

**LIVING OPENLY IN YOUR PLACE OF WORSHIP**



HUMAN RIGHTS CAMPAIGN  
COMING OUT PROJECT



Talk about it.



# WELCOME

**R**eligion, like sexuality or gender identity, is one of the most personal expressions of our identity. Indeed, proclaiming our faith — like living openly as a gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender person — can make us feel terribly exposed to the value judgments of others. Yet faith is also what many of us turn to for strength, direction and solace.

For those who have felt the deep pull of faith and are also gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender, or who are friends, neighbors, family members or allies of GLBT people, this guide will provide you with suggestions and resources about coming out and living openly in places of worship.

Living openly within a faith community is a unique opportunity with its own set of challenges. However, as with any experience of coming out, when you come out or live openly in your faith community you can expect to experience the full spectrum of human emotion — from fear to euphoria. The process can be easier for some, more challenging for others, and it varies depending on who you're opening up to.

Whatever faith you practice and wherever you are in your coming out journey, we hope that this guide will be of assistance. Coming out and living openly within faith communities can be difficult but it can also be a spiritually renewing, even joyful experience. Our greatest hope is that as you take steps to be more fully open in your faith community, your own faith will deepen and your community will be strengthened by your actions.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 2 The Struggle to Claim Your Religious Voice
- 3 Why Be Open in a Faith Community?
- 4 Why Delay Coming Out?
- 5 Steps to Prepare
- 8 Coming Out to Your Religious Leader
- 10 Becoming the Teacher
- 11 Coming Out in Your Place of Worship
- 12 If Living Openly in Your Faith Community Isn't an Option
- 12 The Time Isn't Right — What Else Can I Do?
- 13 Coming Back to a Place of Worship
- 13 Building a Loving Community
- 14 Resources



“We have the will and the vision to offer the good news of a God who proclaims justice rather than judgment; who embodies inclusion rather than exclusion; who calls us to walk in love rather than fear.”

— The Rev. Susan Russell  
president of Integrity USA



## THE STRUGGLE TO CLAIM YOUR RELIGIOUS VOICE

One of the most painful experiences many gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people of faith have suffered is to be rejected by their faith community because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Not only has such rejection been devastating for GLBT people and those who care about them, but it has perpetuated the myth that religion is by definition antagonistic to GLBT people.



In light of such attacks, it's not surprising that many in the GLBT community view religion as an oppressive force and religious people as dangerous. This reaction is certainly understandable, but it has also silenced many people of faith within the GLBT community. Although this guide is primarily directed toward those considering the possibility of living openly in their faith communities, we recognize that claiming one's faith within the GLBT community can also be challenging.

We respect the complicated reasons people belong to one particular faith over another, reasons that are often compounded by race, geography, community and family history. Some GLBT people have chosen to leave their original faith community in search of more affirming faith traditions, or have left organized religion completely. Others have chosen to struggle within a faith tradition that speaks to them spiritually but is not yet open to them as GLBT people.

Whatever spiritual path you take, we strongly believe that no one should be made to feel unwelcome in his or her religious home and that no one should be made to feel less vital to the struggle for GLBT equality because of where he or she chooses to worship.



## WHY BE OPEN IN A FAITH COMMUNITY?

### ■ **To affirm the whole of you**

Living openly in a faith community can be challenging, but the rewards are enormous. By not being open, we deprive ourselves of the spiritual guidance needed to live our lives honestly, and we deprive others of the opportunity to truly get to know us. By living openly we contribute to a stronger sense of fellowship, which in turn enables us to grow spiritually in communion with others without hiding an essential part of who we are.

### ■ **To help your congregation grow in love and compassion**

For too long, gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people have been seen as a “problem” for religious communities. But by being open in a place of worship we offer our community a great gift. When we express our whole selves in worship, we can freely and joyously participate in the work of the community. We offer other congregants the opportunity to love us more fully and honestly, which in turn helps our faith communities become more spiritually responsive to the needs of all people of faith. In short, we help our faith communities find ways to truly become sacred places of solace and inclusive worship.

### ■ **To change the conversation about GLBT people of faith**

When we are open as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender people, we spark a new dialogue about GLBT people and faith. We remind people that the concerns of GLBT people are not only about legal rights. Dialogue about the diversity of religious people becomes much more honest. We give living testimony that GLBT people are spiritual brothers and sisters of all faiths, everywhere.

### ■ **To build religious institutions that are true to their missions and values**

The conversations we start in our faith communities are spiritually healing and empowering. We help faith communities find the source of love, fellowship and the divine that is at the core of all the world’s major religions.



## WHY DELAY COMING OUT?

In some cases, the emotional and spiritual costs of being open in a particular faith community may be too high right now. If the risk of a negative response seems too much, it might be best to defer coming out. Perhaps your congregation is the main social outlet in town or maybe coming out would jeopardize your job and well-being. Perhaps you are going through a difficult period and cannot risk being rejected by your church, synagogue or mosque. No matter what, trust your own judgment, think through the decision and do what's right for you. Remember that living openly can and should be embraced on your own terms and timetable.

However you choose to proceed, try to find a spiritual practice that speaks to your belief. You will always want to look for ways to deepen your faith and to live openly in other parts of your life even if you are not able to come out in your place of worship.



“On a particular Sunday morning I found myself in church. Near the end of the service the minister lifted up a piece of bread and the cup of wine for communion, and she said, ‘These are the gifts of God for the people of God.’ Suddenly my heart leapt. I realized I had come to God’s house, and God was asking me to eat at God’s table. In that instant I knew God loved me and wanted to be part of my life no matter who I was. I was finally able to give up trying to be ‘good enough’ for God.”

— “Young Gay Men Talking”  
[www.AVERT.org](http://www.AVERT.org).





## STEPS TO PREPARE

### ■ **Seek spiritual guidance**

As a person of faith, your conversation with yourself about the benefits and repercussions of coming out in your faith community may lead to a conversation with a higher power. Whether through prayer, meditation or reading, it is a good idea to seek guidance from the sources of inspiration at the core of your faith.

### ■ **Read**

Reading what religious scholars have to say about sexuality can be a valuable way to learn how people from diverse traditions have challenged the idea that homosexuality and variant gender identities are inherently sinful. There is much written now that affirms gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people of faith from many religious perspectives. The religious organizations listed at the back of this guide can assist you.

### ■ **Find a supportive community**

Deciding to live openly is a personal process, but it's not something you will want to take on alone. Find a supportive individual or group in your life before you make the decision to come out, and you will be more likely to feel affirmed rather than isolated. If you do not have adequate support, consider joining a GLBT network or online chat group before going forward.

### ■ **Assess the situation and make a plan**

Take the time to develop a plan, deciding who to approach, when to approach them and how to proceed. For instance, some people may find their priest to be relatively open to GLBT people, even though the congregation may feel hostile. Others might experience the reverse. Sometimes a choir director or lay leader may be more accepting than other members of the congregation.

It is always useful to discuss your plan with a supportive friend first. Ask yourself:

### **What do I know about my religious leader?**

- Does she speak about openness and diversity from the pulpit?
- Does he talk about GLBT people? If so, how often and in what context?
- Does she seem open to new ways of thinking about religion?
- How does he handle controversial issues?

You might want to research the religious authorities that your religious leaders cite from the pulpit. See if they have anything to say about GLBT issues or if their perspective would be inviting to a GLBT person. Sharing an interest in the sources your religious leaders turn to for inspiration and guidance is also an excellent way to begin a dialogue.



### **What do I know about my place of worship?**

- Does it encourage forums on issues affecting the larger faith community?
- Do lay leaders seem willing to encourage diversity among members?
- Are congregants open to more than one way of interpreting the sacred texts?
- Have they shown any interest in exploring what it means to be a “GLBT-welcoming” congregation?







### **Who should I come out to first?**

- Are there individual members, small worship study groups or worship committees that you feel would be more open than others?
- Can you trust this person or group to be discreet?

### **Do you know what you will say?**

Living openly is a process you control, and you can decide to take a more gradual approach. It might be best to begin a dialogue on GLBT issues in your congregation before coming out. Here are a few suggestions:

- Start a conversation about the prospect of your church becoming a GLBT-welcoming place of worship.
- Propose a roundtable discussion about diversity within your synagogue that includes a discussion of sexual orientation and gender identity.
- Suggest bringing in a speaker to your mosque on GLBT people and religion.
- Suggest that a small worship group do some reading of sermons about marriage equality or other issues affecting the GLBT community.



## COMING OUT TO YOUR RELIGIOUS LEADER



“When Orthodox Rabbi Steven Greenberg first came out, he sought the most conservative Orthodox rabbi in Israel. He told him what felt true to him at the time, that he was attracted to both men and women. (He has subsequently come out as a gay man.) He fully expected the rabbi to condemn him, but instead was told, ‘You have twice the power of love; use it carefully.’ Rabbi Greenberg left the room ecstatic. ‘I didn’t ask if it was permissible to have a lover; I knew the answer would be “no.” He was answering the question I was asking him: “Is this ugly?” And his response was, “Oh, no, it isn’t ugly; that’s just the power of love playing around in your heart.””

— From a Human Rights Campaign  
“Faith & Fairness” town hall  
(Washington, DC, November 2005)

**A**s this poignant exchange suggests, you can never predict the kind of response you might get from a religious leader or anyone else. People can always surprise us. We need to hold onto our faith in humanity and be open to the possibility that people will respond humanely and lovingly.

Unfortunately, however, sometimes religious leaders respond in ways that are, frankly, hurtful. You will want to take care of yourself during this process, making sure that you have friends or family around who will support you should your religious leader respond badly.



Although it is impossible to fully anticipate negative reactions, they may ask you to remain quiet or even deny this fundamental side of yourself. You may hear, for instance:

- “Homosexuality is a sin, and you need to change.”
- “Transgender people engage in body mutilation which is counter to our faith.”
- “You will need to remain celibate until or unless God changes your sexual orientation to a ‘normal’ straight one.”

You may also encounter responses that, while accepting of who you are, speak to a religious leader’s own fears. For example:

- “Our synagogue is welcoming to everyone. Why do we have to give special consideration to gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people?”
- “Our mosque cannot sustain the financial loss that will occur if we openly support GLBT people.”
- “The leaders of the congregation will revolt.”
- “We will lose vital church members.”

Although you can’t ignore these responses, you can remind your religious leader of his or her call to ministry. Material concerns should never outweigh the calling to minister to all members of the community and to extend an open heart to those seeking spiritual guidance.

You may offer to assist your religious leader in building a more welcoming place of worship, thus lessening the impact of any material concerns. Remember, however, to hold the moral high ground in such a discussion. The spiritual health of the community is a religious leader’s primary responsibility.

Also, try to keep the door open for further discussion, and be prepared with suggested readings and names of supportive clergy that your faith leader might call upon from within your larger religious organization.



## BECOMING THE TEACHER

Even as you look to faith leaders for religious guidance, you may be more informed on gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender issues than they are. Living openly at your place of worship may call you to teach those from whom you normally learn, or to help connect faith leaders with the resources they need to minister to GLBT congregants.

Some faith leaders may be reticent to speak out about issues of sexual orientation and gender identity. In such cases, you may want to provide your own leadership, whether that means a simple commitment to living openly or helping to establish programming that specifically recognizes and celebrates GLBT people.

You may also want to encourage your religious leader to sign up for the Human Rights Campaign Religion and Faith Program's weekly online preaching resource, "Out In Scripture" at [www.hrc.org/scripture](http://www.hrc.org/scripture). This is the first preaching and devotional resource written from a GLBT perspective. It is free and anyone can sign up. Also consider signing up for the Human Rights Campaign's e-newsletter at [www.hrc.org/religion](http://www.hrc.org/religion) for regular updates on new religious resources on GLBT issues.



“The declaration that we are a welcoming congregation is a declaration that we are ready to be surprised. We are willing to say that we don’t know which persons God may bring as gifts to our faith community. We are willing to say that we have things to learn from the spiritual journeys of people who are different from us — or from people who suddenly seem like different people.”

— The Rev. Sandra K. Johnson  
Sermon for Change, 2002





## COMING OUT IN YOUR PLACE OF WORSHIP

Like all communities, congregations have the capacity to change. Just as it takes some of us a long time to come out to ourselves or begin living openly with others; it may take your congregation time to come to terms with your sexual orientation or gender identity. Initial resistance is one possibility — but remember change is not always easily predictable. It can move slowly and then change suddenly.

Even if reactions disappoint you, they may soften over time. As you talk to others about gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people and faith, know that you will change hearts and minds.

Here are a few suggestions for the long term:

- Start a study group on GLBT issues and religion.
- Suggest discussion forums with outside religious leaders.
- Establish a committee to take steps to create a welcoming congregation.
- Encourage your faith leader to discuss GLBT issues from the pulpit.
- Keep the doors of communication open. It is important for people to feel as if they can talk to you.
- Finally, remember that the grace you give is often commensurate to the grace you will receive. Try to be kind and understand that transformation takes time.



Talk about it.



## IF LIVING OPENLY IN YOUR FAITH COMMUNITY ISN'T AN OPTION

**R**ealistically, you need to consider that some individuals, congregations and organized religions may continue to believe that being gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender is wrong or immoral.

Sadly, living openly in some faith communities will remain incredibly difficult or even impossible if you are to maintain your membership. Though sad, it is wise to recognize this possibility.

If this has happened to you, you may consider finding another place of worship or establishing an additional connection with a welcoming congregation. Religion is not a one-size-fits-all institution and there are many welcoming places of worship. The resources at the back of this booklet and on the Human Rights Campaign's website at [www.hrc.org/religion](http://www.hrc.org/religion) will help you if you need to search for another house of worship.

Even if you change religious communities, you may want to attend services at your original place of worship; change happens faster when gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people are present.



## THE TIME ISN'T RIGHT — WHAT ELSE CAN I DO?

**R**emember that living openly in your faith community is a long journey, and there are other ways to be open away from your spiritual home. You might:

- Consider joining a GLBT affinity group connected with your denomination or a gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender support group. There are many groups working at the denominational level to build welcoming congregations.
- Become active in a GLBT religious group — such as Al-Fatiha for Muslims — that brings together GLBT people, their families and allies of a particular faith.
- Live openly in other aspects of your life — perhaps with your friends, certain family members or co-workers, or in a GLBT organization.





## COMING BACK TO A PLACE OF WORSHIP

Perhaps you left a faith community because you did not feel comfortable coming out but are now ready to reconsider that decision. Perhaps you began the journey but met with a less than enthusiastic response. Whatever the case, there are resources to help you re-examine your needs and find the supportive spiritual home you deserve.

If you return to a faith community or begin exploring a new one, look for signs of openness. Talk to leaders and try to determine whether the community could serve your spiritual needs.

Through this journey, please share your story. By doing so, others learn from our experiences and faith communities become aware of our witness for self and others.



## BUILDING A LOVING COMMUNITY

Increasingly, gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people who feel empowered after coming out within their place of worship also feel called to become leaders on the issue within the larger scope of their religion, denomination or community.

They may facilitate collaboration among faith leaders on GLBT issues, either within one specific religious organization or across a variety of faith communities. This work can be carried out with statewide, regional or national events and organizations, such as a denomination's general convention, a progressive state clergy coalition or a denominational advocacy and affinity group. In addition to the resources in the back of this guide, [www.hrc.org/religion](http://www.hrc.org/religion) has examples and stories of people who have chosen to advocate on this level.

We hope that living openly at your place of worship will inspire you to help build religious institutions that affirm all people. This is the work of love, faith and community and it is a testament to the true power of grace.

## RESOURCES

### **The Human Rights Campaign Foundation Religion and Faith Program**

[www.hrc.org/religion](http://www.hrc.org/religion)

Website features sermons; updates on religious news; information about religions' and denominations' positions on gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender issues; and other valuable resources. Go to our website, [www.hrc.org/religion](http://www.hrc.org/religion) to sign up for a bi-monthly e-newsletter. Also, sign up for our online preaching and devotional resource, "Out In Scripture" at [www.hrc.org/scripture](http://www.hrc.org/scripture).

### **RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS**

#### **Affirmation**

For GLBT Mormons and their allies, families and friends.

323-255-7251

[www.affirmation.org](http://www.affirmation.org)

#### **Affirmation**

For GLBT United Methodists and their allies, families and friends.

847-733-9590

[www.umaffirm.org](http://www.umaffirm.org)

#### **Al-Fatiha**

For GLBT Muslims and their allies, families and friends.

202-452-5534

[gaymuslims@yahoo.com](mailto:gaymuslims@yahoo.com)

[www.al-fatiha.org](http://www.al-fatiha.org)



#### **Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists**

For GLBT Baptists and their allies, families and friends.

508-226-1945

[www.wabaptists.org](http://www.wabaptists.org)

#### **Brethren Mennonite Council for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Interests**

For GLBT people, allies, families and friends in both the Mennonite Church, USA and Canada, and the Church of the Brethren.

612-343-2060

[www.bmclgbt.org](http://www.bmclgbt.org)



#### **The Covenant Network of Presbyterians**

National group of clergy and lay leaders working for a fully inclusive church.

415-351-2196

[www.covenantnetwork.org](http://www.covenantnetwork.org)

#### **Dignity/USA**

For GLBT Catholics and their allies, families and friends.

800-877-8797

[www.dignityusa.org](http://www.dignityusa.org)

#### **Emergence International**

For GLBT Christian Scientists and their allies, families and friends.

[www.emergence-international.org](http://www.emergence-international.org)





### **The Fellowship**

Coalition of Christian Churches committed to radical inclusive ministry.  
[www.radicallyinclusive.com](http://www.radicallyinclusive.com)

### **The Gay and Lesbian Vaishnava Association**

For GLBT Hindus and their allies, families and friends.  
[www.galva108.org](http://www.galva108.org)

### **Gay Buddhist Fellowship**

For GLBT Buddhists and their allies, families and friends.  
415-207-8113  
[www.gaybuddhist.org](http://www.gaybuddhist.org)

### **GayChristians.Org**

A unified listing of local welcoming and affirming Christian congregations.  
[www.gaychristians.org](http://www.gaychristians.org)

### **GLAD Alliance Inc.**

An organization of GLBT and affirming members of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).  
[glad@gladalliance.org](mailto:glad@gladalliance.org)  
[www.gladalliance.org](http://www.gladalliance.org)

### **Integrity**

For GLBT Episcopalians and their allies, families and friends.  
800-462-9498  
[info@integrityusa.org](mailto:info@integrityusa.org)  
[www.integrityusa.org](http://www.integrityusa.org)



### **Institute for Welcoming Resources**

Resources supporting the unconditional welcome of people of all sexual orientations and gender identities and their families in the church home of their choice.  
Sponsored by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force.  
612-821-4397  
[info@welcomingresources.org](mailto:info@welcomingresources.org)  
[www.welcomingresources.org](http://www.welcomingresources.org)

### **Interweave**

For GLBT Unitarians and their allies, families and friends.  
[www.uua.org/interweave](http://www.uua.org/interweave)

### **Keshet Ga'avah**

The World Congress of GLBT Jews, as well as their allies, families and friends.  
202-452-7424  
[www.glbtejews.org](http://www.glbtejews.org)



### **Lutherans Concerned**

For GLBT Lutherans and their allies, families and friends.  
[www.lcna.org](http://www.lcna.org)

### **Metropolitan Community Churches**

The world's largest GLBT spirituality organization.  
[www.mccchurch.org](http://www.mccchurch.org)

### **More Light Presbyterians**

For GLBT Presbyterians and their allies, families and friends.  
505-820-7082  
[www.mlp.org](http://www.mlp.org)

### **Nehirim**

A spiritual initiative for GLBT Jews.  
[info@nehirim.org](mailto:info@nehirim.org)  
[www.nehirim.org](http://www.nehirim.org)



**NUJLS/World Congress**

The National Union of Jewish  
LGBTIQQ Students.  
info@nujilsonline.org  
www.nujilsonline.org

**Office of BGLT Concerns**

For GLBT Unitarian  
Universalists and their allies,  
families and friends.  
www.uua.org/obgltc



**Operation Rebirth**

Predominantly African-  
American Christian churches  
that are GLBT-welcoming  
and affirming.  
www.operationrebirth.com

**Reconciling Ministries  
Network**

For GLBT United Methodists  
and their allies, families and  
friends.  
773-736-5526  
info@rmnetwork.org  
www.rmnetwork.org

**Reconciling Pentecostals  
International**

For GLBT Pentecostals  
and their allies, families  
and friends.  
480-595-5517  
www.rpifellowship.com

**Seventh-Day Adventist  
Kinship International**

GLBT-affirming organization  
for current and former  
Seventh-day Adventists.  
866-732-5677  
office@sdakinship.org  
www.sdakinship.org

**Soulforce**

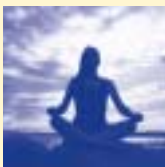
An interfaith movement  
committed to ending spiritual  
violence perpetuated by  
religious policies and teachings  
against GLBT people.  
877-705-6393  
info@soulforce.org  
www.soulforce.org

**Torah Queeries**

Creative and incisive GLBT-  
themed commentaries on the  
weekly Torah portion or Jewish  
holidays. A joint project of  
Mosaic: The National Jewish  
Center for Sexual and Gender  
Diversity and the World  
Congress of GLBT Jews.  
www.jewishmosaic.org/torah

**The UCC Coalition for  
LGBT Concerns**

Provides support and  
sanctuary to GLBT people  
and their families and friends.  
800-653-0799  
office@ucccoalition.org  
www.ucccoalition.org



**Unity Fellowship of Christ  
Churches**

African-American GLBT  
spiritual organization.  
323-938-8322  
motherchurch@ufc-usa.org  
www.ufc-usa.org



## A MESSAGE FROM HRC PRESIDENT JOE SOLMONESE

Dear Friends,

**T**hank you for taking time to read and think about the Human Rights Campaign Living Openly in Your Place of Worship Guide.



For me, coming out was initially a process that was scary and filled with uncertainty. But as I came out to more and more people I began to realize that most people were simply happy for me, and that despite the occasional difficulties, I could ultimately begin to live my life as the person I was truly meant to be. What was stressful at first quickly became empowering.

To those of you who are just starting your coming out journey — congratulations. You are entering a brave new part of your life where you will be able to more completely realize your dreams and potential. At times, it may be scary and hard — but please know that there is a vital and vibrant community ready to help support and welcome you.

For those of you who have been living your lives openly, I hope that you will consider starting new conversations with friends, family and people of faith in your community about your life as a GLBT person — because, even one person at a time, that extra step is the most important thing each of us can do within our circles to help change hearts and minds.

Wherever you are on your journey, the Human Rights Campaign is ready to help stand with you at home, at work, in your place of worship, in your community and beyond by providing resources and tools to help create a more accepting and understanding world for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender Americans.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Joe Solmonese". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Joe Solmonese  
HRC President



## HUMAN RIGHTS CAMPAIGN COMING OUT PROJECT

The HRC Coming Out Project is a program designed to help gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people come out and start living openly.

As coming out is a lifelong journey, the HRC Coming Out Project also helps GLBT people, as well as straight-supportive people, to live openly and talk about their support for equality at home, at work, in their places of worship and in their communities each and every day.

In short, the HRC Coming Out Project's chief export into the world is open and respectful dialogue about the lives of GLBT Americans and their family and friends.

The project is an extension of National Coming Out Day — celebrated every October 11. The day was born out of the 1987 GLBT march on Washington, DC, where hundreds of thousands of Americans marched to support equal rights for GLBT Americans. Today, National Coming Out Day events are held in hundreds of cities across the country and around the world.

Visit [www.hrc.org/comingout](http://www.hrc.org/comingout) for more information.

