

By Jim Merritt

Asking the clergy: Reassuring LGBT people wary of organized religion



Irene Failenbogen Credit: New Synagogue of Long Island

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The Public Religion Research Institute found in a recent national survey that nearly half of Americans who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT) are religiously unaffiliated. This week's clergy discuss why many LGBT people are reluctant to participate in organized religion, and where they might find acceptance among the Island's religious congregations.

Cantor Irene Failenbogen

The New Synagogue of Long Island, Brookville

Many people feel alienated and alone when they face the truth of their beings or they find themselves in love with a person of the same gender. I am sometimes disappointed at how services are denied to people just because they don't follow traditional dogmas or rules. In the New Synagogue of Long Island, I base my leadership role on honest relationships, and my judgments on Torah's teaching of love, "*ahavah*." In "The Annunciation," the poet Edwin Muir describes a good relationship as one in which "Each asks from each/What each most wants to give/And each awakes in each/What else would never be." My personal advice to any member of the LGBT community is to not give up on communities of faith. Many of our congregants had failed in finding a welcoming community of faith until they found us. For example, at our Brookville Multifaith Campus, we recently held a Christian baptism and Hebrew baby naming for the child of an interfaith lesbian couple. Don't base your search in fear but in hope. Before you make a decision to affiliate to any religious institution, make sure that you have a good relationship with the clergy and that the community truly embraces the totality of who you are. To me that means you can trust the judgments of the clergy members and that the people will honor and accompany you in every step of your spiritual journey. The Torah teaches us to love our neighbor as ourselves. That's my basis for opening my arms to everybody, recognizing that we don't choose our sexual orientations or whom we will fall in love with. In the end, if belonging to a congregation is something important to you, keep searching until you find the right relationship for you.

The Rev. Christopher McMahon

Retired, Unitarian Universalist Congregation of the Great South Bay, Sayville

As a Unitarian Universalist (UU) minister, I am proud of my denomination's longtime support of LGBT issues. Since the early 1970s, the Unitarian Universalist denomination has been advocating equality for all people regardless of sexual orientation. Since 1984, the denomination has been publicly calling for marriage equality and has worked tirelessly over the decades to help bring this right into law. Twenty-five years ago, the Unitarian Universalist denomination developed a training and inclusion program — the "Welcoming Congregation" to provide guidance to congregations and their members on how to become more inclusive of LGBT people. Sixty-three percent of UU congregations today

are “Welcoming Congregations.” Although there is always more work to be done in this regard, I believe it is fair to say the vast majority of UU congregations (if not all) are very inclusive of LGBT people today. As a UU minister, I am very aware that some LGBT people are inherently suspicious of organized religion, and this is understandable. Many LGBT people have suffered mightily with intolerance, and worse, at the hands of clergy and congregations that condemn them for being different while at the same time apparently suggesting that “God loves all his children unconditionally.” Sadly, this has negatively affected the spiritual dimension of many LGBT people. Accordingly, I believe it is the job of every clergy person and congregation to welcome LGBT people into their midst and assure them they are accepted and loved.

The Very Rev. Michael Sniffen

Dean, Cathedral of the Incarnation, Garden City

LGBTQ people are rightly wary of organized religion. Misinformed interpretations of Scripture and archaic social teachings have been used to exclude LGBTQ people from full participation in religious and secular life for many years. Some traditions have taught that any sexual orientation or gender identity outside the status quo is “inherently disordered.” Religious judgment of people who identify as LGBTQ has been deeply hurtful and damaging to individuals and families. However, this is not the whole story. In the past several decades, many churches (like my own Episcopal Church), have prayed, studied, debated and changed their positions on human sexuality. In the Episcopal Church today, LGBTQ people serve at all levels of leadership as lay people, deacons, priests and bishops. The sacrament of marriage is available to all baptized persons called into relationships of lifelong fidelity. Organized religions are inherently slow to change — for both healthy reasons (stability) and unhealthy reasons (control). Over time, full inclusion of LGBTQ people in the life of my tradition, and many others, has been advanced. Religious institutions are made up of humans. Some are wonderfully warm and open. Some are cold and closed. Most are somewhere in between. It is important for LGBTQ people and their allies to fight for full inclusion in every community. It is also OK to leave one’s tradition and find another that fully accepts you as God created you. This I know: God loves and cares for all people, and in God’s house all should be welcomed as Christ himself.