

For LGBTQ Persons of Faith and Their Families

FIRST STEPS: PERSPECTIVES ON FAITH REGARDING
SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND GENDER IDENTITY

PFLAG LOS ANGELES

PARENTS, FAMILIES & FRIENDS ALLIED WITH THE LGBTQ COMMUNITY

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You are a person of faith who has discovered that you or someone you love is LGBTQ. At this challenging time, don't give up. This spiritual journey can lead you to a deeper understanding of life and faith.

Why did this happen to us? Some LGBTQ persons feel abandoned by God when they recognize their sexual orientation or gender identity. Parents and family members have similar thoughts. "God doesn't love me." "God is punishing me." In the Hebrew Scriptures, Job is God's blameless servant, yet many difficulties and tragedies beset him. He, too, asks why. God answers Job with a question: "Where were you when I founded the earth. Tell me if you have the understanding." Some things are beyond human comprehension, but Job was not at fault, and neither are you.

Is it okay to ask questions that may challenge my religious leader or religious doctrine? Many events cause us to ask questions of our churches, religious traditions, and God. Your encounter with LGBTQ issues forces you to look at life in a new way and, therefore, to reexamine what you have been taught. As you explore the beliefs in your own tradition and, perhaps, beyond it, give yourself time to gather information and reflect prayerfully. This "living the questions" can be painful and unsettling, but often leads to a deeper faith. Finding non-judgmental people who will listen and support you is very helpful during this time – close family, friends, supportive clergy, and PFLAG groups can help.

What about Scripture that condemns homosexuality?

For many of us, the Christian, Hebrew Scripture, and the Koran are authoritative. Few of us, however, can read and understand the nuances of the original languages: ancient Hebrew, classical Greek, first century Aramaic, and seventh century Arabic. Nor do we understand the social context in which these Scriptures were written. We rely on translations, all of which are interpretations. Biblical scholars do not agree on the meaning of the passages used to condemn LGBTQ persons, so read a variety of commentaries. Interestingly, most religious communities, even conservative ones, do not follow every prohibition in the Scriptures. In many Christian churches, for example, divorced and remarried persons are accepted in the congregation in spite of Jesus' explicit condemnation of such unions. It might be helpful to reflect on whether prejudice rather than faith lies behind the condemnation of LGBTQ persons.

My religion teaches that God didn't create LGBTQ persons – it's their own choice.

We are learning from medical research that, as a baby develops, the environment inside and outside the mother's womb interacts with the genes of the developing child in complex ways to produce natural human diversity. In your own extended family there is probably a wide range of variation in body type, hair and eye color, personality traits, and medical history. LGBTQ persons are part of that naturally occurring human variety. Medical science has determined that hormonal and other processes can predispose some children to be different in sexual orientation or gender identity. Psalm 139, 13-16 suggests that God has a plan for every person: "For You created my inmost being; You knit me together in my mother's womb. . . . My frame was not hidden from You when I was made in the secret place, when I was woven together in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in Your book before one of them came to be."

A family member disclosed they are LGBTQ. Why are they rebelling against the values we taught?

Some parents compare being LGBTQ with adolescent acts of rebellion like taking drugs. Coming out is the opposite of rebellion – it's reaching out. Your family member has paid you the compliment of sharing a very deep part of themselves. They have probably felt "different" for a long time during which they labored to understand what that difference was and what it meant. They have struggled and prayed to change their sexual orientation or gender identity without success. Now they have chosen to share that knowledge with you. It is an act of great trust in you as a parent, friend or family member, and they deeply need your support.

How can I teach my LGBTQ child our faith? Parents want their children to follow the religious tradition that means so much to them. Parents also fear God's anger directed at an LGBTQ child. The impulse to correct, to punish, even to banish an LGBTQ child often comes from love and fear for the child's future. Research, however, shows that these behaviors are unable to change a child's sexual orientation or gender identity. And this kind of correction can be deadly. LGBTQ youth who experience rejection at home are eight times more likely to attempt suicide, six times more likely to become seriously depressed, and six times more likely to use drugs. Your love and support can help you LGBTQ child live the best life they can. As St. Paul says, "Love never fails."

What behaviors are supportive? Listen to your children as they tell about their experiences. Tell your children you love them. Welcome their LGBTQ friends to your home. Allow them to dress in a way that feels comfortable to them. Don't call them names or allow anyone in your home to do so. Don't isolate them from the family or use physical violence.

Won't supporting my LGBTQ child, make them more gay?

Parents are often told to use "tough" love to make a child change his behavior. But unlike drug use or criminal acts, being LGBTQ is not about behavior. It's about an identity that psychologists have found to be remarkably persistent. Punishing and rejecting won't change your child but can put them at risk. This may be hard to accept, and you may have very negative feelings about your child triggered by dress, mannerisms, friends, and other things. But adding one supportive behavior such as a daily hug, or reducing a few negative behaviors such as name calling can help your child grow in a more healthy way.

What about reparative therapy? The American Psychiatric Association, and The American Psychological Association, The American Academy of Pediatrics, The American Medical Association have all issued statements saying that "no published scientific evidence support[s] the efficacy of reparative therapy as a treatment to change one's sexual orientation." These groups also caution that reparative therapy can have serious negative effects including increased depression and anxiety.

How can LGBTQ persons live moral lives? The same way straight persons do. By practicing virtues such as honesty, truthfulness, kindness, compassion, patience, forgiveness and love. Many LGBTQ persons pray, are devout members of a religious community, and perform works of charity.

What about marriage? Many LGBTQ persons follow high standards in their intimate relationships and enter into unions they consider to be holy and identical to marriage. These unions are characterized by love, free consent, mutuality, equality, commitment, fidelity, and fruitfulness whether through raising children or engaging in works of charity,

hospitality and justice. Are all relationships entered into by LGBTQ persons governed by these high standards? Clearly no. But neither are all heterosexual relationships – even those sanctified by churches and other religious institutions.

Can there possibly be a good outcome? People who have wrestled with this issues have many positive things to say about the experience. “It made me less judgmental,” said one Dad. “I came to a deeper sense of God’s unconditional love for me,” said a gay man. “It was the most important spiritual experience of my life,” said a Mom. The LGBTQ issues you face will lead you to think deeply about your faith, your core beliefs and your deepest values. That is a gift.

How do I learn more about religion and LGBTQ issues? In many sacred scriptures, spiritual life is described as a journey. Abraham left Ur; Buddha left the palace of his father; Jesus went out into the desert;– Mohammed traveled from Mecca to Medina. You, too, are on a spiritual journey, and there are many resources to help you on your way. That is why we have created an expanded version of this pamphlet, which includes resources, published and online, writings and sermons from religious leaders, and lists of LGBTQ-affirming websites maintained by a variety of religions and denominations. Don’t be afraid of the questions in your heart. As one religious thinker has said of this journey: “Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves.”

For the expanded version of this pamphlet and other resources visit pflag.LA.org.

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