



**Welcome speech at the opening session of a working visit of
Christian LGBT activists from Eastern Europe**

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Dear brothers and sisters,

On behalf of the Dutch Society of Queer Theologians I would like to express my hope that you will be having a pleasant, inspiring and empowering working visit in the Netherlands. I call you my brothers and sisters, because, even though we may practice our faith in different ways, we share the same faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. I am aware that the terminology of 'brothers and sisters' – just like 'ladies and gentlemen' – runs the risk of succumbing to, or even reinforcing, a gendered binarism.

But I believe that there still is something rather queer about calling you my brothers and sisters. From the very beginning of Christianity, Christians have been calling one another brothers and sisters, transposing this terminology from one area of meaning to another. Thereby the meaning of these words changed, but also both communities – that of the family and that of the church – were, and still are and should be, seen in a different way. As followers of Jesus we belong to the family, as 'religious siblings' of Jesus and through him as children of God the Father. It is this sense of community that informs and determines all other families that exist and develop in our human society.

Now when we hear someone talking about family and family values, we as LGBT or queer activists can become a little suspicious. For several reasons, some churches, governments and other institutions emphasise the need to protect traditional family values, that is, the nuclear family of one man (unambiguously male and masculine), one woman (unambiguously female and feminine) and a bunch of children. Often religious texts, arguments, practices and imagery are invoked to proof the naturalness of heterosexuality, heterosexual marriage and the nuclear family, and to promote it as a Christian ideal.

But if the nuclear family is indeed a Christian ideal, it should be easy to find in the Bible examples of such nuclear families, especially in the case of characters that play an important role in the biblical history. Let's see...

- What about the great king David? I haven't been able to trace all his wives or concubines, but there are a lot of them. And besides, he had a thing going on with Jonathan – I don't know exactly what it was, but it was at least a thing.
- Maybe our patriarch Abraham? But didn't he sleep with Sarah's Egyptian slave-girl Hagar because his wife seemed barren?
- No, wait, Adam and Eve, of course! But Eve was created from Adam's rib – whether this is creation or procreation, it is at least not very 'natural'. Neither was their marriage a very harmonious one, because when Adam is addressing Eve for the very first time, he is blaming her. (Or, maybe, a husband blaming his wife is part of the marriage ideal, I don't know – it wasn't my idea...)

So finding examples of the nuclear family in the Bible is not very easy.

The nuclear family is a myth. But it is through the repetitive reference to the family and family values that its naturalness is suggested. It is often used against gays and lesbians, or against same-sex partnerships or marriages. But there are many more that do not fit into it:

- those who don't have children, those who don't *want* children, those who have *adopted* children, or those who have very *naughty* children;
- those who are not yet married or not married *anymore*, those who don't *want* to marry, or those who want to marry or at least share their lives with someone of the *same* sex;
- those who don't feel comfortable about the expectations connected to their biological sex, or those whose bodies are intersex in one way or another;
- those who live in a household with more than one mother or more than one father (for example households with more than two generations);
- those who share their bed with more than just one strange bedfellow...



When a child is born, one of the first questions many people – at least in the Netherlands – ask is whether it is a boy or a girl. Many of them are unable to explain why they ask this question. Just like when people are addressed as 'Ladies and Gentlemen', one could wonder why people's sex seems to be the primary marker of their identities. Does sex really matter that much and that way?

When we go on a maternity visit to the Holy Family and follow their lives for a while, we soon discover that this isn't really a nuclear family either. Mother

Mary claims to be a virgin and Joseph claims he didn't make Mary pregnant. So the baby Jesus is made, so to speak, from exclusively 'female material', which makes his gender unstable and diffuse – and I mean instability here in a positive sense. And that becomes clear in many other occasions: his body becomes attractive to both men and women, it takes on new shapes, as in the 'gender-neutral' Eucharistic bread. Or think of the creation of the Church at the resurrection: we see how a community arises after Jesus' death and how his resurrection is first witnessed by angels (with their ambiguous gender), then the women and finally the men (the disciples who had stayed home). So a strong gender reversal takes place within the body of Christ.

I think this all implies two things. First, if heterosexual marriage and the nuclear family are modern concepts that are absent from the Bible and the main part of the Christian tradition, it should be possible to draw new and unexpected connections between the experiences of LGBT's and characters, ideas and practices in the Bible and the Christian tradition. Second, even though the work we are doing is – or seems to be – primarily concerned with the freedom of expression of lesbian women, gay men, bisexual man and women, and transgenders, there are many more people who don't identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender, but who do feel marginalised or oppressed by the hegemony of heterosexual marriage and the nuclear family. Put differently, the issues we are dealing with concern more people than one might expect from first sight. This, of course, should not surprise us, because in the Church as the Body of Christ, what affects my body affects others' bodies as well. There is something subversive, then, not only to being non-heterosexual or gender non-conformative, but also to the Gospel. Our challenge, therefore, is to explore how this subversiveness can or should affect our strategies as activists. Therefore, I wish you all a very subversive time!