

Towards a safe LGBTQ+ friendly church

About our relationship with
brothers and sisters (and guests)
with homo or trans feelings or with
related lifestyle choices.

Can someone with a homo relationship or who has gone through gender transition be baptised? Participate at the Lord's supper? Have their relationship or their new gender identity blessed? Become a member of the congregation? Serve in a ministry or hold an office in the church?

Some congregations choose not to talk about this. Perhaps out of naivety, thinking it is self-evident for everyone in the church. Or out of fear, seeking to prevent a church division. Others clearly want to begin this conversation, but how? Where to start?

What kind of congregations are there?

Here in The Netherlands I notice that churches respond in one of four ways to people with LHBTQ+ identities. These four types of church provide a useful framework to encourage a fruitful conversation.

Type A - INCLUSIVE church: a welcoming-affirming congregation

They affirm homosexual relationships and bless their homo 'marriages'. They recognise and affirm trans men as men and trans women as women. **Their biblical emphasis** is on the unconditional grace and love of God (Joh. 3). Just as the arms of Jesus are wide open to receive every human being, so must the church accept everyone. They often speak about subjects such as peace, unconditional love, diversity, grace, acceptance, inclusiveness, 'do not judge' (Mat.7), relationships characterized by 'love and faithfulness', 'being free to be who you are'. They see themselves as an inclusive church where everyone who claims to love the Lord Jesus is warmly welcome.

Type B – TOLERANT church: A welcoming-seeking church

They see themselves as an open and flexible congregation. They do not take a position on homosexual relationships and transsexuality.

They see these as important private matters. They make room for different and sometimes contradictory visions. Leaders in such churches often see themselves more as 'faith facilitators', so that each believer may develop his or her own journey of faith. **Their biblical emphasis** is on the importance of a personal walk with God, personal growth,

personal convictions and the need to love, respect and accept those who have different convictions (Rom. 14). They stress the importance of unity in diversity (John 17). In these churches you often hear it said that the Bible is not clear enough, conclusions can be divisive and that the conversation must remain ongoing. They often settle for 'we agree to disagree'. They prefer to talk about 'interpretations' rather than 'truth'.



Type C - SAFE church: A welcoming-non-affirming church

Everyone is warmly welcome in their services, irrespective of their type of brokenness. They see homosexual feelings and gender dysphoria as expressions of brokenness. Their priority is to help people have an encounter with Jesus Christ. Dealing with sexuality and gender identity (and other lifestyle choices) comes after conversion, as part of being a disciple. They are convinced that sexual intimacy belongs only within a marriage between a man and a woman. God's plan for the life of every human being as man or woman can be seen in the body He has given him or her (intersex is a form of physical brokenness). **Their Biblical emphasis** is on 'grace and truth' (John 1). Terms such as discipleship, marriage covenant, obedience, self-denial and 'take up his cross' (Luk.9) are discussed. They are prepared to use God's truth to 'admonish one another' (Col.3).

Their focus is on learning to trust God, learning to accept and embrace what He says about us and what He gives us (even when it conflicts with our desires and deep feelings) and learning to live a holy life with and for Him.

Type D - PURE church: A protecting-not-affirming church

People in homosexual relationships and those who have chosen to gender transition are immediately and sometimes publicly disapproved of. They are clearly not welcome in their church meetings. Church members are concerned that being 'friendly and welcoming' may be interpreted as being affirming. They do not want to endorse or 'affirm' incorrect lifestyle choices. They do not want to send the wrong signal to others in the congregation, especially the young. Before such people could be welcomed in church services, they would need to acknowledge their sinful choices and correct their lifestyle. **Their biblical emphasis** is on the sinfulness of man (Rom. 3), the effects of the fall, God's holiness, God's judgement and the importance of pure and holy living (1Pt. 1). Terms such as evil, sin, abomination, disobedience, rebellion, judgement, public testimony, defilement, leaven are regularly used.

Observations

- **Type A** (Inclusive) congregations sometimes call themselves 'safe churches'. They mean by this that no one will ask difficult questions about lifestyle choices concerning sexual relations and transsexuality. But this is no 'safe church' for your soul. Just like a city where everyone interprets and applies the traffic rules in their own way is no a 'safe city'.
- **Type B** (Tolerant) churches are unstable. They offer a temporary solution while moving in the direction of what the current culture finds acceptable. They eventually become Type A churches.
- **Type C** (Safe) churches face a major challenge. They can never walk this path without the love, patience and compassion of the Lord Jesus and the daily power of the Holy Spirit. It will often be a messy church, but with a clear Biblical direction and vision (identity), focused on God's honour.
- **Type D** (Pure) congregations make people with homo or transexual feelings feel

condemned, ashamed of their type of brokenness, stay under the radar, leave the church or never enter it.

Important not to forget

- The gospel is 'good news', also about sexuality, also for people with homo and trans feelings.
- Thomas Cranmer, archbishop of the Anglican Church, discovered 500 years ago that "What the **heart** loves, the **will** chooses and the **mind** justifies". That is true also today, also on this topic. "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?" (Jer. 17:9). That is why we need God's Spirit, God's Word and each other.
- *Being* man or woman (or being born intersex) is a **physical category**. *Feeling* man or woman (or something else) is a **psychological category**. A psychological category never determines a physical category.
- We grow in Christ as we speak "truth in love" (Eph. 4:15). We show our love for one another by speaking the truth to one another. "Love... rejoices with the truth" (1 Cor. 13:6).

What kind of church do you want to be?

A Safe Church (Type C) is the model that harmonizes with God's Word, reflects the warm open heart of our Lord Jesus and shows due respect to God's holiness and righteousness. It is also the most difficult church model to practice. The work on it is never done. A good way to begin a discussion on this topic, is to describe church Types A, B, C and D. Using the Bible Type C can then be favoured. In order to develop a Type C church culture, I recommend three priorities. Work on:

1. **Love:** healthy and supportive relationships, connectedness within the church family.
2. **Truth:** acknowledging the authority of God's Word, clear Bible teaching. It may help to develop a vision document that describes a Type C church in a way that fits your denominational colour.
3. **Structure:** effective pastoral and discipleship processes for the whole congregation.