

Fortunate Families

Parents Voice Project Survey Report

By Casey Lopata¹
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This is a report on the responses of Catholic parents of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) daughters and sons to a survey conducted by *Fortunate Families*.² From July 6 to September 19, 2006, 229 parents submitted surveys. Though not a random sample, the findings can likely be viewed as representative of a great many faithful Catholic parents who love both their LGBT children and their Church.

Significant findings

- Parents are significantly more comfortable now than when they initially learned they had a LGBT child. Parents now are quite comfortable with having a LGBT child, and only slightly less comfortable with others knowing that.
- Parents who know at least one other parent of a LGBT person are significantly more comfortable now—both with having a LGBT child and with others knowing—than parents who know no other parents.
- Parents with a higher comfort level now were more likely to have shared their story, to have found sharing helpful, and to feel sharing is important. Most helpful to parents was sharing with immediate family, friends, and other Catholic parents. Least helpful was sharing with civic officials, Catholic psychologists, and their bishops.
- Parents said advocating for justice in society and in the Church were the most important experiences or activities. The most helpful were attending a workshop, advocating for justice in society, and wearing a symbol of gay support. Least helpful were writing to secular or Catholic media, and writing to their Bishop.
- About half of the 75% of parents who responded to the question about involvement possibilities are willing to peer counsel³ other Catholic parents, and 84% of those parents are also willing to publicly identify as Catholic parent peer counselors.
- Asked if there is anything else that would be helpful to them at this point, one theme eclipsed all others: Parents want the institutional Church to be more accepting of LGBT persons.
- Slightly more than 75% of parents read *Always Our Children*⁴, and about 75% of them feel it is helpful for Catholic parents. A majority of parents who commented (see Appendix T for comments) indicated it was somewhat helpful but it “fell short.”

¹ Cofounder and current *Fortunate Families* board member.

² *Fortunate Families* is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization that offers resources to Catholic parents of LGBT children and encourages them to advocate for justice in the Church and in society for their daughters and sons. See www.fortunatefamilies.com for additional information.

³ Parents are not usually professional counselors, and they understand this role as it was intended—listening to other parents, encouraging them, and offering the benefit of their experience when appropriate.

⁴ *Always Our Children: A Pastoral Message to Parents of Homosexual Children and Suggestions for Pastoral Ministers* is a 1997/98 statement of the United States Bishops' Committee on Marriage and Family.

“This has been a ten year journey that would have begun with completely different answers. With the love and support of those who came before us we have been able to move from pain and sadness, loss and grief to the joy, courage and passion to have a voice in places that our son cannot. To carry the message that God’s love is given to EVERY person. That this precious son of ours is the same son that we and God conceived, carried, gave birth to and had baptized into the Catholic Family. Although he feels too tired for a place at the table we will spend our last breath carrying the message that God loves each of his precious children and we do too.”

-- from a Mom’s survey

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

At the end of the survey, parents were asked if they would like to add anything else. Here are some of the wide-ranging comments they offered.

- *You make it appear that there is some genuine hope that we are going to prevail on behalf of our children in the Catholic Church. In the current climate, I cannot see this happening.*
- *Thank you for this survey—gives us GREAT hope that together we will be able love and support each other.*
- *Nothing was said in this survey about prayer. I think that it is crucial that all parents pray daily for our children, our priests and our Church.*
- *I am still so angry with the ‘church’ and its cover up of priests’ sexual abuse of children. How dare they say that being gay is a sin. So much for my being Catholic. But I sure do miss singing in the choir!*
- *I do not feel that the occasional or isolated accepting parish is enough to shore up Catholic parents of GLBT children or for members of the GLBT community. I feel like a hypocrite going to church knowing that I do not agree with the majority of the church leadership. Until religions, including the Catholic religion, recognize and respect my child and his rights I have little or no use for them. It is not enough to ‘tolerate’ or ‘love the sinner but hate the sin.’ At the same time as a cradle Catholic I am unable to feel comfortable in other churches and at other services. I feel like I’m stuck in limbo. I have very strong faith but have no faith community within which to practice that faith.*
- *I would like to believe that there is a way to change the Church’s beliefs about homosexuality and am willing to help in that effort.*
- *The work of the Holy Spirit is definitely present. I was so saddened by the lack of response when I tried to contact other parents and the very next day your survey arrived. Do hope to be a bridge builder in the spirit of Sr. Jeannine Gramick.*
- *I do not feel like the Catholic Church offers any support with our children. I remain a Catholic only because of the Mass and the Eucharist. Maybe we can make some headway within the Church but it will remain slow.*
- *I do like the name of your group. I’ve always felt fortunate.*

Drawing from these remarks, and from the wealth of data and comments produced by this survey and its analysis, here are some conclusions and recommendations, tentatively offered, since they are based on a sample that is not random. They can be helpful to other Catholic parents of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender daughters and sons who are very much like parents represented in this survey. Similarly, these conclusions and recommendations can be helpful to family members and to those who do or should minister with them.

Conclusions

- Support for parents and their LGBT children in the Church is scarce, localized, and a hit-or-miss proposition.
- Parents love their LGBT children, and they love their Church. But they do not see their love, or God's unconditional love, reflected in the institutional Church's response to their LGBT daughters and sons.
- The underlying basis for many parent suggestions is to break the silence in the Church and to get the Church out of the closet. Parents seem to suggest that the Church needs to go through the same process of learning and growth in understanding that parents went or are going through.
- Parents grieve that the Church's inadequate response has distanced both parents and their daughters and sons from the Church. And they grieve what they view as the distancing of the Church from the compassionate example of Jesus. If forced to choose, they choose their children over the institutional Church, but they do not lose their faith in Christ.

That's the overriding sense of the 229 respondents to the survey.

In and through their unforeseen journeys, parents' initial fears and tears have been transformed into ire and fire. The fire has turned to glowing embers for some who have distanced themselves from the institutional Church. For others it is burning strong as they try to concentrate their energy to encourage and enable the people in the pews and the institutional Church to embody the compassion and love of Jesus, and to extend it toward their LGBT loved ones.

"I am comfortable with sharing our story, but political and religious activism are more my style. I think this movement has to some extent been stuck in the coming out phase, and must become more celebratory of the many gifts of our GLBT loved ones, and more politically active in both Church and society."

Fortunate Families' hope is that these parents' love, confusion, sadness, pride, frustration, and anger will be channeled into a prophetic and faithful call for the institutional Church to listen to and understand the lived experience of these parents and their LGBT daughters and sons. Their stories of God's love revealed in their daughters and sons—stories which have been steadily changing the hearts and gaining the support of the grassroots Church—will eventually touch the hearts of institutional Church leaders and bring about the compassion exemplified by Jesus and resulting in justice for our LGBT loved ones. The Church remains diminished until it recognizes and affirms lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender persons as full members of the Body of Christ.

Recommendations

For parents:

- Share your story! Comfort level grows significantly for parents who do.
- Connect with other parents! Parents who know other parents have higher comfort levels.
- Advocate for justice in society and in the Church! These activities are of prime importance.
- Share your story with your bishop! Though least helpful to parents themselves, this may be most helpful in advocating for justice in the Church.
- If you haven't already done so, read *Always Our Children!* Though most parents feel it "falls short," it contains some of the most sensitive and supportive statements offered by the institutional Church.

- Continue to avail yourself of supportive societal and Church resources! *Fortunate Families* may be able to point you to helpful resources, including other parents.
- Challenge Church representatives if they appear to say or do something that does not square with your experience or your knowledge.

For bishops and the institutional Church:

- Listen to parents! Hear parents witness to the goodness and faithfulness of their LGBT daughters and sons, people they know far better than you.
- Dialogue with parents (after listening to them)! Discuss issues and concerns about real people, not as abstract, philosophical issues.
- In word and action, especially in public, signal your pastoral support for LGBT persons and their families! This tells your priests, pastoral leaders, and Catholics in your diocese that it is okay for them to be openly supportive as well.

For priests, religious, and pastoral ministers:

- Get to know Catholic LGBT persons and their parents! Negative stereotypes you may have are likely to dissolve and your comfort level is likely to grow.
- In word and action, especially when preaching, signal your pastoral support for LGBT persons and their families! This tells your parishioners and others you serve it is okay for them to be openly supportive as well.

For people in the pews:

- Get to know Catholic LGBT persons and their parents! Negative stereotypes you may have are likely to dissolve and your comfort level is likely to grow.
- Educate yourself about LGBT-related issues and concerns!
- Be an ally! Support LGBT persons and their families in whatever ways you are able, stretching your comfort zone if necessary.

For LGBT daughters and sons:

- Come out to your parents!—there are a variety of effective ways to do so. Age or gender seems to be irrelevant to their comfort level.
- Continue to gently nudge your parents to talk about any concerns or issues they may have. Their comfort level is likely to increase, and your relationship with them is likely to get better.
- Stay connected to the Catholic Church, if possible! It is your Church as much as it is the Pope's, the bishops', or the priests'. The Church is incomplete without you!

For all:

- In whatever ways you can, challenge the institutional Church with regard to the hurtful language it uses in relation to LGBT people! Do not simply parrot official statements unless you are willing to address them directly to LGBT people you know well, or to their Catholic parents.

Consider these conclusions and recommendations. See if they hold up as you review the data and comments, draw your own conclusions and develop your own recommendations. Most importantly, do whatever you are able, wherever and however you are able, to help enhance the physical, mental, and spiritual well-being of our lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender loved ones—as Christians, “loved ones” includes all.