



Keeping the Faith

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

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.¹ In addition, they have achieved greater moral equality in the eyes of several religious groups.² 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.

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,”³ 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.⁴ 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.⁵

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 2004.⁶

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.⁷ A lesbian couple’s home in the town of

Vonore was burned down last year, leaving the two women homeless.⁸ 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—⁹one while in police custody.¹⁰

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.

Behind the stained glass windows

Pastoral and congregational support across the state

Faith communities in Tennessee are at different stages in terms of their acceptance and support of LGBT Americans. Some are in the early stages, providing informal support to LGBT congregants and allies. In this report we refer to them as “congregations in transition.” Other faith communities are working more publicly and actively for LGBT equality. We refer to them as “anchor congregations.”

Yet other faith communities, while not supporting equality informally or formally, are also not publicly opposing equality for LGBT Americans. In a religiously conservative state like Tennessee, such silence can be counted as a form of support. It should also be noted that support sometimes comes from individual faith leaders, rather than from their institutions. This support is also valuable.

Churches in transition

Regardless of their official stances or teachings, many Tennessee churches informally welcome openly gay and lesbian congregants. Gays and lesbians participate in church activities, such as singing in the choir and volunteering for service projects. Some also share news of events, workshops, programs, and activities regarding LGBT equality.

While such inclusion might not seem overly significant, in fact it is. Hostility toward gays and lesbians often arises when there are no personal connections or friendships—when they are seen as “other.” When lesbian and gay people are part of faith communities, however, they go from “other” to “us.” Such a process isn’t always smooth and straightforward, but it is crucial. Also crucial is increasing the number of these congregations throughout the state.

Activists and allies are working to do so. Although spread thin across the state, they are identifying churches that have openly gay and transgender members, and those that seem open to educational programs on LGBT moral and civil equality. Some LGBT groups are holding workshops to help allies and advocates rebut anti-equality theological arguments and respond to a barrage of anti-equality religious messaging.

Despite these efforts, serious challenges remain within faith communities, including white evangelicals, Catholics, and African-American churches. Challenges include resistance from the religious hierarchy or denomination to which a church belongs, opposition from members in the pews, discomfort with issues of sexuality and sexual identity, hesitancy to oppose prevailing political structures and cultural mores, and attention to issues that feel more pressing.

Further, there has been quiet movement on the part of some Catholic priests to be more inclusive, with the pastoral, *Always Our Children: A Pastoral Message to Parents of Homosexual Children and Suggestions for Pastoral Ministers*,” by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, providing the rationale.¹¹ The document discusses the inherent dignity of gays and lesbians, saying there is a place for them in their church and in communities, even as it asserts they should live chaste lives.¹²

Critical role of anchor congregations

Certain community congregations play an important role in advocating moral and civil equality. They are well known for their work and they anchor LGBT activists and allies by providing spiritual support, economic support, and public support.

For instance, anchor congregations provide in-kind support for LGBT groups through office space and venues to hold events and programs. They provide a religious home to LGBT members and their families and participate in rallies and activities. Anchor congregations display rainbow banners and flags which signal public religious support for LGBT equality.

A number of anchor congregations are in the Nashville area, including Hobson United Methodist and Edgehill United Methodist. Many people committed to equality come long distances because the churches play a significant role in supporting a movement within a state where so many repressive actions and attitudes against gay and transgender people tend to be the norm. A leader of one of these churches notes, “People drive 1 and ½ hour to get to us. They come here for their

‘cup of cold water’ on Sunday morning. But they’re 24/7 Christians. They inspire me.”¹³ When LGBT activists were preparing for the ultimately successful effort to secure a Nashville non-discrimination ordinance in 2009, they began by reaching out to faith communities and garnered the early support of 10 congregations, including Methodist, Episcopal, and Presbyterian churches.

Despite its conservatism, eastern Tennessee also contains a few anchor congregations within the Methodist, Episcopal, and Presbyterians churches. For instance, Munsey Memorial United Methodist Church in Johnson City held services for World AIDS day last December. Elizabethton Presbyterian Church is the first More Light (a Presbyterian term for LGBT welcoming) church in east Tennessee, and is led by a progressive pastor, John Shuck, who is an active advocate for equality in his community. At Elizabethton Presbyterian, there is overlap between members of the church and the local chapter of Parents, Families, & Friends of Lesbians and Gays, or PFLAG, a group that provides community support for friends and family of gay and transgender people.

In Memphis, First Congregational United Church of Christ (commonly referred to as “First Congo”), is another anchor congregation. As one of the only Open and Affirming churches in Memphis, its large campus contains many social justice ministries and is a significant resource to LGBT activists and the Memphis community, serving as one of the main centers of LGBT advocacy in the city. First Congo shares space with 29 other social justice organizations, all committed to “healing, justice, and reconciliation.” Some of its social justice programs include The Pilgrim House Hostel and Retreat Center, a Global Goods Fair Trade store, Loaves and Fishes Closet (food and clothing assistance for those in need in the Memphis community), the Revolutions Bicycle Cooperative, and the Pilgrim Counseling Center for Living and Learning.

Another Memphis anchor congregation is Temple Israel, which supports a wide variety of progressive causes. Rabbi Micah Greenstein is a strong supporter of LGBT rights and lends his moral authority to LGBT equality press conferences and events. He was an outspoken advocate for the recently failed attempt to pass a Memphis non-discrimination ordinance that would legally protect LGBT city employees and contractors.¹⁴

Unfortunately, Temple Israel is only one synagogue, and its members and leadership often feel overbooked when it comes to participating in local progressive activism. According to advocates, most of the other synagogues in Memphis are more conservative and less activist.

LGBT activists and faith allies agree that they are spread “too thin” across the state. Growing faith allies and increasing their work is a major goal.

Influence of faith allies from more conservative denominations

Sometimes it is not only anchor congregations but individual faith allies who are proving instrumental in communities in Tennessee. Oftentimes their influence comes from the fact that they are from more conservative denominations.

Given the strong presence of African-American churches in the Memphis area and to a lesser extent in Nashville and eastern Tennessee, and the vocal opposition of many African-American religious leaders to LGBT equality, it is important to raise the visibility of African-American pastors who are allies. One such pastor is Rev. Sonnye Dixon, minister of Hobson United Methodist Church, a predominantly African-American church in Nashville. Hobson now boasts a congregation that is about one-third lesbian and gay. Rev. Dixon has been a consistent ally on LGBT moral and civil equality work, while also working to press the larger LGBT rights movement to include racial and economic equality as a core issue.

Individual faith allies have also worked to support non-discrimination ordinances in the state. Shelby County Commissioner Steve Mulroy, for example, is a self-described devout Catholic and supporter of the county’s non-discrimination ordinance. He pushed back against opponents who claimed that homosexuality was an “abomination” and supported legal protections for LGBT county residents by people of faith.¹⁵ Also, in a press conference supporting a proposed non-discrimination ordinance for Memphis, an evangelist, Geneva Dorsey, spoke out in public support for LGBT equality.¹⁶

It is important to raise the visibility of African-American pastors who are allies.

Faith below the radar

While faith allies and “anchor congregations” are critical to achieving moral and civil equality for gay and transgender people in Tennessee, there is also a role for religious leaders who are willing to be privately supportive or silent, and not publicly oppose LGBT equality.

Catholic priests generally fall into the willing to be silent or privately supportive categories. Several Catholic priests in Nashville, for example, see their role as providing comfort and support to LGBT members of their congregations. Some of their tolerance and support is informed by the Catholic 2010 pastoral, “Always Our Children.”

In addition, many white and African-American church leaders are increasingly willing to refrain from public opposition to LGBT equality. Moving faith leaders from public opposition to silence is considered by many LGBT activists to be a success. Sometimes this conversion to silence from formerly outspoken opponents happens when faith leaders receive negative comments from within or from outside their congregations.

LGBT equality organizations in Tennessee

An overview of activities and strategies

Tennessee does not contain many regional and statewide LGBT activist groups, but those that exist tend to be effective, thanks to the flexible and coordinated approach to their work and their commitment to working with faith communities. The only statewide LGBT organization is the Tennessee Equality Project, which has regional committees across the state that organize local efforts (there is a statewide transgender group called the Tennessee Transgender Political Coalition that does strong advocacy work as well, but only for that specific community).

Apart from TEP, smaller LGBT organizations, such as the Memphis Gay and Lesbian Community Center and the Tennessee Valley Pride, focus on community support and public engagement. Almost all of the organizational leaders interviewed for this report said they were committed to working with faith leaders and congregations, although some groups have had more success than others.

In virtually all social justice movements there is a tension between movement builders and strategists, and this tension exists in Tennessee as well. LGBT strategists emphasize the importance of realistic, winnable goals, the need to compromise in order to advance, and the importance of pragmatism. In contrast, LGBT movement builders tend to see compromise as questionable and emphasize the importance of holding on to a vision, rather than shrinking the vision to fit what seems attainable. Such tensions have played out in the battle to pass the hate crimes law, for example, and whether or not gender identity language should be included in the legislation.

Statewide and regional coordination

The main statewide organization is the Tennessee Equality Project, or TEP, which focuses much of its activism on local and state politics and is organized

into local city and county committees. This county/city committee structure allows LGBT activists to coordinate statewide goals while also responding to specific community needs.

Memphis has two strong LGBT organizations, the Shelby County Committee for the TEP and the Memphis Gay and Lesbian Community Center. The Shelby County committee, which comprises the area around and including Memphis, has an activist focus. It has spearheaded attempts to pass non-discrimination ordinances for Shelby County and Memphis (A non-discrimination ordinance has passed in Shelby County but not in Memphis).¹⁷ The MGLCC focuses on celebratory, advocacy, and educational programs, from pot lucks to film festivals to collaborating with TEP to lobbying the legislature. It also hosts a support group for Christian gays and lesbians.

The decision to go from being all-volunteer to having one paid staff director has been crucial to taking the MGLCC, and LGBT activism in Memphis in general, to the next level. The paid director has been able to scale up the diversity of programs, offering many more activities, trainings, and services than used to be possible. The MGLCC also offers weekly HIV testing after work hours—it is the only place in Memphis where after-hour testing is offered.

LGBT organizations not affiliated with TEP based in eastern Tennessee include Tennessee Valley Pride, North East Tennessee Pride, and PFLAG affiliates of Greater Knoxville, the Tri-Cities, and Maryville. There are regional TEP committees based in the Tri-Cities area, Knoxville, and Chattanooga, as well. These committees work in a more conservative part of the state, so they tend to focus on being a community support network for gays and lesbians in their area. A new group called the East Tennessee Equality Council was incorporated in the summer of 2010 to manage the annual Knoxville PrideFest and other LGBT community social activities.¹⁸

While groups in eastern Tennessee tend not to launch legislative campaigns, they do engage in quiet lobbying of local government officials. Even though their state representatives are conservative, the Tri-Cities TEP committee lobbyists are able to maintain relationships with some representatives who serve on important committees in the state legislature.¹⁹ But these relationships are kept confidential because the representatives do not want to openly support gay rights issues.²⁰

Almost all of the organizational leaders interviewed for this report said they were committed to working with faith leaders and congregations, although some groups have had more success than others.

As for the Nashville area in middle Tennessee, the main LGBT organizations are PFLAG Nashville, the Tennessee Vals (a social and support group for transgender community members), the Nashville GLBT Chamber of Commerce, and the Nashville Committee of the Tennessee Equality Project. The Nashville Committee has an activist focus similar to the Shelby County Committee, and just recently celebrated the passage of a non-discrimination ordinance for government employees of the metro area that prevents them from being discriminated against based on sexual orientation or gender identity.

Faith allies and LGBT activists working together

Understanding the stakes

In Tennessee, coordination between LGBT activists and faith allies is crucial because so much of the public opposition to LGBT moral and civil equality is faith based. Consequently, success in securing equality depends on countering religious messages of anti-equality with faith messages of equality. Faith allies know this well. One faith leader who has experienced harassment for supporting LGBT equality was adamant about the need for public support of moral equality, both in the church and in the greater community.

It is important to note that while many LGBT activists are either people of faith themselves or see the importance of working with faith communities, this is not universally true. A number of LGBT activists see religion as an oppositional force and are not inclined to work with faith groups. Given the anti-gay culture of so many churches and the rejection that many activists experienced growing up, it should not be surprising that these negative views exist. What is surprising is how limited they seem to be. According to one LGBT activist, “those of us who live here know we can’t pull ourselves out of the community we live in, and many of our members are still active in their churches.”²¹

It is also important to note that economic and racial injustice helps shape the attitudes and views of African Americans to LGBT issues. African-American leaders interviewed for this report agreed that LGBT equality was perceived mainly as a “white issue.” Many pointed out that their communities had more urgent priorities, most of them related to economic justice issues. Some African-American pastoral leaders did support non-discrimination and hate crimes legislation, considering them more important than issues like marriage equality. Even so, for many African-American communities in Tennessee—especially in these hard economic times—basic issues of sustenance and survival come first.

Strategic partnerships at the leadership level

In the often repressive climate of Tennessee, working together boosts strength in numbers. “Nobody wants to do anything alone,” one activist said. A real fear of reprisals lurks underneath the urge to collaborate. Another motivation is the need to expand the number of allies in order to be more effective.

Some LGBT groups—especially those in regions with few supportive congregations—are adding faith representatives to their leadership circle. In Chattanooga, for example, Tennessee Valley Pride has added to their board a representative of the six gay friendly churches in the area. Tennessee Valley Pride also helped organize an interfaith night during PRIDE week.²² Such ongoing involvement helps create authentic partnerships between faith and LGBT advocacy groups, rather than sporadic connections.

Collaborations between faith and LGBT groups are also an effective way to garner attention from elected leaders. According to a Tennessee Equality Project leader in eastern Tennessee, “Here coalitions are a lot more important because politicians can ignore 10 percent of the population, but they can’t ignore all the straight allies.”²³ Coalitions are also critical to undermining opponents’ false framing of the public debate in which religion is opposed to LGBT equality.

Playing defense at the state level, playing offense at the local level

LGBT policy activism in Tennessee is often described as “playing defense at the state level and offense at the local level.” Playing defense involves working to defeat a range of harmful state bills that legislators regularly propose that would reduce LGBT rights or even criminalize being gay. Playing offense means working for targeted legislation, such as city and county non-discrimination ordinances to protect LGBT city government employees from non-merit discrimination.

At the local level

In 2008, TEP played offense when it launched the “It’s Time” campaign which focused on passing local non-discrimination ordinances across the state. So far, three non-discrimination ordinances have passed. They include Shelby County, Nashville, and Oak Ridge (this was a special case in which the town’s citizens voted to amend their charter to prohibit discrimination based on sexual orienta-

tion for city employees.) TEP cannot take sole credit for these victories, but it can take quite a lot for the passage of the Nashville and Shelby County NDOs.

Several attempts to pass a non-discrimination ordinance in Memphis have so far failed. Faith leaders in Memphis have been actively involved with this ordinance, as well. They have come from many faith traditions and denominations, including African-American and white congregations. They have held press conferences explaining why they support the ordinance on moral grounds.²⁴ LGBT activists attribute the failure to succeed so far in part as a failure to secure enough faith allies, though they also recognize that city council members have not heard enough positive, supportive messages from the community at large.

In contrast, LGBT activists in eastern Tennessee tend to focus on faith collaborations to strengthen their movement—by, for example, having churches offer their building as a safe space for LGBT community meetings or for HIV testing, or holding a World AIDS Day commemoration —because they operate in a more difficult environment. These collaborations have enabled them to share capacity, resources, and knowledge in their work when it is too difficult for any one local group to spearhead LGBT-related activities.

In this region of Tennessee, LGBT leaders have begun relationships with several Presbyterian, Methodist, Episcopalian, Lutheran, and UCC churches in the area, but they acknowledge they need to build stronger relationships between churches and gays and lesbians in general in their region.^{25 26}

When LGBT activists do ask some of these churches about supporting a non-discrimination ordinance for the region's counties and cities, though, they are often told that churches will only support a general non-discrimination ordinance, not one specifically meant to protect gays and lesbians.

At the statewide level

At the statewide level, coalitions were also responsible for passage of an anti-hate crimes bill in the state legislature in 2002. LGBT advocates and African-American leaders, especially, worked hard on this effort. In 2009, advocates also worked with African-American political and faith leaders to pass an update of the law to include protections for gender identity and expression. According to a TEP blog post, the Black Caucus's support for the 2009 hate crimes bill “[gave] it new life.”²⁷ Although the update did not pass, it went further in the legislative process than before.

Increasing the number of inclusive congregations

LGBT activists and faith allies recognize that one of the best ways to create a more inclusive and just culture in Tennessee is to increase the number of congregations that formally support LGBT equality.

TEP works to identify congregations that have significant numbers of LGBT parishioners, collaborating with them to talk with their pastors about becoming more formally inclusive or welcoming. TEP tends to work with individual congregations rather than on the denominational level because specific congregations do not automatically support their denomination's affinity groups such as "Open and Affirming," "Reconciling Congregations," and "More Light."

Most often, LGBT church members are the ones who approach their pastors. This approach seems to work best because pastors are usually more responsive to a parishioner than to an outsider. When no LGBT members are able to begin the conversation, LGBT activists do pick up the phone and arrange a meeting.²⁸

Beyond individual efforts, some LGBT activists and faith leaders are setting up congregational teams that aim to grow a significant number of ally congregations for their denomination. This is happening in Nashville, where efforts have produced a new network called The Reconciling Churches of Middle Tennessee. The network has sponsored several churches to attend national and regional denominational events, such as those held by the Reconciling Ministries Network. RMN is a national organization, now in its third year in Tennessee, that helps individuals, congregations, and campus ministries become fully inclusive, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity.²⁹ RMN provides organizational and skills training for two leaders from Tennessee each year, helping them connect vision and strategy and goals.

Congregations in Nashville have also benefited from the work of the Divinity School of Vanderbilt University, and especially its Carpenter Program in Religion, Gender and Sexuality.³⁰ This program uses its standing in the community to host faith-based educational events for the entire Nashville community—events that single congregations or even several congregations together would find difficult to do.

These well-attended events have helped to create a different religious and civic climate in Nashville and make LGBT and faith organizing better understood and valued. The Carpenter Program also has made some efforts to help congregations

grow their networking through this university-based convening where “interested” religious leaders and laypeople are educated on the issues and become more informed and committed partners of the LGBT equality movement. Those efforts have produced the occasional cooperative effort involving multiple congregations, but it has not yet produced sustained networking among them.³¹

Creative arts outreach and media campaigns

LGBT activist organizations in Tennessee have learned from their partnerships with spiritual and faith groups that in addition to rallies and knocking on doors, there are a number of creative ways to build community support. For instance, the Tennessee Equality Project worked with Prescott Baptist Church to put on a conference about using one’s creative voice to promote equality in the community. That conference, “Creativity, Equality, and Empowerment,” featured storytelling and songwriting for equality workshops, musical, and dramatic events.³² The conference also offered educational workshops, such as lobbying training.³³ Advocates believe that artistic expression related to LGBT equality is an effective way to inspire and organize the community.

LGBT activists and faith allies have created innovative organizing and communications campaigns as well. For instance, in the fall of 2009, the Memphis Gay and Lesbian Community Center worked with members of the Memphis community to create a billboard public education campaign to show that gays and lesbians are neighbors and friends, family members and pastors, and members of the military who are protecting our country.

According to Will Batts, executive director of the MGLCC, “These are all local people telling their own truths. No actors.” One of the ministers who was part of the project said she participated because in Memphis, “the lines are so sharp, you’re either for it [LGBT equality in society and religion] or against it.”³⁴

These billboards contain striking images: A lesbian interracial couple holds hands, their wedding rings visible, with the caption, “We’re married and God loves us as we are.” On another billboard, four racially diverse clergy, three women and one man, are smiling. The caption says, “Ministers in support of equality for gay, lesbian, and transgender people.” (see next page) Another billboard shows a young man in full military dress, including a medal on his chest, giving a crisp salute. “I’m gay and I protected your freedom,” the caption says.

“Ministers in support of equality for gay, lesbian and transgender people.”



Memphis Gay and Lesbian Community Center
www.mglcc.org

Courtesy of the Memphis Gay and Lesbian Community Center.

Leaders involved with the campaign said the billboards made people stop and think about the real people affected by religious bigotry. Furthermore, the billboards contained positive religious messages for equality, underscoring the importance of directly addressing religious arguments against LGBT equality by offering concrete, faith-based alternatives.

The billboard campaign is an effective example of LGBT and faith activists working together in creative ways to challenge views that religious people oppose LGBT rights.

Nexus of faith and health

Individual pastors are doing brave and significant work in Tennessee to support moral and civil equality for LGBT citizens, from supporting equality from the pulpit to participating in pro-equality billboard media campaigns and rallies, and more. In addition, work on health issues, particularly HIV-AIDS, connects a number of faith communities to the LGBT movement.

Health collaborations

Increasingly in Tennessee, faith and health organizations are collaborating with African-American churches on HIV/AIDS awareness and education. While many African American churches are hesitant to openly support LGBT rights, quite a few are working to combat HIV/AIDS in their communities. The Rev. Dr. Ken Robinson at St. Andrew's A.M.E Church in Memphis is an example of this work.³⁵ Dr. Robinson is formerly the state commissioner of health and has been outspoken on the issue of HIV/AIDS. His congregation sponsored a public awareness campaign that featured nine billboards promoting HIV/AIDS education and awareness in the community.

Memphis Theological Seminary, an ecumenical Protestant seminary serving the Mid-South region, offers a doctor of ministry concentration in "Faith and Health" as one of its three degree tracks. Several of those interviewed for this report cited the seminary as an important source in study and collaboration, especially in regard to HIV/AIDS and the African-American community.

In addition, the Congregational Health Network, in collaboration with Methodist LeBonheur Hospital in Memphis and the Memphis Theological Seminary, is collaborating with health care professionals and churches to work within the churches on HIV/AIDS and other health issues.

African-American pastoral allies, white LGBT faith allies, and activists all agree that historic racial and race-based economic inequalities in Tennessee must be addressed in order to work together on LGBT issues. Working together on health issues is one area in which these collaborations can take place.

Work on health issues, particularly HIV-AIDS, connects a number of faith communities to the LGBT movement.

Overcoming obstacles to LGBT equality in Tennessee

So far this report has examined collaborations and support among faith groups and LGBT advocates. But it is also important to note the serious opposition from religious and political conservatives toward the LGBT movement. Many highly vocal pastors and faith-based groups actively oppose LGBT equality, using religion as a source for their opposition. These groups do grassroots outreach with congregations, preach against LGBT moral equality, and work against pro-equality policies and legislation. Given the strength of such efforts, it is especially important for pro-equality faith leaders to openly support an alternative moral vision.

Navigating the institutional challenges of certain denominations

Within the Catholic Church, there are a number of congregations that are informally welcoming to, or neutrally accepting of, LGBT congregants. However, because of the church's hierarchy and doctrinal teaching on homosexuality, neither churches nor priests can be officially supportive. The most that many priests can do is be privately supportive. Some priests are using the recent church pastoral "Always Our Children," mentioned earlier, to encourage compassion and support of LGBT parishioners in private counseling settings. This is a far cry from public support for legal, social, and moral equality, but it is a positive step.

A number of Protestant mainline denominations also face institutional challenges in supporting LGBT equality. For example, some United Methodist churches in Nashville are more progressive on LGBT rights than their national leadership. This difference limits the support they can offer to LGBT congregants. For instance, they cannot bless same-sex unions or officially support gays and lesbians who are noncelibate.³⁶

Conservative religious opposition: The Family Action Council of Tennessee

The Family Action Council of Tennessee, or FACT, works with congregations and religious and political leaders across the state to ensure that pro-LGBT equality legislation is defeated. For instance, FACT held a Stand for The Family rally last year at a megachurch in Memphis, Bellevue Baptist, to oppose the proposed non-discrimination ordinance. Tony Perkins, president of the Family Research Council, a major national religious right organization, spoke at the rally.

The minister of Bellevue Baptist was also a strong opponent of the non-discrimination ordinance, speaking at city council hearings and to the media about the harm it would cause churches. Interestingly, his main focus was how Christian churches and businesses would be “victimized” because they would not be able to make “moral” hiring decisions if they could not discriminate against lesbians and gays.³⁷

FACT hosts a “Ministers’ Day on the Hill” at the state capitol which includes prayer groups and small group discussions with pastors and state representatives.³⁸ It also sponsors a program called the “Truth Project,” which they describe as a “powerful, DVD-based, small-group educational experience on developing a biblical worldview.”³⁹ The curriculum is provided by Focus on the Family, one of the most prominent and influential religious right organizations in the country.

The Family Action Council also has a lobbying operation that is legally separated from FACT, called “Family Action of Tennessee,” that pours a significant amount of money regularly into grassroots lobbying efforts. For instance, during the 2006 anti-marriage equality amendment campaign, they raised \$210,393 more than any other committee in the race.⁴⁰ A report by the National Institute on Money in State Politics focused on money behind the 2006 marriage amendments across the country and found that “Tennessee was the only state where proponents of the ballot measure to ban same-sex marriage raised more money than opponents.”⁴¹

Conservative Christians who support LGBT equality say they need more training and resources to learn how to “defend themselves” from these attacks and want to know how to do so from a Christian perspective. One person said, “To be honest, I never felt like I was equipped personally to even argue my points.”⁴² Religious support groups, in which pastors speak about LGBT issues from a religious perspective and LGBT people of faith can talk about what it is like to attend a church that is not welcoming, can be very helpful. Clearly more resources are needed for LGBT Christians and allies in conservative churches to help them articulate support for LGBT equality from a Christian perspective.

More resources are needed for LGBT Christians and allies in conservative churches to help them articulate support for LGBT equality from a Christian perspective.

Confronting the lack of trust many LGBT activists feel toward the church

Despite the fact that LGBT groups and faith communities work together on many issues, antigay biblical interpretation and religious practices in Tennessee have alienated many lesbian and gay people of faith, as well as secular activists and allies. Faith-based religious opposition to moral and civil equality for lesbians and gays has eroded trust and made communications difficult—and stands as a major obstacle to greater collaboration and achieving LGBT moral and civil equality in Tennessee.

For instance, one leader noted that a local Methodist church had offered free space for HIV testing, but many LGBT community members did not want to go because they would have to walk inside a church.⁴³

Another leader described members of the gay community who grew up in families where their church was such a toxic environment that they were against any association with a religious organization, even within their organization's leadership.⁴⁴

Such resentment poses obstacles to building and sustaining collaborative relationships between LGBT groups and faith groups. In addition, infighting and discord over religion within the LGBT community can play into the hands of opponents who can seize upon instances of hostility to paint LGBT activism as opposed to faith.

Weak strategic and technical coordination in certain regions

Many activists note the need for greater strategic coordination among churches and advocacy groups in cities that have had a hard time passing pro-equality legislation, as is the case for Memphis. While a handful of churches in a city like Memphis might be strong advocates for equality, there are often many other churches that have progressive congregations, but choose to focus on noncontroversial, service-oriented projects and campaigns rather than advocacy campaigns that challenge institutional and political structures. Work needs to be done, perhaps in collaboration with local anchor churches, to help more services-oriented churches expand efforts to include advocacy engagement.

In terms of technical coordination, many LGBT activists point out the need for a more politically organized, strategic, and data-driven approach to campaigns as essential to success. One Memphis activist said, “There comes a point where you just have to out-organize [the opposition].” There is certainly more that LGBT activists can do. For example, multiple organizations can join together to purchase access to major voter databases, such as the Voter Action Network.

Conclusion

Through the research we have done for four reports on religious-LGBT collaborations in various states, we have learned several key lessons. They include the importance of:

- Ongoing, authentic, substantive alliances between faith groups and LGBT activists
- Coordinating outreach and messaging to specific faith communities
- Joining forces before campaigns and legislative efforts begin so that groups can hit the ground running and work with those they know and trust
- Infrastructure that can be activated around issue areas and specific campaigns

For instance, both Tennessee and Arkansas are southern states with large evangelical populations. LGBT activists in both states have faced strong religiously based opposition and conservative political activism that draws on the language of morality to oppose equality. In Tennessee, however, there has been more success in gaining faith allies, both LGBT and straight, and working with them effectively to counter the “gay vs. faith” framing of opponents. Successes in Tennessee show that this is a strategy that can produce results.

One of the reasons Tennessee has been more successful than Arkansas in working with faith communities is that its LGBT-faith collaborations are ongoing, rather than created for a particular campaign. Arkansas advocates had to build faith-LGBT collaborations for its work opposing a discriminatory adoption ballot initiative in 2008, which put it at a serious disadvantage to conservatives whose infrastructure was already in place. But Tennessee’s existing infrastructure has built trust and skills among faith and LGBT advocates. They can hit the ground running when a campaign issue arises.

Another advantage Tennessee has held, compared to Arkansas, is broader faith outreach on LGBT issues across the state. The Tennessee Equality Project, with its city and county committees, can work on statewide strategies while also pursuing local initiatives. Arkansas did not have a similarly effective statewide organization.

Indeed, one of the biggest problems with the Arkansas campaign was that almost all of its activism was focused in the progressive state capital of Little Rock, rather than spreading out across the state where they could have gained needed allies and reframed the messaging of conservative religious opponents. Organizations like TEP understand that a Southern state can have not only progressive cities, but also pockets of progressivism throughout the state.

The importance of tailoring outreach and messaging to specific denominations, rather than one-size-fits-all outreach was important in all of our reports. Also important was the need to include faith leaders as equal partners in strategy and planning. In addition, achieving wins wherever possible with faith leaders, whether on the local, city, county, or statewide level, was found to be important in all the states we studied. From non-discrimination ordinances in Nashville and Shelby County to Kalamazoo, Michigan, progress is often made incrementally. Having local pastors and community leaders as allies is key to local successes and can build to larger statewide campaigns.

LGBT moral and civil equality is gaining in strength around the nation. Success, however, is uneven. States with large percentages of religious conservatives are often seen as the most difficult states to work in and are likely to be written off as impossible places to win. However, despite real and serious obstacles, LGBT activists and faith allies in Tennessee are proving that states like theirs provide surprising assets and that with tenacity, courage, and vision, LGBT moral, legal, and social equality is becoming a reality all across America.

Methodology

During the second half of 2010, the Faith and Progressive Policy Initiative at the Center for American Progress conducted individual phone interviews with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender advocates and allies, and with faith leaders throughout Tennessee. We also conducted an on-site roundtable conversation in Nashville at Vanderbilt Divinity School as part of our research for the Tennessee report. This work is part of an eighteen month project for the Arcus Foundation.⁴⁵

Endnotes

- 1 This includes especially the right to marry, in Connecticut, Iowa, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Vermont, and Washington, D.C.
- 2 The Episcopal Church delegates the decision of whether or not to bless same-sex unions to individual bishops who decide for his/her diocese. The Evangelical Lutheran Church of America has recently voted to allow gays and lesbians to serve as ordained ministers, provided they are in monogamous relationships if they are non-celibate. The Presbyterian Church blesses "holy union" ceremonies between same-sex couples. The United Church of Christ has no formal rules regarding marriage and allows individual churches to decide whether or not to perform LGBT marriage ceremonies. For a comprehensive list of religious group positions on LGBT inclusive or exclusive policies, see Human Rights Campaign's "Faith Positions," available at <http://www.hrc.org/issues/religion/4955.htm>.
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