



# Working for Equality in the Great Lakes State

## Executive Summary and Recommendations

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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.<sup>1</sup> 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.

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## 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.

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## 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 state-wide 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.

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## 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,

fundors, 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.

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## 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 intra-group 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.

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## 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.