**‘Come as you are’: Lives of faith for transgender Mainers**

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It’s difficult to overstate how discrimination affects the lives of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender youth and adults in Maine. In addition to often finding themselves isolated and misunderstood, they are more likely to be harmed by others or attempt suicide. For those seeking a congregation to practice their faith or seek an understanding community, the way forward may appear particularly bleak.

Rev. Sue Gabrielson of Sanford Unitarian Universalist Church spoke this week about how congregations across the state are trying to change that image and provide an inclusive and welcoming environment. Gabrielson is also program coordinator of the [Religious Coalition Against Discrimination](http://www.rcadmaine.org/), a network of religious leaders in Maine who advocate for marginalized people to be more widely accepted in congregations and communities.

The group supported the 2012 same-sex marriage campaign. Its next major effort will be a three-year initiative to provide outreach and education to congregations about the needs of transgender individuals in Maine. She has lessons that apply for people of faith or no faith.

“We say, ‘Come as you are,’” she said.

More than 80 Jewish synagogues and churches from an array of denominations — Episcopal, Lutheran, Unitarian, Congregational, United Methodist — have purposefully worked to provide a safe place for those who are gay or transgender. Each congregation has a process for obtaining the specific designation of “welcoming” or “open and affirming” — to let members of the LGBTQ community know the church respects them.

In Gabrielson’s denomination, congregations typically receive 18 months to two years of education about the concerns of those who are gay or transgender. Sermons are preached; speakers give talks; and forums are held to drive conversation and “help the congregation from a theological perspective really focus on the inherent worth and dignity of all people,” Gabrielson said. They discuss sexuality and gender as a spectrum.

The congregation then votes whether to have the “welcoming” designation, and [the work is verified](http://www.uua.org/lgbtq/welcoming/program/23367.shtml) by Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Ministries. Her church completed the process in 1994.

“For the transgender members of our community, it’s probably one of the only places where they absolutely feel safe and can be themselves,” she said.

To start its initiative on transgender inclusiveness, RCAD looked within. It held an all-day retreat for its board members where they listened as speakers who are transgender, and a parent of a transgender person, shared their stories. Next, the organization will organize a conference this fall where congregations can learn about becoming “welcoming” or simply learn how to facilitate conversation about it.

“For some people, they don’t even have the language to talk about transgender issues,” Gabrielson said.

Transgender people feel a persistent difference between their assigned sex and understanding of their own gender. Some undergo surgery and hormone regimens to change their physical characteristics, but many do not.

The irony, Gabrielson said, is that those who have done nothing wrong are often targeted simply because of their physical appearance, whereas those who have hurt others, who do not wear their difference on their skin, can move anonymously through society. Instead of isolating those whom we perceive as different, we should seek to learn from them.

“No matter who you are or what you bring to the church I think our job as a faith community is to meet you where you are, and our job is to support each other on our spiritual journeys. It’s not about judgement,” she said. “This is my whole ministry, really, is to come from a place of humility and not righteousness.”

Some people use Bible verses to argue that being transgender or gay is somehow “wrong,” she said, but those verses are often taken out of context, and “you can find rationalization in the Bible for just about everything.” Instead, she said, she emphasizes messages discussed over and over.

“Jesus’ greatest commandment is to love one another,” she said. Following that directive starts with having a conversation.