



**FUTURE FAMILIES: CHALLENGES FOR FAITH  
AND SOCIETY**

**OPEN SPACE CONFERENCE**

A report based upon consultation with families  
across Ireland in preparation for the World  
Meeting of Families in August 2018

Hilton Hotel, Charlemont Place, Dublin  
14<sup>th</sup> April 2018

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## **Introduction from the Chairperson:**

**Anthony Neville**

The Association of Catholics in Ireland (ACI) is committed to the pursuit of a reform and renewal agenda in the Catholic Church based in the spirit of Vatican II. We are committed to help re-build (through words and deeds) a united Church based on the teachings of Jesus Christ-- a Church that is inclusive, compassionate and that accepts the equality of all believers.

It is in that spirit we approach Pope Francis' impending visit to Ireland this August to attend the World Meeting of Families (WMOF). The WMOF, held every three years, is a major international event that brings together families from across the world to celebrate, pray, and reflect upon the central importance of marriage and the family as the cornerstone of our lives, of society and of the Church.

We support Pope Francis' efforts to seek reform and renewal in the Church and believe the WMOF is a prime opportunity to examine the realities of family life, particularly for those who feel abandoned by or alienated from the Church because of their circumstances. ACI organised a pre-WMOF public event held on Saturday, 14th April 2018 at the Hilton Hotel, Charlemont Place, Dublin 2. Invited speakers represented family groups of all backgrounds and circumstances - those abused and marginalised, those from the LGBT community, those divorced and separated and disenfranchised youth. There was a significant attendance from our membership, from various parish organisations and other lay-led groups, as well as from the membership of the speaker organisations including the National Youth Council of Ireland; One in Four; The Unmarried and Separated Families of Ireland. The speakers' notes are included in this report; they also spoke from their own family experience.

The speakers addressed the following questions:

- What do you see as the problems facing families today from the perspective of the group you represent?
- What is the role of faith in addressing these problems?
- What would you like to see brought forward for discussion/consideration at the WMOFs?

Dr. Margaret Nugent, Maynooth University facilitated this event using Open Space Technology as a methodology. Open Space is a methodology that ACI favours as it maximises participation and is delegate led, therefore it offers high relevance. ACI facilitated an Open Space Forum Synod on the Family Consultation in 2015, and the key themes that emerged have been refined and developed further in this phase. This report was compiled by Dr. Nugent on behalf of ACI. It represents the voices of the delegates and the reality of life for those estranged or alienated from the Church.

We believe that our event and this report will reflect Pope Francis' intentions for the WMOF by listening and representing with compassion the reality of life for many families in Ireland today.

Anthony Neville

Association of Catholics in Ireland

Would the Holy Family be accepted by the Roman Catholic Church today?

## **Speakers**

1. Eileen Finnegan    One in Four
2. Denis O'Brien    National Youth Council of Ireland
3. Ray Kelly    The Unmarried & Separated Families of Ireland
4. Irene Graham    Sexuality and LGBT
5. Susan Casey    Divorced and Second Relationships
6. Gemma    Family with gay child

## **Eileen Finnegan: Clinical Director; One in Four**

*'We set out to find a monster but what we find are wounded children'*

I began my role in One in Four over 12 Years ago and the primary clients were individuals that were victims of sexual violence; the perpetrators were mostly members of various religious orders. However over time the profile of the victim and the offender has changed. The victims were now disclosing interfamilial abuse (within a family context), perpetrated by a family member or by a person known to them. This caused huge pain and suffering for all individuals including families that felt the shame, embarrassment, utter despair. Mothers were left in turmoil, as they had to choose one child over another. We can all be reminded of 'Sophie's Choice ' from that movie with the same name. Families began to engage with the organisation, One in Four including the individuals who had perpetrated the sexual offending. I was not prepared for what began to emerge as I engaged with families impacted by sexual abuse and sexual offending.

### **What do they see as the problems facing families today from the perspective of the group they represent?**

For the families I work with today, the problems they face are being ostracised by family and society and many feel the church has turned their back on them. They have no one to talk to and considering the forgiveness many of them had for the church during their scandals this was not reciprocated.

For many families the devastating reality that they were no longer part of the 'community', a community that preaches forgiveness and inclusion, this has not been their experience. It is not to minimise what their family member has done it is not to be excluded.

### **What is the role of faith in addressing these problems?**

For many of the individuals to have inner peace is something they really want. Faith offers a possibility of this inner peace. The Church is the place where people turn to in times of great joy and great pain. A place to talk and reflect especially from a group who have been through similar trauma and rather than

share this experience they turn their back. What door do they leave open and welcome all individuals in.

**What would they like to see brought forward for discussion/consideration at the WMOFs?**

- To have a conversation would be a good start.
- To begin to talk about how might we as a society, how did we fail our young people by not identifying the factors that led young children to grow up to become offenders
- As a clinician working with individuals who have offended I have been ostracised and judged by so many as society do not want to hear the voices of families and individuals who have allowed me to be 'an invited' guest into worlds.

## **Denis O'Brien: The National Youth Council of Ireland**

Good Morning and thank you for this invitation for the National Youth Council of Ireland, to input into your deliberations on the family.

The National Youth Council of Ireland is the representative body for voluntary youth organisations in Ireland. It uses its collective experience to act on issues that impact on young people.

It seeks to ensure that all young people are empowered to develop the skills and confidence to fully participate as active citizens in an inclusive society. NYCI's role is recognised in legislation through the Youth Work Act 2001. Our vision is of an Ireland where all young people are empowered to develop the knowledge, skills and confidence to realise their potential and to actively participate in an inclusive society that values and respects them.

We have over 50 members, including the organisation I work for Foróige, as well as all the major providers of youth work such as the scouts and guides organisations, Irish language organisations, youth drama, environmental groups, Spunout, Amnesty International, the youth wings of the political parties, the various diocesan youth services, Gaisce, Macra na Ferime the Church of Ireland youth section and the Union of Students in Ireland.

Amongst other things, NYCI

- Represents the shared interests of voluntary youth organisations;
- Advocates on issues that impact on the lives of young people;
- Ensure that the best interests of young people are of paramount importance
- Challenges policies and practices, which infringe upon young people's rights
- Challenges and informs how young people are portrayed
- Promotes the participation of young people in decision-making
- Seeks to challenge all forms of discrimination against young people

- We view Volunteering as a vital dimension of democratic and social life and essential to the development of civic participation, social solidarity and individual development.
- We believe that human solidarity and concern for the common good are created, articulated and sustained by volunteering.

Issues we have been advocating on recently have included, youth participation in decision making, vote at 16, youth homelessness, LGBT rights, youth mental health, child protection, youth participation in politics, returning migrants, decent and quality employment, equality of treatment for young unemployed adults, the national alcohol strategy, and sponsorship of sport by alcohol companies, equality and interculturalism. We have run seminars and workshops on topics as diverse as pornography, spirituality and wellbeing, sustainable development and youth empowerment for political participation.

What do we see as the problems facing families today from the perspective of the group they represent?

**Firstly I want to be clear that NYCI has no gold standard definition of a family – our concern is the child or young person.**

Youth work is not so much focused on the shape and makeup of the family unit as on the ability of that family to meet the needs of the child. Is the family a nurturing environment for a young person?

A key ability for all children is Resilience. This is the capacity to recover quickly from a crisis or shock. When confronted with the fallout of childhood trauma, why do some children adapt and overcome, while others bear lifelong scars that flatten their potential? A growing body of evidence points to one common answer: Every child who winds up doing well has had at least one stable and committed relationship with a supportive adult.

According the National Scientific Council on the developing child in the USA, the power of that one strong adult relationship is a key ingredient in resilience — a positive, adaptive response in the face of significant adversity. “Resilience

depends on supportive, responsive relationships and mastering a set of capabilities that can help us respond and adapt to adversity in healthy ways,” according to the [Center on the Developing Child at Harvard](#). “It’s those capacities and relationships that can turn [toxic stress](#) into tolerable stress.”

The developing brain relies upon the consistent “serve and return” interactions that happen between a young child and a primary caregiver. When these interactions occur regularly, they provide the scaffolding that helps build “key capacities — such as the ability to plan, monitor, and regulate behavior, and adapt to changing circumstances — that enable children to respond to adversity and to thrive. The developing brain is buffered by this feedback loop between biology and environment.

But in the absence of these responsive relationships, the brain’s architecture doesn’t develop optimally. The good news is that it appears that this awesome gift of a consistent supportive relationship does not appear to be influenced by the caregivers’ gender or sexual orientation. In any family, no matter what is make up – a child can thrive if there is at least on supportive responsive adult.

### Time and work

Families are often time poor. In fact the better off they are financially the more time poor they are – unless they have reached a point for one or both parents no longer need to work. For many it starts with the morning commute – people often end up living far from their work and far from their natural support network of family and friends because of the cost of housing to buy or rent in the areas they work in so they are not near grandparents for baby-sitting and the odd meal – and they may not know their neighbours so day to day support structures are weaker – at least until the children go to school and hopefully a network of other parents can be established.

The working day is often family unfriendly – why does a lot of work now start long before children have to be at school, e.g. work at 8 kids at school for 9? Do employers consider this at all? Or consider another example – why do building

sites all seem to require workers to do very long days and often 6 days a week? What is the impact on family life of this type of working?

### **The online world**

Parents are sometimes in blissful ignorance of their children's online activity, sometimes in dread but most often, a step behind them.

NYCI has been undertaking a number of initiatives regarding social media, including developing a social media policy and encouraging its member organisations to do likewise. Youth organisations such as Foróige and Spunout provide internet safety programmes for parents and volunteers and for young people. Parents can be unsure how to act – respect their children's privacy and the need to protect them from predators or bullies or from accidentally or purposefully accessing violent or pornographic content before they are able to critically assess it. As today's teenagers grow into adult hood and become parents themselves, the difference between the awareness of adults and young people may reduce, but today it can be very stark.

A report from the [World Health Organisation](#)(WHO) has suggested that a dramatic rise in the use of computers and social media is wreaking havoc on the health of young people. The study found a “continuous steep increase” between 2002 and 2014 in the proportion of children and young people using technology for two hours or more each weekday for things like social media, surfing the internet and homework. While use increased for both sexes, it more than tripled for girls aged 15 and over during this period, with experts blaming the rise of social media. The WHO, together with experts from the Health Behaviour in School-age Children study, sent questionnaires to more than 200,000 children in schools in 42 countries. A breakdown by age showed children as young as 11 spending a large chunk of time online.

When it came to using computers, tablets or smartphones just for games, between a third and two-thirds of children were spending two or more hours every weekday on them.

A positive impact of social media is social connectedness and the sense of interaction, but there are risks, such as cyber bullying and impact on mental health, as well as things like missing out on sleep.

“Also, there are longer-term impacts on physical health from being sedentary, included cardiovascular disease, obesity and Type 2 diabetes.”

### **Young people’s developing sexual selves**

Young People’s sexuality has been a preoccupation of adults for generations. The current important issues on consent are part of this. This is an area in which the Church (RC) finds itself in a particularly difficult situation. The core messages of respect for self and others and of sexuality as a gift are lost in the rules with which the church has surrounded sexuality. These rules are now a problem rather than a support. Young people will not follow rules they do not see as valid and sensible. For the current youth generation much of the church’s teaching in areas related to sexuality and reproduction is irrelevant and barely rouses their curiosity. Depending on your perspective it could be said that this generation and perhaps the current generations of young parents has escaped from the control of the church or are lost to it. On matters of sexual orientation contraception, sexual expression outside of marriage perhaps even the upcoming referendum they are unlikely to consider or even hear the church’s view.

In our experience young people will not listen to those they feel are making judgments or are not giving them accurate information on which they can make their own judgment. We should not be afraid of young people’s voices on these matters. Generally, once they have an understanding and respect for themselves, they are more likely to make good decisions for themselves. Shutting down discussion – seeking to promote rules that do not seem to make sense and focusing on whether or not something is sinful will drive young people away because they simply will not trust such people or organisations.

And yet in a world which seems to have less rules, it can be difficult to make choices and to decide which are good choices and which are not. Youth organisations play a significant role here. Take for example, Foroige’s Real U programme which is about relationships and sexuality (Relationships Explored

and Life Uncovered) is a high quality, comprehensive programme designed to be used in the non-formal learning environment. It is aimed at young people aged between 12-18 years in a group work setting. Foróige worked closely with The Rape Crisis Network Ireland, The Marie Keating Foundation and the Health Service Executive Crisis Pregnancy Programme and BeLonG To in developing this manual.

The programme was informed by two theories - the Health Belief Model and the Theory of Planned Behaviour, both of which illustrate the importance of working on attitudes and knowledge which in turn, enhance the likelihood of a participant having the self- efficacy to make responsible choices in relation to their sexual health. The resource will assist in the development of skills such as decision-making and communication skills, which promote positive well-being and confidence in relationships.

### **Youth people's mental health**

Parents worry a lot these days about depression, self-harm and body image illnesses. The National Youth Health Programme provides a broad-based, flexible health promotion / education support and training service to youth organisations and to all those working with young people in out-of-school settings.

The programme works with practitioners across the youth sector to build knowledge, skills and expertise on a range of health areas, including health promotion, mental health and sexual health. This work is achieved through the delivery of a range of training programmes on policy, programme and organisational development.

Youth organisations, through the broad range of programmes and activities delivered to young people, including health education and health information, positively influence the development of personal skills, for example self-esteem, self-efficacy, communication, negotiation, life skills and motivation. The development of these skills has a positive impact on health.

Through creating safe and secure physical and social environments, youth organisations provide young people and staff with opportunities to discuss and explore health issues and practice health-enhancing behaviours, thus supporting health education and 'making the healthier choice the easier choice'; for example providing healthy food options in the tuck shop; providing healthy snacks for after schools clubs; providing a smoke free environment, implementing an anti-bullying policy, providing an adolescent friendly health service.

### **Sexual orientation**

While gay marriage is now a reality against the wishes of the official church but with support from many individual church members, the sexual orientation of young people is for each one an untrodden path, which some walk alone, some walk with others. Those who walk it with others do so because the experience of most people around them is similar – they are heterosexual. So the discovers, commentaries and role models are easy and accord with their own emerging selves. For those who are homosexual, they often find themselves alone on their journey of realisation because their siblings, friends, parents are usually heterosexual and so they know no one with similar thoughts, feelings and have no immediately accessible role models for how they feel. Some of this will never change – but certainly by adding a dimension of sinfulness or labelling someone as intrinsically disordered, the church increases the burden and internal conflict experienced by our young people – or at least those who listen to such views. Evidence suggests children self-identify as homosexual by age 12 but don't tell others' until about 17. It's a long time to carry a secret and to live in dread of others reactions. The church is helping to perpetuate this, instead of supporting these children.

Housing education and employment – are always going to be big issues for families and I don't propose to address them today.

- **What is the role of faith in addressing these problems?**

I don't know what the role of faith is here. I do think it is interesting that the question is about faith rather than church. Nor does it say faith in God. Because

our faith can be in humankind, in universal values etc. NYCI does not advocate for any particular religion or faith system – we focus on shared values based on respect for the dignity and potential of the person and their growth as members of society. We believe in young people, in justice, in the uniqueness of each individual and in their potential. Perhaps this is our creed. We want to help young people to find their place in the world and to be able to make their difference – perhaps this is our version of vocation.

Faith or a set of values gives us strength something to cling to and be guided by.

- **What would they like to see brought forward for discussion/consideration at the WMOFs?**

The old chestnuts of rules in relation to sexual morality are actually preventing the church from connecting with young people – it's like a different language which young people no longer speak...

The pressure which house prices is putting on families is crazy and needs to be addressed – why do people have to live so far from where they work? It is seriously damaging family life and relationships.

### **Finally...**

At a mass I attended a few years ago for a gay congregation, the elderly priest spoke about the nature of sin in his homily. He described sin, as not when you break rules – but when you let yourself down – or let others down. It was the first time I felt challenged by a homily in a long time. So if the church can find ways of putting young people in the driving seat – rather than the old control approach, more might listen.

Thank you.

## **Ray Kelly: The Unmarried and Separated Families of Ireland**

Ray Kelly founded The Unmarried and Separated Fathers of Ireland in 2006 to support separated and unmarried fathers who were having difficulty securing access to their children. He subsequently changed it to Separated and Unmarried Families of Ireland when he realised that women were also having difficulty dealing with these situations.

At the ACI meeting Ray outlined the difficulties that fathers particularly experienced at the time of christenings, communions and confirmations. He said men were often excluded and were not allowed to be involved in the ceremonies and he even described one situation where a sympathetic priest held the christening on a Saturday with the mother's family and held a second ceremony on the Sunday for the father's family.

Ray said that he had worked for over three decades with people who had been going through separation and relationship difficulties and his main aim was to focus on the children enabling families to have a more effective family life rather than going the adversarial route and ending up in the courts.

The most profound change in Ray's own experience was perhaps when he decided to cease arguing with his partner over his 'rights' to family entitlements especially to access to his children. He changed from a 'rights' based approach to their relationship [which invariably led to conflict] to a 'responsibility' focused approach. He now places the emphasis on what he is responsible for in his relationship with his family. He described how this approach brought about a really significant transformation in his relationship, not just with his children but also with his former partner.

He said a lot of single and unmarried families felt disenfranchised by the Church and often didn't fit into the ideal family espoused by the Church in its portrayal of family life.

## **Irene Graham: Sexuality and LGBT**

Love, Respect, Responsibility and Accountability; The Expression of sexuality; The importance of the expression of sexuality for health; Love of self; Acceptance of SELF; Health and sexuality; Faith and Homosexuality.

Sexuality is defined as the state of having sexual characteristics, experiences and behaviours. The sense of self as man or woman. The expression of sexuality is determined and defined by each individual. Sexuality influences thoughts, feeling, interactions and actions among human beings and motivates people to find love, contact, warmth and intimacy (WHO 2000).

Sexual Health is a personal sense of well-being as well as the absence of disease, infections or illness associated with sexual behaviour. It includes self-esteem, self-expression, caring for others and cultural values. It is the positive integration of physical, emotional, intellectual, social and aspects of sexuality (WHO 2000).

The sexual expression for all individuals is an necessary part of our humanity and important for mental Health. The experience of a healthy sexual development and maturation has the capacity for an equitable and responsible relationships and sexual fulfilment.

In 2010, The Society for Sexual Education, Treatment and Research and the Psychiatric Association in Turkey made a statement to the press that indicated that homosexuality is one expression of Sexual Orientation. Sexual orientation is not a choice, therefore a phenomena beyond the will of the individual.

Religion and sexuality have always been the most uncomfortable bedfellows. "Sin" for heterosexuals (and homosexuals) who have intimate relationship is a given outside of Marriage in a Catholic Church. So it is for many individual that sexual expression is wrong. Young children/teenagers have an irresponsible attitude towards sex. The need for sexual Health to be taught in homes and

schools is necessary. Learning about sex and relationship from the Internet is unhealthy.

Religions, {Christianity, Judaism, Islam} interpret homosexuality as a sin and it is forbidden. Social and Religious oppression is one of the outstanding elements. Many people attempt to live in compliance with traditions, customs and the religions principles embraced by the vast majority. Negative attitudes towards LGBT individuals stem from the prejudice that they are mentally ill or sinners (Levine and Leonard 1984). Kashmira Gander stated that it's not religion but the community that drives a lot of those fears. "Kashmira went to state that "self acceptance is the "Key". Having a relationship with God and my faith is important to me. I know now that being with who I am and being with who I love doesn't invalidate that. The unconditional love of God is unconditional and loving someone is not a sin. God made you how he wants you to be. Homophobia and transphobia by the church has no basis in Jesus's teaching.

Yale University in a study addressing violence and discrimination towards lesbian and gay individuals, found under the influence of various fears, they hide their sexual orientation. Conducted studies demonstrate that there is a strong bond between homophobic attitudes and violence around the world (Sozen 2009). 50% of homosexuals attempt suicide. They are attacked physically more than others. They use alcohol four times and drugs ten times more than heterosexuals. Self-acceptance and self-esteem in LGBT individuals is not evident in these studies.

Question 1. LGBT community and family: Self-acceptance. Social Oppression.

Question 2. The role of faith: Normalising Sexual Orientation. Accepting sexuality as part of our Humanity.

Question 3: Normalisation of sexual orientation of Men-women-transgender. When will love and respect for difference be part of religion?

What are we afraid of? Homosexuals or Homosexuality?

## **Susan Casey: Divorced and Second Relationships**

Susan Casey is from Maryland in the U.S. A former architectural historian and public media producer, she came to Ireland last October to live with her Irish (and lifelong Catholic) partner of seven years. Susan is divorced with two grown children and while she grew up Catholic, her family left the Church soon after she received her first holy communion. She's here to tell us about returning to the Catholic Church in the U.S. after her divorce and how that status impacted her experience with both clergy and her adult catechism classmates.

Background:

- Family left Church when I was about 10, after baptism and first communion but before I completed my catechism and confirmation.
- Spent young adulthood seeking out other religious and spiritual experiences.
- Married my husband with no religious background/baptism. Married by Presbyterian minister but not in a church.
- Divorced after 23 years of marriage.
- Decided several years ago to return to the Catholic Church.
- Approached my local parish in Maryland about finishing sacrament of initiation there. Distinctly remember feeling grilled by the Director of Religious Education with questions about my marriage, specifics of my divorce. Wasn't sure I was going to be allowed to complete sacrament of initiation – questions about whether or not I was going to need an annulment. Made to feel I barely squeaked by.
- In my class, most of us mature adults with lots of life experience and from different backgrounds. Many accepting of divorced, but some not. Lots of judgment.
- Church losing membership and not welcoming new members. One of my classmates, very close, was kept from completing confirmation with the rest of us because of a technicality with his annulment. Very distressing that we were adults who were coming to the Church willingly and enthusiastically but hurdles put up at every pass.

Problems I see facing divorced families today in regard to the Church:

- Church needs to stop demonizing couples/families by calling divorce “a plague on society”:
- Divorce not easy on families but neither is subjecting children to unhappy households.
- In my own case, I don’t pretend my teenage children were thrilled with the divorce, but them seeing me afterwards with my current partner who adores me and shares my values is modelling a healthy relationship for them to emulate.
- Church’s lack of compassion for the messy realities of human relationships:
- No one wants to get divorced.
- Appreciate support of Church to help couples stay together, but respect couples if they decide divorce is necessary.
- Trust our decision, show mercy, and provide support to families.
- Feel that if there were married and women clergy, there would be more understanding about this issue.
- Stop using Eucharist as a reward/threat of withholding it as punishment:
- As Pope Francis said in *Evangelii Gaudium*: “The Eucharist, although it is the fullness of sacramental life, is not a prize for the perfect but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak...Frequently we (the clergy) act as arbiters of grace rather than its facilitators. But the Church is not a tollhouse, it is the House of the Father where there is a place for everyone with all their problems.”
- And that’s where faith comes in for me in addressing these problems: I believe the words of the Pope reflects the mercy of Christ and the direction I believe we as the Church will go. It’s what motivates me to play an active role in the laity.

## Gemma: Family with Gay Child

My son Steven has honoured my right to freedom of expression in sharing our story, the rest of our family have given their blessing also.

Embracing change can be difficult, yet rewarding, when the scales fall away and slowly one begins to grow by confronting prejudice and ignorance. My name is Gemma and I'm widowed many years. I have three sons and a daughter, my eldest son Andrew is married and I have three grandchildren. Almost eighteen years ago now my second son, Steven, then 26, went to live in Australia. I knew most of Steven's friends, but he was going with a friend, whom I never met - no there wouldn't be time to meet him, he lives outside of Dublin. I was told they were meeting at the Airport and I was working that day.

Then almost two years later Steven was returning for a holiday and a few weeks earlier Steven had sent photos over the Internet of himself and his friend smiling side-by-side, close - very close. Steven was home for a few days. I noticed he was making quite a few trunk calls to Australia. At first I thought the bill would be sky high. Slowly it began to dawn, the photos, the phone calls and yes the anxiety the evening before he went abroad to make sure his friend would be at the Airport. I rang my friend Brian, aware that he has a gay son. I told him I was 99% sure Steven is gay. He agreed with my gut instinct saying we will pray for an opening, so he can tell you. Three days before his departure, Steven came into the kitchen, his opening words, *"When I return to Australia, I think I'll do a course in Psychology. It may help me solve some of my problems."*

*"Problems,"* I repeated, *"Could you tell me, anyway perhaps I already know"* - *"Okay,"* he said, *"if you know you tell me"*.

*"No"* I said, *"trust me, you can tell me"*.

Then with tears in his eyes and deep emotion, he spoke the words *"Mam, I'm gay"*. With feelings of love and pain I embraced him saying, *"Steven you know I love you."* *"Mam,"* he said, *"I feared you might reject me, but deep down I knew you*

wouldn't". Then he told me about his partner and the reason why they had gone abroad was to make a new life together. Wait till you meet him, he has a lovely smile", I guess I knew that. I told him he had to be true to himself and I said I know how lonely life can be lacking intimacy. I admired his courage in coping with his life. But I was sad he hadn't told me sooner.

Explaining his sexual orientation he drew on the analogy of a football pitch, saying if there were a beautiful actress down in one corner and a handsome male footballer up in the other, he would always be drawn towards the male. Searching for the reason why, I spoke about how things happen in nature beyond our control, mentioning for example, a member from our wider family with a disability, he was taken aback. I felt I had unintentionally hurt Steven.

Thankfully he was patient with my ignorance, we continued to talk. We decided who to tell and who not to tell. The next day while Steven was demonstrating the new lawn mower (which he bought me) *the phone rang*. I could hear him saying, "*It's okay, Mam knows*". I was called to the phone. Well it's amazing how much one can converse on the workings of a lawn mower!

While his older brother took the news in his stride his younger brother was devastated. Claire is nine years younger than Steven. They were always close. He wanted to tell her himself, but I regret to say I did not honour his decision when I blurted it out. For Claire, her brother hadn't changed. He was still the same brother she always loved. Claire bought a present for Steven's partner, kissing Steven goodbye her parting words were 'tell him I was asking for him'. Brian in his wisdom advised me not to tell people until you're ready. I sent letters to them as a couple signing my name Magem.

But all was not well as I tried to accept my new reality. I felt depressed, my mind was racing, and I was full of fear about Aids, Society and the Church. I felt isolated, alienated and confused as to how I now felt about Steven. One nightmare showed me stitched in a shroud. The pain ran very deep. I knew I needed help. I rang a priest seeking his advice. He said, "*Come to me*". Before embarking on a trip to Australia I went on Retreat. A Dominican Sister's

comforting words are imprinted on my mind, "*Gemma God loves your son*" and *she repeated it*".

Steven assured me beforehand, sensitive to where I was at; we won't be going round holding hands. Sadly after a few years they parted. Steven was devastated; his friends Tony and Barbara took him into their home and cared for him. Some time passed. Steven met Warren; he said he would take his time before moving in with him.

I was very moved when Steven shared this part of his life with me - when Warren returned from a visit to his parents in the Philippines he had difficulty sleeping. Steven said I went to his apartment to take care of him. I lay on the bed beside him, until he went asleep, then I left quietly.

The first time they came for a holiday the whole family were at the airport, nine of us in all. I remember the excitement that day. Claire and I in competition to reach Steven first, she won and then I was holding Warren in my arms.

Over the years many parents received support from one another at weekends for parents of LGBT sons or daughters in Knocklyd, Co. Antrim. My friend Brian invited my friend Noel and I to go along. It's interesting to note the seeds for these weekends were sown during a Scripture sharing on a Lectio Divina weekend.

Reaching across the religious divide, the love we parents shared for our sons and daughters was palpable in that large room. Language such as "*intrinsicly evil*" and "*disordered*", we found most unhelpful, it angered, disgusted and hurt us, as we sought the best way forward, to give support to our LGBT sons and daughters during their life.

The third weekend the facilitator posed the question "*Well what are you three going to do for parents down South?*" Filled with a sense of joy I made the decision to reach out. The following week I plucked up courage and met with a priest in my parish. Hearing my story he said "*Your son sounds like a maturing*

*young man.*" Cloaking our story with dignity his parting words, *"It's good to meet an Easter person."* He also encouraged myself and two other parents (Noel & Brian) to commit some of our aims to writing and help support other parents, this is how LEAF (Love Empathy Acceptance and Freedom) literature came about.

Many times we felt we were being drawn by Providence. It led us to spend time at the multifarious gatherings of a spiritual gay group. For us it was a privilege, a time of personal growth. They shared their giftedness and creativity with art, dance and knowledge of the environment and much more. I felt grounded in our common humanity. Yes, I had many encounters along the way.

I met a Priest on the road to Rome, he imparted this message *"When a son or daughter tells their parents they are gay, these parents should go out and buy them a special gift."* At a workshop on Liturgy an example was given of a ceremony for a person who is lesbian coming out. Fr. John on a visit from Australia celebrated Mass at the prayer group. In his homily he spoke about people on the margins and his vision for Church as a place of indiscriminate welcome. Afterwards over a cup of tea, I told him about my upcoming trip to Sydney and about Steven.

I was surprised by the first question, *"Does your son go to Mass?"* *"Well, to tell you the truth Father "he's a bit angry at the Church."* Then where does your son live? On being told, he said that's the next Parish to mine, 10 minutes by car. Tell your son he is most welcome in my Church. I wrote and told them the good news.

Going to Church with them was a time of great joy and Fr. John shared his homily again on a Church of indiscriminate welcome. While most people were encouraging, I was told by a woman *"You are on the rocky road to hell."* For me my home is the domestic church, with a round table - a place of indiscriminate welcome.

My love for Steven deepened. He doesn't have to do anything to make me proud of him. He is good enough as he is and a worthwhile person as he is. I love him to

the core of his being. Warren is a lovely person, a great addition to our family. We all really like him; my grandchildren treat him like a favourite uncle.

Through reading and discussion, I have reached the understanding that a person who is gay can only truly relate to God as a spiritually gay person, giving of his or her total being. My experience has enriched my life, challenged my attitudes and inspired me to interpret my faith in a new way. Receiving the gift of a gay son challenged my Gospel values. It has changed me utterly.

Steven has shown me life is not black and white. To live life fully one must embrace the grey. Continuing my journey I strive to accord dignity to all I meet.

I welcome diversity and I see the LGBT persons as a valid part of society and that diversity. I believe each person is unique, created in God's image, that each babe born into this world comes clothed in a God-given dignity. Working within the framework of the Church has always been important for me. It's about building up the Church, not tearing it down, about inclusion the basics of Christianity. For me it's about walking the walk with people where they are at. I operate from a place of love and mystery from the unknowing depths of our Creator.

David, Steven's younger brother, became one of my greatest helpers, printing LEAF literature and by showing his interest in this work. I am happy to say Steven and Warren celebrated the 12th Anniversary of their relationship recently.

I feel solace from these words in Psalm 119 – “Accept Yahweh the tribute from my mouth, and teach me your judgments.” “Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path.”

(This story takes place over a nine-year span).

The following section reflects the deliberations of the Focus Group  
Discussions:

## **Focus Group Discussions**

Following the speakers' contributions, the Open Space Forum commenced. Delegates were invited to identify topics for which they have a passion, and for which they are willing to take responsibility to convene a focus group discussion. The following themes emerged during this process, and formed the basis of the deliberations contained within this report:

- Child abuse: atonement for the past and hope for the future;
- Catholic Priests Secret Families: Wives/partners and children of priests;
- The Church's treatment of LGBTQI people and families;
- How to normalise homosexuality and lesbianism in church and society;
- Need for women speakers at the world meeting of families;
- How are people from non-traditional families to be treated? Are they to be treated as 'full members' or not?
- Parental alienation syndrome;
- What is the role of divorced and separated families in the church?
- Sexuality, celibacy and priesthood: Does chastity play a part in our family or church life today;
- Church today resembles Victorian family.
- Who is funding the WMOF?
- The reintegration of ex- prisoners discharged into society once discharged from custody

## **Child Abuse: Atonement for the past and hope for the future**

Discussion key points:

- Problems in subsequent generations. The impact of abuse on the families of survivors who go on to marry.
- Are we now experiencing a '2<sup>nd</sup> generation syndrome' – children of survivors having to cope with the 'fall-out' of the abuse of one of their parents?
- Honest and open and willing to deal with child abuse both historically and care for people who were abused.
- A Day of Atonement each year to commemorate people who were abused.
- Consider including a prayer in each mass for abused people possibly during the Prayers of the Faithful
- How we are as a society going to reintegrate the abuser and the abused considering the enormous numbers involved?
- Not enough prison space available to lock abusers away

## **Wives/partners and children of priests:**

### **Discussion key points**

- Visibility of the mothers
- Voice
- Recognition
- Should include wives/partners; their love and commitment is not recognised with resultant psychological impact.
- More widespread than known or imagined, world wide problem
- 'COPING International' organisation for these children has been recognised and supported by Irish bishops.
- Ireland is leading the way on this issue.
- Problem is a hidden danger to the celibacy rule.
- Agreements are made with the mother and confidentiality rules to keep it hidden.

### **Problems**

- Fatherhood denial or unknown leading to mental health problems for children.
- Lack of relationship growing up
- Family-me: family is one of the most important inputs into what makes up me but if family is secret then one essential ingredient is missing or distorted.
- Secrecy in church must be acknowledged and exposed.
- Priest /Father must be in stress, which will affect his service to his flock and to his family.
- Priests have faith, believe in God.
- Role of faith must be honoured so they can serve God and live in a sustaining normal married relationship.

### **Recommendations for action**

- Priests to have right to choose to be married or not.
- Priests to take responsibility for actions.
- Wish to have a workshop on this subject at the World Meeting Of Families (WMOF).

## The Catholic Church & Homosexuality

The following is a summation of the forum in relation to the Church and the LGBT community.

1. **God has created us all in his own likeness** but with our own diversity – male or female, black, white or yellow, left-handed or right handed, perfectly or imperfectly formed of mind and body, etc. He also created sexual diversity. We should all accept ourselves and each other as God created us. We do not choose – it was God’s choice to make us as we are. He created us all equally irrespective of our circumstances. Members of the LGBT community are not/have not "special needs" they should be treated equally, with dignity and respect not patronised with comments about 'pastoral care'.
2. **The Catholic Church has historically condemned** those who God created homosexual (LGBT) men and women as being intrinsically disordered and their relationships objectively evil. We hold that to criticise God’s creation as a “sin” is at variance with the spirit of the Gospel.

Given the developments in science and psychology, our Church cannot deny the humanity of LGBT people. To quote the Catholic theologian and priest, James Alison, who is noted for his application of René Girard's anthropological theory to Christian systematic theology and for his work on LGBT issues.: - *“Homosexuality is a regularly occurring non-pathological, minority variant in the human condition, just like left-handedness – and with a remarkably similar incidence. “*

3. **Our Church has caused much pain** and suffering as a consequence of its stance on LGBT persons. This pain and alienation is not confined to the person themselves, but also to fathers, mothers, siblings, friends and whole communities.

4. **Our Church should be a beacon of hope** for all persons and should be a trail-blazer in promoting the acceptance of all God's creation in society. Instead, its stance can be seen to be fuelling society's homophobia.
5. **We must ask the question, what would Christ do** or say in relation to homosexuality? Jesus, in his mission preached inclusivity, love and forgiveness. He likened himself to a shepherd and all God's created people to his flock.

*"I am the good shepherd; I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father and I lay down my life for my sheep. And there are other sheep I have that are not of this fold and these I have to lead as well. They too will listen to my voice and there will be only one flock and one shepherd"* John 10: 11-18.

6. We have inherited the Church from Jesus and we must follow in his footsteps of **inclusivity**, of seeking those who have been lost. In His time, the Jewish hierarchy of the day ostracised the Samaritan, the pagan and the leper but Jesus reached out to all of these as equal before God, their creator. Regrettably, in its treatment of the homosexual, our Church today makes them the leper of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.
7. Our Church's hostile stance on its LGBT members must change to one of loving care and equality. We welcome **the efforts of Pope Francis** in this regard. In line with his frequent acknowledgments that the church has too often excluded people by fixating on a narrow, moral legalism, Pope Francis said in a 2013 interview.

*"A person once asked me, in a provocative manner, if I approved of homosexuality, I replied with another question: 'Tell me: when God looks at a gay person, does he endorse the existence of this person with love, or reject and condemn this person? We must always consider the person. Here we enter into the mystery of the human being. In life, God accompanies persons, and we must accompany them, starting from their situation.'"*

Less than a year later, when asked by reporters about gay priests at the Vatican, his quote became a viral papal soundbite that has reached near-iconic status: ***“If someone is gay and he searches for the Lord, who am I to judge?”***

8. Following the encouragement given by Pope Francis, **many bishops throughout the world have taken initiatives** in their own diocese to welcome the LGBT community as full and equal members of their flock.

***“In a church that has not always valued or welcomed your presence, we need to hear your voices and take seriously your experiences,”*** Bishop John Stowe of Lexington, Kentucky, told several hundred participants at the New Ways Ministry gathering in Chicago last month, “LGBT Catholics in the Age of Pope Francis.”

New Ways Ministry, founded in 1977 by Fr. Robert Nugent and Sr. Jeannine Gramick, were sanctioned in 1999 when Cardinal Ratzinger—then the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, later Pope Benedict XVI—issued a directive that prohibited them from “any pastoral work involving homosexual persons.” Given this history, Bishop Stowe’s presence at the conference is hopefully a sign of changing times.

During a spiritual reflection at the New Ways Ministry conference, Bishop Stowe noted how Jesus often challenged what he called the “self-proclaimed Sabbath police,” and made a direct connection to that mindset with how LGBT Catholics are often treated. ***“Some of you have experienced the same kind of approach to the law that Jesus corrected so many times in the Gospel—an approach that sometimes devalues human beings,”*** he said.

In Brazil, Bishop Antonio Carlos Cruz Santos, of the diocese of Caico in the Rio Grande do Norte, preached that homosexuality is a “gift from God”. Continuing he said; - “

***“If it is not a choice, if it is not a disease, in the perspective of faith it can only be a gift. The gospel par excellence is the gospel of inclusion. The***

*gospel is a narrow door, yes, it is a demanding love, but it is a door that is always open.*

*“When you look at homosexuality, you cannot say it’s an option,” Cruz said, adding that a choice has to be made freely, while sexual orientation is something a person discovers “one day.”*

9. **Our Church’s approach to the impending World Meeting of Families 2018**, to be held in Dublin this August, is most disappointing. Initially, it was announced that this was to be an inclusive event with a welcome for all families. The initial brochure claimed that *“No one is excluded, no one is left behind.”* This welcome to all was emphasised by the inclusion of artwork depicting an LGBT family among other family groupings. Regrettably, and without explanation, this brochure was hastily withdrawn and a new one printed excluding the photo of the LGBT couple. This has caused immense dismay, disappointment and anger, not only with the LGBT community, but with their wider families. Reports are reaching us that many shocked Catholics will not now attend or support the World Meeting of Families on account of this action.

As committed Catholics and members of this Association, we should convey our absolute horror at this developing situation. In particular, it is regretted that this retrograde step is being taken in Ireland at the reported insistence of sponsors and donors to the World Meeting from outside Ireland, the host country. Is money more important than ministry to the WMOF 2018? This is a very sad reflection on our bishops, the organising committee and on the Irish Church as a whole, which we as loyal members of that Church find extremely sad and embarrassing.

Our members in Plenary Session are calling for the following actions to be taken.

1. **Reinstatement** of the excluded gay couple photo on World Meeting of Families literature.

2. **Removal of the offensive language** from the official documents of the church is the crucial action that needs to be taken.
3. Our members **welcome the efforts of Pope Francis** to soften the church's hostile stance towards LGBTI+ people but they point out that notwithstanding the Pope's comments, the offensive language about LGBTI+ people contained in the Congregation of the Doctrine of Faith (CDF) documents and the Catholic Catechism remain on the official record and will remain there after Pope Francis retires or moves onto eternal life, unless action is taken to remove it.
4. **A detailed definition** from Archbishop Diarmuid Martin, as patron of the WMOF 2018, of the family as envisaged by the organisers.
5. **The inclusion of a special forum** as part of the WMOF 2018 welcoming the LGBT community and their families, listening to their stories and restating the emphasis on inclusion in the Church as propogated by Pope Francis.
6. **An apology to the LGBT community** for the homophobia, disrespect and lack of Christian love displayed by the Catholic Church over the generations.
7. **A display of courage** by members of the Irish Hierarchy or by individual bishops to follow the examples of Bishop John Stowe, Bishop Antonio Carlos Cruz Santos and many others in challenging the historic and current Church attitude to LGBT Catholics and promoting Christian values in its attitude to homosexuals.

## Need for women speakers at WMOF

### **Discussion Key Points**

- Behind the scenes role of women
- Who should raise the question?
- Profile of people speaking at the WMOF should be 'real people'
- Who picks the speakers?
- Issue of artificial contraception, 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary
- Humanae Vitae with its ban on artificial contraception was dated 25 July 1968. So this July the hierarchy will be "celebrating" 50 years of Humanae Vitae. This teaching has NOT been received by the people of God in Ireland where a huge majority of families use artificial contraception to plan their families. The WMOF should acknowledge that this teaching is a man made error and needs to be changed.

### **Problems**

- Everyone is welcome at the World Meeting of Families (WMOF) but in reality is there an opportunity to be heard?
- So far out of 18 speakers announced only 2 may be married. 16 are cardinals and bishops and they are supposed to be celibate. How can they be the main speakers at an event for families?
- People are afraid to put their head above the parapet
- Differentiation between parish level and at the higher level within the church
- Role of faith
- Equality is necessary in order to live the Gospel of Christ
- One doesn't need to be in step with an organisation to walk a journey with it, but it has to be an organisation worth walking with

**Recommendation for action:**

- Those attending/speaking at the WMOF should have the opportunity to hear speakers like we did this morning (14<sup>th</sup> April ACI event)
- Need for dialogue and for a conversation to be started
- Of the 18 speakers announced only 2 are women. This is totally wrong.
- There needs to be a balance of male and female speakers
- 50% of speakers should be women
- What is the place/ is there a place for demonstration?
- Speakers should be dealing with relevant issues to families
- Email Tim Bartlett to make opinions known on sexism/imbalance of speakers

## **What is the role of separated and divorced families in the church?**

### **Problems:**

- At present these families are not treated as full members of the church.
- Even if parents separate it affects children-re baptism, discrimination against the child.
- People searching for life and good relationship are punished for doing it. Second relationships are not recognised in the church.
- Rules imposed by the Church are obscuring the message of Christ.
- Individual priests/dioceses are trying to change but change should involve the whole church
- Church doesn't recognise the complexity of modern day challenges.
- Demonisation and stigma attached to separated and divorced families, rather than offering help they are judged. There is embarrassment in continuing to attend church.
- Eucharist is used as a weapon rather than as nourishment, reward versus punishment.
- Unexpected external pressures of modern life are not taken on board by the Church. There is a lack of compassion.
- Housing, longer commutes, harder on families
- Issue of annulment, it is a slow process but not if you have money. This approach does not reflect Gospel values.

### **Role of faith in addressing problems**

John Vs. 10

'I have come that you may have life, and live it to the full'

- Support and acceptance from the Church leads to greater participation.
- The Church as mother is to receive people in distress-rather than turn them away.
- Pope Francis has a message of welcome, but the dioceses follow strict rules.

- Trust and dialogue with people's experience
- 'The authority of experience versus the experience of authority'
- Faith as respecting the values of people, the values of the laity
- What is Faith?
- What is the Church's role in explaining the Greater Mystery?
- Role of faith: Protect children 'let the little children come to me'
- Present rules do not facilitate children building a relationship with the church if parents are divorced. If parents are nourished by the church they can nourish their children
- Church needs to be a Church of Compassion: Set the example for society in dealing with broken families
- Be introduced to the Jesus of the Gospels rather than restrictive rules
- Encouraging prayer and community sharing

### **Message to World Meeting Of Families**

- Get back to the message of Jesus of the Gospels and make rules that reflect that message.
- Set up committees at diocesan or national level that could look at the Church's inadequate response to problems facing divorced and separated families.
- Essential that women be adequately represented
- More support and less condemnation of families already divorced or separated
- Challenge each other as laity not to be judgmental and to become more inclusive-it is not just a clergy problem.
- Need for education/group adult education around these issues.
- Eucharist is nourishment, the bread of life. Celebrants should not block access to it.

## **Church today resembles Victorian family**

### **The Victorian model no longer works for most people.**

- The Church -Father (hierarchical) rules and orders and expects to be obeyed
- Laity –their role is that of mother and children enabling the Church to operate in a hierarchical way.
- Question. How to change it to a 21<sup>st</sup> century partnership?
- Various conscientious Catholics are not adhering to various man-made (as distinct from non existent woman made) rules
- There is a need to take account of the 'sensus fidelium'
- Role of faith to come to the fore.
- Already from necessity women are conducting services and this trend will have to continue if services are to be provided.
- However women's insights need to be integrated into the ruling cadres of the church. Otherwise there is a real danger that many women will leave for a church or group in which they can breathe and function more easily.
- The emphasis needs to be on ecclesia rather than building an organisation.
- Language needs to be made more accessible while being clear on retaining the core values.
- As the church cannot become a mere social club in which anything goes, e.g. human life is sacred and must remain so.
- To love ones neighbour is to respect them.
- The church's hierarchy, like good parents, must listen and evolve.
- Many are still within the church fully accepting that their values are not in alignment with many/most of the values and attributes projected by the magisterium of the Church

## **Who is funding WMOF?**

### **Discussion key points**

- Right wing groups from the USA are funding the WMOF.
- They are not expressing the views of Irish people.
- Archbishop Diarmuid Martin needs to provide transparency in relation to who is funding the WMOF.

## **Parental alienation syndrome**

### **Discussion Key Points:**

- Definition of family needs to be developed and to be inclusive.
- We understand that the churches definition is an opinion.
- The Church has never engaged with what a family is given the changes in society and developing knowledge of roots and parenthood in biology.
- Family includes-gay couples, single parents, unmarried, widowhood etc.
- The perspective of the child is what is important.

### **Problems:**

- What are the intentions of the Catholic Church with respect to marriages in difficulty?
- How does the church relate to couples that are living apart within marriage?
- Can the church intervene earlier to help the couples forgive and work forward?

### **Recommendation for action:**

- Facilitate the maintenance of relationship between parents and children.
- Re-imagine intervention into marriage breakdown.
- Transmission of faith has broken down; re-think sacraments, take out of schools into parishes.
- Church can teach individuals to have faith in themselves.
- Transform the Sign of Peace.
- What's missing in the churches approach? Forgiveness.

## **Sexuality, celibacy and priesthood**

**Does chastity play a part in our family and church life today?**

**Discussion key points:**

- Celibacy in Priesthood: is it relevant to an 83 year-old priest?
- End of day loneliness/isolation/no need of celibacy.
- In Brazil 5000 priests have left the priesthood.
- The strongest instinct we have is sexuality.
- Conscience first/Pope second.
- Conscience is sacred.
- Celibacy offered a safe space for paedophilia.
- Being held is as important as sex.
- Blessings of being a celibate priests are that you have great friends.
- Celibacy should be optional.
- Priests job should be to train Catechists.
- People should follow the 10 Commandments.
- Priests are living with women in a lot of places.
- Priests need a missionary role.
- Chastity is responsible sexuality.
- Chastity is over-rated.

## **Individual Submissions**

## **Catholic Priests Secret Families:**

**Soline Humbert**

I firmly believe that the World Meeting of Families MUST address the international issue of catholic priests' secret families, their partners and wives, but especially their children. Not to do so is to perpetuate the secrecy and the lies which are doing a grave injustice and grave damage to these children. These children exist and they must be acknowledged publicly at the WMOF, otherwise it's more abusive hypocrisy adding to their sense of rejection and their spiritual and mental health wounds.

The issue of the treatment of the children of priests is now officially part of the remit of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors which deals with clerical sexual abuse. In some cases the children are the result of rape of women or girls. COPING International is an on line resource which was set up in Ireland in 2015 to bring these children worldwide from the shadows, to give them visibility and a voice and support as well as justice. It is recognised by the Irish bishops. The treatment of these children has been very similar to the treatment of victims of clerical sexual abuse: denial; secrecy; enforced invisibility through confidentiality clauses; placing the reputation and assets of the institution ahead of the welfare of the children.

There is a well known saying : 'We are as sick as our secrets' .This applies to the catholic church,and this particular secrecy needs to end for the sake of those who suffer most from it, the children. If the WMOF does not include them explicitly in the form of a workshop for instance it is colluding with that deadly culture of secrecy and abuse which is the opposite of the message of Christ.

The time is now for the church community to face up to the truth that these children exist and to embrace them, as well as draw the necessary conclusions as to what concrete systemic changes need to happen.

**<https://www.thestar.com/news/insight/2018/04/17/catholic-priests-take-a-vow-of-celibacy-when-theyre-ordained-but-when-they-break-that-vow-their-children-are-left-to-live-a-lie.html>**

## **LGBTQI Families:**

**Ursula Halligan**

Thank you to everyone in ACI for holding this meeting today and for the invitation to attend. I am a person of faith and a committed Catholic. Women and Gay Catholics are treated as second class citizens by the institutional Catholic Church. As a woman and a gay person, I'm not putting up with it any longer. I'm not sitting at the back of the bus any more. The institutional church has to change on this. All round the world women and gay people are saying this. As a woman, I want to see women priests as well as women in leadership positions in the church. The church can no longer ignore and bypass half of its membership. The church has to change on this.

As a gay person I don't want pastoral care from the church. Pastoral care only brings comfort to the church. I reject the church's teaching that gay people are "objectively disordered" and that our love is "intrinsically evil". That teaching is deeply insulting and offensive not only to the dignity of every gay person but it is deeply insulting to God whose image and likeness we are made in. The church has to remove that language as a matter of urgency. I believe my love is as good as anyone else's love and as a Catholic I'm looking for full sacramental marriage for same sex couples. The church has to change on this.

## **World Meeting Of Families:**

I am deeply concerned about the WMOF and the way LGBTI Catholics and their families may be treated at it. The track record of this event isn't great. I've spoken to families with same sex parents who were verbally abused by other Catholics attending the WMOF in Philadelphia three years ago. They were also subjected to listening to speaker after speaker (including bishops and cardinals) denounce LGBT people from the stage. This is not acceptable and action must be taken to prevent it happening in August. The recent removal of images of gay people from the WMOF event brochure is disturbing and alarming. It sends out a disturbing message.

I sincerely hope the ACI shares our concerns on these issues and will champion them with the institutional church. I'm hoping the ACI will do everything possible to highlight our concerns with the organisers of the WMOF to ensure LGBTI families are openly and visibly welcomed as well as celebrated at the WMOF in August.

**Specific questions re WMOF:**

- What steps the organisers are taking to ensure same-sex couples will be equally welcome at this event?
- What actions and plans are underway to facilitate same-sex couples at the WMOF 2018?
- What actions are being taken to ensure same-sex couples are represented in all signage; advertising and public presentations at the WMOF 2018?
- What actions are being taken to ensure same-sex families are included in all line-ups or public displays of the diversity of family types from around the world during the five day event?
- We note that on the second last day of the WMOF 2018 a Festival of Families will take place on Saturday 25th August and five selected families from around the world will be invited to give witness to their families' faith.
- What preparations are underway to ensure at least one of these families will be a family headed by a same-sex couple?

Other questions:

- What about Child Protection at the event itself?
- Will there be a protocol regarding mutual respect?
- What pastoral outreach will be offered to gay participants?
- Will young people's sessions address sexual identity in an open way?
- What messages regarding homophobia will be given to all participants?
- Will gay organisations be able to have stands at the WMOF?
- We've heard enough vague language including the empty phrase:  
"All Are Welcome" We are asking for much more than words. We're looking for a clear and public sign that LGBT people will be welcome and celebrated at the WMOF.

## **Media Reports of the Event**

[Irishtimes.com](http://www.irishtimes.com) and [independent.ie](http://www.independent.ie)

**Much of church teaching on sexuality and reproduction ‘irrelevant’  
via The Irish Times**

<https://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/much-of-church-teaching-on-sexuality-and-reproduction-irrelevant-1.3462283>

Church teaching on sexuality and reproduction is “irrelevant and barely rouses” the curiosity of young people today, a conference ahead of the World Meeting Of Families has heard.

Denis O’Brien, vice-president of the National Youth Council of [Ireland](#), said Church leaders should learn how to communicate with younger generations that it risks pushing away by imposing views and rules they do not follow.

He was speaking at an event held by the Association of Catholics in Ireland (ACI) which is concerned about the tone of the forthcoming World Meeting Of Families in Ireland, due to be attended by [Pope Francis](#).

The ACI works within the Irish Church promoting a reform agenda. Mr. O’Brien was one of six Catholic speakers giving voice to segments of society who do not fall strictly in line with conservative Catholic teaching.

The outcome of the conference will lead to the compilation of a report that will be sent to Pope Francis ahead of the WMOF in August, it said.

“Young people these days...tend not to follow rules that they don’t see as valid or sensible,” Mr. O’Brien said. “For the current youth generation, much of the church’s teaching in areas related to sexuality and reproduction is irrelevant and barely rouses their curiosity.

‘Escaped control’

“Depending on your perspective it could be said that this generation, and perhaps the current generation of young parents, has either escaped the control of the church in this area or has been lost to it.”

He warned that many may not even hear the church’s view on the upcoming referendum on the Eighth Amendment, and that they would not be inclined to listen to those they feel are judging them.

“We should not be afraid of young people’s voices,” he said.

“Shutting down discussion, seeking to promote rules that do not seem to make sense and focusing on whether or not something is sinful will drive young people away.”

Mr. O’Brien said children now speak a different language, and the Church needs to learn how to speak it.

ACI chairman [Anthony Neville](#) said they wanted to see a “united church”, one that “accepts the equality of all believers by virtue of their baptism”.

‘Perfect’ Catholic family

“We are conscious of the possibility that at the World Meeting the bishops will present the ‘perfect’ Catholic family: mother, father, two children attending Mass every week, and everything in the garden is rosy,” he said.

[Irene Graham](#), a divorced mother of five, said she had raised her children within the faith. However, with a gay son, she asked what people were afraid of regarding homosexuality.

On the forthcoming event, Ms. Graham said: “We want to know when are we going to normalise sexuality – when no one would be looking [at a person] and saying, oh he is gay, or she is gay?”

“When will the church say that our sexuality is part of who we are?”

[Susan Casey](#), a divorced mother of two from the US, described how she had sought to re-enter the Catholic Church years after her family had left.

Noticing “a lot of judgment about someone who was divorced”, she said she felt a church “hemorrhaging” members should be more welcoming.

**Much of church teaching on sexuality and reproduction  
‘irrelevant’**

via The Irish Times

<https://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/much-of-church-teaching-on-sexuality-and-reproduction-irrelevant-1.3462283>

Thursday 19 April 2018

**Ursula Halligan: 'I want gay marriage in church - my love is not evil'**  
**Written by Sarah McDonald, Independent.ie**

<https://www.independent.ie/irish-news/ursula-halligan-i-want-gay-marriage-in-church-my-love-is-not-evil-36809873.html>.

Former TV3 political correspondent Ursula Halligan has said that, as a Catholic gay person, she wants the Church to provide full sacramental marriage for same-sex couples. Ms. Halligan was speaking to the Irish Independent at a conference for Catholic reform groups at the weekend ahead of the World Meeting Of Families (WMOF) in Dublin in August. She said the Church's teaching on same-sex relationships was "deeply insulting and offensive". "As a gay person, I don't want pastoral care from the Church. Pastoral care only brings comfort to the Church," she said. "I reject the Church's teaching that gay people are 'objectively disordered' and that our love is 'intrinsically evil'." Ms. Halligan, who attended the conference as a delegate, described herself as a "person of faith and a committed Catholic".

However, she added: "As a woman and a gay person, I'm not putting up with it any longer. I'm not sitting at the back of the bus any more. The institutional Church has to change on this." She said the Church's teaching on same-sex relationships was "deeply insulting and offensive, not only to the dignity of every gay person, but it is deeply insulting to God whose image and likeness we are made in.

"I believe my love is as good as anyone else's love and as a Catholic I'm looking for full sacramental marriage for same-sex couples," she said.

She added: "The recent removal of images of gay people from the WMOF event brochure is disturbing and alarming. "It sends out a disturbing message.

"On the second last day of the WMOF 2018, a Festival of Families will take place on Saturday, August 25, and five selected families from around the world will be invited to give witness to their families' faith. What preparations are under way

to ensure at least one of these families will be a family headed by a same-sex couple?" she asked.

Speakers at the conference, titled 'Future Families: Challenges for Faith and Society', included Susan Casey, a divorced mother of two originally from the US but living in Ireland. She criticised the Church's "demonisation" of divorced and separated families and warned that "the Eucharist is being used as a weapon rather than nourishment" against people whose marriages fail.

Two mothers, who are practicing Catholics and whose sons are gay, addressed the conference. Other speakers included Denis O'Brien, of the National Youth Council of Ireland, and Ray Kelly, of Unmarried and Separated Families of Ireland.

Concern was expressed by participants that conservative American funders were "calling the shots" over the line-up of workshops and speakers for the WMOF event in Dublin.

Patricia Fitzsimons, of the Association of Catholics in Ireland's steering group, said Irish Catholics were concerned that the WMOF gathering "isn't seen to be expressing the views of Irish people".

<https://www.independent.ie/irish-news/ursula-halligan-i-want-gay-marriage-in-church-my-love-is-not-evil-36809873.html>.

## **Concluding Remarks**

Future Families: Challenges for Faith and Society brought together Irish Catholic families from throughout Ireland, many of whom are members of the Association of Catholics in Ireland (ACI). The key aim of the conference was to provide a forum for the sharing of experiences, and to provide a voice for those who experience disenfranchisement and isolation within the Catholic Church. This report offers the views, concerns and recommendations for action of catholic families in Ireland represented here in all of its diversity. It is a submission to Pope Francis and the World Meeting of Families organising committee in anticipation of his visit to Ireland in August.

The conference was led by the delegates through facilitated focus group discussions on issues of their own choosing including Child Abuse; Catholic Priests Secret Families; Catholic Church and Homosexuality; LGBTQI+ Families; Need for Women Speakers at WMOF; Role of Separated, Unmarried and Divorced Families in the Church; Church resembles Victorian Family; Who is Funding WMOF; Parental Alienation Syndrome; and Sexuality, Celibacy and Priesthood. This report also offers media contributions to the fora.

The core theme that emerged throughout this consultation and in the previous ACI consultation Synod on the Family (2015) is one of Inclusivity. The Association of Catholics in Ireland request that the Catholic Church embraces and includes, in actions as well as words, all of the families of Ireland regardless of their marital status and or sexual orientation.

## Online Resources

<https://www.thestar.com/news/insight/2018/04/17/catholic-priests-take-a-vow-of-celibacy-when-theyre-ordained-but-when-they-break-that-vow-their-children-are-left-to-live-a-lie.html>

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