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We Shall Overcome: A Case Study of the LGBT Asylum Task Force, a Parish Ministry

Max Niedzwiecki 

INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents a case study of the LGBT Asylum Task Force (“the Task Force”), a ministry of Hadwen Park Congregational Church, UCC in Worcester, Massachusetts, which is the only group in the United States that is dedicated to providing wrap-around services, including housing, to LGBT asylum seekers. Since its inception in 2008, it has provided services to over 219 people from 24 countries.

I first became acquainted with the Task Force in 2012 when I was coordinating the LGBT Faith (later “Freedom”) and Asylum Network (LGBT-FAN), of which the Task Force was an active and early member. Over the years I have made modest financial and volunteer donations to

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them. My writing is informed by the knowledge I have gained through this relationship over the past decade, as well as data I gathered through interviews and the review of existing documents and recordings. In some cases, I have used pseudonyms and omitted or changed details about interviewees' stories in order to preserve their anonymity.

In this account, I make extensive use of quotations from Task Force leaders and clients. In general, I prefer not to repeat, analyze, or reinterpret what they say, but to let their words remain authoritative. Before delving into the case study per se, I present background information on religion and forced migration as they relate to LGBT people.

LGBT ASYLUM SEEKERS AND RELIGION

Religion is a double-edged sword for many LGBT asylum seekers. Religious institutions and motivations are responsible for much of the abuse they experience. At the same time, religion provides many asylum seekers with comfort and hope, and aids their recovery. This dichotomy has been described in terms of contradictory conceptions of the divine that coexist within and among religious communities (McGuirk & Niedzwiecki, 2017). It can be seen both on the level of religion described as systems of doctrines and institutions, and on the level of so-called "lived religion," which emphasizes everyday practice and experience (see Ganzevoort & Sremac, 2019).

The proposition that religion is implicated in the need for many LGBT people to flee is well established. The UNHCR (2012, p. 42) has noted that "Where an individual is viewed as not conforming to the teachings of a particular religion on account of his or her sexual orientation or gender identity, and is subjected to serious harm or punishment as a consequence, he or she may have a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of religion."

John Marnell (2021) has shown how religious institutions and concepts are often mobilized against LGBT people in order to support the aims of those whose authority is buttressed by patriarchal ideologies that are depicted as traditional, natural, and divinely ordained. Concerns about cultural self-determination and globalization often accompany calls for a return to idealized ways of thinking and living. These campaigns can serve to unite religious and ethnic factions against scapegoats, and thus support social cohesion for the majority while subjecting LGBT

people to abuse. Anti-LGBT religious campaigns have also been characteristic of broader calls to violence: For example, in March of 2022 the Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church framed his country's invasion of Ukraine as a virtuous repudiation of "the West's" degeneracy, as signaled by acceptance of LGBT rights (Morton, 2022). Theological and political discourses about sexual orientation and gender identity are tightly interwoven, and have repercussions of the highest magnitude.

At least 67 member states of the United Nations explicitly criminalize same-sex relationships, including five that impose the death penalty (Mendos et al., 2020), while at least six nations outlaw certain forms of gender expression (Human Rights Watch, n.d.). Governments often describe these laws as curtailing offenses against religion, but legal codes do not define the limits of persecution, as LGBT people are often subject to the selective application of laws that officially target morality more broadly (ORAM, 2012) (Photo 7.1).



Photo 7.1 Task Force pride march participants often hide their faces in order to highlight the violence faced by LGBT people in clients' countries of origin

Abuse and social exclusion often continue in refugee camps and resettlement countries. For example, a recent study of Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya documents claims of physical assault against 80 percent of self-identified LGBT refugees and cites religion as a motivating factor (Ndiritu, 2021). “Homophobia travels,” in the words of the Rev. Judith K. Hanlon (“Pastor Judy”), the pastor of the parish that houses the Task Force. In the U.S. and elsewhere, LGBT asylum seekers are made more vulnerable by their continuing isolation from their ethnic communities and families.

Nevertheless, religion and spirituality continue to be important for many LGBT asylum seekers. What Marnell (2021, p. 3) writes about the clients of the LGBT Ministry at Holy Trinity Roman Catholic parish in Johannesburg, South Africa, applies equally to many of those at the Task Force:

Despite being exposed to a wide range of harmful practices – everything from hate-filled sermons to forced exorcisms and physical assaults – LGBT people continue to draw strength from faith, even when excluded from formal religious spaces... [In so doing they are] redefining what faith can and should mean.

Task Force leaders and clients often make reference to a principle that reappears again and again in all flavors of religion that affirm LGBT people: Love your neighbor (Marnell, 2021; McGuirk & Niedzwiecki, 2017). A gay Muslim asylum-seeker client from Uganda expressed it this way:

There can be two points. One: There is no way religion cannot be siding with LGBTQ. The reason being, it's religion that really preaches about love, and you will find that the two greatest arguments in Christianity, one stating that love God, and the second one saying love yourself as you love your neighbor. So, you will find that the word “love” is emphasized. That's Christianity. And in the Islamic faith, also love is emphasized in various suras of the Koran. So, there is no way you can say that you will not side with the people who love themselves.

Al Green, who arrived at the Task Force as a client and now serves as the Ministry Director, explains his own thoughts about religion:

A lot of the hurt and the harm that's been done has been at the hands of human beings who were flawed, who have their biases that permeate their teachings and the way they interact with individuals... I create that distinction between what someone thinks their holy scripture says and how they decide to enact that, and what the scriptures actually say and the context within which they were written, and what was in essence the theme of how it is that God has interacted with folks.

For those LGBT asylum seekers who do redefine and embrace religion—and it must be said that a large percentage of LGBT asylum seekers do not—it can become a source of psychological healing. Like forced migrants more broadly, many who are LGBT struggle with mental illness, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, suicidal ideations, and substance abuse (White et al., 2019).

While the integration of spirituality in mental health treatment for trauma survivors is far from universal, a growing body of literature asserts that “PTSD ... is a spiritual diagnosis and that spiritual components need to be part of the treatment protocol” (Goździak, 2017, p. 124). Religion can support psychological healing through integration with therapy (see Harper & Pargament, 2015; Pearce et al., 2018), but not only through those means. Writing about the Metropolitan Community Church of North London, Jordan Dyck (2019, pp. 43–44) shows how faith-based groups can provide environments where asylum seekers are “loved and accepted,” and that “being part of an LGBT-affirming faith community ... helps to heal the psychological damage of homophobic teachings one may have experienced in one’s upbringing ... and helps to counteract the effects of homophobic preaching that may well still be heard in other religious settings.” Dustin and Held (2021, p. 209) show how faith-based organizations are a “key source of personal support and connection with others.” These themes are echoed in the case study that follows.

Al Green reflects on how faith supports healing and community within the Task Force:

You have folks who, all that they've heard back home is that there's something that's wrong with them, that they're abhorrent ... unnatural, and most of it is coming from religion. But, like myself, many still have a strong sense of faith in spite of all of what we've heard from religious leaders in our own countries. And it is that faith that, when it gets tough, carries us through those periods. When we get here and we find a faith community that supports us, that practices a form of faith that is similar to

ours, that doesn't think that we are abhorrent and unnatural, and instead are to be celebrated, it is like a breath of fresh air, it's like a spring in the middle of the desert. In many ways it is healing. I've experienced that for myself.

Finally, religion is important to LGBT asylum seekers because it motivates others to help them (see UNHCR, 2013). What the Rev. Canon Dr. Kapyra Kaoma (2021, p. x) says about the African context applies more broadly:

In speaking to the universal, religion has the potential to provide the clearest vision of authentic humanity – as long as it is planted with the moral imperative for equality and justice. When this is done, Christians, for example, begin to associate the suffering of Jesus with the suffering of oppressed peoples. Thus, the fight for human rights becomes a religious issue.

Here is how Pastor Judy explains her own motivation:

I was born white in the United States of America... I am just oozing with privilege, although sometimes I get frustrated with my personal life, but how can I share this [with asylum seekers] without making them feel less than me, or beholden to me? I have to work hard on that... [Someone said recently,] 'Pastor Judy, you're my savior, you're my mother.' I go, 'No. No, Jesus called me to do this, and that's all. And Jesus will call you to do something like this too down the road, and then you'll do it with joy. You don't owe me anything.'

LGBT PEOPLE AND FORCED MIGRATION

LGBT people are represented among all categories of people who are subject to forced migration, which is defined by the International Organization for Migration (2019, p. 77) as “a migratory movement which ... involves force, compulsion, or coercion.” In the American context, forced migrants include: *refugees* who have been certified as such outside of the United States by the U.S. Government and then helped to resettle in the United States; *human trafficking victims* who have been moved to the U.S. through deception or under coercion and then exploited; *undocumented immigrants* who lack legal status to remain in the U.S.; *asylum seekers* who apply for protection at a U.S. border or within the

U.S.; *asylees*, who have been granted permission to remain in the country permanently; and *other immigrants* who arrive through the full variety of legal channels that are not explicitly related to forced migration. Most of the Task Force's clients enter the U.S. with student, work, or travel visas. Since the Task Force focuses on working with asylum seekers, they will remain the focus below.

LGBT people face particular difficulties in the asylum process: Many are afraid or ashamed to talk about intimate matters. It can also be difficult to "prove" LGBT status. Many became skillful at keeping their sexual orientation and gender identity hidden in order to survive, and took great pains to hide or destroy any documentary evidence that might have existed. In addition, much of the persecution suffered by LGBT people takes place behind closed doors, and is never acknowledged in the public sphere (Dustin & Held, 2021).

It is unclear how many LGBT forced migrants apply for, or are granted, asylum in the U.S. on an annual basis. Asylum claims made by LGBT people are not always identified as such in official records. Additionally, applicants may choose to base their claims on other factors such as membership in a political, ethnic, or religious group that has been persecuted in their home country. The Organization for Refuge, Asylum, and Migration (2012) estimates that 5 percent of U.S. asylum seekers are LGBT. Given the total number of asylum applications received in the three most recent federal fiscal years for which data are available (Baugh, 2020), 14,229 LGBT people would have applied for asylum in 2017, 13,470 in 2018, and 15,385 in 2019.

Once granted asylum, individuals are eligible to work legally in the U.S., and to make use of the full range of government-supported programs and benefits. Until that time they are ineligible for most forms of support, although institutions may use non-federal funds to help them. Access to such support is inconsistent across states, and relatively generous in Massachusetts. Asylum seekers can apply for work authorization 150 days after filing their asylum applications, and then must wait at least 30 days, and often much longer, before receiving permission to work (Immigration Equality, n.d.; Niedzwiecki, 2014). This places many in a difficult position, particularly given the social isolation they experience.

PROFILE OF THE LGBT ASYLUM TASK FORCE

The social isolation faced by many LGBT asylum seekers intensifies the needs they experience by virtue of their immigration status. As Ministry Director Al Green states, “Many people find themselves in some very, very bad situations, and being abused and taken advantage of just so they can have a roof over their heads and food to eat” (University of Southern Maine, 2020). Despite this widespread need, the Task Force remains the only structured program in the country that is dedicated to providing wrap-around services including housing to this population. Legal, health, employment, housing, language access, and education programs are among the more commonly provided services targeted to LGBT immigrants (Gruberg et al., 2018), but housing and income support remain exceedingly rare.

Development of the Task Force

The Task Force developed without reference to a preset plan. Prior to its establishment, the Pastor of Hadwen Park Congregational Church, the Rev. Judith K. Hanlon (“Pastor Judy”) had become an advocate for marriage equality. In her words:

My ... clergy colleague ... said, ‘You know why we have this problem: it’s because of religious abuse. If we pulled the ‘God said that gays are bad’ out of all of this, we wouldn’t be having this problem.’ And I essentially remember standing there going, ‘Holy shit, that’s my arena.’ And so I became affiliated with the Religious Coalition for the Freedom to Marry, and I began to march on the Boston State House... That, right there, was the seed for the LGBT Asylum Task Force.

In 2008, a new mission knocked on the parish’s door in Worcester, Massachusetts, in the person of Linford Cunningham, an asylum seeker who would later become one of the Task Force’s leaders. His lawyer had referred him, as Pastor Judy explains:

He had no food, he had no place to live, and he did believe, based on what the pastors in Jamaica said, that God hated him and he was cursed... So [the lawyer] said, ‘Oh, I remember the newspaper where this Christian pastor was loudly in favor of equal marriage...’ So, she sent Linford to Hadwen Park Church. She called me and said, ‘He’s on his way,’ and I

met him, we went to our terribly bland food pantry, gave him cereal and anything we could do, and got some money out of our church benevolence fund... And it was just in some really simple way what churches do. When somebody comes who's hurting – we're so much better at hospitality than we are at justice, though you might define hospitality as justice, but anyway, he came to church and told his story. And we just passed the hat, and got enough money for his rent.

As the congregation began to help Linford, Pastor Judy led them in the process of learning about the plight of people like him. At the same time, she created a basis for continued commitment by cultivating the understanding that helping LGBT asylum seekers could provide important ways for them to live out their Christian faith.

The religious responsibility to love one's neighbors, particularly those who are in great need, has been cited above. In addition, Pastor Judy makes reference to the biblical responsibility to provide sanctuary for those fleeing violence (Roberge, 2015). Her most consistent themes are Grace and miracles. She sees herself and her flock as miraculous instruments of Grace, which she defines as “unmerited favor” with God as its source. Here she talks about how she sees Grace flowing through her community:

One of the [asylum seekers] from Nigeria ... came to church ... and one day I said in a sermon, ‘Jesus came to set the prisoners free’ – you know the Isaiah stuff – and that stuck with him. I had no idea, but he has ... already done two years of prison ministry, on his own without telling anybody, just because we gave that Grace to him, and he wanted to give it back, and he heard that word in church, and that struck him as his call. That blew me away. It made me feel really humble. This is God's work.

The concept of “welcome” is also very important. The central idea of the “Welcoming Church Movement,” in which Hadwen Park Church participates, is that Christians should extend hospitality toward LGBT people precisely because they experienced “religious abuse,” to borrow the term used by Pastor Judy (National LGBTQ Task Force, n.d.). This hospitality must extend beyond politeness and include the possibility of a relationship marked by mutual love and respect. The United Church of Christ, Hadwen Park's denomination, describes itself as “a distinct and diverse community of Christians that come together as one church united in

Spirit to love all, welcome all and seek justice for all” (United Church of Christ, 2022). This framing has continued to drive the congregation’s commitment.

The Task Force’s activities developed gradually. After the initial engagement, Pastor Judy began to cultivate a core group of parishioners to take leadership. Simultaneously, she began to pull back from day-to-day operational involvement while continuing her preaching, spiritual leadership, and faith counseling. Word spread about the program, and as Pastor Judy says, more people began to arrive:

It was so organic... Some of Linford’s friends in Jamaica heard that Worcester was a place where they could be safe, and loved by a Christian church, and supported with food and housing. So, they came ... And first we put people in two church ladies’ houses... As the money came in, we began to pay some rent... And as the rent grew, we got an apartment that we rented... And as the people came, we found places for them.

Clients typically learn about the Task Force through its website or word-of-mouth. Their paths to Worcester are often circuitous. The case of Irene is instructive. In her native Uganda, she was branded as possessed by the devil and then forcibly married. After she and her young child escaped her abusive marriage, she found a job at an organization that was targeted by the government as pro-LGBT, as a result of which she was arrested and abused by police. With a visa she had obtained from her ex-employer she fled to the U.S. where she was housed by a friend of a friend. It became impossible for her to stay, and again she fled with her child. In her own words (Nuñez, 2021):

So, this one time I woke up in the morning in a lot of pain. I couldn’t even walk at that point and I see a message saying ‘Hello’ ... It was [my friend] ... So, I told him ‘I’m not happy where I am right now, and I don’t have anywhere to go, and do you know anyone who can help me.’ ... He said, ‘Yes, there’s a big Ugandan community in Worcester and if you’d like I’ll just take you and you’ll meet other people, and maybe they can help you.’ I said ‘fine.’ And I remember deep inside me I was just like, ‘Let me just go, you know I’m not gonna tell anyone that I’m not gonna come back. I’m just gonna go and I won’t come back.’ ... When we came [to Worcester] there were all these, you know, people who were just proud being gay, and you know when you meet Ugandans and they’re proud to be gay, it’s different, very different. From where we come from,

we can't talk about things like that. We're so much told to keep everything inside, and I met people who were just openly gay and they would tell you, discuss all these things, and I was just so scared, you know, even telling anyone... But when they started opening up, I told [them] my story and they said 'Wait, you don't need to go back.' The thing that I wanted to hear: you don't need to go back. 'We know an organization that can help you. It helps asylum seekers, LGBT people, and they can find you a place to stay.'

The story provided by Abdul, who is also from Uganda, underscores how chance and unlikely encounters lead many people to the Task Force:

I come into this mosque, and then in this mosque I meet the imam ... and he introduced me to the board of the leaders of their community.... So, through this Ugandan community board of Muslims I meet a man, a gentleman who was very nice to me, who was very caring, and this man introduced me to the rabbi of the Jewish community in Concord. So, while we were meeting with the rabbi, the rabbi gave me a big number of connections... [and] connected me to the Boston Medical Center, which Boston Medical Center helped me in acquiring an attorney... It was one party leading me to another party, leading me to another party. So, I happened to have gotten a team in a very short period of time. So, the team at Boston Medical connected me to some attorney... [who] was actually demanding some money which I didn't have... I told him that, 'You know what, I just landed here, I'm not working, it's really hard for me.' So he advised me, but with his kind heart ... he connected me to some law firm here in Massachusetts which was pro bono... They really, really helped me out, because ... while I was in their offices, they searched about the gay communities in Massachusetts, and discovered that one was in Worcester. And that's how I come to know about the Hadwen Park Church.

As more people arrived, Pastor Judy encouraged participation in public events that would provide a "witness" to the world—another important Christian concept—that their faith was calling the community to act on behalf of LGBT asylum seekers. This witnessing has included regular participation in Boston Pride parades, the launching of a website, pursuit of coverage in newspapers and on radio, and speaking in the worship services of other congregations.

What really enabled us to grow from ... the asylum-seekers finding us – was a website... The organization grew, as I said, organically, and we had to get in touch with other churches because we couldn't handle this. So we got an article in some church newsletters ... We went everywhere to speak ... we went to Chicago, we went to San Diego, and the United Church of Christ ... found us money to take our people on the road.

Although the Task Force has continuously been housed at Hadwen Park Church, questions arose about the form that relationship should take. In part because of the need to raise funds from donors who were leery about supporting faith-based groups (see “Challenges,” below), the group decided to pursue a more secular direction. Pastor Judy explains:

We weren't interested in a large system, but we did feel that we needed a person to direct it. So we hired someone, and the first thing that person did was to want to separate it from the church. So we walked that journey, and I kept saying, 'We are here, essentially, because of religious abuse. The Church knows it, we understand it fundamentally, we understand it from a theological point of view, and in this church I don't want to be an agency'... So I pushed against it, but we went that direction for a while, and then something happened... [After a volunteer had stolen several checks,] we realized that the entity that was at risk was Hadwen Park Church. So at that point we pulled everything back into the church. So presently the financial team that does the church books does the LGBT Task Force work... We feel so much safer about that. The other thing that happened was that we had to vote on it, it became a part of the congregational meeting, and the church became much, much, much more invested...

And now, related to the religious situation, I don't ever want [the Task Force] to be outside of the church. We have 300 members that will take you shopping if you get to know them. I don't have to know about that. It's amorphous. If you meet people at the coffee hour and they become your friends ... they will help.

As the Task Force became more firmly rooted in the congregation and more clients arrived, staffing infrastructure continued to develop. Linford Cunningham, the person whose call for help had sparked the development of the group, took leadership early on and continues to be involved. Al Green tells how his leadership role developed in 2016:

I got referred by ... a pro bono legal network in Boston... I spent a year being supported by the Task Force, and then also during that year got really involved with the church and joined a bunch of committees, and one of them was the Personnel Committee... We were tasked with finding a Ministry Director... And we went through a six-, seven-month process, identified a couple of candidates who eventually turned down the offer for other better-paying options. And we were faced with having to start the whole process over, and no one really had an appetite for that. And one question was put to me whether I would be willing to step into the role. I had been doing some of this stuff before – helping out with events and a little bit of fundraising as well... I'm like, I'm here – money isn't everything, it's important, but it's not everything – and I have the opportunity to assist and to make an impact, and so I'm going to give it a try for the next few years.

I often tell folks that life here is short. And I think that in order for us to make sense out of life and to have some meaning that we should do whatever we can to help people who are less well-off than we are... It's not that we aren't in need of assistance ourselves, but if we have the capacity to help other people who are less well-off than we are ... it's our responsibility. I think that's what we're called to do. Part of what drew me to Hadwen Park Church was the fact that it wasn't just like any other church where they would tell you what to do on a Sunday but that outside of that they weren't necessarily practicing what they preached. It was different. Their faith was put into action... That definitely resonated with my faith, knowing it's motivating what we're called to do: to take care of the marginalized within our society.

Operations and Achievements

As the Task Force has become more visible, it has also become more structured in terms of range of services, partnerships, operations, personnel, expectations, and record-keeping. Since 2008, it has provided services to 219 LGBT asylum seekers from 24 countries, with 65 percent of them coming from Jamaica or Uganda. Approximately 70 percent have been cisgender male, 25 percent cisgender female, and 5 percent transgender or nonbinary. About half had some university education and an additional 40 percent had graduated from high school.

The group's leadership includes the Pastor of Hadwen Park Congregational Church, the Ministry Director and Associate Ministry Director (both asylum seekers/asylees), a Fundraising Committee, and the Chair of the parish's Steering Committee. Pastor Judy focuses on leading

the church as well as spiritual guidance and counseling for those who request it. The others interact with asylum seekers and ensure that their housing, legal, healthcare, and transportation needs are met. They also work with donors, plan fundraising and programmatic events, act as property superintendents, coordinate volunteer activity, and do administrative work. Asylum seekers, members of the congregation, and others volunteer by providing transportation and landscaping services, sharing their meals, and giving advice. Storytelling, as described below, is an important volunteer function for many asylum seekers.

Housing has been a central service of the Task Force since its inception. As of April 2022, it provides housing to twenty-four people in seven apartments and one house which was bought and rehabilitated in 2021. In some cases, it arranges and pays for clients to live in private homes. At least one member of the leadership team meets with each housing group monthly. Each client has their individual room, which has a lock on the door. Rules include no loud music after 10:00 p.m. and no overnight guests.

Clients also receive monthly stipends of \$650 to cover food and other basic expenses. They continue to receive support for three months after they have been granted legal permission to work. This typically means that they receive assistance for 18–24 months.

Many of the services clients depend on are provided by partner organizations. Limited healthcare is available through MassHealth Safety Net. Medical and mental health care, which are generally not discussed with Task Force personnel, are provided by the Family Health Center. Pro bono legal services are provided by a network of attorneys and organizations, many of them located in Boston. While most clients are fluent in English when they arrive, they can participate in language and other classes at the Ascentria Care Alliance.

Challenges

Some of the Task Force's persistent challenges relate to work with clients, and others are more institutional in nature. Several of them have important religious aspects.

Much of Pastor Judy's work centers on helping clients to overcome self-loathing and shame, which she considers to be rooted in religious abuse. In her own words:

I do a lot of counseling ... because the self-loathing is there. There are a few that are less connected to the church who tend not to feel so damned by God, but lots of the women can barely say the word 'lesbian'... So we just talk to them, and we say ... 'You are fearfully and beautifully made in the image of God.' And I pray with them, and I talk to them, and it's slow, but ... it helps them when they get to their immigration hearing. If they go to an immigration hearing and the officer asks 'Are you a lesbian?' and they go 'Yeah' timidly [then they're less likely to be believed]. And, you know, we actually practice [saying] it – I do, with some of the women, who are just so shamed by all they've been through. So, it is still a very big problem, and ... I say, 'How do you feel about yourself in the eyes of God?' And, most of them, you know: 'Well, I tried, I prayed, I went to prayer meetings, I tried to un-gay myself, so I just have to say, you know, there are other sins too.' And I say 'No-no-no-no-no-no. This is not a sin. Your created identity is not a sin!'

Building trusting relationships is another persistent challenge. Al Green explains:

80-plus-percent of folks are really quiet at first, and understandably so. It's probably because they're just unsure of the situation, unsure that it's real. There are folks who [are] ... wondering if it's a scam, if it's just a church that is trying to find gay people and hurt them. So oftentimes folks are quiet, they don't want to share all the details... For many, at first, it feels like it's too good to be true. It's contrary to everything they've heard before getting here, and it takes a while for folks to accept it within themselves that this faith community is legit, and that they actually are OK in the eyes of God.

Pastor Judy provides a more concrete example:

Recently after coffee hour, we sat and talked one afternoon, five or six asylum seekers and three church members, and they started talking about how afraid they were to come to us because this was a church... and one of them said, 'I have to tell you, I really wondered. Everybody was so good to me. They went out and bought me a cell phone ... they gave me \$500.' And he said, 'I would wake up at night thinking they're really trafficking us.'

Fundraising is an ever-present challenge. The Task Force needs to raise approximately \$40,000 per month. Government funding is not available

because most asylum seekers are barred from federally funded programs. Consequently, the group depends on support from private donors.

The Task Force relies heavily on funding from individuals, including the 300-odd members of the congregation, donors from around the world who learn about the group through mass media, and event participants. Since 2017, the Task Force has organized an annual fundraising gala, which has raised up to \$130,000 annually. Supporters solicit donations from their friends through house parties around the country, and Task Force members visit other congregations to ask for contributions. The pandemic limited in-person fundraising, which was compensated for by a significant gift from a foundation.

Storytelling is an important element of the fundraising. Donors need to be convinced to give, and accounts of personal suffering, struggle, and recovery can be highly persuasive. Regardless of whether they participate in public storytelling, clients need to be able to tell their stories in order to make successful asylum claims. Al Green talks about how this is approached:

We tell folks that – well, for example, we have an event coming up this Sunday, and we’ll say ‘We have slots available for two or three asylum seekers to share their stories.’ We will probably end up getting two or three who sign up for it, but we also invite other folks who don’t want to speak to still tag along, so they can sit in the audience. They don’t have to ... speak if they’re not comfortable doing that, but as a way to offer support, and also as a way to get out of the house as well, and to see other people. And when they do that as well, they are far more comfortable talking on a one-on-one basis with folks as opposed to standing up in front of a church and speaking to people. And so, those who do end up going up in front of the congregation or whatever group or organization we’re presenting to that week, it’s left up to them to share as much as they want to. Some are glad for the opportunity to talk about what’s going on in their home countries, and will talk on-end ... but then there are others who will speak for two minutes, and ... that’s fine as well.

Although storytelling is essential to the survival of the Task Force and its clients’ abilities to successfully apply for asylum, it can be problematic. As McGuirk et al. (2015) explain, storytelling has the potential to expose the teller and their loved ones to danger, it can be psychologically damaging, and apparent inconsistencies in published accounts can compromise the

strength of asylum claims. A thorough exploration of these dynamics is impossible given the scope of this chapter.

In general, foundations are reluctant to support groups like the Task Force because of its focus on LGBT immigrants, direct services, and faith. Few foundations recognize LGBT immigrants in their portfolios. A recent comprehensive analysis documented just over \$11 million in contributions during 2017 and 2018 to projects focusing on LGBT “migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers” throughout the U.S., Canada, and Western Europe. In addition, many of the biggest funders of LGBT-focused projects such as the Arcus, Haas, and Ford foundations (Wallace et al., 2020, p. 94) center their giving on advocacy to the exclusion of direct services. Finally, few foundations are both progressive, and therefore likely to give to LGBT causes, and at the same time open to supporting faith-based work. For many, this connection seems at best risky, given the religious abuse outlined above and the outspoken hostility that religious organizations often display toward LGBT people. What has been said of “national and international actors” including major foundations is also true of smaller, more regional funders, particularly with respect to LGBT people: “Local faith communities are often at the forefront of humanitarian engagement with displaced populations. However, these contributions are rarely well documented and generally poorly understood... This invisibility starves local institutions of relevant resources and potentially severely constrains their influence” (Ager & Ager, 2017, p. 47).

The Task Force’s orientation around faith is a source of its strength and also a complication at the institutional level. Not only does it make the group less attractive to many foundations, but it also raises a question that is difficult to answer: How can this community, whose roots and motivations are inextricably linked to religion, welcome and provide help to people regardless of their religion? Without its leaders being consciously aware of it, the Task Force has followed guidance voiced by ORAM (2012, p. 16) which emphasizes the importance of not proselytizing: “Respect must be accorded to the refugee’s own perspectives on faith, no matter what they may be.” Concretely, the Task Force invites clients to attend church services at least once and then to decide for themselves whether they would like to participate. Participation in prayer and discussion about religious matters are consistently available, but optional.

CONCLUSION

Religion is both a blessing and a curse for LGBT asylum seekers: while it is implicated in the persecution that makes many flee their homelands, it can also contribute to their resettlement and healing. This chapter has attempted to clarify these dynamics by centering attention on a single program and amplifying the voices of a few of its leaders and clients.

Like asylum seekers, this account crosses boundaries between territories that are often treated as distinct. It is about immigration, theology, politics, psychology, culture, law, charitable organizations, sexual orientation, gender identity, and much else, all at the same time. While integrating these aspects runs the risk of sowing confusion and glossing over important subtleties of meaning, ignoring them runs the risk of oversimplifying the lives and predicaments of real people who are in need.

Many of the subjects touched on summarily in this account could be expanded into research topics of their own. The functions and complications of storytelling, the place of religion in motivating and structuring humanitarian action at the local level, the empowering potential of “reclaimed” religion for survivors of religious abuse, perceptions and realities of exploitation among asylum seekers, the problematic relationship between institutional philanthropy and religion, and the spiritual dimensions of traumatic experience and recovery—all of these topics spring to mind as especially ripe for further exploration. The LGBT Asylum Task Force is unique in its focus and range of services, and perhaps will always remain so, but service providers, advocates, and scholars have much to learn from its leaders and clients.

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