

## (C1) Reclaiming Family Values Church, Homosexuality and Rainbow Families

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### 1. The European Forum of LGBT Christian Groups

The European Forum of LGBT Christian Groups, founded in 1982, is an ecumenical platform of 46 member organisations from 22 countries all over Europe. Its purpose is to work with and within churches for equality and the human rights of LGBT people. The main activities are

1. Building up the movement in Eastern Europe through a leadership program that includes a theological summer school and a mentoring program as well as by supporting the annual conference of the Eastern European and Central Asian Forum of LGBT Christian Groups.
2. Advocacy for human rights of LGBT people in multilateral European organisations, e.g. by means of a report on the activities of the Religious Right.
3. Advocacy for equality and inclusion of LGBT people in churches, e.g. within the World Council of Churches whose General Assembly took place in November 2013 in Busan (South Korea) and decided to create safe spaces to talk about sexuality and sexual minorities in churches.

### 2. Advocacy in church context

As the secular LGBT movement - due to many hurting experiences - in its majority has internalized the idea of a strict opposition "God vs. gay", it shows little recognition and support for small steps of progress within churches. Therefore, I think it's necessary to explain a little, why churches are a very **specific context** for LGBT advocacy.

LGBT issues are sensitive issues and highly divisive for churches because the Religious Right is usually well subsidized, well connected and noisy and tries to exploit the fears of church leaders for clashes and cleavages. At first sight, they have the Christian tradition on their side.

Churches with a hierarchical structure don't allow for democratic participation which makes working for change much more difficult than in churches with a synodal or congregational constitution.

Besides the organisational differences, it must also be taken into consideration that each denomination has its own theological grammar, language and code of conduct, which must be engaged for changes towards the best of its tradition.

This short analysis leads to several **basic principles** for LGBT advocacy within church context:

- Anticipate that changes may need decades and you may be regarded as stupid.
- Nurture your spirituality and maintain your personal integrity as a faithful Christian.
- Avoid scandal or outrageous reactions wherever possible and work for reconciliation.
- Ask for personal dialogue with church leaders and tell your personal stories.
- Communicate your message by mainstreaming it and by connecting it to Christian values (and by using code words, if necessary).
- Connect friendly insiders.

Currently, the **opportunities for change** are much better than before. Civil partnership laws, equal marriage and the existence of rainbow families allow for a new framing that stresses faithfulness, reliability and care instead of homosexuality which makes it much easier for churches to support same-sex relationships. In addition, there is no longer a clear contradiction between LGBT people and pseudo-traditional "family values".

### 3. The Protestant Church in Germany on Family

In 2013, the Protestant Church in Germany (EKD) has published official guidelines for the issue of the family, called "Between Autonomy and Dependency. Strengthening the Family as Reliable Community". Its theological section is based on an approach that can be called a theology of "shaping family", overcoming the traditional theology of "the conservation of family".

The **conservation of family approach** regards family as an institution based on the order of creation (Gen 1-3), which has to be preserved. The institution has priority over doing family. Here, family consists of father, mother and child(ren). This approach is strongly criticized for identifying the bourgeois small family with the order of creation.

The **shaping family approach** recognizes the diversity of family forms in Bible and history. Family is a form of life that is to be shaped in the following of Jesus Christ. Therefore, family is where people are living in loving, responsible, reliable, faithful, caring, committed, just (...) relationships. This definition of family is value-based and follows dynamic criteria.

One of the biblical key verses of this approach is Gen 2:18 "It is not good that the human being should be alone; I will make him a helper as its counterpart." Reading "Adam" as gender neutral here, it is important to notice that "Adam" shall decide him/herself who fits to him/her.

Based on this understanding, same-sex partnerships are regarded as "of equal value". Although rainbow families are said to be controversial, the guidelines maintain that according to Protestant theology, human beings are not reduced to biology, but have diverse identities and relationships.

#### 4. Pastoral Synod on Family - The Roman Catholic Church

Within the Roman Catholic Church, the new Pope Francis has prioritized a pastoral approach instead of moral condemnation of gays and lesbians, indicated by his famous word "who am I to judge?" This pastoral approach is also driving his plan to initiate a global Synod of Bishops on "Pastoral challenges of family in the context of evangelization", that will take place from 5-19 Oct. this year and from 5-20 Oct. 2015. For the preparation, the Pope has sent out a questionnaire to all Catholics that included questions about same-sex partnership and adoption of children. Addressing this questionnaire to all Catholics was a subversive act, which wasn't appreciated by all bishops. By consequence, the questionnaire was treated very differently by them, ranging from keeping it secret to putting it online. Only Germany and Switzerland published the results, which are not scientific analyses, but nevertheless give some clear indications about the thoughts of the "people of God".

The press release of the German Bishop's Conference presented these results:

- Tolerance and individual appreciation of homosexual people are very important values for Catholics.
- There is a clear tendency among Catholics for legal recognition of civil partnerships and equal treatment with marriage.
- Pastoral attention to people in same-sex partnerships is low and more could be done.
- There is no majority for opening marriage to homosexuals, but wide acceptance for blessing ceremonies.
- Children adopted by same-sex couples must not be excluded and not be treated unequal related to sacraments and religious education.

Further details can be found in the report from some dioceses:

- Questions on same-sex partnerships were most highly polarized and emotional (Munich).
- „Many“ say no to adoption rights for homosexual couples (Munich, Mainz)
- „Most“ demand equal treatment and welcoming of children in rainbow families (Munich)
- 98% want „tolerance and acceptance“ of gays and lesbians (Mainz)
- Same-sex partnership is regarded as the expression of deep personal love, which has its own dignity and deserves to be valued and respected.

While these responses from Germany look pretty much promising for the Family Synod, it must also be taken into consideration that many bishops and bishops conference are very hostile to any change of Catholic doctrine related to same-sex partnership and want to "protect" marriage, family, and the created order of sexes according to their "conservation theology".

What can be **expected** as a maximum from the Family Synod?

- The moral approach takes its basis in recognizing that LGBT people are persons with personal dignity and human rights.
- Based on this, a statement against criminalisation and (unjust) discrimination of homosexual and transgender people.
- A positive estimation of the values lived in faithful same-sex partnerships.
- Regional autonomy related to blessing ceremonies of same-sex partnerships.
- Welcoming and equal treatment of children growing up in rainbow families.
- Ultimately, but not very probable, a "permission" to the State to create laws for civil unions.

The European Forum is working for these goals by a number of activities.

- We have initiated a global network of Catholic LGBT groups and are increasing our contacts with Catholic reform movements worldwide.
- We are preparing a theological conference "The Ways of Love. Towards a pastoral with homosexual and transsexual people" to take place in Rome, 3 October 2014.
- We are co-operating with diplomatic representations to the Holy See to bring the issue of criminalization to the attention of the participants of the Synod.

*After the presentation, a lively debate among the approx. 40 participants of the workshop took place. They expressed their positive surprise about the new opportunities within the Catholic Church and also their positive assessment of the new guidelines from the Protestant Church in Germany which are a big step forward.*

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