

## **The Religious Landscape for LGBTQ+ Persons**

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### **Abstract**

Navigating the world of organized religion is difficult under the best of circumstances given the wide array of expressions, interpretations, ideology, tolerance, and willingness to include all persons. For a member of the LGBTQ+ community, a negative experience can range from merely uncomfortable to intensely and emotionally damaging. To mitigate the negative and increase propensity for a positive experience, markers as to a faith community's degree of openness and inclusion not only exist, but are clear, identifiable, and to a large degree, dependable. This brief review of the major religions and faith traditions in Delaware provides some of those markers along with guidelines for understanding. The focus of this review is based on demographic data from the 2014 Religious Landscape Study conducted by the Pew Research Center's Religion and Public Life Section.

## **The Religious Landscape for LGBTQ+ Persons**

“Landscape” is an apt word for what members of the LGBTQ+ communities will find as they explore the often-unpredictable terrain of religious and spiritual waystations. Some byways will be rolling, halcyon vistas replete with faith-based institutions extending an extravagant welcome. They'll meet follow travelers who have been in the trenches of equality and non-discrimination fights (and victories) for a generation. Visitors will be considered immediate family and welcomed around a table set with diversity, inclusion, and abundance – all viewed with gratitude.

Other routes will be cluttered with twists and turns and unmarked forks, with hills that hide the path beyond the ridge or curves that disguise hazards. The “all are welcome” banner looks worn, tattered, and neglected. How is one to know what to believe or trust? The national organization may decree a restrictive stance while the local congregation balks and chooses a more progressive and inclusive posture. Sure, you're welcome to come inside, sit quietly, conform, and never disclose much about yourself. Know your place in the pew-lined closet and everything will be fine.

Lastly are the dead ends. The message is clear: you're not wanted, you're “less than” and have no place or purpose here. The only good thing? No time or energy is wasted. Thank you for your candor!

The survey undertaken for this essay has sorted and sifted the various faith communities in Delaware into the above groups of “Welcoming Waystations,” “Middle of the Road,” and the “Dead Ends.” From there, further exploration of the “Waystations” group narrows the focus in an effort to provide greater propensity for a positive experience. The Pew Research Center remarks, “the 2014 U.S. Religious Landscape Study is based on telephone interviews with more than 35,000 Americans from all 50 states. This is the second time the Pew Research Center has conducted a Religious Landscape Study.” The first study was conducted in 2007.<sup>1</sup>

For the purposes of this survey, only religious communities which garnered at least 1% of the Delaware population were surveyed, hence groups such as New Age, Pagan, Wiccan, or Native

American were omitted due to a quantitative limit, and not because of any bias or prejudice on the part of the author (see Table 1).

Table 1. Religious Denominations of Survey Population

<b>Grouping</b>	<b>Denomination</b>	<b>Percentage of DE Population (%)</b>
Evangelical Protestant		
	Southern Baptist Convention	3
	Independent Baptist	2
	“Other” Baptist	2
	Assemblies of God	1
	Church of Christ	3
Mainline Protestant		
	American Baptist	1
	United Methodist Church (UMC)	11
	Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA)	1
	Presbyterian Church (USA)	2
	“Other” Presbyterian	1
	Episcopal Church	1
	“Other” Episcopal	1
Historically Black Churches		
	Independent Baptist	4
	African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME)	2
	AME Zion Church	1
Roman Catholic		22
Orthodox Christian		1
Jewish		3
Muslim		1
Hindu		2
Unitarian		1

Of the above list, the following were investigated as their stance on three basic areas: attitude toward homosexuality, support for or against marriage equality, and ordination, if appropriate (see Table 2).<sup>2</sup>

Table 2. Religious Groups’ Stance on Homosexuality, Marriage, and Ordination

<b>Denomination</b>	<b>Homosexuality</b>	<b>Marriage</b>	<b>Ordination</b>
<b>Welcoming Waystations</b>			
ELCA	This is the most welcoming of the three leading Lutheran denominations. LGBTQ+ folks are “welcome to participate fully in the life of the congregation	Ministers and congregations have autonomy as to marriage and many will perform same-gender ceremonies.	LGBTQ+ people are eligible for ordination.

<b>Denomination</b>	<b>Homosexuality</b>	<b>Marriage</b>	<b>Ordination</b>
Episcopal	LGBTQ+ people are entitled to the “full and equal claim on love, acceptance, and the care of the church.”	Marriage equality is supported and practiced.	Ordination is open to all persons.
Judaism – Conservative	Some congregations are affirming – others are not. Denomination has taken strong stand in favor of inclusion.	Supports and practices marriage equality.	LGBTQ+ persons are eligible for ordination.
Judaism – Reconstructionist	Most consistently welcoming and affirming of Jewish denominations.	Affirms and practices same-gender marriage.	All persons are eligible for ordination. Discrimination is prohibited.
Judaism – Reform	Most congregations are fully welcoming, inclusive, and affirming.	Affirms same-gender marriage. “Relationship of Jewish, same-gender couple is worthy of affirmation through appropriate Jewish ritual.”	All persons are eligible for ordination.
Presbyterian Church (USA)	LGBTQ+ people are fully integrated in the life of the church. The denomination is entirely welcoming although there are degrees within congregations.	Marriage equality is fully supported and the standard marriage ceremony is now gender-inclusive.	LGBTQ+ candidates are eligible for ordination.
Religious Society of Friends (Quakers)	Meetings are autonomous and LGBTQ+ folks are welcome.	Will perform same-gender weddings.	No ordination standards.
Unitarian	Not only do Unitarians open their doors to all persons, but “value diversity of sexuality and gender and see it as a spiritual gift.”	Unitarians have been at the forefront of the struggles and victories for marriage equality.	Ordination is open to all.
United Church of Christ (UCC)	“Extravagantly welcome!”	Affirms equal rights for all persons including marriage.	Yes – all persons are eligible for ordination.
<b>Middle of the Road</b>			
Buddhism	No central teaching or government. Wide array on all topics.		

<b>Denomination</b>	<b>Homosexuality</b>	<b>Marriage</b>	<b>Ordination</b>
Hindu	There is no central authority in the denomination and “given the inherent spiritual equality, Hindus should not ostracize but accept LBGT persons as fellow sojourners.” Kama Sutra celebrated same-sex activity.	Some communities will affirm same-gender marriage. Varies.	Yes, all men and women are eligible for ordination but are expected to maintain a vow of celibacy.
Muslim – Sunni and Shi’a	“It is rare that an openly LGBTQ+ Muslim feels welcome at a mainstream mosque in the United States.”	Same-gender marriage is normally not affirmed, although some imams will perform.	There is no formal process for ordination.
United Methodist Church (UMC)	Recently affirmed the “Traditional Plan” which prohibits homosexuality in the church	One man and one woman. In addition, clergy can be punished for performing or participating in a same-gender wedding.	Will not ordain.
<b>The Dead Ends</b>			
AME	Church condemns same-sex relationship.	Does not support marriage equality.	Denomination is not in favor of ordination of openly gay persons to the ranks of clergy.
American Baptist	Homosexuality is incompatible with Christianity	One man and one woman	Will not ordain.
Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons)	Homosexual attraction is not a sin, but action on it is. No longer offers conversion therapy.	Same-gender marriage is seen as apostasy.	Ordination is open to men only and no LGBT.
Eastern Orthodox	Homosexuality is immoral and inappropriate forms of behavior and attacks the institutions of marriage and family.	Marriage is reserved for one man and one woman. It is a sacred institution reserved for monogamous heterosexuals.	LGBTQ+ persons and women are not eligible.

<b>Denomination</b>	<b>Homosexuality</b>	<b>Marriage</b>	<b>Ordination</b>
Judaism – Orthodox	Homosexuality is prohibited – although there are small signs of welcome.	Forbids and condemns same-gender marriage	Does not ordain LGBTQ+ or women.
National Baptist Convention	Homosexuality is incompatible with Christianity.	One man and one woman	Strongly independent congregations hence ordination stands may vary, but rarely do.
Presbyterian Church in America (PCA)	“Homosexual practice is sin.” Churches seek to “transform the lifestyle” with conversion programs designed for people to “leave behind the gay lifestyle.” “Gender distortions” are considered sin.	Marriage is one man and one woman.	LGBTQ+ people and women are not eligible for ordination.
Roman Catholic	“Homosexual acts are intrinsically immoral and contrary to natural law. Homosexual tendencies are “objectively disordered.”	Does not support marriage equality.	Ordination is possible due to celibacy vow.
Southern Baptist Convention	Homosexuality is always considered sinful and impure. Classified with adultery and pornography. It should be opposed. “Love the sinner, hate the sin.”	One man and one woman	Will not ordain a person who is homosexual regardless of activity.

As this initial survey was undertaken, one key indicator became clearly evident, and that is a denomination’s or tradition’s public and system-wide stand on marriage equality for same-gender couples. All other indicators followed suit regardless if the position was affirming or condemning. The “gray area” arose when either there was no centralized message or individual communities dissented from the prescribed position.

Therefore, if a denomination supports and practices same-gender marriage equality, one can safely assume that its congregations are welcoming and affirming, and that LGBTQ+ persons are eligible for ordination. Hence, if an LGBTQ+ person were to seek a community of faith in which to explore membership or alliance, one should start with the following organizations:

Conservative Jewish Movement

Episcopal Church

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

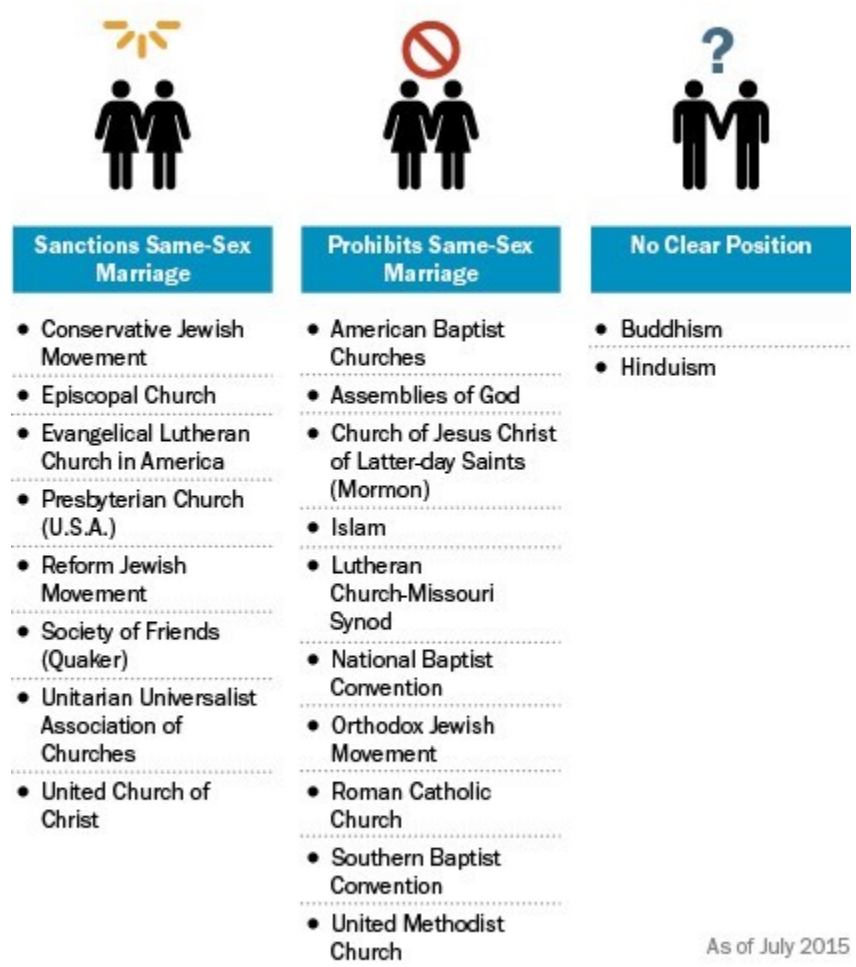
Presbyterian Church (USA)

- Reconstructionist Judaism
- Reform Jewish Movement
- Society of Friends (Quakers)
- Unitarian Universalist Association of Churches
- United Church of Christ

The following graphic produced by the Pew Research Center provides a more in-depth review (see Figure 1)<sup>3</sup>:

Figure 1. Where Major Religions Stand on Same-Sex Marriage (Pew Research Center)

### Where Major Religions Stand on Same-Sex Marriage



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Although the scope of possibilities has been drastically reduced, sadly, the work does not end there. Within those listed on the above graphic as “Sanctions Same-Sex Marriage,” the demeanor of individual faith communities and churches may vary drastically.

The denomination with which I am most familiar is the Presbyterian Church (USA) wherein I serve as a pastor for one of the most liberal, progressive, and accepting congregations – not just in Delaware – but in the entire denomination. Yet, within two miles is another congregation of the PCUSA in which an openly gay, lesbian, or trans person may not (read: “probably won’t”) feel welcome and included despite “all are welcome” signage. What follows are six tips for determining the degree of welcome, comfort, and safety one may or may not discover when walking through the doors:

1. Google “gay friendly (name of denomination/tradition) church/faith community in (city or town).” Save considerable time and frustration and search only the denominations or faith traditions in the far-left column of Figure 1.
2. Scan websites – but first, don’t read a word, just look at pictures. A community that’s intentional about its welcome will make that clear with the people they place on their homepage. Are there any photos of people appear to be part of the LGBTQ+ communities? Are there any same-gender couples?
3. Read the opening statement of the home page – does it go beyond “all are welcome”? Most every congregation or group considers itself “welcoming” and so one must dig a little deeper. Does the statement mention any advocacy or social groups specific to LGBTQ+ people? Scan a few recent sermons, talks, newsletters, announcements, or bulletins and watch for language that is either radically welcoming or appears to support more traditional and heteronormative persons and family configurations.
4. Find a policy on marriage. Again, communities that are gay-friendly and perform marriages will make that clear in their language about weddings. This is, as discussed above, the “litmus” test for both denominations and for individual faith communities.
5. If the website promotes phrases such as “family values,” “Bible-based preaching,” or anything “traditional” – this is likely not a community that values the diversity that LGBTQ+ folks bring.
6. Larger is often safer – but not always. Downtown, city-centered is often a better bet than suburban or rural – but not always!

Much of the above emanates from the experiences of openly gay and lesbian persons, yet the same indicators of welcome and inclusion should hopefully hold for transgender or gender non-conforming people. Faith communities may not have as much direct experience or well-developed relationships with trans persons, but a community committed to diversity and inclusion has a higher likelihood of welcoming all.

The religious landscape for LGBTQ+ persons can be treacherous and difficult to navigate, yet by restricting oneself to those communities that support and practice same-gender marriage and following the six tips listed, one can quickly minimize hazardous conditions!

The journey is worth it. Finding a faith-based community with which to practice, grow, nurture, question, and even challenge one’s spirituality adds a dimension to life that adds nearly immeasurable meaning, joy, and purpose. Knowing that one is “home”, that one is “family,” when for so many of the LGBTQ+ community neither of those may have been positive experiences, is a degree of acceptance and celebration not often found in secular society.

Lastly, there are many factors unrelated to sexuality that converge to determine whether or not a faith community is a good “fit.” If one doesn’t feel right – keep moving. Trust always that there is a community that is just as anxious to greet you as you are to find it – and that makes the world a better place for us all!

## References

1. Pew Research Center. (2014). Religious Landscape Study: Adults in Delaware. Retrieved from <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/state/delaware/>
2. Campaign, H. R. (n.d.) Faith Positions. Retrieved from <https://www.hrc.org/resources/faith-positions>
3. Pew Research Center. (2015, December 21) Where Christian churches, other religions stand on gay marriage. Retrieved from <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/12/21/where-christian-churches-stand-on-gay-marriage/>

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