



## **America Family Outing Begins Dialog with Lakewood Church and Pastor Joel Osteen**

Research Shows the Impact When Houstonians Know Gays and Lesbians

Houston, TX - On Mother's Day, Jay Bakker, son of Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker, brought a group of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) families to worship at Lakewood Church—the largest mega-church in the U.S. After the service, Bakker met privately with Lakewood's pastor, Joel Osteen, to talk about faith, family, and LGBT people.

The visit is part of a nationwide fellowship effort called The American Family Outing, which aims to create dialogue between LGBT families and families at six American mega-churches. Several prominent mega-churches, including Willow Creek Community Church in Illinois, and Hope Christian Church in Maryland, have agreed to meet lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender families.

Earlier in the week, Lakewood officials had expressed an unwillingness to meet with Bakker and The American Family Outing. A tip from a Lakewood Church member led Bakker to seek out Osteen after the Saturday evening service, during the time when the pastor greets new visitors to Lakewood. The two exchanged remembrances of Bakker's late mother, Tammy Faye Bakker Messner, and arranged to meet privately the next day.

Bakker's conversation with Osteen came just a day after The American Family Outing hosted a picnic in a Houston park for families from Lakewood Church. A handful of Lakewood members attended the picnic and expressed their appreciation for the effort to start an open conversation about the status of LGBT people at Lakewood.

Opportunities to connect one-on-one and family-to-family are the goal of the American Family Outing, which was created in the belief that it is possible for families to have meaningful conversations in spite of perceived differences.

In Houston, Rice University Professor Stephen L. Klineberg's data can confirm the impact of simply getting to know someone who is gay or lesbian:

"One of the most powerful predictors of area residents' attitudes toward gay rights, as powerful among religious fundamentalists as it is for the more secular respondents, is the simple question, 'Do you have a personal friend who is gay or lesbian?'

"It seems clear that the opportunity to get to know someone who is homosexual helps to break through the stereotypes and fears, and to reinforce the sense of common humanity," says Klineberg, who is a Professor of Sociology and the founding-director of the Houston Area Survey (1982-2008), which has tracked Houston's demographics and public attitudes for the past 27 years.

"Support for gay rights (e.g., allowing gays and lesbians to serve openly in the military, or to teach in the public schools, or to be legally permitted to adopt children) has continued to increase steadily and consistently among Harris County residents over the past two decades," Klineberg continued.

The American Family Outing is a collaboration between Soulforce, COLAGE, National Black Justice Coalition, and the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches.