

## Assessing Resources Benefitting the LGBT Community In Greater Jacksonville

### COMMUNITIES OF FAITH

Few things are as inviolate, as non-negotiable as the tenets of one's faith. Whether learned in childhood or adopted in adulthood, one's religion and religious beliefs are part of one's core identity and provide a moral map and boundary for the contemporary landscape. To the truly faithful, these are values worth fighting for, suffering for, dying for.

For the faithful, to be rejected by the faith is to feel the sear of eternal damnation. It is as if the mother has rejected the child. The pain is lasting; the wound does not heal.

Faith communities across America, however, issue such excruciating rejections almost daily, dismissing the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender children of God as sinners who must repent and become "new" individuals to earn forgiveness and be made "right." The fallout from these rejections is heartbreaking.

Yet, for those who care about and advocate for LGBT individuals, avenues for recourse are few. The world of faith in America is completely private. Congregations are not required to report to the public. Denominations and religious organizations are self-governing. No federal or state laws dictate how communities of faith must deal with their members as long as the fundamentals of public safety and freedom of movement are observed.

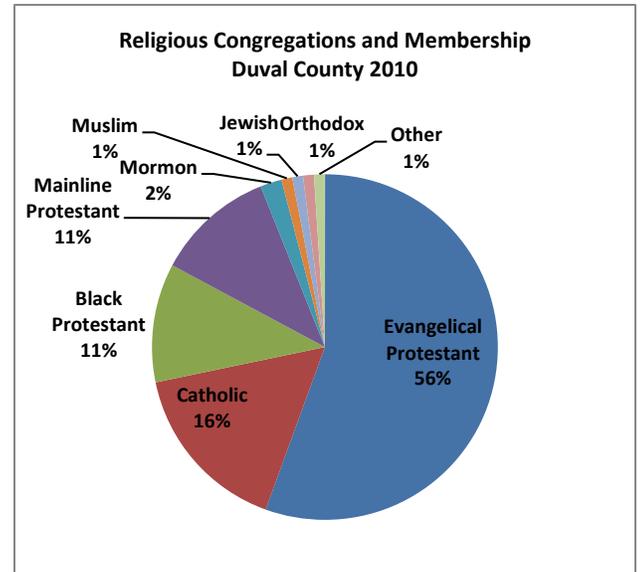
Scholarly research does provide some insight into the diversity of faith communities, however. The 2010 U.S. Religious Census<sup>1</sup> showed that 56% of the population in Duval County holds membership in a faith community or regularly attends religious services. Of those, more than half are affiliated with evangelical Protestant congregations and another 16% with the Catholic faith, meaning that more than 70% of Jacksonville's faithful are affiliated with congregations that, in their formal statements of belief, do not affirm LGBT individuals and families.

That is not to say that there are no affirming congregations in Jacksonville. In fact, our research has yielded a list of "affirming"<sup>2</sup> congregations in Jacksonville (see reverse).

### What Role for Philanthropy?

Nationwide, LGBT-focused philanthropy has tended to support issues of civil rights, marriage, health and education, with relatively little interest in issues of faith. Between 1970 and 2010, only 4.5% of all LGBT grant dollars -- about \$33 million over 40 years -- focused in issues of religion in the LGBT community. Today, the Arcus Foundation remains the leading funder for LGBT religion-related concerns. Through its Global Religions Program, Arcus works to increase diverse pro-LGBT voices within the Islamic world, communities of color and the South (among others); and challenge religious opponents of LGBT people.

On the national and global stage, a host of organizations exist that could responsibly receive and effectively deploy philanthropic dollars. In addition to groups working for change within specific denominations, there are organizations such as **Faith in America**, which works to confront "religious bigotry," and the **Religious Institute**, a multi-faith organization working at the intersection of sexuality and religion and partnering with major LGBT advocacy organizations.



Philanthropy’s challenge always is two-fold: identifying the issue it wishes to address and then identifying a responsible recipient for philanthropic investment that has the capacity to achieve the desired result. In Jacksonville, responsible recipients for philanthropic investment in the faith community around LGBT issues – beyond individual congregations -- are difficult to identify.

There has been no regular and active ministerial alliance in Jacksonville for roughly a decade. While informal connections exist among some clergy, there is no established infrastructure to bring together the faith leaders of the community for conversation or collaboration.

Some organizations may seem logical connecting points for these issues -- OneJax, for example, an outgrowth of the National Council for Christians and Jews. But OneJax has struggled with issues of organizational capacity and continues to strengthen its infrastructure, leaving it unable to provide the level of community leadership needed to address issues of this complexity in the near term.

There is no academic leadership -- neither the University of North Florida, Jacksonville University nor Edward Waters College offer any faith-related degrees.

Consequently, any effort to launch a local conversation around LGBT individuals and the church would first require significant effort to identify and organize the "church" participants to that conversation.

## An Alternative Response

Given the unique characteristics of the local landscape of faith communities, an alternative approach for philanthropy might be one of encouragement and inclusion.

As philanthropy works to support services for LGBT youth, for example, it might reach out to those affirming congregations, determine whether they offer supports for LGBT youth and explore opportunities for connection. Similar efforts could be made in addressing the needs of LGBT seniors.

Such an approach could begin to build relationships among organizations and congregations that could enrich the resources for both.

### KNOWN AFFIRMING CONGREGATIONS - JACKSONVILLE

| Congregation                                     | Affiliation                         |
|--|-------------------------------------|
| Arlington Congregational-United Church of Christ | United Church of Christ             |
| Buckman Bridge Unitarian Universalist Church     | Unitarian                           |
| Called Out Believers In Christ Fellowship        | Non-denominational                  |
| Christ Church of Peace                           | Non-denominational                  |
| Congregation Ahavath Chesed                      | Reform Judaism                      |
| Episcopal Church of the Redeemer                 | Episcopal                           |
| Jacksonville Friends Meetings                    | Quaker                              |
| Lakewood Presbyterian Church                     | Presbyterian                        |
| Riverside Avenue Christian Church                | Disciples of Christ                 |
| Riverside Baptist Church                         | American Baptist                    |
| Riverside United Church of Christ                | United Church of Christ             |
| Spirit of Life Lutheran Church                   | Lutheran                            |
| St. Anthony                                      | National Catholic Church of America |
| St. George Episcopal Church                      | Episcopal                           |
| St. Johns Cathedral                              | Episcopal                           |
| St. Johns Lutheran Church                        | Lutheran                            |
| St. Lukes Community Church                       | Non-denominational                  |
| St. Mary's Episcopal Church                      | Episcopal                           |
| St. Nicholas Park Christian Church               | Disciples of Christ                 |
| Unitarian Universalist Church of Jacksonville    | Unitarian                           |
| Unity Church of Jacksonville                     | Unity Church                        |

<sup>1</sup> 2010 U.S. Religious Census: Religious Congregations & Membership Study, sponsored by the Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies.

<sup>2</sup> "Affirming" means the church does *not* view homosexuality in and of itself as a sin. Affirming does not necessarily mean that the church is allowed to ordain gay ministers or perform same-sex marriages or holy unions. Affirming is a more supportive stance than "welcoming." Congregations can "welcome" LGBT individuals while still adhering to the belief that homosexuality is a sin.