fully and give what we have, not what we are supposed to have.” Another person said it was important for coalitions to have the human and financial resources to make things happen. “I don’t waste my time with groups that don’t have the capacity,” she said.

It takes time to build consensus, which was frustrating to some we interviewed. People also mentioned limited capacities for collaboration, with one interviewee describing where she lived as the land of “sole practitioners.” Libertarian rather than conservative is how some people put it. Some suggested that a live and let live mentality might be easier to win over than a rigidly conservative one in terms of making progress on LGBT issues.

Interviewees also discussed the question of who should be invited to sit at the coalition table. Casting the net wide may sound equitable, some said, but becomes unmanageable with so many organizations. One person suggested drawing the line at paid staff because it would be easier for them to commit to weekly calls and other assignments. The person acknowledged, however, that exceptions had been made for good reason—one of which was that some minority groups, despite being well organized and interested in participating, tended to be smaller and to rely on volunteer staff.

An interviewee said that what was most important in coalition work was to “come committed, stay focused, don’t worry about who gets the credit, and share in the success.” A hopeful note was sounded by one interviewee who said, “We have more allies than we believe. We just don’t give them an opportunity to show up. We need to help our allies help us.”

The coalitions that people described tended not to include faith-based groups as key members. But one person who had worked in an interfaith advocacy coalition said that a challenge was not to water down different faith traditions so much that they lost their distinctiveness.

Issues affecting the activist community

Some of the people we interviewed said that the **2004 marriage equality loss was a large blow to the LGBT community**. “It created a tremendous amount of heartbreak and exhaustion,” one interviewee said. Not much has been accomplished in the six years since, according to this person, who cited territorial

fight, lack of direction from leadership, and lack of communication with the community as serious problems.

One activist bemoaned the **lack of coordination among LGBT groups and a resulting lack of clout in Lansing**. “The lack of activism on our side is crushing. A paid lobbyist at the state level [is crucial],” the person said. “We need a constant and reliable presence in Lansing. We are so easily dismissed. They hear from the right wing; they don’t hear from the middle or left, and we have no influence. They feel no political pressure to act on our behalf.” Another interviewee cited an immediate need for “professional, effective leadership,” saying, “if we wait another two years, we will be doomed.”

Adding to the challenges in Lansing is the fact that, according to one interviewee, “many conservative Michigan legislators base their votes on their faith beliefs which include a condemnation of LGBT groups and concerns.” One of our interviewees said that as long as Republicans control the state senate, it will be virtually impossible to pass LGBT legislation. This person advised working through the executive branch where regulations can come from state agencies, or enacting measures on the municipal level.

LGBT groups across the state are diverse. This is a strength, but also presents challenges, one of which is that they have different missions, styles, and cultures. One of the people we interviewed called these differences a “schism between activism/marches vs. education/nurturing/community.” Not everyone is comfortable with activism, the person said—adding, “there needs to be a space for everyone.”

A number of interviewees remarked on the social nature of many LGBT groups. One said that most of the LGBT community in her area was involved in social networks rather than political ones. An interviewee from a rural part of the state said that “working for rights is kind of taboo here.” The reasons weren’t simply cultural. They were also pragmatic. The person added, “This is a hard place to get a job. If you work for the Catholic Church and they find out, there are consequences.”

Inadequate funding is a serious problem. Virtually everyone we interviewed described lack of funding as detrimental to their work. “LGBT organizations need financial stability” in order to be effective, said one interviewee. Another said, “Coalitions don’t work well unless they’re staffed. They need a targeted pot of money.” He added, “We don’t lack good ideas. We lack the resources to amplify those ideas.”

It seemed that virtually every problem described by those we interviewed was linked to lack of funding. Turf wars, lack of communications, ineffective leadership, lack of training in conflict resolution and relationship building, ineffective coalitions—all of it was connected to inadequate resources. Not everyone saw increased funding as a single solution—but without it, they did not see paths to effectiveness and success.

In terms of **transgender issues**, one of people we interviewed voiced strong frustration, not by lack of funding, but by hurtful attitudes and behaviors from the gay and lesbian community. The person said, “I can’t tell you how hard it is to do this trans work. We have so few people. We have no movement. We’re like lesbians 20 years ago.”

Another transgender person said, “Some people ... want us to plan fundraising, but we also want to plan policy and be much more visible on boards. They might want our stamp of approval but not our visibility. They may still be bit embarrassed by us being visible in their organizations. One thing I am working on with them is to get over it.”

Challenges to alliance building between LGBT and faith groups

A significant challenge to collaboration between Michigan LGBT and faith groups is the fact that **religion is often seen as an opponent, rather than an ally, in the struggle for LGBT human rights** in the state. LGBT advocates who are religious—as well as those who are not—find themselves battling well-funded right-wing religious forces, the Catholic hierarchy, and others with power and money. Such antagonism takes a toll and decreases the chance that LGBT advocates will seek out faith groups as natural allies.

Powerful conservative groups like the Family Research Council and the Catholic Bishops, along with wealthy individuals, claim they are defending moral values and religious truths. In truth, many have given religion a bad name. At the same time, they have made it even more urgent for faith groups and LGBT advocates to work together. Pro-LGBT religious voices are essential in order to gain LGBT human rights in Michigan because much of the opposition is based in religious thinking. One of our interviewees said, “For most people, their objections are what they’ve been taught in church. It doesn’t matter if there’s a gay group like Affirmations. We need to engage people in congregations.”

The good news is that this is happening, as religious voices that are pro-LGBT are getting stronger and spreading across the state. From Detroit to Grand Rapids, and Traverse City to Battle Creek, faith leaders are moving in measurable ways toward greater acceptance and welcoming of LGBT people. This is important for many reasons, one of which is political. A pastor we interviewed described lobby days in Lansing that he helped organize, where members of his congregation met with representatives on LGBT human rights issues. While their efforts were important, he said, they were not sufficient to sway lawmakers who were “were under more pressure from the other side.”

There is still a great deal of work to do. One of our interviewees who works with clergy said that many didn’t want to be on the front lines of social change. Furthermore, they didn’t want their churches to be seen as “gay churches,” but rather churches that were welcoming to all. The interviewee said it was important to identify clergy who *did* want to be strong advocates so that LGBT advocacy groups could work with them.

Another challenge to alliance building comes from conservative churches. A number of faith leaders in those communities worry that public alliances with LGBT groups could work against them and “taint” their work. One interviewee said, “People see ‘those liberal militant gays,’ and the groups have a negative impact. All their lobbying doesn’t change people’s hearts.” In fact, this concern goes beyond conservative congregations.

One of the people we interviewed described reconciling work that the LGBT community was doing with local churches on issues of race, gender, and sexual orientation. The good news was that they were able to share similar struggles and find space to work together. The bad news was that on certain efforts and events, some faith communities—because of their religious beliefs—refused to participate if LGBT groups were at the table.

Gender issues are another challenge for LGBT and faith groups. Most religious organizations are male dominated and patriarchal in structure, culture, and history. Several of our interviewees connected the roots of homophobia to misogyny and remarked upon the built-in oppressions that exist in many religious institutions. “In terms of building trust, you must know your identity. Gender and class are really relevant. There are old ways of organizing that are male dominated...that include unions and churches. Each organization should do an assessment of where they are,” said one of the people we interviewed. Another explicitly linked sexism and homophobia, saying, “The whole issue is sexism, in all of its manifestations.”

In some cases, LGBT groups don't see religion as an opponent—but it is unfamiliar. **The diversity of religious teachings, traditions, and vocabulary are unknown, and so advocates can inadvertently stumble and offend.** African-American churches, for instance, talk about homosexuality differently than white Lutherans do. Methodist ministers are constrained by their denomination in ways that Presbyterian ministers are not. Some faith communities have made great progress on LGBT issues, while others are still struggling, and some are just beginning to tackle them. Too often LGBT advocates lump religious communities into a monolithic entity and see them as just another interest group to organize. Such an approach rarely ends well.

In fact, one of the challenges to alliance building among faith and LGBT groups is the perception among many faith groups that they get “used” in campaigns by strategists who want their public endorsement, but are less interested in treating them as equals and giving them a seat at the table where strategic and policy decisions are made.

Another challenge to advocacy and activism, in both the religious and secular realm, stems ironically from the progress that has been made on LGBT rights.

Several of those we interviewed cited a lessening of activism among LGBT people in the state. One pastor of a majority-white church said of the LGBT congregants, “Most are pretty comfortable. They have the resources to work the system as it is. They have a second home and are financially comfortable. They don't want to put themselves on the line. Instead they say, ‘I just want to live my life.’” Another person added, “People don't want to be active on their own behalf. They want to stay in the closet.”

One leader who has been working on collaboration among groups said, “More is going on than before, although we still have a largely apathetic community. We haven't made progress in engaging people who are afraid to come out—many are just happy with the social aspects.”

But there are good reasons for LGBT people to be cautious. One minister said, “I hear over and over, ‘I am LGBT but would lose my job and my kids if I speak out.’”

A number of faith communities do collaborate with LGBT groups. Of the alliances that exist, many are informal. For instance, a church might list LGBT events in the bulletin, host speakers, or provide space for groups to meet. A faith community might participate in gay pride events, or co-host gay-friendly family celebra-

tions and picnics. Some of our interviewees said that the mingling of LGBT and faith groups was more likely to happen in western Michigan because religion is so pervasive in that part of the state.

It is important for alliances to grow and for LGBT and faith groups to stay connected. The time to build trust and working relationships is *before* an issue campaign begins, so that both communities can hit the ground running and be ready to do their part.

Implications of racial issues in LGBT and faith groups

One of the most intractable problems in Michigan has been that of racism. Geographic segregation, economic inequality, and political inequity remain persistent throughout the state. Despite efforts over the years to increase inter-racial understanding and improve relations, the fact remains that racial tensions and conflict too often hinder efforts to achieve social justice.

This is especially true regarding efforts to gain LGBT human rights and equality. Race becomes even more nuanced and complex when religion is added to the mix. One of the criticisms communities of color raise is that they are often viewed as monolithic, especially where religion and LGBT issues are concerned. The notion that there is a taboo against discussing homosexuality in the African-American church or that African-American pastors condemn homosexuality is often stated as true across the board. Such statements, however, fail to reflect the diversity within African-American faith communities, and they also ignore the leaders and allies within these communities who have long stood up for LGBT human rights. Interviewees repeatedly cited leadership within the NAACP in Michigan as being supportive of LGBT human rights. And Detroit has a number of openly gay African-American clergy.

Having said that, it is important to note that LGBT issues are problematic for many African American communities. One of the faith advocates we interviewed said that the social justice coalition she led believed in protecting the rights of all people. To specifically tackle LGBT issues, however, would divide the coalition. Having a dialogue on LGBT issues might be possible, but even so, the leader estimated that only 25 percent of the members would be willing to do so.

Another challenge to alliance building is the way in which LGBT issues are framed. Are they part of a larger social justice framework that includes racial justice, or are they the single focus? Many of the people we interviewed said that including LGBT issues within a larger social justice framework was more effective in building alliances with communities of color because it was more inclusive and allowed

for more diverse opinions and movement. Another person said that a single focus on LGBT issues can come across as elitist in communities of color and that approaching LGBT issues within a progressive frame works better.

While many agreed that it was important to include LGBT issues as part of a larger frame, they warned it was also important not to conflate LGBT issues and civil rights. “Don’t equate the two movements,” people warned again and again. Even this taboo, however, contained a certain amount of nuance. One person said he has heard a number of young African-American men and women who support LGBT rights quoting Martin Luther King who said, “Unless we’re all free, none of us is free.”

A number of LGBT African-American faith leaders see themselves as “part of the movement,” stressing that “there is a need for black Christians to be visible.” One of the leaders we interviewed, however, emphasized the need for the LGBT movement to be truly diverse by including people of color in leadership roles, rather than confining them to publicly visible roles, such as leading marches or speaking at press conferences.

The so-called religious-secular divide is less apparent in many communities of color, especially African-American communities, where issues of faith and social justice are likely to be entwined. “Speaking the language of faith” was seen as crucial for increasing support among African Americans on LGBT issues—and so was being able to work with authentic faith leaders. One of the people we interviewed said that his community always dealt with secular LGBT leaders, but rarely saw leaders from their own faith community, even when the moral aspects of LGBT issues were being discussed. We need someone who speaks the language, he said. “Our armor should include faith-based leaders who know the scripture up and down.” He added that a challenge facing communities of color was developing a sufficient number of faith leaders to work in larger coalitions.

Another issue that came up during our interviews concerned the way issues were prioritized. Was the most important issue marriage equality? Safe schools? Employment antidiscrimination? Second parent adoption? Several of the people we interviewed remarked on the different priorities held by white LGBT groups and communities of color regarding certain issues, especially marriage equality. White LGBT groups were more likely to rank marriage equality as a top priority, while African-American communities were not.

One person we interviewed said, “For people of color, this is not our main concern. There are much bigger fish to fry for the community. If your partner doesn’t have a job or you don’t have property, [marriage equality] doesn’t impact you. I have three burdens on my back; one is being black, second is as a woman, and third is as a lesbian. Contrast this to a white man who has only the burden of being a white gay man. Should we remove the burden of the white guy? I am almost certain he will not come back to help me. Instead, he could become another foot on my neck. When they get fully franchised, they’re not going to help you ... or marry you. And white women can jump on the coattails of white men.”

Another interviewee concurred, saying that white LGBT advocates kept urging the African-American community to get organized around gay marriage. We said we weren’t ready, she said. We told them, “We have some capacity building to do before we can move forward in a way that is meaningful to our community. But the white community kept saying, ‘come on.’” The interviewee said her community felt it was being used as a “black face” of the movement.

Another person said, “There’s been concern among some in the minority community about pursuing Eliot-Larson [civil rights legislation] especially in this economic climate. Are we going to be looking for special rights when people are losing jobs all over the place?”

The issue of second parent adoption was also seen through a distinctive lens by a number of African Americans we interviewed. One said, “Quite honestly, black folk pick up kids all the time and just raise them. We don’t necessarily go to the system. We might not want to go through an adoption course for six weeks, and we don’t want them to know about our income or how we raise our kids. We informally adopt kids all the time. Almost everyone I know, gay and straight, has parented some kid that wasn’t theirs. We have figured out how to make our family system work.” Yet a young African-American pastor in a focus group described how surprised (and pleased) he was to find common ground with white LGBT participants who wanted to adoption laws to become more just and inclusive because he had faced the issue himself in his struggle to legally adopt his sisters and brothers.

Many of the people we interviewed stressed the need for white LGBT activists and allies to work on issues of racism. “A lot of activists have not done any work around race and privilege,” one person said. “I am shocked at the lack of work, and it gets in the way.” People cited failure to listen, acting with condescension, and discrediting people of color as common problems. Many of those we interviewed said that for a

long time, the LGBT movement in Michigan had been run by white men, that they had the power and money, and that gay issues were seen as white issues.

There was also some resentment about the lack of reciprocity regarding issues that affected both communities, such as HIV-AIDS. Now that the disease has migrated to communities of color, it tended to be seen by whites as more of a racial problem than a gay problem. Furthermore, the support the gay community had provided to “its own” in terms of meals, medical care, and more was not being given in measurable ways to the African-American community. Beyond this, many of those we interviewed saw issues of race as central to movement building, not an isolated problem that needed to be solved so that the real work of movement building could move forward.

Many of the racial challenges described above also apply to faith communities. Despite heartfelt intentions and efforts to be more inclusive, many faith communities remain segregated, stymied by geography, liturgy, music, worship styles, discomfort with difference, prejudice, and more against easing racial and ethnic divides.

Finally, it should be noted that despite these challenges, efforts to reduce racism have been going on in Michigan for decades and have intensified in the last several years. In our interviews, it was striking how many faith and LGBT leaders recognized the importance of having broad, demographically diverse coalitions. Often this recognition was unprompted by the interviewer. Although considerable challenges still exist, the first step is recognition of the need for engagement. Many groups have recognized this need, and a number are actively addressing it and steadily increasing the diversity of voices at the table.

Challenges and opportunities in Muslim-American communities

Although we did not interview a large number of Muslim Americans for this report, those we did talk with provided valuable information and insights. They were both gay and straight. All were practicing Muslims.

Those who were gay described the challenge of living with clashing identities—being Muslim, being American, being Arab, being gay. One person said, “You are taught it is against your faith and God. Then you have these strong feelings that you try to put aside. You try to lie. You try to be cured, even get married. A lot of people leave their faith because they think they can’t be gay and [Muslim].” The person went on to describe a father who saw his son going into a gay bar. He beat his son, breaking his arm and ribs, and wouldn’t let him come back home.

Another person said, “God made me a Muslim and God made me gay. That’s my lot in life. My test is how to figure out how to work those things together.” He thinks of himself as a devout Muslim who prays five times a day, goes to mosque, reads the Koran, and fasts during Ramadan. He said, “I feel I have a lot to say to my community. I want to try to be part of a movement, to help spread change and love, but I’m afraid to rock the boat.”

According to our interviewees, homosexuality is an issue that “no one talks about.” Not in the mosque, not with the imam, not with one’s family or friends. There’s no discussion and “you need to watch out what people say. You need to be sure you’re not disgracing or shaming your family.” A community leader told us that homosexuality is treated as an issue within the “private domain.”

Interviewees said that a great deal of miseducation exists. For instance, many in the community believe that being gay is a choice or a sickness, or that gay Muslims don’t exist. Stereotypes abound because people don’t think they know anyone who is gay. An interviewee said, “It would be helpful if the community had a little bit more of an open mind. They don’t need to do their own Pride parade, but when they hear the word, they immediately go to the dark places. Let’s humanize and say, here’s a good person.”

One person who lived near LGBT advocacy groups in the eastern part of the state said, “I’m not looking for help. I’m not looking for someone to tell me it’s okay. What I really need in my life and in the people I surround myself with are healthy normal gay people, where it’s not a problem.”

An Arab-American Muslim we interviewed said, “We’re seeing more and more Muslims coming out to their therapist and dealing with internalized homophobia.” Some Muslim therapists are uncomfortable treating gay Muslim patients, she said, or try to cure them. Other therapists, though, see the need for greater awareness, understanding, and support, and attempt to raise the issue with imams. However, they don’t get very far. “Imams don’t believe in homosexuality,” the interviewee said. “They have no personal connection with the issue.” We were also told that if there were legislative battles on LGBT issues in Michigan, imams would most likely sit on the sidelines, rather than organize and engage in political advocacy.

Interestingly, one of the people we interviewed said that being transgender was a less difficult issue, especially among Shias. If someone believes they are of a different gender, the process of changing is permitted by theological laws and teachings.

The one place where some discussions have been taking place is college campuses. For instance, the University of Michigan-Dearborn last year held forums that focused on Arab and LGBT communities. We have also heard that informal conversations are occurring among non-Muslim allies and imams they know.

In other work we have done with Muslim Americans, we have encountered young Muslim Americans who do work on LGBT issues. They see themselves as progressive advocates for social justice, including LGBT issues, and are seeking to make the Muslim-American community more inclusive. They tend to live in urban areas and have gay friends, or be gay themselves. Their Muslim identity is part of who they are—and given the diversity of the Muslim-American community, they have allies among individuals and organizations, such as Muslims for Progressive Values. They are still very much in the minority within their community however. As one Muslim American recently said to us, “The issue is taboo.”

“Most winnable” issues and second parent adoption

Nearly two-thirds of the people we interviewed said the most winnable issue in Michigan was safe schools/antibullying. One third said antidiscrimination was most winnable, with multiple people placing it as second and a few people tying it with safe schools/antibullying for first. For many, the two issues seemed rather interchangeable in terms of winnability. Almost all our interviewees said that the least winnable issue was marriage equality. They used words like “threatening” and “hot button” to describe it, and one person said, “anything but marriage.”

There was little in-depth understanding of second parent adoption among the people we interviewed. Those who were familiar with the issue tended to be from groups like the Coalition for Adoption Rights Equality or the ACLU. Others had learned about it through groups like Inclusive Justice’s Together in Faith Collaborative, while still others had personal experience.

Safe schools/antibullying

Most of the people we interviewed knew about safe schools/anti-bullying as an issue and felt it was both important and winnable. Safe schools had support from LGBT allies and communities of color—and a number of people said that one of its advantages was that messaging could focus on children and their welfare. There was debate regarding whether proposed legislation should be enumerated or nonenumerated. While no strong majority existed on either side, many interviewees were unfamiliar with the details of the distinction, or with the distinction itself. Interestingly, one of the people we interviewed noted that an advantage of safe schools/antibullying was that—unlike other issues where gays and lesbians were requesting rights for themselves that straight people already had—in this case, all groups were seeking an expansion of rights, which put them on equal footing.

Antidiscrimination legislation

LGBT advocates strongly supported antidiscrimination legislation as an important and winnable issue. One person we interviewed said, “Most people in Michigan think it is unfair to be fired simply because you are gay.” Another person went into more detail, saying, “In my experience most people believe the LGBT community has some protections ... people are already familiar with rights laws. ‘I know I can’t discriminate against people because of race and religion,’ so it is easier for them to make a leap to sexual orientation and gender identity.”

A counterview came from an interviewee who said, “In this economic climate, people are watching out for themselves, and in the voting booth they’ll be comfortable keeping discrimination.” Several others agreed, noting the similarity between antidiscrimination policies and the affirmative action measure that was defeated in 2006. They feared that while polling research might show support for antidiscrimination policies, a difficult economic climate would prompt people to vote against it in the voting booth. On the other hand, several interviewees felt that given last year’s success in the Kalamazoo antidiscrimination ordinance campaign, other municipalities were ready to propose antidiscrimination laws.

It is significant to note that most of the LGBT advocates we interviewed were keenly aware that the state had no antidiscrimination laws on the books to protect LGBT people. Several cited this lack of legal protection as a risk factor in their lives. Outside the LGBT community, however—among faith leaders, allies, and others—that level of awareness was marginal at best.

Second parent adoption

A number of people we interviewed said an advantage of second parent adoption was that it focused on children and their welfare. One person said the issue had the potential to shift the family values debate 180 degrees. A number agreed that it could be framed broadly as an issue that affected many kinds of “nontraditional families.” One person said, “second parent adoption [can be winnable] because it is a larger issue than just an LGBT issue. People will see it as not just a gay issue.”

Another saw the issue as an opportunity for coalition building among LGBT and faith groups. “I’m always surprised that there isn’t more energy for second parent adoption,” she said. “I have adopted – as a single parent, I see it as a family issue

that the church can get involved in down the road, as family is being redefined.” In order to be persuasive with a wider audience, though, several interviewees said that new language was needed because “second parent adoption” sounded like jargon.

As noted earlier, a number of African-American interviewees were uncertain if the issue would gain traction in their communities. One said, “We already figured out how to do this. We adopt kids informally all the time.” Furthermore, second parent adoption would invite unwanted scrutiny and government oversight, and could create legal and financial difficulties. Several interviewees noted that if the LGBT community wanted African-American support for second parent adoption, it would need to do work beforehand, explaining how second parent adoption would affect existing arrangements, as well as how it would benefit the community.

The Coalition for Adoption Rights Equality, or CARE, has done good work on this issue. Despite limited resources, it has gained endorsements from 28 professional organizations, many national organizations—and according to the group’s leaders, has secured a commitment from the Michigan Catholic Conference of Bishops that they would not oppose a legislative initiative on second parent adoption. (Others knowledgeable about the Catholic Church in Michigan, however, believe that the church would oppose second parent adoption because the hierarchy would interpret the issue according to their theology of the family.) CARE has also prepared lobby briefs, talking points, fact sheets, legislative language, coalition building guidelines, and endorsement letter forms. Beyond that, it has created compelling short profiles—the Faces of Second Parent Adoption—that describe the diverse kinds of families involved (see endnote 2).

As described in the endnotes, stories of those seeking to co-adopt children can be effective vehicles to build support. Such stories are not widely known, even within the LGBT and faith communities. During one of our roundtable conversations, a participant described the anxiety her family endures because her partner, the stay-at-home parent, has no legal rights regarding their children. Another participant, the minister of an open and affirming church, realized that he had assumed that the children of same-sex couples in his congregation were jointly adopted, but that was probably not be the case.

In terms of the “winnability” of second parent adoption, our interviewees said that organizing around children was a good way to frame the issue. One major difference between the safe schools issue and second parent adoption is that there is greater public awareness and advocacy around safe schools. As a result, more pub-

lic education and awareness needs to happen around second parent adoption. The upside of this challenge is that because the issue is so unknown, public views are not already formed. Unlike marriage equality which has been framed by conservatives as a threat to family values, religious liberty and parental rights, second parent adoption is still a blank slate in the public mind. And so rather than reacting to a fixed narrative, we can create the message—in essence, writing it on the blank slate.

Conclusions and recommendations

The diverse voices of those we interviewed add dimension, complexity, and nuance to the issues facing faith and LGBT communities in Michigan. At times these voices echoed similar themes, but they also contrasted with each other. There is no one reality when it comes to the challenges and opportunities that faith and LGBT communities face. Instead, there are many divergent realities, depending on one's vantage point, philosophical beliefs, resources, and more.

In order to achieve human rights and equality for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people in Michigan, both the faith and LGBT communities need to more fully understand each other and work together. They also need to work within their own communities, increasing their effectiveness so that they can be strong partners.

The following recommendations are suggested as a way to help achieve these goals.

1. Faith and LGBT groups need to build alliances before campaigns start, so that relationships are in place when it's time to make decisions and begin work. Successful alliances that are already in place can serve as models moving forward. LGBT and faith groups need to work together to create and nurture such alliances, and build trust between the two communities.
2. Faith groups need to be equal partners with LGBT groups, with a seat at the decision-making table. At the same time, faith groups need to work within their own community, sharing resources, strategies, and best practices in order to increase their capacity and expertise. For their part, LGBT groups need to strengthen their own leadership, increase their organizational effectiveness, and improve intragroup collaborations so they can be effective partners for faith communities.
3. Clergy leadership on LGBT issues needs to be strengthened according to their religious, racial/ethnic, and cultural traditions. Clergy who want to be

public advocates for LGBT human rights need training in a range of areas, including media and messaging. Clergy should be brought together for networking and mutual support.

4. Lay leadership on LGBT issues in faith communities also needs to be supported and strengthened. Successful “hybrid” groups that are faith-infused but reach into the secular world should receive targeted support, so that the most effective can scale up and broaden their reach.
5. LGBT and faith groups need to consider how their issues fit within a larger social justice framework and context, with the goal of broadening their base of allies and connecting with the large public. LGBT and faith groups should be advocates for their issues within multi-issue coalitions, while being respectful of competing priorities.
6. More work needs to be done connecting Michigan’s economic revitalization to enacting LGBT human rights. Groups doing work in this area should be identified, with the possible creation of a small task force to identify business leaders, philanthropists, civic, political and cultural leaders, educators, and others who can be leaders in a campaign.
7. Many faith groups are ready to work on a social justice issue that has an action plan and tangible goal. Given polling and research, focusing on antidiscrimination and/or safe schools/antibullying seems a good place to start.
8. LGBT and faith communities need to confront racism and be committed to honest dialogue and ongoing work, in order to become more effective institutions, more authentic voices of the community, and more accurate reflections of the equality and justice they espouse.
9. Youth leadership should be supported. This includes supporting promising LGBT student and faith-based groups and leaders in colleges and universities, holding youth development retreats, and mentoring young people. In addition, more work needs to be done intergenerationally so that experience, skills, and training can be passed on from older to younger people, and so that the younger people can share their insights and views in order to keep the movement relevant to those coming of age.

10. Second parent adoption can be a winnable issue in Michigan if it is named and framed in a nonjargony way; if communities who are potential allies are given the public education, support, and voice they need; and if a strategic and well-organized campaign, along with effective messaging and outreach, can be created statewide. Furthermore, the issues of nondiscrimination and safe schools/antibullying seem to have both high awareness and support, and top the list of winnable issues.

Methodology

We conducted interviews with more than 50 LGBT advocates and allies, with clergy, and with lay leaders of faith communities and faith-based groups across the state of Michigan. In addition, we conducted five roundtable conversations with 8 to 10 participants each in Grand Rapids and Holland, at the Ecumenical Seminary in Detroit, and at Chicago Theological Seminary with Michigan-based faith leaders. In total, we spoke with more than 90 people.

Each individual interview lasted about an hour. Virtually all were conducted over the phone, with the questioner taking extensive notes. The Faith and Progressive Policy team at Center for American Progress and a Michigan-based consultant developed the questionnaire. We explained our project and its goals and assured each person that our conversation would be confidential and off the record—and that they would not be quoted by name or affiliation, nor be identifiable in our report.

We selected interviewees based on their roles and responsibilities within LGBT and faith organizations and communities. We sought geographic, racial, ethnic, age, issue, and gender diversity. Given the size of the state and the abundance of LGBT and faith communities within it, we recognize that our relatively small sample does not fully represent LGBT and faith communities. We hope that the report will inspire further conversation, research, and action—and that the report's findings will provide strategic insights that will help build strong alliances and coalitions for human rights and social justice among LGBT and faith groups across the state of Michigan.

Appendices

Fact sheet on second parent adoption in Michigan

Joint and Second Parent Adoption in Michigan: Frequently Asked Questions

Q) How many children are waiting to be adopted in Michigan?

A) According to the most recent available data, there are **15,466 children** in foster care in Michigan. Of these, approximately **3,788 children** are waiting for placements in adoptive families.³ A foster child in Michigan stays in the foster system an average of **21 months**.⁴

Q) What is joint adoption?

A) Joint adoption is a legal procedure that allows a couple to adopt a child from his or her biological parents, or from state custody.

Q) What is second parent adoption?

A) Second parent adoption is a legal procedure that allows a second parent to adopt the biological or adopted child of his or her partner.

Q) What does joint and second parent adoption mean for Michigan families?

A) Joint and second parent adoption would significantly expand the number of two-parent families available to children in need. Some would be gay and lesbian parented families, while others could consist of two family members joining together to legally raise a child in the family, such as a grandmother and an aunt, or a widow and her sister. Legal adoption provides children two parents with full financial, medical, social, and legal rights.

Q) What is the status of joint and second parent adoption legislation in Michigan? In the United States?

A) **Michigan does not currently have any joint or second parent adoption laws on record that expressly prohibit or allow this form of adoption;** this leaves the issue of nontraditional family adoption in a legal gray area in Michigan. The

decision to grant second parent rights to petitioning adults has been left largely up to individual courts. Because there is no specific process in the adoption laws allowing for joint adoption, judges refuse to allow petitions for joint adoption in nearly all cases.

Joint and second parent adoption is legal in **eight states**, including California, Colorado, Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Illinois, New York, and Vermont, as well as the District of Columbia. Joint and second parent adoption is legal in selective jurisdictions in other states across the country. For a complete list of the status of adoption laws in every state, see page 26 of our report, “Faith and Family Equality.”

Q) What are the economic benefits of joint and second parent adoption?

A) A 2003 study by the Family Independence Agency revealed that it costs the state government and Michigan taxpayers **\$5,110 per year** for a child under age 13 and **\$6,314 per year** for a child between 13 and 18 to stay in foster care.⁵

In 2009, Medicaid had to cover 38 percent of Michigan’s children.⁶ Joint and second parent adoption would lower these government costs by providing children with two legal parents and access to health insurance.

Q) Some critics claim that legalizing second parent adoption for gay and lesbian parents would predispose their children to be gay or lesbian, or that the children will be worse off in this home environment. Is this true?

A) **No.** Numerous reputable researchers have studied children raised in same-sex households and come to the same conclusion: **being raised in a same-sex household has no effect on sexual orientation.**⁷

Furthermore, respected researchers have concluded that children raised in a same-sex household are just as well off as children raised in heterosexual households.⁸

Summary of three roundtable conversations in Grand Rapids and Holland

We held three roundtable conversations in western Michigan over two days in early April. Two conversations were held in Grand Rapids, and one was held in Holland. Participants included clergy, LGBT advocates and allies, lay leaders, and community leaders. Some clergy were gay, lesbian, or bisexual, while others were straight allies. The conversations were off the record and confidential. Many shared experiences that were frank, personal, and poignant.

Each session opened with participants being asked to give one word that came to mind when hearing the terms “religion” and “LGBT issues.” Here are some of their words: *fear, tension, hope, conflict, judgment, pain, intolerance, confusion, change, lies, disrespect, incongruent, a joke, breadcrumbs, complex, intense, sloppy, maddening, intertwined*. One person sighed.

Their list reflects the incongruities that participants face in their personal lives and in the institutions where they work and worship. Participants in all three roundtables expressed a vivid mix of frustration, anger, sorrow, impatience, and hope about the pace of LGBT progress in their communities and lives

Personal transformation

There was general agreement that the pace of change was most notable at the personal level, even in some of the most seemingly resistant communities. For instance, a minister who often speaks on LGBT issues to classes at local colleges said that when he began speaking years ago, he would ask how many students knew someone who was gay and only a few people raised their hand. Now when he asks the question, everyone raises their hand. The kinds of questions students ask have also changed, from accusatory to asking how to support gay friends. “The issue is no longer abstract—it’s personal,” the minister said.

A minister in a conservative church said, “I don’t have anybody in my immediate family who is gay, nor am I. A friend introduced me to someone who was interested in following Jesus, but no one would talk to him because he was gay.” The minister got to know the man and to care for him deeply as a friend. The experience transformed his understanding of Christianity. He now sees that Christ “calls us to radical love and changed thinking.” The minister said he felt honored

to be part of the conversation and was thinking deeply about how to work with his congregation on these issues.

A minister's widow described her journey when her son came out. At first she wanted to "fix him." It took years of "reading and soul searching," of studying the Bible and theology to get to the place she is now, where she loves and celebrates her son without judgment. She is a respected and influential leader in her conservative church community and runs an LGBT family support group. She says, "I want to help my friends get through this a lot faster than I did."

A father turned into an advocate when he learned his son was gay. "My son just wants to live his life," he said, adding that in conservative churches, there seemed to be a wall that could not be breached. At various points in the conversation, this theme of a wall of resistance was echoed by several participants who questioned how strong, in fact, the wall actually was—and if it could be knocked down with some well-targeted efforts.

Not all stories were positive. A young gay man from a conservative background described his parents' struggle when they learned he was gay. "They had to give up their hopes and dreams for me," he said. He is afraid of pushing them too far and doesn't know what would happen if he found a partner—adding, "I'm afraid of walking in that space."

Those who counsel LGBT students described the pain of young women and men who believe they cannot be both gay and Christian. They work with students who love the church, despite how they've been treated, and those who hate the church because of its condemnation and rejection of them.

One of the ministers said, "I am hopeful, but not optimistic. I know the winds of history are on our side, but the reactivity is stunning. It isn't going to play out in obvious ways. I am more optimistic outside of the church. If Jesus can't make it work inside the church, he'll go elsewhere."

A Catholic woman with two adopted children and a female partner said that she has supportive relationships in her neighborhood and children's schools. No one, however, seems able to move from personal friendship to public advocacy for fear of repercussions. The woman is grateful to a local priest who performed private baptisms for both her children. She has heard rumors of a local judge who secretly signs second parent adoption papers, but doesn't know his name. Legalizing her

partner as the second adoptive parent is extremely important. Her partner is the stay-at-home mom and primary caregiver for the children. The woman fears what might happen if she is out of town, the children get sick and consent forms must be signed. She said, “I have all these supportive people, but they are silent.”

As the woman told her story, a transformative moment occurred. A minister at an open and affirming church said that his congregations had many gay and lesbian families with adopted children. He had always assumed the children were jointly adopted. “Do you think they face the same problems you do?” he asked. The woman replied that they probably did. The minister was stunned. “I’m aware, yet I’m ignorant,” he said. “In my conversations, I made assumptions. I know these people intimately, and yet I don’t.”

Another participant said that second parent adoption isn’t on most people’s radar. The stories that could persuade aren’t being told because gay and lesbian families have too much to lose. Personal stories and conversations are needed. Bethany Christian Services was mentioned as a major adoption agency in Michigan and the nation. “Would they resist second parent adoption?” someone asked. A participant familiar with Bethany recommended bringing them into the conversation, saying that quiet inroads could be made with certain staff and board members who’d be willing to have a conversation.

As people described personal changes, a participant agreed that such transformations are powerful, but are not sufficient. Institutional forces are strong and can end a career and inflict serious damage. Such reality makes people afraid to stand up and speak out. “You’re always waiting for the other shoe to drop,” someone said.

Transforming the personal into the political—bringing about institutional change

A significant aspect of our conversations focused on how to move from the personal to the political—in other words, how to expand from individual to organizational change in order to bring about institutional progress on LGBT issues.

The minister of an open and affirming church said that clergy can play a key role in institutional change. One way is to discuss LGBT issues as normative, rather than being defensive or apologetic in tone. Don’t begin a sermon with, “well, you may have a problem with this,” he said. “Assume it is the norm.” Another minister

echoed his views. “We are the silent majority!” he exclaimed. “We are the majority but have been silent and it is time to change that. We need to give people tools to organize within their churches. That is something to get excited about.”

The first minister went on to say that it’s a mistake to assume most people are against LGBT human rights and equality. “We let people get away with thinking this is a conservative community,” he said. “As allies, we have less to lose, and when we speak, we are amazed at how many support us.” As an example, he mentioned an effort by conservatives to rescind a local antidiscrimination law that protected LGBT people in Grand Rapids. “We stopped it because we were organized,” he said. “One of our opponents was clergy, so we needed a countermessage.”

Another participant said that institutional change comes about when new practices become the norm. For instance, Grand Valley State University, one of the largest employers in the Grand Rapids area, now offers benefits to same-sex partners and is a leader on LGBT issues. “It sends a message that we are a contributing part of the community,” the participant said. “It changes the conversation.”

Several participants suggested media campaigns as an effective way of shifting hearts and minds. Someone mentioned “Campaign Rapid,” a media campaign for rapid transit in Grand Rapids that featured well-known people on billboards and in ads. Showing LGBT families and their normalcy—putting a face on the issue—could be powerful. One person agreed it was a great idea, but added, “I don’t fancy myself on a billboard. It would risk my family and my employment.”

The Arcus grant to Gays In Faith Together (GIFT) was seen as very promising. Participants agreed that GIFT’s upcoming media campaign, “Gay Christian? Yes!” could be powerful in changing hearts and minds.

In terms of building institutional support, participants said that we need to expand our base of allies beyond LGBT people and their friends and relatives. Someone said, “I’m trying to strategize how to go from [being involved because someone I love is gay to being involved because I] “believe in the radical inclusion of Christ. In order to move the church, we need to move beyond gay friends and their relatives.”

Several participants mentioned the importance of academic and theological leaders at Hope and Calvin College speaking and writing against the condemnation of homosexuality as a way of moving conservative people toward a more accepting place. “I would empty my bank account to see that happen,” said one conservative minister, knowing how much influence these leaders have.

At one point in the conversation, we talked about how change becomes institutionalized. Which comes first, we wondered. Do changed hearts and minds lead to laws that change, or do changed laws establish a new norm that shapes hearts and minds? We decided it was both—that the two forces were reciprocal and we had to work equally hard on both sides—changing minds and hearts, and changing laws and policies.

Organizational advocacy strategies

The conversation also focused on how advocacy groups can work to bring about change. One participant mentioned work that has been done on racism, wondering what was applicable for LGBT issues. Someone described the LGBT community in West Michigan as fragmented and territorial. The best strategy would be for them to collaborate, this person said, but if that isn't possible, at least they shouldn't fight each other. "Community mindedness" needs to be built within the LGBT community, the person went on. Groups need to focus on the larger context and keep their eye on the big picture.

Simply having LGBT advocacy organizations in the area is important. A participant in the Holland conversation noted that a decade ago, groups like PFLAG were not in Holland, but now they are, providing LGBT friendly voices, support for churches to become open and affirming, and other institutions to be more inclusive. More churches are willing to be open and affirming than in the last decade—progress is visible.

Several participants mentioned the importance of having an issue to organize around. When second parent adoption was suggested as a potential issue, most said they were unfamiliar with it. They hadn't heard the term and didn't know what was legal or not legal in the state. In terms of a winnable issue, many thought it was more winnable than marriage because "children in need are appealing. It isn't about sex." Another participant agreed. "It is easier than marriage. I don't think people will bring the same intensity to it." This prompted someone to wonder if evangelicals will think of second parent adoption as gay people "training little gays."

One participant mentioned the power of alumni at local Christian colleges. For instance, when Hope College now makes fundraising calls to alumni, it gives a formulated response to alumni who say they won't give until the college changes its antigay practices. It seems that sufficient numbers of alumni have withheld their money for this reason, forcing the college to create a prepared response.

Although in most cities and towns, newspapers are losing influence and prompt little public conversation, in a small town newspapers still have clout. The conservative Holland Sentinel has played an influential role in the public debate on LGBT issues, as columns, news stories, and letters to the editor have triggered strong responses and counter-responses. In the past months, a controversy involving award-winning filmmaker Dustin Lance Black being invited, dis-invited, and re-invited to show his movie, “Milk,” on the campus of Hope College with a panel discussion, has triggered a strong community reaction on both sides of the issue, and led to the formation of two pro-LGBT organizations—Hope is Ready and Holland is Ready.

Resistance and struggle

Among the most moving stories at the roundtable conversations were those describing the suffering of girls and boys, men and women who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender. We learned about a 15-year-old lesbian who quietly sat in church with her family as the minister preached that if any homosexuals were in the congregation, they should get up and leave. We heard about gay men on their second and third marriage, trying to “do the right thing.” We heard from a gay college student that three kids in his high school had killed themselves in recent years because they were gay. And we heard the pain of all who couldn’t be their authentic selves because of the stigma and punishment attached to coming out. Drained energy, lost talents and gifts—all of it gone because people could not live openly.

Money and economic influence

Some of the most energetic moments in the roundtable conversations focused on the power of money, in particular the heavy hand of right-wing conservative donors. We discussed the beginnings of some counterefforts among corporate leaders to exert a more inclusive and progressive influence in the area. Conservatives like Elsa Prince and the DeVos family wield strong influence on local institutions—giving millions to selected colleges and institutions to erect buildings, conference centers, and more. Their money comes with strings attached, making recipients fearful of offending them and losing funding. The power of these wealthy conservatives extends across the state, as they aim to strangle efforts toward justice and human rights for LGBT people. One participant who is relatively new to the area, remarked on how unusual it was for the opinions of wealthy individuals to count so much. “Their opinion matters more around here than anybody else’s,” he said. “Other places people hear sermons on poverty—not here.”

Several participants described some counterefforts from a few wealthy business leaders who are concerned about the state's brain drain and see an urgent need to retain and capture creative talent. Some run businesses that are inclusive—or aim to be more so. One business leader told a participant, “Michigan needs rejuvenation—we need young, creative minds.” A goal is to “create a buzz” for an area, making it a creative exciting hub that talented people want to live and work in. Business leaders know that it is impossible to draw the human capital and talent the state needs if an area is perceived as intolerant and antigay. Participants said that the challenge was to get the more progressive business leaders to go beyond being supportive on an individual basis and to take a public leadership role. Someone suggested sponsoring a competition for Top 10 Best Area Companies for LGBT fairness and equality. Participants agreed that corporate leaders needed safety in numbers. This was especially true for those in service and sales industries, where boycott campaigns could be very damaging. Participants also named wealthy donors who were not evangelical—some were Jewish or Catholic who were progressive and could potentially be tapped for a campaign.

Religion

Several participants mentioned the challenge of working with conservative churches that interpret the Bible literally. Many people in these churches fear a “slippery slope”—if they reject literal interpretations concerning homosexuality, they will reject other passages and lose their faith altogether. According to several participants, this is a major concern that needs to be dealt with.

One suggestion came from the moderator who shared advice from Bishop Gene Robinson, who found himself confronting similar situations. People he met felt that if they gave up their belief that homosexuality was sinful, they would also have to give up their core doctrinal beliefs, such as Jesus's atonement and resurrection. Bishop Robinson said the first thing he did was assuage their fears by sharing his religious orthodoxy, showing it is possible to be gay and theologically conservative.

Strict doctrinal stances within religious hierarchies are an added roadblock to change. The Christian Reformed Church and the Reformed Church in America, for instance, are theologically dense with rules of governance and accountability that can make clergy and other church employees timid to speak out for fear of repercussions. In addition, the strong reliance on the Old Testament by these churches makes them more resistant than other denominations, such as

Lutherans, Episcopalians, or even Presbyterians. One participant mentioned such differences as a church's cultural DNA. The differences might be invisible to an outsider and unconsciously accepted by insiders, but they deeply influence beliefs and behaviors and can account for seemingly irrational roadblocks.

In the Lutheran church, for instance, there has been less upheaval over acceptance of LGBT parishioners than in reformed denominations. One participant said that a reason could be the Lutherans' stronger emphasis on the teachings of Jesus. When the gospel is read in the Lutheran church, the congregation stands. The minister and congregation say, "This is Jesus speaking. The word of God is Jesus Christ." The reformed churches, on the other hand, put greater emphasis on the laws of God.

A minister from a conservative church talked about the importance of vocabulary. His ear was attuned during our conversation to certain words and phrases that would be "conversation stoppers" in conservative circles. For instance, the word "inclusive" is heard with suspicion, he said, although the word "marginalized" would be fine. Likewise, the term "social justice" would sound overly political, while the word "justice" would sound biblical, conjuring up the prophet Micah.

Others agreed that selecting the right message and messenger was crucial in reaching churches, and that "one size does not fit all." Being inside the "tribe" is important because it gives credibility and relationships are already in place. Outsiders aren't known and trusted in the same way.

Someone said that we need to go beyond a negative theology of fear. We need to move from the law to the teachings of Christ. Another participant added that we need to go from stories of oppression to sharing what works. "Everyone has done something that works," he said. "If we lift up these things, we can increase hope and help change the world." Yet another participant said, "We are all saying the same thing. This is a justice issue and we are reclaiming our Christianity."

A participant mentioned the importance of separating LGBT issues from sexuality, since churches have such conservative views on sexuality. Instead, LGBT issues should be seen through a wider lens that encompasses the reality of people's everyday lives.

Some ministers expressed the fear of getting too far ahead of the congregation on controversial issues. The church's budget—and even their jobs—could be in jeopardy. In response, a minister said that it was important for church members to push their pastor and say, "why aren't you talking about this? Why aren't we deal-

ing with this?” Pastors have too much to do, and it’s easy to skip what’s difficult and controversial. There needs to be a “justice culture,” he went on. “If we are about justice, how can we not be about this particular justice issue? People have to hear the stories. We have to be actively affirming, not just tolerating.”

Another participant added, “Sometimes pastors need to run to catch up—this genie is out of the bottle,” and there’s no turning back. “There is an urgency about this. I’ve listened to more painful stories than I can handle, and there shouldn’t be one more. We need to move from personal to institutional change.”

More than one minister in our conversations had come from more liberal places in the U.S. One said how strange it was to be considered radical, when in fact she’d been the voice of moderation in more liberal places. Another voiced frustration with the slow pace of change in Michigan. Issues that had been settled decades ago in her previous congregation were being hotly debated here. It was hard to have patience, she said. The first minister added, though, that even in the short time she had been in Michigan, she had seen positive changes. She said, “Change won’t come from a small number of wealthy people. There needs to be a swelling from the community.”

Second parent adoption

One of our participants wrote an academic research paper on gay and lesbian adoptions and shared her research findings with the group. No respected research finds gay and lesbian men and women unsuitable to be foster or adoptive parents. The only contrary research she encountered came from a conservative pseudoscientist who’d been kicked out of the American Psychological Association and paid to have his articles placed in conservative research journals.

Another participant in one of our roundtable conversations was adopted as a special needs child and has two adopted children. Although he wasn’t familiar with second parent adoption, he supported it. Other participants had same-sex couple friends who had adopted children.

Strategic next steps

All three roundtable conversations contained high levels of interest in working together on faith and LGBT issues. People were ready to focus on an issue. One of the groups expressed interest in continuing to meet on a regular basis. They said

it had been very helpful for them to share thoughts in a candid manner and were nourished by spiritually committed colleagues. Some of the participants in the conversations knew each other beforehand, but many did not. Afterwards, we realized that simply bringing these individuals together for honest conversation was an important thing to do and could be a first step toward collaborating on an issue.

Participants expressed interest in CAP's religion and LGBT work. They greatly appreciated that someone was doing this work on a national level, particularly a secular think tank, and wanted to learn more about our activities, our Arkansas adoption report, and our policy work on LGBT issues. Following the roundtable conversations, we sent them links to our Arkansas report and to our other LGBT work.

One distinction that became clear in all three roundtable conversations was the difference between organized religion and the personal religion of individuals. The latter is more fluid and complex, more private and seemingly less influential than institutions with money and clout. However, there are more people in the pews than those in the hierarchy, and people hold potentially more power. Keeping these distinctions clear is important, and knowing how to work with each will help create an effective agenda for change.

Summary of Chicago Theological Seminary roundtable conversation

We conducted a focus group at Chicago Theological Seminary for pastors and pastors-in-training who live and work in Michigan. The group was racially diverse, and included both African Americans and European Americans, both ordained pastors and students, first through third year. They were from Lansing, Grand Rapids, Detroit, the Kalamazoo area, and one person from Chicago moving to central Michigan to work in health care ministry.

United Church of Christ struggles over LGBT issues in Michigan dominated the first part of the focus group session. There was a considerable amount of discussion about the struggles at the faith community levels with being Open and Affirming in the United Church of Christ. One youth pastor told of the struggles of the congregation and senior pastoral leadership with the stance of the United Church of Christ on LGBT inclusivity.

Pastors came and went over the years, and for a time one congregation considered leaving the denomination when a more “liberal” pastor pushed the church to become opening and affirming, or ONA. The church pushed back, saying we’re “not quite ready to take those steps.” There are LGBT families in the church, and some lay people “extensively involved” with LGBT rights issues outside the church. The youth pastor believes that the most that has been done is because of these lay families and those who know them.

We heard about Phoenix UCC, a church that “was specifically formed to meet the needs of LGBTQ people within the community. Rev. Janice Springer was there, and very involved politically and in the community. After Rev. Springer left, the church struggled financially.

Michigan UCC churches have not always been accepting of LGBT people preparing for ministry. “I know that when my partner was going through her process toward ministry she had to sit down with her UCC pastor and explain ‘we’re not freaks.’ He had no concept of anything LBGT and she was providing him with materials for starting conversations and being more welcoming.” Michigan students and pastors talked about the “huge naïveté” among even ONA churches and the burden of constantly “having to educate the people on the committees and in the church who want to remain supportive.”

Supportive clergy and LGBT activists worked in parallel, not in coalition, in opposing Proposition Two, the ballot initiative against same sex marriage. Some clergy in central Michigan, a central Michigan participant noted, were opposed to Prop 2, and were also opposed to the religious rhetoric of those who wanted this constitutional amendment. Clergy participated on panels speaking about “why it was that as people in ministry we were against this amendment, because there was so much religious rhetoric in support of the amendment. To be clergy offering a different point of view and biblical interpretation was important.” When pressed about whether these supportive clergy formed coalitions or collaborations with the LGBT groups organizing against the amendment, the reply was, “It felt more like parallel tracks. I don’t think it was being approached from a coalition point of view, there seemed to be a kind of divide across that. I don’t think it was intentional, but just how it shook out organizationally.”

LGBT students from Michigan are not returning, though Michigan universities have helped them become allies. Two members of the focus group had grown up in more rural areas in central and western parts of the state. Both had gone to college in Michigan and had on campus experiences of working with LGBT student groups. For both this was significant. They found their local churches much less supportive of LGBT rights once they graduated and were considering ministry. Both chose to go to seminary in Chicago, and both said they did not expect to return to Michigan to look for a church after they graduated and were ordained. Both plan to seek churches outside Michigan.

This is despite some positive changes that each one sees in Michigan UCC churches becoming more open on LGBT issues. For example, one of these students shared that the Grand Rapids church where she is now in process for ordination (in the UCC, students are “in care” of a local church) has “done a lot to make LGBTQ people feel more welcome” not only as laypeople, but also as employees. Yet “the dynamic is challenging because it’s a large affluent congregation in a downtown area, a long history of pretty wealthy families that don’t want to see a lot of change. There’s a political struggle to keep the status quo.”

Health care is an overlooked area where progress is being made on LGBT rights, and more could be done. The group engaged in a lengthy discussion of health care as a way for LGBT rights to advance, especially in eldercare, assisted living, and long-term care. There has been progress in Michigan and elsewhere in “bringing to the fore the fact that there are a lot of LGBT people living in assisted living right now, living silently; there are baby boomers coming that are different and

won't be so quiet." What has been effective is connecting this generation's movement into eldercare with reviewing policy around long-term care, revising the policies to eliminate bias and stimulate discussion, both with residents and family members. According to the one focus group member who had recently sought employment in health care ministry in Michigan, the message in senior health care that administrators want to convey is "We're calling on you to understand that when we say 'persons in our care' we do really need to respect all persons... There's extreme excitement from health care associations in MI" about this work, and, according to this recent recruit to Michigan, the desire to do more.

The African-American church and LGBT issues dominated much of the focus group discussion. Growing up in the black church in Detroit, one pastor said, "I remember growing up in those churches and [realizing what] people's stereotypes of LGBTQ meant, but no one talked about it. When I look back, I see people trying not to be that, people married who were actually lesbian and gay. In the African-American churches there's been a tradition of 'we don't see you all,' if you just act the part we're okay with that."

Two African-American focus group members described the same African-American UCC church and what being open and affirming meant in that church. One of these two people was very explicit about the internal church dynamics. "We are certainly an open and welcoming church, but we've never done the ONA process to my knowledge. We had and have members who are LGBTQ... by and large the ministers who have been in leadership have been in support of whoever comes, whoever wants to be a member. It's not been an issue. There was an incident in this church where a new associate pastor "went off" on LGBT folks in worship; the senior pastor was not there. The next week when the senior pastor returned, he made it clear "that's just now how we do things" in this church, by which the focus group leader understood the group member to mean that being rabidly antigay from the pulpit was not acceptable in that African-American church. The dynamics of this church changed over time, due to this pastor's leadership. This same focus group member continued, "Interestingly the same minister just a short while after that said 'well you know I'm beginning to think that there's something to this gay and lesbian thing, maybe this is just the way they are.' Now this pastor is southern raised, southern Christian raised. I [the same focus group member] really thought this was the Spirit working through him. He said 'I really think this is just the way God made them.'"

One of the younger African-American students who had grown up in Detroit (her family was originally from Alabama and South Carolina) said that her college experience was important for recognizing the rights issues for LGBT people, but it was not until moving to Chicago and joining Trinity United Church of Christ that she understood that this was also an issue that could be addressed powerfully and pastorally in the black church. “Pastor Moss stood in front of the church and informed the church about the law in Uganda threatening LGBTQ persons with the death penalty and he urged us to sign petitions.” That was the first time this young African-American student had heard an African-American pastor speak of the black church supporting the rights of LGBT people.

The group also discussed the dynamics of the African-American church in recent years, and why there is so much more push back on LGBT issues than people remembered in the past. An older African-American pastor said, “I’m remembering my elders, the church was saying one thing, but I remember the elders saying there’s nothing wrong with those people they’re God’s children too. Now that wasn’t at the pulpit, maybe it wouldn’t have been said in church, but remembering all the way back there were always folks who were LGBT and sure people whispered and stuff like that, but it’s always been fascinating to me in the last decades that the African-American church has had such a big brouhaha. Why are you acting like they just appeared yesterday?” When this person was pressed to say why that is, the answer was a generally increased emphasis on biblical literalism.

The focus remained on race even when the focus group leader turned the group’s attention to what was winnable in Michigan. Employment discrimination seemed winnable to the African-American group members, and the rest of the group concurred, because “being African American you’ll have folks in our congregation who have experienced employment discrimination, especially those members 40 and older—you may get them on board because of their own experiences. If they can see the bigger picture, they understand that it should not happen to anyone; they should be more sensitive to it.”

The discussion shifted to how to help people make that identification, and the African-American women led the discussion. “I think what would possibly get in the way of that, those folks that really just cannot wrap their mind around LGBTQ issues, you just say the word and they just say ‘no.’ A prejudice would override. What would help with that is some open dialogue, really what is it, break down what the Bible says.” Renita Weems, African-American womanist theologian, says people always talk about what’s natural, but every pairing of male and female isn’t right [or] natural.” (NB: Weems writes about violence against women and the Bible.)

Another factor that could make the employment discrimination issue difficult for gaining the support of the African-American community and winning across the state is that African Americans believe there is a hierarchy of oppression, and they are more discriminated against on every level than LGBT people for being LGBT.

When asked whether building coalitions with LGBT groups and African-American churches could be effective if common issues were worked on by both groups, there was still doubt that it could work. The lack of trust in Michigan between the African-American and white communities was named. Group members knew stories of African Americans discriminated against in LGBT groups. “One gentleman I know said there was a fear of him as black, even though he was there as a gay person. To experience those same kinds of discriminations in a group that’s supposed to be supportive. I’ve experienced the same kind of thing in women in ministry groups where I’m the only African-American person there.”

African Americans feel it is either/or, and “black issues” exclude “gay issues.” Some in the group felt that even for African Americans who are gay, “gay is white.” Yet, a young African American in the group felt you have to challenge that. “A lot of people feel they’re losing racism when they’re fighting for LGBTQ issues. It’s important to see that they’re connected.” Yet, upon being questioned by the leader whether her generation of African Americans are more open to LGBT people, she thought not. “I don’t want to stereotype black people at all but hip-hop is very homophobic, the media is playing a significant impact on my generation.” An older African-American pastor concurred. “I think that it’s still an issue that’s not discussed like it should be in the African-American community. I think late adolescent groups, the sexual identity formation is still happening, there’s still a lot of homophobia, so a lot of the 20-something African Americans may not be self-identifying, there’s still a lot of ‘what do I say to grandma, grandpa.’”

Second parent adoption “seems winnable,” while marriage does not. The group was divided on safe schools/antibullying. The group thought that second parent adoption is winnable because it is not a part of what happened with marriage, and it “appeals to a wider constituency.” The group was divided on antibullying, with one participant saying, “It depends on what the bill says.”

Summary of Ecumenical Theological Seminary roundtable conversation in Detroit

The group was religiously and racially diverse. The denominations represented were Episcopal, Presbyterian, Methodist, Charismatic Renewal/Emerging Church, Baptist, and Buddhist Christian. Three of the focus group members were faculty members and the rest were students.

Heather Grace led the group in a discussion of coalitions and collaborations in which they were experienced in Michigan, in order to identify potential and current collaborations in LGBT/faith community work. The group had participated in a large number of coalitions and collaborations including: the Social Forum; the Boggs Center; Greening of Detroit; the Detroit Agricultural Network; an Ashram in western Michigan for Christian, Jewish, and Hindu dialogue; the Michigan Foster Care Coalition; the Detroit Partnership; More Light; the Water Quality Board; Earth Day for University of Michigan; South Eastern AME Women in Ministry Alliance; and the Dioceses (Episcopal) Council for Michigan.

The next questions were about what made something work well, especially when working across differences. Group members tended to agree that keeping coalitions simple, especially when working with volunteers was key. If leadership keeps changing, it keeps people from engaging in true dialogue. One group member argued that you need to be aware of “the three I’s—inclusiveness, impulsiveness, integrity.” He argued that it was important to live “a life of inclusion,” including resisting cliques, the “good ole boys system” and including key people who need to be included for the process to go forward. Lack of good planning and lack of strategy and giving into “impulsiveness” all needed to be resisted or they would end partnerships, as had apparently been the case in the “suburban/urban” partnership in which he had participated.

“Level 5 leaders” [Jim Collins book, *Good to Great*] were mentioned. Working through “sexual and cross cultural misunderstanding” was considered crucial.

The question was then asked, “What happens when conflict erupts?” The group was very concerned about this issue, and there was a lot of input. Conflict avoidance was the norm. LGBT group members agreed, “We get in our own way a lot.” In the discussion, what was stressed by a couple of participants was the need for honesty, getting past defensiveness, and listening to one’s anger in order to find out what it’s telling you, trying for open communication, compassion, watching out for co-dependence, and using conflict resolution, practices of acceptance and collegiality.

The lack of an ability to deal with conflict was noted in younger adults. One pastor said, “I pastor people whose average age is between 25-40. I never in my life have dealt with so many people who have lived with such a spirit of rejection. They go over histories, build a wall to protect themselves, and they don’t realize that also walls them in. They don’t keep peace or speak truth in love.” This pastor referred to people as “dip stickers,” checking the conflict level before they are willing to get involved with another person. His sense was that younger adults in his African-American community, both men and women, but in particular men, feel so generally rejected that they don’t know how to form and maintain relationships. This observation was in the context of a discussion of what gets in the way of forming families, forming churches, and forming healthy communities that can engage in and sustain coalitions.

The group tended to agree that respect was crucial; people can disagree about a lot of things, but in the absence of respect, nothing is going to get resolved.

Another group member suggested that “hospitality” is a good way to work through conflict. “For me, a way in is hospitality. I invited a person who was conservative to drive with me to Lansing; we talked about things other than our issues, and I found this hospitality was a way to deal with conflict.”

The discussion shifted to second parent adoption and the group experienced an “ah ha” moment. Most of the group had not heard of second parent adoption. Then a younger African-American man spoke up. “I lived it; my mother was on drugs, the state of Michigan came and took my brothers and sisters away. When that happened it was a scene like right out of a movie, my brothers and sisters crying for me. [Though I was only 18,] I fought the state really hard and had to provide adequate housing despite the fact that I was a full-time student. I was known on campus as Mr. Mom. I was able to legally adopt them. This really affected me as someone who is straight.” The group seemed to recognize that these kinds of stories could build a bridge on second parent adoption and unlikely allies could find each other.

Unsurprisingly in a seminary focus group with faculty present, the “faith focus” questions became quite technical and ranged over the evolution of faith, from narrow to broader, from doctrine to spirituality. For example, a Pentecostal/charismatic faith has opened to a broader theology and perspective. Evolution and “being stretched” was a common theme in the discussion. “Mainstream” Protestant was common, but with an emphasis on “living one’s faith.” Letting go of one’s prejudices and becoming more open, including open on LGBT issues, was a big part of this discussion.

One faculty member did contribute a fairly complicated model of a wheel, spokes, and the “circle of life” to illustrate the ways in which all parts of faith interconnect.

Many in the group had left more conservative religious groups, and seminary had helped with that. “You know in seminary you can’t go in and not be challenged. My faith has changed because my idea of God has changed or maybe it’s all changed because that’s the way the world works. It is a bottom up. I was raised Catholic, but now I am Presbyterian for the last 20 years.” Another person said they were “a recovering colonial Methodist.”

Endnotes

1 The Michigan research effort is one component of our Progressive Faith and Family Equality Project. Other components include:

- A major report we released in May examining the 2008 Arkansas ballot initiative on same-sex adoption that analyzed religious activity on both sides of the issue—and lessons learned for other states.
- An assessment of alliances among Tennessee and Kentucky faith communities and LGBT advocates and allies, examining the relevance of messages learned in Arkansas for those two states.

2 Profiles compiled by CARE for this report.

Two nuns who have been fostering children. The older of the two nuns has adopted one or more of the children and was interested in having the second nun also adopt so that the child(ren) would have continuity and permanency in the event that the legal mother dies or becomes incapacitated.

Linda Burghardt, government relations specialist at NASW-MI, testified at the last legislative hearing that her husband and the father of their son, died when her son was very young. She was interested in having one of her parents or her sister co-adopt her son so that he would have two parents and the resources from both.

A single mother who adopted a special needs child from Guatemala is later diagnosed with an aggressive form of cancer. Physically and financially devastated from the disease, she wanted her best friend and a person who was well acquainted with the child and has a professional background in medicine to secure parental rights over the child prior to her death. This was important so that the transition with health insurance, residency, school, treatment for the child, and emotional attachment would be easier and less disruptive to the child's health and emotional wellbeing. She also wanted to be sure that her child had a permanent legal connection to the caregiver she chose for her child and no interference from extended family members before she left this earth. Unfortunately, she was only afforded that option if she was willing to give up her own parent rights as she was dying.

A single mom and her child live with the maternal grandfather. Mom struggles to make ends meet and provide health insurance. The father has not and will not provide child support because he cannot keep steady employment and has several other children who he should also be supporting. She is worried about the economy and has a very real chance of losing her job. She wants her father to become a second parent so that the child has benefits from both of the people who are currently supporting the child.

A woman lives with her adult daughter who is getting into her late 30s and does not believe she has any acceptable prospects for marriage in the near future. She decides that regardless of marriage, she wants to be a parent, and contracts with physician to use donor sperm for insemination. A child is born and is being raised by the mother and the maternal grandmother who all reside in the same home. Both the mother and the grandmother want to make sure that they can provide for the child now and in the event of incapacity or death.

A teenage girl is reconnected to her paternal grandparents via very difficult circumstances. Her father had died when she was very

young, and her mother took her to another state where, several years later and through the development of a mental illness, mother becomes homeless, living in a car on the streets, and prostituting to keep her and her daughter fed. Child protective services become involved, and the teenager is sent back to Michigan to be placed with relatives. The grandparents have since divorced, but still both clearly love their granddaughter and would do whatever it takes to help her get back on track. Both would love to adopt her to give her stability, show their love and commitment, and provide her with resources, but they cannot co-adopt because they are no longer married to each other.

Two friends, a man and a woman, decide to get a residence together. There is no romance between them, and marriage is not an option. The man has a child from a prior relationship, and the mother of that child becomes incapable of caring for the child. So, the child comes to live with the Dad and his friend. The friend offers to help with the child, and over the next several years becomes, for all intents and purposes, the Mom. She would like to have her parental rights secured and Dad wants to make sure that the child stays with her if his health problems worsen.

A young man and a young woman get married. She has a toddler at the time they marry. A few years later, the marriage breaks down and the two divorce. The husband, however, is the only "father" that the child has ever known, and clearly the two have a deep bond to each other. The man continues to serve as a father to the child until the child reaches his teenage years, including financial support, guidance, involvement in school and other activities, and parenting time. During the teenage years, it becomes more and more important to the child to have that parental bond secured. In fact, it is affecting the child's development and well-being knowing that the parental bond is not legally secured. Mom is in full agreement with adoption. Unfortunately, the man is no longer a stepparent and has no ability to secure a co-adoption.

3 State of Michigan, Department of Human Services, "Fact Sheet" (2010), available at http://www.michigan.gov/documents/FIA-FactSheet_109046_7.pdf.

4 Center for Law and Social Policy, "Child Welfare in Michigan" (2006), available at <http://www.childrensdefense.org/child-research-data-publications/data/state-data-repository/cwf/child-welfare-financing-fact-sheet-michigan-2006.pdf>.

5 Equality Michigan, "Adoption," available at http://equalitymi.org/?page_id=197 (last accessed July 7, 2010).

6 Michigan League for Human Services, "Déjà Vu: Michigan struggles to fund Medicaid Program" (2010), available at <http://www.milhs.org/media/EDocs/MAMandatoryOptSvsMay10.pdf>.

7 American Psychological Association, "Can Lesbians and Gay Men be Good Parents?" available at <http://www.apa.org/topics/sexuality/orientation.aspx> (last accessed July 7, 2010).

8 Charlotte Patterson, "Children of Lesbian and Gay Parents," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 15 (5) (2006): 241-244.

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