



PFLAG FAITH

FIELD GUIDE:

CHAPTER STRUCTURE, PROGRAM AND ACTIVITY
IDEAS FOR OUTREACH TO FAITH COMMUNITIES



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Coming to terms with the fact that a loved one is lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT) can often be hard for people of faith. Thankfully, many of these people find PFLAG. Our chapters provide invaluable support, education, and advocacy for those struggling to reconcile their feelings for their loved one and their commitment to their faith. Finding the best ways to serve people of faith can be challenging. However, by keeping a few things in mind, PFLAG chapters can continue to be a welcoming place for all. Reevaluating chapter policies and support groups, expanding chapter programming, and building more coalitions can help make your chapter a powerful resource for people of faith. Any steps you take, whether small or large, can have a lasting impact on your chapter's work with people of faith.



MAKING YOUR CHAPTER MORE INCLUSIVE

People from all faith backgrounds come to PFLAG looking for support. Finding ways to serve diverse communities can be a difficult but rewarding process. By implementing small changes in how your chapter responds to and talks about faith, you will be able to create a welcoming environment for everyone.

We know that most PFLAG chapters put a lot of work into making sure that all people are included; this is a checklist of steps that your chapter should review and put into practice to ensure that you are being as inclusive as possible.

Some things to consider:

- **Think about your meeting location and what message it sends.** Many PFLAG chapters meet in churches, and such locations can be intimidating for non-Christians and people of different denominations. We encourage you to explore other more neutral options, such as community centers or libraries. If a church is the best location that you can find, then be sure to let people in the community know that the chapter is not religiously affiliated. For example, mention on your chapter's flyer that PFLAG is a non-denominational organization.
- **Make sure language in your chapter materials lets people know that the chapter is welcoming to people of all faiths or no faith.** Unless you do so, people may believe the chapter to have a specific religious affiliation. Consider using words like "all inclusive" in your chapter's materials.
- **Talk about faiths other than Christianity in discussions.** Many chapters host forums for religious leaders (more on that later), and it is important that these events not be just a mixture of leaders from different Christian denominations. Look beyond these groups and reach out to other faith communities, such as Jewish and Muslim people. Even if you don't have members in these communities, simply by reaching out you send the message that you are open and welcoming to all. Additionally, reaching out may connect you to other people of faith who would benefit from the support of your chapter.

- **Elect a faith representative.** Create a position within your chapter to specifically focus on faith issues and their role within the chapter and community.
- **Have people of faith in your speakers' bureau.** This helps make your chapter more welcoming, provides a great way to reach out to faith communities, and helps educate PFLAGers about faith issues while educating people of faith about LGBT issues. Try to get speakers from different faith communities.
- **Watch for religious holidays when planning your events.** It is important to remember holidays of different religions when planning your calendar. Planning an event or even a board meeting on someone's holy day will prevent them from attending and feeling fully included in the chapter. Also, it may sound simple, but having a "Holiday Celebration" or an "End of the Year Party" will be more welcoming than a "Christmas Party."



By being a welcoming environment, and also being sensitive to different faiths, you will attract more diverse members, so be prepared to engage with them appropriately.



CHAPTER SUPPORT GROUPS

PFLAG chapter support groups often bring together people with different perspectives and needs. For many of these people, navigating their feelings about their faith and their LGBT loved one or LGBT identity can be difficult. PFLAG support groups can provide a safe place for people to talk about their concerns and hear from others who have had similar experiences. Talking about religion and faith can be difficult for some, especially when someone is struggling. It is important to keep a few things in mind as you work with and support people of faith.

- **Let them take the lead.** Just as no two parents react the same after learning a child is LGBT, no two people's faith journeys are exactly alike. Let people tell you their stories in their own time. Although you may want to relate or comfort, do not inject your opinions. Give them a chance to ask questions. Let them lead the conversation and express their level of concern.
- **Avoid generalizations.** Because you know someone of a specific denomination that had a hard time doesn't mean everyone will. Everyone comes from a different background and a different perspective.
- **Do your reading.** Be aware of other local and national faith resources. Letting people know about other resources can help them find more specific information that will guide them in a helpful direction.
- **Consider pairing up people with similar faith backgrounds for one-on-one support.** Some people are more likely to open up outside of the support circle. Pairing them with an experienced PFLAGer from a similar faith background may make them feel more comfortable.



CHAPTER PROGRAMMING MEETINGS & BEYOND

Faith issues can easily be incorporated into chapter meeting programming and special events for the chapter. Learning about faith issues is of interest to many PFLAGers, and it is an ever evolving topic. There are so many possibilities that the sky is the limit when it comes to chapter programming around faith issues. From large-scale projects that include the entire community to small inclusive gestures, there are many ways in which you can easily add faith issues to your programming.

Beginner - Because chapter leaders are always looking for programming ideas, we have provided a few simple suggestions to get you started.

- **Watch a faith-related film and have a discussion.** This is a favorite chapter program model because it takes little work to put together and the programs are a big success. The last few years have been ripe with new films that explore the LGBT community's relationship with faith issues. Many of these films also feature a family theme, as they share the personal stories of how families have worked through faith issues. Showing films and then leading a discussion can help get a dialogue started and provide an educational opportunity for your members. Be sure to show films on a diversity of religions and ethnicities. A few good films to watch are *For the Bible Tells Me So* and *Trembling Before G-d*.
- **Include articles in your newsletter about faith.** Including an article or even devoting a regular column to faith in your newsletter is a good way to keep people informed about the latest news and issues. The articles can be news stories or personal stories where guest columnists (from within your chapter or the community) share their stories of coming to terms with their faith and having a LGBT loved one. Again, be diverse in who writes the story and the perspective they share.

Intermediate - Starting with a smaller project, such as hosting a film and discussion, can help you gauge interest in larger-scale projects. Of course, there are always other projects that you can undertake. Larger projects like hosting a forum of religious leaders will take more work and commitment from the chapter. It is a good idea to get people thinking – and educated – about these issues first, so that no one feels overwhelmed.

1. **Hosting a religious forum.** A religious forum of diverse faith leaders to discuss LGBT people and issues can be a rewarding and exciting program. This is a great time to bring together different religious leaders to share in discussion and provide insight for working within faith communities.

- **Include leaders from diverse backgrounds.** Make sure that the discussion is not just Christian, and make sure it includes diverse denominations.
- **Have the event at a neutral location.** Try to find a space that is neutral for your participants. Local colleges, universities and community centers can be good spaces for these events.
- **Have some structure.** There are many different ways to structure this event, but the key is to make sure that it has some organized format so that everyone gets an equal amount of time to speak. One suggestion would be to allow all participants a few minutes for opening comments then have a moderator ask questions, before providing a few minutes at the end for questions from the audience.
- **Set a respectful tone.** Talk to the audience about the importance of being respectful to all participants. It is ok to disagree with certain people and/or participants, but they must still be treated with respect.
- **Invite the community.** A forum of diverse faith leaders talking about LGBT issues will be an attractive event to many people, not just PFLAG members. Publicize this event broadly and ask participants on the panel to publicize it as well. This is a great opportunity for coalition building (more on that later) that you don't want to miss out on. Also, be sure to pass the hat and use this opportunity to promote your chapter and all the work that you are doing. Attendees may be interested in PFLAG.
- **Invite the press.** Create a press release and distribute it widely to local media.
- **Follow up.** Follow up with any contacts made and be sure to send thank-you notes to the participants.

2. When something happens in your community that is anti-LGBT and has a faith angle, consider organizing a response. A perfect example of this is Love Won Out.

Love Won Out (LWO) is a traveling conference run by the anti-gay group

Focus on the Family. Local churches sponsor LWO, often putting up billboards that say, "Change is Possible."

Sometimes even the most negative attention brought to issues gives you the best opportunity to educate your community.

Responses to LWO and other anti-gay activities in communities can include:

- **A press conference with representatives from affected communities.** Faith, youth, state equality groups and other organizations interested in countering negative faith messages should all have a brief opportunity to speak. Contact the PFLAG communications office for help organizing the press conference.
- **An emergency PFLAG meeting.** Often people in the community will feel intimidated or hurt by just the presence and negative press that conferences like LWO bring. Reminding them that there are supportive people in the community who are willing to listen is important for counteracting the message of change promoted by LWO.



- **A peaceful protest.** As participants filter into LWO, it is nice for them to see an alternative message to the one they will hear inside. Signs that say, “I love my gay child the way he is or God loves my lesbian daughter” remind people that there is more than one faith message. It is also important to get those messages out to press who will attend the event.
- **A press release.** Once you have planned all of these great activities and messages of love, you want to let people know. Work with communications at the national office to draft a press release that reinforces your message and welcomes people to your events.



Advanced - Some people in your chapter may be interested in taking their faith work even further. Many people hope to make a difference by working directly with their local faith communities to make them more inclusive. Working directly on making an individual church or denomination more welcoming is a good activity for interested individuals in your

chapter, but is less appropriate as an entire chapter activity because it isolates individuals in the chapter who may not be a member of that particular faith community, or people with no specific faith community and tends to signal that the chapter is affiliated with one faith community. It is appropriate, and very helpful, to provide resources to chapter members who are interested in reaching out directly to their faith community. Suggesting the member's provide specific examples to faith groups about what they can do will help you make our voices heard in faith communities.

Some suggestions that you can provide to your faith community to help them be more inclusive are:

- **Include readings or quotations in their bulletin that deal with justice, equality and unconditional love.**
- **In sermons, homilies and other materials that pertain to justice and equality, mention lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people as individuals in need of understanding and support.**
- **Provide educational programs which dispel stereotypes and myths. Encourage social action committees to become more aware of this issue.**
- **Offer programs to youth groups that openly discuss sexual identity concerns.**
- **Educate clergy about being sensitive to issues facing lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender people of faith and their families and friends.**
- **Provide LGBT faith books to the church library.**



COALITION BUILDING

Learning to build coalitions is an important tool for all PFLAG chapters. Coalitions are important to help chapters expand their voice and find partners to help them in the work that they do. Building coalitions with faith communities is often a good way for PFLAGers to expand their existing coalitions or create new ones.

It is important to find common ground with any group that you would like to form a coalition with. Sometimes all it takes is reaching out and asking other groups to get involved. You may even find that you have more common ground with local faith communities than you think. Here are some tips to get you started.

- **Emphasize what you have in common.** There are many issues PFLAG chapters work on, but not all of them will be of interest to other groups you might want to partner with. Choosing the right issue to ask about can help shape a long-term relationship.
- **Consider support and education, not just advocacy.** Some people may not be ready to help with fighting a ballot initiative. That's OK. Provide ways that they can get involved at different levels, including education and support. Having a PFLAGer give a presentation to a church group might be a good first step.
- **Find a connection.** As with any potential coalition partner, it is a good idea to find someone with a connection to the organization to help make the ask. Having someone within a congregation ask the community leadership to get involved will most likely carry more weight than an outsider. This will also let the religious community know that this is an issue important to its membership.
- **Move outside of our Metropolitan Community Church and Unitarian Universalist comfort zone.** When reaching out to faith communities, remember to look beyond the usual suspects. There are lots of congregations that are welcoming or are looking for ways to become welcoming. Working with PFLAG can be an easy way for them to get started.

Through the chapter's work with coalitions, the chapter can also establish itself as a resource for these faith communities. Providing faith communities with a contact to ask questions will help them move forward and introduce new people to PFLAG.



FAITH CONVERSATIONS

Many people come to PFLAG, or will pick up this guide, hoping to gain skills to help them have conversations about faith and LGBT issues with their families or with their faith community. Sharing experiences and practicing these conversations can make them easier and less intimidating.

It is important, before you start a conversation about faith, to decide what your goal for the conversation is. Is your goal to share your story or to discuss how to make a particular faith community more welcoming? Knowing ahead of time what you are trying to accomplish can help you to keep the conversation focused. Talking to a person of faith about accepting an LGBT

family member will be different than talking to acquaintances about what their faith community believes about LGBT issues, and both will be different from talking to your faith community about being more welcoming. Think about the goals and be focused. As emotions arise it is easy to get off track. Remain calm and clear by keeping the goal in mind and preparing yourself with a positive mantra to repeat during the difficult moments.

Remaining calm and focused is a good way to approach any potentially heated discussion. Other helpful tips include:

- **Choose the time and place of the discussion carefully.** The dinner table at Thanksgiving is probably not the best time to talk about faith issues with a loved one. Pick a time when there aren't any distractions so that the person you are talking with can give the conversation their full attention.
- **Listen more than you talk.** Listen to what the other person is saying and try to understand their perspective. As you are listening, don't make assumptions about them or what they are saying. When you make assumptions about the conversation, you aren't listening to what they are saying, but rather to what you think about what they are saying.



- **Don't try to change the other person's mind.** Just stay focused on your goals. It often takes small steps and time to get people to expand their thinking, perspective, and/or behavior. You should view your conversation as only the first step.
- **Don't argue scripture.** Debating scripture is difficult and very draining. Scripture can be interpreted many different ways, and arguing it may only lead you in circles. Instead, focus on finding common ground and how you can work together. For example, perhaps you both have a child, so focus on how parents all want what's best for their children.
- **Practice.** Make time at a PFLAG meeting to practice having these conversations by having people break into pairs and role play. Anticipating the tough questions and thinking about them in advance can help you feel less nervous about the conversation.



WHAT'S NEXT?

This guide is just the beginning of your work on faith issues and with faith communities.

Using the tools in this guide, you can help make your chapter stronger and enhance the faith work that your chapter does. Ensuring that your chapter is inclusive, hosting strong support groups, presenting interesting programs and building strong coalitions can get the chapter on the path toward being a strong ally and resource for people of faith. As always, if you have questions, or need more help, contact your field and policy coordinator at the PFLAG National Office. The small steps that the chapter takes today will benefit members and future members for years to come.

SUPPORT PFLAG

PFLAG (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) works to promote a society where all people are treated with respect, dignity and equality. Help support our mission of support, education and advocacy by sending in a gift today. YES! I want to help PFLAG parents, families and friends stand up and fight for equality and a fair chance for the LGBT community. Enclosed is my gift of:

\$25 \$50* \$100 \$_____

Name

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Keep me informed with PFLAG updates:

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*Annual gifts of \$50 or more entitle you to full PFLAG National membership benefits.

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