

# COMING HOME TO EVANGELICALISM AND TO SELF



HUMAN  
RIGHTS  
CAMPAIGN  
FOUNDATION™

# Welcome



Dear Friends,

All across this country and around the world, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) people are having important conversations about the role of faith in our lives. I'm proud of the contribution this document makes to that conversation, particularly as it relates to the evangelical community. I especially want to thank the advisory team of evangelical Christian scholars and advocates who helped shape and hone this work. Their expertise

made its wisdom and inclusive message possible.

Today, LGBTQ people are part of our country's diverse faith communities. Within the evangelical churches, many LGBTQ people and our friends, families, and allies are seeking to create a safe and welcoming place to practice their religion. There remains much work left to do, but this guide speaks to the real challenges facing those working to live openly and fully, as their true and complete selves.

Wherever you are on this journey, we hope this resource helps you on your way.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Chad Griffin". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

**Chad Griffin**

*President, Human Rights Campaign*

# Table of Contents

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INTRODUCTION

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THE PEOPLE IN THE PEWS



TRANSGENDER AND EVANGELICAL



THE POWER OF PARENTING



SACRED TEXTS, SACRED LIVES



TAKING TIME, TAKING STEPS



WORDS OF WISDOM AND ADVICE

---

CONCLUSION

---

RESOURCES

---

PUBLICATIONS

---

A Special Note: This publication is primarily intended to serve as a general guide for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) evangelical Christians who wish to enrich their faith.

# Introduction

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**“If you can find a way to get past all the head noise and ask God how God sees you, and if you’re able to listen for an answer, you will hear God’s love for you.”**

– Susan Cottrell, Founder and President of FreedHearts

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Evangelical Christians who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer often find it difficult to be fully themselves in their church communities. They may have been taught that sexual or romantic relationships that are not heterosexual are sinful through sermons, Sunday school classes, pastoral counseling or implicitly through the culture of the congregation. Often, church teaching would state that the Bible declares being LGBTQ an “abomination.” Yet, these same LGBTQ people of faith know deep within that they were born this way. The church’s ruling against them contradicts their own profound awareness of self. This tension becomes especially difficult when a church



## THE COMING GENERATIONAL REALIGNMENT

According to Public Religion Research Institute, a majority of young adults are in favor of LGBTQ equality. The generational divide cuts through every demographic group in the U.S. even in groups most opposed to marriage equality.

- A majority (53%) of young white evangelical Protestants favor legalizing same-sex marriage, compared to just one-quarter (25%) of white evangelical seniors.
- Three-quarters (75%) of young Hispanics favor same-sex marriage, compared to only 38% of Hispanic seniors.
- Close to seven in ten (69%) young black Americans express support for same-sex marriage, compared to only 40% of black seniors.
- Majorities of both young (84%) and senior (54%) Asian-Pacific Islander Americans favor same-sex marriage.
- Close to four in seven (45%) of young white evangelical Protestants reject a policy allowing religiously based refusals to serve LGBTQ people.
- Nearly two-thirds (66%) of black Americans oppose religiously based refusals to serve LGBTQ people, compared to roughly six in ten Hispanic (61%), Asian-Pacific Islander (60%), and white (58%) Americans.
- A majority (54%) of evangelical Protestants support nondiscrimination protections for LGBTQ people.

Source: Public Religion Research Institute, "Emerging Consensus on LGBT Issues: Findings from the 2017 American Values Atlas."



rejects a member for being LGBTQ, making them unwelcome in the community. And that rejection can take many forms. Sometimes they may even be rejected by the church altogether and exiled from the community they grew up in. They may also require the member to be celibate, forbid the member from serving the church in any type of leadership role or refuse to celebrate or officiate a wedding ceremony to the person they choose.

All of these possibilities can bring pain, and sometimes deep and lasting trauma, to the LGBTQ person who seeks to remain faithful both to God and to their understanding of themselves. The HRC Foundation's *Coming Home* series is designed to help LGBTQ people live fully in their sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression, *and* live fully in their religious, spiritual and cultural traditions. Shae Washington, a member of National Community Church in Washington, D.C., says, "My relationship with Jesus is central to who I am. Being in church has always been a part of that. There's such power with being part of a local body."

The personal narratives and firsthand advice found on the following pages are designed to help LGBTQ evangelical Christians navigate these difficult waters. Friends and family may also find these unique perspectives helpful as they support their loved ones on the journey.

"Jesus talks about how the church should be," Washington says. "In a large part churches today have strayed from that. I still have this hope, though, that church can be transformative and have an impact for love."



## The people in the Pews

### Evangelical Challenges and Opportunities

Unlike denominations like the Roman Catholic Church or The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the evangelical faith is mostly comprised of a loose network of autonomous congregations and theologically conservative denominations. Interpretation of Scripture and attitudes on social policy are not handed down from above but often discerned at the community level. It is possible, therefore, to find evangelical churches on a broad spectrum of inclusion for LGBTQ people, from rejecting and dismissive to warm and welcoming.

### The Power Dynamic

And yet, a power dynamic remains. Rev. Brandan Robertson, author of “Nomad” and pastor at Missiongathering Christian Church in San Diego, explains, “There actually is an invisible hierarchy. It’s largely determined by the size of the church or the level of political clout of the church leader. We have these power brokers who control the teachings of the entire evangelical movement, and they have a lot of wealth and influence.”

An international advocate for inclusive churches, Robertson sees these influential leaders as a stumbling block to change. He finds hope, though, in the flexibility of the evangelical structure.



“It’s a lot easier for churches to leave the movement, to leave the Southern Baptist Convention, for example,” he points out. “Over the last three years, hundreds of small churches have left the network or affiliation they belong to. They continue in that autonomous tradition and they choose to affirm LGBTQ people.”

For Robertson, the choice to break away is a clear reflection of Jesus’ ministry. “When an independent church comes out of that system in order to welcome LGBTQ people, they’re giving up a lot,” he says. “They’re giving up power and influence, sometimes wealth in order to do the right thing. And that’s the call of Jesus.”

### Revelation and Reaction

David Gushee, Professor of Christian Ethics and Director of the Center for Theology and Public Life at Mercer University, knows firsthand how difficult such a decision can be. One of the leading lights of the evangelical movement, a renowned author and frequent speaker, he published “Changing Our Mind: A Call from America’s Leading Evangelical Ethics Scholar for Full Acceptance of LGBT Christians in the Church” in 2014. The response was swift.

“I was seen as having abandoned the true faith,” Gushee remembers. “I experienced all kinds of angry diatribes, cancellations, various forms of rejection. I’m now occasionally invited to engage in conversations about LGBTQ inclusion but otherwise doors are closed to me.”

His work on behalf of LGBTQ evangelical Christians has brought new personal understanding. “Every time I speak on these issues, I meet young LGBTQ people who have experienced something similar to the rejection I’ve felt. I see the pain in their eyes and I hurt with them.”



### WORKING FOR A NEW DAWN IN THE BLACK CHURCH

Many Voices is a Black church movement for LGBTQ justice. They work towards envisioning a Black church and community that:

- Embraces the diversity of the human family and ensures that all are treated with love, compassion, and justice.
- Transforms the inaccurate narrative that the entire Black church is negative.
- Raises the voices of Black LGBTQ Christians who, despite rejection and condemnation, contribute so much.

Learn more at [www.manyvoices.org](http://www.manyvoices.org)



### **No Second Class at the Communion Table**

Like many others, Gushee came to his affirming stance through getting to know and admire LGBTQ people. “It was gradual,” he admits, explaining that he began working with the LGBTQ population at First Baptist Church of Decatur, Georgia, where he served as Interim Pastor. “Decatur has a strong LGBTQ community,” he points out. “Some had found a welcome here at our church, even before we had an official policy.”

Gushee’s growing involvement with LGBTQ parishioners proved to be a powerful experience. “I learned about their diversity, their experiences of church, their suffering, their love for Christ,” he says. “It shattered my ignorance, and I developed a loyalty because these were my friends.”

The core tenets of his Baptist upbringing also came into play. “As a Baptist I have certain convictions about what it means to *be* church,” Gushee says. “Among them is the belief that every member matters and that everybody is of equal worth and status. There can be no second-class Christians. There is no first or second class at the communion table.”

### **God’s Spirit is Here**

Shae Washington’s family comes from the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) tradition but her formative church experiences were with a non-denominational, evangelical congregation. “A friend invited me to her youth group and that’s when I thought, ‘God is fun!’” she remembers.

Deeply involved in those youth programs, Washington later joined a young adult ministry and helped plant a new church. “My sexuality had always been there but it’s something I buried,” she says. “We were taught it was a sin so I struggled a lot personally. I thought it was just a phase I went through, but that was actually me pushing it down, not acknowledging what was going on.”

Eventually, she came to a new understanding. “My sexual attraction to women wasn’t going away,” she says. “So I did all these Google searches, asking, ‘Can you be gay and Christian’ and I came across the Gay Christian Network (GCN), now known as Q Christian Fellowship.” The discovery that she wasn’t alone and that she could, indeed, be gay and Christian was a revelation.

### **Abundant Life**

“I had a spiritual encounter with God,” she remembers. “I felt very much like God was saying, ‘You’re gay. I made you this way. You’re fine. This is who you are. I didn’t die to give you abundant life just so you could live in the closet.’”

Her community was not pleased. “The church we all came up in relies heavily on one interpretation of the Bible, so they wanted to know how I could scripturally justify what I was telling them,” Washington says. “They didn’t care so much about this spiritual encounter I’d had with God.”

Her first GCN conference offered the opposite experience. “There were lesbians and trans people and gay men and bisexuals,” she remembers. “There were people in relationships and not in relationships. There were people whose theology was that God was fine with them but who chose celibacy. There were people who were more affirming, who believe that God blesses same-sex relationships. It was amazing. I thought ‘God’s Spirit is here.’”

National Community Church, where Washington continues to attend, considers itself non-affirming of LGBTQ people but is in a process of conversation and discernment to change. “It leaves room for people to decide that they are affirming and still participate in the church,” Washington explains. She met her wife through mutual friends and attending NCC together is something they did from the start of their relationship.



## **DECIDING TO TELL OTHERS**

### **SOME BENEFITS OF DISCLOSURE**

- Living an authentic and whole life
- Making a viable spiritual path through continued participation
- Becoming a role model for others

### **SOME RISKS OF COMING OUT**

- Not everyone will be understating or accepting
- You may be subject to various forms of discipline, from being denied Baptism or Communion to being disfellowshipped or excommunicated, depending on your situation

says. “Being in church has been a part of that. There’s such power with being part of a local body. No church is perfect, because it’s made of people and we’re all flawed. But there are some who are really trying to get it right.”

### **Mentors and Friends**

Growing up Baptist in largely Catholic Puerto Rico, Rev. J. Manny Santiago, a longtime devout Christian, assumed he was part of a liberal denomination. “We had women pastors,” he points out. “The executive minister in Puerto Rico was also a woman and all her ordained staff were women. Until I was twelve, I thought you had to be a woman to be a Baptist preacher.”

He discovered just how conservative the church was when he started thinking about coming out. A university professor proved to be his saving grace. He visited her office and nervously tried to share his secret. “She took it very seriously. She listened. She took the time to understand where I was coming from.”

True to form, the professor — who didn’t believe in God herself — spoke clearly and honestly. “She said to me, ‘I don’t believe in your God, in any God, I think you should give up your God altogether, but my job is to help my students become the best self they can be. I want you to read this book.’”

She gave him David Comstock’s “Gay Theology without Apology”. “I still have it,” Santiago says. “It was my introduction to any sort of interpretation of the Bible from a queer perspective. And the professor, she’s still one of my closest friends.”

Now an openly gay man, Santiago was ordained by an American Baptist congregation in Massachusetts, an accomplishment made possible because of the autonomy of individual Baptist churches.

“The president of the Ordination Council, a theologically conservative woman, told the members that they weren’t there to pass judgment or agree or disagree with my life,” Santiago says. “She reminded them that my church had called me and that they were supposed to see if I had fulfilled the requirements.” The vote proved unanimous in his favor.

### **Subtle Shaming**

Amelia Markham, the Programs and Organizing coordinator for The Reformation Project, points out that many churches are welcoming on some levels but can still do harm to their LGBTQ members.



“It’s sometimes hard to recognize the subtleties,” says Markham, who uses the pronouns they and them. “For evangelical Christians, if your faith in Christ is the most important part of you, then whoever is leading you and teaching you and sharing kindness with you is going to have authority over how you think about ethics. People are spending quality time with you. And it’s genuine. It’s a lot harder to be present to how you are simultaneously being harmed.”

Markham sees three core obstacles for the LGBTQ evangelical Christian: 1) questions of Scripture and how it’s to be interpreted, 2) precedents within Christian history for LGBTQ inclusion, and 3) the lack of LGBTQ Christian role models. That final obstacle is one that people like Markham, Robertson, Santiago and others interviewed for this guide are determined to change.

### **Telling Their Story**

In presentations and workshops, Markham often shares their personal story as someone who identifies as transmasculine. It includes an early awareness of their interest in spiritual matters matched with an equal awareness that they were different from many of their peers.

“It was connected to gender, about what it means to be a boy or a girl,” Markham says. “It was about how I connected with my peers but also with family and teachers and baby sitters. Whatever made me different was deeply relational. That didn’t seem sexual for the first years— not romantic or erotic — I just knew I was different.”

A growing sexual awareness occurred simultaneously with Markham's growing involvement with Christianity. "I felt like I had to make a choice — either go deeper into my faith or be ostracized for putting a name to all these different impulses I was having. Given those two roads I chose to search out the Christian faith to see if it had the answers I was looking for."

### Letting Go of Either / Or

As the years went by, Markham let go of that either/or mentality. "I started reading and studying, not just about sexuality and gender identity and what the Bible says, but also searching out the expansive views of family and connection that the Christian tradition points toward."

Gradually, they came to a new understanding of God's work in the world. "I switched from thinking God will fix it — or *not* — to seeing whatever turmoil I was going through as something transformative from God, as something that others might benefit from," they say.

The trauma experienced by LGBTQ people in evangelical churches spurred them to action. "The more stories I heard of depression and anxiety and suicide ideation, the more I realized that every minute I spent deliberating what is right and wrong was another minute that someone was imagining themselves as deplorable to God."

Markham is quick to point out their position of privilege. "I come to this tension with a college education, from an upper middle class family, with friends and resources and a job," they point out. "If I can barely survive this, what does it mean for other people who don't have those things?"

### Taking a Stand

Markham decided to take a stand and quickly felt the consequences. "I set up coffee meetings, created a PowerPoint presentation, started talking to people," they say. "And that began a slow fade of people from my life. No one responded with vitriolic hate but my pastors and my friends at church made it an inhospitable place for me to be. They made it clear they were no longer people who would be there for me."

That growing exclusion helped them understand the anti-LGBTQ stance as something separate from Christianity. "The opposition isn't just about how we interpret the Bible or maintain Christian tradition," they said. "At the end of the day there's just a systematic prejudice or bias. I could not in good conscience operate in that setting without intentionally deconstructing the bad things and rebuilding the essential message and good things that come with Christian faith."



## Transgender and Evangelical

Rev. Paula Williams grew up believing that she'd be free to choose her own gender, and that she'd be a girl when the time came. "It was a wonderful feeling," she says, looking back. "It was like the world is your oyster."

It wasn't until kindergarten that Williams learned the truth, that she was expected to conform to the gender assigned to her at birth — male. "It felt like a betrayal of the gods," she says. "And there was no one with whom I could speak about it. So I lived my life as a boy. I just knew I wasn't one."

Following family tradition, Williams became an evangelical minister, married a preacher's daughter and had three children. Success led to a role as an executive with the Orchard Group, an organization that plants and supports evangelical churches.

"Because of my concern for my family's well-being, I committed to living my life as a male," she explains. "It got increasingly difficult, though, and I got to the point where there was some suicidal ideation. Still, I felt like I could make it through."

### Experiencing the Call

In 2013, with a decades-long career in the evangelical church, Williams felt called for the first time — realizing she had to transition.

That decision led to Williams' rejection from the church and removal from the Orchard Group. "When I chose to transition, I was resoundingly rejected by the evangelical church," she says. "My second call, though, was a call to return to the church, even when I thought I was done with it."

Williams returned, though, to a different kind of church than the ones she'd served in the past. "My theology at that point had become more mainline, but my methodology was evangelical," she says.

### An Undiminished Faith

At Highlands Church in Denver, Williams found a congregation that matched her needs. The theology was mainline protestant and liberal; the style of worship was evangelical. "I discovered Highlands then I discovered the Open Network, which has 30 or so churches," she says. "All of them were once evangelical and still are in style."

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## “I’m really drawn to Jesus”

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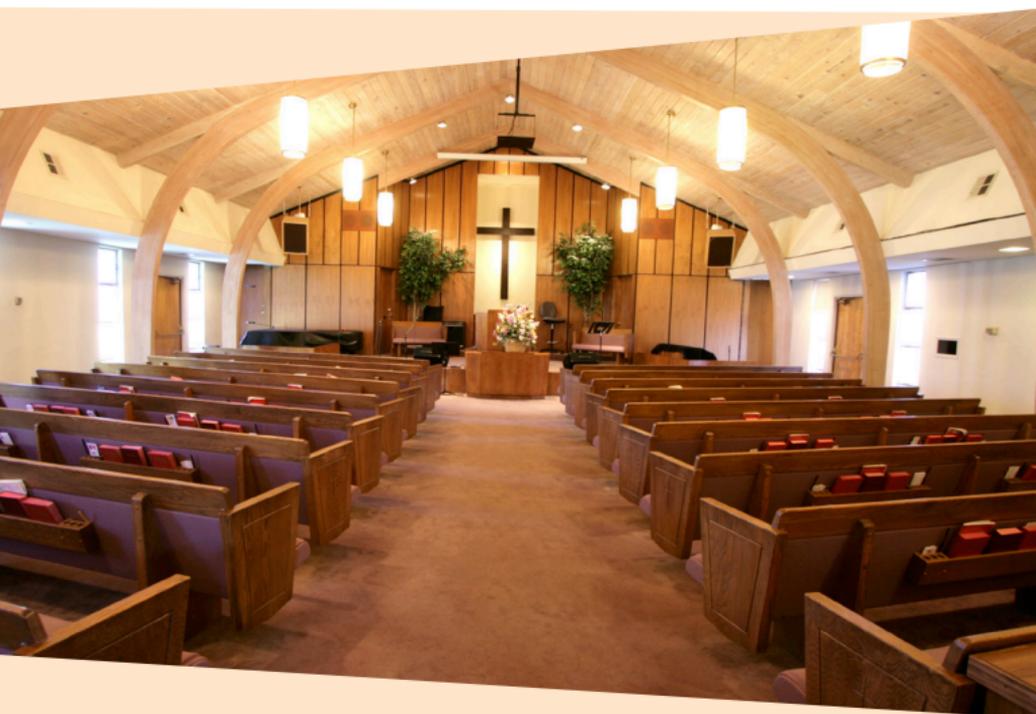
Williams' third call was to pastor a new church in Boulder County. A daughter congregation of both Highlands and Denver Community Church, it will be fully open and affirming.

Her lifelong journey of discovery has only served to strengthen her faith. “I host pastors from the Unitarian Universalist environment,” she says. “I have close friends who are Buddhists. As for me, I’m really drawn to Jesus. I believe that Jesus is God-come-to-Earth to show solidarity for us in our sufferings. That was strengthened through these trials, not diminished.”



### FINDING A COMMUNITY

Deciding to live openly is a personal process, but it's not something you have to face alone. Consider joining A private, password protected place to connect with others in Q Christian Fellowship at [community.qchristian.org](http://community.qchristian.org). You may also consider looking for an open and affirming church. The Affirming Church Directory™ provides an online directory so people can locate and visit welcoming Christian churches around the world. Learn more at [www.gaychurch.org/find\\_a\\_church](http://www.gaychurch.org/find_a_church)





# The Power of Parenting

Susan Cottrell, Founder and President of FreedHearts, has firsthand experience with the complexities of being a deeply devout parent thriving in an evangelical church only to learn that she has children who are LGBTQ.

"I know this can look very scary," she says to parents in similar situations. "To pull out this one piece about homosexuality, something that you've been taught is a deep sin, can look like the whole pile is going to collapse."

The core advice that Cottrell offers through frequent workshops and her books "True Colors" and "Mom, I'm Gay" is to trust in God. "Let God be God," she says. "God will shake up, deconstruct and reconstruct your faith." Her commitment to that process is grounded in a single, core concept. "God is good," she says. "You don't have to be afraid of that. Fear is not from God."



## RESOURCES FOR PARENTS AND ALLIES

Here are top 5 suggested resources for evangelical allies and parents of LGBTQ children:

- 1 FreedHearts is an organization that helps Christian parents fully embrace their LGBTQ children. More at [www.freedhearts.org](http://www.freedhearts.org)
- 2 Progressive Evangelicals in the Mainline Churches is an online support group for those who self-identify as progressive evangelical. More at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/856363894495336>
- 3 PFLAG is a national organization that offers support for families, allies and LGBTQ people, and provides education about the unique issues and challenges facing LGBTQ people. More at [www.pflag.org](http://www.pflag.org).
- 4 Gender Spectrum helps families, organizations, and institutions increase understandings of gender and consider the implications that evolving views have for each of us. More at [www.genderspectrum.org](http://www.genderspectrum.org)
- 5 The Marin Foundation has compiled a list of local support groups for Christian parents of LGBTQ children. More at [www.themarinfoundation.org/resources/resources-for-parents/](http://www.themarinfoundation.org/resources/resources-for-parents/)

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## “Let God be God”

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Cottrell also understands the very real dangers that threaten LGBTQ youth, specifically the possibility of traumatic bullying and of suicide. It was a concern long before her two daughters came out, when she learned of two suicides at the local high school.

“All I could think about was coming home and finding my youngest dead,” she says. “I had no reason to suspect that would happen but I’m pretty sure that was true of those kids’ parents as well.”

According to the Trevor Project, suicide is the second leading cause of death among people ages 10 to 24. The rate of attempted suicide is four times greater for LGBTQ youth. Most concerning, LGBTQ youth who come from families described as “highly rejecting” are 8.4 times more likely than others to attempt suicide.

“Your job with these children that God has entrusted to you is to love them to the ends of the earth,” Cottrell tells parents. “In this day and age, the risk is astronomical. Suicides are occurring daily.”

She feels strongly that parents shouldn’t wait until the family is in crisis to create an inclusive home. “Be the safe place for your child whatever their story,” she says. “Become affirming *now*. Create a safe space in your home, in your circles, so that if your child is gay or trans or bi they can come out safely.”

That safe space also becomes a haven for others. “Create the safe place for your kids but also for their friends,” Cottrell says. “Create the space for your niece or your brother to come out safely. People will come to you.”

Throughout her work, she constantly returns to her faith. “I really love Jesus and Jesus was the entry point for my relationship with God,” she says. “I hope people struggling with this will seek God, will reconcile whatever questions they have in order to be affirming, and know that being affirming is consistent with our call to love. I fully affirm because of my faith, not in spite of it.”

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## “I really love Jesus and Jesus was the entry point for my relationship with God”

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## Sacred Texts, Sacred Lives

Cottrell's call for people of faith to reconcile their concerns and affirm LGBTQ lives can be a tall order. For many, the Bible is crystal clear in its teachings on same-sex behavior.

Several passages, spread across the Old and New Testament, appear to name same-sex behavior as a grievous sin and even depict those who practice it as outside the grace of God. It is sometimes Scripture that offers the greatest challenge to LGBTQ evangelical Christians, who feel that their inherent nature is in conflict with biblical teachings. Some believe that the love and desire they feel will be the cause of their own damnation.

Those passages — often called the “clobber passages” — regarding what some assume to be LGBTQ stories have been used to marginalize or even exile portions of the church community, yet those same passages appear to clash with the all-important, big-picture values that run throughout the Bible. Those values are captured most succinctly in the Golden Rule, spoken by Jesus (Matthew 7:12), who quotes the ancient Hebrew text.

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**You shall not take vengeance  
or bear a grudge against any of  
your people, but you shall love  
your neighbor as yourself:  
I am the Lord. – Leviticus 19:18**

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“When we look at Scripture, there seems to be a core decision that must be made, perhaps repeatedly,” David Gushee says. “What do we hold onto as unchangeable, perhaps fundamental, and where are we more flexible? How do we discern which is which?”

Gushee notes that many who read the Bible without historical context don't realize how much interpretation happens all the time. For example, in the New Testament, many churches do not strictly follow Paul's instructions on women leadership, slavery and more. Regarding the Old Testament, Gushee notes, “We don't observe kosher laws. We don't support holy wars and genocide. It's a selective literalism.”

He suggests that people read those six passages through a new lens. “When you engage those passages with a heartbeat for the suffering of LGBTQ people you start asking different questions,” he says. “Are they really about what we think they’re about? And are these the only passages that are relevant to how a marginalized group of people are to be treated?”

### **Starting with the Right Question**

Matthew Vines, founder of The Reformation Project and author of “God and the Gay Christian,” agrees. “One of the greatest divides happens before people ever open the Bible,” he says. “It’s a matter of what questions they’re seeking to answer, and what governing lens they’ve chosen to use.”

Like Gushee, Vines emphasizes the importance of personal relationships. “A lot of conservative Christians are unaware of the negative impact of the church’s non-affirming teaching,” he says. “They’ll approach Scripture with a simple question, ‘What does the Bible say and is it positive or negative?’ But that’s not a very thoughtful question to be asking.”

Vines suggests a shift in focus. “We should ask instead, ‘What do the Bible’s stories have to do with LGBTQ people and their relationships?’” Referencing the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, many biblical scholars now hold that a careful reading of Genesis in its historical context offers no solid basis to conclude that the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah had anything to do with LGBTQ people and their relationships. Instead, the text is about neglecting to show hospitality to strangers.



### **A BRIEF BIBLICAL CASE FOR LGBTQ INCLUSION**

The Reformation Project is a Bible-based, Christian grassroots organization that works to promote the inclusion of LGBTQ people by reforming church teaching on sexual orientation and gender identity. Their booklet on “How to Talk About the Bible and LGBT Inclusion” gives readers a concise but comprehensive overview of the biblical case for LGBTQ inclusion. For a brief summary, go to [www.reformationproject.org/biblical-case](http://www.reformationproject.org/biblical-case).

## **Good Trees Bear Good Fruit**

To support his reasoning and his support for full inclusion in the church, Vines turns to the Sermon on the Mount.

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**In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit.**

– Matthew 7:17-18

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“The church’s teaching against same-sex relationships has caused tragic amounts of relational and spiritual devastation,” Vines says. “That’s not good fruit so it can’t be coming from a good tree.”

He first realized the extent of harm done by non-affirming church rhetoric during his freshman year in college. “I got to know more openly gay people,” he explains. “It was impossible to deny the damaging consequences that church teachings had on their lives. That suffering is proof that we were doing something wrong.”

## **Made in the Image of God**

Rev. J. Manny Santiago, ordained in the Baptist churches, looks to Genesis as a source of affirmation. “One thing we



learn from the stories of creation is that humanity is made in God's image," he says. "When the first person was made a human it is through God's breath so we each have a spark of the divine."

He notes that the word "adam" in the original Hebrew is a word that refers to the first human, not the first male human. "Adam is not even gendered," Santiago says. "Stop listening to people who say we're not part of that creation. That's not what the Bible says. The Bible tells us that God finished and said *all* of this good. We're included in that."

### **Jesus as Role Model**

For a clear example of how the church might approach the issue, Santiago points to Jesus. "We learn from the gospels that Christ went around picking his own community members," he says. "We know about the twelve apostles he chose but he also approached other people and brought them into his inner circle. That's a model for how we might create sanctuaries and communities."

Santiago notes that the gospels also offer new ways to understand family. "Jesus was very explicit," he points out. "They came to him and said, 'Your mother and siblings are looking for you,' and he said, 'No, the people who follow me are my family.' So, even if the church says there's no space for you, you can still imitate Christ and call up your own family. If the institutional church doesn't welcome us then the communities we create become our sanctuaries."





## Taking Time, Taking Steps

Darren Calhoun, a worship leader at Chicago's Urban Village Church, experienced a long journey of discernment and discovery, leaving a church community that attempted to alter his sexual orientation, moving to a church whose inclusion of LGBTQ people was conditional, and finding a home where both his faith and his life as a gay man could be celebrated.

"I had to go to a church that wasn't affirming but was welcoming," he explains of that middle step. "I couldn't have named that at the time. I knew I wanted to engage with another church but it had to speak something of the language I knew without totally being a different ball game."

A singer, photographer and frequent public speaker, Calhoun comes from a tradition where pastoral authority is unquestioned. That perspective changed as he stepped away from a destructive church environment and made his first step toward wholeness. "Getting to Willow [Creek Community Church] I had a chance to start questioning those kinds of ideas," he says. "I was able to reintegrate into church at a slower pace and do things on my own terms."

### A Diversity of Views

Calhoun also had the opportunity to meet a wider range of people, with a wide range of views. "I was finding all these different Christians who all very clearly loved Jesus and followed Christ but whose interpretations were very different," he says.

He met LGBTQ people who chose celibacy, who married same-sex spouses, who joined intentional communities, and who chose to knowingly and honestly enter mixed-orientation marriages.

"At the end of the day, this is between me and God," Calhoun says. "No one is going to give me a solid answer. The questions aren't going to go away. I had to learn to trust the relationship I had with God."

Eventually, he realized his personal relationship with God wasn't being nourished at Willow, where church leaders had specific expectations of their LGBTQ members and where opportunities were limited if those expectations were not met.

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**"God is always there, no matter what.  
God was reminding me that I am worthy"**

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## Doing Life Together

When Urban Village invited Calhoun to become a Worship Leader, he knew that God was opening a door. “On one level, it was a practical decision,” he says. “I needed a more regular income and I couldn’t be on staff at Willow as a gay man unless I was celibate. I didn’t want my income to be jeopardized if I went on a date with someone.”

Urban Village had worked through their questions about LGBTQ issues and emerged a truly affirming evangelical church. “There’s no penalty if I choose to be celibate as a gay man or choose to be married,” Calhoun said. “They weren’t demanding an explanation of my dating life. They just wanted to do life with me.”

The full realization that he’d found a church home came after worship one Sunday. “Two of my volunteers were talking about how they missed their spouses, who were both out of town. One volunteer was heterosexual and the other was gay. Just to hear two people talking about missing their spouses, and the commonality of that. It was so normal.”

## A Personal Relationship with God

For Calhoun, it always comes back to a personal relationship with God. “Our churches teach us how to relate to God,” he says. “We see it modeled in leadership. We’re taught it in Bible studies.” The form and content of that teaching can make all the difference.

“In that first toxic church I was constantly being told I was unworthy, in danger of God’s judgment and wrath,” Calhoun explains. “I was told I had to debase myself to be pleasing to God. But that was the church talking. God was not relating to me that way.”

In Calhoun’s experience, God is always there, no matter what. “God was reminding me that I am worthy,” he says. “I had to figure out that the church is completely wrong and that God is still using me and still showing up in my life.”

He realizes this is a tough road for many. “For a lot of people the church is God and the pastor is God and even your parents can represent the attitude of God,” he says. The key, Calhoun learned, is to separate the institutional rule setting from what he calls “God’s abundant grace.”

“God was making it abundantly clear that there’s nothing I can do that will separate me from God,” Calhoun says. “You’ll never be separated, you’ll never be forsaken, you’ll never be cast away.”



## Words of Wisdom and Advice

Like Calhoun, Susan Cottrell knows how important it is to speak about God's grace with those who have been taught that they lie outside of it. "To LGBTQ people who are ashamed of their sexuality, I want to say, 'God made you the way you are,'" she says.

Cottrell emphasizes that sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression are inherent, but that hatred is not. "You were conditioned to feel loathing," she explains. "It was not inherent in you to loath anything about yourself. If you can find a way to get past all the head noise and ask God how *God* sees you, and if you're able to listen for an answer, you will hear God's love for you."

To be open to that message, however, can be a journey in itself. Finding a supportive, affirming community is key, as is finding people going through similar struggles and living out similar stories.



## **Transformation, Impact, Love**

Shae Washington found support outside her church community without entirely leaving that community behind. “Our campus pastor has been a great part of our lives,” she says. “He did our premarital counseling. We still feel like we want to be part of our church and help usher in inclusion and affirmation of LGBTQ people. I still have this hope that church is transformation and impact and radical love for all people.”

“A starting point for young people coming out in evangelical traditions now is the Internet,” Amelia Markham points out. “There’s more open source material than ever before. You might start by looking specifically for Bible-based materials that promote the inclusion of LGBTQ people. Just knowing there are books and websites and organizations with an evangelical perspective but arriving at different conclusions can be lifesaving.”

## **A Beautiful Thing to See**

Rev. Brandan Robertson agrees. “The Q Christian Fellowship has loosely affiliated Facebook groups divided by age. There are thousands of young LGBTQ Christians in Kansas and Missouri and places that might not have affirming churches but have vibrant online communities.”

Like Markham, he urges a thorough web search to find the community that fits. “There are Google chat groups where people cook their dinner and hang out for six hours online together,” he says. “It’s a beautiful thing to see. There’s such a depth of relationship, and such support.”

Robertson also calls on the entire church community to step up. “If you’re an ally, there’s a role for you. It’s about asking questions and putting pressure on the community and being the annoying voice,” he says. “Ask why we’re talking this way, why we’re excluding people. Raise the issue, present it to the conscience of the church.”

## **Proclaiming the Good News**

With emotional and physical safety as a top priority, Robertson also sees a unique role for the LGBTQ congregant. “If you have the support and feel that you can shield yourself from potential harm, being a witness as a faithful LGBTQ person, just a regular member of the congregation, is one of the most powerful things you can do,” he says. “People get to see the Spirit of God within you.”

He warns, though, that such a stance is not available to everyone. “If you don’t have that kind of strong support in your life or in the church, the healthy choice might be to leave a community that is speaking things that are toxic,” he says. “You might need to find a Christian community that will proclaim the good news to you.”



### **A Changing Landscape**

Reports from Public Religion Research Institute show that 12 percent of white evangelical Christians were in favor of marriage equality in 2003, with a jump to 34 percent by 2017. The numbers are even higher for evangelical millennials. “There will be a major shift in the next 10 to 20 years,” Rev. Paula Williams says. “In some communities, it’ll happen in the next five to 10 years.”

For Williams, the current challenge lies in uncovering the deeper truth of a congregation’s stance on LGBTQ inclusion. “The vast majority of mega churches say they are open to transgender people,” she offers as an example. “Drill down and you’ll find that they’re not. You have to ask the questions: can I preach here, can I teach here, can I be an elder? The answer is most likely no.”

Remaining in such environments can pose serious threats to physical and spiritual well-being. “The more time you spend within that non-affirming community, the more time you have to internalize transphobia and homophobia,” she explains. “When we internalize shame about who we are, it can build up. It may lead to suicidal ideation.”

### **Sacred Spaces, Sacred Communities**

Alternatives, though, are cropping up around the country. The Open Network hopes to establish affirming churches in cities where such resources are currently nonexistent. “Keep your eyes open,” Williams says. “New churches are being planted.”

Rev. J. Manny Santiago echoes that sentiment, and expands upon it. “People are always talking about how the church is not the building,” he says. “So if you’re not welcome into that space, remember the church is the people. The relationships you build throughout your life become sacred spaces and sacred communities. That’s where new churches are being built.”

## Conclusion

The stories shared above reveal how the unique quality of each person's experience with evangelical Christian churches. They also reveal how similar those stories are at their core. Here are some key thoughts to keep in mind as your own journey continues:

Evangelical churches are largely autonomous and exist on a continuum from totally rejecting LGBTQ people to fully welcoming and affirming them.

There is a wealth of online resources for LGBTQ evangelical Christians. These include reliable information and often the opportunity for meaningful, faithful community.

There are deeply committed, devout evangelical Christians who are not LGBTQ but who are working to transform their communities and create a welcome for all.

For those who are able – through personal strength and community support – remaining in the church community as an openly LGBTQ faithful Christian can be transformative for all.

For others, deeply hurt by their church, the healthier choice may be to seek out alternatives for worship and faithful community.

But either way, you can have both a relationship with God while being your full self.

Finally, as the stories told above confirm, there is the example of Jesus' own ministry, which calls for a loving and affirming welcome to all peoples, from all walks of life.

# Resources

## **LGBTQ and Allied Organizations**

### **Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists**

An organization solely devoted to building the Welcoming and Affirming movement within the Baptist traditions.

[www.awab.org](http://www.awab.org)

### **Believe Out Loud**

An online network that empowers Christians to work for LGBTQ equality and elevates people and places where Christianity and LGBTQ justice intersect.

[www.believeoutloud.com](http://www.believeoutloud.com)

### **Brave Commons**

An intersectional queer movement focusing on connecting, empowering, and supporting marginalized communities within and beyond university walls.

[www.facebook.com/Brave-Commons-1991010127854575](https://www.facebook.com/Brave-Commons-1991010127854575)

### **Evangelicals for Social Action**

An organization and movement committed to “reconciliation, wholeness, and restoration promised by the whole gospel,” including a series of dialogues, Oriented to Love, aimed at understanding sexual and gender diversity in the church.

[www.evangelicalsforsocialaction.org](http://www.evangelicalsforsocialaction.org)

### **Fellowship of Reconciling Pentecostals International**

A network of Pentecostal ministers, churches, and ministries which seeks by means of the full gospel of Jesus Christ to reconcile all repentant people to God without regard to race, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, religious affiliation, or any other thing that divides.

[www.rpifellowship.com](http://www.rpifellowship.com)

### **FreedHearts**

An organization that helps parents fully understand and embrace their LGBTQ children, reconcile faith issues, and keep their children safe and their family together.

[www.freedhearts.org](http://www.freedhearts.org)

### **Many Voices**

A Black church movement for LGBTQ justice working toward a community that embraces the diversity of the human family and ensures that all are treated with love, compassion, and justice.

[www.manyvoices.org](http://www.manyvoices.org)

### **Q Christian Fellowship**

A community of queer Christians, guided by the light and love of Christ, that is transforming attitudes about the LGBTQIA+ community across denominations and cultures.

[www.qchristian.org](http://www.qchristian.org)

## **Queer Theology**

An online community of LGBTQ+ Christians and allies that provides resources, encouragement, and support for LGBTQ Christians and straight, cisgender supporters and religious leaders.

[www.queertheology.com](http://www.queertheology.com)

## **Seventh-day Adventist Kinship International**

A diverse, multigenerational worldwide community of LGBTQ people who are connected to the Adventist community.

[www.sdakinship.org](http://www.sdakinship.org)

The Evangelical Network (TEN)

A growing American association of 28 LGBT-affirming organizations and individuals dedicated to providing LGBTQ and allied evangelicals a safe space for worship and dialogue.

[www.theevangelicalnetwork.net](http://www.theevangelicalnetwork.net)

## **The Fellowship**

A coalition of Christian Churches committed to radical inclusive ministry.

[www.radicallyinclusive.com](http://www.radicallyinclusive.com)

## **The Marin Foundation**

An organization that works to build bridges between the LGBTQ community and conservatives through scientific research, biblical and social education, and diverse community gatherings.

[www.themarinfoundation.org](http://www.themarinfoundation.org)

## **The Reformation Project**

A grassroots organization rooted in the teachings of the Bible that promotes Christian inclusivity and affirmation of sexual orientation and gender identity.

[www.reformationproject.org](http://www.reformationproject.org)

## **Tyler Clementi Foundation**

An organization created by the Clementi family which seeks to prevent bullying through inclusion, assertion of dignity and acceptance as a way to honor the memory of Tyler Clementi: a son, a brother and a friend.

[www.tylerclementi.org/resources-for-faith](http://www.tylerclementi.org/resources-for-faith)

# **Publications**

## **ARTICLES**

### **“A Love Letter To Transgender People From A Transgender Priest.” Queer Theology.**

Robertson, Brandon. “I’m queer, and I’m (still) an evangelical (COMMENTARY).” Washington Post. 24 Feb. 2015.

## **BLOGS**

### **Austen Hartke**

Austen Hartke is the creator of the YouTube series “Transgender and Christian,” which seeks to understand, interpret, and share parts of the Bible that relate to gender identity and the lives of transgender individuals.

[www.austenhartke.com](http://www.austenhartke.com)

### **Blue Babies Pink**

Blue Babies Pink is a 44-episode Southern Coming Out Story created by Brett Trapp.

[www.bluebabiespink.com](http://www.bluebabiespink.com)

### **Paula Stone Williams**

Paula worked for a major church-planting ministry for 35 years, including time as Chairperson and CEO, and served as a weekly columnist and Editor-At-Large for Christian Standard magazine.

[www.paulastonewilliams.com](http://www.paulastonewilliams.com)

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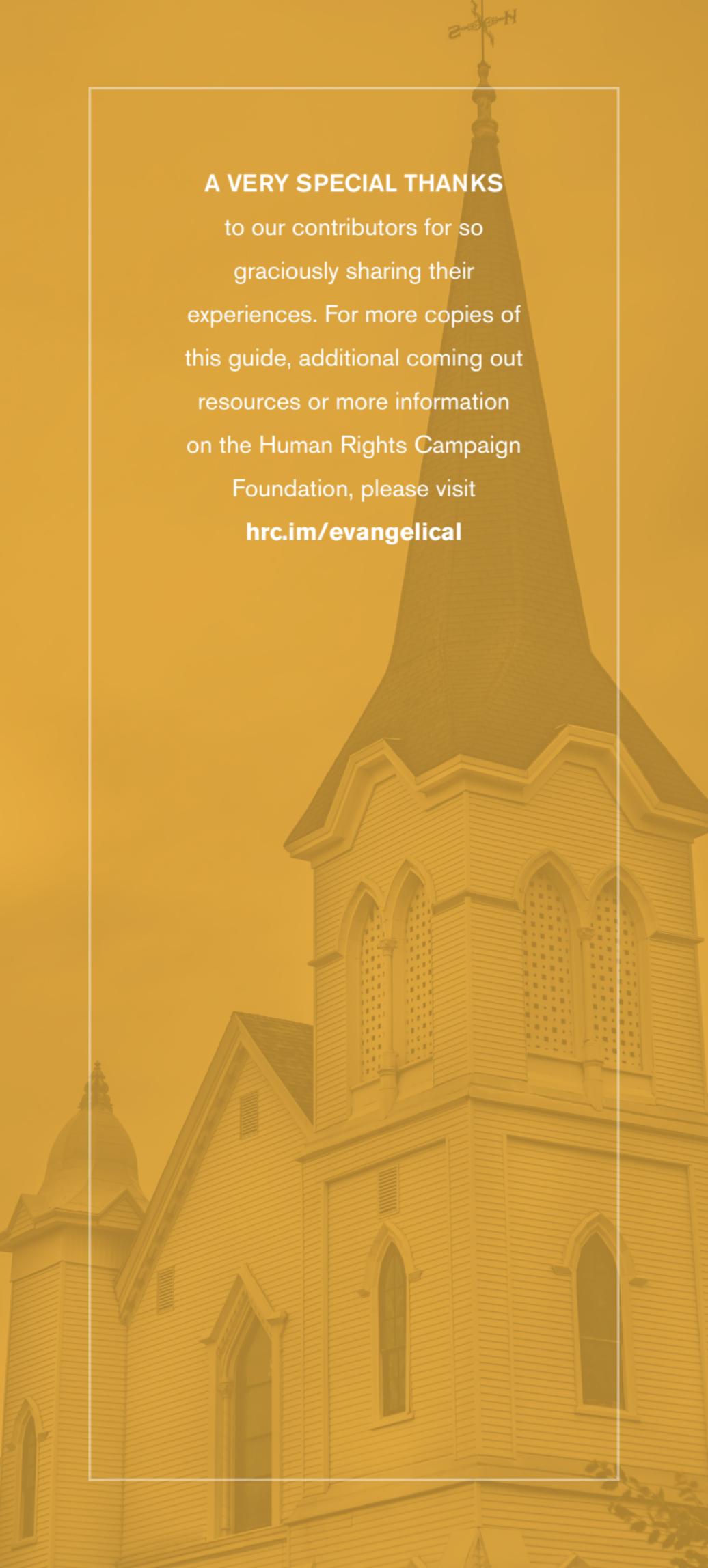
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The HRC Religion and Faith Program is working to create a world where nobody is forced to choose between who they are, whom they love and what they believe. Thanks in part to this work, more and more Evangelical Christians aren't simply engaging in dialogue around LGBTQ equality, they're leading the conversation. They do this work not in spite of their belief or values, but because of them. To learn more, visit [hrc.im/evangelical](http://hrc.im/evangelical)

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