



# Keeping the Faith

Faith Organizing for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender  
Moral and Civil Rights in a Southern State

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Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite and Marta Cook January 2011

Center for American Progress



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The Center for American Progress, through the Faith and Progressive Policy Initiative, has been engaged for two years in individually tailored research to examine religious and advocacy efforts that contribute to or impede moral and civil equality for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Americans. This report is the fourth in a series and examines faith and LGBT advocacy efforts in Tennessee. The goal of all our reports is to help reframe the debate beyond “religion vs. gay rights” and put forth the importance of ongoing, substantive collaborations between faith communities and LGBT advocates.

In previous reports, we examined such collaborations in Michigan and Arkansas on marriage equality and same-sex adoption issues. We learned important lessons about what works when it comes to faith organizing, outreach, and communications. While some similarities exist among the states we’ve studied, differences also abound. This report, which examines faith and LGBT advocacy efforts in Tennessee, contains lessons that hold true for other states, even as it reveals lessons that are less portable. Both types of lessons are important, as we continue efforts in other states, and at the national level, to bring full equality to all Americans.

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# Introduction and summary

The lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender rights movement has made enormous strides in recent years. LGBT rights activists and their allies have secured important victories in achieving equal legal rights.<sup>1</sup> In addition, they have achieved greater moral equality in the eyes of several religious groups.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, hundreds of churches and synagogues across the country, in almost every state, have become formally welcoming to LGBT Americans.

Increasingly, gay and transgender advocates are working with a growing group of faith allies to assert a compelling moral vision of inclusiveness, love, respect, and tolerance. These advocates and faith allies are working together to challenge messages that oppose equal rights for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Americans in both religious communities and in society at large.

Unfortunately, much of the opposition to equality for LGBT Americans over the years has come from organized religion. In particular, many conservative religious leaders and faith-based groups have been vocal in their views that to be gay or lesbian is a violation of God's will. Beyond preaching, many religious leaders and groups have worked in the political arena to oppose legislation and policies that provide equality for LGBT Americans. Their efforts have distorted the public debate and the diversity of religious views on LGBT equality, hindered LGBT progress, and denied millions of Americans their God-given rights.

While it is crucial to support the First Amendment rights of faith communities to voice their beliefs, it is also crucial to oppose their efforts to impose their theology on a pluralistic democracy and deny justice and equality to millions of LGBT Americans. In addition, it is critical to raise up the voices of people of faith who are advocating *for* LGBT justice and equality. It is important to broaden and reframe the debate, to say that moral equality is as important as legal and social equality, and to show the advances that organized religion and people of faith have been making over the past years.

It is especially important to highlight the efforts of faith communities and LGBT advocates in Tennessee. The state illustrates how movements for equality can advance in the face of organized religious and political opposition—and how that opposition can spur alliances among faith groups and LGBT advocates. Tennessee offers lessons to other states concerning what it is doing on LGBT equality and what it is not doing but needs to do. Examining both provides a helpful roadmap as we plan strategies and alliances between faith communities and the LGBT movement.

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## The religious and political context of Tennessee

According to a recent Pew poll, Tennessee ranks fourth of all 50 states in “certainty of belief in God,”<sup>3</sup> and is the fifth most religious state in the country. Over half of all those who live in Tennessee consider themselves evangelical, almost twice the national average.<sup>4</sup> Evangelicals as a group are more likely to oppose marriage equality, and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender civil equality than other Americans. Their stated reasons for this opposition are almost exclusively based on their biblical or theological views of homosexuality.<sup>5</sup>

Political opposition to equality in Tennessee for LGBT residents of the state has drawn heavily on conservative religious interpretation. In 2006, an overwhelming majority of the citizens of Tennessee (81 percent) voted to amend the state constitution to specify that only marriage between a man and a woman can be legally recognized. Conservatives organized a grassroots campaign through churches across the state, where they distributed “biblical” materials to demonstrate the “intent of the Creator” in heterosexual marriage. Four hundred white and African-American churches in Memphis purchased a newspaper ad called “Standing Together for One Man and One Woman in Marriage Only” in late 2004.<sup>6</sup>

A significant amount of religious opposition comes from the Family Action Council of Tennessee. The organization, known as FACT, acts as a central religious right organizing group in the state, distributing materials and videos to pastors and congregations, lobbying the state legislature (through its political advocacy arm), holding rallies to oppose local civil rights legislation, and more. Beyond such organized opposition, the climate within many white conservative evangelical churches contains varying degrees of opposition towards LGBT equality on moral grounds.

Negative attitudes toward gay and transgender people in Tennessee can have real world consequences, such as job loss, economic insecurity, housing discrimination, harassment, and even hate crimes.<sup>7</sup> A lesbian couple’s home in the town of

Vonore was burned down last year, leaving the two women homeless.<sup>8</sup> The FBI and local law enforcement are investigating the home burning as a possible hate crime. In addition, transgender women have been beaten and shot—<sup>9</sup>one while in police custody.<sup>10</sup>

Despite such resistance to equality, the remarkable story of Tennessee’s LGBT activists and faith allies demonstrates the progress that can happen when both groups work together.

Tennessee as a case study on LGBT activism in a highly religious state

While many states experience a divide between faith communities and LGBT activists, the religious-secular divide is less apparent in Tennessee. This is partly because many activists are themselves people of faith who go to church. In addition, many activists who are not religious see the importance of working within faith communities to achieve LGBT equality. As a result, collaborations and ongoing alliances are more pronounced in Tennessee than in many other states. Through their work together on legislative and media campaigns, they are putting a face on being religious and being pro-equality.

This cultural context of Tennessee sheds light on what it takes to move a highly religious population toward greater acceptance of the moral equality of LGBT Americans. The overall lesson is that high levels of conservative religious participation in a state do not present insurmountable roadblocks toward achieving LGBT equality. In fact, religious conviction can be an asset for equality efforts when effectively engaged. Tennessee demonstrates that well-coordinated LGBT/faith organizing can achieve remarkable success, despite religious and political opposition. Tennessee also illustrates an ongoing challenge faced by other states: how to cross racial boundaries in LGBT work so that the agenda for equality is broad rather than narrow, and all groups have a seat at the table.

Religious and racial demographics of Tennessee

Major cities covered in this report



Religious distribution

Percent of population	
Evangelical Protestant	51%
Mainline Protestant	18%
Historically black Protestant	8%
Catholic	7%
Orthodox	1%
Jehovah's Witness	<0.5%
Other Christian	<0.5%
Jewish	<0.5%
Muslim	1%
Buddhist	<0.5%
Hindu	<0.5%
Other world religions	<0.5%
Other faiths	1%
Unaffiliated	12%
Don't know/refused	1%

Source: The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, available at <http://religions.pewforum.org/maps>

Race distribution

Percent of population	
One race	98.6%
White	79.2%
Black or African American	16.5%
American Indian and Alaska Native	0.3%
Asian	1.3%
Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander	0.1%
Some other race	1.3%
Two or more races	1.4%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2005-2009 American Community Survey.

Tennessee is often considered to be divided into three regions: western (which includes Memphis), middle (which includes Nashville), and eastern (a more rural region with smaller cities). Each region has its own distinct culture, history, and challenges. Accordingly, this report's research and presentation is structured with these distinctions in mind. In the pages that follow, we will explore these three regions of the state. Briefly, though, this is what we discovered:

- LGBT activists and faith allies in Tennessee have attained a remarkable level of success in a state with a high level of religious affiliation. Despite faith-based opposition that is well-organized and well funded, LGBT advocates have developed creative strategies and messages regarding LGBT equality rooted in faith.
- Tennessee exhibits less of a religious/secular divide between faith groups and LGBT activists than exists in other states. Many LGBT advocates are themselves faith leaders, and many LGBT organizations recognize that effective faith alliances and targeted faith messaging are critical to success.
- Despite these efforts, serious challenges remain within key faith communities, including white evangelicals, Catholics, and African-American churches. Key to increasing the success of LGBT organizing work in Tennessee is expanding faith alliances. In some cases that means crafting outreach strategies and collaborative efforts to meet communities where they are.
- LGBT policy activism has been remarkably effective in the state, securing state-wide hate crimes legislation that includes sexual orientation as a protected category, and in securing the passage of three local non-discrimination ordinances that address employment issues.
- While certain African-American faith allies are doing brave and significant work in Tennessee to support LGBT moral and civil equality, most do not come from historic African-American churches. African-American and white faith allies agree on the need for more reciprocity in raising issues of social and economic justice for African Americans alongside issues of equal legal rights for LGBT citizens of Tennessee. They see this as indispensable to having more African Americans become a part of the LGBT movement in the state.
- HIV awareness/prevention campaigns have provided critical opportunities for concrete work between LGBT groups and African-American churches. This work tends to be below the radar and involves broader issues of health and

sexuality education. Some African-American faith allies, white faith allies, and LGBT activists, however, see this issue area as a way for collaborative work to go forward between these communities.

- Creative faith collaborations, targeted faith messaging, and efforts to expand faith support for equality should not obscure the enormous obstacles that LGBT advocates and allies face in Tennessee. Opposition from religious and political conservatives has increased political support for intolerance and produced negative effects within the LGBT community, where some distrust the validity of any faith activism.
- In addition to cultivating faith allies and making a faith case for equality in Tennessee, growing the organizational and technological sophistication of the LGBT movement in Tennessee is essential to more effectively compete with well-funded and organized opposition.



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