

The Rainbow Manifesto: Church and Society Responding to Issues Relating to Homosexuality in Iceland

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When Gay Pride was celebrated for the first time in Reykjavik, in the summer of 1999, nobody could have guessed that within a few years it would become the second largest annual event in Iceland. The first Saturday in August every year, thousands and thousands of people of all ages (up to 80,000 out of a population of 320,000 in total), homosexual and heterosexual, gather together down town Reykjavik, in order to show “solidarity with the gay cause.”²

In this essay the focus will be on the discourse regarding homosexuality that has developed within church and society in Iceland since the early 1990s. The situation of homosexual people in Icelandic society has changed drastically in the past two decades. Their legal rights have improved enormously, and the general attitude toward homosexuality has taken a U-turn.

While the rainbow has served as a symbol for gay and lesbian people for decades, it has a strong religious significance pointing all the way back to the story of Noah in the Old Testament. After the flood, God established a covenant with Noah and “every living creature of all flesh.” And God said to Noah:

When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh (Gen 9:14–15).

An important question regarding the issue of homosexuality has been if everybody, regardless of sexual orientation, should be recognized as bearers of the divine image. According to the story of Noah, the question concerns the covenant between God and “all flesh that is on the earth.”

Theological discourse never happens in a historical vacuum. Homosexuality is without question one of the most pressing issues facing the Christian church in the beginning of the twenty-first century. Walter Wink, a former professor of biblical interpretation and ordained minister within the Methodist Church, rightfully

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compared the issue of homosexuality with the controversy caused by slavery in the nineteenth century. He wrote:

Sexual issues are tearing our churches apart today as never before. The issue of homosexuality threatens to fracture whole denominations, as the issue of slavery did a hundred and fifty years ago ...³

For the past two decades the church community in Iceland has been preoccupied with pressing questions related to homosexuality. While a large group within the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Iceland wanted their church to be proactive in its support of the rights of homosexual people, the resistance was also strong among church members. In the end a common marriage legislation for homosexual and heterosexual people called for a final decision on behalf of the church. The conclusion was full recognition of the rights of homosexual people to get married within the church.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Iceland (ELCI)

Christianity became a legalized religion in Iceland by a decision made by Althing, the national legislative assembly, in the year 1000. The Church of Iceland was a part of the Roman Church until the Reformation was enforced by the Danish king, and the established church became Lutheran in 1550. The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Iceland (hereafter referred to as ELCI) is a National Church and, like the Lutheran majority churches in the Nordic countries, has operated in close association with the state, much closer than religious organizations in other parts of Europe. It has enjoyed both protection and support, including financial support by the state, guaranteed by the Icelandic constitution. This

1. The author was an elected member of the Constitutional Council and is a member of the Doctrinal Committee of the ELCI.

2. <http://www.gaypride.is/Index/English/AboutReykjavik-GayPride/>

3. Wink, 33.

support is greater than that given to any other religious organization in Iceland.⁴

Currently, 75 percent of Iceland's population are members of the ELCI. By the implementation of new church laws in 1997, the ELCI has gained a great deal of independence from the state. It is still a National Church by definition, and the parliament has the final say in any external matters regarding the status of the church. Most importantly, the church is completely independent regarding theological matters.

As a majority church, the ELCI has been greatly challenged by questions regarding homosexuality and increasing legal rights of gay and lesbian people in Icelandic society. A reevaluation of presumptions and attitudes toward homosexuality and same sex relationships has been inevitable, while ordained ministers as well as parishoners have had to reconsider their ideas about the role and meaning of marriage. Within the ELCI the burning issue has not been the ordination of homosexual individuals, unlike, for example, for churches in the United States. Rather, rather, it is the question of whether it is permissible for clergy to preside at a blessing or a wedding ceremony for same sex couples in church. The ordination of homosexual individuals has never been openly debated within the ELCI. In the end of the 1990s the Bishop of Iceland stated in the media that lesbian and gay individuals seeking ordination would not be denied ordination based on their sexual orientation. This is in-line with Lutheran churches in the other Nordic countries.

Discrimination prohibited by the constitution

Iceland was granted its first constitution by the Danish king in 1874, while Iceland was still a part of the Danish Crown. Necessary constitutional changes were made when Iceland became independent, but only minor changes have been made since then. A clear exception is the chapter on human rights issues, which was updated in 1995, in-line with international human rights declarations, such as *The European Convention on Human Rights* and *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. Article 65, on prohibition of discrimination, originates from 1995:

Everyone shall be equal before the law and enjoy human rights irrespective of sex, religion, opinion, national origin, race, colour, property, birth or other status.
Men and women shall enjoy equal rights in all respects.⁵

A Constitutional Council was elected in a general election in November of 2010. The task of the elected members was to rewrite the Icelandic Constitution. The Council finished its job in the summer of 2011 and presented a bill for a new constitution to the speaker of the parliament at the end of July.⁶ In an updated version of the prohibition of discrimination *homosexuality* has been added to the list of grounds on which everyone should be protected from

discrimination. A new constitution has to be approved both by the majority of the parliament and those who are eligible to vote in a national referendum before it goes into effect. Whether it is approved or not, it most likely reflects the will of the majority of people of Iceland to guarantee the equal rights of individuals in our society, regardless of their sexual orientation.

Same sex partnership

In 1989, Denmark became the first Nordic country to grant legal rights to same sex couples. Norway and Sweden followed in 1993 and 1995 respectively. On June 27, 1996, the Icelandic parliament (Althing) passed a bill granting same sex couples the rights to enter a registered partnership.⁷ A clear majority of parliamentarians supported the bill. This was indeed a huge step toward the full equality of homosexual individuals in Iceland.

Since pastors of the ELCI as well as leaders of other registered religious communities are licensed to officiate at wedding ceremonies, it was inevitable that the question of same sex marriages conducted in churches would come up. Responses from the ELCI were mixed. Even if the news regarding the newly passed legislation on same sex partnership were greeted by pastors with applause during an annual Pastoral Synod⁸ meeting on June 27, 1996, the body of ELCI, clergy as well as lay members, was still widely split on the question of the right of same sex couples to get married in church. The overall reaction from Evangelical Free Churches was negative.

According to the law regarding registered partnership from 1996, same sex couples could neither adopt nor have access to in vitro fertilization (IVF). In 2000 it was made legal for homosexual partners to adopt the children of their spouses. A much bigger change occurred in 2006, when same sex couples were allowed to adopt according to the same law as heterosexual couples, and lesbian couples were given the legal rights to get assistance through IVF.

The church's response

The first time the question of homosexuality was raised formally within the ELCI was in a Pastoral Synod meeting in June of 1987. The burning issue was the increasing danger of AIDS and how churches, congregations, and Christian individuals could help prevent the spread of the disease. In a press release, it was reiterated that all individuals are in fact created by God, which obliges them to love their neighbors and not to harm them. Hence, homosexual and heterosexual individuals alike, were encouraged to show responsibility in their sexual lives, and not take any chances that would put their partners at risk.

In the summer of 1996 the Church Council⁹ appointed a

4. Hjalti Hugason, 107.

5. <http://www.government.is/constitution/>

6. <http://stjornlagarad.is/english/>

7. <http://www.althingi.is/altext/120/s/1182.html>

8. *The Pastoral Synod* is an annual meeting of all pastors and deacons serving within ELCI. It processes major decisions on matters of faith and worship.

9. *The Church Council* is the supreme executive body of the church, consisting of five members, two lay and two clergy together with the Bishop of Iceland who serves as the chair. The Council is

study group to evaluate the situation of homosexual individuals from a theological, ethical, and legal perspective. The group presented a report to the annual meetings of the General Synod¹⁰ in October 1996 and the Pastoral Synod in June 1997, which strongly recommended that the church prepare a liturgy for a blessing ceremony for same sex couples who have already entered into a partnership during a civil service. At the same time, the report urged church authorities to look carefully into possibilities for the church to officiate at ceremonies for same sex couples who want to enter into partnerships. Finally it stressed the importance of open discussion and education within the church regarding questions related to homosexuality.

Neither the General Synod nor the Pastoral Synod made any final decisions during their meetings within the next couple of years. The report was thoroughly discussed, and opinions were quite diverse. There was still a general agreement on the importance of a continuing dialogue among members of the church, as well as the necessity of educational material provided by the ELCI office of education. Unfortunately, this never materialized, and the issue was more or less put on hold. In the meantime the Bishop of Iceland drafted a liturgy for a blessing ceremony for pastors who chose to offer such ceremonies for same sex couples who had entered into partnership during a civil service, and wished to be blessed by their church. Thus, since 1999, pastors of ELCI have had permission from their bishop to provide blessing ceremonies for same sex couples.

Theological “home-work”

The initiative to revive the study process came from the Prime Minister of Iceland, which is a clear example of how close the relationship is between the ELCI as a National Church and the State. In the fall of 2003 the Prime Minister assembled a committee in order to evaluate legal rights of same sex couples. The committee finished its work in the fall of 2004, and presented an extensive report. The report included a strong recommendation to the ELCI to reevaluate its position on same sex marriage, and offer a church ceremony for same sex couples. In June of the following year, the Pastoral Synod passed a resolution encouraging the Bishop of Iceland to call for a theological response from the Doctrinal Committee of the ELCI to the appeal from the Prime Minister’s committee that pastors should start officiating at marital ceremonies for homosexual couples as well as heterosexual couples in church.

The Bishop of Iceland summoned the Doctrinal Committee¹¹

elected by the General Synod.

10. *The General Synod* is the decision making body of the ELCI, that meets once a year. There are twenty-nine representatives, seventeen lay and twelve clergy. The chair person is elected from the group of lay representatives.

11. The role of *the Doctrinal Committee* is to advise the Bishop of Iceland on doctrinal matters. The Bishop of Iceland chairs the committee. Other members are: the two Suffragan Bishops; a Professor of Systematic Theology at the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies,

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in the fall of 2005. A draft of a position paper was presented at the Pastoral Synod in June 2006. It was revised by the Committee in light of recommendations from the Pastoral Synod, and presented again at the General Synod in October 2006.¹² The General Synod agreed that it should be sent out to parishes and institutions within the ELCI for discussions and responses were requested to be submitted in time for the annual meeting of the General Synod in the fall of 2007.

The Doctrinal Committee decided that questions regarding same sex partnership and the church belonged to the following theological loci :

- Interpretation of Scripture
- Ethics
- The church’s diaconal mission
- Ecclesiology

Probably the most frequently used arguments against homosexuality within the church are based on oft-cited biblical texts. By claiming that these texts should not be considered directed against homosexuality as such, “nor the individuals who live in a caring relationship of love and commitment,” the Committee changed the premises of the discourse significantly. This conclusion is based on the Lutheran understanding that Christ alone (*solus Christus*) is the hermeneutical key to Scripture. When Scripture is read primarily as our main witness to Jesus Christ as the savior of the world (*sola scriptura*), everything that does not point to Jesus Christ becomes secondary, i.e., a matter belonging to the temporal order and not a matter of faith (*sola fide*).

When it came to the ethical question, the Doctrinal Committee started by emphasising that because God is the Creator of all human beings, the church recognizes the equal status of everybody, and advocates justice and human rights. As children of God (whether they admit it or not) everybody is obliged to live according to the commandment to love God and to love her/his neighbor, as well as the Golden Rule from the Gospel of Matthew: “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets” (7:12). These texts should form the basis for our moral reflections and decisions when there are disagreements

the University of Iceland; a representative of the Pastoral Synod; a representative of the General Synod (a lay person).

12. <http://www2.kirkjan.is/skjol/elci-and-registered-partnership.pdf>

on moral issues such as those regarding human sexuality.

While claiming “a traditional” (i.e., heterosexual) understanding of marriage as a union between a man and a woman, the Committee reiterated that because marriage is not considered a sacrament within the Lutheran tradition, legislation pertaining to marriage is not a religious but a civil matter. Thus, even if Luther held marriage in high regard, as he certainly did, he considered it a part of God’s order of creation and not pertinent to our salvation. But despite the fact that the Committee held to a heterosexual understanding of marriage, it nevertheless was ready to state that the ELCI acknowledges “other forms” of relationships in addition to a marital relationship between a man and a woman.

An ELCI pastor is a state official as well as a servant of the church, therefore having a double role while performing in a wedding ceremony. Hence, a wedding has legal but also a religious significance. While holding to a heterosexual understanding of marriage, the Doctrinal Committee maintained the church could not oppose a blessing ceremony for same sex couples. This is why the Committee recommended that ministers of the ELCI would be allowed to bless a civil partnership of same sex couples, and they would be provided a liturgy for the occasion. The important message was that the blessing offered to heterosexual couples in a wedding ceremony was essentially the same as the blessing offered to homosexual couples in a blessing ceremony with no legal status.

Regarding the ecclesiological question, the Committee refers to the definition of church given by the *The Augsburg Confession* Article VII, where a clear difference is made between what is necessary and what isn’t. It writes:

It is also taught among us that one holy Christian church will be and remain forever. This is the assembly of all believers among whom the Gospel is preached in its purity and the holy sacraments are administered according to the Gospel. For it is sufficient for the true unity of the Christian church that the Gospel be preached in conformity with a pure understanding of it and that the sacraments be administered in accordance with the divine Word. It is not necessary for the true unity of the Christian church that ceremonies, instituted by men, should be observed uniformly in all places. It is as Paul says in Eph 4:4, 5 “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism”.¹³

As long as the Lutheran Church does not regard marriage as a sacrament, but as a “worldly institution,” the Doctrinal Committee concluded that questions related to marriage or same sex unions are moral or ethical questions, and not faith questions. Therefore, such questions should not threaten the unity of the church. Nevertheless, practices within the larger ecumenical context are to be respected, as the ELCI is not an isolated identity but belongs to

the larger church community.¹⁴

Toward full equality

The members of the Doctrinal Committee were far from being of one mind regarding the matter of contention, as some members were from the beginning ready to argue for the right of same sex couples to be married in church. This is why the report reflects a compromise between different opinions. While a heterosexual definition of marriage was clearly favored by those who didn’t want any change, the report was nevertheless able to move the discussion forward. First of all, to claim that biblical texts about same sex relationships should not be understood as a condemnation of homosexuality, as such, was an important attempt to respond to those who did not want to take the discourse beyond citing texts from Scripture, something that clearly had stifled the discourse. Second, it was a step forward to argue that the blessing offered to heterosexual couples during a wedding ceremony in church was of the same nature as a blessing offered to same sex couples during a blessing ceremony. Implied was the understanding that the only difference between the two services was the legal implementation of getting married in church. In these two important matters, the Doctrinal Committee had managed to move the discourse forward, regarding two important matters.

A finalized report from the Doctrinal Committee was first presented at a meeting of the Pastoral Synod in April of 2007. From the discussions taking place among pastors and deacons it was clear that while many considered the Report too supportive of homosexuality, others thought it was not radical enough. Heated discussions took place regarding a proposal by a group of pastors who wanted pastors of the ELCI to be permitted to perform wedding ceremonies for same sex couples. The proposal was turned down by a majority of pastors at the synod meeting, while the Report from the Doctrinal Committee received a clear majority of support.

The content of the Report was officially received at a meeting of the General Synod in October 2007. An agreement was reached regarding the question of civil partnership of same sex couples by adopting the following proposal:

The General Synod declares support for the basic understanding of the position paper from the Doctrinal Committee on the church and civil partnership and affirms traditional understanding of marriage as a covenant between a man and a woman.

If legislation regarding civil partnership of same sex couples will be changed so that churches and religious associations will be licensed to conduct same sex partner-

14. The question of prerequisites for the unity of the churches within the Lutheran Communion plays a key role in the study of “Marriage, Family, and Human Sexuality” conducted by a task force appointed by *The Lutheran World Federation Council*: http://www.lutheranworld.org/LWF_Documents/EN/Council_07-Task_Force_Report-EN.pdf

13. *The Book of Concord*, 32.

ship, then the General Synod supports that pastors who are licensed to do so, will be allowed to contract a civil partnership.

The General Synod stresses that pastors should have the right to choose whether they perform this service or not.¹⁵

In 2008, Althing changed the legislation on same sex partnership, permitting pastors and leaders of religious associations to legally conduct the act. The General Synod agreed in 2009 that pastors would act according to the new law.

In May 2009, a new government coalition of The Social Democratic Alliance and The Left-Green Movement was formed. The new government announced that its agenda included a common marriage legislation for homosexual and heterosexual people. This announcement revitalized the discussion about the possibility of same sex couples to get married in the church. At a meeting of the Pastoral Synod in April of 2010, ninety-one pastors and deacons put forward the following proposal:

The meeting of the Pastoral Synod in the Church of Vidalin on April 27 – 29, 2010 supports the bill of new marriage legislation proposed by the Minister of Justice and Human Rights. The Pastoral Synod believes the ELCI is ready to take the step with the government, after many years of comprehensive theological discussion about church, sexual orientation, and marriage.¹⁶

The Synod was heavily split regarding the proposal. To some it was absolutely impossible to imagine that pastors might marry same sex couples. Their counter-proposal was that pastors no longer officiate at any wedding ceremonies. After intense discussion, members of the Synod voted on the proposal, and it was defeated by only three votes. The Synod agreed that the Doctrinal Committee would draft a response to the pending new marriage legislation.

The discussion continued in the church and in society at large. Many people expressed anger toward pastors (and “the church”) for not being ready to act in support of their homosexual sisters and brothers. The Bishop of Iceland then sent a survey to pastors, deacons, theologians, and chairs of parish councils asking them if they believed the church was ready to take a stand on the matter, or if it needed more theological preparation. The result of the survey was that almost 80 percent thought pastors should continue to officiate at weddings after the new legislation would come into effect.

Full legal equality finally came on June 27, 2010, when Parliament unanimously passed new legislation regarding marriage. The main difference between the new and the old legislation was the definition of marriage. Before, marriage was defined as a legal partnership between man and a woman; in the new legislation, marriage is a contract between two individuals, regardless of sex.

15. <http://kirkjuthing.is/gerdir/2007/8>

16. Translated from the Icelandic by the author from notes on the occasion.

By adopting this liturgy the ELCI completed a long process toward a full recognition of the rights of same sex couples to get married within the church.

At the same time, the legislation regarding registered partnership from 1996 became obsolete. According to the new legislation same sex couples in registered partnership could have their partnership acknowledged as a marriage. Among those who chose to have their partnership converted into a marriage was the Prime Minister of Iceland, Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir, who legally married her spouse, Jónína Leósdóttir, on June 27, 2010, something which attracted world wide attention.¹⁷

A few days before the bill was passed, 111 individuals, pastors, theologians, and deacons, signed a statement, which was published in the daily newspapers in Iceland and was well covered in other media. More than half of the pastors serving within the ELCI were part of the group. The statement was the following:

We are pastors, deacons, and theologians, who serve within the ELCI and in Icelandic Lutheran Free-churches. We celebrate one marriage law in Iceland, becoming effective as of June 27, 2010. We celebrate because soon homosexual as well as heterosexual couples can get married in their churches.¹⁸

This statement caused much attention within the church, as well as in the society at large.

On Sunday, June 27, 2010, the new legislation was celebrated in churches all over Iceland. Numerous wedding ceremonies were conducted, and for the first time, same sex couples were married in church. A celebration was held in a downtown Reykjavik church in the evening, in which the National Queer Organization granted its human rights award to the pastors, theologians, and deacons who signed the statement for their “invaluable support” of human rights of homosexual, bisexual and trans-gender individuals in Iceland.¹⁹ The Minister of Justice and Human Rights gave a speech about the significance of this legislation for equality of all members of society, and an important contribution to the legal rights of homosexual individuals to enjoy family life.²⁰

17. <http://www.britannica.com/blogs/2010/06/debating-same-sex-marriage-iceland-prime-minister-weds-partner/>

18. <http://einjhjuskaparlog.tumblr.com/>

19. http://www.samtokin78.is/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=5342:mannrettindavieurkenningar-samtakanna-78&catid=1:latest&Itemid=26;

http://www.samtokin78.is/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=152&Itemid=159

20. http://www.innanrikisraduneyti.is/radherra/raedur_ragna/nr/7584

Adapting to the new legislation, the Doctrinal Committee of the ELCI approved of a new liturgy of marriage, prepared by the Liturgical Committee. This is a common liturgy for homosexual and heterosexual couples. By adopting this liturgy the ELCI completed a long process toward a full recognition of the rights of same sex couples to get married within the church. In many ways this has been a long and strenuous process, driven by the deep commitment of homosexual individuals to their church, and the strong conviction of many pastors and lay people, that full recognition was the only just conclusion.

“...in the image of God”

The issue of homosexuality is without doubt among the most important theological matters the church is faced with world wide today. By no means is it simply a question of human rights, which it is, of course, too; or for that matter a question of political correctness, despite allegations of those who want to brush it off the table. Being an issue which is “tearing our churches apart today as never before”, as Walter Wink maintained, churches do not have a choice but to face pressing theological questions regarding this issue, questions which touch on key subjects like Scriptural interpretation, ecclesiological understanding, theological anthropology, and, last but not least, perceptions of God.

How the ELCI has reacted to questions regarding homosexuality and the right of homosexual individuals to be acknowledged for who they are, is an example of how theological discourse is often (if not always), more or less, initiated and shaped by its historical context. On similar notes, Wendy Farley, a professor of systemic theology at Emory University, argues in her book, *Gathering Those Driven Away*, that theology “makes sense only if it speaks to real experience.”²¹ That is certainly the case, Farley states, when the “real experience” of those who have been “driven away” becomes the starting point for the theological discourse about who rightfully belongs to the church, or the covenant between God and creation.²²

The issue of homosexuality is certainly not the first issue threatening the unity of the church, as Wink rightfully pointed out. The serious debates about slavery and the ordination of women have before (and in the case of the ordination of women, still does) threatened to break apart denominations and church communities. There are striking similarities in the theological discourse related to the status of homosexual individuals, slaves, and women within the order of creation. An important part of the discourse relates to the question of the image of God, and whether women and men, slaves and free, homosexual and heterosexual individuals, are all created equal, hence equally participating in the covenant between the creator and “every living creature of all flesh.”

When theologians were still debating whether women were “fully human” as men, theologians frequently discussed whether or not women had a soul, and whether they were made in God’s image. Most theologians, including Augustine, bishop of Hippo

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(354–430) and Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), affirmed women’s humanity, but denied women’s equality with men. For both Augustine and Aquinas, for example, the male human being was assumed to be the norm, in comparison to which the female human being appeared to be deficient. Regarding the question of *imago dei*, neither Augustine nor Aquinas thought women and men carried the image of God in the same way, without totally denying women’s participation in God’s image.²³

Despite striking similarities, by no means are the matters of contentions related to the status of women, slaves, and homosexual individuals, all the same. I would nevertheless argue for significant similarities which makes a comparison between different theological discourses worth while. Important examples are questions of the role of Scripture, and what it really implies to be created “in the image of God.” Hence, questions of how to interpret texts such as the ones in Leviticus, chapters 18 and 20, and the first chapter of Paul’s letter to the Romans, are always going to be a part of the theological discourse, as well as the question of whether homosexual individuals are without any qualifications created in God’s image. Only when those questions have been answered is it possible to state whether everyone, regardless of sexual orientation, should be recognized as a bearer of the divine image—or not; namely, whether God’s covenant is for “every living creature of all flesh,” or only the straight ones.²⁴

21. Farley, *Gathering Those Driven Away*, 134.

22. *Ibid.*, 201.

23. Guðmundsdóttir, *Meeting God on the Cross*, 9; 22–23.

24. I would like to extend my gratitude to Professor Anna Carter Florence, at Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Ga., USA, for her helpful editorial comments and critique.