

FAITH IN OUR FAMILIES:

TALKING ABOUT FAITH, SEXUAL ORIENTATION,
GENDER IDENTITY, AND GENDER EXPRESSION



PFLAG
pflag.org

About PFLAG. PFLAG is the first and largest organization for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) people, their parents and families, and allies. PFLAG has over 400 chapters and nearly 250,000 members and supporters crossing multiple generations of families in major urban centers, small cities, and rural areas across America. This vast grassroots network is cultivated, resourced, and supported by the PFLAG National office (located in Washington, DC), the National Board of Directors, the Regional Directors Council, and our many advisory councils and boards. PFLAG is a nonprofit organization not affiliated with any political or religious institution.

Our Vision. PFLAG envisions a world where diversity is celebrated and all people are respected, valued, and affirmed inclusive of their sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression.

Our Mission. Our mission is to build on a foundation of loving families united with LGBTQ+ people and allies who support one another, and to educate ourselves and our communities to speak up as advocates until all hearts and minds respect, value and affirm LGBTQ+ people.

About this publication:

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BEGINNING

Learning that a family member or friend is lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ+) can pose new questions for people of faith. For some, the revelation might prompt them to re-evaluate beliefs that they previously took for granted. If you are reading this publication, you likely consider yourself a person of faith and might be pondering these questions yourself, wondering—as many people do—if this revelation will influence your religious beliefs or relationship with your faith community.

These questions are common, and in asking them, you are not alone. Exploring these issues may be difficult at first, since many people have been taught not to question their faith or the teachings of their faith community. But for many people, exploring their relationship with their faith and with an LGBTQ+ loved one leads to new understandings and sometimes a renewed sense of faith.

In this booklet, we won't provide textual interpretation of the Bible, Koran,

Torah, Karmic Sacred Texts, or other texts. Widely respected scholars disagree about many details in scripture and sacred text, and at PFLAG, our role is not to question those interpretations. Rather, we are here to provide support and education as you respectfully consider your questions and ideas about the intersection of sexual orientation, gender identity/expression, and faith.

We'll also share personal stories from people from a variety of faith traditions about their own experiences, to

hopefully serve as a starting point for your own journey and your own conversations with and about LGBTQ+ loved ones, faith leaders, and others in your faith communities—journeys and

conversations that can hopefully bring about understanding, transformation, healing— and possibly offer space for reconciliation.

No matter how you walk the path, remember that coming out to family and friends might be one of the most difficult or even scary experiences

“You may feel isolated in your struggle, but you are in the company of many who know how you feel...”

an LGBTQ+ person will have. The prospect of losing loved ones because of who you are is unthinkable for most people, but is a reality for LGBTQ+ people everywhere. Your loved one has come out to you with trust and love. Even if you discovered this information in another way, remember this person is the same person that you have always loved. Finding peace between this news and your faith is a way for you to affirm your unconditional love and support for them as well as treat

yourself with the compassion needed to feel spiritually fulfilled.

Most important, remember: **You are not alone.** You may feel isolated in your struggle, but you are in the company of many who know how you feel and who have found this process to ultimately be enlightening. Find them and talk about it. As always, your local PFLAG chapter can be a source of support during this time.

DISCOVERING

“LGBTQ+ people are children of God. Therefore my faith calls me to support, care, and advocate for equal rights under the law. As scripture mentioned: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

– Edith Guffey, parent of a Black, transgender, nonbinary child; Conference Minister, Kansas-Oklahoma Conference United Church of Christ; member, PFLAG National Board of Directors

Finding out that a friend or family member is LGBTQ+ can interrupt the path you were taking within your faith or religious or spiritual community. While the thought is scary to many, this new information about a loved one may lead you to reflect on your beliefs and how they relate to LGBTQ+ people. The journey is ongoing and can lead in many directions, from mourning the loss of long-held beliefs to embracing new ideas. As the journey continues, many people are inspired to stay within their current faith communities, working to create change and healing, while still others make a decision to consider new faith communities that are already open and affirming. All of these paths are important and valid, and there is no one unique way to navigate the journey.

No matter where the journey leads, the first step on this path is to get immediate support. Finding out that your child or loved one is LGBTQ+ raises many questions, and getting answers to those questions will pave the way for the spiritual issues that you’ll explore.

PFLAG provides this support in communities across the country, with other families who are having a similar experience, as well as those who have taken this journey and are now committed to helping people who are starting theirs. PFLAG chapters host support groups that are non-judgmental, confidential, and provide the space you need to start getting answers. You can find a PFLAG chapter by visiting pflag.org/find.

EXPLORING

“As a person of Faith, I support LGBTQ+ people because they are my brothers and sisters and siblings and my faith calls me to love, support and advocate for LGBTQ+ people because Jesus already said it, “Love one another as I have loved you.”

– Rev. James Martin, S.J., Jesuit priest, author, and editor at large at America: The Jesuit Review

When asking spiritual questions, the answers you find may be life-altering. After all, you might be challenging or rethinking religious and/or spiritual beliefs you’ve held for your entire life. But remember, for many people the process of

questioning and exploring their faith tradition brings them even closer to that tradition. Is it okay to ask these questions, to challenge your faith leader and/or religious doctrine?

Yes. In fact, there are many scholars and religious leaders of various faith communities who encourage critical engagement with sacred texts or scripture.

Be gentle with yourself. Realize that asking questions and exploring the many possible answers is an important first step in your journey to being a supportive person to your LGBTQ+ loved one.

“For many people, the process of questioning and exploring their faith tradition brings them even closer to that tradition.”

A good way to begin is to make a list of what information you want to gather as you start exploring your relationship with your faith community and its views. Some of the most common

questions include:

- What is my religion’s (or faith/spiritual traditions’) teaching about being LGBTQ+?

- Are there other people from my faith tradition who have navigated this path? How have they reconciled religious teachings regarding being LGBTQ+? Are these interpretations generally accepted?
- Are LGBTQ+ people allowed to serve in positions of faith or lay leadership within my faith tradition? Are they included in leadership in my personal congregation?
- What place do LGBTQ+ people and/or their family members or friends have in my religion/faith community?
- Does my religion formally provide positive support for LGBTQ+ people and/or their family members or friends? If yes, what kind of support is offered—and is it healthy and accurate? If not, where can LGBTQ+ people, and/or their family members or friends find support?
- Are there various or conflicting views about LGBTQ+ people within my faith community? How—if at all—do these play out in my personal congregation?
- What are the personal views of my religious leaders on this topic?

These are some big questions, and finding the answers often takes time and

personal reflection. But simply asking questions and exploring possibilities are important first steps. Allow yourself time to live without concrete answers. We acknowledge this can be hard, but this period of exploration and reflection is an important part of your journey; we encourage you to be gentle with yourself and the process.

Remember that you don't need to go through this alone. There have been families on this path before you, and there will be ones who follow you; find those families--through PFLAG or other groups--and take the journey together. A strong support system is a powerful and necessary tool while you are asking questions and finding answers. Whether it's a friend, spouse or partner, small group of people, or an entire PFLAG chapter, it is important that you share with people who can listen without judgment. Still, even with a strong support system, you may enter a period of time where you are living without answers. This can be unsettling, but it is often part of the process, and an idea inherent in faith itself.

The resource list at the end of this publication are good sources of information and support, in addition to reaching out to your local PFLAG chapter [pflag.org/find].

You can find an expanded list of faith resources at pflag.org/faithresources.

CONSIDERING

“I show my love for G-d, as a parent, by loving G-d’s children as my siblings. Love, preach, and change the world. G-d doesn’t put extra people in this world. We see you. We love you. We need you.”

– Rabbi Mike Moskowitz, Scholar-in-Residence Trans and Queer Jewish Studies, Congregation Beit Simchat Torah

Some families find themselves in what appears to be an untenable situation—they love their LGBTQ+ family member or friend, but their religion teaches them that their loved one is sinful, wrong, or required to “change” to be faithful. Some people feel that their only solution will be to avoid having a relationship with their LGBTQ+ loved one, or create distance. While these may seem like the only solutions at hand, they are not, and many denominations have worked to create support networks within their own traditions.

Many religious groups have wrestled with these issues and decided to be more welcoming to LGBTQ+ people. Others, like the United Methodists, continue to wrestle with

these issues, with bigger changes evolving (see below for some affirming congregations from the denomination as it currently stands).

“Many religious groups have wrestled with the issues and decided to become more welcoming to LGBTQ+ people.”

Here are just a few examples from a variety of faith traditions:

- United Church of Christ (UCC), the Episcopal Church (USA), and Unitarian Universalists (UUA) welcome and affirm LGBTQ+ members at a national level. We encourage you to look for the Open and Affirming seal in many of these churches or ask your faith leaders where they stand on the lives of LGBTQ+ people.
- Presbyterians and United Methodists have welcoming and affirming congregations

(sometimes called “Open and Affirming”). Many are members of More Light Presbyterians, Reconciling Ministries, or in the case of the Lutherans, Reconciling Works.

- The Jewish community has affirmed the lives of LGBTQ+ people since the Union of Reform Judaism welcomed LGBTQ+. Their opening of doors was followed by the Reconstructionist and recently the Conservative Associations of Judaism opening their synagogues and temples to all.

- Islam has taken a different route, with Mosques around the world being beacons of comfort and open doors as well as individual Imams creating intentional Muslim communities to fill the void and provide care for LGBTQ+ Muslims worldwide.

At the end of this guide, you’ll find a list of Resources from a variety of faith denominations that will be helpful to you as you consider your options.

A comprehensive list can also be found on the PFLAG National website, at pflag.org/faithresources.

POSSIBLE PATHS

“Dharmic scriptures speak about “Swadharma”—that being true to ourselves, as imperfect as it may be is better than aligning with someone else’s truth. For me, this means supporting our LGBTQ community in being true to our divine nature. My goal as a Spiritual leader is to foster a space of inclusion centered on this divine love and ability to show just as we are.”

– Dr. Raja G. Bhattar, Hindu

Many people find that considering their religion’s position on LGBTQ+ people is rewarding, deepening their commitment to their congregation and to their family. Others find the process painful, causing them to wonder whether their faith tradition remains consistent with their personal beliefs. Most people have a journey that encompasses both of these experiences, and many others.

***“Remember:
There are as many paths
as there are
people.”***

Ultimately, though, there comes a time in this process of discernment where you might feel ready to consider choosing a specific path forward. And, if your religion is not accepting of your LGBTQ+ family member or friend, you

might wonder: Can you comfortably continue practicing your faith in that spiritual home? Would you consider leaving, or perhaps consider staying to be part of a process of change? What are your choices?

In this section, you’ll find some common paths that people have taken as next steps on their faith journey. While each person’s experience is unique, PFLAG members

have reported facing similar choices. Remember, there are as many paths as there are people. No matter which road you are on or which destination you choose, look for the path that best meets your needs.

STAYING WITHIN YOUR FAITH COMMUNITY

“I support the LGBTQ+ community because the very vibrancy of our faith traditions and secular cultures depends on it. We can only build a world of justice, equity, dignity, and love, if all people experience these things -- from other people and the systems in which we live.”

– Rabbi Becky Silverstein

Sometimes people have the happy revelation that the conflict they expected from their faith community either doesn't actually exist, or that the conflict moves relatively quickly to acceptance. Other times, individuals determine that, even though there is some conflict, the prospect of changing religions or faith communities is not a viable option, and that the easiest or most practical solution is to live with that conflict.

When choosing to stay and the latter is true, some people choose to avoid the potential for elevating that conflict (or rejection altogether) by remaining “in

the closet” (quiet) about the fact that they have an LGBTQ+ family member.

Even though an individual may still find themselves wrestling with questions—such as how to deal with the disapproval of a faith leader or other members of the community—continuing with the familiar is where they find peace.

All of these are common and legitimate choices for many family members as well as LGBTQ+ people themselves. For some it will be their permanent solution, while for others it will be the first stop on the journey.

ENCOURAGING CHANGE WITHIN YOUR FAITH COMMUNITY

“As a rabbi and the parent of a gay child, I realize that the goal of equality, acceptance, and the celebration of committed relationships shared in the LGBTQ+ community cannot become part of the fabric of our society without the supportive voices of allies and members of our religious institutions and faith communities.”

– David M. Horowitz, Rabbi Emeritus of Temple Israel, Akron, Ohio and past Board President of PFLAG National

Some people choose not only to stay within a faith community that has conflicting beliefs, but also to work to bring about change and create a space within their congregation that is welcoming to LGBTQ+ people and their families. While these efforts can be very rewarding on both a spiritual and practical level, they can also be very challenging. It is realistic to expect that, as an advocate, you will get pushback; fortunately, you're never alone.

Many faith traditions have groups working on LGBTQ+ issues within their denominations that are available to join. Visit pflag.org/faithresources to access a list of faith and denomination-specific LGBTQ+ support and advocacy groups.

If your faith tradition does not already have such a group, you may choose to start this work yourself, with the goal of bringing about change. *be not afraid - help is on the way! straight*

for equality in faith communities [pflag.org/benotafraid], a publication from PFLAG National's Straight for Equality™ program, is a helpful and easily accessible guide to ways to engage as an ally of faith, and make your community more welcoming, with practical tips for engaging in challenging conversations that bring about change.

Look to join forces with others within your congregation or faith community, to open communication channels with your leadership, from the lead faith leader to their supportive council (Council of Elders, Board of Directors, Spiritual Counselors, etc). Research where your Spiritual Care leaders stand and use their wisdom to help you navigate the terrain. As always, feel free to reach out to PFLAG National to connect with other like-minded parents or faith leaders for support.

INVESTIGATING DIFFERENT FAITH COMMUNITIES

“I support LGBTQ+ people in faith because I desire to create a beloved community. Because the greatest commandment is love. Because the creator did not make a mistake in creating the diversity in human sexualities. Because LGBTQ+ folks are a part of God’s creation.”

– Rev. Dr. Jamie Washington: Pastor, Unity Fellowship Church of Baltimore; Elder (Unity Fellowship Church Movement)

Sadly, some people discover that their congregation, or their denomination as a whole, is unwilling or unable to meet their new spiritual needs, or even actively works against LGBTQ+ inclusion. For some of these people, leaving that tradition, which may have been a long-time spiritual home and refuge, can be an emotional and difficult decision.

Remember that regardless of your faith tradition, a community of faith is supposed to be a place where you can spiritually grow and develop with love and compassion. In order to grow in your faith community,

you must feel comfortable in that community, free from judgment. It may take time to find your new spiritual home, but know that there is one for you. Don’t go on the search alone—get the support that is there for you, and use the online resources that can help you get started.

Check out the resources at the back of this publication, and be sure to visit pflag.org/faithresources for additional support.

CHANGING BRANCHES OR CONGREGATIONS WITHIN YOUR DENOMINATION

“I am called to trust God’s will and plan regardless of what some religious organizations might teach. I am called to love my neighbor, practice humility, and seek God’s word with diligence and intelligence. God wants us to fully understand his scripture and teachings and the context and meaning of those words.”

*– Dr. Joshua Moon-Johnson (he/him); PMJ Consulting, LLC.
(Christian Non-Denominational)*

Even within a denomination, every branch and congregation is different in how they express their faith. From very conservative to extremely progressive, faith communities offer a wide variety of ways to practice religion within the boundaries of what makes each one unique. Each religious leader has a distinctive style, and communities are full of unique personalities and beliefs. If you are uncomfortable with attitudes toward LGBTQ+ people within your existing congregation, you might consider finding another congregation where you will feel more comfortable. Although it might be uncomfortable or difficult, finding a new branch or congregation may offer a more spiritually nourishing place to worship.

In recent years, many communities of faith have developed specific congregations that are sensitive to the needs of LGBTQ+ people, their families, and their allies. These congregations are often referred to

as “open and affirming” and have gone through a process of education and training, getting the support of the leadership and members of the congregation on becoming more inclusive of LGBTQ+ people and their loved ones. These congregations offer people a way to stay in their faith tradition, but in a setting more consistent with their evolving beliefs and needs. New congregations are always developing, so it is best to search online to find the one closest to you.

A word of caution: Do your homework when looking to change congregations. The overall leadership of a denomination could approve of opening their doors and welcoming LGBTQ+ people without reservation, but individual congregations might still be journeying to that end. If your denomination has an LGBTQ+ Ministry, they will be happy to direct you to Open and Affirming congregations in your area.

FINDING FAITH ON YOUR OWN

“Jesus never said, ‘Love IF.’ He said, ‘Love.’ PERIOD. After much reflection and sitting with God, I chose a personal faith journey that does not limit me from living out my commitment to justice and liberation. I could have thrown it all away, but my faith is a core part of my identity. I instead chose a path that resonated with who I believe God and Jesus to be. The God and Jesus I grew up with no longer exist. Love, show compassion to, advocate for and with, and protect. Do so in ways that don’t take up space but provide safer spaces. Any verse that speaks to love ,because NONE of them communicate love ‘if.’”

– Dr. Joy L. S. Hoffman (Christian)

The idea of leaving organized religion altogether can be daunting. Some people, however, feel that their objections to the LGBTQ+ views of their faith are stronger than their ties to a particular community or tradition. Before you decide to leave your faith or organized religion altogether, be sure to reach out to others who have been faced with a similar decision to find out how they navigated this choice and to get support as you make your own choices.

No matter which path you take—one of the ones above or an entirely different one altogether—decisions about your faith journey are complex and very personal. This process of discovery and exploration takes time and is different for each of us. It is important to take your time, ask questions, and remember that you are not alone.

To find families who have been faced with similar issues of faith, visit a PFLAG chapter. You may find the closest PFLAG chapter by visiting pflag.org/find.

SHARING YOUR STORY

“As the mother of two lesbian daughters, the story of the Loving Parent speaks to me about the unconditional love a parent must have for their child. If we are called to explain ourselves before G-d, it will not be for mundane concerns. The question will be if we ever, at least once during our lives, loved unconditionally.”

– Rev. Rosa G. Manriquez, IHM, Immaculate Heart Community, an ecumenical Christian community

As you become more open about your LGBTQ+ loved one, you may find that some individuals in your faith community will turn to you for support. Your faith leader may come to you with questions about LGBTQ+ issues. By being a resource within your faith community and supporting others on their paths to understanding, you can help start a dialogue and create a more welcoming environment for LGBTQ+ people, their families, and those who desire to become better allies.

Being the first one to speak up may be difficult, but it can begin a process of education in your congregation and beyond. Sharing your story about your journey in a personal, one-on-

one setting is often one of the most spiritually fulfilling and powerful experiences that people have. On

both sides of the conversation—both for the one telling the story and the one hearing it—there is a unique opportunity for understanding these issues in a new personal light as well

as for transforming the perception of LGBTQ+ issues. Remember that it is through compassionate conversations—not confrontations—that you can change hearts and minds.

You do not have to have all the answers to be a resource. Just by sharing your personal story you are making a difference and showing people that faith comes in many different forms.

*“It is through
compassionate
conversations
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and minds.”*

CONTINUING THE JOURNEY

I have become a better person for having a gay son—the things that I’ve learned and the way that I see other people and the way that I love other people, it’s just more loving, more open, less judgmental. I tell him all the time ‘You are such a gift from God,’ because he has shown me how I’m supposed to be loving other people and I wouldn’t know that without him. And my religion, as wonderful as it is, my religion didn’t teach me how to love. My gay son did.”

– Wendy Montgomery, co-founder of Mama Dragons, former Board of Directors for Affirmation, (LDS)

Whether you’re still at the threshold of the path, trying to peer over hills and around corners, or nearing the end of your discovery, thank you for taking this important spiritual journey. How people understand their relationship to faith can shift over time, so we hope that you will pick this booklet up again from time to time to see what new insights emerge. Please remember to visit our website (pflag.org) for an updated list of resources, materials, and information. At PFLAG you will always find a committed network of chapters and volunteers who are eager to support, guide, and encourage you.

“Share your story—and especially your struggle—if you have one...you are not alone.”

No publication can take the place of hearing from families like yours who have wrestled with questions of faith and their child’s sexual orientation and/or gender identity and expression. Talk to families both within your faith community and in other faith communities. Ask them about their journeys to reconcile their religious beliefs and their love for their child. Share your story, and especially your struggle, if you have one. By sharing your story, you will help others—and you will see you are not alone.

RESOURCES

Affirmations (LDS)

affirmation.org

Affirmation creates worldwide communities of safety, love, and hope and promotes understanding, acceptance, and self-determination of individuals of diverse sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions, supporting LGBTQ persons as they define their individual spirituality and intersection with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

American Baptist (Baptist)

awab.org

As the only organization solely devoted to building the Welcoming and Affirming movement within the Baptist traditions, AWAB has a unique call to be The National Voice for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Allied Baptists in the US.

Dignity USA (Catholic)

dignityusa.org

DignityUSA works for respect and justice for people of all sexual orientations, genders, and gender identities—especially gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender persons—in the Catholic Church and the world through education, advocacy, and support.

Disciples of Christ (DOC)

disciplesallianceq.org/about/

The Disciples LGBTQ+ Alliance works to transform the Disciples of Christ Church into a just and inclusive church that welcomes persons of all gender expressions and sexual identities into the full life and leadership of the church.

Eshel (Jewish - Orthodox)

eshelonline.org/eshels-mission/

Eshel's mission is to create a future for Orthodox lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals, and their families. Through its innovative and culturally sensitive programming, Eshel works with each individual, family, and community in creating a place for their LGBTQ members.

Keshet (Jewish)

keshetonline.org/about-us/

By strengthening Jewish communities and equipping Jewish organizations with the skills and knowledge they need to make all LGBTQ Jews feel welcome, Keshet works to ensure the full equality of all LGBTQ Jews and their families in Jewish life.

Metropolitan Community Church (Christian)

mccchurch.org/overview/

Since its founding in 1968, MCC has been at the vanguard of civil and human rights movements by addressing important issues such as racism, sexism, homophobia, ageism, and other forms of oppression. Metropolitan Community Church proclaims and practices a spirituality that is anchored in the liberating Gospel of Jesus Christ and confronts the issues of our volatile, uncertain, and complex world.

More Light Presbyterians (Presbyterian)

mlp.org/about-us/

More Light Presbyterians engages over 230 congregations and thousands of individuals in the Presbyterian Church (USA), enabling Presbyterians to lead LGBTQ+ service and advocacy in communities nationwide.

Muslims for Progressive Values (Muslim)

mpvusa.org/lgbtqi-resources/

MPV endorses the human and civil rights of LGBTIQ individuals. We affirm our commitment to ending discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity and we support full equality and inclusion of all individuals, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity, in society and in the Muslim community.

Rainbodhi (Buddhism)

rainbodhi.org

Rainbodhi is a spiritual group for LGBTQIA+ Buddhists and an advocate for more inclusion/diversity in the broader Buddhist community.

Reconciling Ministries (Methodist)

rmnetwork.org

Reconciling Ministries Network (RMN) equips and mobilizes United Methodists of all sexual orientations and gender identities to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves.

Reconciling Works (Lutheran)

reconcilingworks.org

Reconciling Works advocates for the full welcome, inclusion, and equity of LGBTQ+ Lutherans in all aspects of the life of their Church, congregations, and community.

Sadhana (Hinduism)

sadhana.org/blog-1/2017/10/11/a-progressive-hindu-statement-on-national-coming-out-day

Sadhana is building a progressive Hindu movement, practicing their sadhana, or faith in action, by advocating for those social justice principles they believe are at the heart of Hinduism.

Unitarian Universalist Association

uuu.org/lgbtq

UUs open their doors to people of all sexual orientations and gender identities and work to value diversity of sexuality and gender. UUs strive to create inclusive religious communities and work for LGBTQ justice and equity as a core part of their work.

United Church of Christ (UCC)

openandaffirming.org/ona/find/

UCC is a distinct and diverse community of Christians that come together as one church to join faith and action. With over 5,000 churches and nearly one million members across the U.S., many are considered Open and Affirming Churches (ONA).

