

Faith-Based Efforts in the Caribbean to Combat Discrimination Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity



March 2020

Arcus commissioned this report in the context of the strategic planning of its Social Justice Program. The following information reflects the opinions of its authors. Arcus uses some but not all of the findings to guide grantmaking decisions.

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“We struggled against apartheid in South Africa...because black people were being blamed and made to suffer for something they could do nothing about—our very skin. It is the same with sexual orientation. I could not have fought against the discrimination of apartheid and not also fight against the discrimination that homosexuals endure, even in our churches and faith groups.”

—Bishop Desmond Tutu

Acknowledgements

The consultants want to thank the many people who mobilized focus groups, participated in interviews and shared documents that allowed for the completion of this mapping exercise in February 2020. Special thanks are extended to the following individuals:

- Faye Ferdinandus – Trinidad & Tobago
- Joel Simpson – SASOD, Guyana
- Kenita Placide – ECADE, OECS
- Kenneth van Emden – SMU, Suriname
- Ro-Ann Mohammed – SHE, Barbados
- Yolanda Simon – +Women and Girls, Trinidad & Tobago
- Lucien Govaard – SMU, Suriname
- Caleb Orozco – UNIBAM, Belize
- Ian McKnight – CVC, Jamaica
- Colin Robinson – CAISO, Trinidad & Tobago
- Donnya Piggot – B-GLAD/Pink Coconuts, Barbados
- Ayanna Sebro – NACC, Trinidad & Tobago
- Dr Rambaran – SHE, Barbados
- Tiffany Jordan – Equals, Barbados
- Dadrina Emmanuel – CEED, Barbados
- Jaevion Nelson – Equality for All Foundation, Jamaica

We also want to acknowledge the participation of the following organizations that contributed to the focus group discussions:

- Trinidad and Tobago Transgender Coalition
- I Am Trans
- Double Positive
- Foundation Liefdevolle Handen
- He and HIV
- Women’s Caucus
- St. Kitts Alliance
- United and Strong
- Dominica Chap
- Guyana Trans United
- Equality for all Foundation Jamaica
- Butterfly, Barbados
- TransWave, Jamaica
- Friends for Life
- D. Carr Foundation
- Suriname Men United
- Chances for Life
- WomenSWay
- Pride TT
- Vincy Chap
- Grenada Chap
- Women Against Rape
- B-GLAD
- Jamaicans for Justice

Executive Summary

Project Aims, Objectives, Activities Deliverables

The aim of this project is to map faith work in the Caribbean that supports the advancement of sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) human rights. Additionally, the consultants were asked to assess concrete needs and opportunities for change to which Arcus Foundation could contribute, taking into consideration its three goals:

1. **Increased safety for LGBTQ people.** Safer societies with reduced levels of anti-LGBTQ violence. Increased security for LGBTQ advocates and communities.
2. **Increased LGBTQ-affirming protections.** International, regional, and local policies that fully protect and uphold the human rights and fundamental freedoms of all LGBTQ people and the repeal of policies that curtail such rights and freedom.
3. **Increased inclusion and acceptance of LGBTQ people.** Public-positive protections, narratives, and discourse that appreciate the full diversity and experience of LGBTQ people; produced in conjunction with LGBTQ people, especially those pushed to the margins.

This mapping exercise documents the presence of faith-based initiatives that address the advancement of SOGI rights.

Geographic Scope

The mapping exercise covered countries within the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), including:

- Barbados
- Belize
- Guyana
- Jamaica
- Suriname
- Trinidad & Tobago
- OECS (including *Antigua and Barbuda, Dominica, Grenada, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Lucia, and St. Vincent and the Grenadines*)

Methodology

Several methods were used to access information on past and present faith-based and SOGI initiatives, identify local and regional faith allies and locate and document faith-based initiatives that may threaten the sociopolitical advancement and safety of members of the LGBTQI community.

Data was gathered through two major activities:

- 1) A review of LGBTQI/faith-based issues and initiatives within the Caribbean.
- 2) Qualitative research—key informant interviews and focus group discussions—conducted with LGBTQI activists, faith leaders, key experts, and select gender and human rights advocates from state and civil society organizations.

Most interviews and focus groups were conducted using virtual platforms, including Skype, WhatsApp, and Zoom. A few interviews were conducted in person.

Conclusions and Lessons Learned from the Review

The review provided an opportunity to look more closely at faith-based efforts targeting SOGI advancement in the Caribbean. Although the dialogue has not grown exponentially, the visibility of the LGBTQI community has been steadily growing and challenging Caribbean societies to reconsider issues of discrimination, rights, faith, and inclusion. But the journey for both the faith community and LGBTQI activists has been painful and lacks guidance and strategy. Our discoveries have shown that:

1. Faith-based organizations (FBOs) continue to struggle with the issue of theology and affirming sexual diversity.
2. Most Caribbean citizens and governments are not clear on inalienable rights of all people, so they are slow to adopt policies and laws that include SOGI protection.
3. Documented efforts of faith-based and SOGI initiatives have been centered on HIV mitigation, and most of the documented work on this has been done through the regional Justice for All and Champions for Change initiatives implemented by CARICOM and PANCAP (Pan-Caribbean Partnership Against HIV/AIDS).

The lack of documentation of FBO and LGBTQI collaboration is also noteworthy; the consultants were unable to access documents and reports of faith-based LGBTQI engagements that have occurred nationally. We learned of these initiatives mostly via interviews during the mapping exercise. There are very few Caribbean research and scholarly writings on LGBTQI issues. The Institute for Gender and Development Studies at the University of the West Indies had several publications beginning in 1995 that focused primarily on women with some focus on how Caribbean notions of masculinity influence the power relations between women and men. When homosexuality was addressed, most studies focused on men who have sex with men, rather than women who have sex with women. Transgender, queer, and intersex issues were not explored at all in the literature.

In terms of faith-based and SOGI collaboration, many respondents identified priests, pastors, and the media as proponents of homophobia. They admitted that politicians and media publishers were highly influenced by the voices of faith leaders in maintaining the culture of hostility and ostracism, using biblical passages and developed-world prejudices as reasons for maintaining the status quo of discrimination and exclusion.

What can be inferred from the interviews is that the faith-based community views SOGI human rights arguments with suspicion and that many do not view LGBTQI rights favorably, fearing this will lead to Caribbean nations accepting same-sex marriage.

Mapping Report

This report is based on key informant interviews and focus group discussions. It includes:

- 1) An overview of reported SOGI-related faith work happening in the Caribbean, including current and past faith-based initiatives addressing safety, human rights advocacy, and inclusion.
- 2) An overview of FBO interventions that may threaten the sociopolitical advancement of SOGI issues detailing the who, what, where, and how of each initiative.
- 3) An overview of recommended strategies and interventions that could strengthen faith-based and LGBTQI collaboration and reduce the impact of the lobby against LGBTQI equality.
- 4) Capacity needs for LGBTQI organizations to increase collaborative initiatives with faith-based organizations and for faith-based organizations to work with LGBTQI issues and groups.
- 5) Specific organizations and groups that could be funded.

Overview of Interviews

The interviews covered countries within the English-speaking CARICOM, including Belize, Barbados, Guyana, Jamaica, Suriname, OECS (including Antigua and Barbuda, Dominica, Grenada, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Lucia and St. Vincent), and Trinidad & Tobago. Mapping information was gathered through an in-depth review, followed by interviews with experts on the LGBTQI issues and faith interventions and focus group discussions with key LGBTQI activists.

The consultants utilized well-recognized local and regional networks in several countries, to mobilize individuals from whom specific information was harnessed for optimum mapping results. The interviews were conducted using questionnaire templates to ensure that the information gathered could be compared with other interviews. The templates consisted of 29 questions and took around 60 minutes to complete with each respondent. The questions centered on respondents' knowledge and experience about past or current faith-based projects and initiatives that address issues around sexual orientation and gender identity. All the respondents were allowed to protect their identity because of the nature of the topic.

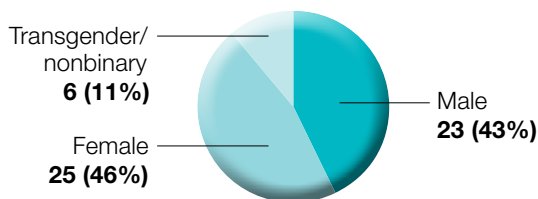
Over four months, the consultants covered 12 countries and reached 54 people via:

- 12 elite expert interviews
- 7 focus group discussions (39 people)
- 3 interviews with faith leaders

The questionnaire considered sex, age, gender identity, sexual orientation, country of residence, and religious affiliation. The following diagrams break down the demographics of the individuals interviewed.

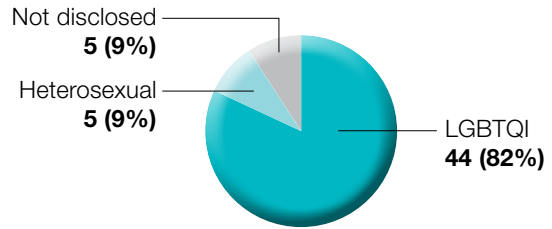
Sex

Overall, slightly more females (46%) than males (43%) were interviewed in both focus group and key expert interviews. The gender breakdown is as follows:



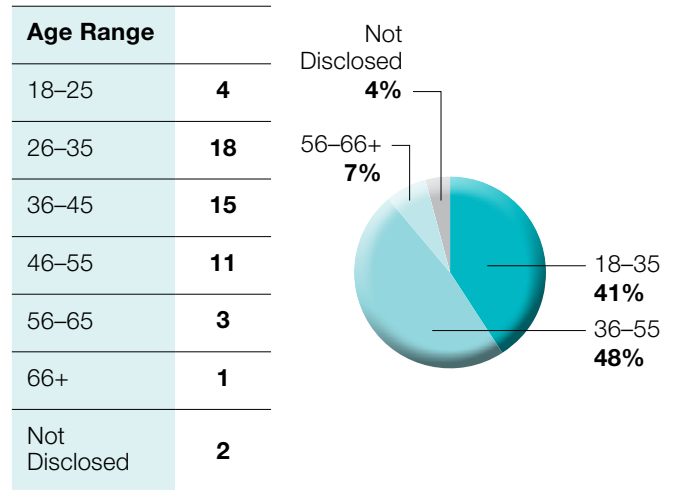
Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

This chart shows how respondents identified in terms of sexual orientation and gender identity; most respondents identified as members of the LGBTQI community (82%).



Age Range

A plurality of the respondents were ages 26 to 35, closely followed by the 36-to-45 age group. A deliberate effort was taken to speak to the leaders, gatekeepers, and individuals who work on LGBTQI issues professionally, so most of the people interviewed are ages 26 to 55 (81%).



Religious Affiliation

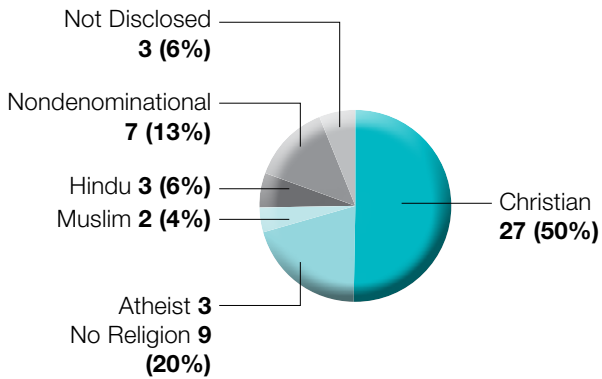
“When we discover our sexuality, it does not take away our history with and connection to religion.”

—LGBTQI activist, Suriname

Since this exercise focused on faith-based interventions on SOGI advancement, it was particularly insightful to determine the religious affiliation of the respondents.

Most were raised Christian or in another religious environment and participated in worship and attended religious schools as children. Depending on the denomination, some even reported completing sacraments of the church.

The majority of respondents identified as Christian (50%), followed by either atheist or no religion (20%).



Personal Experiences With Faith

When people of faith who identified as LGBTQI were interviewed, the first question asked was about personal experiences with faith. Respondents were asked to recall childhood incidents when they felt conflicted between their sexual orientation or gender identity and their religion. The accounts included painful memories of conversion therapy and exclusion from their religious community.

“They tried to pray the gay away. I was baptized more than once.”—transgender activist, Trinidad & Tobago

As LGBTQI became aware of how unreceptive clergy and faith-based congregations were toward them, the result was feelings of ostracism and confusion. Some even said clergy members targeted them with vitriol and criticism. Many said that in general, they did not feel welcomed by congregations and leaders.

“I felt awkward and I pulled away from church, but it has not deterred my faith. It just deterred my congregating.”—LGBTQI activist, St. Lucia

Respondents said these experiences shaped their relationship with religion. Common in the accounts was that early experiences with faith affected involvement with religion. Many respondents said they left the church when they began to embrace their sexuality.

“They were sympathetic, but they were firm that my same-sex attractions were wrong. At first, I made a deal with God that I would not follow through with my attractions. But that didn’t last.”—LGBTQI activist, Barbados

Even when respondents did not disclose their sexual orientation in faith communities, they were exposed to negative perceptions that made them feel unsafe.

“When sharing their experience around sexuality, some of our clients draw a church with a padlock on it. It signified that they have no access to the church.”—female advocate, Suriname

Collaborative Faith-Based/ LGBTQI Interventions

In the review and the interviews, there were no identified, structured, and deliberate faith-based efforts that specifically address SOGI rights in the Caribbean. Through the mapping exercise, the consultants found pockets of improvised interventions by individual faith leaders. But these initiatives were not part of a wider strategic plan from faith-based organizations. In most cases, they did not have the approval of the governing faith-based authority.

Notably, the Anglican church and Anglican clerics were frequently reported as supporting LGBTQI human rights throughout the region. One cleric pointed to Anglicanism Reloaded II, an initiative of the Anglican Diocese of Trinidad

and Tobago that examined how the church could address marginalized and vulnerable populations, including the LGBTQI community.

“There is something to study about the Anglican church, because pastors and laypersons have come to the fore when it comes to SOGI advancement.”

—LGBTQI activist, Jamaica

Among religious denominations, other LGBTQI allies in the region were the Methodist and Lutheran churches in Guyana and Suriname, the Baptist church in Jamaica, and the Presbyterian church in Trinidad & Tobago.

TABLE 1: List of Faith-Based LGBTQI Initiatives in the Region

Country	Organization	Initiative	Impact
Barbados	Anglican Church and Barbados Gays, Lesbians and All-Sexuals Against Discrimination (B-GLAD)	Pride in Jesus religious service (2019)	LGBTQI-friendly religious worship service, which was included in Barbados’s schedule of activities for Pride.
Guyana	Roman Catholic Church and the Society Against Sexual Orientation Discrimination (SASOD)	SASOD’s 10th anniversary panel: Faith and Sexuality (2013)	Before this initiative, no religious leader had participated in an event hosted by the LGBTQI community. This opened the door for more engagement with other religious leaders, and SASOD has sustained close relationships with the Roman Catholic and Anglican churches in Guyana.
	Roman Catholic and Anglican Churches and SASOD	Pride Festival 2017 and 2018 interfaith services	Guyana’s first Pride Festival was in 2017, and it opened with an interfaith forum hosted by Roman Catholic Bishop Francis Alleyne. In 2018, Anglican Bishop Charles Davidson hosted the Pride Committee at his residence. He then publicly denounced laws that criminalized same-sex intimacy. This engagement helped fuel collaborative discussions. <i>“The public demonstration of support by the bishops allowed us to branch out and develop relationships with other religious leaders.”</i> —executive director, SASOD

	Hindu and Muslim faiths and SASOD	Panel discussions with Hindu and Muslim FBOs (2019)	<p>Discussion to bring the LGBTQI and faith-based communities together to reduce cultural stigma and discrimination. Faith leaders were able to identify religious doctrine that promotes nondiscrimination and inclusion.</p> <p>The Muslim representative apologized for the way his denomination treated the LGBTQI community.</p> <p>The Hindu representative noted that Hinduism is the only large religion that recognizes three genders but noted that culturally (in Guyana) this is strongly contradicted.</p>
	Hope of Christ United Anglo-Catholic Church	LGBTQI-affirming church (2019–2020)	The first of its kind in the Caribbean. The church opened as an LGBTQI-affirming organization. The founder and pastor said he started the church because LGBTQI in Guyana “were being shamed and ostracized from Christianity.”
Jamaica	Jamaica Council of Churches	Mapping exercise of the HIV & AIDS response among FBOs in Jamaica (2015)	Identification of social service resources offered by FBOs to people living with HIV. Production of a directory of services that are HIV-positive-friendly and open to members of the LGBTQI community.
	Sunshine Cathedral (U.S.) & Jamaica AIDS Support	Underground mobile faith service (2009)	A mobile and underground Christian worship service that provided opportunities for LGBTQI to worship. It was not financially sustainable. The service was advertised secretly. When information about it leaked in the national media, it became difficult to book spaces.
	United Theological College of the West Indies	Two radical voices (one female, one male) shaped the dialogue on human rights and gender issues (no date)	Their theology of inclusion created a language and understanding of a theology of inclusion.
Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS)			
St. Lucia	The Other Sheep (U.S.) and United & Strong	Conversations with faith leaders and the LGBTQI community (2012)	This strategy opened the door for faith leaders to engage. One pastor publicly supported protection and safety for the LGBTQI community.

Regional	PANCAP	Justice for All and Champions for Change (2017–2019)	<p>Global Fund initiatives to reduce the stigma and discrimination faced by people living with and affected by HIV. The focus was on giving them equal access to health and social services. There was no real impact culturally or politically.</p> <p><i>“Commitments that are made regionally are very difficult to achieve nationally.”</i> —LGBTQI activist, Trinidad & Tobago</p>
	Global Interfaith Network	Caribbean interfaith network (2020)	<p>The network is working to expand into the region. Its goal is to create LGBTQI access to fellowship and worship by promoting dialogue among faith leaders and a shared theology of inclusion.</p>
Suriname	WomenSway Foundation	Roundtable discussion with faith leaders (2015)	<p>At a roundtable discussion, a Catholic priest publicly stated that “God loves all of his children, and LGBT persons should not be discouraged from attending church.” It was the first time a faith leader made an inclusive and welcoming statement in public when addressing LGBTQI issues. This led to more discussions with faith leaders.</p>
	Moravian and Pentecostal Churches & Chances for Life	Roundtable discussion with faith leaders (2018)	<p>This initiative sought to build bridges between the LGBTQI community and leaders of the Moravian and Pentecostal faiths. Faith leaders who attended the sessions were willing to have conversations with community members, but they wanted the conversations to be private. One issue that emanated from the meetings was that faith leaders felt ill equipped to provide counseling around sexual diversity.</p> <p><i>“[Faith leaders] struggled with having conversations around being both LGBT and Christ-like.”</i> —female advocate, Suriname</p>
Trinidad & Tobago	Coalition Advocating for the Inclusion of Sexual Orientation (CAISO) and senior clerics of the Anglican and Roman Catholic churches	Faith and sexuality: panel discussion with faith leaders (2009)	<p>First documented organized initiative between the LGBTQI community and two senior clerics in the Anglican and Catholic churches. Understanding that the fight for inclusion will be long and arduous, clerics made the key point that LGBTQI people should “create their own faith community.”</p>

	Anglican Church, Unity Church of Trinidad & Tobago, and CAISO	Panel discussion and worship service (2012)	Services led by clerics of the Anglican and Unity churches. These interventions created opportunities for faith leaders to investigate the impact of systematic, structural, and administrative violence against the LGBTQI community.
	Holy Saviour Anglican Church and CAISO	LGBTQI-affirming interfaith service (2009)	<p>Very well-attended service at a revered parish. Members of the LGBTQI community participated in leading the worship service as servers, ushers, and readers and by leading intercession prayers. This led to a collaborative relationship between the Holy Saviour parish and CAISO in cross-referring counseling clients. Additionally, it supported parishioners who identified as LGBTQI.</p> <p><i>“Young LGBT parishioners thanked me. They said they were happy their church was a safe space. They were happy to have a priest they can trust. They were happy they would not have to leave the church because of their sexuality.”</i> —female cleric, Trinidad & Tobago</p>
	Anglican Diocese of Trinidad and Tobago	Local capacity initiative project (2017)	<p>A series of sessions to educate clerics about issues related to human rights, gender, sex, and sexuality to promote a theology of inclusion and support for the advancement of a rights-based ministry. An outreach initiative helped build bridges between the church and marginalized communities.</p> <p>This initiative led to the diocese collaborating with the Ministry of Health to train Anglican volunteer nurses to conduct HIV testing.</p>
	Holy Saviour Anglican Church Trinidad & Tobago	Testing drive for transgender sex workers who worked near the church (2017–2018)	This very successful activity was an outcome of the local capacity initiative project.

Respondents considered most of these initiatives successful because of the bridge-building benefits and short-term feelings of optimism among the LGBTQI community. But the lack of human and financial resources to support planning, mobilizing, and implementation made these achievements difficult to repeat. Clerics said they have received negative attention from members of their faith communities whenever they have demonstrated support for SOGI advancement.

“It is difficult for religious leaders to stand up for LGBT issues. Leaders who support the LGBT community are inevitably seen as gay, queer, and weird. They lose favor within their own religious community and are even stigmatized by external religious bodies.”
—religious leader in the Caribbean

Faith-Based Advocates and Allies

There was difficulty getting faith leaders and other faith-based officials to participate in interviews because the issue is provocative and polarizing. Consultants contacted about 10 faith-based officials, but only three agreed to be interviewed, and anonymity was preferred.

“I stay away from public conversations on the issue because of how quickly it can get volatile. It is difficult to ask men [faith leaders and politicians] to support LGBT rights because they fear being seen as gay.”—gay cleric

Interviews and research revealed that some clerics covertly support SOGI advancement by providing pastoral counseling services and family mediation and even participating in LGBTQI community discussions. But they take a professional risk since their advocacy is not usually sanctioned by the religious officials. Faith leaders said that when they show

support for the LGBTQI community, they are usually ostracized by their contemporaries and receive pushback from their congregations.

During the interviews, LGBTQI respondents identified several faith leaders as allies to SOGI advancement. Table 2 lists faith leaders who are considered local and regional allies. Because faith leaders may face alienation if identified as LGBTQI allies, the consultants listed only those who were public in their advocacy for LGBTQI safety, protection from violence, and freedom to worship.

“Sometimes it is the faith leaders who initiate these conversations, and they recognize that they have a role in reducing stigma and discrimination. They just don’t know how to do it.”—female advocate, Suriname

TABLE 1: Faith-Based Allies

Country	Name of Faith-Based Representative	Faith-Based Organization
Belize	Rev. Mary Martin (Canadian Expat)	Christian (denomination unknown)
Grenada	Bishop Clyde Harvey	Roman Catholic Church
Guyana	Rev. Marvin Livian	Hope of Christ Anglican Church, United Anglo-Catholic Church
	Bishop Francis Alleyne	Roman Catholic Church
	Bishop Charles Davidson	Anglican Church
Jamaica	Rev. Canon Garth Minnot	Anglican Church
	Rev. Sean Major-Campbell	Anglican Church
	Rev. Marvia Lawes	Baptist Church
	Rev. Devon Dick	Open Bible Baptist
	Rev. Damien Williams	Open Bible
Suriname	Rev. Danielle Dokman	Lutheran Church
	Rev. Urwin Hollband	Lutheran Church
Trinidad & Tobago	Rev. Dr. Knolly Clarke	Anglican Church
	Rev. Dr. Shelley-Ann Tenia	Anglican Church

Faith-Based Barriers to SOGI Advancement

As respondents pointed out during the interviews, when laypersons object to LGBTQI equality, their rationale is usually based on their interpretations of biblical teachings. Even secular opponents to SOGI advancement cite Christian traditions. This type of opposition has been common in other rights-based movements, including race and women’s rights.

Regional activists were encouraged when faith leaders began to contribute their voices to end HIV-related stigma and discrimination. But those faith leaders stopped short of becoming LGBTQI allies. Many were comfortable working on behalf of people living with HIV, but they struggled to work on SOGI issues.

For the Champions for Change and Justice for All initiatives, PANCAP recruited and assembled faith leaders involved in HIV-related work. Although these faith leaders made local commitments to work with vulnerable populations, many did not add their voices to SOGI advancement.

“Even the most well-intended faith leaders struggled and were torn around questions of sexual diversity. Even with their best efforts, they were never going to be able to connect same-sex intimacy with morality.”—activist, Trinidad & Tobago

Table 3 is a list of local and regional faith-based barriers that present continual and organized strategies to halt the advancement of human rights protections for LGBTQI people.

TABLE 3: Faith-Based Barriers to SOGI Advancement

Country	Organization	Interventions
Barbados	Family, Faith, and Freedom	Funded by Christian groups from Canada and the United States, this LGBTQI group mobilizes a regional conference. In 2016 the organization’s conference theme was “Saving the Family.” Attendees were faith leaders from various denominations and groups.
Belize	Belize Action	An Evangelical network that strongly lobbied against the decriminalization of homosexuality in Belize and continues to work against SOGI human rights protections. <i>“The church likes to absolve itself from the violence that members of the LGBT community face, but they cannot be absolved. They have created the attitudes that foster violence. And when the violence happens, their silence and inaction says a lot.”</i> —LGBTQI activist, Belize
Jamaica	Lawyers’ Christian Fellowship	A network of Christian lawyers who lobby against LGBTQI rights, sexual and reproductive health education, and the rights of women and marginalized populations.
	Jamaica Coalition for a Healthy Society	A group of Christians who envision a Jamaican society in which social, spiritual, physical, emotional, and mental health of society are driven by Judeo-Christian values. This group has a powerful lobby that advocates for anti-LGBTQI legislation and lobbies local and regional governments to maintain sodomy laws.

Regional	World Congress of Families	A U.S.-based coalition that promotes conservative Christian values internationally. It opposes same-sex marriage and women’s sexual and reproductive health rights. It has a strong presence in the Caribbean, holding conferences in the region and lobbying against SOGI rights. “There are international missions investing in maintaining LGBT discrimination in the Caribbean.” —female LGBTQI activist, St. Lucia
	His Way Out Ministries	A U.S.-based Christian ministry that works with local anti-LGBTQI activists in Trinidad & Tobago and Guyana. It conducts media and school campaigns that discourage SOGI advancement.
Trinidad & Tobago	Hospital Christian Ministries	Local Christian medical professionals who lobby against LGBTQI rights. They conduct school lectures and information, education, and communication (IEC) campaigns. “[This is] a highly funded, highly organized resistance, doing a lot of work to ensure that LGBTQI rights are totally denied.” —LGBTQI activist, Jamaica
	Lawyers for Jesus	Christian legal professionals who advocate against SOGI advancement and protecting LGBTQI rights.
	Trinidad & Tobago Council of Evangelical Churches (TTCEC)	TTCEC embarked on a series of campaigns, including public demonstrations, opposed to amending the Sexual Offenses Act. When activist Jason Jones was suing the government to decriminalize same-sex intimacy, TTCEC strongly lobbied the government and threatened political consequences.
	Faith-Based Network (2018)	When sodomy was decriminalized, six religious leaders (led by the present Catholic Archbishop and representing Hindu, Muslim, Spiritual Baptist, and Christian faiths) came together to lobby the government to maintain protections for sexual orientation and gender identity under the Equal Opportunity Act. “Lobbying of the Government to exclude persons from the LGBT community from basic human rights protection was demoralising for the community. We never thought that faith leaders will object to basic human rights protections.” —gay male activist, Trinidad & Tobago

It is difficult to measure the success of these interventions based on delays in policy and legislation offering human rights protections. But the protests have been well attended and contribute to cultural stigma and discrimination against LGBTQI people.

One unintended by-product of the anti-LGBTQI lobby is that they sometimes prove to be a catalyst for LGBTQI community mobilization and increased involvement of community allies.

“On a personal level, seeing the Methodist church join this group to support discrimination against the LGBTQI community was painful, but this fueled the creation of SASOD.”—SASOD executive director, Guyana

After anti-LGBTQI demonstrations organized by the Trinidad & Tobago Council of Evangelical Churches, a hugely successful demonstration of LGBTQI activists assembled at the Parliament building in Port of Spain. This may have contributed to the repeal of several discriminatory articles in the Sexual Offenses Act and, later, organizing of Trinidad & Tobago's first Pride event in 2018.

“The biggest impact that the religious fundamentalists have is how they are able to dehumanise you (members of the LGBT community). They don’t see your accomplishments, your hard work, how you take care of your family or your good qualities. They just reduce you to being the worst thing in society. And no matter how much you have done and accomplished, you could never be a role model or anything.”—LGBTQI activist, Trinidad & Tobago

Faith-Based Influence on Policy and Legislation

The mapping questionnaire did not include faith-based influences on policy and legislation, but the issue inevitably came up during the discussions, because faith-based organizations have an inherent sociopolitical influence on policy issues that address sexual and reproductive health rights.

“The church is impactful in political discussions to change the laws ... the church is the biggest influence on the society’s view of the LGBTQ community.”—female medical practitioner of faith, Barbados

When activist Caleb Orozco challenged the Belize government’s sodomy laws, several faith-based organizations sided with the government as “interested parties.” They included the Roman Catholic Church of Belize, the Belize Church of England Corporate Body, and the Belize Evangelical Association of Churches.

Similarly, in Trinidad & Tobago, during discussions to add sexual orientation and gender identity as protected statuses under the Equal Opportunity Act, a group of faith leaders—convened by the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Port of Spain—urged the government to resist this effort. The leaders represented the Catholic, Muslim, and Hindu communities as well as Seventh-day Adventists, the Evangelical Council, and an umbrella evangelical group called the Faith-Based Network. The Archbishop said that religious leaders joined forces because the “fabric of society was at risk.” The EO Act does not include sexual orientation or gender identity as protected statuses, but the government has not responded to the religious leaders’ request. Respondents said it is particularly dangerous when pastors are also politicians, which happens in many countries in the region.

“Parliamentarians who also happen to be faith leaders and their dual influence have been problematic. Their power is great on both sides and they use it against people who identify as LGBT.”—lesbian activist, Suriname

Although many respondents said religious values influence governmental policies on sexual rights, many were more concerned about the impact religious rhetoric has on their daily lives, such as participation in worship and fellowship and their influence on public safety and social inclusion.

Most participants said that politicians will not change their stance until faith leaders change their dialogue. Some respondents said this requires elected officials and their religious allies to work together more closely. Conversely, it was also noted that faith community allies are not equipped to advance policy and legislative strategies.

“Too many Religious Leaders don’t have the theological training to analyse and understand the issue. They are unaware that their discourse on the issue can be very violent and incite violence. It is the way we speak culturally and it is harmful.”—religious leader of the region

In reviewing the interview reports, LGBTQI respondents said that while FBOs may be culpable for the pervasiveness of homophobia in their communities and countries, they were committed to collaborating with FBOs. The respondents acknowledged that many in the LGBTQI community longed to openly and safely participate in a faith community. They also noted that aside from policy and legislation, religious-based homophobia and transphobia directly affect their quality of life.

“...the religious opposition to gay rights is not contained within the Church but also seeps into services that people of faith provide, so people of faith use religious bias to prevent quality access to health, religion, education and housing.”—regional LGBTQI activist, Jamaica

Recommended Strategies and Interventions That Could Reduce Faith-Based Discrimination

The final question on the interview template addressed recommendations for effective and sustainable collaboration between SOGI and faith-based communities. Such collaboration could alleviate LGBTQI social and political discrimination. Respondents offered several suggestions, from capacity-building initiatives for faith leaders to the creation of LGBTQI-affirming worship spaces, where faith could be practiced safely. The recommendations are organized under specific categories:

LGBTQI-Affirming Safe Spaces and Worship Spaces

Several respondents promoted the creation of worship spaces that include and affirm people who identify as LGBTQI. During the mapping exercise, a focus group respondent said that an LGBTQI-affirming church was being planned in Guyana; the first service was held in December 2019.

“Despite popular belief, many gay people do believe in God.”—LGBTQI activist, Trinidad & Tobago

Recommendations for inclusive worship spaces included:

- Creating spaces for worship and religious fellowship, using north-south partnerships as a guide to build inclusive faith communities in the Caribbean.
- Identifying faith leaders who maintain working relationships with the LGBTQI community, and mobilizing the LGBTQI community to support them in building and growing their ministries.

Capacity-Development Sessions

For Faith Leaders

Many respondents suggested strategically selecting faith leaders who are already allies and grooming them to deliver messages of SOGI rights. This group, they said, must appeal to the masses, including politicians. One respondent went further: “It will be useful to locate and train converted religious fundamentalists who may be able to expose the dangers of fundamentalism.”

The consensus was that investment in capacity-building sessions for clergy who already demonstrate a readiness to work with the community could be beneficial.

Recommendations included:

- Capacity training for faith leaders to enhance their abilities to work on issues like LGBTQI homelessness and partner- and gender-based violence.
- Sessions to develop advocacy skills for faith leaders who have already demonstrated a readiness to engage in LGBTQI human rights advancement.
- Support and train faith leaders (who are advocates) to deliver rights-centered pastoral care to queer congregants and their families.
- A strategic intervention to introduce human rights and gender perspective into religious studies at theological colleges and religious study programs.

“Faith-based organizations have a role to play in protecting members of the LGBT community. It is a vulnerable community, and faith-based organizations have an obligation to work to protect all those who are vulnerable.”

—LGBTQI activist, Barbados

For LGBTQI Activists and Organizations

Additionally, it was proposed that LGBTQI activists develop their skills to effectively and successfully support the engagement between the communities. During the interviews, the following strategies were recommended:

- Develop strategies to amplify the voices and works of religious leaders who are human rights and LGBTQI advocates.
- Develop initiatives that support religious leaders who take the risk of being allies.
- Create safe spaces where religious leaders can safely and confidentially address their sentiments, beliefs, biases, and experiences around issues of sexuality.
- Create structured, continual psychosocial support for faith leaders who are active and visible allies.
- Develop pathways and protocols where clerics and community cross-refer individuals or families who need psychosocial support or pastoral care.
- Develop LGBTQI capacity to provide technical support to faith-based organizations and assist them in building mandates and ministries that support inclusion.
- Train LGBTQI advocates and activists in theology so they can articulate religious teachings and rebut theories that religion supports homophobia.

- Conduct programs with community leaders that develop the capacity of faith leaders to use scriptures for human rights advocacy.

“There is biblical justification for equality and inclusion, and advocates need to learn it.”—LGBTQI activist, Guyana

Research

There has been a dearth of professional studies in the Caribbean examining faith and sexuality, and respondents pointed out the need to understand how a culture of homophobia, supported by religious beliefs, affects the experiences of community members. The following were suggested:

- Sponsorship of scholarly articles that explore how religious teachings affect the overall safety and wellbeing of LGBTQI people.
- Research that exposes incidents where religious texts have been manipulated to support discrimination and exclusion of populations.
- Creation of a watchdog mechanism to document and analyze discriminatory acts related to religious doctrine and to report on the impact these acts have on the overall wellbeing of members of the LGBTQI community.

“The public needs to be aware of the psychological impact of discrimination.”—LGBTQI activist, Belize

- Research to obtain a clear understanding of issues that can be constructively addressed: Which issues will members of faith communities support? Which ones need more discussion and understanding? Which ones do they feel strongly about?

Information, Education, and Communication Interventions

- The data coming out of the interviews yielded several suggestions that centered on the use of IEC campaigns:
- Developing awareness campaigns that recognize that many LGBTQI people believe in God and want to participate in faith traditions.
- Promotional media campaigns addressing LGBTQI issues and feel-good stories around acceptance and inclusion coming from faith communities.
- Implementing visible, monumental campaigns that show harmony between FBOs and the LGBTQI community; for example, human peace chain link between LGBTQI and faith communities and allies.

- Increasing LGBTQI visibility by promoting and highlighting socially celebrated people who are also part of the queer community.
- Developing media campaigns around respect, tolerance, and love for diversity.
- Developing a series of platforms for LGBTQI people and faith leaders to work together.
- Creating campaigns that reduce discrimination by targeting people’s sense of fairness and human dignity. Develop common messages around no hate and no violence.

“Religion plays a very strong role in the violence that persons in the LGBTQI community face. Most of the time, during violent and discriminatory acts, religious scriptures are quoted as a justification for the attack.”

—LGBTQI activist, Trinidad & Tobago

- Highlight stories of resilience, examples of mothers and fathers who love their LGBTQI children.

“Parents and grandparents want to love their children as they are, but they feel the church will not support it. That is the crux of their struggle.”—female religious leader,

Trinidad & Tobago

Policy and Legislative Initiatives

Although there was agreement about working to separate faith from government policy, there were few specific suggestions to address this.

“The state makes carnival policy without faith-based organizations. If we can do that, we can do it for sex.”

—LGBTQI activist, Trinidad & Tobago

- Strategize to promote a clear separation between church and state.
- Using trained faith leaders, develop initiatives to assist politicians to separate religious dogma from their obligations to uphold the human rights of all citizens.

Recommendations for Moving Forward

Capacity needs for increased LGBTQI and faith-based community collaboration

It is clear from this exercise that work has to be done to stimulate the required change that needs to happen to ensure that LGBTQI people in the region have equal access to holistic and healthy life choices. The culture of fear and hate that is directed toward the community needs to be targeted. This fear and discrimination are present in laws throughout the region, but the work to dismantle homophobia and transphobia has to start in the hearts and minds of the people. This does not minimize the critical need to ensure legal equality and protection; rather, efforts must also target institutions that represent the culture and ethos of the people. We believe that once such transformation begins, the political uncertainty around these issues will be easier to resolve.

As expressed throughout the interviews and research, the work has already commenced. Strategic efforts are needed to ensure that authentic, Caribbean-based, sustainable initiatives are developed to increase the momentum of equality and inclusion.

The consultants suggest first homing in on the lower-hanging fruits by working with faith-based organizations and clerics who are recognized by the LGBTQI community as allies. Focusing on some of the respondents' recommendations, the consultants suggest these strategies and interventions using Arcus Foundation's three indicators.

1. Increased safety for LGBTQI people

Safer societies with reduced levels of anti-LGBTQI violence. Increased security for LGBTQI advocates and communities.

Throughout the discussions, LGBTQI community members emphasized their need to feel safe in social and public spaces, including spaces of worship. It is therefore recommended:

- To identify, mobilize, and train faith leaders (who are willing to be LGBTQI advocates) to develop safe spaces or worship centers that support affirming messages for LGBTQI people and their families. Such initiatives will require:
 - faith-based allies to be trained in delivering messages of inclusion
 - pastoral care training that focuses on family mediation, gender- and partner-based violence, and welfare-support casework

- Although one major objective of LGBTQI advocacy work is the safety of community members, from the interviews it has become clear that religious allies are insecure about supporting SOGI advancement. If the community requires support from faith leaders to dismantle the structures of discrimination, the community must support allies who take professional and social risks to do so. Therefore, we also recommend that LGBTQI community organizations build their capacity to:
 - Create initiatives and spaces where religious leaders could safely and confidentially address their sentiments, beliefs, interpretations, biases, and experiences around issues of sexuality and sexual diversity. This would allow for the thoughtful consideration of issues around theology and sexuality.
 - Develop systems that allow for psychosocial support for faith leaders who are active allies.

Throughout the interviews and group discussions, LGBTQI people said biblical language felt insurmountable. Many in the LGBTQI community struggled to challenge religious teachings using biblical language and interpretation. But the Caribbean people, including the SOGI community, have an unshakable desire to practice their faith. The consultants suggest:

- The development of a training program in which LGBTQI community activists can learn to use biblical language to strengthen their work with the faith-based community.

2. Increased LGBTQI-affirming protections

International, regional, and local policies that protect human rights and fundamental freedoms for all LGBTQI people.

Repealing legislation that curtails the rights and freedoms of LGBTQI members is a long and arduous journey.

In preparing for this, the consultants suggest:

- capacity-building training packages designed to develop the advocacy skills of faith allies, so they can engage in effective and sustainable human rights promotion

- strategic interventions with regional theological colleges and religious programs to introduce curricula that focus gender, sexuality, and human rights issues
- using trained faith leaders to develop initiatives that could help politicians understand a theology of inclusion and to find ways to uphold their obligations to human rights principles
- conducting in-depth research to obtain a clear understanding of the best pathways to constructively develop productive collaborative relationships between the LGBTQI and faith communities. Which issues are faith communities willing to support? Which need more discussions and understanding? Which are not negotiable?

“Can we all agree that every human being deserves human rights? And agree on what those rights should look like?”

—Technical Director, NACC, Trinidad & Tobago

3. Increased inclusion and acceptance of LGBTQI people

Positive protections, narratives, and conversations that appreciate the diversity and experience of LGBTQI people. Produced by and with LGBTQI people, especially those pushed to the margins.

We believe that this is a critical indicator, and full human rights for LGBTQI people hinges on it. The interview showed that there needs to be more public awareness around SOGI rights that will influence public understanding. The consultants said it is necessary to highlight messages that foster fairness and human dignity and discourage a language of hate and violence. We therefore suggest:

- sponsoring scholarly articles that explore how religious teachings affect the overall safety and wellbeing of LGBTQI people
- creating a watchdog mechanism that documents, analyzes, and publishes all discriminatory acts that cite religious doctrine and reporting on the social, physical, and mental impact on LGBTQI people
- developing and circulating promotional media campaigns featuring stories of inclusion and accomplishments coming from collaborations between LGBTQI and faith-based leaders
- highlighting stories of reconciliation, including religious families and their LGBTQI children and loved ones

Finally, the lack of proper documentation of faith-based interventions in SOGI advancement was prominent during this exercise, so the consultants also recommend:

- developing capacity-building modules and training sessions in project evaluation and documentation for both communities
- developing a platform or technology to systemically record local and regional faith-based SOGI initiatives, so the work conducted in the region is adequately reflected

“There is a way that issues of sexual orientation and Christian ethics could be empathetically and compassionately addressed that has not been fully explored by Caribbean Christian Churches.”—LGBTQI activist, Barbados

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Claudette Francis is the CEO of CRF Consulting, a consultant psychologist, and a senior international advisor in community systems strengthening and engagement. She has over 30 years of experience in public health in the Caribbean, having provided consulting services to CAREC, PAHO, PANCAP, UWI-HEU, WORLD BANK, UNDP, UNFPA, UN Women, UNAIDS, Global Fund, GTZ, and Caribbean HIV/AIDS Alliance. She is Co-Founder and was voluntary Technical Advisor to the Caribbean Regional Network of People Living with HIV/AIDS (CRN+). She also served as voluntary Executive Director of Community Action Resource, the Trinidad & Tobago HIV support group (CARE).

Francis has key competencies in HIV/AIDS program development, strategic planning, and substance abuse counseling, and is a Certified Employee Assistance Program (EAP) Provider. She is a trainer in emotional intelligence, HIV/AIDS counselling, and the STI/HIV Clinical Management Foundation Course—Psychosocial Issues of the British Association for Sexual Health and HIV (BASHH).

NADINE LEWIS-AGARD

Nadine Lewis-Agard is a human and social development consultant with nearly 20 years of experience working on issues related to program management, social vulnerability, sexual and reproductive health, HIV awareness and education, gender equality, and LGBTQI rights. Her professional career began in social work as one of the architects of a foster care system for Trinidad & Tobago and counseled families within the foster care system. She then became an advocate for children’s rights and the de-institutionalization of children in care. Her work with the state continued as an advisor to the first Minister of Gender, Youth and Child Development.

Lewis-Agard then branched off to work on human rights, stigma, and discrimination reduction and facilitated training sessions for faith-based, public health, and community-based organizations, including armed forces across the region. As a certified UN Women Caribbean Gender Advocate, her current work involves gender and diversity rights and equality, which focuses on the elimination of all types of gender discrimination and violence.

ABOUT ARCUS FOUNDATION

Founded in 2000, the Arcus Foundation is dedicated to the idea that people can live in harmony with one another and the natural world. Arcus’ work is based on the belief that respect for diversity among peoples and in nature is essential to a positive future for our planet and all of its inhabitants. Arcus is among the most consistent funders of social justice work pushing for the safety, acceptance, and inclusion of LGBTQI people around the world, and of conservation work to ensure the world’s great apes and gibbons can thrive in their natural habitats. The Foundation works globally and has offices in New York City and Cambridge, United Kingdom. Learn more at www.arcusfoundation.org.

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