

Article of Faith: Taking the Pulpit to Pride

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— Rev. Rebecca Voelkel, National Religious Leadership Roundtable

WASHINGTON, June 13 — The lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community celebrates Pride season with myriad events throughout the summer. What follows is an Article of Faith addressing the convergence of the faith and LGBT communities.

Article of Faith by the Rev. Rebecca Voelkel National Religious Leadership Roundtable

For years now, I have donned my brightest T-shirt with my congregation’s logo, my shorts, my sensible shoes and my liturgical stole in preparation for my participation in the local Pride parade.

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Rev. Rebecca Voelkel (center) and her parents

It used to be, in the early history of Pride parades, that they would include the few faithful from the local Metropolitan Community Church and, perhaps, a smattering of courageous leaders from other religious traditions. This illustrated two important factors — the chasm between secular LGBT folk and religious ones, and the nascentness of the pro-LGBT religious movement. For many it was less safe to be religious in the LGBT movement than it was to be queer in religious circles. (And it was darn hard to be queer in religious circles.)

But we have seen a lot of change over the years. As I’ve participated in Pride parades in Seattle, Minneapolis, Hartford, Dallas, Atlanta and elsewhere, the religious contingent is larger every year. There are Pagans and Buddhists, Roman Catholics and Protestants, Jews, Muslims and Hindus. Recently, Affirmation, the pro-LGBT Mormon group, created a float that was a replica of a horse-

drawn wagon. The proud gay men on top were clean-cut, dressed in period clothing and waving with joy to the crowd — a moment for them, that I can only imagine was a rare confluence of spiritual and sexual identities.

In much the same way that Pride marks other changes — like the deepening and broadening of the LGBT community with the addition of LGBT AA groups, and every kind of employee group from General Mills and American Airlines and a vast number of corporations and queer bowlers and transgender bridge groups — these changes in Pride celebrations are indicative of change in the pro-LGBT religious movement.

Although the chasm between the wider LGBT community and the religious pro-LGBT community still exists, it is smaller and there are many bridges being built to traverse it. And, although there yet remains a long way to go, much progress has been made within religious communities to change the homophobia, heterosexism and gender phobia. For example — many of the major LGBT organizations now have programs devoted to religious work. The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, GLAAD, HRC and the National Black Justice Coalition have all recognized that advancing LGBT work means working with pro-LGBT movements within different religious bodies. And those pro-LGBT movements have done amazing things.

For example, in the last three years, the numbers of publicly “welcoming and affirming” congregations within the Christian tradition has grown from 1,300 to more than 3,100. At the Institute for Welcoming Resources, this is the work we engage in daily, as we collaborate with congregations across the country to support and build the welcoming church movement. Each of these congregations represents the honest, hard work of thousands of folks — engaging in relationship building, serious study of Scripture and sharing of stories.

Within the Jewish tradition, the Renewal, Reconstructionist, Reform and Conservative movements have all created pro-LGBT policies and are working on a program to help synagogues declare themselves welcoming and affirming. Within Hinduism, there exist ashrams and communities where LGBT people are supported and affirmed. Within Paganism, there is a long tradition of celebration of LGBT people, especially welcoming LGBT folks into spiritual leadership. Within Islam, there are out imams, there are pro-LGBT organizations and the dialogue with the tradition is beginning. Within Buddhism, there exist pro-LGBT organizations and sanghas that welcome and affirm LGBT people.

This widening and broadening within religious communities of the support for LGBT people is a critical part of our LGBT movement. In particular, almost all of the work that has been done in religious circles has involved large numbers of allies. For example, of the nearly 3 million members of welcoming and affirming Christian congregations, the vast majority of them are straight. This building the base of allies is a hugely important asset the religious movement brings to the larger LGBT movement.

In a recent Pride parade in Chicago, my parents, both of whom are clergy and members of the United Church of Christ Parents of LGBT people, rode in the back of a convertible. The laughter, celebration, joy and excitement were a high for them. And the fact that dozens of folks ran out to the car to hug and welcome them solidified, yet again, their work for LGBT rights — both within their religious community and in the larger society.

In this Pride season, I pray for more vintage horse-drawn wagons and more Pagan May Pole dances and more clergy in the backs of convertibles — and for continued transformation and justice-making.

About the Author: *The Rev. Rebecca Voelkel is the Institute for Welcoming Resources and Faith Work director for the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force.*