

RESPONDING TO ANTI-GAY RELIGION

Executive Summary



movement advancement project ▶

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Movement Advancement Project

Launched in 2006, the LGBT Movement Advancement Project (MAP) is an independent, intellectual resource for LGBT organization executives and donors, funded by a small number of committed, long term donors to the movement. MAP's mission is to speed achievement of full social and political equality for LGBT people by providing donors and organizations with strategic information, insights and analyses that help them increase and align resources for highest impact. In short, MAP's purpose is to stimulate additional contributions to the LGBT movement, as well as additional productivity from those contributions. See www.lgbtmap.org for more information on MAP.

Strategic Issues Briefs

This report is one of a series of MAP strategic issue briefs. These briefs examine key issues facing the LGBT movement and aim to help funders and organizations put the issues in their current and long-term perspective, understand strategies for solving the problem, prioritize giving and action plans, and, ultimately, make the most effective use of limited resources. In addition, by outlining the broad scope of work underway to solve a specific issue, MAP hopes to spark both funders and organizations to think expansively and to collaborate with other funders and organizations working to solve the same problem.

The opinions expressed in this report reflect the best judgment of MAP and are based on extensive research and examination of the issue, including data gathering and analysis, review of current literature and media, numerous in-depth expert interviews, attendance at key conferences, etc.

MAP strategic issue briefs are based on a point in time and while MAP will periodically update the briefs, current events advance rapidly and, therefore, this report may not reflect the most recent changes in the landscape.

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Why LGBT Movement Donors Should Respond to Anti-Gay Religion

In the past decade, the power of the “Religious Right” has surged in America, as it influences politics, the media, the public, and US government policy with enormous media presence, consistent messaging, organized politicking, and influential preaching. Conservative Christian denominations not only have the most members (78 percent of all Christians versus 16 percent and 6 percent in moderate and liberal denominations, respectively), but they are also by far the fastest growing, having increased membership by 14 percent in the 1990s. (Moderate and liberal denominations actually shrank in the 1990s, by 5 percent and 11 percent respectively.)¹

While most Americans are not part of the extreme right, the average American is still very much swayed by religion, with over 84 percent of Americans saying that religion is important in their lives – second only to Mexicans’ 86 percent. Additionally, 37 percent of Americans say that religious leaders should try to influence government policy – the highest among western nations.²

For the most part, religion has not been a friend to the LGBT movement, with the majority of large denominations espousing anti-gay doctrines and actively preaching against homosexuality, creating a strong link between religious beliefs and anti-gay attitudes. For example:

- ▶ Seventy-five percent of Americans with “high” religious commitment oppose gay marriage, whereas just 35 percent of those with “low” religious commitment do so.³
- ▶ Four of the top seven reasons for denying marriage rights to same-sex couples in a 2005 Colorado poll were religious: “the Bible,” “keep marriage sacred,” “being gay is morally wrong,” and “homosexuality is a sin.”⁴
- ▶ Fifty-five percent of Evangelicals who regularly hear anti-homosexual sermons have a “very negative view of gay men.” Just 32 percent of Evangelicals who do not regularly hear such sermons view gay men very negatively.⁵

That said, the Religious Right certainly does not speak for all people of faith, and there is a growing movement that challenges Americans to embrace a more tolerant, compassionate faith perspective. However, thwarting anti-gay religion will require sustained and concerted effort for three reasons.

First, American religious institutions are highly fragmented, necessitating many tailored, small-scale interventions. Christian faiths (most important by far as they comprise 95 percent of religious Americans) split into 12 major denominations, about 140 sub-denominations, and 350,000 individual congregations. Each denomination and sub-denomination can have widely different views (e.g., on homosexuality, on the infallibility of the Bible; on how to interpret scripture), as well as widely varying governance, decision-making, legislative and judicial processes.

Second, virulently anti-gay Evangelical leaders who incessantly agitate and fundraise about homosexuality have very substantial financial backing. Thirty-seven conservative foundations gave \$168 million to 700 evangelical groups in 1999-2002. Jerry Falwell Ministries spends \$200 million annually. James Dobson’s Focus on the Family has a \$136 million annual budget and a radio audience of 200 million.⁶ There are no significant similar progressive religious organizations.

Finally, challenging a person’s religious beliefs can go to the heart of his or her identity. In this realm, progressive policy analysis and rational arguments – progressive foundations’ stock in trade – are rarely persuasive. Only 8 percent of denominations consider “human reason” foundational to their beliefs, whereas 82 percent of denominations rely on “sacred scripture” and 60 percent on “the Holy Spirit.”⁷ Clearly, change must come through leaders and lay people who speak to religious individuals on their terms and about their values.

Understanding the Work Underway to Counter Anti-Gay Religion

MAP has grouped the many nascent efforts of both religious and secular organizations to oppose anti-gay religion into five streams of work: denominational work, clergy coalitions, media work, religious resourcing and seminary work.

Denominational work is conducted within specific denominations (e.g., United Methodism, Presbyterianism, etc.) by members of those denominations. LGBT issues have been a source of friction in almost all moderate denominations and this work aims to make them more accepting of LGBT people. Currently within Christian denominations, only the United Church of Christ (UCC) officially and publicly welcomes LGBT people, though many individual congregations of other denominations welcome gays.

¹ Glenmary Research Center, 2000. “Religious Congregations and Membership Study”; MAP analysis. ²AP/Ipsos Public Affairs poll, May 2005. ³Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life poll, August 2006. ⁴Lauer Research Inc. Colorado Statewide Baseline Poll, August 2005. ⁵Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life poll, October 2003. ⁶“Holy War, The Religious Right’s Crusade Against Gays Heats Up”, Intelligence Report, Spring 2005; NCRP, January 2005. ⁷“Funding the Culture Wars.” ⁷Hartford Institute for Religion Research, March 2001. “Faith Communities Today.”

Denominational work takes two primary forms:

- ▶ Attempting to increase the number of individual congregations and clergy who are affirming of LGBT people.
- ▶ Trying to change overall denominational policies regarding LGBT people on issues such as church membership, ordination of LGBT clergy, and same-sex unions.

Similar in nature to the activities of secular politics, this work involves grassroots organizing among pastors and within congregations, as well as lobbying and electioneering church governing bodies. Pro-LGBT denominational groups are grossly underfunded versus their conservative counterparts.

Clergy coalitions draw attention to and leverage faith leaders who are already supportive of LGBT issues. This work is similar to that of secular lobbying groups that seek to influence the public, the media, and public officials. State-based clergy coalitions' tactics typically include grassroots organizing, lobby days, meetings with legislators, postcard campaigns, prayer breakfasts, speeches, and media work.

Having visibly supportive clergy in the public and political realms changes the nature of the debate by silencing or softening the opposition. It prevents opponents of LGBT equality from claiming the religious high ground and/or purporting to represent all people of faith.

State clergy coalitions are primarily limited by finances. Only four groups (Washington, Oregon, Massachusetts and New York) have budgets over \$50,000. The remaining groups operate using only volunteer and/or part-time staff.

Faith-based media work aims to publicize faith-based support for LGBT issues in the mainstream media. It takes three primary forms:

- ▶ Developing public faith leaders and getting them into the media via PR, speaking tours, TV appearances, etc.
- ▶ Media and advertising campaigns, including all forms of public relations and paid advertising. Due to the high cost of mass media, these have been used only sporadically.
- ▶ Cultural influence projects that integrate religious support of LGBT issues into broader arts and culture (e.g., visible clergy attendance at pride parades).

Given the generally high cost and impact of media work, it is critical that message development and testing be done to create a consistent and compelling voice.

Seminary work both trains future faith leaders and provides leading-edge thinking to current faith leaders. Seminaries reach student clergy before their opinions are set, and give existing religious leaders the necessary language to speak confidently on LGBT issues.

Only three US-based seminaries have specific LGBT centers of study: the Pacific School of Religion, Chicago Theological Seminary, and Hebrew Union College (of Reform Judaism). These seminaries also engage in external work such as hosting roundtables on LGBT issues, making media appearances, engaging in debates, and creating LGBT resources that can be accessed by the public.

Religious resourcing provides tools for use in all of the above efforts. Resourcing primarily falls into two categories:

- ▶ Educational and infrastructure resources used to educate clergy, the media, the public, and politicians. Examples include scriptural arguments, sample advertisements, brochures, DVDs and videos, speeches and talking points, sample faith statements, and open letters.
- ▶ Tools that supportive clergy can use within their congregations, including sample sermons, lectionary resources, children's time ideas, ceremonies and liturgies, reference materials, and theological frameworks.

The Institute of Welcoming Resources (IWR), a project of The Task Force, seeks to centralize some of the various religious groups' resource development. However, the need for customized materials of all sorts (e.g., for various faith traditions, denominations, youth, and people of color) means that, while it will be possible to re-use a core set of materials, there will always be a need for those materials to be adapted to specific circumstances.

Promising Avenues for Investment in Countering Anti-Gay Religion

While an increasing number of donors recognizes the importance of LGBT religion work, funding levels remain extremely low. LGBT religious groups are severely underfunded and have very few fundraising avenues. They are almost never funded by their denominations (which are generally not supportive of LGBT issues), are often run by clergy lacking non-profit fundraising expertise, and face resistance from secular donors reluctant to get involved in religion.

MAP has identified promising funding opportunities in each of the five areas of religion work outlined previously.

Denominational groups need general operating and infrastructure support, fundraising assistance, and skills building (particularly in grassroots organizing, speaker training, and congregational change strategies). Given limited funding availability, MAP recommends focusing funds on the faith traditions that are either more moveable than others or more influential than others.

State clergy coalitions are also severely under-funded and it is unlikely that enough funding will arise to fully fund coalitions in all 50 states. Rather than spread “bare-bones funding” across all states, MAP recommends adequately funding six to ten key battleground states such as California, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Washington, Ohio, and Pennsylvania.

Faith-based media work could most benefit from a national plan and a set of tested messaging that would enable coordination across organizations and initiatives. There are also numerous opportunities to fund leadership development, paid advertising, and cultural activities.

Seminary work is long-term in nature and requires both basic infrastructure funding and financing of key faith leaders to do theological work (e.g., through research or sabbatical funding). Donors could encourage promising young faith leaders to attend progressive institutions with scholarship funds.

Finally, in *religious resourcing*, while IWR is taking the lead on developing materials for use across denominations, specific needs include filling gaps in audience-specific materials (e.g., especially for people of color and youth), materials that humanize the LGBT community (e.g., videos, DVDs), and support materials for LGBT people of faith – especially youth who struggle with conservative personal religious convictions that they hold to be immutable truths.

While the United States is a religious nation, the feminist and civil rights movements – which were also initially countered by conservative Christians on Biblical grounds – have shown that when voices are lifted for equality, even very conservative denominations can eventually be persuaded to interpret the Bible in new, more accepting ways. There is much to be done, and many organizations fighting anti-LGBT religion are woefully under-resourced. However, the good news is that these same organizations are staffed by dedicated and tireless individuals who believe it is their mission, and even their calling, to help end religion-based discrimination against LGBT people. In the fight against anti-LGBT religion, a little additional funding and support can go a long way to making progress in changing the hearts and minds of religious Americans.



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