



NATIONAL RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP ROUNDTABLE

And Yet...a testament to transgender persistence

*A response from the National Religious Leadership Roundtable to "Created Male and Female,"
a letter from conservative religious leaders denying the reality of transgender lives*

This past week, 20 conservative religious leaders, representing stridently anti-LGBTQI segments of Christian and Muslim faith communities in the U.S., published a statement on the website of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops to proclaim their belief that being transgender is a false idea – and to assert there is only male and female.

And yet, millions of people of faith in the U.S. and throughout the world live a different reality that is true to them – they are transgender. They are young and old, some are thriving and some struggling, many are faith-filled and others have found only rejection in faith. The voices represented in this statement are in the minority of people of faith in this country as a majority affirm LGBTQ equality.

The religious leaders' statement proclaims that gender cannot be divorced from one's sex as male or female – a position that leads the thoughtful reader to ask, "Do they really understand what gender is?"

And yet, the meaningful lives of transgender folk are vibrant testimonies to the fact that an individual's self-perceived gender may not conform with the gender assigned to them based on their biological characteristics. To demand, as the letter does, that these two concepts must align denies the reality of life for transgender and intersex people, as well as many others who experience discord between their biological sex and the gender that society assigns to them in their culture. Denying that fact makes it impossible for faith leaders and religious communities to be sources of pastoral care and sanctuary for all people.

Wording of the religious leaders' letter makes light of the transgender experience – using terms like "a person's *discomfort* with his or her sex" and "the *desire* to be identified as the other sex" – in an effort to portray transgender identity as a selfish "choice" that can be changed and to dismiss the real-life struggles of transgender people as they try to understand the unique dimension that has shaped their lives.

And yet, transgender people persist because that is their only option; being transgender is who they are and constitutes the wholeness of their being. Denying that reality ignores the staggering statistic that 41 percent of transgender people report having attempted suicide – yet the religious leaders' letter is insensitive to that and the myriad of repercussions that flow from their ill-informed treatise.



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The religious leaders acknowledge that transgender “is a complicated reality that needs to be addressed with sensitivity and truth” and “each person needs to be heard and treated with respect” but they affirm that “it is our responsibility to respond to their *concerns* with compassion, mercy and honesty.”

And yet, we know that their use of “truth” and “honesty” will be used as an opportunity to once again negate the validity of a person’s gender journey and condemn the individual as sinful and perverted. The signatories of the letter and the faith settings they represent have a tortured history of using their pulpits and places of worship to denigrate and denounce rather than lift up or provide meaningful pastoral support to the transgender people in their midst who look to them for guidance and succor.

The religious leaders proclaim in their document that children are harmed when they are told they can “change their sex” and they tell parents that they “deserve better guidance on these important decisions.”

And yet, the transgender experience often begins in childhood with children realizing at age five or six – well before an age when puberty can be blamed as making this an issue of confused sexuality - that they are experiencing life in a way that is much different than that of their peers of the same assigned sex. Parents today are able to access a rich reservoir of medical, psychological, social research – and even faith-based curricula - to make support of their gender questioning children faithful, effective and appropriate.

The religious leaders’ letter calls on “medical institutions to honor the basic medical principle of ‘first, do no harm.’”

And yet, they are ignorant of the harm that their letter will bring to the millions of people who they trumpet should be treated with sensitivity, respect, compassion and mercy – elements that are missing even from their own letter.

Our transgender communities are living through difficult times. Only a few weeks ago, they assembled at city halls, plazas, churches and community centers for the annual Transgender Day of Remembrance to commemorate the 27 transgender individuals who have been murdered in the US this past year alone. Next, they faced a government administration that proclaimed that even using the word transgender in some federal documents was forbidden. And now comes this unbalanced letter, written as a religious testament against the validity of their very lives.



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And yet, we know that transgender people will persevere, survive and hopefully flourish as beloved people divinely created with the same love bestowed on the signatories of this deplorable document.

As members of the National Religious Leadership Roundtable, we ask divine blessings on the transgender individuals who brighten our churches, synagogues, mosques, temples and assemblies with their vibrancy and uniqueness - as well as on those many who have been driven from faith assemblies by the ignorance, fear and vitriol that permeates too many sacred spaces.

As leaders from a wide range of moderate and progressive faith and spiritual communities, we reject the intent of the letter to deny the existence of our beloved transgender companions.

Finally, we implore those religious leaders who signed the ill-conceived, trans-denying letter, "Created Man and Woman," to reach out and connect with transgender people – you obviously know little about their lives, struggles, victories and aspirations. You will learn a lot about the divine's creative genius if you walk and talk with transgender people and really listen to their stories.

National Religious Leadership Roundtable members and other faith leaders signing onto this testament include the following:

PARITY

National LGBTQ Task Force Institute for Welcoming Resources

National Officers of the United Church of Christ

Open and Affirming Coalition United Church of Christ

United Church Of Christ HIV & AIDS Network

Imam Daayiee | MECCA Institute

New Ways Ministry

Metropolitan Community Churches

Disciples LGBTQ+ Alliance

Room for All

Global Justice Institute

Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics, and Ritual (WATER)

Many Voices: A Black Church Movement for Gay & Transgender Justice

TransSaints

Tynan Power, Trans and Muslim Project Coordinator

Transfaith

Religious Institute

DignityUSA



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Soulforce

Center Faith, The DC Center

Affirmation LGBTQ United Methodists

Queer Clergy Trading Cards

Robyn Henderson-Espinoza, PhD | Director of Public Theology Initiatives, Faith Matters Network

Deacon Ross Murray, ELCA

Bishop Allyson Abrams, D.Min | Empowerment Liberation Cathedral



Some members of the National Religious Leadership Roundtable at a recent convening in Detroit, MI.