

What We Wish We Had Known

***Breaking the Silence
Moving Toward Understanding***

A Resource for Individuals and Families

***First Tuesday Group
The Presbyterian Church
Mt. Kisco, New York
www.mkpc.org***

Third Edition

“What We Wish We Had Known”

Breaking the Silence Moving Toward Understanding

A Resource for Individuals and Families

Twenty-five years ago, acknowledging one’s homosexuality in public was an insanely reckless thing to do.¹ Gay people had reason to remain silent: they wanted to survive.

Today, many people are identifying themselves as gay. The number of gay people has not grown, but our awareness has.

Why are so many gay people disclosing their identity now? What has changed? Why do they take such a risk? Where were they before?

There are many factors which have caused this major shift in the visibility of gay people. One of the most crucial has been their ability to begin to free themselves from isolation.

Whether we realize it or not, everyone knows people who are gay.

They may be our friends or colleagues, our employers or employees, our siblings, our neighbors, our patients, clients, customers or stockholders, our fellow parishioners, our teachers or our students, our political representatives, our aunts, uncles or cousins, our children or our grandchildren.

Even fifteen years ago, if you were growing up as a gay person, you probably would have been convinced that you were the only gay person in your particular world. Discussing your identity with a single other person would have been exceedingly difficult, and public disclosure unthinkable.

If we are heterosexual, we can try to imagine what it would be like to grow up not knowing a single other straight person. This terrible isolation and the constant, critical need to dissimulate, avoid and evade were the hallmarks of existence for gay people for most of recorded history.

Today, the interplay of technology, new scientific information about sexual orientation, the speed and universal access to information through the Internet, personal courage and the deeply human desire to connect allow gay people to reach out to others and to feel less desperately alone.

Increasingly, gay people now have the support of each other and the love and support of many families and friends.

The media, the military, corporations, churches, schools, legislatures and families have begun talking about what it means to be gay.

However, in a twist on the famous line in which Lord Alfred Douglas described homosexuality as “the Love that dare not speak its name,” some have complained in recent years that homosexuality has now become “the love that won’t shut up.”²

Some people believe: “We never had to deal with this subject before and everything was fine.” But everything wasn’t fine. Lives were diminished or cut short by prejudice and self-hatred, and families were silently destroyed. Careers were ended. Basic human rights were denied. Alienation and estrangement abounded.

All of this continues today, but it is being openly discussed throughout our nation.

Gay people are now, always have been, and always will be, an integral part of our communities. *The age of silence and invisibility is inexorably and undeniably passing away in our lifetime, before our very eyes.* How will this affect our lives and the lives of those in our communities?

This resource book is designed primarily as a starting point to encourage thought and dialogue. It is certainly not meant to be definitive. It is meant as a step toward breaking the silence in families.

In learning more about the subject, a largely untapped resource for communities consists of gay people themselves. We hope that religious institutions will create an environment (such as the one in our own church) in which it is safe for gay people and those who love them to tell their stories. It is very important to put a human face on this issue. It is difficult to understand *any* great religious, civil or social struggle without a human face.

We have found that when families can deal openly with this issue, they become stronger and closer than ever before.

Our gay loved ones are very important to us, not only for who they are, but also for what they have taught us. We honor those who have survived and we remember and honor those who have not. We are inspired by their courage and never take it for granted.

History and Dedication

This manual is a gift to the congregation of The Presbyterian Church, Mt. Kisco, New York from the First Tuesday Group, in recognition of the love and support that the church members and staff have given to individuals and families whose lives have been touched by the issue of homosexuality.

Most of us grew up with very limited factual information about sexual orientation. It was not a topic which was discussed in public forums or within the family. Some of us within the congregation who now realize that we have gay or lesbian loved ones struggled a great deal as a result of this lack of information and because of the myths and sensationalism associated with homosexual orientation. As a result of our concerns, we founded the First Tuesday Group.

When we learned that this issue had affected our lives, we had many fears and questions. Scientific fact sheets, though excellent resources, did not address our concerns about our faith. Theological discussions often ignored scientific understanding. At risk were our family relationships and our relationship with the church. Some of us were accepting and supportive of our loved ones. Others experienced pain and alienation when we related to family with fear, silence and denial. We struggled a great deal. We were well meaning, but ignorant of basic facts.

We began our study. While we looked at prejudices against gay people, we soon learned more about the nature of *all* prejudice and its subtle and overt power. We learned more about ourselves and those we love the most. Our faith deepened. Instead of feeling defensive and diminished, we felt the world opening up to us. We hope this resource guide will help others in our congregation whose welcome and support has meant so much to us.

Frequently Asked Questions

This resource is designed to address the most frequently asked questions about homosexual orientation.

Experience has taught us that not everyone is interested in the same aspects of this issue, so a “Question and Response” format is used. Most of us were concerned initially with the survival of our families. Some wanted to know more about the scientific perspective or social issues; others wanted to know exactly what the Bible said. Some of us did not quite understand why a gay person would ‘come out’ or what sexual orientation is.

Feel free to refer to those questions of most interest to you. The subject matter is divided into sections including scientific, social, family life and theological perspectives.

Reading the ‘family life’ section, for example, gives insight into what friends and neighbors might experience when a loved one ‘comes out.’ This section might prove useful in understanding and supporting other people and families, even if one’s own family has not knowingly been touched by the issue.

These questions cover areas that we wished we had understood before our loved ones disclosed their identity. Like any organized society, families with information, openness and love can heal and be transformed. We hope that our experience and search will be useful to others and will open dialogue, reduce fear and estrangement among families and help in the healing of broken relationships.

The common perception that gay people are marginal, identifiable and rare is untrue. Our loved ones lead productive and happy lives. They work, live, love, pay taxes, have friendships, interests, contribute to the world and are honored by their families. Their lives are just as special and just as ordinary as ours.

Many of us grew up with the idea that homosexuals are a visible enemy from whom we must protect ourselves and our families. The reality is that most gay people are invisible because the world is unsafe for them and they are among the people we most love and respect.

*First Tuesday Group
The Presbyterian Church
Mt. Kisco, New York*

Notes:

Much of this booklet is compiled and directly quoted from a wealth of books and articles written on the subject. ***Within the text of the booklet, an endnote number following a sentence (or paragraph) indicates a direct quote from the documented source. When an endnote begins with the phrase “Adapted from,” a word or words have been deleted (for the sake of brevity) or the basic idea or concept used, but not quoted verbatim.*** We understand that, by standard protocol, direct quotes are included in quotation marks. However, to maximize readability in a work which uses so many sources in so little space, we elected to omit quotation marks. (See also: “Note” on pg.66)

The word ‘gay’ is often used in this manual to refer to gays, lesbians, and bisexuals, even though many lesbians and most bisexuals do not use the word to describe themselves. We use the word ‘gay’ only for the sake of consistency and simplicity; we do not mean to exclude or offend.

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Responses to Frequently Asked Questions

1. *What is sexual orientation?*

- *an enduring emotional, romantic, sexual or affectional attraction to individuals of a particular gender*
- *orientation may or may not be expressed in behavior*
- *refers to an individual's feelings and self-concept*

Sexual orientation basically refers to the part within each of us which determines who we are drawn to and who we fall in love with.

The American Psychological Association defines it in this way: **“Sexual orientation is one of the four components of sexuality and is distinguished by an enduring emotional, romantic, sexual or affectional attraction to individuals of a particular gender...”**

Three sexual orientations are commonly recognized: *homosexual*, attraction to individuals of one's own gender; *heterosexual*, attraction to individuals of the other gender; or *bisexual*, attraction to members of either gender.”³

Sexual orientation is different from sexual behavior because it refers to feelings and self-concept. Persons may or may not express their sexual orientation in their behaviors.⁴

Most people realize that they are heterosexual long before they are involved in any kind of heterosexual relationship. As we mature, we understand that we enjoy the company of, develop crushes on and are drawn to others of the opposite gender.

We know that heterosexuals are not attracted to *every single person* of the opposite sex, only to particular people. We also know that being heterosexual is not something one *does* in the privacy of one's own home. It is something one *is* all day, every day.

These same concepts are true for homosexual orientation. Gay people realize they are gay as they mature; they are only attracted to particular people and they are gay whether or not they are in a relationship. As with heterosexuals, attractions are not just sexual, but emotional, affectional and romantic.

Sexual orientation is an inherent part of every individual's core identity.

2. *What causes homosexuality?*

- **studies suggest a biological component**
- **orientation is established early in the life cycle**
- **orientation is discovered rather than chosen**
- **homosexual orientation is not a developmental flaw**
- **homosexual orientation is not caused by parents or family**

How a particular sexual orientation develops in any individual is not well understood by scientists. Research suggests that homosexual orientation is in place very early in the life cycle, possibly even before birth.⁵ Studies suggest that sexual orientation has a biological component, including genetic or hormonal factors.⁶ Scientific research includes studies of brain anatomy, animal studies, twin studies, extended family studies, finger print studies, hormonal (androgen) studies, cochlea studies and DNA studies.⁷ The prenatal environment (endocrinological levels within the womb) may also affect sexual orientation.⁸

Scientists believe that sexual orientation is shaped for most people at an early age. Like heterosexuals, gays and lesbians discover their sexuality in the process of maturing. Like heterosexuals, they do not choose their orientation.

Acceptance of gay people and information about homosexuality does not cause heterosexuals to become gay. Oppression and discrimination against gay people does not cause them to become heterosexuals.

Previously held theories that homosexuality is a developmental flaw or is caused by poor parenting have been discarded by the scientific community. (The most famous of these theories was the belief that homosexuality was caused by a dominant mother and a weak father.) The psychoanalytic community was the group which originally formulated these theories. The American Psychoanalytic Association has now extended a public apology for the pain caused to gay people by their previously held views and banned discrimination against gay people within its own organization.⁹

Investigation of the effects of neurobiology, endocrinology, and genetics on the development of sexual orientation is ongoing.

3. What type of person has a homosexual orientation?

- **all types of people**

Homosexual orientation is not limited to a particular type of person. Gay men and lesbians are of all ages, cultural backgrounds, races, religions, and nationalities. They work in all occupations and live in all parts of the country.¹⁰ They come from all socioeconomic backgrounds. They grow up in all types of homes with all types of families. Gay people live in cities, in the suburbs and in rural areas.

Gay people have existed throughout history.

4. Is sexual orientation a choice?

- **no**
- **it is an essential element of core identity**
- **it is not a result of a decision**
- **it is not a result of ongoing daily effort**

No. Sexual orientation emerges for most people before or in early adolescence and before any sexual experience. Some people report trying very hard over many years to change their sexual orientation from homosexual to heterosexual with no success. Psychologists do not consider sexual orientation to be a conscious choice that can be voluntarily changed.¹¹

Most heterosexuals recognize that their own sexual orientation is not the result of a decision or an ongoing daily effort. The same is true for gay people.

Heterosexuals recognize that that their own sexual orientation is a core part of who they are. They know that they are heterosexual even if they are not involved in a relationship. They are heterosexual if they are virgins, if they choose to be celibate, if they are incapacitated, if their spouse is incapacitated, or if they lose their partners. Their heterosexual orientation does not go away. Heterosexual orientation is not defined by what you do; it makes up a part of who you are. This same concept is true for homosexual orientation.

5. Does birth order affect the likelihood of an individual being gay?

- **homosexuality can occur in any family**
- **in males, homosexuality is associated with being later born**

While homosexuality can occur in any family, there is an intriguing association with birth order. Research has suggested that homosexuality is associated with being later born, at least among males.

Studies have shown that each previously born brother raises the possibility of a man's being gay.¹² (Previously born brothers are not necessarily older brothers, because the study also counted brothers who died before study participants were born.) Having elder sisters does not correlate to an increased probability of homosexuality, nor does having younger brothers.¹³

The likelihood of being gay increases with each previously born brother.

The crucial factor seems to be the number of completed male pregnancies of the mother. According to the authors, the fact that homosexuality appears to be correlated with the number of older brothers, but not with the number of older sisters, is consistent with an immunological explanation of homosexuality.¹⁴

6. Is homosexuality a mental illness or emotional problem?

- *no*
- *the label of “mental disorder” was removed by The American Psychiatric Association in 1973*
- *rejection by family and society can be stressful*

No. Psychologists, psychiatrists and other mental health professionals agree that homosexuality is not an illness, mental disorder or emotional problem. Much objective scientific research over the past 35 years shows us that homosexual orientation, in and of itself, is not associated with emotional or social problems.¹⁵

Homosexuality was thought to be a mental illness in the past because mental health professionals and society had biased information about homosexuality since most studies only involved lesbians and gay men in therapy. When researchers examined data about gay people who were not in therapy, the idea that homosexuality was a mental illness was found not to be true.¹⁶

In 1973 the American Psychiatric Association confirmed the importance of the new research by removing the term “homosexuality” from the manual that lists all mental and emotional disorders. In 1975 the American Psychological Association passed a resolution supporting this action. Both associations urge all mental health professionals to help dispel the stigma of mental illness that some people still associate with

homosexual orientation.¹⁷ The World Health Organization has also removed homosexuality from its list of disorders.

The American Psychological Association states that “[homosexuality] is simply the way a minority of our population expresses human love and sexuality. Study after study documents the mental health of gay men and lesbians. Studies of judgment, stability, reliability, and social and vocational adaptiveness all show that gay men and lesbians function every bit as well as heterosexuals.”¹⁸

There is no significant difference between the mental health of heterosexuals and the mental health of homosexuals, *based on sexual orientation itself*. However, the isolation and social stigma associated with being gay can be emotionally trying and rejection by society, especially one’s family, can be devastating.¹⁹

7. Can homosexuality be cured?

- **there is no disorder; therefore it cannot be “cured”**
- **‘reparative’ therapy is condemned by professional, scientific and medical organizations**
- **‘reparative’ therapy may cause psychological harm**

Since homosexuality is not a disease or disorder, it cannot be “cured.”

Therapy aimed at changing sexual orientation is variously referred to as reparative, conversion or aversion therapy.

The American Psychiatric Association states: “There is no published scientific evidence supporting the efficacy of *reparative therapy* as a treatment to change one’s sexual orientation...There is no evidence that any treatment can change a homosexual person’s deep seated feelings for others of the same sex. Clinical experience suggests that any person who seeks conversion therapy may be doing so because of social bias and internalized homophobia. Gay men and lesbians who have accepted their sexual orientation positively are better adjusted than those who have not done so.”²⁰

They continue: “The potential risks of ‘reparative therapy’ are great, including depression, anxiety and self-destructive behavior, since therapist alignment with societal prejudices against homosexuality may reinforce self-hatred already experienced by the patient.”²¹ In February 2000, this medical group issued an updated fact sheet reiterating its condemnation of reparative therapy.²²

The American Psychological Association concurs that there is no scientific evidence to support the effectiveness of any therapies that attempt to convert homosexuals to heterosexuals. The Executive Director of the Association, Dr. Raymond Fowler states: “Groups who try to change the orientation of people through so-called *conversion therapy* are misguided and run the risk of causing a great deal of psychological harm to those they say they are trying to help.”²³

“The incidence of homosexuality in a population does not appear to change with new moral codes or social mores. **Research findings suggest that efforts [to change] homosexuals are nothing more than social prejudice garbed in psychological accoutrements.**”²⁴

The American Academy of Pediatrics states: “The psychosocial problems of gay and lesbian adolescents are primarily the result of societal stigma, hostility, hatred and isolation.... Therapy directed at specifically changing sexual orientation is contraindicated, since it can provoke guilt and anxiety while having little or no potential for achieving changes in orientation.”²⁵

The American Medical Association states: “Most of the emotional disturbance experienced by gay men and lesbians around their sexual identity is not based on physiological causes but rather is due more to a sense of alienation in an unaccepting environment. [Our organization] does not recommend *aversion therapy* for gay men and lesbians. Through psychotherapy, gay men and lesbians can become comfortable with their sexual orientation and understand the societal response to it.”²⁶

8. What attempts have been made in the past to change gay people into heterosexuals?

- *historically, a wide variety of attempts have been made to change sexual orientation*
- *‘conversion’ therapy is condemned by scientists as ineffective and potentially harmful*
- *individuals may become hopeless and despondent when attempts to change their orientation fail*

Besides confining gay people to mental wards and prisons, many ‘therapeutic’ attempts have been made to change gay people into heterosexuals. These attempts include electroshock, chemically induced convulsive therapy, hypnotherapy, hormone therapy, surgery, cauterizations, acupuncture, rest, marriage, psychotherapy, behavior therapy, liaisons with prostitutes, bicycling, psychoanalysis, primal screaming, and lobotomy.²⁷

Currently, ‘conversion’ therapies are offered by fundamentalist Christian groups who claim to change people by means of prayer. The most famous of these groups is Exodus International. This group was co-founded by two gay men who later fell in love with each other, became a couple and repudiated the approach.²⁸

When individuals in ‘conversion’ therapy sense no change in orientation, they may feel that God has abandoned them. They may blame themselves: they believe they simply can’t pray ‘hard enough’ or that God has turned against them. This may create a potentially dangerous circumstance in which the individual feels worthless and hopeless.

The moving book *Prayers for Bobby* is a mother's true account of her struggle and that of her son when the family learned that Bobby was gay. Mary Griffiths and the family were Presbyterian and deeply religious. Mary encouraged Bobby to ask God to change him into a heterosexual and Bobby prayed and tried very hard, wanting to change and feeling intensely the pain his family was experiencing about his being gay. Sensing no change in his orientation, he came to hate himself.²⁹

The young man wrote in his diary about his feelings of worthlessness: "I've heard [my family] lots of times talking about gay people. They've said they hate gays, and even God hates gays, too. It really scares me now, when I hear my family talk that way, now they are talking about me.... guess I'm no good to anyone...not even [to] God. Life is so cruel and unfair. Sometimes I feel like disappearing from the face of this earth."³⁰

Bobby wrote this passage when he was 16. He continued his struggle for four more years, becoming increasingly desperate. A few days after he turned 20, Bobby threw himself from a highway overpass into the path of an oncoming truck and was killed instantly.

As mentioned above, the scientific community condemns attempts to change orientation as ineffective and potentially harmful.

9. How many gay people are there?

- **oppression and discrimination make exact numbers difficult to determine**
- **a significant minority of people are gay**

The exact percentage of homosexuals in the general population is difficult to precisely determine because so many gay people fear identifying themselves publicly. For decades, the incidence has been thought to be approximately ten percent; organizations opposed to gay rights have consistently claimed the number to be much lower.³¹

An often-cited study by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago states "the best way to discuss homosexuality is to report several numbers."³² They present three ways to define homosexuality: by desire, by behavior, and by self-identification. They go on to show that the percentages of population defined as homosexual by any of these three measures are 10.1% of men and 8.6% of women. The survey participants were guaranteed anonymity. The questions were administered in one and half-hour face-to-face interviews in the participant's home.³³

The Battelle Institute study, often cited by those who wish to diminish civil rights protections for gays and lesbians, states that only 1% of surveyed males in the 20's and 30's are exclusively homosexual in behavior. The authors did not study desire or self-identification. Most importantly, this study did not provide for anonymity. The participants were required to name their place of employment, give references, and provide their social security number. (!!)

It is unlikely that many gay individuals would

feel safe enough to participate in such a study. The study also fails to address the fact that most gay people, especially in their youth, date the opposite sex, in an effort to convince others (and perhaps themselves) that they are heterosexual.³⁴

Political analysts are becoming increasingly aware of the number of gay individuals. The Voter News Service states that gay and lesbian voters accounted for 5 percent of the national electorate in the 1996 presidential election.³⁵ The Boston Globe reports that in the crucial states of California and New York, that percentage could climb to between 8 and 9 percent, more than enough to make it decisive in close races.³⁶

The Voter News Service did exit polls in March 2000 California primary and found that gay voters were racially diverse and earned the same or slightly less than non-gay voters. The VNS: “The fact that the self-identified [gay sample] is centered in younger [respondents] – as it is nationally – means that we can expect that the total rates will increase over the next 10 years.”³⁷

10. Does the number of gay individuals matter?

- **most of us know gay people whether we realize they are gay or not**
- **in America, equality of citizens does not depend on the numbers of citizens in a group**

Gay people are largely an invisible minority. It is likely that, until the stigma of being gay is removed from society and gay people are safe at work, at school and on the street, that the controversy about how many gay people there are will continue. It is safe to say, however, that almost everyone has contact with at least one gay or lesbian person on a regular basis whether he or she is aware of it or not.³⁸

It is important to remember that the right to be treated fairly does not depend (at least in America) on a head count. Those who insist that the size of a minority group determines the amount of protection they may receive under the law do not fully understand the principles on which our country was founded.³⁹

11. Are humans the only animals that engage in homosexual behavior?

- **no**
- **homosexuality has been scientifically documented in more than 450 species of animals**

Scientists have observed consistent homosexual behavior in the animal kingdom in many different species, ranging from mountain rams to seagulls to gorillas.⁴⁰ As writer Eric Marcus gently and humorously points out: No one has yet suggested that this is the result of a passive father and a domineering mother.⁴¹

Sometimes those opposed to equal rights for gay citizens insist, inaccurately, that humans are the only animals that engage in same-sex behavior. (Although exactly what the existence or non-existence of “lesbian seagulls” would have to do with insuring equal rights for mankind is unclear.)⁴²

Even though we are always learning more about the complexity of the natural world, the fact that homosexuality occurs freely in nature is surprising to many.

In a recent, widely-acclaimed work, *Biological Exuberance: Animal Homosexuality and Natural Diversity*, Dr. Bruce Bagemihl, a biologist and researcher, draws upon a rich body of zoological research spanning more than two centuries.⁴³ The Kirkus Review describes Dr. Bagemihl’s work as “a scholarly, exhaustive, and utterly convincing refutation of the notion that human homosexuality is an aberration in nature.”⁴⁴

Homosexuality in its myriad of forms has been scientifically documented in more than 450 species of mammals, birds, reptiles, insects and other animals worldwide. It is found in every major geographic region and every major animal group.⁴⁵ Animals engage in all types of non-reproductive sexual behavior. Same-sex sexual expression includes courtship, pair-bonding, sex, and co-parenting—even instances of lifelong homosexual bonding in species that do not have lifelong heterosexual bonding.⁴⁶

Dolphins and whales, deer, buffalo, sheep, giraffes and antelopes, geese, ducks, sandpipers, chimpanzees, zebras, elephants, koalas, swallows and warblers, lions, penguins, and monarch butterflies are among the species in which homosexuality has been observed.⁴⁷

Dr. Bagemihl also reports that, historically, biologists’ discomfort with their own observations has been common. His colleague, Dr. Linda Wolfe, describes discussions with several primatologists regarding their findings: “They seemed reluctant to publish their data.... either because they feared homophobic reactions (“my colleagues might think that I am gay”) or because they lacked a framework for analysis (I don’t know what it means”).⁴⁸

Although the first reports of homosexual behavior among primates were published more than 75 years ago, virtually every major introductory text in primatology fails to even mention its existence.⁴⁹ Because of the omission and inaccessibility of information on animal homosexuality in the scientific literature, many zoologists are themselves unaware of the full extent of the phenomenon.⁵⁰

12. *Why are there different sexual orientations?*

- *difference is a defining characteristic of creation*
- *to assume that difference is a negative rather than a positive is limiting*
- *our understanding of difference will have great legal and religious implications in the future as society develops the capacity to change and control genetic make-up.*

Why there are different sexual orientations is not certain, anymore that it is known why different racial groups exist.

Difference is a defining characteristic of creation, part of the basic design of life.

Every single person who has ever lived is unique in his or her DNA makeup. We are unique within our very cells, in who we are and in what we can contribute.

Sexual orientation is just one area where differences occur. Most people are straight and some people are gay.

There may be evidence, as a matter of evolutionary biology, that homosexuality came about as an important and positive adaptive trait for human beings. Evolutionary biologist, E.O. Wilson, for instance, believes that homosexuality may have “evolved as an important element of early human social organization.”⁵¹

It is very important to counter negativity in the climate of today’s extreme rhetoric, when gay people are publicly referred to as “biological errors” and “genetic defectives.”

Some of the most gifted people in the world were known to be gay. For example, in recent times and to name only a few: James Baldwin, Hans Christian Anderson, Cole Porter, E.M. Forster, Aaron Copeland, Henry James, Gertrude Stein, Bessie Smith, Somerset Maugham, Marcel Proust, Peter Tchaikovsky, Langston Hughes and Walt Whitman all enriched the world with their voices.

This is not to say that all gay people are creative or fit a certain mold or that one must be gifted to be valuable. But to assume that difference is a negative rather than a positive is limiting.

Our understanding and appreciation of difference has great ethical, legal, social and religious implications. It will become even more important in the future, when we live in a world of “genetic surgery” and may be able to tell, during pregnancy, which babies have traits that will make them different from the majority.

We do not always know the exact purpose of differences, but we know that differences are an essential and vital part of humanity and of creation.

13. What is the ‘gay lifestyle’?

- **gay people are a diverse group**
- **the lives of gay people are as varied as the lives of heterosexuals**
- **condemnation of a ‘lifestyle’ sounds better than condemnation of loving, committed relationships or condemnation of equal opportunity**

Just as there is no such thing as a single *heterosexual lifestyle*, there is no such thing as a single *gay lifestyle*.⁵²

The lives of gays and lesbians are as varied as the lives of heterosexuals.⁵³ Some choose to live in long term committed relationships, others choose to remain single. Some couples choose to raise children, others do not. Interests, hobbies, affiliations, and occupations are just as varied.⁵⁴

Some anti-gay activists have promoted the term *gay lifestyle* to suggest that the lives of homosexuals revolve around sex and the pursuit of sexual encounters.⁵⁵ Gay people are just as offended by this offensive stereotype as heterosexuals would be. Promiscuity is not a result of an individual’s sexual orientation, but a reflection of an individual’s values, beliefs and personal standards.⁵⁶

The term *gay lifestyle* is a common phrase and most people who use the phrase certainly do not mean it in a manipulative, disrespectful or hurtful way.

However, some anti-gay organizations *do* use the term consciously to make discrimination seem socially acceptable. They hold the view that gay people are human beings unworthy of experiencing the love of a partner and believe that “the pursuit of happiness” should be limited to heterosexual citizens only. Some (not all!) are unwilling to state these positions so bluntly. In this case, disapproving of a *lifestyle* certainly sounds better than disapproving of love or equal opportunity.⁵⁷

14. Are gay and lesbian people more likely to molest children than heterosexuals are?

- **no**
- **95% of child sexual abuse is committed by heterosexual men**
- **historically, other minorities have been slandered as sexual predators**

Absolutely not.

Heterosexual men commit 95% of all reported incidents of child sexual abuse.⁵⁸ The perpetrator is most often a family member or a close family friend.⁵⁹

Molestation of children by heterosexual women appears to be uncommon, and even less common among lesbians.⁶⁰

The American Psychological Association states: “Another stereotype about homosexuality is the mistaken belief that gay men have more of a tendency than heterosexual men to sexually molest children. There is no evidence indicating that homosexuals are more likely than heterosexuals to molest children.”⁶¹

Historically, portraying minorities as predatory has been used as a technique to demonize those who are different and characterize them as immoral and dangerous. Jews were once accused of using Christian children in secret religious rituals. Racists portrayed black people as lacking in sexual self-control and black men as sexual predators who were a threat to white women. This was a prime argument in favor of segregation.

The belief that gay people molest children is one of the ugliest myths about homosexuality.

15. What is the ‘closet’? What is meant by ‘coming out’?

- ***the closet is a metaphor for the place of truth inside a gay person which is secreted and ‘shut away’ from the world***
- ***the closet is oppressive and confining, yet it seems safe***
- ***the main reason for staying in the closet is survival***
- ***friends and loved ones of gay people are also in a type of closet***
- ***the closet (in America) is quite large and apparently somewhat crowded***

The closet is a metaphor for the place of truth inside a gay person which is secreted and ‘shut away’ from the world.⁶² A person may be closeted completely or ‘out’ to some people and ‘in the closet’ with others. People may deny their orientation even to themselves. The process of recognizing and accepting one’s own homosexuality or bisexuality is sometimes referred to as ‘coming out to oneself.’ However, coming out of the closet almost always refers to making one’s sexual orientation known to others.

Andrew Tobias, author, financier, journalist, and currently Treasurer of the Democratic National Committee, grew up in Bedford and came out when he was 23. He describes his experience:

“(Coming out) had only taken me a dozen years from the time I realized – instinctively, at age 10 or so – that that *word* my father and his friend were using with such distaste as they walked through the TV room applied to *me*.... I wasn’t stupid, so I never told anyone about this. But it was the very essence of who I was. There wasn’t a moment growing up that I wasn’t consciously compensating for it. It was as if I had been a secret agent in a foreign country. Everything I said, every glance.... it all had to pass through the censor.....”⁶³

Living in the closet seems safe, but it can also be exhausting, frightening, confining and infuriating.

When a gay person who lives in the closet confides their identity to a single other person, that person enters a type of closet as well. Even in the face of anti-gay remarks friends and family members may remain silent. (Otherwise, people might wonder: “What’s it to you? Why do you care so much?”) They are no longer free to fully express themselves. They have a responsibility to protect someone.

*There is a saying: “**When children come out of the closet, the parents go in.**” When a child or loved one is out very selectively, friends and relatives are fearful of unintentionally outing the person completely. They do not want to betray a confidence or put their loved one at a disadvantage in a hostile world. They may remain silent.*

What does the parent of a gay person look like? What does the brother, sister, or grandparent of a gay person look like? It is impossible to say. What is important is to remember that not only are most gay people invisible, so are their loved ones.

Gay people often come out first, not to their families, but to another gay person. Unlike other minorities, most gay people, as they grow up, do not have others to talk to about their feelings and their inner life. Talking to someone else who can relate to them about their identity can be an important first step. It is safe environment. It is helpful to know that one is not totally alone.

16. Since heterosexuals don’t discuss their sexuality, why do gay people need to discuss theirs?

- *expression of heterosexuality is an integral and basic part of our everyday lives*
- *our words and actions over time let everyone know we are heterosexual*
- *what is seen as ‘flaunting’ by gay people is ‘everyday’ behavior for straight people*
- *it is difficult to go through life monitoring every thing you do or say*
- *the majority of gay people do not ‘flaunt’ their orientation; they go to great lengths to hide it*

In a twist on the famous line in which Lord Alfred Douglas described homosexuality as “the Love that dare not speak its name,” some have complained in recent years that homosexuality has turned into “the love that won’t shut up.”⁶⁴

However, it has also been noted that the public expression of heterosexuality is such an integral and basic part of our everyday lives that it goes unrecognized.⁶⁵

Non-gay people don’t have to come out of the closet because they’ve never been in it. Growing up, heterosexuals can talk about a crush on a friend, a rock star, a favorite actor or actress. In every high school cafeteria, there are conversations about who is ‘hot’ and who is not. Teenagers may introduce their dates to their friends and parents. They can hold hands walking down the street. Adults at work can speak freely about their girlfriend, boyfriend, husband, or wife without fear of losing their job. They can put a

picture of a spouse on their desk with no questions asked. They can wear engagement and wedding rings, talk about their weekend plans, kiss goodbye at the airport and include their significant other in company parties.⁶⁶

There is no *specific need* to let people know they are heterosexual because their actions and words over time let everyone know.⁶⁷ A gay person who chooses to do the same things, may be seen as a ‘trouble maker’ or a ‘radical homosexual’ out to prove a point. They may be harassed or worse yet, physically attacked.⁶⁸

Imagine for a moment what it’s like to “keep it to yourself.” When you are deeply in the closet, you must be on guard constantly. You can never respond spontaneously to an innocent question or comment, whether the question is asked by a colleague, a relative or even a cab driver. You have to be careful and monitor everything you say.⁶⁹

The majority of gay people don’t flaunt their sexuality. As a matter of fact, many go to great lengths to hide their sexual orientation. There is a double standard in our society. Personal conduct that is regarded as everyday behavior for heterosexuals is often seen as ‘flaunting’ by gay people.⁷⁰

Most gay people simply want to be able to incorporate the many aspects of their lives the way heterosexuals are permitted to do.⁷¹

It is exclusion and the denial of human rights which ‘politicizes’ sexual matters and which makes sexual orientation such an issue. Gay people wish to be seen as individuals.

17. Why do gay people come out?

- ***people want to be honest and comfortable with those they love and trust***
- ***coming out is a recent phenomenon***
- ***coming out is intensely personal and unique to the individual***
- ***the average age of coming out has dropped dramatically***
- ***an individual must first come out to themselves; this may take many years***
- ***most people come out selectively, quietly, to only a few people important to them***
- ***coming out is an ongoing process, for the individual and for their loved ones***

Basically, people come out because they want to be comfortable as themselves; they want to be honest with those they care about and trust.

Coming out is a very recent phenomenon. Before the current gay rights movement, acknowledging one’s homosexuality in public was almost an insanely reckless thing to do.⁷²

Coming out is a *very* individual experience. Every coming out is unique.

Hiding one's identity over a lifetime can be exhausting and frightening. It can be personally destructive to have to pretend each day that you are someone else. It is difficult to be close to people if they don't know who you are. The need to evade and avoid important issues takes a heavy toll; always watching what you say is draining.

Some people come out when they can no longer bear the isolation and fear connected with living in the closet; some people just slowly develop a need to be themselves, no matter what; some people decide to come out when they fall in love: some choose to confide in a few trusted people because they need *someone* to know who they are and how they feel.

The average age for coming out has dropped dramatically. Ten years ago it was age 26 for men and age 28 for women. Today it is age 15.⁷³ Most gay people realize that they are gay years before coming out.

Coming out first requires coming out to one's self – a process which may take many years. Most gay people are not thrilled when they realize they are gay, especially if they are raised in an environment in which anti-gay attitudes are common and anti-gay remarks are acceptable or go unchallenged. It may take many, many years for them to accept and love themselves and to be willing to reveal their identity to even the most trusted people in their lives.

Coming out does not mean making a public announcement (although this also occurs occasionally.) It may mean telling just one other person... an understanding sibling, a close friend. Most gay people are selective in disclosing their identity.

Many people wait until they feel a degree of emotional and financial security. Service providers for runaway and homeless youth estimate that up to 40% of their clients are gay kids.⁷⁴ These are children who have either been kicked out of the house by their families or have run away because they feel unloved, angry or hurt.

Another terrible scenario, of course, is being 'outed' by another person and it is understandably one of the most devastating experiences for a gay person.

For gay and lesbian people who choose to live out of the closet, coming out is an ongoing process. There are all kinds of chance encounters and conversations that force gay people to decide whether or not to answer honestly. Coming out is not something you do just once.⁷⁵

Many gay people who do choose to disclose their identity to someone else feel that coming out was the most empowering and deeply rewarding experience of their lives, but it can be *very* difficult, requiring patience, tolerance, emotional stamina, spiritual strength and tremendous resiliency. Coming out can be an act of courage and an act of love. It is fraught with great danger and can carry great rewards.

18. Why do some gay people prefer not to come out?

- *to protect themselves*
- *to protect those who depend upon them*
- *to avoid prejudice and hurt*
- *an individual may not be completely 'in' or completely 'out'*
- *openness about identity is a luxury reserved, by and large, for heterosexual citizens*

Most closeted individuals remain so because of issues of privacy, the desire to protect themselves and those who depend on their ability to earn a livelihood or as a result of a realistic appraisal of the unrelenting and institutionalized prejudice which they face on a daily basis.

Gay people and their families are in the closet because they do not want to be damaged or hurt anymore and because they want to protect themselves from prejudice.

There is a widely held and inaccurate belief that one is either 'in' or 'out.' In reality, a gay person may be 'out' to only a very few people. Being cautious in discussing one's sexual orientation is understandable. Many gay people (as well as straight people) are selective when sharing personal information. There is nothing sinister about this.

Unfortunately, in our present American culture, openness about one's identity is a luxury reserved, by and large, for heterosexual citizens.

Coming out is not a contest. The number of people to whom a gay person may or may not be out is not a measure of bravery or character. Nor should a straight person ever feel diminished because a friend or loved one did not say to them the exact words: "I want you to know that I am gay." Coming out is a delicate, complex issue. Sometimes gay people just recognize that others do know, respect and comprehend their situation and so feel it is not necessary to say the words.

It is important to honor all those who have had the courage to survive, to overcome tremendous obstacles, and to do creative, productive work, regardless of the numbers of people they might select to tell about their orientation. It is remarkable to witness the ability of some gay people to move forward in the face the crushing rejection that most of us could not tolerate, even for a single day.

19. Where do gay people most likely work?

- **everywhere**

The gay population is diverse in its employment and gay people work everywhere... as teachers, attorneys, doctors, nurses, accountants, architects and social workers. Gay people work in the financial industry, but there they are frequently deeply closeted. Gay people work in the retail, restaurant, fashion, and entertainment industries with more openness. The government employs many gay men and lesbians. Many gay people (some of whom keep a 'low profile') find careers in the police and fire departments, professional sports, and as elected officials. Gay people are writers, scientists, computer specialists, journalists, entrepreneurs, farmers, sanitation workers, tree surgeons, pipe fitters, and construction workers...⁷⁶

As an employer, the military uses a "don't ask, don't tell" policy to silence gay people; However, even in this institution dedicated gay people can survive. In Identity's *One in Ten* study, 31 percent of gay male respondents were veterans of the U.S. military.⁷⁷ Identity is a gay support group within the Episcopal church.

Only eleven states protect American citizens from job discrimination based on sexual orientation. In all other states (including New York State), it is legal to fire someone for being gay.⁷⁸ There is no legal recourse. Recently, Westchester County passed legislation which will help protect gay people who face discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. There is no protection at the state level.

20. When I interact with a professional, I usually assume I am talking to a heterosexual. If this is not the case, how does this affect my professional relationships?

- *in the past, coming out was unthinkable for professional and business people*
- *increasingly, gay people do not attempt to hide who they are*
- *sensitivity and fairness to all minorities can enhance professional opportunities*

Before the 1970s, coming out at work was unthinkable in any white-collar profession. Even a decade ago, gay professionals who came out at work were usually self-employed or in gay-friendly industries. A gay professional in a mainstream business career had two options: stay closeted or leave.⁷⁹

The costs of the closet are many: stress and fear of exposure, vulnerability to blackmail and other forms of harassment, discomfort with socializing and the lack of a strong support system. The closet means less networking with other gay people, strains on personal relationships and lower self-esteem. It can undermine self-confidence and productivity.⁸⁰

Exactly what does it mean to be 'out' at work? A recent study of 100 gay and lesbian alumni of Harvard Business School, found that most people come out quite selectively. Only a few used the simple declarative statement, "I am gay." Rather, many relied on the ability of their listener to infer meaning from oblique statements and conversation. Most

gay people in business are emotionally conservative by nature. They prefer to test the waters before finally coming out.⁸¹

Desire to hide one's orientation has decreased during this decade. In 1990, almost 50% of those studied led their coworkers to believe that they were dating heterosexually. In 1993 and 1994 many who said they "sort of" misled coworkers in the past had stopped doing so. Finally, a large majority of recent graduates in this study report they have never actively attempted to conceal their orientation and never intend to.⁸²

Overwhelmingly, parental acceptance led those in the study to be more willing to be out to work colleagues.⁸³

In places where homophobic jokes or comments go unchecked, other forms of discrimination (against racial minorities or women, for example) are also likely to take root. In contrast, companies that are consistent in stamping out discrimination on every front are the most likely to have loyal employees. They are also the most likely to tap into profitable opportunities in a diversity of markets.⁸⁴

Recently, The Wall Street Journal profiled three top financial firms who, recognizing that talented workers are their most valuable resource in a highly competitive world, are actively recruiting gay MBA graduates.⁸⁵ The New York Times recently held a forum on the importance of advertising to gay-friendly people and the use of the Internet.⁸⁶

The coming out process is helpful to society at large because we can now begin to have a clearer picture of who gay people are and how many more people are gay than was previously imagined. In the past our understanding of the demographics of this issue was not very accurate.

21. When the subject of homosexuality comes up, we usually focus on our feelings about gay people. What are gay people feeling? Why are some gay people angry or depressed?

- *gay people have many different feelings about being gay and about how they are perceived and treated*
- *anger and depression are common responses to rejection*
- *almost every cultural organization institutionalizes discrimination*
- *government denies gay people equal protection*
- *families reject gay people*
- *it is socially acceptable to malign gay people*
- *the anger gay people feel is often turned inward*

Gay people have many different feelings about being gay and about how they are perceived and treated by others. The literature is rich with examples of the breadth and depth of their feelings.

One common feeling that many gay people have is anger.

Anger is a natural surge of energy that occurs when a human being is confronted with injustice. Gay and lesbian persons are condemned, criticized, penalized, abused, and rejected for something inherent in their makeup, which they did not cause or choose. They are taught and told to experience their sexuality, not as a gift, but as a cruel life sentence, something to be denied or changed.⁸⁷

Almost every cultural organization institutionalizes discrimination and then defends itself with declarations of moral superiority. Some organizations recognize discrimination as destructive, but they look the other way and do nothing. Government denies gay people equal protection, many businesses discriminate, elected officials and political action committees malign gay people in order to get votes and raise funds. Parents reject their gay children.

Depression is another common response to rejection.

Anger is often turned inward. Because of the hopelessness they feel gays and lesbians may suffer depression or consider or attempt suicide. Some make bad decisions about relationships or about drugs and alcohol, substances which may temporarily help them to feel the pain of rejection less acutely. Decisions about coming out can be wrenching. At stake are family relationships, employment security, business opportunity, political viability, choice of residence, and personal safety.

Ed is a man who lives locally and some years ago began a career as a player with a National Football League team. Distraught by doubts about his identity, he became overwhelmed with anxiety and despair. He went to the Kensico Dam, lay down at the top, said a prayer and plunged to the bottom. Ed survived. He is now quadriplegic and has dedicated his life to helping other handicapped people live fully productive lives. His ability to overcome tragedy and to inspire and help others is a testament to the strength of the human spirit.

A sense of isolation is another common feeling among gay people.

If you are heterosexual, imagine growing up not knowing a single other straight person. After writing a book about her son Bobby's suicide, (See question # 8) his mother received a letter from a young man signed, merely, Corey.

"Everything that Bobby believed is what I believe. I have never told my family or friends the truth, and I never, ever will. I want to fit into this society so badly and I never will be able to as gay. All I want to do is to be able to function as a normal straight man. But I cannot and I hate myself for it. I do not fit in anywhere.

I was brought up in a semi-religious household. I was told that God thinks homosexuals are bad....Why..did he create them then?! Every single day I pray about ten times for God to make me straight.

I sit here and think, Why couldn't Bobby and my paths have crossed?" We could have shared our fears with each other, shared our dreams. I could have been the friend he needed – he could have been the friend I need.... I have considered suicide but.... I couldn't do that. But there have been times when I've wished someone else would do the job."⁸⁸

Many gay people do not survive this type of isolation and self-hatred. The words of the world renowned psychiatrist, Dr. Erik Erikson: ***"Someday, maybe there will exist a well-informed....public conviction that the most deadly of all possible sins is the mutilation of a child's spirit."***⁸⁹

The miracle is that gay people survive. Many gay people even thrive and are able to forgive and move forward in their lives. It is somewhat surprising that gay people who came of age without any of the gay-friendly support systems that now exist, are still alive, still creative and productive, still hopeful and participating fully in life. It is a very humbling experience to know such people.

22. Why is homophobia sometimes called "the last socially acceptable prejudice?"

- ***rhetoric used to demean ethnic, religious, and racial minorities is unacceptable***
- ***rhetoric used to demean gay people is acceptable, and sometimes considered admirable and patriotic***
- ***anti-gay comments within families are common***

Rhetoric used in the past to demean ethnic, religious, and racial minorities is no longer considered appropriate language in a public forum. Not so with rhetoric directed at gay Americans. Polls and focus groups show that anti-gay positions and anti-gay letters to constituents are one of the most effective fund-raising techniques of all time for those who use them.

No one can imagine saying to a person of another race, nationality or ethnic background: *"I know it's not your fault that you're (whatever...) You were born that way and you can't help it. But do you have to mention it? You're making us all uncomfortable. We're not used to being around people like you. In fact, in our ideal world, people like you wouldn't even exist."* No one can imagine adding: *"I'm broad-minded and I forgive you. Have you ever considered prayer as a 'solution' to your 'problem?'"* We can imagine the hostility that would result from such comments.

These kinds of statements, in one form or another, are directed at gay people all the time. In fact, the above statements are considered so acceptable that the remark -- "It's not your fault that you're gay." -- is seen by many as a nice thing to say, helpful and supportive. Many of us in our First Tuesday group, before we began to learn about the subject, said

(or at least thought) some of these very things. Though not uncommon, these remarks are extremely offensive to gay people.

Here are six 'real-life' examples from our group of statements that show how common anti-gay comments can be, even within families. They vary from frightening to downright silly. All of the following statements were made by parents to children *not knowing* that their children were gay. (Though at the time this was little comfort to the individuals involved.)

"All fags should be rounded up and shot."

"Homosexuals should *never* be allowed to occupy positions of importance or power."

"Gay people are all right, unless they get together and try to *assert* themselves."

"Your gay friend is intelligent: eventually he'll realize it's a mistake to be gay. Tell him not to worry...it's just a phase."

"I can't believe Rock Hudson was gay. He seemed like such a nice guy."

"I can't believe Rock Hudson was gay. What a waste!"

We all read and watch anti-gay rhetoric everyday on radio and TV. The very fact that equal inclusion of all citizens is seen as *so* controversial in America in the year 2000 is in itself distressing to most gay people and those who care about them.

23. Why is the word 'faggot' offensive and what does it mean?

- ***a faggot is a bundle of sticks used for kindling***
- ***historically gay men were used as kindling to burn witches***
- ***gay people see the term as threatening as well as insulting***
- ***anti-gay slurs are particularly devastating to young people***
- ***anti-gays slurs are just as ugly and hurtful as racial and ethnic slurs***

A 'faggot' is, in old English, a bundle of sticks, tied together and used for kindling. In the days when witches were burned at the stake, it was believed that they would not burn using regular fire, that a special or unusual fire was needed. Gay men were set on fire and used as kindling to burn witches. Many believe that this is the original derivation of the slang word.

The word 'faggot' is now used mainly as a pejorative word for gay men or as a generic insult meaning 'loser.' To gay people, however, it is not only ugly and insulting, it is also seen as a threat.

Every time someone uses a word like 'faggot,' they communicate a very negative message, whether they mean to or not. By using such words, people send the message that they *are* homophobic, that they do not respect gay people or care about their feelings, that gay people should not feel comfortable coming out to them or that they are not conscious of the effects of homophobia.

People who use words like ‘faggot’ usually do so without any knowledge of the words’ possible origins. The term is common among young people as a generic put-down and many who use the slur assure others that they are not homophobic. What they do not realize is that they are hurting people and that it is unlikely that a gay friend will feel comfortable coming out to them if they refer to homosexuals in such derogatory terms.

Throughout history, societies have created highly negative images of minority groups, sometimes with a political motivation and sometimes out of fear and ignorance. The negative image of gay people that has been created in our society has been so powerful that a study by The American Academy of University Women showed that *among boys, actual physical assault was preferable to being called gay.*⁹⁰

Anti-gay slurs are just as ugly and hurtful as racial and ethnic slurs.

24. What is the relationship between anti-gay rhetoric and attitudes and anti-gay violence?

- ***anti-gay rhetoric puts the safety of gay people at risk***
- ***perpetrators of hate-crimes believe their actions are justifiable***
- ***hate crimes against gay Americans are not new, but they are growing***

Anti-gay rhetoric creates an atmosphere in which the safety of gay people is at risk. If individuals feel that gay people are predators, a threat to society and condemned by God, these beliefs may lead to attacks and the conviction that such attacks are justified. Constant condemnation by politicians and religious leaders and exclusion of gay people by major cultural institutions reinforce these beliefs.

The physical safety of gay people is at risk in American society. Gay people are frequently the victims of hate crimes. While the general crime rate has gone down, violent attacks against gay people have increased.⁹¹

The shocking torture and death of Matthew Shephard, beaten and left to die on a fence post in Wyoming, led many Americans to face the reality of anti-gay hate for the first time. The nation reacted with horror, confusion and disbelief. The strength and courage of Matthew’s parents have been an inspiration and a call to address this age-old problem. Judy Shephard, Matthew’s mother, shy, soft-spoken and a stay-at-home mother, realized that she can make a difference in the continuing national conversation on hate crimes and intolerance. Rather than push a specific political agenda, Judy has tried to talk openly and honestly about her son, to put a human face on the cost of intolerance.⁹²

These violent attacks on gay people *are not new*; they are newly reported.

In 1984, in Bangor, Maine, Charlie Howard was beaten and thrown off a bridge by three local teenage boys because they knew that Charlie was gay. These young men, knowing Charlie could not swim, watched him as he drowned. There was no national outcry. It is

only recently that the public has become more aware of the many gay people who have had their lives and those of their families damaged and destroyed by hate.⁹³

Anti-gay murders are often characterized by extreme viciousness. Studies show ‘extraordinary and horrific’ violence in crimes against gay people.⁹⁴ The victims often have no chance at all to defend themselves. We remember Private First Class Barry Winchell, a young soldier who, because of his perceived sexual orientation, was bludgeoned to death with a baseball bat last July while he slept in his army barracks.⁹⁵

Violence toward gay people occurs on many levels. Physical violence, experienced through attacks by others or directed inward through suicide, results when a group is targeted as undesirable and defective. Violence to the human spirit and irreparable damage to the emotional development of gay youth occur daily when messages that define a group as substandard go unchallenged.

Some rhetoric is overt, suggesting that gay people are dangerous and a threat to society. Some is more subtle, limiting the visibility of gay people by pretending no one in the audience (or congregation) is gay. Some rhetoric is ludicrous. The most famous is the Rev. Phelps “God Hates Fags!” campaign. A few preachers have also warned their followers against reading the King James Version of the Bible, since most historians now agree that King James was a gay man.⁹⁶

Much anti-gay rhetoric has religious belief as its basis.

We also see daily the efforts of groups to use homosexuals in their fundraising efforts. Maligning gay people as the enemies of society is the backbone of many campaigns. Efforts to raise funds by appeals to fight racism and poverty or to reduce the divorce rate have just not been as successful from a financial point of view.

It is not only gay people who are harassed or attacked. Straight citizens who are *perceived* to be gay are also at risk.

A special note: We wish to pay tribute to the family of James Byrd, Jr.

The members of the Byrd family are exceptional people who are role models for all Americans. James Jr. was dragged to death last year, a victim of an horrific racial hate crime in Jasper, Texas. His parents, Stella and James Byrd Sr. and his nephew Darrell Varrett have become powerful voices in condemning hatred of minorities and the painful division that it brings. They say that speaking out has helped in the healing of their family. They have consistently offered tremendous support to the gay community, speaking out on its behalf and appearing in solidarity with gay people to honor all our families. Their grace, dignity and power and their willingness to testify and speak out for *all minorities* are compelling.

25 *If it were understood that one's sexual orientation is not a choice, would that significantly reduce prejudice against gay people?*

- *it would help*
- *it would not solve the problem*
- *many people are prejudiced against racial and ethnic minorities, fully realizing that these characteristics are innate*

One of the reasons that some people cling so desperately to the idea that sexual orientation is a choice may be to avoid responsibility for discrimination. If one believes everyone can simply 'decide' to be heterosexual, much of the discomfort about discrimination disappears.

But the fact that sexual orientation is innate will never stop prejudice. As racial minorities can readily attest, an understanding that race is inherent has not prevented ongoing and virulent discrimination against people of color.

Ethnic, religious and racial minorities sometimes suffer more than one kind of prejudice. In his brilliant work, "One More River to Cross: Black and Gay in America," Keith Boykin describes the experiences of hundreds of black lesbians and gay men. He describes his own coming out, as a 25 year old Harvard law school student, and examines the experience of those who struggle with racism *and* homophobia.

Mr. Boykin, who served as the principal liaison and spokesperson between the White House and the minority (including African-American and gay) media, writes: "One of the most enduring qualities of oppression is not only that it teaches the oppressed to hate themselves but also that it teaches them to hate one another, pitting minority against minority in a senseless contest to replicate the oppressor. Remarkably, the oppressed absorb and accept the values of the oppressor."⁹⁷

A constant barrage of negative images about oneself can damage one's self respect. In *Letter from the Birmingham Jail* Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. referred to this inner turmoil as "forever fighting a degenerating sense of 'nobodyness.'"⁹⁸ Racial, religious and ethnic minorities who are also gay have to fight difficult battles on many fronts, from within and from without.

26. *Why should we grant civil rights protection on the basis of behavior?*

- *homosexuality is not defined by behavior*

Some claim that gay people are not deserving of civil rights protections, because they believe that unlike racial minorities, homosexuality is defined by behavior, not something innate such as skin color. What they fail to consider is that sexual orientation *is* innate and in place very early in the life cycle.⁹⁹

Furthermore, homosexuality *is not* defined simply by behavior. Sexual orientation (whether it is homosexual or heterosexual) is distinguished by an enduring emotional, romantic, sexual, and affectional attraction to individuals of a particular sex. A gay person is gay regardless of whether or not they are in relationship, just as a straight person who is celibate remains a heterosexual.¹⁰⁰

27. What are ‘special rights’?

- *gay people do not have the same civil rights as heterosexuals do*
- *anti-gay organizations claim that protecting citizens on the basis of sexual orientation would only benefit gay people...hence, the term ‘special rights’*
- *no one today considers the great civil rights laws of 1964 and 1965 to be ‘special rights’ for racial minorities*
- *in the pivotal 1996 case, *Romer v. Evans*, The Supreme Court of the United States ruled that gay-rights laws are not ‘special rights’*

Currently gay people do not have the same civil rights as heterosexuals do. Many people are unaware that in most states and cities a gay person can legally be denied housing, public accommodation, and employment because of their sexual orientation.

Organizations opposed to laws that would prevent discrimination claim that everyone is already protected equally. (In other words, no one’s rights are protected on the basis of sexual orientation.) They state that laws designed to protect citizens on the basis of sexual orientation would only benefit gay people.... hence the term ‘special rights.’ However, they fail to realize that it is extremely unlikely that a heterosexual would be fired because they are straight or be denied housing or public accommodation on that basis. Gays and lesbians, on the other hand, are far more likely to face this kind of discrimination.¹⁰¹

The great civil rights laws of 1964 and 1965 ensured that citizens could not be discriminated against on the basis of race. No one today considers these rights to be ‘special rights’ for people of color.

The gay community is not interested in obtaining ‘special rights’ of any kind. They seek equal protection. Gay people do not seek laws that would legislate affirmative actions programs such as quotas. Churches and other religious institutions are always exempt from any laws governing the employment of gays and lesbians because of the separation of church and state.¹⁰²

In the pivotal 1996 case *Romer v. Evans*, the Supreme Court of the United States rejected the argument that gay-rights laws constitute ‘special rights’ for homosexuals. *The Court clearly stated that protecting gay citizens is not a form of ‘special rights’.*

The case came about because the state of Colorado passed an amendment that prohibited civil rights protections for gay citizens. (The denial of protection was called Amendment Two.) This denial was challenged and the case went to the Supreme Court.

The Supreme Court wrote: “ The State’s [Colorado’s] principal argument in defense of Amendment 2 is that it...does no more than deny homosexuals special rights. This reading of the amendment’s language is implausible...We find nothing special in the protections Amendment 2 withholds. *These are protections taken for granted by most people either because they already have them or do not need them: these are protections against exclusion from an almost limitless number of transactions and endeavors that constitute ordinary civic life in a free society.*”¹⁰³ (Emphasis added)

28. What is meant by straight people ‘coming out’? What can I do?

- ***heterosexuals and institutions ‘come out’ as straight allies***
- ***the coming out process is similar whether one is gay or straight***
- ***what we can do as individuals***

Increasingly, straight people ‘come out’ as allies in support of equality for gay citizens. Institutions do this as well. In these cases, a similar process of anxiety, angst, soul-searching and trepidation may come into play. Coming out is not easy, whether one is a gay person, a parent, a sibling, a concerned straight citizen, or an institution. It may require much internal inventory, dialogue, research, questioning and prayer.

One can never underestimate the power, difficulty, anxiety and joy of coming out.

One’s sexual orientation has nothing to do with the desire to see all people treated equally. It is not just Jews who should resist anti-Semitism, or only African-Americans who should oppose racism: these are ethical obligations for everyone.¹⁰⁴ Increasingly, straight people are speaking out for the equal inclusion of gay people.

What can we do as individuals? A good start is to acknowledge that we care about gay people. How things turn out for gay people makes a difference to someone we love.¹⁰⁵ When we hear anti-gay aspersions and jokes, we can point out to the speaker the hurtfulness and destructiveness of their words.¹⁰⁶

We can meet one another in our daily lives with the recognition that not everyone is heterosexual. We can keep open the channels of communication and the flow of ideas. We can block attempts to silence gay people. We can respect their need to speak about being gay when, where and with whom they choose.¹⁰⁷

We can include our gay relatives so they do not become ghosts at the periphery of our lives.¹⁰⁸ We can know that some children, ours or other people’s, will be gay. We can remember that justice will save and strengthen the lives of some of these children as they grow and mature.

We can support local and national organizations that seek equality for all people. We can be aware of which social or political action groups demean or support gay people. We can be aware of the policies of groups to which we belong.¹⁰⁹

We can acknowledge that many perks, privileges, opportunities, benefits and rights flow to us because of our status as straight people and acknowledge that others are denied these same things because they are not straight people.¹¹⁰

Straight and gay people can work on joint projects that do not directly address their differences. Studies have found that use of such projects – as has been done with racial tensions in the military – help people find common ground.¹¹¹

Each of us can reexamine our past beliefs and seek out accurate, current information. We can talk to gay people about their lives. We can begin to insist that all people be able to exercise the same rights to freedom and equality. We can point out the harm done to innocent people by exclusion and prejudice.¹¹²

Among the most important and easiest things straight people can do is to speak openly and in an affirming way with friends, colleagues and family about their feelings and beliefs about gay people. When we remain silent in the face of disparaging remarks, people assume that we agree with them.

Gay people and those who love them are very sensitive to language and listen for subtle messages that they are in a safe or an unsafe environment. When we let others know that we realize not everyone is straight and that we respect all people, we can begin to open doors.

29. What is life like for gay youth?

- ***gay youth suffer from high rates of depression and suicide***
- ***most gay youth are extremely isolated***
- ***gay teenagers are often quite homophobic***
- ***gay youth does not have family support that other minority children have***
- ***school is not a safe place for gay teenagers***

Depression is very common among gay teens and gay adolescents are two to three times more likely to attempt suicide than heterosexual young people are. It is estimated that up to 30% of the completed youth suicides are committed by lesbian and gay youth.¹¹³ Most gay teenagers do not feel safe in their own homes with their own families. They are not safe in their schools. Most are at risk in their communities, including their faith communities.

The pain of feeling ostracized or of feeling that one does not ‘fit the mold’ is universal. It is particularly painful for young gay people. Gay teens, in therapy for depression, may not confide in their therapists for fear that even the therapist will reject them.

Unfortunately, even the love of parents is not enough to protect young gay people.

When Robbie Kirkland's family realized he was gay, they let him know immediately that they loved, supported and accepted him. But their efforts could not protect him from the rejection and harassment he experienced daily at school and his overall perception of how society and his religion viewed homosexuality. A soft-spoken, gentle boy, he was teased and harassed at school, beginning in the first grade.

Robbie knew he was gay by age 10. He suffered tremendous abuse and rejection during his short life. Eventually, he simply could not go on. On January 2, 1997, four months into his ninth grade year, Robbie shot himself in the head. He was fourteen years old and was found by his nineteen-year-old sister. In his suicide note, Robbie wrote: "I hope I can find peace in death that I could not find in life" and asked his family to pray for him and to remember him.¹¹⁴

Kate Stone Lombardi, feature writer for The New York Times describes the struggle on a local level: "Sixteen year old Cat B., was walking out of White Plains High School on a recent afternoon when the verbal assault began. 'There was a group of guys, all football players,' Cat said, adding that the name caller used words that alluded to her sexual orientation and yelled, 'Don't hit on my girlfriend!' and 'If you sleep with me one night, you'll change!' The experience is not uncommon for the sophomore, who is a lesbian, but it is one that never loses its sharp jab of pain. 'You want to die,' said Cat, whose large brown eyes were suddenly downcast. 'You want to crawl under a rock and die.'"¹¹⁵

Respect and consideration for all people is a message that is appropriate at any age. Surveys show that *the second most common insult* among second-graders is "That's so gay!" (The most common insult is "That's so stupid!")¹¹⁶ Though children in second grade may not know what 'gay' means, society has already begun the process of teaching them that the term is insulting and negative.

Over 90% of gay youth frequently hear homophobic remarks in their school. Over one-third hear homophobic remarks from faculty or school staff. 61% report verbal harassment. 46% report sexual harassment. 27% report physical harassment. 13% report physical assault.¹¹⁷

Gay youth often has little or no information about sexual orientation. The American Psychological Association states that accurate information about homosexuality is especially important to young people struggling with their own sexual identity. Fears that access to such information will affect one's sexual orientation are not valid.¹¹⁸

It is not uncommon for gay teenagers to be very homophobic. Recognizing (and rejecting) a part of themselves or concerned about feelings they may have, gay young people may often make anti-gay remarks and harbor strong prejudice against gay people.

Gay youth hear politicians and religious leaders condemn and exclude gay people. Many parents may make anti-gay remarks at home, blind to the fact that they have gay children

who are listening to them in fear and despair. Many young people experience tremendous isolation, feeling it is too big a risk to discuss their identity with one single other person.

It is particularly damaging for gay youth to hear the nation's leaders suggest that equal inclusion of citizens like themselves will lead to the disintegration and moral decline of our society. (This is another common and socially acceptable remark.) It is not a good idea for *any* young person (gay or straight) to hear this type of statement made about *any* minority group. Messages that some groups are condemned and some groups are superior are messages that young people hear and carry for a lifetime.

Young people may hear their friends and relatives express their disappointment when learning that someone is gay, especially if that individual is highly attractive: "What a shame! What a waste!" It is difficult to develop self-respect under these circumstances and some children do feel they are worthless. These are the words of Ellen Stewart, explaining why her A's and B's had slipped to C's and D's : "I didn't care. I was completely out of it. I felt like so degraded as a person that anything else I did had no value. It was kinda like nothing really mattered."¹⁹

It requires an exceptionally strong core of personal strength for a young person to develop as a whole, healthy person, living in such a hostile world. *Any young person* who learns very early that they are singled out and hated will be profoundly affected in their growth and self-concept. *A greater issue is not only the presence of any specific prejudice, but the impact of any prejudice on human development.*

It is very rare for a young gay person to report anti-gay abuse or slurs to his or her parents. Normally, if a child (from another minority) faces racial, ethnic, or religious prejudice at school or elsewhere, this is recognized as unacceptable and damaging to everyone, and the parent immediately takes action. The child who is the target or who has just overheard a hurtful remark is protected, his or her worth is reaffirmed, and they are reminded how precious and valuable they are. This is not the case for gay teenagers. Fearing rejection, they are silent and struggle on alone. Many are permanently damaged by self-hatred and the hatred of others. Many do not survive.

30. Do gay teenagers always deal directly with their orientation?

- **no, many gay teenagers postpone dealing with their orientation**

Many adolescents who are gay will postpone dealing with their natural orientation as long as possible. It requires enormous ego strength within adolescents to be different from their peers and many do not find this strength until later adolescence or adulthood.

Additionally, many children and teenagers who are gay have a clear sense of any hostile environments around them, such as their peer group, family, school, or church, so that

they exhaust their energies trying to satisfy and impress these forces in their lives. This means postponing any serious efforts towards understanding their sexual orientation until they have gained sufficient strength to do so or until their environment changes.¹²⁰

The most courageous thing a parent can do is to face their fears or questions that one of their children might be gay and seek out ways to reinforce them as human beings. It is important to speak in loving and inclusive ways so that, even on a vague and generalized level, a young child or adolescent will know that if they should turn out to be gay they are loved and valued within the family.

31. Do families know if their children are gay?

- ***this varies from family to family***
- ***gay people do not disclose their identity unless they feel safe***
- ***sometimes families sense that a loved one is gay, but avoid discussion***
- ***sometimes anti-gay remarks are used by parents and siblings as a warning that it's not O.K. to be gay in that particular home***

In the experience of our group, most parents of gay teenagers have no idea that their children are gay. To parents, most gay adolescents 'appear' to be heterosexuals (just the way adult gay people do). Many gay people will disclose their identity to a close friend or sibling when they are younger, but wait until they become adults to tell parents, if in fact they ever do.

The vast majority of gay teenagers have been raised in 'all-straight' households with no information whatsoever about homosexuality. They have no role models or people to give courage, comfort and guidance. Children who belong to racial, religious or ethnic minorities have parents who are very aware of the challenges their children may face because of their identity and are prepared to help them. In contrast, gay people growing up are *very* isolated.

Sometimes parents who have always considered themselves very 'open-minded,' who have gay friends and colleagues, can be surprised by their intensely negative reaction when they learn that their *own* child is gay. This is not unusual at all. Everyone realizes that the future of one's own children is not a theoretical construct. Everything takes on new meaning when it affects your own children. Also, most of us were raised with the idea that gay people were 'somebody else.'

Some families believe that overt and vocal disapproval of homosexuality will prevent their children from being gay. This is counter productive. One cannot 'promote' or 'discourage' something which is not a choice. Some children do not recover from damage that results from growing up in a hostile environment. Even subtle or unspoken disapproval is difficult when it is unrelenting.

Other families wonder about a child's orientation, but they may not acknowledge it. This can create a distance between parent and child which can last for decades.

"Family members express interest in the child's life but are careful not to make inquiries that could bring an avalanche of truth telling. ...[They] do not engage in... intentional delusion to be hurtful. On the contrary, they probably think they are doing what is best for all: sparing feelings and dodging conflict that would threaten family unity. ...[but] the self-esteem of homosexual adolescents is ultimately harmed, as they conclude they cannot be loved for who they really are, but only for the person they pretend to be."¹²¹

"The casualties in this kind of family conflict are both sad and pathetic...adolescents in pretending families waste energy in self-monitoring and self-protection...and there are families where the price of toleration is silence or second-class status."¹²²

Unfortunately, silence about important topics teaches children that avoidance is an effective life skill.

Most people are painfully aware of the emotional energy needed to pretend *any* given reality does not exist within the family.

32. What happens to families initially when children come out?

- *some families handle this news well, but most do not*
- *those who are coming out are emotionally vulnerable*
- *those who are receiving the news are often upset and overwhelmed*

Though some families handle news about a family member's homosexual orientation calmly, most do not.

When children, whatever their age, decide to come out to families, they are in a very vulnerable state because they are risking *everything*. Parents are upset, overwhelmed and frightened. This is a very emotionally charged situation.

Family members may be in shock, may be angry, may withdraw or stop speaking. Parents may blame themselves or each other. The parents' marriage can be under stress. Some parents become depressed. When some family members take different views than others, conflicts can arise within the family unit.

Sometimes rejection is more subtle: families insist they are understanding, yet keep the gay relative only on the periphery of their lives.

Gay people may eventually remove themselves emotionally (and sometimes geographically) from a painful family situation.

Most families need and benefit from conversation, support and guidance during this time.

33. What happens when well-meaning parents initially reject their children?

- *some families hope that rejection will lead gay relatives to become heterosexual*
- *long-term damage may be done to the individual and to the family unit*

Dr. William Pollack, social researcher, a specialist in childhood development and the author of “Real Boys: Rescuing Our Sons from the Myths of Boyhood,” relates a conversation with a patient.

“ ‘I haven’t spoken with my parents in ten years,’ Evan told me despondently, ‘because when I told them I was gay, they kicked me out of the house. I was only fifteen years old and had nowhere to go. I ended up staying with friends of mine who understood what I was going through. When my parents let me move back home a few months later, things were never the same. My father never talked to me and my mother told me over and over again that in her mind I was just a ‘boarder,’ that I was no longer her son. I never got over this and felt bad about myself for years. The only way I could cope was to stop seeing my parents at all.’

‘My parents are old now,’ Evan explained, ‘and sometimes they leave a message on my answering machine begging for me to come home to see them. But as much as they want to see me now, I just can’t get myself to do it....It hurts a lot.’

While it might be easy to think of Evan’s parents as having been thoughtless or uncaring, the reality is that they probably believed that if they withheld their love and affection from their son, somehow he would “decide” he was no longer homosexual. But sexual orientation is constitutional – an essential part of who each of us is – and is not a “decision” that we can control or that can be changed by or for our parents. Especially because a boy may be in an extremely tenuous emotional state by the time he finds the courage to discuss his sexuality, I believe it is critically important to convey to him, as soon as he shares his feelings, that he is still loved through and through, that his sexual orientation will not in any way diminish how much he is admired and respected. These are the things a boy needs most to hear.

To refrain from saying [these things] is to risk placing a boy in serious emotional – even physical – jeopardy. And to risk losing him, in one way or another.”¹²³

While this reference and Dr. Pollack’s research deals specifically with boys, its message applies to families of all young people.

We recognize the power of the need for a family to conform and fit into society, not to be too different from others. People who have gay loved ones may initially fear that others will have less respect for them or consider them inadequate in some way. These feelings can be very powerful. However, the decision to avoid the topic for fear of “what the neighbors will say” can be devastating to the family unit.

From “Loving Someone Gay,” by psychologist Don Clark: *“Once upon a time, people selected the most beautiful and talented youths of the community and ceremoniously threw them into boiling volcanoes as an offering to appease the angry gods.... Some parents are still willing to sacrifice their beautiful gay offspring to appease the god of conformity...I feel compassion for the parent who breaks the sacred bond and turns away from the outstretched arms of a son or a daughter...”*¹²⁴

While Evan’s family situation was a dramatic rejection, other types of rejection can be equally powerful.

Gay children may begin to live as a ‘second class’ family members; less importance is attached to their life, to their future and to their presence (or absence).

Anti-gay remarks may continue. The subject may be avoided or considered ‘off limits’ and completely dropped. The child’s friends or partner are never mentioned and never included in family gatherings. Parents may withdraw emotionally or wonder aloud what they did ‘wrong.’ Gay children are frequently advised not to tell grandparents. The reality that the child is gay may be carefully avoided in the parents’ social circle.

The wounds from outright rejection are painful and so are those feelings that arise from the fact that one’s very existence is an embarrassment to the family.

34. Can these initial wounds be healed?

- ***absolutely***
- ***many, if not most, families are very resilient***
- ***families can become closer and stronger than ever before***

When children finally acknowledge their orientation, they often express anger and resentment toward those persons and situations that earlier caused them to feel rejection, fear and shame for something they never chose. But by acknowledging these experiences and honoring the reactions of all concerned, by learning more about the issue of sexual orientation and discussing it openly, a family can be transformed, no matter how many years have elapsed.

Many families receive help, either formally or informally, from other families, friends or supportive clergy.

Dealing with this issue is not easy because it usually requires the confrontation of denial, silence and fear on everyone's part. It requires patience and openness to work toward healing. But openness works more successfully than defensiveness.

Like all healing processes, family healing takes time. It does not happen overnight.

Those who unintentionally inflicted pain during the young person's formative years have a chance to apologize for their remarks and behavior. They will often want to acknowledge their former lack of information and understanding. The member of the family who is gay has an opportunity to extend generosity and forgiveness. Everyone may have said and done things which wounded the other. Acknowledging and becoming accountable for this can lead to healing and renewed strength for the family.¹²⁵

Healing and reconciliation can occur even after many years of estrangement. No one should feel that their situation is hopeless.

35. What does it mean when a married person announces that he or she is gay? Isn't that a type of change in orientation?

- *it is a myth that marriage is 'proof' that one is heterosexual*
- *some gay people marry before they come to terms with their orientation*
- *some couples may marry for companionship rather than romance*
- *some gay people marry hoping this will help them become straight*
- *marriage may protect gay people from the hostility of society*

Some gay people do marry and it is a common misconception that to be married is 'proof' that one is heterosexual.

Some people may marry before they come to terms with their homosexual orientation.

Some adults, one gay and one straight, may form a couple to provide for mutual support and loving companionship rather than for romance. Respect and mutual regard sustain these relationships. No change in orientation occurs.

Some gay people, who have tried to blend in and appear as heterosexuals for most of their lives may stop trying to accommodate themselves to the expectations of others and begin to live openly. No change in orientation occurs.

A gay individual may also, under intense family or social pressure, decide to attempt living as a heterosexual and marry. Anti-gay groups applaud such attempts. However, even among families who promote so-called 'conversion' therapy, it is unlikely that an announcement from a heterosexual child that he or she is planning to marry someone who "*used to be gay and now is straight*" would be met with much enthusiasm.

Those who marry in an attempt to assure themselves (and society) that they are straight often hope that marriage will help them become heterosexual. This hope is not uncommon among individuals who have been taught that gay people are marginal people and a disappointment to their families. Those who enter into such marriages are *not* manipulative people who are purposely being deceptive. They are trying *very* hard to do what society has told them is necessary to do in order to be acceptable.

Sometimes a gay person will marry another gay person of the opposite sex in an attempt to satisfy society's expectations of marriage. These are known as 'lavender' marriages.

Arranged marriages between gay and straight people also exist, especially among those in the public eye. These marriages protect the gay partner and help them to develop their careers free from rejection and condemnation.

Bisexual individuals may appear to change their orientation over a lifetime because of a change in a life partner. In fact, there is no change; the person continues to be bisexual.

There are many reasons why people join their lives together in marriage and it is difficult to make generalizations.

36. What does the issue of sexual orientation have to do with Christian education or Christian family life? What about family values?

- *every gay person is a member of a family*
- *for some young people and adults in our churches, sexual orientation is an important issue in their lives*
- *many young people postpone dealing with fears about sexual orientation until after their schooling*
- *in retrospect, they feel rejected by their church and God if their religious education denounced them or taught that they were inherently less worthy*

Every gay person is a member of a family. The long-held societal perception that there are *families over here in this group* and *homosexuals over there in that group* is wildly inaccurate. Gay people are our children, our grandchildren, our brothers and sisters, our cousins, our aunts and uncles. We are all family together.

The average age at which gay people come out to themselves has dropped dramatically over the last decade. Today, it is not uncommon for teenagers to recognize their homosexuality.¹²⁶ Most people know for years that they are gay before confiding this to a single other person.¹²⁷

Previously, when homosexuality was a taboo subject, the idea that a student in a Sunday school class or a youth group would know (or later come to know) that he or she was homosexual was unheard of. It was believed that teenagers were 'too young' to

understand themselves. At the same time, we believed that teenagers were not ‘too young’ to understand that they were heterosexual.

We now know that some young people, especially teenagers, do have their sexual identity as an important issue in their lives. This means that gay teens are quietly and acutely aware that they will not participate on an equal basis within the life of most churches. They feel diminished and unwelcome. Their inner spiritual life will likely be damaged as a result. Young people who do not disclose their identity are still acutely aware of their second-class status.

It is very common for gay youth to pray to God to make them heterosexual. There is a widespread belief among gay youth that there is no legitimate place for them within the institutional church (which, to many young people, *represents* God.)

Bruce Bawer, author and journalist, states: “ On the night of the day I realized I was gay, I didn’t say the prayers that, until then, I had recited faithfully at bedtime since earliest childhood. Nor did I say them the next night, or the next; as it turned out, I didn’t say them again for almost a decade. That’s how sure I was that being Christian was not consistent with being gay.”¹²⁸

The majority of gay people within most churches remain silent and invisible because they realize, and with good reason, that they are not safe. Of course, which of God’s children are gay has always been known to the Creator. But within the institutional church that truth (and honesty about it) becomes a liability.

Anti-gay groups characterize gay people as a threat to ‘family values.’ Threats to family values are divorce, domestic violence, infidelity, child abuse, children having children, dead-beat dads, empty or stressed relationships, lack of time together and substance abuse. These are problems that we have as heterosexuals. Nothing is uglier than using the term ‘family values’ as a weapon against gay people. Discrimination is bad for young people and it is bad for families.

37. What are the public perceptions of gay and straight people which gay individuals and their families find offensive and ironic?

- ***gay people and their loved ones are bombarded with unfair, ironic, and offensive remarks and assumptions***

Negative behaviors of gay people are *almost always* attributed to their sexual orientation, while negative behaviors of heterosexuals are *almost never* attributed to sexual orientation. A somewhat confused double standard exists.

- Though divorce, substance abuse, control issues, infidelity and domestic violence are continuing problems affecting the breakup of the family, it is gay people who are commonly portrayed as the major threat to family values.

- In spite of the tremendous support marriage receives from society, the divorce rate is alarming. Yet it is gay people who are commonly perceived as unable to maintain stable relationships.
- Many who emphasize the crucial role of truth and honesty in society and the life of the individual also insist that gay people lie about or conceal their identity.
- One has never read or heard the statement: “Mr. So-and-So, the heterosexual rapist with life-long ties to the heterosexual community.....” In contrast, anti-social behavior of *any* kind concerning a gay person will almost inevitably mention sexual orientation as an implied cause.
- Talk shows and magazines often feature heterosexual couples in all sorts of illicit relationships. Yet gay people are seen as promiscuous.
- Convicted axe-murderers on death row have the freedom to marry. Law-abiding gay couples do not.
- Gay people are disdained by many as one dimensional and self-involved at the same time that their desire to serve in the military and die for their country is rejected.
- Some anti-gay groups become quite confused and self-contradictory when stereotyping gay people. Sometimes gay people are described as miserable, destructive, marginal people at the fringes of society. Other times, they are described as powerful, wealthy, influential people who are taking over society.
- People (who would be appalled at the suggestion that people of color should ‘pass’ as white or that Jewish people should ‘pass’ as Gentiles) are startled or angered when gay people refuse to ‘pass’ as heterosexuals.
- The ‘defense’ of traditional marriage (the idea that the stability of marriage depends on denying legal protections to gay Americans) is supported by politicians who have themselves been married and divorced more than once. Which marriage they are ‘defending’ is unclear. Why the presence of committed gay couples would cause them to divorce is also unclear.
- Heterosexuals know in the depths of their soul that they did not choose their sexual orientation. Yet many insist that gay people have chosen theirs.
- It is a common belief that heterosexuals are well adjusted and that gay people, who presumably lead unhappy lives, should be pitied and forgiven. Evidence that gay people are happy and that they forgive their oppressors results, not in gladness, but in anxiety and confusion.
- Extremists who quote Leviticus and picket the funerals of gay people do not picket restaurants serving shellfish and pork or strike against shopping centers which are open on Sundays.
- Many people who feel that one can always ‘tell’ when a person is gay also feel it is inappropriate for a gay person to tell anyone.
- Gay people are portrayed as promiscuous and hedonistic. Yet their desire to permanently and legally commit to one another is often greeted with outrage.
- Heterosexuals have a life; gay people have a ‘lifestyle.’
- Those who believe sexual orientation is a choice do not clearly explain why gay people would choose a life in which they were maligned, denied civil rights, subject to bias crimes and treated with contempt. They do not explain why a young gay person would commit suicide rather than just decide to be a straight person.

- Efforts to stereotype offend gay people. The fact that gay people are stockbrokers, carpenters, members of congress and police officers is still quite surprising to many Americans. The ‘typical’ gay person can be anyone.¹²⁹

These ironies are not meant to disparage straight people or to call attention to the human frailties that we all experience. They only underscore how myths and stereotypes often go unquestioned, even if they are inconsistent with reality or common sense. Myths about minority groups take on a life of their own. We have been told all our lives that gay people are marginal, predatory, sex-obsessed, shallow, self-involved, promiscuous, and a threat to society. Only recently have these sensational claims been challenged.

38. Are religious people anti-gay?

- *many religious leaders and congregations support equal inclusion of gay people*
- *many gay people are deeply religious*
- *most fundamentalist religious leaders do not support inclusion of gay people*

The idea that all religious people are anti-gay is inaccurate. An increasingly large number of Jewish and Christian congregations, religious leaders and organizations support gay people and dedicate themselves to the principle of full and equal inclusion of all human beings.

Like heterosexuals, gay people come from families that range from deeply religious to non-religious. Like individual heterosexuals, individual gay people hold beliefs that can range from deeply religious to non-religious.

It is true that many gay people, raised in congregations or denominations that reject them often may avoid connection with all organized religious groups.

The Reverend Peter Gomes, the much loved Preacher to Harvard University and the Plummer Professor of Christian Morals is an openly gay, African-American pastor. He is a Republican with a conservative religious background. His decision to come out in 1991 was prompted by anti-gay religious bias on campus. He was invited to speak at a rally, along with other administrators and faculty, to calm the crisis situation. He writes: “I fully appreciated the fact that I was not asked to speak because of any radical credentials that I may have had: I had none and was not thought to have any.” His openness helped many to understand that religious people and conservative people may also be gay.¹³⁰

Dr. Gomes is the author of *The Good Book: Reading the Bible With Mind and Heart* which deals not only with the issue of homosexuality (just one chapter) but with discussions of the Bible and race, anti-Semitism, women, the good life, suffering, joy, evil, temptation, wealth, science, and mystery. In it we can see that the issue of acceptance of gay people is an issue which embodies questions about the authentic meaning of the Gospel itself.

Within almost every Christian denomination there is a formal organization that strives for the equal inclusion of gay people within that denomination. A list of these groups appears at the end of the manual. Our congregation is a member of More Light Presbyterians.

Increasingly, the public understands (in spite of what some religious leaders might present to us) that ‘Christian’ and ‘anti-gay’ are not synonyms.

39. How does new information about sexual orientation affect church policy?

- *sexual orientation is innate and inherent in each individual*
- *to treat gay people differently, we must believe God wants a category of human beings to be denied equality*
- *to state that some human beings are inherently less worthy is a radical departure from the authentic message of the Gospel*
- *the church has yet to confront the issue that it creates or sustains a second-class category of believers*

Discrimination is not a new issue for the church; the church’s history of discrimination in matters of gender and race is easily documented. Before such practices were abandoned, the church maintained that its policies of discrimination carried out the will of God and used the literal interpretation of the Bible to condone and justify its position. It uses the same approach now in its exclusion of gay people.

Most people grew up with the idea that gay people are simply heterosexuals who have gone astray or who are emotionally ill or confused. In reality, gay people are inherently homosexual. *Current scientific understanding of human sexuality means that to treat gay people differently than others, we must now adopt a new theology: that God created a separate category of human beings who must, by definition, be denied equality of opportunity.* The church has yet to confront this issue from this perspective.

Did God create a separate sub-standard category of people who should be denied equality and a fully integrated life? This view (currently held by most institutionalized churches, though usually not stated in these blunt terms) is currently being challenged.

One of the main functions of any institution is to sustain itself. There is a great desire in many denominations to emphasize unity and avoid controversy and tension. We know that confronting any controversial topic not only causes personal anxiety and stress; it also causes institutions to fear losing members and needed contributions.

Many mainstream Protestant churches, including The Presbyterian Church (USA) publicly and clearly condemn society’s discrimination against gay people in housing, public accommodations and employment. This has been the official policy of our national church since 1978.¹³¹ Yet, while our denomination condemns discrimination

against gay people *outside* the church, it requires discrimination against gay people *inside* the church.

Gay people who are in loving relationships may not serve as elders, deacons, or ministers of the Word and Sacrament. Any person, straight or gay, who is single, must be living in chastity in order to hold these leadership positions. The Book of Order serves as a reminder to gay youth and adults that, should they find someone with whom to share their lives, they will be considered morally unfit to serve the church. It goes without saying that heterosexuals in loving relationships always have the freedom to marry.

Some Presbyterians are confused as to why the church condemns discrimination in other organizations but at the same time maintains employment and service discrimination within its own institution. (Those who are not Presbyterians question this as well.)

However, many Presbyterians and local congregations decline to treat other human beings in this way. These churches, ours among them, continue to ordain all persons, known and elected by the congregation, who are called to Christian service.

The ugliness, cruelty and absurdity of all discrimination are antithetical to the life and teaching of Jesus Christ and the church's call to support the worth and dignity of all people. So the church continues to struggle with the issue, because it realizes that, in the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: "*True peace is not merely the absence of tension; it is the presence of justice.*"¹³²

40. How do gay people and their families feel about the church?

- *those in supportive churches feel they have found a safe haven*
- *in many churches, gay people (and those who love them) feel estranged and rejected*
- *since this population is invisible, the reasons gay people and their families leave may go unnoticed*

Gay people and those who love them tend to be very torn about staying in an institution which dishonors them. It is intriguing to talk to people who do stay. In local churches, where families feel the support of a welcoming congregation, there is a profound sense of having found a home and a sanctuary in a hostile world. There are none of the feelings of estrangement, isolation and rejection found in churches which avoid the topic or actively discriminate.

Just as patriotic Americans who deplore racism usually do not consider leaving the country because racism continues to blight the nation, families of gay people may choose to stay and help move the church to a more loving place. Everyone hopes for a brighter future. People who stay in an institutional church that has discrimination as a basic tenet often do so because they hope to contribute to the dialogue.

Yet, other gay people and their loved ones do leave the church just as others who reject discrimination would not consider joining in the first place. Families, learning that they have gay loved ones, who may not have questioned discrimination before, may now experience a deep sense of betrayal by the institution. But because this population is so invisible, much of this angst of coming and going goes unnoticed. It is not acknowledged publicly.

Because of the invisibility of gay people, many Christians are not aware of how much the policies of exclusion have impoverished the church. Christians with great gifts and much to give do not feel welcome. In fact, they are clearly not welcome on an equal basis.

As more and more people disclose their identities to loved ones, more families will begin to seek information about the subject and increasingly question the church traditions which dishonor those they care about the most.

41. In what ways have societies used different interpretations of the Bible to 'prove' a point?

- *in countless ways*

The Bible can offer strength, wisdom, inspiration and hope in the face of hopelessness. It can be used to confront persecution, to empower the weak and outcast, and to fight for justice and equality.

At the same time, it has also been used to maintain political power and wealth, wage wars, oppose science and persecute minorities.¹³³

The following is a partial list of ways the Bible has been used historically to maintain a particular position:

- To justify slavery
- To call for the abolition of slavery
- To argue the superiority of white Protestants
- To argue for the civil rights of African-Americans
- To persecute the Jews
- To define a subservient role for women
- To provide sanctuary to political refugees
- To empower and liberate the poor
- To accuse and execute women as witches
- To support the ordination of women
- To oppose the ordination of women
- To support the marriage of priests
- To oppose the marriage of priests

To condemn remarriage after divorce
To condemn masturbation
To justify the physical punishment of children
To regulate clothing and hairstyles
To condemn the wearing of jewelry (for women)
To impose dietary laws (restricting pork and shellfish)
To assign guilt for disease
To argue the inferiority of black peoples
To justify discrimination against gay people
To support the inclusion and acceptance of gay people
To support capital punishment
To oppose capital punishment
To condemn dancing
To mistrust and persecute Catholics
To argue that Catholicism is the only true church
To define the terms of marriage
To condemn the consumption of alcohol
To permit the consumption of alcohol
To forbid work and commerce on the Sabbath
To permit work on the Sabbath
To justify prayer in school
To oppose prayer in public schools
To embrace medical science
To oppose medical science
To increase the political power of the church
To proclaim that the Kingdom of God is within
To justify war
To oppose war
To prove that the earth is the center of the universe (i.e. to oppose Galileo)
To prove that God created Man and the universe
To exploit the environment
To protect the environment
To predict that the end of the world is at hand¹³⁴

Some believers may use the Bible to condemn and oppress whole groups of people, but many of those traditionally oppressed people have found their deepest redemption in the pages of the same book.¹³⁵

42. What did Jesus say about homosexuality?

- ***Jesus had nothing to say about homosexuality***

Jesus said nothing about the subject.

Those who use the Bible to condemn homosexuality cannot quote from the teachings of Jesus or cite a single word spoken by Christ because Jesus never spoke about the issue.

Jesus never hesitated to teach and comment on the world of His day.¹³⁶ He took strong positions on divorce, remarriage, adultery, material possessions, hypocrisy, oppression, greed, selfishness, class structure and the accumulation of wealth. Jesus never mentioned homosexuality. Many believe that if God had something to say about the matter, Jesus would certainly have said it.

Many Christians think it is ironic that some religious leaders focus so *little* on some of the issues that deeply concerned Jesus and talk so *much* about an issue which He never mentioned.

For Christians, nothing in the Scriptures supercedes the teachings of Jesus. There is not a single word in the four Gospels, even by inference, about same-sex relationships.¹³⁷

Exclusion of gay people is not based on the ministry or teachings of Jesus.

43. Does the Bible condemn homosexuality?

- ***all believers use the Bible as a basis of faith; yet they are diverse in their beliefs***
- ***some believers feel homosexuality is condemned in the Old Testament; many others do not***
- ***those who use the Bible to condemn gay people use a literal interpretation of Scripture***
- ***literal interpretation of Scripture is always selective***
- ***historically, the Bible has often been used to exclude those seeking full citizenship in the secular world and within Judaism and Christianity***

All Christian denominations use the Bible as a basis for their faith, yet beliefs among churches can be quite diverse. Christians differ widely on many issues: birth control, the role of women, the right to remarry after divorce, the necessity to serve in the military if asked, the role of individual conscience vs. church law, etc. In this same way, some believe that the Bible condemns homosexuality; others do not.¹³⁸

Some denominations (our own among them) reexamine and change church doctrines over time. Many denominations are examining the issue of full equality for gay people.

Most people who use the Bible to condemn homosexual people rely on a literal interpretation of the Scriptures. This literal interpretation is *very* selective: passages which call for the stoning of unruly children or death for all women who are not virgins on their wedding day or giving away all one's belongings to follow Christ are usually not taken literally. The Torah alone (what we Christians refer to as the Pentateuch) contains 613 commandments, hundreds of which contemporary Jews and Christians no longer follow because they reflect the limited knowledge and understanding available thousands of years ago.

Throughout history some mainstream Christian churches have used the Bible to justify slavery, racism, anti-Semitism, the annihilation of native peoples, the subordination of women and, most recently, exclusion of gay people and apartheid. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. used Scripture to inspire those struggling to overcome racism at the same time others used the Bible to promote racial segregation. It is clear that the Bible can be interpreted in many different ways.¹³⁹ The use of the Scriptures in the discussion of homosexuality is no exception.

Many great theologians have pointed out that it is not necessary to take the Bible literally in order to take it seriously.

44. If Jesus never mentioned it, what does the rest of the Bible say about homosexuality?

- *almost nothing*
- *it is not mentioned in The 10 Commandments*
- *it is not mentioned in the Summary of the Law*
- *it is not mentioned by any of the prophets*
- *it is not mentioned in the four Gospels*
- *it does not seem to be an issue in the early churches*
- *there are two references in the Holiness Code (in Leviticus): this Code maintains religious rituals and contains the ancient laws that separate Jews from Gentiles.*
- *remaining references to homosexuality include those to same-sex rape and prostitution*
- *these references to homosexual relationships do not speak about loving, committed same-sex relationships just as other references to rape and prostitution do not speak about heterosexual relationships*
- *sexual orientation is never mentioned in the Bible*

Dr. Gomes: “Given the appeal to the Bible in the case of homosexuality, one would assume that the Bible has much to say on the subject. It has not. The subject of homosexuality is not mentioned in the Ten Commandments, or in the Summary of the Law. No prophet discourses on the subject. Jesus himself makes no mention of it, and

homosexuality does not appear to be of much concern to those early churches with which Saint Paul and his successors were involved.”¹⁴⁰

Biblical references to same-sex activity that *do* exist include: condemnations of same-sex rape, condemnations of temple prostitution and sexual abuse and the regulations in what is called the “Holiness Code” that are designed to maintain the ritual purity of ancient Israel. The meaning of these verses in the context of our current understanding of sexual orientation and in the context of loving, committed relationships is now being examined. Many believers feel that these references do not shed much light on the issue of equal inclusion of gay people.

Dr. Gomes: “The biblical writers never contemplated a form of homosexuality in which loving, monogamous and faithful persons sought to live the implications of the gospel with as much fidelity to it as any heterosexual believer. All they knew of homosexuality was prostitution, pederasty, lasciviousness and exploitation. These vices, as we know, are not unknown among heterosexuals, and to define contemporary homosexuals only in these terms is a cultural slander of the highest order.”¹⁴¹

Sexual orientation is never mentioned in the Bible.

45. What do we know of references to same-sex activity in the Bible?

- *same-sex rape is mentioned in Sodom and Gomorrah*
- *temple prostitution is mentioned and condemned by Paul*
- *sexual abuse of slaves is mentioned and condemned by Paul*
- *the importance of ‘nation-building’ is implicit in the Bible*
- *Israel was a small, tribal, desert community. Any and all sexual activity that did not produce offspring was strictly forbidden.*
- *loving relationships between persons of the same sex are not discussed*
- *a Quaker perspective*

During Biblical times, the men (and kings) of conquered tribes were sometimes raped by the invading army as the ultimate symbol of defeat and humiliation.¹⁴² Homosexual rape was also a way of humiliating visitors and strangers. (See: the story of Sodom and Gomorrah.) We see vestiges of these brutal practices today in American prisons. These acts of power and domination have nothing in common with consensual sex between gay people.

Secondly, some non-Jewish tribes in the area had male and female prostitutes in their temples who ritually engaged in sexual activities: this horrified the ancient Israelites and Paul later condemned these practices rigorously in the New Testament.¹⁴³ However, the subject of prostitution has nothing to do with loving relationships between heterosexuals or homosexuals. Same-sex prostitution has as much to do with homosexuality as

opposite-sex prostitution has to do with heterosexuality. Prostitution, regardless of what kind, is about exploitation and the selling of self.

Thirdly, it was common within the Roman Empire for male adults to keep boy prostitutes for the purpose of sexual activity. These boys were often slaves. In modern times, this is rightly considered a criminal offense and an egregious type of child abuse. This type of abuse was witnessed by Paul. It has nothing to do with religious and cultural inclusion of gays and lesbians.

For ancient Israel, in the beginning of the Old Testament, condemnation of same-sex activity was linked to the desperate need of Israel to increase its size and power. The Israelites were a very small and rather defenseless agrarian group, surrounded by war-like tribes. ‘Nation-building,’ the necessity to propagate and become larger and less vulnerable was one of the most important goals of the people. At risk was the survival of Israel. This is written into the Scriptures: “Be fruitful and multiply.” It is understandable that anyone who did not produce offspring would be considered less valuable.

For gay people, very selective literal Biblical interpretation, removed from its historical context, has been devastating. It is still being used to justify the denial of equality and human rights. Equally disturbing, it has been used to make some gay individuals hate themselves and has blighted their relationship with God.

The Quakers use the Bible in a powerful way to examine same-sex relationships. In a recent (December 1999) statement a Quaker group explains: “We believe that sexuality is governed by the same New Testament ethic that guides every other conduct choice for faithful Christians. Responsibility, mutuality, love, justice, non-violence, non-domination, and non-exploitation characterize what Jesus called the “Kingdom of God.” How will sexual expression of love be judged? “By their fruits you shall know them.” (Mt 7:20) Does this relationship create an environment of love and justice? Does it further the creation of loving and sustaining community?”¹⁴⁴

46. Were Sodom and Gomorrah destroyed because of homosexuality?

- *the story has been used throughout the ages to condemn gay people*
- *the sex in the story is about rape*
- *Ezekiel later clearly identifies the sin of Sodom as pride, idleness and failure to help the poor and needy*
- *many scholars (and Jesus himself!) believed that the sin of the city was a lack of hospitality to strangers, a life-threatening sin in Biblical times*

Recent archaeological discoveries indicate that the location of Sodom and Gomorrah was evidently very fertile and that the people who lived there enjoyed a prosperity not shared by the surrounding areas which were evidently primarily desert wasteland.¹⁴⁵

Here is the story of Sodom and Gomorrah:

Sodom was a city that God intended to destroy. It was filled with greed and materialism. As the prophet Ezekiel later proclaimed: “Behold, this was the iniquity of thy sister Sodom: pride, fullness of bread, and abundance of idleness was in her and in her daughters, neither did she strengthen the hand of the poor and needy!”
(Ezekiel:16:49)

Two angels were sent to Sodom by God to warn Lot of the impending doom. Lot invited the divine travelers to stay in his home. Ancient Judaic hospitality codes required people to offer food, shelter and protection to people who were traveling. The people of Sodom did not obey this code; they were afraid their possessions would be stolen by strangers staying inside their city gates.

After the angels ate and were preparing for bed, the men of Sodom converged on Lot’s home, demanding that the angels come out so that they might know (rape) them. Rape was the ancient way to subdue and humiliate enemies. Protecting his guests, Lot did not allow the crowd to rape them, but instead offered his two virgin daughters to the angry mob. (!!) “Behold now, I have two daughters which have not known man: let me, I pray you, bring them out unto you.”

The townspeople refused and charged at Lot. The angels pulled him back inside the house and rendered the angry crowd blind. The angels warned Lot and his family to leave the city. The family was saved except for Lot’s wife who, according to the story, looked back and was turned into a pillar of salt.

Shortly thereafter, the two daughters, fearing that they would never have children because the world had been destroyed, tricked their father into becoming drunk and sleeping with them. They each became pregnant and each bore a son.

Some people want to believe that the message of this story is that God hates homosexuality and plans to destroy gay people. This tradition is so strong that even the word ‘sodomy,’ which technically means anything but very traditional sex between persons (heterosexual or homosexual) is derived from this story about the city of Sodom.

Yet if the passage is about sexual activity at all, it is about rape, not homosexuality.¹⁴⁶ It also raises questions about the value placed on women.

Scholars believe that the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah was inhospitality (refusing to take in strangers, which was a life-threatening sin in Biblical times.) The people of the town were concerned mainly with themselves and their property, closing their doors to strangers traveling through the desert.

Three thousand years later, when Jesus talked about the destruction of Sodom, He indicated that it was destroyed because it was a place lacking hospitality. Dr. Gomes: “In the New Testament, Jesus himself is under the impression that Sodom was destroyed

because it was a place lacking in hospitality; we find him saying as much in (Matthew 10:14-15) and in (Luke 10:10-12.)”¹⁴⁷ In either passage, Jesus never mentions the topic of homosexuality when He refers to the cities, but speaks about the lack of welcome and rejection of strangers.

Dr. Gomes: “*What is revealing about all this is that nowhere in the Old or New Testaments is the sin of Sodom, the cause of its sudden and terrible destruction, equated with homosexuals or homosexuality.*”¹⁴⁸

47. What is the Holiness Code?

- *a set of specific rules and guidelines for religious behavior in ancient Israel*
- *the Code was designed to promote cultural identity within Judaism*
- *most contemporary Jews and Christians no longer follow most of this Code*
- *Jesus set new standards for what it means to be holy*

The Holiness Codes of the Old Testament, in which the two verses against homosexual activity are found, were rules designed for a very particular purpose in a very particular setting.¹⁴⁹ They were a guide for the ancient Jews to help them build their nation and distinguish themselves from the Canaanites, whose land they had been given by God. The context was a listing of rules for ritual purity which would promote cultural identity, protection, procreation and the advancement of Judaism.

The Codes contain hundreds of commandments which contemporary Jews and Christians no longer follow or which prescribe behavior which is illegal in today’s society. For example, the Codes mandate the death sentence for non-virginal brides, the stoning to death of unruly children, the death sentence for adultery, etc.

Biblical scholars agree that the Holiness Codes include material that is cultural and cultic:¹⁵⁰ Workers must be paid wages on the day of their labor. Two types of yarn are never to be woven into the same cloth. Tattoos are forbidden. Bigamy is acceptable. Horoscopes and mediums are forbidden and use of them is named an abomination and punishable by death. An unbetrothed woman raped by a man must become his wife and stay with him forever. Handicapped persons may not approach the altar of God. Those who shave their beards or wear round haircuts are condemned. Slavery is endorsed, but not tolerance or mercy for the vanquished.

In addition to a verse calling same-sex behavior an abomination, there are verses which term other behaviors abominations as well. It is an abomination for women to wear clothing which is traditionally worn by men. Eating pork and shellfish are abominations. People who even touch the skin of a pig (a football?) are condemned.¹⁵¹ √

It is the admonition found in Leviticus: “You shall not lie with a male as with a woman.” that is used to condemn gay people. The context of the prohibition (to separate the Jews from the practices of neighboring peoples, to propagate and build up the nation of Israel, to have as many children as humanly possible) is not taken into account. Nor is the fact

that hundreds of other commandments and prohibitions are quite naturally disregarded by Christians and Jews today.

Christians give priority to the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth over the Old Testament. Jesus set new standards for what it means to be holy. He followed particular Old Testament Laws and openly rejected and violated others. He raised justice, mercy, kindness and love to new heights.¹⁵² He taught that we should examine ancient laws as to their continual purpose. For example, it was against the Law to heal on the Sabbath. When Jesus healed on the Sabbath, his 'sin' outraged the legalistic religious leaders.

To selectively choose to interpret literally a passage from Leviticus in order to condemn a minority group, while ignoring hundreds of other passages, seems designed more to hurt gay people than to seek the truth for all humanity. Many people find such selective interpretation to be theologically unsound, intellectually indefensible and reflective of a prior prejudice.

48. *What about the teachings of Paul regarding homosexuality?*

- ***The only references in the New Testament to same-sex behavior are found in the writings of Paul***
- ***There are no references to the subject by Jesus or others who knew Jesus.***
- ***Paul wrote some of the most beautiful passages in the Bible***
- ***however, some of Paul's teachings regarding slavery, marriage, and women are deeply rooted in the culture of his time and his legalistic Judaic upbringing***

The only references to same-sex behavior in the New Testament are found in the writings of Paul. Dr. Gomes: "The homosexuality Paul would have known and to which he makes reference in his letters...has to do with pederasty and male prostitution... All Paul knew of homosexuality was the debauched pagan expression of it. He cannot be condemned for that ignorance, but neither should his ignorance be an excuse for our own."¹⁵³

Paul infused Judaic teachings into his own writings in the New Testament. Paul believed Jesus would come again during his lifetime so he advised Christian men not to marry because the end of the world was at hand.

He perpetuated the ancient place of women in the church, admonishing them to cover their heads and keep silent. To some people, Paul's writings serve as 'proof' that women should not hold office in churches today. He taught that women must obey their husbands.

Paul also wrote in Ephesians that slaves must obey their masters and do so cheerfully. The obedient slave will find his or her reward in heaven. (These are the famous passages quoted so often during the Civil War to justify slavery.) Slave owners were not defensive about owning slaves. On the contrary, they believed that the Bible (and Paul) taught that slavery was part of God's plan for mankind.

Dr. Gomes: *“Those who wished to challenge the morality of slavery found that they had to challenge both the authority and the interpretation of scripture. They found also that it was not as easy as it might appear, for...the biblical case for slavery was both strong and consistent.”*¹⁵⁴

Although in other passages Paul writes some of the most beautiful and empowering words in the New Testament, he also carried with him much of the culture and legalistic Judaic teachings of his day. Paul, the great Apostle, was a man of his time.

***49. When reading the Bible, how does one use the historical perspective?
(More thoughts to ponder about the Holiness Code and the teachings
of Jesus:)***

In our group we found that the need to examine our own beliefs and our search through the Bible brought into great relief what we did and did not know about the Scriptures. This was one of the most compelling and enjoyable parts of our journey.

We found that, in seeking isolated verses as ‘proof’ that the Bible supports a particular opinion, one can find verses to support any view on almost any topic. We learned about the importance of reading the Scriptures with an understanding of their historical context.

Commandments in the Holiness Code at one time served a vital function. All have their origin in the early years of Judaism more than 5000 years ago. They were deemed necessary for the physical survival and propagation of the small religious community. The proper cooking and storage of foods was not well understood; leprosy and contagious diseases were common and lethal; any sexual activity that did not produce children threatened their very survival. It is hard for us to imagine how difficult life must have been for these early tribal people.

Contemporary Judaism has become one of the world’s most ardent proponents of equality for all people. Tradition informs the religion, but interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures (what we call the Old Testament) is not taken literally or out of historical context. The Union of American Hebrew Congregations states: “Consistent with our Jewish commitment to the fundamental principal that we are all created in the divine image, the Reform Movement has been in the vanguard for the full recognition for lesbians and gays in society.”¹⁵⁵

To underscore the importance of using an historical perspective, we list the following as just a few examples of commandments from the Holiness Codes which are *not* taken literally by most contemporary Jews and Christians. In terms of our society’s current understanding of the world, we recognize that many of the following are not only personally upsetting, they are illegal in today’s culture.

On plundering and pillaging neighboring tribes:

These early laws included the rules of war for taking land and possessions from other tribes, granting Israel the same rights as their neighbors to loot and plunder the homes and villages of the vanquished.

It was unlawful to show mercy or kindness to those defeated in battle.

Slavery was endorsed.

On women and children:

Any woman found not to be a virgin on her wedding day must be stoned to death.

Any woman caught in adultery met the same fate.

Hebrew parents were instructed to bring unruly children to the Temple where the religious Elders were to stone them to death in public view.

Bigamy was acceptable as long as all the wives of Hebrew men were also Hebrew.

Women were not allowed to participate in worship.

It was an abomination for women to wear the same type of clothing that men wore.

A woman who was raped must marry her attacker and could not be divorced from him.

On daily life:

Men who shaved their beards were condemned.

Anyone bearing a physical handicap could not approach the altar of God.

Any one with a rash on their skin was to be expelled from the community.

It was unlawful (and punishable by death) to seek a prediction of the future from a medium or by observing the movement of the stars (today's horoscope).

It was unlawful to weave two types of yarn into the same cloth (today's blended fabrics).

It was unlawful (an abomination) to eat shellfish and pork and it was against these same religious laws to touch anything made from the skin of a pig (today's football).

Commerce or work of any kind on the Sabbath was strictly forbidden.

The Holiness Code can be seen in the context of helping to sustain and increase the small nation of Israel in a difficult and hostile world.

It was into this context, 3000 years later, that Jesus was born.

Ancient religious leaders felt that the observance of these laws were the only means of salvation for a people of God. As a young Jewish rabbi, Jesus felt otherwise. He taught that the Kingdom of God is within and that salvation comes through the grace of God.

Jesus taught about love, fidelity, forgiveness, mutual honor, and the qualities of the Spirit which sustain and nurture all human relationships and our relationship with God.

50. Do the members of First Tuesday Group ever feel emotionally torn because their full acceptance of homosexuals conflicts with the current church policies?

- *no*
- *we see no conflict between the Gospel and equal inclusion of all people*
- *we are optimistic about the future*

No. Discrimination against gay people is not based on the teaching and example of Christ, but on misinformation, *very* selective literal interpretation of the Bible and the anti-gay bias of society. We see no conflict between the Gospel and the full and equal treatment of all human beings.

On the contrary, we believe that those who reject others in the name of a religion based on love *do* face a serious ethical dilemma. Intolerance hurts us all. When even a single person must deny his or her identity or live a diminished life in order to be treated equally, we are all diminished.

Silence, denial and exclusion are not our traditional Presbyterian values. They are certainly not remotely connected to the message of love that Jesus taught us. As Christians we are called to help the oppressed, not to lead the attack against them or treat them as ‘tolerable’ second-class citizens: those who may be invited to worship, but must be denied equality and wholeness. We have seen in our own families the effects of such exclusion. They are deadly, far-reaching and long-lasting.

We believe that God’s invitation and grace come freely and directly from the Creator and are not dependent upon committees, task forces or consensus within denominations.

Gay friendly people are confident that gay people will someday be free; in fact, freedom seems inevitable at this point. The speed with which it is approaching is remarkable. Andrew Tobias (See: #15: “What is the closet?”) recounts a recent experience:

“ I came to Harvard College with a clear sense of who I was and a core-of-my-existence determination no one would ever find out. For four years, not a soul did. But as I recently told 600 ninth through twelfth-graders when I was invited to my high school’s second (no less) annual gay and lesbian awareness assembly: When I was sitting where they were sitting, there wasn’t an hour that went by-- not in six years at Horace Mann or the four that followed at Harvard—that I did not think of my one central mission: namely, never to have anyone find out the horrific truth.

And there I was telling virtually the entire school.

A couple of months later, they made me a trustee. Has this world ever changed.”¹⁵⁶

It is very powerful to witness the age-old oppression endured by gay people break apart in our lifetime before our very eyes. Typically, gay friendly religious people are much more worried about the future and legacy of the church than their own future which, in spite of a considerable struggle ahead, seems very bright.

We close with a favorite passage from Isaiah:

Is not this the sort of fast that pleases me
--it is the Lord God who speaks—
to break unjust fetters
and undo the thongs of the yoke,

to let the oppressed go free
and break every yoke,
to share your bread with the hungry,
and shelter the homeless poor,

to clothe the man you see to be naked
and not turn from your own kin?
Then will the light shine like the dawn
and your wound be quickly healed over.

Your integrity will go before you
and the glory of God behind you.
Cry, and God will answer;
call, and He will say, “I am here.”

If you do away with the yoke,
the clenched fist, the wicked word,
if you give your bread to the hungry,
and relief to the oppressed,

your light will rise in the darkness,
and your shadows become like noon.
God will always guide you,
giving you relief in desert places.

He will give strength to your bones,
and you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water
whose waters never run dry.

You will rebuild the ancient ruins,
build up on the old foundations. (58: 6-12)

Welcoming and Affirming Religious Groups Within Christian Denominations:

Denomination – Formal Welcoming Group

Presbyterian – More Light Presbyterians (www.mlp.org)
Methodist – Reconciling Methodist Congregations
Mormons (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints) – Affirmation
Episcopalian – Integrity
Lutheran – Lutherans Concerned
Catholic – Dignity
Baptist – Welcoming and Affirming Baptists
Seventh-Day Adventist – Seventh-Day Adventist Kinship International, Inc.
Unitarian Universalist: the denomination itself takes an active stance
United Church of Christ (Congregational): the denomination itself takes an active stance.
United Church of Christ also administers – the Open and Affirming Program
Metropolitan Community Church: the denomination itself takes an active stance
Christian Science – Emerge
Brethren/Mennonite – Brethren/Mennonite Council for Lesbian and Gay Concerns
Quakers: the denomination itself takes an active stance

Within Judaism:

Conservative Jews support equal rights for gays and lesbians and welcome them at synagogues.
Reform Jews do not discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation and accept gay and lesbian rabbis. Reform rabbis may bless unions between same-sex couples.

Affirming Resources Within the Secular World

The following resources have information for individuals and families.

Because of issues of safety and confidentiality, gay people and those who love them frequently make use of the Internet. For this reason, we include the website address of these supportive organizations.

For Support and Advocacy for Families and Allies:

Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays: www.pflag.org

PFLAG has resources for gay people of African descent, Asian-Pacific people, Latino/a people, Native American people and Japanese people.

For Support, Advocacy and Educational Resources:

Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network: www.glsen.org

For Support, Education, Public Awareness and Human Rights Advocacy:

Human Rights Campaign: www.hrc.org

National Gay and Lesbian Task Force: www.nglftf.org

Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation: www.glaad.org

Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund: www.lambdalegal.org

Servicemembers Legal Defense Network: www.sldn.org

The Anti-Violence Project: www.avp.org

Amnesty International: www.amnesty.org

Southern Poverty Law Center: www.splcenter.org (monitors hate groups which target minorities)

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NOTE:

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However, quotation marks were used in a limited way, in order to insure a greater level of readability.

Within the text of the booklet, an endnote number following a sentence (or paragraph) indicates a direct quote from the documented source.

When an endnote begins with the phrase “Adapted from,” a word or words have been deleted (for the sake of brevity) or the basic idea or concept used, but not quoted verbatim.

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