

Get involved with your district-level activities to start networking with other BGLT groups in other congregations within your district. This networking can be the best support you have. Also, network with other religious BGLT groups in your area; some of them may have more experience than your group on specific issues.

Send at least one person from your group to General Assembly, where they can link up with other BGLT UUs and with Interweave Continental. And come to Interweave Continental's Convocation every February, where BGLT people from all parts of the UU community come together to discuss our common issues, problems, and goals.

Resources and contact info

So much more could be said on all of these topics. Interweave Continental is looking at how best to serve our chapters, and preparing more detailed materials regarding starting and sustaining BGLT groups in UU congregations as well. In the meantime, feel free to email or write to Interweave Continental or the UUA Office of BGLT Concerns at:

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How to Start a BGLT Group

A Handbook for You and Your Congregation



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Setting up a Unitarian Universalist BGLT Group

You may have gotten to this point from various places. Sometimes a congregation decides to go through the Welcoming Congregation process and that leads to the desire for a bisexual, gay, lesbian, transgender (BGLT) and allies group. Sometimes individuals get to know each other and decide to form a group within their congregation. Sometimes one individual wants to establish a BGLT presence in the congregation and starts out on their own.

Knowing why you want a BGLT group is essential to assuring the success of your endeavor. Mission statements are discussed below, but to start, keep in mind these fundamentals that agree with Unitarian Universalist (UU) principles:

- 1. Be inclusive.** With regard to every choice you make, ask yourself: Will this open us to more people or will some feel left out?
- 2. Be democratic.** A core UU principle for governing our groups, this can mean different things in different settings. But involvement in decision-making keeps people involved in a group and gives them a stake in it.
- 3. Be active.** People lose interest if you don't have regular activities that bring them together. Interaction and connection is what it's all about.
- 4. Be a safe place.** Make your group a place where BGLT people and those who are questioning or unsure feel safe, with all of the privacy that the most insecure person in the group wants. Keep that in mind in setting up your group.

What should we call ourselves?

By all means, we invite you to call your group Interweave. The name is not legally owned by Interweave Continental or anyone else, and has become a great way for BGLT UUs to identify themselves – with a word that has many resonances for our place in our congregations and in the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA). Some UU groups have chosen

Have a good mix of activities – regularly scheduled activities that become the backbone of your group, and special events that keep the group together in planning ahead.

Always participate in congregational activities – social hours, fairs, new member activities, etc. At least some of your members should be ready to identify themselves as BGLT or allies at services or church functions, such as with a rainbow or pink triangle decal on their church name tags. These stickers can be acquired from the UUA Office of BGLT Concerns (contact information is at the end of this Handbook). Look for guidance from older and more established BGLT groups in our area or in other UU congregations. Contact Interweave Continental for contact information for Interweave chapters.

Be conscious of group dynamics – dissension within the group, conflict, even personal member crises. Sometimes your group will be the safest place to turn to for a member in crisis and you will find yourself quickly in a pastoral role. Get these persons to the real thing – your minister – but be ready as a group to form a circle of caring around them as they navigate their personal crisis. These are the bonds that keep groups together.

What resources are available to us as we set up a group?

You are not alone. There are dozens of BGLT groups in UU congregations throughout the continent. Interweave Continental is always available as a resource. Our bi-monthly newsletter, *InterweaveWorld*, features a contact list of chapters as well as a column of advice by chapters for chapters. Our e-mail chat list, *interweave-d*, through the [uua.org](http://www.uua.org) website is a good information exchange mechanism to raise questions or concerns. Probably some other group has dealt with the same questions already. Join *interweave-d* at www.uua.org/mailman/listinfo/interweave-d. If you choose to affiliate with Interweave, you can join our chat list specifically for chapter leaders. Get in touch with the UUA Office of BGLT Concerns in Boston. Their full-time staff can help you out as well.

Advocacy activities

- ▼ taking part in your local Pride activities
- ▼ holding a Pride service at your church
- ▼ lobbying your congresspeople on timely BGLT issues
- ▼ starting congregational discussion and support of issues, such as:
 - Boy Scouts
 - same-sex marriage
 - non-discrimination laws
 - support of anti-bullying campaigns in local schools
 - adoption rights for same-sex couples

Social activities

- ▼ potluck dinners
- ▼ movie nights at the church or at a member's home
- ▼ welcome brunches after every service for newcomers to the group

Any of these activities can be co-sponsored with other groups in your congregation, or with other BGLT religious or non-religious groups in your area. Forming alliances to undertake activities increases the chances of success, broadens the pool of people who you will meet, can lead to unexpected new ideas for programs or collaboration, and almost always enriches the participants who have come together.

How do we keep our group alive and functioning?

Sustaining a BGLT group over time is a real issue. We are all volunteers when it comes to running and planning activities for a church group. Stay focused on a continuum of leadership, and always have an eye out for a member who can be a driving force when new leadership is needed.

Communicate with one another regularly – use e-mail, or create a list-serve on your church's website. Communication keeps people involved. Don't be excluding with your form of communication, however. If some folks don't have computers, be ready to call or send snail mail about events. And push information out to your interest group. Don't expect them to come to you for it, such as having to check a web page every few days.

other names, while others have just continued on with their Welcoming Congregation group becoming their BGLT and supporters group.

Do we need to affiliate with Interweave Continental?

This is the UUA, where congregational autonomy reigns supreme. Local groups don't have to affiliate with anyone, even their own church, if they don't want to. But Interweave Continental has been advocating on behalf of BGLT issues inside the UUA since the 1970s, resulting in many positive statements of support for BGLT rights at General Assembly, and the creation of the UUA Office of BGLT Concerns, among other things. Interweave Continental is the best-known voice for BGLT UUs and affiliating with us will strengthen our voice. We already provide an online information exchange network open to all BGLT UUs. We are doing much to increase our ability to provide services to chapters, and look forward to the day when Interweave Continental will be an integrated network of all BGLT groups within the UUA. Joining us now will hasten the day when a truly continental network of UU BGLT groups comes into existence. Interweave Continental has more information on affiliated chapter benefits and responsibilities. Contact information for Interweave can be found at the end of this Handbook.

How do we go about setting up a group?

There are so many choices to make in starting a BGLT group, and each choice is dependent in large measure on the goals of your group, your congregation's bylaws, the size of your congregation, how close you are to a big city with a large BGLT presence, and other factors. So, there is no one answer to this question, but here are some of the issues that you will have to address:

Relationship with your congregation

Know your church's bylaws. They will govern affiliation of groups to the church. Decide what type of affiliation you want, if any. Affilia-

tion might bring funding from the congregation, but often comes with strings attached about the “right way” to raise issues, when not to “rock the boat,” etc. Some BGLT groups are official church committees, others are affiliated groups, and still others have not officially affiliated at all with their congregation. In going through this process, be sure to talk with your minister(s), members of the Board of Trustees, and leaders of other church groups. Look for allies in other church groups, such as anti-racism and youth/young adult groups.

Group formalities

Some groups like to keep things fairly informal, and in the beginning this may be appropriate. However, although you may not always want to operate with bylaws and Robert’s Rules, when contentious issues arise, you will be glad they are there. Provide for selection of leaders and terms for leadership posts. Beware of becoming dependent on a founding or very active member without any provision for change in leadership. Many groups fall apart after an energetic or founding leader retires. While democracy in our organizations is a UU principle, it is important for current leaders to keep eyes open for potential new leadership within the group.

Mission Statement

Working through a mission statement may seem tedious to group members, but it is crucial to assure that everyone is on board regarding what your group is all about. Some groups have looked to Interweave Continental’s mission statement as a model. Others have looked at their congregation’s mission statement to see how they can fit into it. Either approach will do, but it is better to first look at the needs and wishes of the actual founding members to help define the mission. Some people may be there for social reasons, others to fight for political issues, still others for spiritual communion with other BGLT people. These can all be a part of your mission statement, but sort this out before factions develop over the direction the group should take. Remember inclusiveness. A mission statement should be broad enough to cover every member’s reason for being there. And don’t forget service as an important mission for any UU group – service to your congregation, service within the UUA, and service to the community where you live.

Immediate goals

Set some immediate goals – an issue to advocate, an event to plan or sponsor, a service commitment – that conform with your mission statement, and get the group immediately coalescing into action! If your congregation has not gone through the Welcoming Congregation process, that’s an excellent place to start. But don’t neglect the importance of fellowship with each other as the foundation of any stable group.

Funding of your group

Groups affiliated with the congregation may be eligible to make a budget request from the church. Accepting such money raises the same issues discussed above with regard to affiliation with the church. Some groups prefer to raise their own funds, either through activities or dues. Dues raise the issue of membership, which can be controversial in a BGLT group. Making people choose whether or not to be members (particularly if they are not “out” in the congregation or the community) is not an inclusive approach. Dues can be requested from regular participants, however, as an alternative to formal membership. Make sure one (or more) person(s) is responsible for group funds, and work out how to maintain group funds – through the church office, in a separate bank account, etc.

Types of activities

These will depend on on mission statement that the group as a whole has agreed to. Here are a few suggestions:

Spiritual activities

- ▼ Small Group Ministry or Covenant Group type sharing circles
- ▼ undertaking the Building Your Own Theology program or other adult Religious Education together

Educational activities

- ▼ film series with discussions
- ▼ speakers/topic driven meetings (same-sex marriage, or transgender persons as a part of the BGLT community, for example)

Service activities

- ▼ working to support BGLT youth in your community
- ▼ visiting homebound or elderly BGLT members of the community
- ▼ nursing and chores for BGLT people in need