



Faith Outreach on Anti-Gay Religious Refusals Toolkit

January 2015

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Talking about Anti- Gay Religious Refusals from a Faith Perspective

Many people of faith remain conflicted about the place of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people in their congregations and in society. Often people in conflict know gay or lesbian people, and want to embrace fairness and inclusion. They worry, however, about what they have been taught about LGBT people. They sometimes fear that acceptance for LGBT people could interfere with their ability to practice their faith. Religious leaders can help calm these fears, and help ease the conflict inside people's hearts and minds. In speaking out as a person of faith you are joining thousands of other clergy and lay people around the country in proclaiming God's love for all. The suggestions below come from what research shows best allows this message to be heard.

Sharing common values:

People of faith have multitude of interpretations of scripture and tradition. Most of us, however, agree on these main themes. Speaking from a place of similarity, instead of difference, can have a profound impact on those listening to us.

- Faith calls us to love and respect

"After praying about this issue I have come to truly believe that as a Christian I am called to respect the fundamental dignity of each individual"

- Faith calls us to treat others the way we would want to be treated

"My faith teaches that I should treat others the way I want to be treated, including those that may seem different than me"

- It is not for us to judge another

"I came to understand that it wasn't for me to judge"

★ ★ **Speak from your experience:** Although these are common values, it is important to give space for people who are still discerning around these issues. We are most effective when we speak from our own beliefs and experiences. Speaking in blanket terms can be off putting, closing doors for conflicted people of faith who don't yet agree. Statements like "My faith has taught me ..." are much effective than "Christians know..."

Speaking from faith:

Many people fear that they cannot support LGBT people while still being true to religious teachings. Sharing your own faith centered support is incredibly important.

"When I search my heart I believe I'm called to respect ..."

"For me truly living my faith means..."

"Praying about this issue I came to understand..."

★ ★ **Be your authentic self:** People trust us when we are ourselves—there is no need to "ham it up". In fact, studies show that people of faith respond best when clergy and faith leaders can speak about God and faith while not coming off as too heavy handed

or judgmental. By sticking to main themes- as opposed to proof texting scripture-- we allow people to listen without feeling like they are being attacked or quizzed.

Telling our stories:

Many individuals and faith communities have struggled with the issue of LGBT equality but have moved toward acceptance and understanding. Sharing your own journey, or the journey of your congregation or family, can provide conflicted listeners an example of someone who knows what it is like to be in conflict. This commonality makes it easier for them to listen.

“ I struggled with this issue at first, but after really getting to know Mary and Elizabeth- a lesbian couple in my congregation- I realized that their family was not so different from my own. After much prayer and study I realized that they, like all of us, are children of God, and that I am called to include and love all of God’s children ”

Establishing credibility:

People in conflict are looking for guidance from religious leaders on this issue. Sharing your experience helps them trust you and listen to what you have to say.

“I have been a Rabbi for 25 years and, in that time...”

Calming Fears:

There is lot of confusion in our communities and congregations about laws that protect religious liberty. People of faith can address this confusion by explaining that religious liberty is incredibly important- but that anti- gay religious refusal are unnecessary and are not supported by people of faith.

- Religious liberty is important to all of us
“Freedom of incredibly important- it is one of our fundamental rights as Americans – and that is why it is protected in the very first amendment to the constitution.”
- Clergy people, and places of worship, have the freedom to determine which marriages they will and won’t perform in their faith traditions. Nondiscrimination laws don’t change that.
“As I understand it, Jesus calls us to include, not exclude. HB XXX would allow public businesses to turn away gay and lesbian people, they could be denied service in restaurants, even be evicted from their apartment simply because of who they are and who they love. To me that just isn’t right.”
“My faith does not teach that we should turn people us away from public businesses and accommodations- instead it tells me to love other people as children of God”

5 Things Your Congregation Can Do to Stop Anti-Gay Religious Refusals Bills in Your State

- 1. Preach/ Teach:** Include this issue in an upcoming sermon, and/or host a small group to talk about why this issue is important to your community. Consider doing this in conjunction with writing letters to the editor, phone calls to your legislator or as a to kick off a letter writing campaign -- these issues can be upsetting and, once people fully understand the threat, it is often important to empower participants with a way to take concrete action for change.
- 2. Write Letters to legislators:** Engage your congregation or social justice committee in writing letters to your elected officials. Hand written, heartfelt letters from people of faith are incredibly impactful for legislators who are trying to decide how to vote on a controversial issue. Please see the attached Letter Writing Tip Sheet for more information about this critical work. Congregants can look up their elected officials by entering their address here: <http://openstates.org/>
- 3. Letters to the editor:** Filling in district papers with LTEs from people of faith opposing anti-gay religious refusal Bills sends a clear message that many people of faith believe that gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community members should be respected and included. The opinion page is the most widely read section of the newspaper, and legislators pay attention to what is on it. Host a letter to the editor writing gathering, and then submit your letters to your local paper.
- 4. Call your legislator:** Legislators listen to the people who elected them! Consider printing a flyer in your bulletin with the number of the legislator(s) in your area-- you can look them at the URL above. After preaching or teaching on this topic ask congregants to call their elected official and leave a voicemail asking them to stand against discrimination. While this activity is not a perfect fit for all communities it can be a quick, empowering way for people to put their faith in action. It can also be a great activity for social justice small groups.
- 5. Request a constituent meeting:** One of the most powerful tools for moving legislators is to invite them to small, intimate gatherings where they can have personal conversations about anti- gay religious refusals. Consider gathering a group of 4-8 people from your congregation and calling to request a constituent meeting with a legislator. All attendees should live in the district, or be joining immediate family members who live within the district. Before setting up a constituent meeting, please review the constituent meeting guideline sheet.



WRITING A LETTER TO YOUR LEGISLATOR IN 5 EASY STEPS

Writing your own handwritten *personal* letter shows elected officials that you care deeply about stopping harmful anti-gay discrimination measures in your state. The few moments you take now will make a lasting impression.

STEP 1: Address the letter and state the reason for writing.

Dear Legislator,

As your constituent, I am writing to share my strong support of religious freedom and equality for all. That is why I stand opposed to opposition to **[BILL NAME AND NUMBER]** which would allow individuals to use their religious beliefs as an excuse to harm others.

STEP 2: Add a few personal reasons about why you oppose discriminatory laws.

[Identity + Value/reason for support]

Examples:

- As a Christian, my faith tells me to treat others as I want to be treated. Creating a new law that goes against this principle hurts us all. When I search my heart, I believe I'm called to respect the fundamental dignity of all people. My religion teaches me to work to accept and love everyone, even those whose values and faith may be different from mine. We are all God's children, deserving of love and acceptance.
- I love and support my brother/sister/cousin/friend/coworker/neighbor who is gay/transgender, and this new law would allow for discrimination against him/her.
- As a Republican, I oppose unnecessary legislation that burdens taxpayers and business. Passing this new, unnecessary bill will lead to endless lawsuits at a great cost to taxpayers when religious freedom is already guaranteed and protected in the U.S. Constitution. As a strong supporter of business, I believe that local businesses play an important role in our economy and communities; that's why it is so important that they serve all customers and not judge or refuse to serve them because of who they are.
- [For everyone] Gay and transgender people are our friends, neighbors, family, and co-workers. They work hard, serve in the military, and pay taxes. When they walk into a business or government office, they should be treated like anyone else and not be discriminated against.

STEP 3: Ask your legislator to oppose harmful, discriminatory anti-gay religious refusals bills.

Please do everything you can to stop this harmful, discriminatory anti-gay religious refusals bill. I will be following this issue closely; please keep me updated and respond to my letter as soon as possible. Thank you for your time and public service.

STEP 4: Include your complete contact information.

This lets your legislator know that you are a constituent, and also lets them follow up with you. Include your full name, complete address, and email.

STEP 5: Return your letter today to a volunteer or mail it directly to your legislator!

Find your legislator's address at <http://openstates.org/>.

If you receive a follow-up letter or email, we would love to know!

Please forward a copy to [NAME] at [EMAIL].

Example Letter:

January 12, 2015

Dear Senator Smith,

As your constituent, I am writing to share my strong support of religious freedom and equality for all. That is why I stand opposed to opposition to HB XXX which would allow individuals to use their religious beliefs as an excuse to harm others.

As a Christian, my faith tells me to treat others as I want to be treated. Creating a new law that goes against this principle hurts us all. When I search my heart, I believe I'm called to respect the fundamental dignity of all people. My faith teaches me to work to love and accept everyone, even those whose values and faith are different from mine. We are all God's children, deserving of love and acceptance.

Gay and transgender people are our friends, neighbors, family, and co-workers. They work hard, serve in the military, and pay taxes. When they walk into a business or government office, they should be treated like anyone else and not be discriminated against.

Please do everything you can to stop this harmful, discriminatory anti-gay religious refusals bill. I will be following this issue closely; please keep me updated and respond to my letter as soon as possible. Thank you for your time and public service.

Sincerely,

*Judy James
123 Main Street
Libertyville, TX 12345
judy@mail.com*



Out for Freedom Campaign Guide to Effective Constituent Meetings

One of the most powerful tools for moving legislators to be supportive of LGBT equality is to invite them to small, intimate gatherings where they can have personal conversations, let down their guard, and gain deeper insight into the lives and concerns of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people and their allies. While constituent meetings may be successful in many variations, there are strategies we have found to make these meetings most effective.

Effective Constituent Meetings:

Who: Constituent meetings are meant for constituents. All attendees should live in the district, or be joining immediate family members who live within the district. Exceptions would be a clergy member or business leader whose congregation or business is within the district. Frequently, everyone in the group has a personal connection to the host couple and ideally the meeting would include a mix of LGBT people and their straight family or friends. Also, constituent meetings are not for everyone –especially the easily agitated. Everyone who attends the meeting should be confident that they are able to hear the legislator’s point of view without responding harshly.

How Many: Ideally a meeting consists of 4 to 8 individuals – the size of the group should fit into someone’s living room. The larger the meeting, the less intimate and more intimidating for the legislator. The meeting will typically last one hour and should allow for each participant or couple to share in detail their story of support for LGBT people and personal reason for their position on the bill (in support of nondiscrimination policy or opposed to anti-gay religious refusals bills).

Where: Meetings should be requested for the home of a constituent, ideally the home of a family with a direct LGBT connection (parents of a gay or transgender child, adult married same sex couple with children). This allows for the Senator to experience LGBT people in a family environment, amidst their family photos and belongings. Some legislators will prefer more neutral ground. Other options include a church or synagogue, library, or even diner. The last choice is the State House, which offers too many distractions and a lack of intimacy.

Getting a Meeting: Some legislators are more available than others for meetings, and all have many requests on their time. Typically, it takes persistence to schedule a meeting. Preferably the host of the meeting will call regularly (every three to five days) as well as requesting meetings in writing. If there is no response, visiting the legislator at his place of work or within the State House to request a meeting can be tried.

Preparing for a Meeting:

As a group: Prior to the constituent meeting, schedule a meeting or conference call with as many participants as possible and a member of the advocacy team (ACLU or coalition staff who is well versed in messaging and with insight into legislative strategy) in order to share the latest information about the legislator’s position and develop a shared strategy for the meeting. Determine who will speak in what order and what each person will talk about. Decide on questions you’d like to ask the legislator and who will ask them. Decide who will close the meeting, and who will ask the legislator to oppose the anti-gay religious refusals bill (or support the nondiscrimination bill). Make a plan for debriefing the meeting with the advocacy team staff once completed.

Individually: It is a great idea to bring family photos to the meeting. Find photos of multigenerational families that support a gay or transgender member of the family. If possible, make copies of these photos that you can leave with the legislator. Writing a letter that can be left with the legislator is a great way to ensure that you can share your story as you mean to, even if time runs out in the meeting or the legislator changes the subject.

During the meeting: Do’s and Don’ts:

DO STAY POSITIVE: Congrats! It is a great sign that the legislator is willing to take a meeting with you! And, if this meeting is a positive experience, it is likely the legislator will do this again. Keeping the tone positive, not aggressive, will make it more likely the legislator will be open to listening to what you have to say. Thanking the legislator frequently throughout the meeting and acknowledging that this can be a difficult decision can go a long way to making the legislator feel more open and comfortable.

DO FOCUS ON PERSONAL STORIES: The advocacy team already has lobbyists who can talk about rights, benefits, legal issues and technical process points. Constituent meetings are about sharing stories of real people who support fair treatment of gay and transgender people. You want to be the “face” of the issue, the person who will come to mind as the legislator is casting his or her vote. Focus on real stories, as personal as possible.

DO BE SPECIFIC: Talk about real people (Jim and Steve, not gay couples, etc). Use specific examples of how the proposed legislation will affect your life or the lives of people you know and love. Be sure to share how this makes you feel (ex: how a parent of a gay child fears their child being treated unfairly or moving away if discrimination is allowed in this state, gay couple with kids share the fear that they won't be recognized as a family in life's most critical moments, etc).

DO SHARE YOUR FAITH EXPERIENCE: Often legislators assume people of faith oppose LGBT equality. That's why it is great to share your own faith experience and how it relates to your support for gay and transgender people. Don't be afraid to go there – if your faith in Jesus has led you to support equality, say so! Bible quoting doesn't get us far, but sharing your deeply held faith values- like loving your neighbor and treating others as you want to be treated- can resonate with legislators.

DON'T ASSUME THAT YOU ALREADY KNOW WHAT THE LEGISLATOR WILL SAY: Preparing for a constituent meeting is not about preparing a rebuttal. Concentrate on listening to the legislator and remind yourself that it can be uncomfortable for the legislator to be in a room full of constituents who feel strongly (and often differently) than he or she does.

DON'T ENGAGE IN LONG CONVERSATIONS ABOUT PROCESS: Potential language changes, potential legislative shenanigans and other "process" points are conversation stoppers. This is space where the legislator is the expert and frequently it can be used as an excuse to avoid a conversation about the real issue of discrimination against gay and transgender people. We want to avoid process conversations by reminding the legislator that there are real gay and transgender people, and/or their friends and family, in the room there to talk about an issue that affects their lives.

DON'T ENCOURAGE LEGISLATORS TO "SET THEIR FAITH ASIDE": Talking about the separation of church and state is a terrible subject for constituent meetings. It sends a message that the legislator can't follow their faith and support ending discrimination against LGBT people. We want to let the legislator know that they can support gay and transgender equality because of their faith background, not in spite of it.

DEBRIEFING A CONSTITUENT MEETING

- What was your overall impression about the meeting?
- How would you describe the mood of the legislator?
- What specific words did the Senator use to describe their feelings about the policy specifically? About gay and transgender people more generally?
- At any point, did the legislator seem to respond enthusiastically to something—either in agreement or in disagreement – with something that was said? What was it that caused the reaction? How did you know? What visual cues did the legislator give?
- What did the legislator agree with most during the meeting?
- Did the legislator seem moved by any personal stories? What ones?
- Did the legislator mention anything specific that held him back from being on our side of this issue? Were there any people, places of worship or areas of their district that they were concerned about?
- Did the legislator mention anyone that had talked to about this previously?
- How did the meeting end? What was the mood at that point? What, if any, follow up did the legislator ask for?