

Love Thy Neighbour

What people of faith really think about homosexuality

by Ruth Hunt & Gill Valentine



Stonewall

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'Part of both the burden and the privilege of being the Church we are in the nation we're in is that we are often looked to for some coherent voice on behalf of all the faith communities living here. And that is a considerable privilege, and I hope we can use it well.'

Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, 11 February 2008.

'The British are more prejudiced than Muslims are. Muslims have conflicts with their faith. The British have more prejudice than some of the Muslims do against gays and lesbians. But for some British people who have prejudice this is purely because of the hatred, not because of faith.'

Jamal, 39, Muslim

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Introduction

Faith leaders in modern Britain often point to a claimed tension between religion and equality for gay people. It has even been suggested that lesbian and gay people and people of faith do not and cannot get along.

At Stonewall we have long been sceptical about such claims, not least because many lesbian and gay people hold strong religious views themselves. It's certainly true that many gay people do not attend religious services, or feel welcome within religious communities, or feel able to be themselves with people of faith. But this is perhaps understandable.

Living Together, a YouGov survey of more than 2000 people commissioned by Stonewall in 2006, found that more than half of British adults felt that religious attitudes were a prevalent cause of public prejudice against gay people. However, that polling also revealed that people of faith in modern Britain are no more likely to be prejudiced against gay people than anyone else. Eighty four per cent of people identified as religious disagreed with the statement 'homosexuality is morally unacceptable in all circumstances'.

Mindful that some of the most vocal opposition to gay equality in recent years has come from religious leaders, Stonewall commissioned a series of focus groups to talk to people of faith themselves. These discussions – with Jewish, Muslim, Hindu and Christian participants – show that many people of faith appear content to live, work and socialise with gay people and recognise a detachment between the purist religious viewpoints which so often colonise the public domain and the reality of their own lives.

Some religious leaders may have created the impression that to be religious it is necessary to be prejudiced against gay people. Yet it is clear from this report that knowing, socialising and working with others reduces negative ideas about difference. This is a core principle of community cohesion that emerges in examination of perceived tensions between so many different groups of people.

This leads to a stark conclusion. When it comes to religion and homosexuality in modern Britain, perhaps it is time to start listening to the voices of those many people of faith which have until now not been heard enough.



Ben Summerskill

1 Summary

There is a perception that many people of faith object to lesbian and gay people. This leads some to think that people of faith and lesbian and gay people cannot get along, or share experiences and interests. Stonewall wanted to investigate the extent to which this is true, explore the range of attitudes that exist and what contributes to those different attitudes. We therefore commissioned six focus groups with people who are Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu and lesbian and gay people within those faith communities. The focus groups were conducted by experts from the University of Leeds. This report presents the findings of the focus groups.

The participants were drawn from communities in the north of England. All acknowledged that their faiths, at one point or another, are depicted as being homophobic and that many faiths hold views about lesbian and gay sexuality. They recognised that these positions and perceptions sometimes give the impression that all people of faith are intolerant of gay people. They all, however, acknowledged that this was not always the case but that a number of factors and influences shaped, challenged and influenced individual views about gay people.

2 Key Findings

- Participants acknowledged that some parts of their faith community objected to lesbian and gay sexuality.
- However, participants suggested that these objections were often over-emphasised and narrowly reflected by both religious leaders on the one hand and by the media on the other.
- When focus group participants had met lesbian and gay people, they often felt differently towards them than popular consensus would suggest. Knowing gay people makes a crucial difference.
- Some participants observed that increased legal protections for lesbian and gay people had a 'civilising effect' on society. They felt that an increased acceptance of gay people on a national, political level had an impact on attitudes at a local level.
- The participants expressed the view that although some people of faith may not agree with the way some lesbian and gay people live their lives, gay people deserve exactly the same protections from discrimination as everyone else.
- The participants felt that the cultural influences in Britain had affected their attitudes towards gay people. They were of the view that people of faith were sometimes influenced by the current values reflected in British culture, including the media.
- It was often felt that attitudes to gay people varied between generations. They suggested that younger people of faith were more likely to think about their faith, rather than be concerned about attitudes to others.

3 'Some people hate them' – a thorny issue

'That's not the church's view; it's someone who's getting on their soap box. It tends to be those people who are heard because they make the most noise...'
David, 37, Christian

In 2007, Stonewall published *Living Together*, polling by YouGov, which explored Britain's attitudes to lesbian and gay people. More than half of the 2,009 respondents felt that religious attitudes were the second most prevalent cause of public prejudice against gay people. The poll also revealed however, that 'people of faith' are no more likely to be prejudiced than anyone else. Eighty four per cent of religious people disagreed with the statement 'homosexuality is morally unacceptable in all circumstances'. *Living Together* highlighted a discord between a public perception of one universal religious viewpoint of lesbian and gay people and the much more nuanced opinions and views of people of faith in modern Britain.

'Truly orthodox Jews would condemn homosexuality, absolutely without question.'
Jonathan, 65, Jewish

'Well I think that's very, very unfair to pillory somebody because of their sexuality.'
Sara, 81, Jewish

'People talk of Jews as if we are all the same, but we're not, we're not.'
Beth, 54, Jewish

The participants in the focus groups validated the findings of *Living Together*. The participants acknowledged that there was a difference between official theological positions about lesbian and gay people and the reality of living, day-to-day, in communities where people of faith often meet, work, and sometimes socialise with gay people.

'Traditionally I guess the Christian churches would have said we don't approve of any kind of practice of homosexuality, that would be the traditional view. I think it would be fair to say there's a much greater variety of views nowadays.'
Tom, 55, Christian

'They say that God hates you, but really it's probably just them that hate gay people.'
Luke, 19, Christian

Individual participants recognised that sometimes strongly held religious beliefs meant that people of faith do not approve of lesbian and gay people but this did not mean that they 'hate' gay people, or felt the need to judge people because of their sexual orientation.

'But it isn't, in my opinion, the church's role to say gay and lesbian, 'you're not welcome, you can't serve God and you can't be a Christian', because that just doesn't make any sense to me at all.'

Catherine, 58, Christian

'The thing is, everybody has got the right to live his life in his own way...so if somebody is lesbian or homosexual, right, it's entirely up to him.'

Nadish, 60, Hindu

'I'm not going to be judging anybody.'

Taroob, 39, Muslim

Individual participants demonstrate that there are a variety of views and attitudes towards lesbian and gay people from people of faith, and people of faith are not automatically discriminatory.

'We invite everybody; there is no discrimination in here... We don't discriminate. We never had discriminated; we always respect everyone...'

Nadish, 60, Hindu

'When I come out to my straight Christian friends, they kind of frown upon it and sort of think it's a shame. But essentially they still accept me for who I am.'

Louise, 20, Christian

'There's actually one chaplain in the university who's a member of the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement, and he's not gay himself, he's got family and kids, but he's a member so that he can like write it on his profile on the website so that gay Christians would know of someone to go to, which I actually think is a really good thing.'

Ben, 22, Christian

4 'Nobody should be hated in public' – the role of public spokesmen

The sometimes received wisdom that all people of faith are likely to be homophobic can have an impact on how people of faith and gay people interact with each other and can create barriers to community cohesion. This perpetuates and heightens tensions between the communities.

Many of the participants felt that the perception that people of faith were openly and resolutely homophobic was often a result of statements made in public by religious leaders, and the fact that alternative views were not put forward. They observed that religious leaders sometimes wrongly create the impression that they speak for most religious people.

'The church generally seems to be quite against homosexuality, but then practically how that works itself out depends on your community of people.'

Katie, 33, Christian

'When these new anti-discrimination laws came in... What threw me was that I found that my denomination was not giving a lead as a denomination, and that actually it seems to me, and this is just my perception, that we were all over the place. And I actually looked for a lead from our leaders, if you like, and didn't find it.'

Mike, 34, Christian

'When I've been on the wards recently there's a couple of people who I've noticed wearing crosses round their necks – and they could be decorative – but they also could be their faiths and I've thought twice about talking about my partner.'

Ronda, *Being the gay one: Experiences of lesbian, gay and bisexual people working in the health and social care sector*, Department of Health 2007

The participants in the focus groups felt that regardless of their own personal views about lesbian and gay people, public statements from some religious leaders can wrongly create an impression that all people of faith are prejudiced against gay people.

Participants felt that the negative views of religious leaders towards gay people are more likely to be covered by the media.

'Vicars could be sued for refusing to bless gay weddings, fears Church'
Daily Mail headline – 21st November 2006

'That's the problem; the media only tends to show the arguments and the negatives. When the church shows itself to be anti-gay, that's when the media gets involved, because that's the better headlines.'

Luke, 19, Christian

Bishop ordered to have equality training over gay discrimination

A Church of England Bishop who lost a discrimination case against a gay Christian has been ordered to undergo equal opportunities training.

Cardiff Employment Tribunal ruled that the Bishop of Hereford, the Right Rev Anthony Priddis, had discriminated against John Reaney, 42, by blocking his appointment as a church youth worker because of his sexuality.

The Times, Hannah Fletcher, 9th February 2008

Participants felt that the very public, unequivocal condemnation of lesbian and gay people did not always reflect their views or the reality of how communities exist together.

'I believe that Islam has always suggested that you work towards moderation and work towards compromise, never go for extremes, because extremes in itself is self-destructive for the whole society.'

Amir, 30, Muslim

'I mean who do people think that lesbian and gay people are, some kind of aliens from outer-space or something? They're just people.'

Catherine, 58, Christian

The focus group participants were generally of the view that regardless of privately held views about lesbian and gay people, these do not have to be amplified and emphasised in a public forum. The issue of religious belief and lesbian and gay sexuality might be complex, but not as complex as the media suggests.

'Nobody should be hated in public.'

Husna, 24, Muslim

5 'It's just like he chooses a different brand of rice' – the realities of communities

Despite some strongly held views about lesbian and gay people, focus group participants all acknowledge that they live in a society where lesbian and gay people do exist. Twenty years ago it's likely that many would have denied knowing anyone who was gay. Now they acknowledge that working, socialising, living and even praying with gay people is part of their lives. The realities of living in a diverse and open society prompt some focus group participants to reconsider the position of their faith in relation to their attitudes to gay people.

'As Muslims we live in a community that isn't just Muslim, it's got other people in it... My boss: he's a Buddhist, he's a professor, and he's gay.'

Taroob, 39, Muslim

Working together:

Focus group participants acknowledged that working together isn't always easy. Some of the Muslim focus group participants explained how working with gay people had sometimes been challenging and difficult for them, prompting them to change the way they thought about gay people and their own role within a job. In one case, a participant felt it necessary to leave her job.

'I just left the job because I wasn't comfortable in that place with the gay man, it's embarrassing, you know.'

Laila, 30, Muslim

Others in the Muslim focus group had developed different strategies. They expressed an understanding that even though they might personally find lesbian and gay issues difficult, this should not have an impact on their work. They made a distinction between their personal views about gay people, and the realities of working together.

'As a person I like my boss, he's fine. As a person I like his partner, he's a nice person. But sometimes sitting in a meeting and your thought goes to them being gay, you personally think 'urgh I don't like it'...and then you have to think, come on, pull yourself together, you're in a meeting, he's your boss, you're here on a professional basis. He's not doing anything in front of you, it's not your business what he does ...My interaction is more on a professional basis, what he does in his private life is not affecting me...it's just like if I took a particular brand of rice, he chooses a different brand of rice.'

Tarooob, 39, Muslim

On the other hand, meeting and working with gay people could be an enriching experience. One Muslim focus group participant explained how meeting gay people at work had been an entirely positive experience, and had helped change her attitudes and views about lesbian and gay people.

'I have come across some gay people and I think I have changed my opinion. I have worked with these people, you know, they're really, really nice people...they are people.'

Husna, 24, Muslim

The contributions from the Muslim focus group demonstrate that a range of views exist about working with gay people. Crucially, however, regardless of the personal opinions of the participants, none expressed the view that gay people should not work, or that they should not have the right to be openly gay at work. The participants recognised that if they were uncomfortable, they would have to do something about it; their discomfort was their responsibility.

Socialising together

'I would love to encourage every Christian I knew and every Christian I didn't know, to say before you make these pronouncements of opposition and complete un-acceptance of individuals, get to know them as individuals first and love them as people, and then work out what you think actually where God is in all of that and where Christianity sits with all of that, because I don't think it would be the same place.'

Laura, 34, Christian

Participants from a range of focus groups talked about how they would feel if their friends were gay, and how having gay friends had made them question their opinions about lesbian and gay people and their faith. Participants explained how sometimes learning that their friends are gay might concern them, but would not change how they felt about them.

'I've often thought how I would feel if he was gay and I thought it would make me highly uncomfortable, it would change a lot of things, but that doesn't mean you stop caring about that person.'

Amir, 30, Muslim

Participants acknowledged that having gay friends challenged them to think about their faith and their views on sexuality, but in a way that often made them reconcile their beliefs about lesbian and gay people and the reality of living in a world where gay people exist.

'On a moral level it's unacceptable to you because religion and society teach you that it's wrong, yes, but when you see a person in front of you that has done no wrong to you...you can't judge them because of their sexuality.'

Tarooob, 39, Muslim

One focus group participant explained how talking to a gay friend about the issue helped change her way of seeing gay sexuality. By talking to a gay person about faith, she began thinking about it in a different way.

'I was certainly brought up to think 'love the sinner, hate the sin'. And it wasn't until ten or fifteen years ago that a friend of mine who had told me she was a lesbian, helped me to understand how damaging a statement like that can be. Because if you're saying that, you said you didn't accept her. Because actually you were saying that who she was, was sin within nature, her nature, who she was as a person was sinful. She felt that that totally pushed her away from any opportunity to have faith, she had no right to become part of the Kingdom of God. That really challenged me.'

Katie, 33, Christian

Individual participants explained how a strongly held faith did not preclude being friends with people who are gay: the two positions are not exclusive. Instead, faith is personal and reflects the spirituality of the individual.

'Both of my daughters, both have gay friends. My oldest daughter was at medical school here and her best friend was gay. They went on holiday together.'

Beth, 54, Jewish

Living together

Participants in the focus groups acknowledge that working and socialising with gay people poses certain challenges but can be reconciled with their faith; the two positions are relatively separate. If a family member is gay however, this can have a different impact. Stonewall's *Living Together* found that 73 per cent of the general population would be 'comfortable' if their child was gay. Of those who were uncomfortable, four in five said they would not love their child any less. Despite a range of views about lesbian and gay people and issues, the majority of focus group participants indicated that they would not love their child any the less if he or she were lesbian or gay.

'If it was a child of mine I would be devastated. But it's his life. It may hurt me because of a particular belief of mine, but you know, there are lots of things that, you know, you don't like your child to do, but they go ahead and do them anyway. But that doesn't mean I would disown my child or anything.'

Amir, 30, Muslim

'If he ever came home and said to me that he was gay I could not stop loving him; he would still be my son.'

Taroob, 39, Muslim

'I remember as my boys were growing up I once said to them if you feel that you have homosexual tendencies, tell me, you're still my sons, whatever you do it's alright by me, but you know, don't hide, don't feel you have to hide these things. And they both looked at me and said 'I don't think we are mother'.'

Jessica, 56, Jewish

Individual participants who are lesbian and gay talked about how their families sometimes struggled with their sexuality, but were often more concerned about how they would continue to abide by the principles of their faith, and participate in the faith community. Being gay was not in and of itself a problem; abandoning other principles and traditions because they were gay was more of a concern.

'A lot of Jewish activity takes place around the family, it's about having children, it's about, you know, getting married, being secure, Friday night candles, da-da-da-da-da. And so of course the issue is not the sexuality per se, it's to do with participating, taking up your position within a whole series of rituals, which becomes more difficult and challenging. A friend of mine took forever coming out to her parents and eventually she started a relationship with somebody which went over a long period. And they finally decided to have a civil partnership last year and it was really interesting because actually that solidified the family and made it much more acceptable.'

Danae, 51, Jewish

'Well my family are Christians; they've basically given me those values of being faithful and settling down with like a long-term partner. And so that has made me uncomfortable with the whole thing of one night stands I think.'

Luke, 19, Christian

Focus group participants talked about how prejudice against gay people sometimes affected their relationship with their faith communities. A participant in the Christian focus group explained that the fact that her gay son was not a welcome part of her church, affected her relationship with it.

'To find that the church, in part, would not accept him was I think, one of the biggest disappointments in my life and I don't think I've ever felt the same about the church since then.'

Catherine, 58, Christian

Others talked about how their faith community had responded to other families who had gay children. The general consensus was that despite a degree of gossip, everyone was generally 'fine with it'.

'One [gay man] is from a very Orthodox religious family and his family are fine with it and, you know, it was a bit of gossip, like people did talk about it, but now everyone's fine with it. And they've got boyfriends and it's fine.'

Janet, 20, Jewish

This acceptance was also reflected in how gay children were treated by their parents compared to their heterosexual brothers and sisters. Despite sometimes strongly held beliefs about lesbian and gay people, in reality, families treat their children the same: it doesn't have 'anything to do with religion'.

'This man was a homosexual, came from an Orthodox background and his father didn't cut him off from the family. They were quite a wealthy family and there were two other sons who were heterosexual and the boys were all treated exactly the same by the father. I really don't think it was anything to do with the religion.'

Jessica, 56, Jewish

Worshipping together

For some people of faith, being in the same congregation with gay people helped them reconsider the positions of their faith in relation to gay people. They noted that on discovering that some of the followers of their own faith were gay, this led them to think differently about faith and sexuality.

'I can't separate somebody who I believe to have a loving faith who is also a gay man. To me, that's not mutually exclusive, it's all tied up together.'

Laura, 34, Christian

When gay people are part of faith communities, it demonstrates that people of faith and gay people can and do co-exist comfortably.

'In the Orthodox there are lots of gay boys that come out and they go to our synagogue. I mean they're just accepted. Their life in the Jewish community is quite normal I think.'

Beth, 54, Jewish

The inclusion of gay people of faith in congregations made the participants consider how a gay identity can be reconciled with a faith that can sometimes seem at odds with that identity. The fact that people can be conscientious followers of a religion while at the same time being comfortable with and open about their sexual orientation shows the complexity of religious attitudes to homosexuality.

'People we love have been wrestling with the issues of their own sexual identity and faith as well. So for us, that's been a very significant thing, seeing that journey happening to somebody that we love very dearly and as Christians, see his faith develop and also his identity as a gay man.'

Laura, 34, Christian

'I think the philosophy in Indian society is extremely complex... Men together, women together, people of different genders and both genders.'

Raam, 35, Hindu

Welcoming and including gay people of faith provides a crucial means of improving relations between people of faith and gay people. Interacting with gay people encourages people to get on, and not judge each other.

'A few years ago we found out that a friend of ours, who'd been a friend for ten years, was gay. In the community we came to terms with that, because he's been very central to many of our relationships within that context.'

Mike, 34, Christian

Knowing gay people may help people of faith discover that not all gay people are the same. Gay people may also share common interests and values with people of faith. Some of the participants noted that it is the opportunity of knowing gay people that made them less prejudiced.

6 'Law reflects culture and can give a steer to culture' – the power of legislative change

Knowing gay people challenges prejudice because it can make people think about the reality of being gay, instead of relying on assumptions about one religious viewpoint. However, not all people of faith know gay people. Living in a society where there are developing legislative protections for gay people also makes a difference.

Focus group participants acknowledged the impact that legal changes have on attitudes to lesbian and gay people, even amongst those who have strongly held views about the morality of homosexuality.

'I think that the decriminalisation is really the thing that's made it so much more acceptable today...I think that has made an enormous difference.'
Beth, 54, Jewish.

The decriminalisation of homosexuality was felt to have led to a greater acceptance of lesbian and gay people by people of faith. Focus group participants felt that this indicated that views about lesbian and gay people might derive from culture, rather than religious belief.

'What I've always found interesting in wider debates is where people use the Bible as a way of targeting anger or prejudice against gay people; they forget all the bits about forgiveness and they forget all the bits about acceptance and they forget all the bits about how Jesus actually broke many social taboos by mixing with people he wasn't supposed to mix with, and all that side of the Bible gets lost.'
Ben, 22, Christian

'I mean we can say religion will never change and they will never change, but they do, change happens around us in society and how do we cope with that in a Muslim society?'
Amir, 30, Muslim

Focus group participants pointed out that in countries where homosexuality was still a criminal offence, condemnation of lesbian and gay people was more acceptable. The fact that this is not the case in Britain prompts a different level of acceptance.

'The truth of the matter is that today in some countries around the world, if someone stood up and said they were lesbian or gay, they would be lynched. It is completely against the law in some countries. In the West I don't have an issue if somebody says they are gay. I am patient because things are like that.'
Amir, 30, Muslim

'I guess we have to sort out two things. One is the religious thing and there is the cultural thing. In most countries where we come from it is a taboo and no go area. But having said that, there are instances when we do things for the culture in this country and change.'
Amir, 30, Muslim

Civil partnership, introduced in Britain in 2005, is also seen to have had a positive impact on the acceptance of gay people by people of faith, particularly amongst Jewish and Christian people. Focus group participants felt that civil partnerships demonstrate that gay people can live by the same religious principles as heterosexuals: civil partnerships were felt to reflect the importance of commitment and monogamy.

'If a couple of blokes or a couple of women, whatever, came to our Rabbi and suggested that they be married under the canopy, I personally wouldn't disagree.'
Jonathan, 65, Jewish

'This civil partnership was turned into, in effect, a wedding, by the mother. And I think it was very interesting because it was a way for her to relate to the relationship, through the kind of understandings that she had about what a relationship was about.'
Danae, 51, Jewish

'With the advent of civil partnerships, actually in a sense that does give you a place within the faith, so you could kind of see that there would be that kind of broad interpretation that civil partnership is the same as a marriage.'
Fay, 23, Christian

Participants drew parallels between attitudes and responses to racism, and equality for lesbian and gay people.

'So I think over the last 20 or 30 years, race relations legislation has had some very substantial benefits and I would think that that ought to be true for gay and lesbian people too.'

Sam, 42, Christian.

'Gays should be protected at the same time. In the same way that racism and ethnic minorities are, because they're in a similar situation I think.'

Beth, 54, Jewish

'I don't have an issue with that because to me, to judge somebody because of their sexuality is the same as judging them because of their colour. It's not acceptable. Unacceptable.'

Amir, 30, Muslim

Some of the participants pointed out cultural changes do have an impact on how some people of faith think about gay people. They pointed out that discrimination against gay people is increasingly considered unacceptable and outdated. As a result some participants see gay people as less of a taboo and more a part of the British culture.

'Part of cultural change is a change in legislation. Law reflects culture and can give a steer to culture. So the two are not totally different.'

Sam, 42, Christian

'Some people of faith are in support of human rights protection of gay people. If you're either sky-blue, pink or with a yellow border, it makes us human beings first and foremost, and if you believe and are sincere and you want to be part of this community, so be it.'

Beth, 54, Jewish

Participants felt that lesbian and gay people had the same human rights as everyone else, and recognised the consequences of not respecting people regardless of their sexuality.

'You see the thing is right, we're talking about human rights, we are talking about freedom of speech, right. I mean it's a good thing to have human rights, freedom of speech, right.'

Rutva, 67, Hindu

'You have to think about people's rights in terms of not discriminating, you have to think about it, you cannot not think about it, or somebody is killing somebody because of their sexuality or something.'

Raam, 35, Hindu

'Actually this is a human issue, it's not a moral issue, it's about people's humanity and their rights to protection in the same way that we have religious freedom, you know, as well.'

Laura, 34, Christian

Tony Blair has said that civil partnerships have had a 'civilising effect' on society. Even if people of faith have no interaction with gay people, changing laws does apparently change culture and can consequently change attitudes.

7 'I have a different view to Grandma' – generational changes

Individual participants felt that attitudes towards gay people were shifting between generations, despite the fact that this is rarely reflected in national discussions about faith and homosexuality. Participants pointed out that younger people tend to be more accepting of gay people.

'I think that's probably because being the younger generation, they are more open minded than perhaps older Christians like leaders and stuff. So I think that inevitably the church, like society as a whole, will become more open minded towards gay people, in the way that society most definitely has.'

Louise, 20, Christian

The impact of legislative changes, and changing congregations, means that focus group participants anticipate a time when gay people are a welcome part of faith communities, and people of faith will be more tolerant of gay people.

'Society's changed a lot over the last few years, like I have a different view to my Grandma. Like I have no problem with it whatsoever, but my Grandma probably would.'

Janet, 20, Jewish

Young focus group participants made a distinction between faith, culture and theology. Luke felt that spirituality is something that lasts, but culture changes and acceptance of gay people is part of culture, rather than spirituality.

'The congregation's going to eventually become like people who are young now and everything. It seems sensible to me to separate theology from culture, it seems sensible to me, spirituality and faith is supposed to be something that's timeless, and culture is something that's very transient.'

Luke, 19, Christian

'I think because gay people are more accepted now, more people are coming out as gay because they're not so ashamed to say it anymore. And it's okay and I think most people my age are fine with that.'

Janet, 20, Jewish

The participants also pointed out that younger people of faith tend to have a different interpretation of religion from older people of faith. The participants pointed out that younger people of faith tend to have a more liberal interpretation of religion.

'When I look around at the denominations I work with, there are definite distinctions in the generations about how they feel, how they relate to this particular issue. But that is not just about proximity to people, that's also about different ways of reading the bible and understanding the bible, that seems to be adopted by younger generations.'

Mike, 34, Christian

Older focus group participants felt there was some way to go before lesbian and gay people were truly accepted and included. The Jewish focus group discussed the possibility of a time when Jewish gay people would be part of the Jewish community and have a public, representative voice.

'There is obviously a lot going on on the internet – Jewish and gay. But in terms of actual communities? There is nothing that is representative, institutionalised. I don't think that will happen very soon. Maybe in another generation.'

Sara, 81, Jewish

8 Recommendations from people of faith involved in the research

Focus group participants made a number of recommendations about how to improve relations between people of traditional faith communities and gay people.

1 'We behave like ostriches' – acknowledge gay people of faith exist

Gay people do exist, and do belong to religious communities, or want to belong to religious communities. Focus group participants felt that the most effective way of tackling prejudice was the inclusion of gay people in faith communities.

'Just by saying it does not exist, does not mean it's not happening. We behave like ostriches, you know, we dig our heads into the sand and we say everything is fine, it's an ideal world. You have to accept it and then you have to think of a way, okay we all want to live with these people, because they're good human beings, so what's the way forward? And I believe that Islam has always suggested that you work towards moderation and work towards compromise, never go to extremes, because extremes in itself is self-destructive for the whole society.'

Amir, 30, Muslim

2 'Shouting across the divide' – don't be distracted by dogma

Focus group participants felt that when the issue of faith and sexual orientation was discussed in public, the agenda becomes dominated by dogma and aggression. The polarisation of the discussion prevents anyone seeing the reality of how faith communities and gay communities co-exist.

'How do you get the two groups to work together? Well you do it quietly, because public dialogue becomes aggressive. You end up with them shouting at each other across this divide in the middle. You've heard from us, the individuals on the ground, openness and trying to engage. The danger with public dialogue is that it becomes the dogma.'

David, 37, Christian

3 'A different viewpoint' – empower individuals to achieve change

Focus group participants felt that the key to change was helping individuals work with their faith communities and not just those who claim to represent those communities. The reality is that people of faith comfortably live, work, socialise and pray with gay people.

'I think we have to find a way of working between individuals and communities as well. Individuals get pulled along when their community is pulled along as it were, because then they begin to get their eyes opened to a different viewpoint, simply because they're now in friendships or whatever with other people. Ultimately change has to come from ordinary people or groups perhaps who begin to work in new ways and behave in new ways.'

Tom, 55, Christian

4 'A quieter voice' – don't just listen to those who shout the loudest

Focus group participants felt that the voices and views of individuals of faith were often unheard and their views and perspectives weren't listened to. They asked that organisations working towards cohesion make more effort to listen to them, because it is individuals that help change a community.

'I think I just feel grateful to have an opportunity as a small voice and maybe a quieter voice, to be able to maybe present a different view and hopefully in a positive way about something that I feel very strongly about. So I'm grateful for that opportunity.'

Laura, 34, Christian

5 'It's just society' – recognise the difference between culture and faith

Focus group participants felt that prejudice against lesbian and gay people often had nothing to do with personal faith and spirituality, but with society and culture. They suggested that people should distinguish between the two. There is a difference between organised religion and personal faith.

'I think it's just society that makes you either accept something or what you think can sometimes be impinged upon. Your thoughts can sometimes be swayed.'

Michael, 67, Jewish

6 'They laugh at me' – teach respect in schools

Focus group participants acknowledged that younger generations had a different attitude to lesbian and gay people and this would help tackle prejudice. But schools are not challenging homophobia, and not helping young people of all faiths to respect people regardless of sexual orientation.

'My children question me, you know, 'so your boss is gay?'; and they laugh at me. So that shows you even right down to from a very young age Muslim children and I'm sure children in other religions as well, learn that being gay isn't normal, isn't acceptable.'

Taroob, 39, Muslim

7 'You don't see very much pastoral care' – don't lose sight of faith is about

Focus group participants felt that the discussions and debates about faith and sexuality often resulted in gay people of faith being ignored and their spiritual needs neglected in favour of politics. Gay people of faith want to be able to express their faith rather than let rhetoric make them and others lose sight of what is important.

'Do you think with all the arguing we're actually losing out as gay Christians? I mean I've read an essay by Rowan Williams, where he was saying that we need to remember that we're here for pastoral care of all the people. But the thing is, with all the arguing that's going on, you don't see very much pastoral care. What you tend to see is discussion groups or debates or talks, you don't really see spirituality groups for gay people in churches. If there's anything, there's arguments.'

Ben, 22, Christian

8 'As if we're all the same' – recognise difference within faiths

Focus group participants feel that there is a monolithic view of faith, and that there is only ever one viewpoint. They felt this was damaging, and failed to reflect the diversity of opinions within faith communities. Some elements of a faith community may be prejudiced, others might not.

'You see people talk of Jews as if we're all the same, but we're not, we're not. We're so sub-divided it's hard to believe, but some of those sub-divisions, amongst some of those sub-divisions the people are prejudiced.'

Beth, 54, Jewish

9 'Go ahead and do whatever you want to do' – respect people's privacy, regardless of faith

Focus group participants felt that regardless of how people felt about gay people, everyone was entitled to a private life, and everyone should be treated with respect. The participants felt that this was sometimes forgotten in discussions.

'Islam says that you go ahead and do whatever you want to do in your own private life. We are not allowed to come in and have a judgement on what you do behind closed doors.'

Amir, 30, Muslim

10 'The stigma that's attached' – tackle wider prejudice in general

Focus group participants expressed surprise that people who were not religious were prejudiced against gay people. They felt that discrimination was not just a faith issue, but a social and cultural issue within Britain. They felt the key to tackling prejudice in faith communities was to tackle discrimination generally.

'The British are more prejudiced than Muslims are. Muslims have conflict with their faith...For some British people who have prejudice this is purely because of hatred, not because of faith.'

Jamal, 39, Muslim

Love Thy Neighbour

What people of faith really think about homosexuality