

# Addressing Religious Arguments to Achieve LGBT Equality



But why is it so difficult with a pro-equal rights President and a Democratic-controlled Congress?

We believe it is because there is an air of acceptability in America to be against LGBT people based on one's religious beliefs.

## Foreword by Steve Hildebrand

### Advisor to Faith in America

LGBT organizations have done a lot of great things. They've fought ballot initiatives, worked to elect friendlier politicians, moved local governments and businesses forward, defended our rights in courtrooms and brought us closer to achieving overall equality.

Regarding faith and religion, courageous denominations have taken on battles for new mission statements affirming gay men and lesbians. Some even affirm gay ministers in committed relationships.

The Institute for Welcoming Resources and its member organizations have worked hard to increase welcoming and affirming congregations by 75% in 3 years. They helped rally support for pro-gay policies in the Episcopal Church and the United Church of Christ in the face of threats by anti-gay forces. The Evangelical Lutheran Church made major advances. The Presbyterian and United Methodist Churches came close to repealing ordination and same-sex blessing bans. These strides are important because the mainline Protestant churches continue to have significant influence in American power circles.

Progress has come because these brave people took on bigotry and spoke in religious ways to counter it.

At the federal level, progress has been slow. Passing hate crimes legislation was the first federal law affirming LGBT rights. Now, we are on the verge of repealing the discriminatory policy against gays serving openly in the military. Maybe. But why is it so difficult with a pro-equal rights President and a Democratic-controlled Congress? We believe it is because there is an air of acceptability in America to be against LGBT people based on one's religious beliefs. For faster, significant change, the mood has to change.

We should keep trying to change laws, but until we deal with core issues causing discrimination, progress will continue to be slow. Religion, morals, harm, bigotry, science, fear, understanding – these are core issues we need to confront head-on if we want to reduce discrimination toward gay people.

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“The research showed the path to winning marriage rights is to finally deal with the core values of religion and morals.”

–Steve Hildebrand, Deputy National Campaign Manager, Obama for America

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How do we win marriage and adoption battles when a majority of voters oppose these rights based on their religion and morals? How do we get members of Congress to stop hiding behind religion when voting on laws for our government? How do we change deeply held beliefs and attitudes?

Every day, a vocal minority of ministers and priests, fathers and mothers, pundits and politicians preach hate and bigotry toward gay people. Their hateful comments oftentimes go unchallenged while causing tremendous emotional and physical harm to gay people.

In California and elsewhere, hundreds of thousands of dollars were spent conducting focus groups and polls designed to learn what went wrong and find a path to winning marriage rights. The research showed the path to winning marriage rights is to finally deal with the core values of religion and morals.

**I believe the biggest barrier to achieving LGBT equality is religion-based bigotry, coupled with the failure of the gay community to confront religious arguments. We must put our time, energy and money behind counter-messaging the anti-gay religious establishment.**

Our only hope in stopping them is to challenge religion-based bigotry clearly, thoughtfully and publicly.

Ignoring religion-based bigotry will not stop the Roman Catholic, Mormon and Evangelical Churches from raising and spending millions of dollars to convince their followers that homosexuality is a sinful, immoral behavior choice and that gay people are a threat to children, to the institution of marriage and to society as a whole.

**Should we let them get away with this or confront them head-on?**

Donors and activists should begin to question: How can we end religion-based bigotry?

We should use the proven, effective messaging developed by **Faith in America** that is designed to address core religious beliefs and change attitudes toward gay people. Faith in America has developed this counter-messaging strategy, confronting religion head-on with polite but pointed arguments.

Done well, this counter-messaging will successfully change long-held attitudes so less harm is caused to LGBT people and our fight for equality will finally be achieved.

Addressing religion-based bigotry is our biggest barrier. We can no longer avoid it.

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Research has confirmed that most anti-gay prejudice and discrimination are based on religion.

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### Background

This report is for advocates, organizations and individuals working to build public support for LGBT people.

Research has confirmed that most anti-gay prejudice and discrimination are based on religion. For example, after California voters enacted Proposition 8 in 2008, researchers found that one of the characteristics most predictive of who supported Proposition 8 was religiosity. More recently, a 2010 report by Public Religion Research Institute and the Arcus Foundation found that there is a direct correlation between a person's religious views and his or her opposition to equality measures for LGBT people.

We must find effective ways of addressing religion based bias and prejudice, but many LGBT people and advocates are afraid to do so. Some feel unprepared to engage someone who is schooled in religious teaching. Others have been badly damaged by religion and want to avoid these conversations at all costs. Others fear being perceived as anti-religious.

As a result, our movement has been largely silent in the face of religion-based anti-gay prejudice. Our silence allows new generations of LGBT children and youth to be subjected to devastating harms. When given a chance, many of those who now hold religiously-based anti-LGBT views can come to recognize that their deeper religious values do not justify or require discrimination against gay people.

This report provides tested, effective messages for addressing religion-based bigotry and prejudice against LGBT people.

These messages work. We have used them successfully in many communities across the country and tested them through polling. We hope they will inspire and empower you.

## Our story

**Faith in America** was formed as a nonprofit educational organization in 2005 with a very simple goal – to effectively counter-message the bigotry, prejudice and hostility toward the LGBT community being sold to the public for several decades under the guise of religious belief and religious teaching.

The organization’s founder, Mitchell Gold, is a longtime civil rights advocate and businessman.

After moving from New York to North Carolina in the late 1980s to form one of the most successful furniture companies in America, Gold became increasingly aware of the hostility and prejudice toward gay Americans found in rural North Carolina as well as other regions outside the large metropolitan areas. Repeatedly, he saw that people of varying faiths attempted to justify their anti-gay views by appealing to religious teachings.

The widespread trauma that Gold saw in the lives of gay and lesbian individuals, especially youth, prompted him to launch an effort to educate people about the harm caused when bigotry, prejudice and discrimination are given a religious stamp of approval.

Gold reached out to former Methodist minister and longtime LGBT advocate Jimmy Creech, who was put on trial by the Methodist Church for blessing a gay union. He also reached out to Brent Childers, a former journalist and lifelong conservative evangelical Christian, who up until 2003 had been an ardent follower of the Religious Right and for years had publicly derided gay and lesbian citizens under the banner of Christianity.

In 2005, together with Creech and a distinguished national board, Gold launched Faith in America as a vehicle to educate the public about the harm caused by religion-based hostility and prejudice toward LGBT people.

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... he saw that people of varying faiths attempted to justify their anti-gay views by appealing to religious teachings.

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These sidebar boxes highlight statements people often make when attempting to deny lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people their full and equal rights and the responses we recommend to address them.

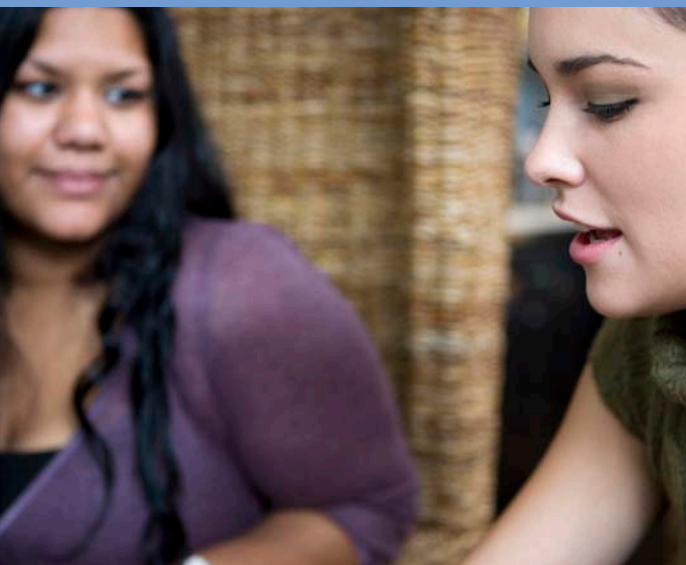


## CHARGE

**Homosexuality is a sin ... it says so in the Bible.**

## RESPONSE

First, that is your interpretation of the Bible, and you should be aware that many others don't interpret it that way. Second, we should all remember that millions of people have been harmed over the years because the majority's religious teachings have determined minority groups' civil rights. Religious teachings were used to support the horrors of slavery, deny women the right to vote, deny loving interracial couples the right to be married, deny black people their full and equal place in our society and deny minority religious groups equal rights. We have learned from these horrible mistakes that it is wrong to use religious teachings to dehumanize and marginalize any minority group. It is no less wrong today to use religious teachings to deny gay people full and equal civil rights.



In 2006, the organization began a series of four-week educational campaigns in a number of communities across America with print newspaper ads, billboards and radio ads. The first was held in Baltimore, Maryland, with ads running in the local African American newspaper. The organization also held campaigns in Indianapolis, Indiana; Ames, Iowa; and Greenville, South Carolina. Polling was conducted before and several weeks after each campaign, which closed with a community meeting to discuss religion-based bigotry toward the LGBT community. Polling in each campaign showed positive movement in acceptance levels. (See polling section on page 15 for more information.)

By 2008, and after several more community forums and a series of focus groups, the organization realized its message had the ability to move people, particularly persons of faith, toward acceptance and equality. That same year, Gold published *CRISIS: 40 Stories Revealing the Personal, Social and Religious Pain and Trauma of Growing Up Gay in America*. *CRISIS* shows the emotional and psychological harm caused by religion-based bigotry. It is a collection of stories by gay and lesbian individuals, parents, straight allies and ministers, who talk about how they have been personally affected by religiously based anti-gay attitudes and messages. The book's message has had a positive impact on the lives of thousands of gay youth, as well as many people of faith who had not previously understood the harm caused by religion-based anti-gay attitudes and beliefs.

## What we've learned

Our core message is that religious-based condemnation and rejection of LGBT people cause great harm to LGBT individuals and our society.

We have learned that when we focus on the harms caused by religious hostility toward gay people – its destructive role in the lives of gay and lesbian Americans – persons of faith can understand why religion must no longer be misused to justify hostile attitudes and actions toward LGBT people.

Throughout this report, we use the term “religion-based bigotry” to describe attitudes of prejudice, hostility or discrimination toward gay people that are falsely justified by religious teachings or beliefs.

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Most people of faith who hold anti-gay views do not hate gay people.

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**Religion-based bigotry exists in the mind, not the heart.** Most people of faith who hold anti-gay views do not hate gay people but rather have simply internalized religious teachings and beliefs that condemn homosexuality as sinful. Effective messages to the religious movable middle must avoid any suggestion that people with anti-gay attitudes based on religious teaching are motivated by hatred or personal animosity toward gay people.

**Talking about religion-based bigotry is more effective than using the term “homophobia.”** Using the term “homophobia” is generally not effective with people of faith. “Homophobia” is defined as an irrational or unreasonable fear of homosexuality. For many people of faith, especially those who hold to a literal interpretation of Scripture, there is nothing wrong or irrational about fearing sin. Many people of faith are taught that they must turn away or reject sin. As a result, they believe that they are doing the right thing according to church teaching when they reject homosexuality as a sinful choice and hold negative views of gay people.

**Addressing the false belief that being gay is a choice is vitally important when engaging persons who view homosexuality as a sin.**

Our experience has shown that it is unrealistic to engage people on the topic of religion and homosexuality without addressing the false belief of many religious people that being gay is a sinful choice.

When people who believe that homosexuality is sinful realize that sexual orientation is an innate part of a person, not a choice, they no longer have a basis for viewing homosexuality as an immoral behavior or some perverse proclivity.

**Messages based on the Golden Rule are effective but not sufficient.** Some research has suggested appealing to the Golden Rule – the basic faith principle of treating others as we would want to be treated – can be effective in helping some people of faith realize that religious teaching cannot justify discrimination toward LGBT people. For example, research conducted before the Maine marriage initiative in 2009 suggested that the campaign supporting

1,000+

Rights and responsibilities that are currently the exclusive right of heterosexual couples.

the freedom of gay people to marry should emphasize the Golden Rule to encourage Maine voters to empathize with their gay neighbors, relatives, and friends.

Faith in America’s work, however, has shown that Golden Rule messaging – while it can be effective – does not penetrate deeply enough, particularly when messaging on the freedom to marry. Many people of faith have been taught that homosexuality is a sin. A person who believes this message may support laws that prohibit employment discrimination against gay people without feeling that they are compromising on the belief or church teaching that homosexuality is wrong. But that same person may have a much harder time supporting a gay person’s freedom to marry, since that may seem like a more direct expression of social approval.

Therefore, particularly to win support for the freedom to marry, appealing to the Golden Rule is not enough. We must also address the underlying belief that homosexuality is a sin and that lesbian and gay people are not worthy or deserving of participating in an institution that our society upholds as good and important.

**It is possible to confront the harm caused by anti-gay views that are rooted in religious teachings or beliefs without attacking a person’s faith.**

## CHARGE

**I believe the Bible clearly condemns homosexuality as a sin.**

## RESPONSE

There are many Christian denominations as well as Reform and Conservative Judaism that no longer teach this to be true. The interpretation and understanding of Scripture change when people become more informed and have new experiences. For example, we no longer interpret certain verses to justify looking upon African Americans as inferior or other texts that were used to justify treating women as unequal. According to polling – polls by religious groups – half of Americans no longer interpret the Bible to say homosexuality is a sin. Everyone is free to interpret Scripture for themselves, but we believe we must challenge those whose interpretation is used as a blunt weapon that harms gay Americans.



Some people of faith, particularly conservative Christians, may believe the LGBT community is prejudiced or hostile toward them. It is important that we not trigger defensiveness by attacking a person's faith – or religion in general.

The core messaging in this report is not anti-religious. To the contrary, it is an appeal to deeper religious values of universal human dignity and respect. The focus is on the harms caused by misusing religious teachings or beliefs to support anti-gay views. The point is that no religious teaching or belief can justify harming another person and that religion-based bigotry causes serious harm to LGBT people – and especially to LGBT youth.

The messaging guidelines in this report show how to engage non-accepting persons – whose attitudes are based on religious belief or teaching – without attacking their religion or being seen as prejudiced or close-minded toward their faith. Rather than attacking people's religion or faith, we ask them to confront in their own minds and hearts the question: Can the immense harm caused to gay and lesbian individuals exist comfortably with the principles of your faith?

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By asking a person to examine whether his or her religious beliefs are causing harm to gay and lesbian people, our goal is not to undermine the person's faith but rather to promote the deeper faith values of love, compassion and respect. Our goal is to open the person's heart and mind to the possibility that acceptance and equality are values that people of faith should promote in the homes, schools, churches and other places of worship and within faith communities as a whole.

### Core messages

**Religion-based bigotry causes enormous harm to LGBT people, especially young, vulnerable teens.**

More than a million LGBT teens are suffering debilitating depression because their families and religious institutions see them as deviants. Suicide rates amongst LGBT youth are four times higher than those of heterosexual youth.



If a person believes sexual orientation is a choice, they are 70% more likely to be against LGBT equal rights.

< 70% >

If a person believes sexual orientation is part of how you are created, they are 70% more likely to be in favor of LGBT equal rights.

LGBT people are victims of discrimination and bigotry, which are often justified and promoted by religious teaching that says homosexuality is immoral, sinful or abominable. If we don't talk about it, no one will know how much hurt and suffering it causes. It is particularly important for those in the religious movable middle to hear this, because no concept is more antithetical to the faith values of love and compassion than causing harm to others.

In 2008, Faith in America published *CRISIS: 40 Stories Revealing the Personal, Social and Religious Pain and Trauma of Growing Up Gay in America*. Traveling the country promoting *CRISIS* has allowed us to see firsthand the transformative power of telling stories about our youth. People don't want to hurt children. They may not have sympathy for an adult advocacy leader talking about job discrimination or marriage, but they do sympathize with vulnerable teenagers.

For example, Dr. David Gushee, a Christian ethicist, author and Southern Baptist minister, wrote the following about *CRISIS* in the June 2009 issue of *Christian Century* (a mainline Protestant publication going to 70,000 members, largely clergy): "As an evangelical Christian whose career has been spent in the South, I must say I find it scandalous that the most physically and psychologically dangerous place to be (or even appear to be) gay or lesbian in America is in the most religiously conservative families, congregations and regions of this country. Many of the most disturbing stories in this volume come from the Bible Belt. This marks an appalling Christian moral failure."

When people of faith understand they are causing harm, it creates a conflict or question – can causing such harm to others exist comfortably with the core faith principles of love and compassion? That inner conflict will be

resolved in two ways: 1) Avoidance that results in unresolved inner conflict; or 2) Analysis and reconsideration of their attitude or belief.

It is this conflict – a deeper analysis, process or journey – that our messaging guidelines can help foster in the minds and hearts of the religious middle. This process of change does not happen overnight. But by sharing the harm caused by religiously based rejection and condemnation of gay people, we can plant the seeds of change.

**Sexual orientation is a natural part of a human being, whether it be heterosexual, bisexual or homosexual. Same-sex orientation is not a choice to go against God's will. It is a normal, natural and healthy expression of human sexuality that is innate for some people.**

Studies have shown that if a person believes sexual orientation is a choice, they are 70% more likely to be against LGBT equal rights (2007 Gallup's annual Values and Beliefs Survey). Conversely, if a person believes sexual orientation is part of how you are created, they are 70% more likely to be in favor of LGBT equal rights.

We've learned there is something much deeper here that we need to address. The religious teachings that many people of faith embrace play an important role in whether people see being gay as a choice. Many people of faith believe:

- Heterosexuality is for all people the normal and natural expression of sexuality. Homosexuality is a conscious choice to deviate from this norm.
- Gay people, according to religious teachings, are committing a sin and are an abomination.

## CHARGE

**That's not my interpretation ... that is the Word of God.**

## RESPONSE

Again, consider that there are many people who do not agree with you. We can recall when people like Jerry Falwell or George Wallace would have said it was the Word of God that the races be separated or women were not equal to men. Look back at some of these past histories where people have said much of what you are saying; history has now shown how wrong and harmful they were. And how many people like George Wallace and Jerry Falwell changed their vitriolic condemnations in relation to segregation? How many people have changed their view on homosexuality being an immoral lifestyle? Have you ever known a person to walk away from racism and then later return? How many persons of faith have embraced acceptance and equality and then returned to religion-based bigotry? They simply do not because they experience the positive effect of being liberated from such a negative force.



- Gay people are making a conscious choice to go against God's will or order.
- If it is a conscious choice, children who are exposed to gay teachers or gay married couples might CHOOSE to be gay.

We must educate Americans on the scientific facts about sexual orientation. Homosexuality is not a deliberate choice. It is innate to some people. One's sexual orientation is not a deliberate decision to act against God's will.

Just as religion-based bigotry underlies most anti-gay attitudes, the belief that homosexuality is a sinful choice is the cornerstone of religion-based prejudice against gay people. We cannot ignore it and hope to change the attitude of someone who has been taught that homosexuality is sinful. But when we offer someone a better understanding of sexual orientation, we can affect their mindset without getting mired in a never-ending theological discussion.

Rebutting the argument that being gay is a choice is important for another reason as well. Most persons of faith, conservatives in particular, are familiar with how church teaching in the past has justified treating women and African Americans as inferior. They know that religious communities have, for the most part, rejected such prejudices as harmful and misguided. By emphasizing that being gay is an innate condition, we can get them to understand that it is equally wrong to treat others unfairly based solely on their sexual orientation.

**Religion-based bigotry against LGBT people is wrong ... just as it was wrong to use religious teachings to justify discrimination against Native Americans, African Americans, minority religious groups, women and interracial couples.**

Gay kids who experience family rejection are

8

times more likely to attempt suicide and

6

times more likely to report high levels of depression.

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By citing historical instances of religion-based bigotry and prejudice, you allow the person to be more comfortable with attitudinal change.

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Connecting the dots between historical bigotry against other groups and the attitudes of some people today toward homosexuality is one of the most effective ways to educate people about the denial of equal rights to the LGBT community.

Most people know that, historically, religion has been used to justify discrimination against women, religious minorities and people of color. Putting anti-gay religious beliefs in this historical context can be a powerful tool in connecting discrimination that most Americans today accept as morally wrong and the discrimination faced by LGBT people. By citing historical instances of religion-based bigotry and prejudice, you allow people to be more comfortable with attitudinal change – they realize they are not stepping out alone against a commonly accepted viewpoint but rather following historical progress toward justice and equality.

When talking about the misuse of religion to justify discrimination in the past, it is important not to say that the LGBT community's struggle with discrimination is exactly the same as the Civil Rights Movement. Rather, the point is that religion-based bigotry has been a common denominator of injustice toward many groups in American society's past. When given a chance, many people will see the underlying historical pattern of using religious teachings and beliefs to justify harmful discrimination.

There is another benefit to citing other times in the past when religious teachings have been used to justify discrimination. Many times, when people of faith are challenged about their anti-gay views, they cite biblical verses or other religious texts as a safe haven when they are unable to articulate why they hold prejudiced attitudes toward LGBT people. Instead of telling people that their interpretation is wrong, you can remind them that other religious texts have been used in the past to justify attitudes and laws that are recognized today as morally wrong and unjust – such as discrimination against women, people of color and religious minorities.

History provides the moral judgment, and we do not have to be theologians engaged in scriptural debates to point people to the judgment rendered by history.

## CHARGE

You can't compare gay rights to black civil rights of the past or women's rights. Black people and women didn't choose their race or gender. Homosexuality is a choice!

## RESPONSE

Being gay is not a choice. As a matter of fact, homosexuality is no more a choice one makes than heterosexuality. Both are innate expressions of human sexuality. African Americans, women and Native Americans recognize today how religion-based bigotry played a role in the prejudice and discrimination toward them. We are not saying the gay person is like the African American person. We're only saying that misguided church teaching was used against the African American person as it is being used against the gay person today.



## CHARGE

Homosexuality is a behavior that can be controlled or changed. If you have a relationship with God and accept Jesus Christ as your savior, you can control it.

## RESPONSE

This is a very important point, and I'm glad you brought this up. The American Medical Association – the organization that guides your everyday health needs – has clearly stated that sexual orientation is not a choice but rather a natural part of a human being. The American Psychiatric Association has once again stated how harmful it is to one's emotional and physical well-being to try and "control" sexual orientation. Groups like the Family Research Council who promote that it can be changed have regularly been discredited. In fact, several researchers whom they quote have demanded that they retract their statements because they have been either taken out of context or blatantly misquoted.

## Four crucial elements in presenting this message

### 1. Use your own experience or story

Psychological barriers can be broken down when people hear our personal stories. Many people of faith are deeply moved when they hear us talk about the immense harm so many have experienced as a result of religious teachings or beliefs that label them as morally or spiritually inferior.

Our experience with sharing the personal stories of devastating harm caused by religiously based anti-gay attitudes and beliefs in the book *CRISIS* has reinforced the power of this message. When we talk about the harm that religion-based bigotry causes gay Americans and their families, it is a powerful motivator.

Country singer Chely Wright's interview with Oprah, describing the emotional and psychological harm that she experienced because of anti-gay religious teachings, is a wonderful reminder of how powerful our personal stories can be. (You can view the interview here: <http://www.oprah.com/oprahshow/Why-Chely-Wright-Came-Out-as-a-Lesbian-Video>)

### 2. Challenge the harm, not the person's faith

Our job is to educate, not offend. Calling someone a bigot based on their religious belief is unproductive and, at worst, counterproductive.

Calling attention to the harms caused by particular religious teachings or beliefs is not the same as attacking a person's faith. We can engage people about religious belief or religious teaching without being

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More than a million LGBT teens are suffering debilitating depression because their families and religious institutions see them as deviants. Suicide rates amongst LGBT youth are four times higher than those of heterosexual youth.

4 TIMES HIGHER



perceived as attacking a person's faith. People of faith recognize that religious teaching has been up for debate for centuries. They may privately question something their pastor states during a sermon over lunch or voice their disagreement on church teaching to others. Discussions about religious teaching or belief can take place without someone feeling the core principles of their faith are being challenged.

### 3. Remember that ending religion-based bigotry has a positive impact on us all

People of faith who have been taught it's okay to hold negative attitudes toward gay and lesbian individuals are themselves harmed by these false and misguided beliefs.

Letting go of those harmful beliefs is a very positive experience for a person of faith.

Many people of faith are initially hesitant to embrace acceptance and equality because they may fear they are letting go of an important part of church teaching. If I don't believe the Bible teaches homosexuality is a sin, then isn't all of its teaching up for reevaluation? This is where pointing to history as a guide can be effective.

People of faith usually understand that religious teaching was used to justify discrimination against interracial couples, women and African Americans. They can realize that departure from those misguided religious teachings did not lead to a dismantling of religious doctrine or faith communities but rather had a positive effect on religion and its communities. That realization can open their minds to the idea that questioning religious teaching or beliefs that condone harmful discrimination against gay people may also strengthen their faith community and lead to other positive results.

### 4. Speak to the movable religious middle, and engage boldly but with patience

Many people in the movable middle want to learn, they want to change and they do not want to cause harm. Remember to stress the positive effect a person of faith can experience by not allowing core faith beliefs to be hijacked by groups who peddle religion-based bigotry and its harm. If in a televised or public debate/conversation, remember you are talking to the audience of the movable middle and not just the professional anti-gay individual.

Use the first person whenever possible. Remember, our goal is to stop people from harming young vulnerable kids and others. For example, "Senator, do you believe I have a right to marry the person

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Our job is to educate,  
not offend.

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#### CHARGE

**You claim that I am a bigot, but you are being the bigot by not allowing me to practice my religion.**

#### RESPONSE

(Use their name), we all know what bigotry is. Clearly, the African Americans in the 1960s struggling for their equal rights were not promoting bigotry and racism by challenging those people who sought to treat them as inferior and unequal. I would encourage you to look carefully at how your attitudes and actions are affecting others.

#### ALTERNATE RESPONSE

I'm not calling you a bigot. I'm only saying that you are espousing and promoting – whether consciously or unconsciously – a very unique form of bigotry. Religion-based bigotry is particularly harmful as it places a moral and religious stamp of approval on the harm it causes people. We are in no way opposed to you practicing your faith. We are only pointing out to you the harm that is done when religious teaching is used to justify bigotry, prejudice and violence toward others. Religious teaching has been misused in the past in such a manner, and it has been judged as unjust, immoral and simply wrong. You must decide if such bigotry and prejudice truly belong as a part of your faith, values and principles.

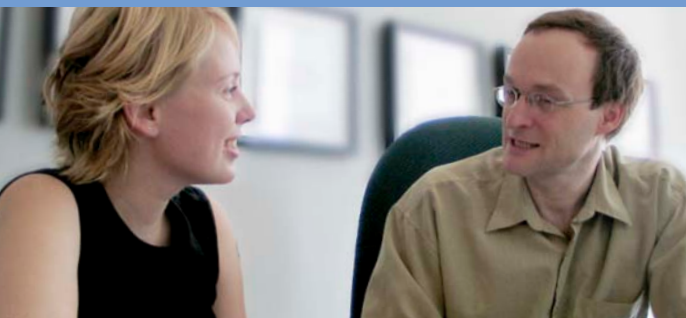


## CHARGE

**If marriage equality is legalized, then homosexuality will be taught in schools, and I don't want my kids to learn about that.**

## RESPONSE

Marriage is not taught in schools now regardless of what kind. But I don't think that is what you really are concerned about. Many people I talk to are concerned that if gay relations are normalized – if their children see Mr. Smith married to Mr. Jones and it is legal – that their kids will think it's okay and “choose” to be gay. That just isn't the way our bodies work. Sexual orientation – gay, straight or somewhere in between – is not a choice; it is simply a natural part of a human being. I want to protect your children, just like you do. For your children's mental and physical well-being, if they do happen to be gay, they need to know that it is okay. I know from firsthand experience that realizing you have a same-sex attraction can be traumatic if your parents, family, church and society do not accept you for who you are. Gay kids who experience family rejection are eight times more likely to attempt suicide, are six times more likely to report high levels of depression and in general are far more likely to do drugs. (*Pediatrics*, Vol. 123, No. 1, January 2009, pp. 346–352)



I love ... to care for and be responsible for him/her?” This makes your point more realistic and understandable to the person you are speaking to. OR: “Reverend, do you understand the harm that is caused to a 14-year-old when he/she hears you say that he/she is immoral or sinful?” These are meant to be guides; you must tailor them according to the conversation.

Avoid saying that “it is okay for you to have your religious beliefs and values” when the person is using religious beliefs to justify discrimination. This reinforces that it is acceptable to use religious beliefs and values to justify bigotry, prejudice and discrimination. We have found that most people are not offended when you challenge a specific aspect of what they have been taught by the church.

Many LGBT people and allies avoid this conversation because they feel unprepared to debate someone who is schooled in religious teaching – or because they don't want to engage in a religious debate. By focusing on the harm caused to individuals and society by anti-gay teachings or beliefs, you do not have to debate the “correct” interpretation of religious texts. You can focus on the human impact of anti-gay beliefs and the history of using religion to justify discrimination rather than your knowledge of a given religion's teachings.

### Your job is to plant the seeds of change – not to have all the answers

It is rare that someone will change his or her views overnight or in a matter of minutes. There is no single silver bullet message that will change vast numbers of people quickly. We've learned it's about planting seeds, and no one really knows which seeds will sprout within a particular person. We suggest ongoing conversations that give the person causing this harm the space to change.

Throughout this report, in the blue boxes, we have highlighted the statements people most often make against LGBT people and the responses we have found to be the most helpful.

### Results demonstrate effectiveness

The messaging guidelines presented in this report are effective in moving the middle because history and truth are on the side of our core message – that religion-based bigotry causes great harm to LGBT individuals and our society. Three years of personal interactions, on-the-ground observations, focus group results and positive media coverage have shown that these messages work. Polling surveys have shown that as well.

One of the most important observations from the polling and media strategies employed to date is that directly challenging the harmful impact of anti-gay religious beliefs with these guidelines does not create backlash or cause people of faith to become defensive or feel insulted. To the contrary, we have seen that using these respectful messages that focus on the harm caused by anti-gay religious teachings and beliefs is effective in sparking a process of change.

## Polling

Since 2006, Faith in America has conducted a number of extensive 6- to 8-week educational campaigns in which we saturated the local media with full-page newspaper ads, billboards and radio and television advertising. Each campaign contained a variety of grassroots support including door-to-door canvassing and town hall meetings to conclude each campaign.

The campaigns were held in 2006 in Indianapolis, Indiana, and in 2007 in Ames, Iowa, and Greenville, South Carolina. In each campaign, the industry-respected Public Policy Polling conducted pre- and post-campaign polling to help determine the impact of our messaging.

### **The 2006 Indianapolis polling demonstrated we achieved positive movement on a number of questions:**

- Should a Christian treat every man and woman as a brother and sister? +12%
- Do you believe homosexuals should have the full civil rights promised by the U.S. Constitution? +5%
- Are you more accepting of homosexuals today than six months ago? +16%

### **The 2007 Ames, Iowa, polling showed:**

- The 18–34 year olds increased from the pre- to the post-campaign survey in their agreement with:  
1) Homosexuals should have the same protections under our nation’s civil rights laws that other groups of Americans have (83% to 91%); 2) Homosexuals have been harmed in the name of religion (64% to 74%).
- Democrats increased from the pre- to the post-campaign survey in their agreement with: “Homosexuals have been harmed in the name of religion” (79% to 87%).

## CHARGE

**Homosexuals are trying to redefine the sanctity of traditional marriage. For thousands of years, it has been defined as the relationship between a man and a woman.**

## RESPONSE

Marriage is constantly evolving to be more inclusive and fair to all people. To say I am trying to redefine something that is sacred is misleading. A woman in a marriage was the property of a man as late as the 19th century and couldn’t hold property or go to school without the approval of her husband. Slaves were not allowed to marry in America. And interracial couples were not able to marry legally in all states except Iowa until 1948 when California became the first state to lift the ban on their marriage rights. Marriage for gay and lesbian couples is simply a natural progression of inclusiveness and equality. Marriage bestows over 1,000 rights and responsibilities that are currently the exclusive right of heterosexual couples. As the human race has evolved to learn and become more knowledgeable, we have learned that sexual orientation is not a choice – it is a natural part of a human being. Same-sex couples have the same natural desire for companionship and love as opposite sex ones and, as such, deserve the same rights and responsibilities. It is not redefining marriage but rather making it better.



FROM 64%  
TO 74%

Increase from pre- to post-campaign survey in agreement with the statement: *Homosexuals have been harmed in the name of religion.*

- Other Christians (not Protestants or Catholics) increased from the pre- to the post-campaign survey in their agreement with: “If the law guaranteed that no church or congregation would be required to perform marriages for same-sex couples, I would support allowing gay couples to legally marry” (21% to 37%).

Utilizing what we had learned from our previous campaigns, we decided we would again test our messaging in a community located in one of the most conservative primary states and selected Greenville, SC, as we had conducted an extensive focus there in April 2007.

The Greenville campaign consisted of four weeks of full-page ads in the *Greenville News*, 22 billboards, television ads featuring Greenville resident Elke Kennedy that aired on the Fox News cable channel, a theater showing of *For the Bible Tells Me So*, distribution of 2,500 yard signs, distribution of 5,000 door hangers and a culminating town hall meeting.

**In Greenville, SC, post-campaign polling demonstrated positive movement with what we consider weighted significance considering the conservative demographics of the community.**

- In September a 61% majority of Greenville respondents disagreed that some people are born homosexual. By the end of November, that percentage had dipped below 50%.
- Before Faith in America’s Greenville campaign, only 17% more residents disagreed than agreed that it was acceptable to use the Bible to justify discrimination regarding sexual orientation. By late November that had increased to 28%.

### Focus groups

Faith in America conducted three separate focus groups, and while these sessions confirmed the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of some of our educational campaigns’ ad material, it also allowed us to understand how developing a message through traditional focus group formats can often lead to erroneous conclusions.

Traditional focus group formats often employ an independent moderator who is instructed not to challenge what the group participants are saying. We found it ironic that such a format in essence parallels what has been going on in our society as a whole – a lot of misinformation from the anti-gay religious establishment has gone unchallenged. We have observed how traditional focus group formats fail to take into account certain unique social interaction dynamics that are in play when discussing topics involving religious belief.

In a 2007 focus group in Greenville, SC, using the traditional format, we observed how participants with strongly held beliefs are often quick to interject their opinions first or do so in a very authoritarian way. They often preface their statements with something like “Well, I believe what the Bible says, and God says in the Bible that homosexuality is a sin.” This puts other participants in a very uncomfortable situation when asked whether they agree. Even if they do not agree, they may feel averse to being perceived as taking a position contrary to “what the Bible says.” In that same focus group, a dominant anti-gay participant asked the group if they were familiar with all the research done by James Dobson and that the research had concluded that only “1 percent of 1 percent of the population is gay.” Such gross



misinformation went unchallenged. We observed how other participants would be intimidated when one of the participants would forcefully declare their belief that the Bible or God says homosexuality is a sin. This seemed to cause group participants to hesitate in voicing their disagreement and understandably so – who can disagree with God? Therefore, analysis of the session would be expected to show anti-gay religious views to be deeply entrenched and with little potential for movement.

In a focus group held in 2008 in Charlotte, NC, the organization employed its executive director to serve as moderator. For much of the 90-minute session, the moderator asked questions and made statements and asked participants to respond. Again, one African American male interjected his anti-gay opinions early on and cited the Bible as justification for his position. Other participants remained silent or nodded in agreement. About three-quarters of the way through the session, the dominant anti-gay participant responded to a question about the harm caused to gay people by saying he understood how gay people might be hurt by certain rhetoric coming from religious circles but that he could not let that override the fact that God says in the Bible that homosexuality is a sin and wrong. At that point, the moderator asked him to clarify whether that was his interpretation. He responded by saying it was not what he was interpreting but what God said. At this point, an African American female participant who had sat mostly silent became visibly agitated with the dominant anti-gay participant and challenged him to explain how he believes God is saying one thing in the Bible when others may not agree. This exchange initiated a 5- to 10-minute discussion about how different people of faith interpret the Bible differently. The final question asked by the moderator was if the participants could see where interpreting Scripture in a way that casts gay people as sinners and unworthy can cause great harm. All participants agreed. At the conclusion of the session, several members asked if the session could continue as they found it thought-provoking and engaging. All the participants had self-identified prior to the session as moderately anti-gay or very anti-gay.

### Results from media strategies

Throughout the previous four years, Faith in America has observed in town hall meetings, door-to-door canvassing, focus groups, media strategies and countless one-on-one conversations that we can engage people of faith in a dialogue about religion, sexual orientation and equality without shutting them down or offending them.

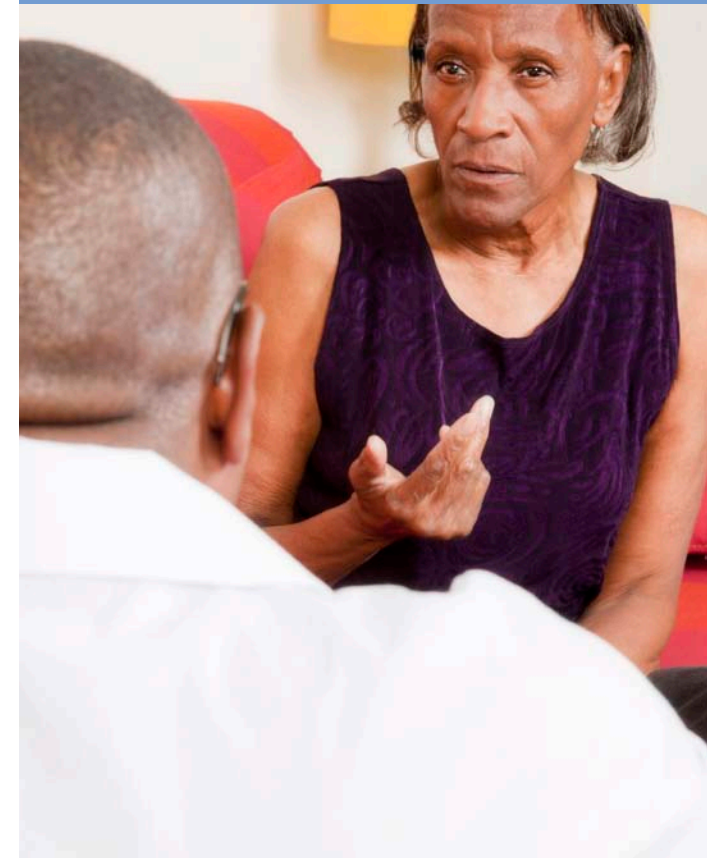
- In a 2007 CNN/YouTube presidential primary debate in Charleston, SC, a Faith in America supporter (an African American pastor) asked the Democratic primary candidates, “Why is it still acceptable to use religion to deny gay Americans their full and equal rights? We’ve been down that road before.” In addition to wide applause from the debate audience, the question (heard by millions of CNN viewers)

### CHARGE

**I do not think the gay lifestyle should be something our society condones.**

### RESPONSE

Homosexuality is not a lifestyle that a person chooses. It’s who they are, not how they live. Their “lifestyle” is much the same as everyone else’s. Being gay is the emotional, psychological and sexual wiring a person is created with. Being attracted to someone of the same sex is as natural for the gay and lesbian person as being attracted to someone of the opposite sex is for the heterosexual.



## CHARGE

**Homosexuality is an abomination to God.**

## RESPONSE

You are entitled to your personal beliefs, but you are not entitled to harm others with those beliefs. Using words like “abomination” is deeply hurtful to individuals who have not chosen to be born the way they are. You might question whether you truly believe that this is how God would want you to treat others. Moreover, “personal” beliefs are anything but personal when moral and religious condemnation against gay people has been a mainstay in the American public discourse for decades. The number of gay and lesbian individuals who have been maligned, bruised and injured by the way you and others interpret certain verses of the Bible during that time is innumerable.



was rated the best question of the evening by an independent group of students from around the globe who were monitoring the debate questions for relevance and importance.

- During Faith in America’s anniversary recognition of the *Loving vs. Virginia* 1967 Supreme Court ruling on the unconstitutionality of interracial marriage bans, we sought out and interviewed Mildred Loving. During the interview, Ms. Loving was asked if she recognized the parallel of how religion-based bigotry was once used against her and her husband and how it is being used today against gay Americans. She said she could and added that the Bible she read is not one that causes harm to others. Ms. Loving later issued a statement supporting the freedom of same-sex couples to marry and empathizing with the emotional and psychological harms caused by being denied that freedom.
- With the publication of the book *CRISIS* in September 2008, Faith in America began a national discussion about the harm caused to gay Americans by religion-based bigotry with more than 25 public forums held in communities, churches, schools, legislative halls and conferences. In addition, Mitchell Gold and other Faith in America spokespersons have participated in more than 200 interviews with newspaper, television, radio and web-media outlets. Prior to the passage of anti-bullying legislation, copies of the book were distributed to all North Carolina legislators. Throughout the previous 18 months, numerous individuals, parents, educators, school guidance counselors, pastors and lawmakers have commented on the effectiveness of the book’s message – which is the message presented in this report – in transforming hearts and minds.
- In January 2010, CNN’s Soledad O’Brien conducted a live interview on stage with Mitchell Gold at Lenoir-Rhyne University in one of the most socially conservative regions of western North Carolina. More than 1,000 residents from the community attended following event advertising that targeted the community at large and particular socially conservative segments. The editor at the area’s conservative-leaning newspaper attended the event and two weeks later authored an editorial in support of repealing Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell (DADT). He stated afterwards that he wrote the editorial because he had heard Mitchell during the interview challenge individuals to no longer be complicit in the harm that religion-based bigotry causes in justifying and promoting prejudice and discrimination.

# #1 RATED QUESTION

DURING THE SOUTH CAROLINA  
DEMOCRATIC PRIMARY DEBATES

“Why is it still acceptable to use religion to deny gay Americans their full and equal rights? We’ve been down that road before.”

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## The FIA awareness campaign moves community attitudes toward LGBT people in a positive way.

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- Country music singer/songwriter Chely Wright announced to the world in May 2010 that she would not accept being put down by those who see her sexual orientation as something to be ashamed of or something morally or religiously wrong. Wright contacted Mitchell Gold in early 2009 after reading the book *CRISIS*. In an interview after coming out, she stated:

“[Faith in America founder] Mitchell Gold wrote a book called *CRISIS* that changed my life. It was after I moved to New York. I was in the Village, and I was looking for a book to help me understand the gay society – I was trying to go to Gay School 101. I thought I would go in and buy these books about facts and figures, and the book I picked up was Mitchell Gold’s book, *CRISIS*. I thought I knew what I wanted, but God put in my hands the book that I needed.”

We encourage you to watch Chely Wright’s interview with Oprah (<http://www.oprah.com/oprahshow/Why-Chely-Wright-Came-Out-as-a-Lesbian-Video>) and observe the powerful message behind her words.

### Conclusion

We can challenge the misuse of religion to support harmful anti-gay views and win, and we must do so to make continued progress.

Now is the time for our movement to coalesce behind an effective messaging strategy against religion-based bigotry. The messaging in this report is not the only strategy. But we know from experience that these messages can have an impact on people of faith who are anti-gay.

We hope you can put these messages to work in building support for human dignity, acceptance and equality in your community.

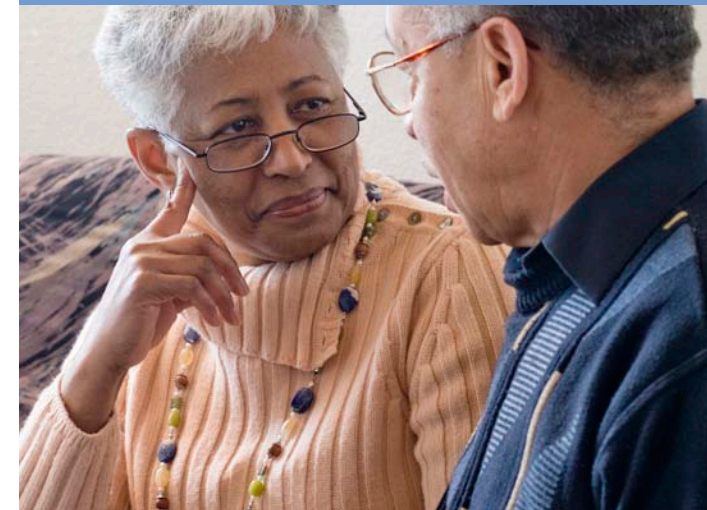
Please visit our website, [www.FaithInAmerica.org](http://www.FaithInAmerica.org), to find additional resources, to get involved or to sign up for our updates. We really do have faith in America, and that once educated, the American people will do the right thing.

### CHARGE

Many Christians adhere to a doctrine that we are all sinners and that you cannot have a proper spiritual relationship with God without accepting Christ and repenting of your sins. So our faith has an exclusionary, some might even say discriminatory, aspect to it. Therefore, we are not treating gays any differently from other people who have unrepentant sin in their lives.

### RESPONSE

Some believe people sin when they divorce, and some churches will not marry a couple if either person has been divorced. That’s their right as a religious entity, but we certainly wouldn’t think about lobbying our state government to ban marriage between divorced people. When you lobby your government to deny me the same civil rights as other citizens because of your religious beliefs, you are asking them to codify that belief into law, and that goes against our founding fathers’ effort to avoid establishing religion as a tool of oppression.



# Religion-based Bigotry



Attitudes of prejudice, hostility or discrimination that are falsely justified by religious teachings or beliefs.

## FaithInAmerica.org

Faith in America is a 501(c)(3) organization founded in 2005 whose mission is to educate about the harm caused to gay Americans when certain church teachings are misused to justify and promote hostile attitudes and actions toward lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Americans.