

Addressing Religious Arguments to Achieve LGBT Equality



But why is it so difficult with a pro-equal rights President and a Democratic controlled Congress?

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**Foreword by Steve Hildebrand,
Advisor to Faith in America**

LGBT organizations have done a lot of great things. They've fought ballot initiatives, worked to elect friendlier politicians, moved local governments and businesses forward, defended our rights in courtrooms and brought us closer to achieving overall equality.

Regarding faith and religion, courageous denominations have taken on battles for new mission statements affirming gay men and lesbians. Some even affirm gay ministers in committed relationships.

The Institute for Welcoming Resources and its member organizations have worked hard to increase welcoming and affirming congregations by 75% in 3 years. They helped rally support for pro-gay policies in the Episcopal Church and the United Church of Christ in the face of threats by anti-gay forces. The Evangelical Lutheran Church made major advances. The Presbyterian and United Methodist Churches came close to repealing ordination and same-sex blessing bans. These strides are important because the mainline Protestant churches continue to have significant influence in American power circles.

Progress has come because these brave people took on bigotry and spoke in religious ways to counter it.

At the federal level, progress has been slow. Passing hate crimes legislation was the first federal law affirming LGBT rights. Now, we are on the verge of repealing the discriminatory policy against gays serving openly in the military. Maybe. But why is it so difficult with a pro-equal rights President and a Democratic controlled Congress? We believe it is because there is an air of acceptability in America to be against LGBT people based on one's religious beliefs. For faster, significant change, the mood has to change.

We should keep trying to change laws, but until we deal with core issues causing discrimination, progress will continue to be slow. Religion, morals, harm, bigotry, science, fear, understanding – these are core issues we need to confront head-on if we want to reduce discrimination toward gay people.

“The research showed the path to winning marriage rights is to finally deal with the core values of religion and morals.”

-Steve Hildebrand, Deputy National Campaign Manager, Obama for America

How do we win marriage and adoption battles when a majority of voters oppose these rights based on their religion and morals? How do we get members of Congress to stop hiding behind religion when voting on laws for our government? How do we change deeply held beliefs and attitudes?

Every day, a vocal minority of ministers and priests, fathers and mothers, pundits and politicians preach hate and bigotry toward gay people. Their hateful comments oftentimes go unchallenged while causing tremendous emotional and physical harm to gay people.

In California and elsewhere, hundreds of thousands of dollars were spent conducting focus groups and polls designed to learn what went wrong and find a path to winning marriage rights. The research showed the path to winning marriage rights is to finally deal with the core values of religion and morals.

I believe the biggest barrier to achieving LGBT equality is religion-based bigotry, coupled with the failure of the gay community to confront religious arguments. We must put our time, energy and money behind counter-messaging the anti-gay religious establishment.

Our only hope in stopping them is to challenge religion-based bigotry clearly, thoughtfully and publicly.

Ignoring religion-based bigotry will not stop the Roman Catholic, Mormon and Evangelical churches from raising and spending millions of dollars to convince their followers that homosexuality is a sinful, immoral behavior choice and that gay people are a threat to children, to the institution of marriage and to society as a whole.

Should we let them get away with this or take them head-on?

Donors and activists should begin to question: how can we end religion-based bigotry?

We should use the proven, effective messaging developed by **Faith in America** that is designed to address core religious beliefs and change attitudes toward gay people. Faith in America has developed this counter-messaging strategy, taking religion head-on with polite but pointed arguments.

Done well, this counter-messaging will successfully change long-held attitudes so less harm is caused to LGBT people and our fight for equality will finally be achieved.

Addressing religion-based bigotry is our biggest barrier. We can no longer avoid it.

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Background

Faith in America was formed as a nonprofit educational organization in 2005 with a very simple goal – to effectively counter-message the bigotry, prejudice and hostility toward the LGBT community being sold to the public for several decades under the guise of religious belief and religious teaching.

The organization's founder, Mitchell Gold, had been a longtime civil rights advocate serving in different capacities with a number of national LGBT organizations. During his tenure with these organizations, he observed a reluctance to develop a movement-wide strategy to confront religion-based bigotry as the number one impediment to full equality.

Relocating from New York to western North Carolina in the late 1980s to form one of the most successful furniture companies in America, Gold became increasingly aware of the bigotry and prejudice toward gay Americans found in rural North Carolina as well as more populated regions outside the large metropolitan areas. In practically every instance he observed that people of varying faiths attempted to justify the bigotry and prejudice by appealing to certain religious teachings.

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The widespread oppression and trauma that he observed in the lives of gay and lesbian individuals, especially youth, in these areas prompted him in 2004 to begin developing plans to launch an effort aimed at educating people about the harm caused when bigotry, prejudice and discrimination are given a religious stamp of approval.

In early 2005, he enlisted the assistance of former Methodist minister and longtime LGBT advocate Jimmy Creech to begin working on a messaging framework for the organization. Creech, who was put on trial by the Methodist Church for blessing a gay union, knew the face of religion-based bigotry up close and personal. Gold also enlisted the assistance of Brent Childers, a former journalist and lifelong conservative evangelical Christian. Childers, who up until 2003 had been an ardent follower of the Religious Right and for years had publicly derided gay and lesbian citizens under the banner of Christianity, had been a voice of religion-based bigotry.

Employing more than 700 workers in a very rural and socially conservative area, Gold realized that many of his employees were good, decent, hardworking Americans, yet many of them harbored deeply rooted hostility toward homosexuals or homosexuality. He came to realize that these individuals had not been confronted with the knowledge that such attitudes and actions exact a horrific human toll on the lives of many gay and lesbian individuals, and most especially gay youth.

In 2005, together with Creech and a distinguished national board, Gold launched Faith in America as a vehicle to educate the public about the harm caused by religion-based bigotry.

With a background in history, Gold recognized that religion-based bigotry had been used to oppress other minorities throughout our nation's history and it had been judged as simply wrong and immoral in each case.

So the foundation of Faith in America's messaging platform was in place – educating the public about religion-based bigotry's harm to gay and lesbian Americans and connecting the dots to its history of similar mistreatment toward other minorities in society.

In 2006, the organization began a series of four-week educational campaigns in a number of communities across America with print newspaper ads, billboards and radio ads. The first was held in Baltimore, MD., with the ads running in the African American newspaper. The organization also held campaigns in Indianapolis, IN., Ames, IA., and Greenville, SC., with polling conducted prior to the start and several weeks after each campaign – which had closed with a community meeting to discuss religion-based bigotry toward the LGBT community. Polling in each campaign showed positive movement in acceptance

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These sidebar boxes highlight statements people often make when attempting to deny lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people their full and equal rights, and the responses we recommend to address them.



1,000+

Rights and responsibilities that are currently the exclusive right of heterosexual couples.

levels. (See polling section on page 17 for more information.) At the first CNN/YouTube Presidential Primary Debate in Charleston, SC., a Faith in America supporter asked why is it still okay to use religion to justify denying gay and lesbian Americans their equal rights. The question was rated by a group of students gathered from around the globe as the best question of the debate. According to audience members at the debate, it garnered the loudest applause of any question.

By 2008, and after several more community forums and a series of focus groups, the organization realized their message was one that had the ability to move people, particularly persons of faith, toward acceptance and equality. That same year, Gold developed and published the book *CRISIS: 40 Stories Revealing the Personal, Social and Religious Pain and Trauma of Growing Up Gay in America*. Encapsulating religion-based bigotry's history and revealing the emotional and psychological harm it causes through a collection of stories by gay and lesbian individuals, parents, straight allies and ministers, the book has been hugely successful in putting the message before the American public. With more than 200 media interviews by Faith in America spokespersons since its publication and 20,000 copies distributed, the book's message has had a positive impact on the lives of gay youth and those who have never been aware of why religion-based bigotry is so harmful to those in our community.

What we've learned

When we expose religion-based bigotry's history and its harm – its destructive role in the lives of gay and lesbian Americans – persons of faith can understand why it must no longer be allowed to flourish as justification for hostile attitudes and actions.

The term **religion-based bigotry** was coined because it best fits the description of the problem. The word *bigotry* encompasses the attitudes of prejudice, hostility, or discrimination that are falsely justified by religious teachings or beliefs and therefore are **religion-based**.

Religion-based bigotry is not synonymous with bigotry. It is a uniquely vile form of bigotry as the prejudice, hostility and discrimination behind the word are given a moral stamp of approval.

Religion-based bigotry is the foundation of anti-gay attitudes in our society and in the minds of a majority of Americans, particularly persons of faith. It is the narrow-mindedness, intolerance and prejudice toward LGBT individuals that results when certain religious teaching places in people's minds the notion that homosexuality is an immoral or sinful behavior. Such teaching, in part, creates and justifies the mindset that a moral authority has shut the door to acceptance and equality for gay and lesbian individuals.

Religion-based bigotry exists in the mind, not the heart. We have observed this important concept in so many of the conversations we have had with persons of faith, and it is a concept that guided us in employing specific language. Just as our founder observed in his employees who held anti-gay attitudes, the majority of persons of faith do not hate gays. This is why we believe an effective message to the religious movable middle should avoid any generalization that implies people with anti-gay attitudes based on religious teaching indeed hate people who are gay.

Homophobia sinks in only so deep. Religion-based bigotry resonates more effectively than homophobia because persons of faith feel justified in

fearing homosexuality. Their fear (to them) is not irrational or unreasonable as the definition of homophobia states.

For persons of faith, especially those who hold to a literal interpretation of Scripture, there is nothing wrong or irrational about fearing sin as they are taught they should have a great aversion to it. Many people of faith are taught that they must turn away or reject sin and therefore rejection, bigotry and prejudice toward homosexuality as sin are natural responses as they have been taught these are appropriate responses according to church teaching.

Our work has shown this is **why the choice argument is so vitally important** when engaging persons who view homosexuality as a sin. To them, their religious teaching allows their bigotry and prejudice to be seen as virtues. The late Jerry Falwell once proclaimed during a cable news interview that if believing the Bible made him a bigot, then he was proud to be a bigot.

But when persons of that mindset come to the realization that sexual orientation is an innate part of a person, not a choice, there no longer is a basis for viewing homosexuality as behavior-driven immorality or some perverse proclivity. There no longer is any virtue in their prejudice or discrimination.

In fact, our experience has shown that it is unrealistic to try and effectively engage people on the topic of religion and homosexuality without a focus on the choice issue. We suggest that messaging within the movement that has focused on the choice issue perhaps has had a more positive impact on the mindset of the religious movable middle than any other messaging. A recent Gallup poll showed a majority of Americans no longer consider homosexuality immoral, and we believe this is in large part due to the efforts to show Americans that being gay is not a lifestyle choice.

It's a commonsense issue with people of faith and was best summed up by a grandmother responding to a granddaughter who asked if God considered her a sinner simply because she was gay. "God created you that way and God don't create junk."

For a very long time, religion-based bigotry has led many persons of faith to justify discrimination toward gay and lesbian Americans. Research during the previous five years has shown that a majority of religious adherents within evangelical, mainline Protestant and Catholic denominations no longer view traditional church teaching as justification for such discrimination.

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CHARGE

Homosexuality is a sin ... it says so in the Bible.

RESPONSE

First, that is your interpretation of the Bible and you should be aware that many others don't interpret it that way. Second, we should all remember that millions of people have been harmed over the years because the majority's religious teachings have determined minority groups' civil rights. Religious teachings were used to support the horrors of slavery, deny women the right to vote, deny loving interracial couples the right to be married, deny black people their full and equal place in our society and deny minority religious groups equal rights. We have learned from these horrible mistakes that it is wrong to use religious teachings to dehumanize and marginalize any minority group. It is no less wrong today to use religious teachings to deny gay people full and equal civil rights.

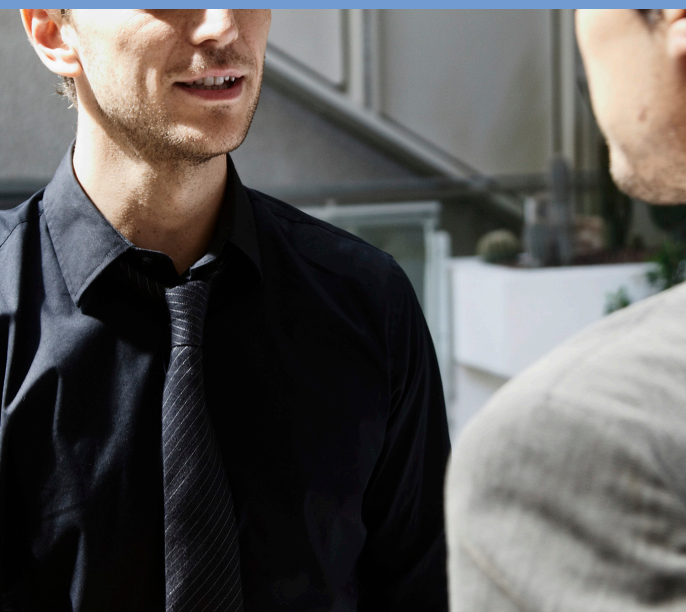


CHARGE

I believe the Bible clearly condemns homosexuality as a sin.

RESPONSE

There are many Christian denominations as well as Reform and Conservative Judaism that no longer teach this to be true. The interpretation and understanding of Scripture change when people become more informed and have new experiences. For example, we no longer interpret certain verses to justify looking upon African Americans as inferior, or other texts that were used to justify treating women as unequal. According to polling – polls by religious groups – half of Americans no longer interpret the Bible to say homosexuality is a sin. Everyone is free to interpret Scripture for themselves, but we believe we must challenge those whose interpretation is used as a blunt weapon that harms gay Americans.



It has been suggested that the basic faith principle of treating others as we would want to be treated (the Golden Rule) has played a role in faith adherents coming to realize that church teaching cannot justify discrimination toward others – as discrimination is an obvious contradiction to the Golden Rule principle. Research conducted prior to the Maine marriage initiative suggested marriage proponents emphasize the Golden Rule concept in hopes that this tendency would translate to persons of faith also seeing a vote against marriage equality as contradicting that principle.

Faith in America's work, however, has shown that Golden Rule messaging – while it can be effective – does not penetrate deeply enough among religious adherents, particularly when messaging on marriage equality. They have been taught that homosexuality is a sin, and messaging from anti-gay factions reinforces the notion that there is moral justification in opposing same-sex marriage. People of faith can support certain nondiscrimination measures without feeling that they are compromising the belief or church teaching that tells them homosexuality is something that society should reject as abnormal or unacceptable behavior.

We see evidence that our adversaries may attempt to claim we are being bigoted toward them or their beliefs. We have to be careful not to respond by simply saying such a charge is ridiculous. The fact is that some persons of faith, particularly conservative Christians, indeed may perceive the LGBT community as being prejudiced or hostile toward them. Our primary objective here should be to avoid that perception when at all possible.

When we engage a non-accepting person – whose attitudes are based on religious belief or teaching – with the messaging guidelines in this report, we can avoid having that person feel as though we are attacking their religion or expressing prejudice or close-mindedness toward their faith. We respond by stating as matter-of-factly that we are not attacking their religion or faith but only asking them to confront

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< 70% >

If a person believes sexual orientation is part of how you are created, they are 70+% more likely to be in favor of LGBT equal rights.

in their own mind and heart the question: Can the immense harm caused to gay and lesbian individuals exist comfortably with the principles of your faith?

The end result of our challenge and our engagement is not to promote close-mindedness, hostility and prejudice – the results of bigotry – but rather following history as the arbiter of religion-based bigotry and the lesson that equality and human dignity are superior moral goals within our society.

By asking a person to examine whether certain religious teaching is the basis for their hostile attitude or action toward gay and lesbian individuals, our goal is to liberate the person from a uniquely harmful form of bigotry and to open their heart and mind to the possibility that acceptance and equality can co-exist comfortably with their faith. Our challenge and our goal therefore are the antithesis of bigotry.

When we respond by exposing religion-based bigotry for what it truly is, the public can and will acknowledge that the LGBT community is not promoting bigotry and without question not the uniquely vile form of religion-based bigotry. When the LGBT community stands opposed to hostility that is based on religious teaching, it will be very difficult for our opponents to persuade the public that our stance is one rooted in immoral motives and hostile attitudes. Using historical examples of how religion-based bigotry toward other minorities has been judged by society as morally corrupt, the public can clearly understand our stance is only an expression of our desire to achieve social justice. Can we even conceive of Martin Luther King being accused of expressing bigotry by those who opposed his demand for racial equality?

The Religious Right and all its anti-gay religious factions are the sole harbingers of religion-based bigotry toward the LGBT community – this they cannot deny, and this the public will realize when we educate them about religion-based bigotry, its past and the role it is playing in society today.

The harm, the sin and the history of religion-based bigotry

Religion-based bigotry causes enormous harm to LGBT people, especially young, vulnerable teens.

More than a million LGBT teens are suffering debilitating depression because their families and religious institutions see them as deviants. Suicide rates amongst LGBT youth are four times higher than heterosexual youth.

LGBT people are victims of discrimination and bigotry, which is often justified and promoted by religious teaching that says homosexuality is immoral, sinful or an abomination. If we don't talk about it, no one will know how much hurt and suffering it causes. It is particularly important for those in the religious movable middle to hear this, because no concept is more antithetical to the faith values of love and compassion than causing harm to others.

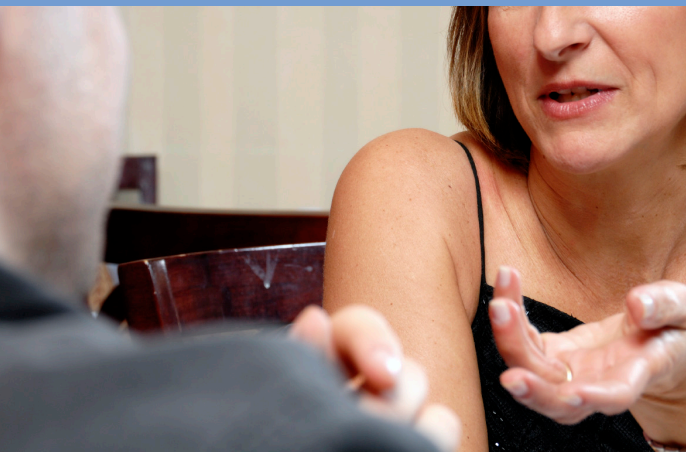
In 2008, Faith in America (FIA) printed and self-published the book *CRISIS: 40 Stories Revealing the Personal, Social, and Religious Pain and Trauma of Growing Up Gay in America*, edited by FIA founder and president Mitchell Gold. Traveling the country promoting *CRISIS* has allowed us to see firsthand the transformative power of telling stories about our youth. People

CHARGE

That's not my interpretation ... that is the Word of God.

RESPONSE

Again, consider that there are many people who do not agree with you. We can recall when people like Jerry Falwell or George Wallace would have said it was the Word of God that the races be separated or women were not equal to men. Look back at some of these past histories where people have said much of what you are saying and history has now shown how wrong and harmful they were. And how many people like George Wallace and Jerry Falwell changed their vitriolic condemnations in relation to segregation. How many people have changed their view on homosexuality being an immoral lifestyle? Have you ever known a person to walk away from racism and then later return? How many persons of faith have embraced acceptance and equality and then returned to religion-based bigotry? They simply do not because they experience the positive effect of being liberated from such a negative force.



don't want to hurt children. Gold has often said that they might not have much sympathy for a "well-moisturized" advocacy leader talking about job discrimination or marriage, but they do sympathize with vulnerable teenagers.

Dr. David Gushee, a Christian ethicist, author and Southern Baptist minister wrote the following about *CRISIS* in the June 2009 issue of *Christian Century* (a mainline Protestant publication going to 70,000 members, largely clergy), "As an evangelical Christian whose career has been spent in the South, I must say I find it scandalous that the most physically and psychologically dangerous place to be (or even appear to be) gay or lesbian in America is in the most religiously conservative families, congregations and regions of this country. Many of the most disturbing stories in this volume come from the Bible Belt. This marks an appalling Christian moral failure."

We have learned that focusing on the emotional and psychological harm caused to gay and lesbian individuals is much more effective with persons of faith than just talking about the harm associated with not being able to enjoy certain rights. The possibility of being fired from a job is in ways harmful to a person but it cannot compare to the type of pain and trauma associated with being condemned or rejected as morally inferior by a parent, friends from school or society in general. We may help them to understand that their religious teaching is fostering prejudice and discrimination and there may come a level of discomfort with that recognition. But when we focus on the emotional, psychological and physical harm that their religious teaching is promoting and justifying, the discomfort level increases.

When persons of faith understand they are causing harm, it creates a conflict or question – can causing such harm to others exist comfortably with the core faith principles of love and compassion? That inner conflict will be resolved in two ways: 1) Avoidance that results in unresolved inner conflict; or, 2) Analysis and reconsideration of their attitude or belief.

It is this conflict — a deeper analysis, process or journey — that our messaging guidelines can help foster in the minds and hearts of the religious middle.

We have learned that focusing on the emotional and psychological harm caused to gay and lesbian individuals is much more effective ...

Sexual orientation is a natural part of a human's being whether it be heterosexual, bisexual or homosexual. Same-sex orientation is not a choice to go against God's will. It is a normal, natural and healthy expression of human sexuality that is innate for some people.

The immorality or sin viewpoint loses its foundational support when behavior is removed from the equation. This is a profound moment for those who are in a process of attitudinal analysis. A person in the religious movable middle will understand that it is wrong to condemn someone based on an innate characteristic such as race, gender or ethnicity.

This is a critical part of the discussion for us. Studies have shown that if a person believes sexual orientation is a choice, they are 70+% more likely to be against LGBT equal rights (2007 Gallup's annual Values and Beliefs Survey). Conversely, if a person believes sexual orientation is part of how you are created, they are 70+% more likely to be in favor of LGBT equal rights.

We've learned there is something much deeper here that we need to address. The religious teachings our adversaries follow are an important part in the notion of choice. They believe:

- Heterosexuality is for all people the normal and natural expression of sexuality. Homosexuality is a conscious choice to deviate from this norm.
- Gay people, according to religious teachings, are committing a sin and are an abomination.
- Gay people are making a conscious choice to go against God's will or order.
- If it is a conscious choice, children who are exposed to gay teachers or gay married couples might CHOOSE to be gay.

We must educate Americans on the scientific facts about sexual orientation. Homosexuality is not a deliberate choice, but rather it is innate to some people. One's sexual orientation is not a deliberate decision to act against God's will.

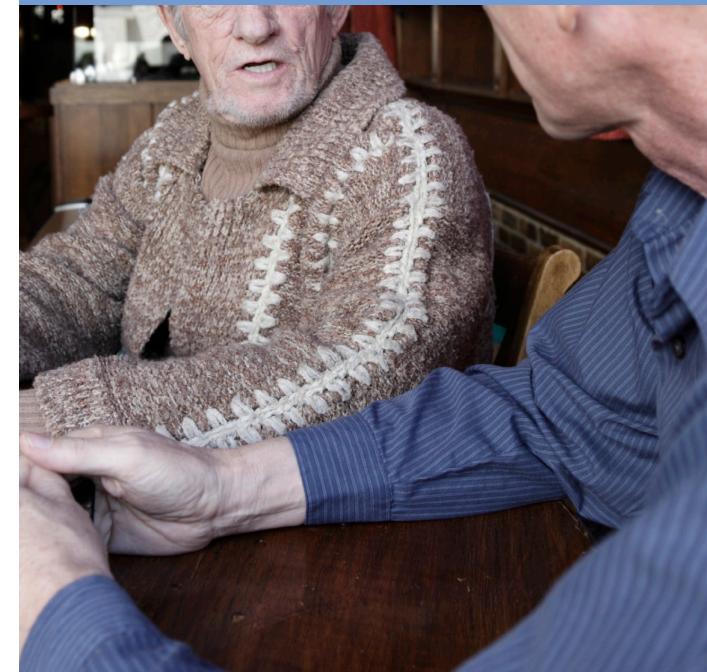
While religion-based bigotry is a foundation of anti-gay attitudes, the sin argument is the cornerstone of religion-based bigotry. We simply cannot ignore it and hope to change the attitude of someone who has been taught that homosexuality is sinful. When we offer someone a better understanding of sexual orientation, we can impact their mindset in terms of the sin argument without getting mired in a never-ending theological discussion.

CHARGE

You can't compare gay rights to black civil rights of the past or women's rights. Black people and women didn't choose their race or gender. Homosexuality is a choice!

RESPONSE

Being gay is not a choice. As a matter of fact, homosexuality is no more a choice one makes than heterosexuality. Both are innate expressions of human sexuality. African Americans, women and Native Americans recognize today how religion-based bigotry played a role in the prejudice and discrimination toward them. We are not saying the gay person is like the African American person. We're only saying that misguided church teaching was used against the African American person as it is being used against the gay person today.



When we talk about the sin versus nature issue in context of the historical precedents of religion-based bigotry, our argument can be more persuasive. Most persons of faith, conservatives in particular, are familiar with how church teaching in the past has justified treating women and African Americans as inferior. They know that religious communities have, for the most part, rejected such prejudice based on race and gender. By emphasizing the innate condition of being gay, we can get them to understand that it is equally wrong to treat others unfairly based solely on their sexual orientation.

Religion-based bigotry against LGBT people is wrong ... just as it was wrong to use religious teachings to justify discrimination against Native Americans, African Americans, minority religious groups, women and interracial couples.

The majority's religious teachings cannot be used to deny minority groups their civil rights in a democracy. California Supreme Court Justice Joyce L. Kennard said it best in her concurring opinion in the May 2008 ruling for marriage equality:

"The architects of our federal and state Constitutions understood that widespread and deeply rooted prejudices may lead majoritarian

institutions to deny fundamental freedoms to unpopular minority groups, and that the most effective remedy for this form of oppression is an independent judiciary charged with the solemn responsibility to interpret and enforce the constitutional provisions guaranteeing fundamental freedoms and equal protection."

Religion-based bigotry's history in America is undeniable, and it can be a powerful tool in connecting the dots between discrimination that most Americans today accept as morally wrong and the discrimination faced by the LGBT person. By citing historical instances of religion-based bigotry and prejudice, you allow the person to be more comfortable with attitudinal change – they realize they are not stepping out alone against a commonly accepted viewpoint but rather following historical progress toward justice and equality.

Faith in America has been cognizant of the fact that some African Americans are uncomfortable with comparing same-sex equality to civil rights issues of the past. It is important to emphasize that talking about religion-based bigotry's past doesn't equate the LGBT community's struggle with the Civil Rights Movement – rather it only points to religion-based bigotry as a common denominator for injustice toward most minorities in American society's past.

1,000,000+ 4 TIMES HIGHER

More than a million LGBT teens are suffering debilitating depression because their families and religious institutions see them as deviants. Suicide rates amongst LGBT youth are four times higher than heterosexual youth.

Our experience has demonstrated that citing the historical precedents of religion-based bigotry allows us to disarm the often used defense of biblical verse recitation by religious-minded opponents or those who simply use it as a safe haven when they are unable to articulate why they have/hold prejudiced attitudes toward LGBT people.

Religion-based bigotry's history in America is undeniable ...

We discovered we could elevate our argument by reminding people that other religious texts have been interpreted in the past to promote social injustice. Instead of telling people that their interpretation is wrong, we remind them that certain interpretations of Scripture have promoted or justified attitudes and laws that are recognized today as morally wrong and unjust.

History becomes the moral arbiter on religion-based bigotry, and we do not have to be theologians engaged in scriptural debates to point people to the judgment rendered by history.

Connecting the dots between historical bigotry and today's attitudes toward homosexuality is one of the strongest, most moving ways to educate people about the denial of equal rights to the LGBT community. We find this same history lesson in the May 2008 California Supreme Court ruling allowing marriage equality, the ongoing Prop 8 federal case and the recently decided federal DOMA case in Massachusetts.

Four crucial elements in presenting this message

1. Use your own experience or story

Psychological barriers can be broken down when people hear our personal stories. Many organizations have recognized how effective it can be when Americans hear our personal stories. We should continue to tell our stories, but we should also recognize exactly what it is within those stories that move people. Our experience has demonstrated that this segment is deeply moved when persons of faith hear us talk about the immense harm so many have experienced at the hand which attempts to press them down under the weight of being judged as morally or spiritually inferior.

CHARGE

Homosexuality is a behavior that can be controlled or changed. If you have a relationship with God and accept Jesus Christ as your savior, you can control it.

RESPONSE

This is a very important point, and I'm glad you brought this up. The American Medical Association ... the organization that guides your everyday health needs ... has clearly stated that sexual orientation is not a choice but rather a natural part of a human's being. The American Psychiatric Association has once again stated how harmful it is to one's emotional and physical well-being to try and "control" sexual orientation. Groups like the Family Research Council who promote that it can be changed have regularly been discredited. In fact, several researchers who they quote have demanded that they retract their statements because they have either been taken out of context or blatantly misquoted.



Gay kids who experience family rejection are

8

times more likely to attempt suicide,

and

6

times more likely to report high levels of depression.

Our experience with the publication of the book *CRISIS* has repeatedly reinforced this most important messaging strategy. When we talk about the harm religion-based bigotry causes gay Americans and their families, it is a powerful motivator.

Country Singer Chely Wright's interview with Oprah is a wonderful reminder of how powerful our personal stories can be. (You can view the interview here: <http://chely.com/videos/chely-oprah-part-1>)

When put in context of the emotional and psychological harm caused by misguided religious teaching – as Chely's father demonstrated during the interview – the persuasion in our personal stories is powerful.

2. Do not challenge someone's faith

Religion or people of faith are not the opponent, and we should avoid making them feel targeted.

Religious teaching or religious belief is not synonymous with faith. We can engage people about religious belief or religious teaching without the fear of being perceived as attacking a person's faith. People of faith recognize that

religious teaching has been up for debate for centuries. They may privately question something their pastor states during a sermon over lunch or voice their disagreement on church teaching to others. Discussions about religious teaching or belief can take place without someone feeling the core principles of their faith are being challenged.

Our job is to educate, not offend – calling someone a bigot based on their religious belief is unproductive and, at worst, counterproductive. We're all human and we all have degrees of bigotry or prejudice whether we admit it or not. But religion-based bigotry is not a natural part of such human emotion. It is something taught, and it perhaps is the only form of bigotry whose moral and religious stamp of approval goes unchallenged by many, especially large segments of the media. Many people of faith have been taught or conditioned that bigotry toward gays is an appropriate response and therefore their total person is really not that of a bigot. We can show someone what religion-based bigotry looks like by using its historical precedents, and it is then up to the person to decide if those attitudes find comfort in their hearts and minds.

3. Ending religion-based bigotry: It has a positive impact on us all

People of faith who have been taught it's OK to hold attitudes of bigotry, prejudice and hostility toward gay and lesbian individuals are indeed themselves victims of religion-based bigotry.

Being liberated from religion-based bigotry is a very positive experience for a person of faith.

Our biggest opportunity is to help that important religious movable middle person to realize what they are doing, and as a result, change their belief. We have often heard that a person of faith is hesitant to embrace acceptance and equality because they may fear they are letting go of an important part of church teaching. *If I don't believe the Bible teaches homosexuality is a sin, then isn't all of its teaching up for reevaluation?* This again is where pointing to history as a guide can be effective. Persons of faith understand how religious teaching was used to justify discrimination against interracial

People of faith recognize that religious teaching has been up for debate for centuries.

couples, women and African Americans, and can realize that departure from those misguided religious teachings leads not to a dismantling of religious doctrine or faith communities but rather a positive effect on religion and its communities.

The goal is enlightenment – we can't force people to change their minds. We can only inform them and let them come to their own conclusions. When we work deliberately and wisely to make them aware of religion-based bigotry's harm and its history, it becomes much easier to take that step toward acceptance and equality.

4. Engage boldly but with patience

If on a televised or public debate/conversation, remember you are talking to the audience of the movable middle and not just the professional anti-gay individual. We've learned that many people in the movable middle want to learn, they want to change and they do not want to cause harm. Remember to stress the positive effect a person of faith can experience by not allowing their core faith beliefs to be hijacked by those so-called religious groups who peddle religion-based bigotry and its harm. Think in terms of people hearing you say these things in conversations or speeches other than just debates on TV. We're not suggesting this message is one that will win over the person on the spot. But we do believe that when we emphasize the harm of religion-based bigotry and its history, it can open a person's mind to evaluation.

This is one reason we feel strongly that this messaging could have a broad impact if organizations within the movement would incorporate it into at least one aspect of their messaging. As we talk to people and open their mind to evaluation, they will be encouraged to take the next steps if they hear our community and our allies all speaking with one voice when it comes to religion-based bigotry as the greatest impediment to acceptance and equality.

Use the first person whenever possible. Remember, our goal is to stop people from harming young vulnerable kids and others. For example, "Senator, do you believe I have a right to marry the person I love ... to care for and be responsible for him/her?" This makes your point more realistic and understandable to the person you are speaking to. OR: "Reverend, do you understand the harm that is

CHARGE

You claim that I am a bigot but you are being the bigot by not allowing me to practice my religion.

RESPONSE

(Use their name), we all know what bigotry is. Clearly, the African Americans in the 1960s struggling for their equal rights were not promoting bigotry and racism by challenging those people who sought to treat them as inferior and unequal. I would encourage you to look carefully at how your attitudes and actions are affecting others.

Alternate response: I'm not calling you a bigot. I'm only saying that you are espousing and promoting – whether consciously or unconsciously – a very unique form of bigotry. Religion-based bigotry is particularly harmful as it places a moral and religious stamp of approval on the harm it causes people. We are in no way opposed to you practicing your faith. We are only pointing out to you the harm that is done when religious teaching is used to justify bigotry, prejudice and violence toward others. Religious teaching has been misused in the past in such manner, and it has been judged as unjust, immoral and simply wrong. You must decide if such bigotry and prejudice truly belong as a part of your faith, values and principles.



CHARGE

If marriage equality is legalized, then homosexuality will be taught in schools and I don't want my kids to learn about that.

RESPONSE

Marriage is not taught in schools now regardless of what kind. But I don't think that is what you really are concerned about. Many people I talk to are concerned that if gay relations are normalized ... if their children see Mr. Smith married to Mr. Jones and it is legal ... that their kids will think it's okay and "choose" to be gay. That just isn't the way our bodies work. Sexual orientation ... gay, straight or somewhere in between ... is not a choice; it is simply a natural part of a human's being. I want to protect your children, just like you do. For your child's mental and physical well-being, if they do happen to be gay, they need to know that it is okay. I know from firsthand experience that realizing you have a same-sex attraction can be traumatic if your parents, family, church and society do not accept you for who you are. Gay kids who experience family rejection are eight times more likely to attempt suicide, six times more likely to report high levels of depression and in general are far more likely to do drugs. (PEDIATRICS Vol. 123 No. 1 January 2009, pp. 346–352)



caused to a 14-year-old when he/she hears you say that he/she is immoral or sinful?" These are meant to be guides ... you must tailor them according to the conversation.

Avoid saying "it is okay for you to have your religious beliefs and values" when the person is using religious beliefs to justify discrimination. This reinforces that it is acceptable to use religious beliefs and values to justify bigotry, prejudice and discrimination. We have found that most people are not offended when you challenge a specific aspect of what they have been taught by the church.

The goal is enlightenment — we can't force people to change their minds.

We have found that LGBT people avoid this conversation because they feel unprepared to engage someone who is schooled in religious teaching. Others feel they have been badly damaged by religion and want to avoid these conversations at all costs. This is where the historical religion-based bigotry lesson is effective, because it takes the focus off of interpretation of religious text and places the emphasis on history instead of your knowledge of a given religion's teachings.

You don't have to have all the answers, just the ones you are comfortable with.

It is rare that someone will change their views overnight or in a matter of minutes. There is no single silver bullet message that changes vast numbers of people quickly. We've learned it's about planting seeds, and no one really knows which seeds will work with whom you are talking to. So we suggest ongoing conversations that give the person causing this harm the space to change.

Throughout this report, in the blue boxes, we have highlighted the statements people most often make against LGBT people and the responses we have found to be the most helpful.

Results demonstrate effectiveness

Faith in America has observed how the messaging guidelines presented in this report can be effective in moving the middle from the simple fact that history and truth are on the side of our core message — that religion-based bigotry causes great harm to LGBT individuals and our society. While three years of

FROM 64%
TO 74%

Increase from pre- to post-campaign survey in agreement with the statement: *Homosexuals have been harmed in the name of religion.*

personal interaction, on-the-ground observation, focus group results and overwhelming positive media coverage have reinforced this assertion, we have substantiated positive movement in a number of polling surveys as well.

One of the most important observations from the polling and media strategies employed to date is that challenging religious belief with these guidelines does not create any recognizable backlash from either religious adherents or African Americans. We have proven that you can challenge religious belief with effective messaging and that African Americans realize and understand how religion-based bigotry has been used against them as a minority.

Polling

Since 2006, Faith in America has conducted a number of extensive 6- to 8-week educational campaigns in which we saturated the local media with

full-page newspaper ads, billboards and radio and television advertising. Each campaign contained a variety of grassroots support including door-to-door canvassing and town hall meetings to conclude each campaign.

The campaigns were held in 2006 in Indianapolis, Indiana, and in 2007 in Ames, Iowa, and Greenville, South Carolina. In each campaign, the industry respected Public Policy Polling have conducted pre- and post-campaign polling to help determine the impact of our messaging.

The 2006 Indianapolis polling demonstrated we achieved positive movement on a number of questions:

- Should a Christian treat every man and woman as a brother and sister? +12%
- Do you believe homosexuals should have the full civil rights promised by the U.S. Constitution? +5%
- Are you more accepting of homosexuals today than six months ago? +16%

The 2007 Ames, Iowa, polling showed:

- 18–34 year olds increased from the pre- to the post-campaign survey in agreement with: 1) Homosexuals should have the same protections under our nation's civil rights laws that other groups of Americans have (83% to 91%); 2) Homosexuals have been harmed in the name of religion (64% to 74%)
- Democrats increased from the pre- to the post-campaign survey in agreement with "homosexuals have been harmed in the name of religion" (79% to 87%)
- Other Christians (not Protestants or Catholics) increased from the pre- to the post-campaign survey in agreement with "If the law guaranteed that no church or congregation would be required to perform marriages for same-sex couples, I would support allowing gay couples to legally marry." (21% to 37%)

CHARGE

Homosexuals are trying to redefine the sanctity of traditional marriage. For thousands of years it has been defined as the relationship between a man and a woman.

RESPONSE

Marriage is constantly evolving to be more inclusive and fair to all people. To say I am trying to redefine something that is sacred is misleading. A woman in a marriage was the property of a man as late as the 19th century, and couldn't hold property or go to school without the approval of her husband. Slaves were not allowed to marry in America. And interracial couples were not able to marry legally in all states except Iowa until 1948 when California became the first state to lift the ban on their marriage rights. Marriage for gay and lesbian couples is simply a natural progression of inclusiveness and equality. Marriage bestows over 1,000 rights and responsibilities that are currently the exclusive right of heterosexual couples. As the human race has evolved to learn and become more knowledgeable, we have learned that sexual orientation is not a choice ... it is a natural part of a human's being. Same sex couples have the same natural desire for companionship and love as opposite sex ones and, as such, deserve the same rights and responsibilities. It is not redefining marriage but rather making it better.

The FIA awareness campaign moves community attitudes toward LGBT people in a positive way.

Utilizing what we had learned from our previous campaigns, we decided we would again test our messaging in a community located in one of the most conservative primary states and selected Greenville, SC., as we had conducted an extensive focus there in April 2007.

The Greenville campaign consisted of four weeks of full-page ads in the *Greenville News*, 22 billboards, television ads featuring Greenville resident Elke Kennedy that aired on the Fox News cable channel, a theater showing of "For The Bible Tells Me So," distribution of 2,500 yard signs, distribution of 5,000 door hangers and a culminating town hall meeting.

In Greenville, SC., post-campaign polling demonstrated positive movement with what we consider weighted significance considering the conservative demographics of the community.

- In September a 61% majority of Greenville respondents disagreed that some people are born homosexual. By the end of November that percentage had dipped below 50%.
- Before Faith in America's Greenville campaign only 17% more residents disagreed than agreed that it was acceptable to use the Bible to justify discrimination on sexual orientation. By late November that had increased to 28%.

Focus groups

Faith in America has conducted three separate focus groups, and while these sessions confirmed the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of certain of our educational campaigns' ad material, it also allowed us to understand how developing a message through traditional focus group formats can often lead to erroneous conclusions.

Traditional focus group formats often employ an independent moderator who is instructed not to challenge what the group participants are saying. We found it ironic that such a format in essence parallels what has



been going on in our society as a whole – a lot of misinformation from the anti-gay religious establishment has gone unchallenged. We have observed how traditional focus group formats fail to take into account certain unique social interaction dynamics that are in play when discussing topics involving religious belief.

In a 2007 focus group in Greenville, SC., using the traditional format, we observed how participants with strongly held beliefs are often quick to interject their opinions first or do so in a very authoritarian way. They often preface their statements with something like “Well, I believe what the Bible says, and God says in the Bible that homosexuality is a sin.” This puts other participants in a very uncomfortable situation when asked whether they agree. Even if they do not agree, they may feel averse to being perceived as taking a position contrary to “what the Bible says.” In that same focus group, the dominant anti-gay participant asked the group if they were familiar with all the research done by James Dobson and that the research had concluded that only “1 percent of 1 percent of the population is gay.” Such gross misinformation went unchallenged. We observed how other participants would be intimidated when one of the participants would forcefully declare their belief that the Bible or God says homosexuality is a sin. This seemed to cause group participants to hesitate in voicing their disagreement and understandably so – who can disagree with God. Therefore, analysis of the session would be expected to show anti-gay religious views to be deeply entrenched and with little potential for movement.

In a focus group held in 2008 in Charlotte, N.C., the organization employed its executive director to serve as moderator. For much of the 90-minute session, the moderator asked questions and made statements and asked participants to respond. Again, one African American male interjected his anti-gay opinions early on and cited the Bible as justification for his position. Other participants remained silent or nodded in agreement. About three-quarters of the way through the session, the dominant anti-gay participant responded to a question about the harm caused to gay people by saying he understood how gay people might be hurt by certain rhetoric coming from religious circles but he could not let that override the fact that God says in

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the property of a man as
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19th Century.

the Bible that homosexuality is a sin and wrong. At that point, the moderator asked him to clarify whether that was his interpretation. He responded by saying it was not what he was interpreting but what God said. At this point, an African American female participant who had sat mostly silent became visibly agitated with the dominant anti-gay participant and challenged him to explain how he believes God is saying one thing in the Bible when others may not agree. This exchange initiated a 5- to 10-minute discussion about how different people of faith interpret the Bible differently. The final question asked by the moderator was if the participants could see where interpreting Scripture in a way that casts gay people as sinners and unworthy can cause great harm. All participants agreed. At the conclusion of the session, several members asked if the session could continue as they found it thought-provoking and engaging. All the participants had self-identified prior to the session as moderately anti-gay or very anti-gay.

Results from media strategies

Throughout the previous four years, Faith in America has observed in town hall meetings, door-to-door canvassing, focus groups and media strategies and countless one-on-one conversations that we can engage people of faith in a dialogue about religion, sexual orientation and equality without shutting them down or offending them.

- In a 2007 CNN/YouTube presidential primary debate in Charleston, SC., a Faith in America supporter (an African American pastor) asked the Democratic primary candidates, “Why is it still acceptable to use religion to deny gay Americans their full and equal rights? We’ve been down that

road before.” In addition to wide applause from the debate audience, the question (heard by millions of CNN viewers) was rated the best question of the evening by an independent group of students from around the globe who were monitoring the debate questions for relevance and importance.

- During Faith in America’s anniversary recognition of the Loving vs. Virginia 1967 Supreme Court ruling on the unconstitutionality of interracial marriage bans, we sought out and interviewed Mildred Loving. During the interview, Ms. Loving was asked if she recognized the parallel of how religion-based bigotry was once used against her and her husband and how it is being used today against gay Americans. She said she could and added that the Bible she read is not one that causes harm to others. Ms. Loving later issued a statement in support of marriage equality which was presented to the California Supreme Court prior to its 2008 ruling to allow gay marriage in California. Closing arguments in the ongoing Prop 8 case by David Boies and Ted Olson encapsulate the core message contained in Faith in America’s messaging as it relates to marriage: “Excluding individuals of the same sex from the institution of marriage harms plaintiffs, their children, and hundreds of thousands of other gay men and lesbians (and their families) throughout California.”

- With the publication of the book *CRISIS* in September 2008, Faith in America began a national discussion about the harm caused to gay Americans by religion-based bigotry with more than 25 public forums held in communities, churches, schools, legislative halls and conferences. In addition, Mitchell Gold and other Faith in America spokespersons have participated in more than 200 interviews with newspaper, television, radio and web-media outlets. Prior to the passage of anti-bullying legislation, copies of the book were distributed to all North Carolina legislators. Throughout the previous 18 months, numerous individuals, parents, educators, school guidance counselors, pastors and lawmakers have commented on the effectiveness of the book’s message – which is the message presented in this report – in transforming hearts and minds.
- In January 2010, CNN’s Soledad O’Brien conducted a live interview on stage with Mitchell Gold at Lenoir-Rhyne University in one of the most socially conservative regions of western North Carolina. More than 1,000 residents from the community attended following event advertising that targeted the community at large and particular socially conservative segments. The editor at the area’s conservative-leaning newspaper attended the event and two weeks later authored an editorial in support of



RATED QUESTION

DURING DEMOCRATIC PRIMARY DEBATES

“Why is it still acceptable to use religion to deny gay Americans their full and equal rights? We’ve been down that road before.”

No one can dispute the harm. The science of sexual orientation is self-evident. The truth imparted from religion-based bigotry's history is irrefutable.

repealing DADT. He stated afterwards that he wrote the editorial because he had heard Mitchell during the interview challenge individuals to no longer be complicit in the harm that religion-based bigotry causes in justifying and promoting prejudice and discrimination.

- Country music singer/songwriter Chely Wright announced to the world in May 2010 that she would not accept being put down by those who see her sexual orientation as something to be ashamed of or something that is morally or religiously wrong. Wright contacted Mitchell Gold in early 2009 after reading the book *CRISIS*. In an interview after coming out, she stated:

"[Faith in America founder] Mitchell Gold wrote a book called CRISIS that changed my life. It was after I moved to New York. I was in the Village, and I was looking for a book to help me understand the gay society – I was trying to go to Gay School 101. I thought I would go in and buy these books about facts and figures and the book I picked up was Mitchell Gold's book, CRISIS. I thought I knew what I wanted, but God put in my hands the book that I needed."

We encourage you to watch Chely Wright's interview with Oprah (<http://chely.com/videos/chely-oprah-part-1>) and observe the powerful message behind her words.

Conclusion

We can challenge the anti-gay religious establishment and win ... the time is now.

No one can dispute the harm. The science of sexual orientation is self-evident. The truth imparted from religion-based bigotry's history is irrefutable.

CHARGE

I do not think the gay lifestyle should be something our society condones.

RESPONSE

Homosexuality is not a lifestyle that a person chooses. It's who they are, not how they live. Their "lifestyle" is much the same as everyone else. Being gay is the emotional, psychological and sexual wiring a person is created with. Being attracted to someone of the same sex is as natural for the gay and lesbian person as being attracted to someone of the opposite sex is for the heterosexual.

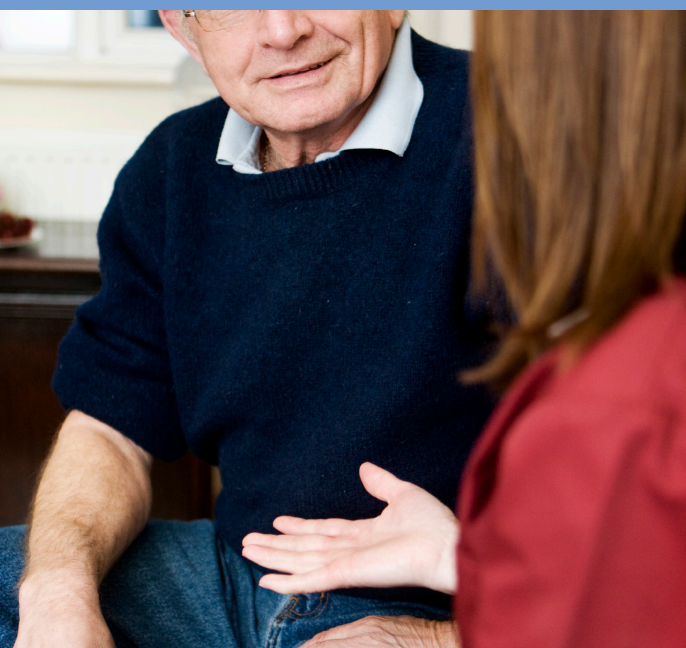


CHARGE

Homosexuality is an abomination to God.

RESPONSE

You are entitled to your personal beliefs, but you are not entitled to harm others with those beliefs. Using words like “abomination” is deeply hurtful to individuals who have not chosen to be born the way they are. You might question whether you truly believe that this is how God would want you to treat others. Moreover, “personal” beliefs are anything but personal when moral and religious condemnation against gay people has been a mainstay in the American public discourse for decades. The number of gay and lesbian individuals who have been maligned, bruised and injured by the way you and others interpret certain verses of the Bible during that time is innumerable.



We are not suggesting that the messaging in this report is the only strategy. We are saying from experience that these are messages that can produce an impact on the mindset of persons of faith who are anti-gay.

In separate reports addressing the religious component of equality released in July 2010 by Public Religion Research Institute and the Arcus Foundation, researchers confirmed several key components contained in Faith in America’s messaging guidelines:

- There is a direct correlation between a person’s religious views and their opposition to equality measures. (From July 21, 2010, report from Public Religion Research Institute)
- Many African Americans surveyed appreciate the nuances of religious and biblical language when they are used to counter anti-LGBT rhetoric. (Arcus 2010 report on messaging African American communities)
- An emphasis on the concrete harm caused to LGBT persons must be a component of an effective message to African American communities. (Michael A. Blake, Deputy Associate Director, White House Offices of Intergovernmental Affairs & Public Engagement Affairs comments during teleconference meeting to discuss Arcus 2010 report on messaging African American communities.)
- LGBT advocates should develop effective messaging strategies to engage persons of faith. (Arcus 2010 report)

During a July 21, 2010, teleconference call to discuss the 2010 Arcus report on messaging African American communities, two questions submitted from callers asked how LGBT advocates can do a better job messaging on topics involving religion.

This message report is only one set of suggestions to assist in meeting that objective – not only in African American communities – but in the religious movable middle as a whole.

Now is the time for our movement to coalesce behind an effective messaging strategy against religion-based bigotry. We are not suggesting that the messaging in this report is the only strategy. We are saying from experience that these are messages that can produce an impact on the mindset of persons of faith who are anti-gay.

That is what we hope to have offered in this report – not just the messaging but the impact. We hope you can put it to work in bringing about human dignity, acceptance and equality in your community and we are ready to assist in any way we can.

This report is the first in a series of reports Faith in America will put forth in the coming months. While any one message will not change the hearts and minds of every anti-gay person, this messaging has proven effective in changing attitudes of many who have used religious teachings to justify bigotry toward LGBT people.

Please visit our website www.FaithInAmerica.com to find additional resources, to get involved or to sign up for our updates. We really do have Faith in America, and, that once educated, the American people will do the right thing.

FaithInAmerica.com

CHARGE

Many Christians adhere to a doctrine that we are all sinners and you cannot have a proper spiritual relationship with God without accepting Christ and repenting your sins. So our faith has an exclusionary, some might even say discriminatory, aspect to it. Therefore, we are not treating gays any different from other people who have unrepentant sin in their lives.

RESPONSE

Some believe people sin when they divorce, and some churches will not marry a couple if either person has been divorced. That's their right as a religious entity, but we certainly wouldn't think about lobbying our state government to ban marriage between divorced people. When you lobby your government to deny me the same civil rights as other citizens because of your religious beliefs, you are asking them to codify that belief into law and that goes against our founding fathers' effort to avoid establishing religion as a tool of oppression.



Religion-based Bigotry



Attitudes of prejudice, hostility, or discrimination that are falsely justified by religious teachings or beliefs.

FaithInAmerica.com

Faith in America is a 501(c)(3) organization founded in 2005 whose mission is to educate about the harm caused to gay Americans when certain church teachings are misused to justify and promote hostile attitudes and actions toward lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Americans.