

# Tensions, Power, and Commitment: LGBTQ and Swedish Free Churches

## ABSTRACT

Experiences of being LGBTQ<sup>1</sup> within Swedish free-church environments have not been highlighted to any great extent. In the autumn of 2020, I participated, as an observing researcher, in a study group consisting of LGBTQ persons and LGBTQ allies focusing on LGBTQ in the Christian free-church environment. The discussions took their point of departure in the question how we ensure that congregations are a welcoming and safe place for LGBTQ people. This article is based on the conversations that took place during these meetings. In the article I will examine how power relations and tensions were described and investigate how LGBTQ persons and their allies handle and challenge them. The results of the investigation show that free-church contexts are permeated with hegemonic heteronormativity, the structural power of which operates both visibly and covertly. The participants talk about unlivable compromises, emanating from membership always being conditional and subject to certain terms for LGBTQ persons. The participants narrated their experiences, ranging from subtle comments or silences to ostracism and exclusion. All participants testified to the existence of various forms of conversion efforts in contemporary free church environments and recounted examples of how they had been pressured in prayer and pastoral care and conversations in which they had been silenced or told that it is possible to change one's sexual orientation or identity.

**Keywords:** LGBTQ, Christian free churches, Sweden, heteronormativity

## Introduction

**SWEDEN, TOGETHER WITH** Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands and Canada, is often described as one of the world's most open-minded and affirmative countries as far as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer people are concerned (Laskar, Johansson & Mulinari 2016). Even though Sweden has come a long way in terms of law and official policies, LGBTQ people are in some contexts still subject to homophobic actions and unable to be open about their sexual identification (Björk & Wahlström 2018). In previous research, Christian churches have been described as outermost heteronormative environments (Enstedt 2015; Gustavsson 2001). However, experiences of being LGBTQ within Christian free churches have not been highlighted to any great extent in Sweden. In the autumn of 2020, I participated as an observing researcher in a study group about LGBTQ in the Christian free-church environment. The purpose of the group was to discuss how congregations can be a welcoming and safe place for LGBTQ people. This article is based on the conversations and discussions that took place during these meetings. In the article I will examine how structural power relations and tensions surface in the participants' narratives and recounting of their experiences of LGBTQ in free-church congregations. I will also investigate how LGBTQ people and their allies handle and challenge these relations and tensions.

In this context, the term *free church* refers to the communities that emerged from the great revival movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, sometimes called evangelical or biblical communities. Here and in what follows, the term covers Evangelical free churches that are members of the Christian Council of Sweden – namely the Evangelical Free Church, the Salvation Army, the Uniting Church, the Pentecostal Movement, the Alliance Mission and Vineyard Nordic.<sup>2</sup> Free churches are characterised by a strong emphasis on biblical authority, a personal faith in God and active and committed membership in a congregation (Andersson, Spjuth & Wenell 2017). However, it is important to note that free-church communities do not constitute a homogeneous group, and this is especially true when it comes to issues and values concerning LGBTQ people, intimacy and sexuality.

In recent decades, several legislative changes and reforms that have led to an increased acceptance of LGBTQ people in majority society have been implemented in Sweden. In 1979, the National Board of Health and Welfare removed homosexuality from its list of psychiatric diagnoses. During the 1990s, several reforms were introduced – including partnership legislation – and, in the early 2000s, same-sex couples were given the right to be considered as adoptive parents. In 2003, hate-crime legislation was enacted, and gender identity and gender expression have been protected by law since 2009. In 2009, marriage legislation was also made gender-neutral, and the same year, same-sex couples gained the right to marry in the Church of Sweden. These changes and reforms have led to greater openness and a normalization of LGBTQ issues in society. Despite this, the figures regarding mental illness are considerably higher among LGBTQ people, among whom stress, anxiety and sleep disorders are significantly more common than among others. According to the National Board of Health and Welfare (Socialstyrelsen 2016), this indicates serious psychosocial stress emanating from the fact that the group is in a minority position running the risk of discrimination and negative treatment. In religious contexts, there is a further ethical and moral dimension concerning questions of faith and the interpretation of religious texts in relation to sexuality. Internationally, several studies have arrived at the conclusion that LGBTQ people are subject to stigmatisation and exclusion in Christian congregations, resulting in a marked risk of anxiety, stress and mental illness, together with feelings of shame and guilt (Nkosi & Masson 2017; Subhi et al. 2011; Wilcox 2003; Yip 2000).

### **Previous research**

In a Swedish context, perspectives and views on LGBTQ and Christianity have been examined to surprisingly small extent, especially in relation to Swedish free churches. There are even fewer studies available on personal experiences of being LGBTQ and belonging to a Christian community. The Swedish Christian free churches have various different attitudes and approaches to LGBTQ. Niclas Öjebbrandt

(2017), a pastor and Bible teacher, describes how Christianity is divided in its view of homosexuality, which creates an unsustainable situation in which free-church congregations become insecure, unclear in their stance and silent on the matter. Some churches have allowed the societal changes to permeate the life and teachings of their congregations, thus becoming more affirmative in matters concerning LGBTQ, while others see the changes as incompatible with fundamental Christian values. Öjebrandt believes that the normalisation process has created a counterculture in many free churches, one of which he himself has previously been a part. To give way to contemporary societal views has, according to Öjebrandt, been seen as an expression of weak biblical views and a concession to destructive forces that risk diluting the identity of the Church. Öjebrandt's reasoning is in line with that of religious sociologist Linda Woodhead (2007), who describes how individuals who continue to actively practice their faith in secular societies become more restrictive, especially in their views on intimacy and sexuality.

EKHO's<sup>3</sup> report *Församling för alla? (Congregation For All?* Wickberg 2016), examines the life conditions of Christian LGBTQ people and Christian congregations' attitudes to LGBTQ issues. All in all, 125 Swedish congregations answered questions about how well prepared they are to meet LGBTQ people. The report clearly shows the range of different attitudes among congregations, for example to the possibility of members living openly gay or lesbian lives, the spectrum of answers ranging from "of course" to "only if the person does not live in a same-sex relationship". The report also contains interviews with Christian LGBTQ people who provide narratives of demon expulsion, attempts at healing and exclusion from their congregations due to their sexual identity. Van den Berg (2017) examines the debate about same-sex marriage in Sweden in order to understand how religion, sexuality and marriage are constructed in relation to each other. She bases her analysis on media articles that shed light on the initiative "Protect Marriage" (PM) during the years 2006 and 2007. She describes the conservative attitude that came to be associated with Swedish free churches:

After the “liberalization” of the Church of Sweden, religious conservatism now seems to be in the hands of the free churches who showed a remarkable self-confidence in expressing their views and who sought the public arena much more purposefully than perhaps the Church of Sweden would (2017: 241).

Enstedt (2015) describes how the Church of Sweden makes a clear distinction between “good” and “bad” homosexuality. Good, genuine, homosexuality mimics the loving heterosexual marriage. Genuine homosexuality is thus modelled on the image of heterosexuality and is only as such allowed in the Church of Sweden. In line with Enstedt (2015), Gustafsson (2001) highlights how “homosexuals” as a group have contributed in an almost constitutive way to a strengthening of the construction of the “right” heterosexual marriage and the place and purpose of sexuality. In a discourse analytical study on how homosexuality was presented in the Swedish Christian newspaper *Dagen* during the years 2009–2019 (Carlström 2020), three discourses were identified: the affirmative contextual discourse, the middle-of-the-road discourse and the conservative discourse, with the latter given the most space in the newspaper. In the affirmative contextual discourse, contributors emphasised the importance of interpreting the Bible in line with contemporary society. In the middle-of-the-road discourse, contributors sought an affirmative attitude towards homosexuality without giving up their conservative stance. Finally, in the conservative discourse, contributors argued that the Bible is the word of God and should be interpreted the same way regardless of time and place. Of the 188 articles analysed, only four were written by people who identified as homosexual or “people with homosexual feelings”. The fact that LGBTQ people are allowed little room within the Christian context has also been noted in other studies. For example, Trammell (2015) states that gays and lesbians are invisible in evangelical Christian contexts in the United States. At the same time, it is clear that the discussion *about* homosexuality and LGBTQ people is ever present in Christian communities. Jesper Svarvik (2008: 302), Associate Professor of New Testament exegesis, writes

in his book *Bibeltolkningens bakgator* (The Back Streets of Bible Interpretation):

In recent decades, no complex problem – apart from the question of the relationship between church and state – has been given as much attention and researched as thoroughly as the question of Christian homosexual people’s opportunities to be seen, to act and have their presence sanctioned in church life.<sup>4</sup>

### **A hegemonic heteronormativity**

Although there is no unified view on LGBTQ in Swedish Christian free churches, there is a common denominator in that the vast majority of them are permeated by a heteronormative value base (see, for example, Enstedt 2015; Gustafsson 2001). Heteronormativity is based on the notion that there are only two sexes and that these two sexes are different in nature and should complement each other; heterosexual relationships are seen as more natural or normal than other relationships (Ambjörnsson 2016). For the purposes of this article I will use the term *hegemonic heteronormativity* as an analytical tool to describe the dominance that heteronormative ideals exert in contemporary free church contexts. The term hegemony, meaning “leading position”, was coined by the Italian sociologist Antonio Gramsci (1997). Gramsci believed that society consists of a dominant layer which retains its position as long as the dominated, the subalterns, accept the order. The term hegemony explains how a certain social system can maintain its position of power and its support from the dominated groups. Hegemony means that a structure is dominant to such an extent that everyone must relate to it in some way or another. According to Gramsci, the established social order is thus not (only) maintained through the ability of the ruling class to use violence, but (also) through the ruling class inflicting their worldview on the dominated classes and getting them to adopt the same notions. This worldview becomes “common sense”. The nature of the hegemony determines which issues can be discussed (Ehnmark 2005; Gramsci 1997). Discourse theorists Laclau and Mouffe (1985/2001)

show that a discourse or a truth regime can achieve hegemony without other discourses necessarily disappearing, which implies an ongoing power struggle. When new thoughts and ideas emerge, however, these must relate to the current hegemony.

### **Methodological reflections**

In the autumn of 2020, I took part, as observing researcher, in a study group on LGBTQ in the Christian free-church environment. The study group discussions were about how free-church congregations can form a welcoming and safe place for LGBTQ people and took their point of departure in the anthology *Välkomna varandra. Bejakande perspektiv på homosexualitet i frikyrkan*<sup>5</sup> by Poletti Lundström (2017). The study group, consisting of eight people including me, met on five occasions via Zoom. Each session lasted two and a half hours. All the participants were, or had been, members of a Christian free-church congregation. Four identified themselves as women, two as men and one as queer. Four identified themselves as LGBTQ people and the other three referred to themselves as allies. The participants ranged in age from 25 to 50 and lived in both cities and smaller towns in different parts of Sweden. Everyone in the group described themselves as Christian. One of the participants was a pastor, one was a member of the board in their congregation, and others had left their congregations. My role was to participate as an observing researcher, and I was therefore not active in the discussions except when asked to respond to specific questions. I kept detailed notes of what was said. Inspired by Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis (2006), I then thematised the empirical material. First, I read the conversations and my reflective notes several times. I then embarked on a coding process to identify prominent and recurring themes and patterns in the empirical material. The themes were subsequently analysed in relation to theoretical concepts and previous research.

### **Ethical aspects**

Before the start of the study group sessions, I contacted the organiser of the meetings to explain my research and ask if I could participate

in a purely observational capacity. The organiser informed the participants of the study and asked if they were comfortable with me observing. Everyone consented to me taking part. At the first meeting, I introduced myself and gave a short presentation of the research project. I explained the purpose of the study and of my presence during the meetings. I received a positive response, with several participants emphasizing the importance of this kind of research being carried out. For confidentiality reasons, it was decided that everything said in the group should stay in the group. It was also decided that the identity of the participants should not be disclosed in any other context. In order to maintain confidentiality, I will avoid sharing further information about the organisers of the study group. My study has undergone ethical review by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority.

## **Results**

### *Tensions and unlivable compromises*

As mentioned, most free church congregations are permeated by a heteronormative set of values. This hegemonic heteronormativity has profound consequences for LGBTQ people and the question of what it means to be welcomed as an LGBTQ person by a free-church congregation was repeatedly discussed during the meetings. The different free-church strands differ in their approach to LGBTQ people being members and taking part in congregational life. There is however a rarely pronounced common attitude. Sara says: “My experience is that leaders have usually not made an overall decision on stance but the attitude is passed on in a culture where some have strong opinions and are listened to”. There are very few free-church congregations where the board has made an active decision on which approach should be taken to matters concerning LGBTQ. In recent years, some congregations have undergone LGBTQ certification, through the so-called *Rainbow Key* (*Regnbågsnyckeln*),<sup>6</sup> certifying that they are an LGBTQ-friendly congregation. However, according to Amanda, this development is entailed with a risk in that other churches may refer LGBTQ people to these congregations instead of working towards change themselves. She says:



“There’s a risk that the bullied person is forced to leave while the mob can safely stay where they are. I’ve heard so many times that ‘there are other churches you can choose’”. Sara continues:

There’s always someone telling you, “But why don’t you join the Swedish Church instead”, but for me... I don’t want to admit defeat. I was discouraged but still, I cannot accept that I don’t fit in. I still don’t dare go to church though I still want to. It’s so sad. It’s a pity that my children don’t go to church regularly.

Amanda agrees and says: “I understand you, it’s the same for me. Even though I’m not LGBTQ, I’ve left church because of this. My husband has also left. I’m hypersensitive to all of this”. Being non-congregational is something that Amanda and Sara share with many Christian LGBTQ people. Several studies have highlighted how LGBTQ people are involuntarily forced to leave their congregations due to stigma and expulsion (see, for example, Wilcox 2003). The conversation continues with the statement that the welcoming of LGBTQ people is always subject to some kind of condition. Billie wonders what it really means to be welcome and says: “Since I’m bisexual or queer, people sometimes claim I can choose to be straight. Being welcome is always subject to some kind of term”. Being bisexual, non-binary or queer is often seen as an intermediate or transient position where the person can choose to be one or the other (see Malmquist, Hanner & Lundberg 2017; Norrhem, Rydström & Winkvist 2008). In order to be a good Christian, the person is thus expected to choose what best suits the heteronormative image. The compromise may also consist in only allowing partial participation for LGBTQ people. Amanda says:

In my former congregation, LGBTQ people weren’t allowed to hold positions of trust. As an LGBTQ person, you were allowed to make coffee or clean toilets but you weren’t trusted with assignments of any sort. You were not allowed to use your spiritual gifts. For example, when a youth leader was openly gay, there were fears it might be contagious (...)

I'm all too familiar with these compromises and they're unsustainable. You go to church because you want to get involved, because you have a gift and because you're suited to perform certain tasks. It is incredibly lame. In cases like those it would be better if they told you outright that they don't want you to participate... because this is even worse. It is very, very sad.

The others in the group nod in agreement and Billie says: "There's something skewed in that. It's unlivable. Where these compromises exist, LGBTQ people cannot live; the blame is placed on the individual". John believes that such an approach leads to "an othering, a 'we against them' where people differentiate between people; but we're all human and we're all equal before God". Leah tells us that she during one of her job interviews was asked "Do you know that there are congregations that don't want to hire you because you are LGBTQ?" She continues: "Afterwards I thought about it – how can someone even ask such a question? Shouldn't the question instead be about how the *congregations* can change? It's even against the law". As Leah points out, not hiring someone because of their sexual orientation is outright discrimination. Since 1999, discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation is against the law. The consequences of an affirmative approach and the readiness to adopt such an approach was another aspect discussed in relation to an affirmative perspective. Billie says:

If you want to be affirmative, you must be prepared for things to come out. For example, older people who have always been gay but have chosen to live in celibacy – what can be done to support them? It is probably not easy to accept this affirmative perspective for a person who has given up so much.

Amanda continues:

This is very important. Is their struggle not worth anything? They might be thinking "What about me, I've walked all my life carrying this cross

and struggled with this – how can it be only now that we’re adopting an affirmative approach?” That person can really end up on a slippery slope, the whole ground crumbling beneath them. It’s serious.

The norm in most free-church environments has, until recent years, been for LGBTQ persons to live alone and in celibacy (see, for example, Cedersjö 2001). For people who have lived in line with these norms their whole life, an affirmative perspective can, as Billie and Amanda point out, have dire consequences and result in existential crisis.

*The role of allies and the importance of knowledge and representation*

The importance of representation and visibility around LGBTQ issues was a recurring theme in the conversations. The participants gave several examples of visibility and representation: openly LGBTQ congregation members, congregations having undergone Rainbow Certification and symbols such as the Pride flag being visible on websites and church premises. Leah says: “The rainbow flag is very welcoming. Is there a flag on the website? Is there a link to EKHO? I always look for that”. Billie says they are aware of the symbols displayed in church, but at the same time questions what weight of these symbols. “What does it mean to have a flag?” Amanda responds: “If there is a flag, then at least the board is affirming the acceptance of LGBTQ. You have to be able to trust that”. Siri emphasises that the Pride flag is a loaded symbol:

I think about the flag and how it irritates people and elicits emotions. In our congregation we’ve held a *rainbow* mass, not a *pride* mass. The choice of words was very important – and the flag was *not* allowed on stage. It was all very sensitive!

According to the sociologist Wasshede (2019), a cultural artefact, such as the rainbow flag and its role in the production of belonging and dis-belonging, has to be viewed in context. It has no fixed meaning in itself but, as Wasshede (2019: 148) notes, it is “involved in co-productions of meaning/reality/life together with other agents, such as human beings,

artefacts, nature, symbols, etc”. Even though several critics argue that the flag and Pride parades have become normalised, mainstream and are thus harmless (see, for example, Klapeer & Laskar 2018; Peterson, Wahlström & Wennerhag 2018), they still carry a symbolic meaning and have huge impact in many contexts. Wasshede (2019: 148) continues:

The fact that something like the rainbow flag is an empty signifier does not mean, therefore, that it is meaningless to study. Rather the opposite; it is when studying it in different local contexts that we can grasp how it is used and what it does to people. Different meanings, emotions and values are attached to it. It is when we see it used in practice that we can get sight of its performative potentials.

Clearly, the rainbow flag is associated with strong emotions and values in many free-church environments. John raises the concern that the flag and other LGBTQ issues receive too much attention:

Some probably feel that ... when you wave a flag, that's the only thing you can talk about ... too much focus is put on it. Other things are also important; you need to be able to deal with several commitments at the same time and to show that the Church's identity does not lie in the rainbow flag – there's room for so much more.

Billie replies: “I don't really agree with John, I think we need to talk more about LGBTQ. It's like saying “Must we talk about the poor again? ... Oh how boring”. We don't do that and it ought to be the same with LGBTQ”. In addition to representation, everyone in the group emphasises the need for more knowledge on issues concerning sexuality, intimacy and LGBTQ in free church environments. Siri highlights that silence is often associated with ignorance and that, instead of exposing that ignorance, people sometimes respond with silence:

As for pastors and others, I don't think they realise their knowledge

is lacking; they are expected to answer all kinds of questions but with regard to this the lack of knowledge is so great and you end up running the risk of silence. It's better to say "I don't know much about this" or "Can I come back to you on this?" or the like.

Billie continues:

It may have something to do with the fact that there are not many free-church sexologists. Personally, I would never raise the question with a pastor. I wouldn't dare. It's on the level "you are an apple that turns into waste". It doesn't exist.

Billie is referring to the parable of the apple – a parable familiar to many who have grown up in free-church environments. A young girl is likened to an apple and every time she has sex, a bite is taken from the apple and in the end only the apple core remains. The moral is to wait with having sex, because who wants to marry an apple core? Billie's experience of that kind of sex education has made her realise the need for free-church sexologists. Leah also emphasises the importance of knowledge. Hegemonic heteronormativity not only makes LGBTQ issues invisible, it also means that relationships and sexuality risk becoming difficult for LGBTQ people. She says:

Questions like how to date, how to do... I haven't been given any answers in church. There was nothing but silence. There's no spontaneity, no small talk about relationships. This really is a risk factor when it comes to ending up in sexual and relational destructiveness. There is a need for sexologists and sex education in church!

The others nod in agreement and Sara says: "There really is an urgent need for free-church sexologists".

The role of allies is emphasised in discussions on how to bring about change in issues concerning LGBTQ in free-church contexts. Leah says: "Allies are so important, LGBTQ people will not stand up for

themselves". John points to the importance of working at grassroots level and provides an example of such work. He continues:

But it also needs to come from the top, the management must first offer an apology and then let it seep down to the smaller congregations. EFK, of which I am a member, does not have an affirmative perspective. The management has apologised to those who have been hurt, but they continue applying the same perspective. What is the apology worth then? There is nothing better on offer. You need to investigate and apologise and the change needs to take place now. A decision really needs to be made. You can't waver in between trying to find a golden mean that I don't think exists.

Amanda replies:

We, the allies, must dare step in, become stronger, grow into a large crowd that goes against the conservative views. We have to make a change. I cannot stand with my back straight as long as things are like this. But it is difficult; in your heart you understand that it is not right, but then there are those who know the Bible inside and out. We allies must step in now!

The importance of LGBTQ allies has been highlighted in previous studies (see, for example, Wasshede 2019). Being an LGBTQ person in a free-church environment most often means being in a vulnerable position, therefore the allies have an important role to play in pushing and engaging in issues related to LGBTQ.

#### *Conversion therapy and disguised caring*

During the summer of 2020, the Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society (Myndigheten för ungdoms- och civilsamhällesfrågor, MUCF) was commissioned by the government to compile knowledge about young LGBTQ people's exposure to so-called conversion therapy. The government's press release<sup>7</sup> concludes that the issue of

conversion therapy aimed at young LGBTQ people has attracted the attention of various actors in civil society in recent years. There is no uniform definition of the term “conversion therapy” but the government’s definition of the term focuses on “pressure and coercion to prevent a person from identifying as an LGBTQ person or expressing that part of their identity”. MUCF’s mission is to map the phenomenon and compile existing knowledge about how conversion therapy manifests itself in Sweden.

During one of the meetings, we discussed conversion therapy and MUCF’s investigation. We took our point of departure in the question: What kind of phenomena in free-church contexts would you say fit the description of conversion therapy as offered in the government’s definition? Siri starts by saying “It makes me think of the teaching in church, probably during services and worship as well – the clear stating of ‘these are our values’”. Since the individuals responsible for teaching usually have a privileged position, a higher position than those who listen, free-church contexts always constitute a hierarchical order of power. In this way, the hegemonic status of heteronormativity is maintained and reproduced. Leah continues: “I have previously thought of conversion therapy as more structured, as a whole programme, but it does not have to be. I think of prayer, as an intercession, to be healed, as in ‘I will pray for you’. That is common”. Billie says:

I also think of the pressure when people talk about the dangers of homosexual people being visible, because it can lead to more people becoming homosexual, of the notion that if you have a so-called deviation, you can settle it with masturbation... this I have heard. It’s a clear example of pressure.

Amanda refers to the expression “To carry one’s cross” and says: “The churches have come far enough to realise that therapy is not an option, but they maintain you have to carry your cross as a homosexual person and that other people have other crosses to carry. I have heard that many times”. Sara continues:

I also think of pastoral care. I myself have experience of being silenced during such conversations. There's always a shift in power, it's a pastor or someone higher up in the hierarchy. It's so obvious. Before, I didn't think this could be viewed as conversion therapy but, with such a broad definition, it becomes clear it occurs. Organisations like Exodus and Medvandrarne (fellow travellers) have closed down in recent years which, of course, is positive, since they brought with them so much misery.

Amanda believes that even though networks such as Exodus international<sup>8</sup> and its Swedish counterpart Medvandrarne<sup>9</sup> (Fellow travelers) have been closed down, the notion that homosexuality can be cured is still present in many congregations, although it is kept secret:

I have come into contact with a person on Messenger who sends me one YouTube clip after another about expulsion – thinking it works and so on. These opinions exist. He's a young person and convinced that homosexuality can be cured. But I don't know how widespread it is.

All participants testify to the existence of various forms of conversion therapy in free churches today. They recount their own experiences of being pressured in prayer an pastoral care and of conversations where they, for example, have been silenced, told that it is possible to choose your sexual orientation or encouraged to find someone of the opposite sex to be with. Religion sociologists Ole Riis and Linda Woodhead (2012: 134) use the term ultra-internalisation to describe what happens when a group of people “consider the true religious emotions to be only those that conform with the authorised framework and guidance of the community”. Emotions and expressions of ideas that do not conform to the teachings of the Church are considered dangerous or evil. In an ultra-internalised group, members are constantly guided and controlled and learn to internalise which emotions are appropriate and not appropriate to feel and express. This is legitimised by the fact that individuals are seen as sinners who need to be disciplined and purified. This type of community is characterised by a hierarchical order and strong leader-



ship in which the subjective feelings and expressions of the individual are suppressed. In matters relating to LGBTQ, the ultra-internalised stance can be condemning, as same-sex relationships are seen as an attack on biblical authority. In contexts such as these, not condemning homosexuality is often regarded as incompatible with being a biblical and “true” Christian. Several of the study group participants clearly have experience of congregations of the kind of that Riis and Woodhead describe as ultra-internalised.

When the discussion moved on to the question “What motivates good Christians to use psychological violence against people they love when it clearly hurts them?”, several participants mentioned the fear many have of what would happen if they displayed an affirmative attitude towards LGBTQ. The view that LGBTQ is a sin is deeply rooted and the fear is tied up with what sin can lead to. John says:

Basically, our Christian faith is that we want to do good on earth and that by doing good we are given a place in heaven. Saying “You are wrong” [to an LGBTQ person] is something you think you need to do, to prove that you are a good Christian. You think it is an expression of the right faith.

Viktor recounts what happened when he told his sister and her husband that he is gay:

There were a lot of tears. She cried and asked, “Have I done something wrong?” Her husband told me “You have a choice, you can choose”. It’s about the Bible, that you risk missing eternity. It’s a sin, according to them. So yes, there were a lot of tears (...) They are still scared. She hasn’t changed; according to her “Everybody sins, but you continue to choose to live in sin”.

Amanda continues:

As you all say, there is a fear of sinning. You are afraid for yourself as

well. Like ... if you choose to give it your blessing, then you are a sinner yourself. You are afraid of getting dirty. And I cannot deny that I thought so as well in the beginning. "If I think LGBTQ is okay, will I be a sinner myself?" Shouldn't I also be "rebuked", which is a common word in these contexts?

Hegemonic heteronormativity is not only dominant in free-church congregations, it can also be described as internalised by its members (Gramsci 1997). In free-church contexts, power relations become complex as they are framed by moral and existential positions and dilemmas. To shape their own stance on these issues, members need not only take into account the prevailing hegemony and the values taught by the Church, but also deal with and take a stand on issues related to sin, biblical interpretation and what it means to be a good Christian. There is an ongoing power struggle both within and between free-church congregations concerning attitudes to LGBTQ. This struggle also takes place within the individual, with the majority of those who have adopted an affirmative position having previously had an attitude in line with hegemonic heteronormativity. As described by the participants in the study group, the process of adopting an affirmative position is often both difficult and existentially challenging. As Laclau and Mouffe (1985/2001) point out, new thoughts and attitudes must relate to the hegemony. This process of change is described in a nuanced way by Esther Kazen in her book *Feministpastorns tro och tvivel* (2020; *The Feminist Pastor's Faith and Doubt*).

### *Silence and silencing*

Sometimes there is talk of inclusion of LGBTQ people in the Christian community. However, it can be problematic to talk about inclusion since inclusion aims at recognising the conditions of heteronormativity, an attitude of "As long as you are like us, you are welcome". Social anthropologist Fanny Ambjörnsson (2016) points out that inclusion almost always goes hand-in-hand with invisibility and silence. One topic that was raised during the study group talks was the "silence

of the free church”. We discussed the questions “Why this silence?”, “What are the consequences of this silence?” and “How do we break the silence?” The conversation deepened and several participants related their own experiences. At times things became emotional and some were close to tears. Viktor said that the congregations need to be clear: “Are we welcome or not? Silence is worse than anything”. Amanda continued: “When it’s quiet it’s dead and it leaves you with the horrible feeling that you don’t exist”. Leah believes that people are ignorant and unaware of how much the silence hurts. She says: “They say ‘We’ll deal with that situation when it becomes relevant’. I’ve heard this several times. But it never becomes relevant because, in congregations like these, LGBTQ people are silent and that means others are silent as well”. Sara continues: “Those concerned will be very vulnerable when it does become relevant. It’s like ... we can be racist until someone who isn’t white enters the room. It becomes very objectifying and sad”. Billie describes the silence of the free churches as “my subject of hatred in life”:

This is the hardest thing for me to talk about. There is an eternal aspect in this that is so harmful. There is nothing that can stop people. The silence or unwillingness to compromise is the salvation and answer. It’s very painful to live with this silence if you want to believe in eternity. And yes... [becomes sad] I have a lot to say but it’s so hard. I’m not active in church anymore because I cannot bear the silence. It’s so hard to take in. It never comes out – it’s stuck inside me. I can’t talk about it.

Towards the end of the session, the group leader concludes “This has been a serious conversation and several of us are affected by what has been said”. John says:

I have a lump in my throat from hearing about your experiences. We who are cis and hetero sense the silence but we are not the ones exposed. Hearing your stories is fundamentally touching. Your stories make me more confident in my cause than any theological exposition ever could.

I have a responsibility and I want to listen and try to get hetero and cis people to listen. That is one of my challenges... we will make room for you... our responsibility is to listen.

Before the session ends, everyone is given the opportunity to describe the feelings elicited during the conversation. Leah says: "I feel a little sad. We have a lot to do and I feel confused". Billie continues: "I also feel sad and irritated; usually I can bawl and scream but in this I feel quiet and powerless". Viktor responds: "Yes, I feel the weight of it but I carry with me the hope that we are on our way!" Amanda continues: "The conversation has touched me too, the silence is a heavy issue. It will stay with me for a few days. It's tough". Siri says: "I have a lot of thoughts. I believe in conversation, in daring to talk. In doing it in a humble way. In listening in and breaking the culture of silence". It becomes clear that hegemonic heteronormativity governs what kind of conversations are allowed space within free churches, what issues come up for discussion and what you are allowed to talk about. Several of the participants emphasise that silence is the worst possible response and reaction.

### **Summary and discussion**

How can free-church environments in Sweden become a safe place for everyone? This issue was addressed in a study group that met on five occasions during the autumn of 2020. Based on the discussions that took place, I have analysed how LGBTQ people and their allies handle and challenge the power relations and tensions that permeate these communities. Although free churches differ in their attitude to LGBTQ, they are characterised by hegemonic heteronormativity. The structural power relations operate both visibly and covertly. The study group participants talked about unlivable compromises owing to LGBTQ people's membership and participation always being subject to terms and conditions. They spoke of their experiences, ranging from ostracism to subtle comments and silences. All the participants testified to the existence of various forms of conversion therapy in free churches today and related experiences of, for example, pressure in prayer and pastoral care and

conversations where they, or somebody they knew, had been silenced or told that it is possible to change your sexual orientation or identity.

In many parts of the world, the climate for LGBTQ people is hardening, with consequences such as increased vulnerability, restriction of sexual rights and political repression – a development that is also legitimised by the churches in these parts of the world. This conservative undercurrent can also be found in Swedish churches. At the same time, much is being done by both LGBTQ people and their allies in a bid to handle and challenge the heteronormative hegemony in free-church congregations. An increasing number of churches is taking an active stand for a more affirmative approach. Study groups, workshops and rainbow masses are being organised, books with an affirmative perspective on LGBTQ issues are being written and social media communities for Christian LGBTQ people are being created. Sociologist Ken Plummer talks about “the tale and its time” (1995: 35) when describing how many (sexual) stories remain unheard as they, in order to reach a larger audience, need to be received and listened to. Issues concerning LGBTQ in the free church context can be regarded as a field of tension where different discourses struggle to find room for interpretation. However, it is obvious that LGBTQ people and their stories can no longer be dismissed and silenced. There are a lot of people within the free churches – both LGBTQ people and their allies – who are dedicated and committed to working towards an affirmative stance on LGBTQ.

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## NOTES

1. The umbrella term LGBTQ stands for lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgender and people with queer expressions and identities. LGB concerns sexuality or sexual orientation and T is about gender identity. The Q brings together groups with dif-

- ferent identifications and includes sexuality and sexual practice as well as relationships and gender identity (Lundberg 2017).
2. The Quakers, Word of Faith and the Seventh-Day Adventist Church in Sweden are not members but participate as so-called observers – see <https://www.skr.org/en/>.
  3. Ecumenical groups for Christian LGBTQ people
  4. My translation.
  5. In English: Welcome Each Other. Affirming Perspectives on Homosexuality in the Free Church. The anthology is described as the first book in Swedish history that sheds light on same-sex relationships within the Free Church from a civil-rights perspective and is written by pastors, theologians and experts, several of whom define themselves as homosexual.
  6. The Rainbow Key, offered by the ecumenical association for Christian LGBTQ people (EKHO) and the study association Sensus, consists of education, study circles, vision work and reflection. Since 2013, all workplaces within the Church of Sweden are offered the education. Since 2019 the training is also offered to free-church congregations. So far only a few congregations within the United Church have been certified.
  7. <https://www.regeringen.se/pressmeddelanden/2020/07/regeringen-vill-se-mer-kunskap-om-unga-hbtq-personers-utsatthet-for-sa-kallad-omvandelseterapi/>.
  8. Exodus International was an ex-homosexual umbrella organisation with ministries in twenty nations before it disbanded in 2013. For more information about Exodus international, the well acclaimed Netflix documentary Pray Away (2021), produced and directed by Kristine Stolakis can be recommended. The documentary is based on interviews with people exposed to conversion therapy, as well as former leaders of the Exodus movement.
  9. Medvandrararna was formed in 1994 and were initially part of Exodus International. The association was dissolved in 2010.