

February 2009

**TO:** Interested Parties  
**FROM:** Rachel Laser, Director of the Culture Program, Lanae Erickson, Policy Counsel, and Jim Kessler, VP for Policy  
**RE:** Attitudes of Religious Americans on Gay Equality Issues

## Overview

Too often, when it comes to the issue of equality for gay and lesbian Americans, progressives see religious leaders and Americans as rigid, unreasonable, and monolithically hostile. However, our extensive public opinion research has revealed four key insights about the attitudes and mindset of those who have religious objections to same-sex relationship recognition and other equality issues.

- Many of their concerns are not rooted in bigotry, hatred, or homophobia;
- Their feelings towards gay and lesbian people are trending warmer;
- They are concerned about preserving traditions like marriage, the workplace, and the military; and
- Their faith, though often a hurdle, can also lead them to positive attitudes towards gay and lesbian Americans.

If progressive leaders better understand the mindset of religious Americans, they may be able to make progress on these critical issues by bringing people of faith into the conversation, rather than leaving them out in the cold.

## Religious Americans' opposition to equality issues is not based in bigotry.

In our research, 76% of the country favored some form of relationship recognition for gay and lesbian couples—from marriage to civil unions to domestic partnerships. This included 81% of Catholics, 68% of Evangelical Christians,<sup>1</sup> and 66% of regular churchgoers.<sup>2</sup>

And approximately 55% of *each* of these groups has a close gay or lesbian friend or family member.

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<sup>1</sup> Those who identified themselves as Protestant and a “born-again or Evangelical Christian.”

<sup>2</sup> Those who attend church once a week or more.

## **Religious Americans' feelings towards gay and lesbian people are trending warmer.**

Eighty-one percent of people who said their views towards gay and lesbian people had changed in the past 5 to 10 years said they had become more accepting. This warming trend could also be seen throughout religious demographics, including 85% of Catholics and also 70% of regular churchgoers and Evangelicals.

## **Religious Americans are concerned about eroding traditions.**

Whether it is because of high divorce rates or general concerns about the American family and culture, 80% of the country thinks that the institution of marriage is facing problems, with 49% labeling those problems as major. Among religious Americans, seventy-six percent of Catholics think marriage is facing problems, and over 80% of Protestants, Evangelicals and regular churchgoers do.

When asked whether gay and lesbian couples who want to get married are trying to change the institution of marriage or join it, the country was largely split: 41% answered "change" and 50% answered "join." But there is a large difference between religious and non-religious Americans. Fifty-four percent of both Evangelicals and regular churchgoers said gays and lesbians were seeking to "change" marriage. By contrast, only 23% of people who seldom attend church chose "change," while 69% chose "join."

## **Religious Americans' faith can also lead them to positive attitudes towards gay and lesbian people.**

Religious objections remain a hurdle for many observant Americans. Fifty-four percent of Americans agreed with the statement: "Homosexuality goes against my religious beliefs," including 64% of Protestants, 51% of Catholics, 76% of Evangelicals, and 72% of regular churchgoers. However, for many religious people, their faith also leads them to positive conclusions about gay and lesbian people.

- Eighty-eight percent of the country agreed that "We should all follow the Golden Rule and treat others as we'd like to be treated, including gay people." This included 87% of Evangelicals and 85% of regular churchgoers.
- Seventy-one percent of the country thought that a gay person could be a good Christian, including 63% of Protestants, 79% of Catholics, 46% of Evangelicals, and 60% of regular churchgoers.
- Sixty-three percent of the country thought a gay person could go to heaven. That group included 64% of Protestants, 71% of Catholics, 61% of Evangelicals, and 60% of regular churchgoers.

## Conclusion

Faith remains an obstacle on equality issues for gays and lesbians, but it is a hurdle, not a wall. There may be an opportunity to turn faith into an asset rather than a roadblock on equality issues. Advocates should use language that speaks to religious Americans' faith, including invoking the Golden Rule, and cultivate and magnify the voices of religious leaders who are articulating a positive message around equality issues. Advocates must also win the "join v. change" argument. That means that messages to frame support for relationship recognition, as well as employment nondiscrimination and repeal of the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy, must demonstrate that new laws are needed to allow gay people to join and take part in important societal institutions.