

2007



FORTUNATE FAMILIES

PARENTS VOICE PROJECT

REPORT ON SURVEY

OF CATHOLIC PARENTS

OF LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL,

AND TRANSGENDER

DAUGHTERS AND SONS

A U G U S T 2 0 0 7

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AUGUST 2007

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This report and all the appendices can be downloaded from the Fortunate Families website (www.fortunatefamilies.com). A CD that includes this report and extensive appendices is available for a nominal fee. The appendices include complete responses to each survey question, additional analyses, and open-ended question responses that give perspective to the statistical results.

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Fortunate Families

Parents Voice Project Survey Report

By Casey Lopata¹
August, 2007

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 parent respondents 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.”

Significant 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 how the institutional Church relates to their LGBT daughters and sons.
- The underlying inference of many parent suggestions is the need 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 institutional Church's inadequate response has distanced many parents from the Church and driven many of their daughters and sons away from it. Parents also grieve what they view as a failure of the institutional Church to follow 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.

In and through their journeys to understanding, parents' initial fears and tears have been transformed into ire and fire. For some parents the fire has turned to glowing embers of sadness and anger, and they have distanced themselves from the institutional Church. For other parents the fire burns strong, concentrating their energy as they encourage and enable the people in the pews, as well as the institutional Church, to embody the compassion and love of Jesus and extend it to their LGBT loved ones.

“

“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

”

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.

INTRODUCTION AND METHOD

What is on the minds and in the hearts of Catholic parents who have lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender daughters or sons? That is the question the Parents Voice Project survey, conducted by *Fortunate Families*, explores. The survey—to which 229 Catholic parents of LGBT children responded between July 6 and September 19, 2006—identifies: 1) the needs of such parents, 2) the gifts they can offer other parents, and 3) their interest and willingness to help other parents.

The survey project was made possible by the generous financial support of the Wheaton (IL) Franciscan Sisters and Mary's Pence.

Survey implementation was made possible by the gracious expert support of Dr. Claire Dente, who helped develop the survey, and Dr. Timothy Franz, who put the survey online and supervised the analysis of survey submissions.

This is not a statistically random sample. Over 4600 surveys were distributed via email and hard copy to the *Fortunate Families* newsletter distribution list and to various other groups that were likely to include or be in touch with Catholic parents of LGBT children. Except for one group which has no stance on LGBT issues, these groups tend to view the sexuality of LGBT persons (and heterosexual persons) as normal variants of God-given human sexuality. The survey may not have reached many parents with ties to groups who believe that only heterosexuality is normal. However, the results can likely be viewed as representative of a great many faithful Catholic parents who love their LGBT children and love their Church, and who seek to understand the issues and work through conflicts that might diminish either of these loves.⁵

What follows are significant findings from the surveys. Representative quotes from parents, such as the one below, help illustrate the summary findings. Bolded italic statements describe specific findings. Commentary follows each finding.

“*The Church has to be more accepting, open, and loving to parents who are struggling with this.*”

⁵ See Appendices for more about the survey, how it was conducted, who responded, detailed responses to survey questions, additional charts, all relevant parent comments, and additional acknowledgements.

RESULTS

The 229 surveys came from a mixed, though not random, sample of Catholic parents

- Parents responded from 40 states, and three Canadian provinces.
- 78% were female.
- 96% were white.
- The average age was 64.3. The youngest was 37, the oldest 86.
- On average, parents learned they had an LGBT child 12-1/2 years ago—ranging from 4 months ago to 40 years ago.

Parents reported having 242 LGBT children

Some parents had more than one child who was LGBT, so the 242 LGBT children reported exceeds the number of parents who submitted surveys (229).

- 147 (64%) had gay sons
- 83 (36%) had lesbian daughters
- 1 (<1%) had a bisexual son
- 7 (3%) had bisexual daughters
- 3 (1%) had transgender female to male sons
- 1 (<1%) had a transgender male to female daughter.

Parents are quite comfortable now

Parents were asked to record their comfort level to four questions on a scale ranging from “very uncomfortable” (1) to “very comfortable” (7).

- 1) How comfortable were you about having an LGBTQ⁶ child when you found out?
- 2) How comfortable are you now about having an LGBTQ child?
- 3) How comfortable were you with people knowing you have an LGBTQ child when you found out?
- 4) How comfortable are you now with people knowing you have an LGBTQ child?

6 The survey included “Q” for Questioning. No parents reported “Q” children, so the analysis ignored “Q.”

FINDING—Chart 1:

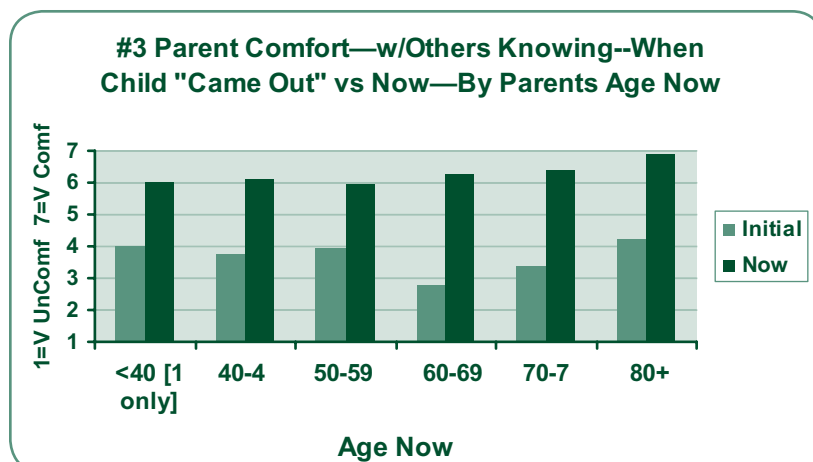
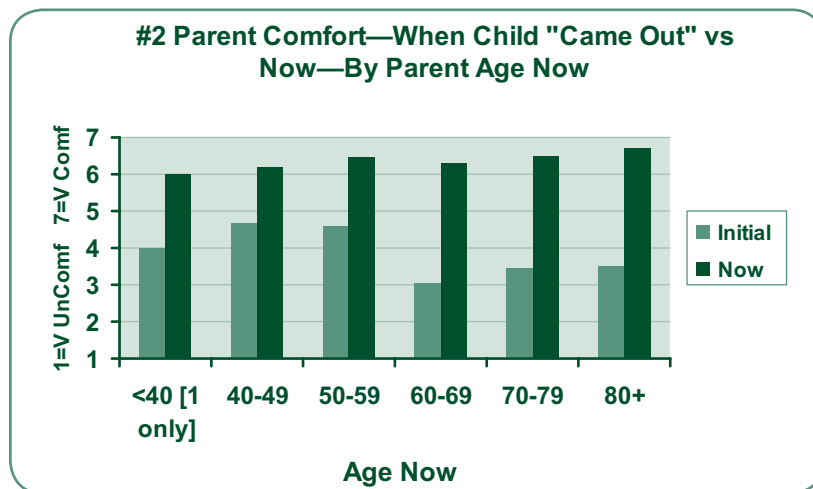
Parents, on average, were initially somewhat uncomfortable with having a LGBT child (3.57). With significant growth, parents now are quite comfortable (6.4).

Similarly, parents, on average, were initially somewhat uncomfortable with others knowing they have a LGBT child (3.27). With significant growth here as well, parents now are quite comfortable with others knowing they have a LGBT child (6.24).

“At this point in our journey, I have lovingly accepted my daughters and the path that God has chosen for them to walk. It hasn't been easy for them or for me.”

Apparently, time heals, and it heals well. Our ministerial experience suggests, however, that time alone does not heal, but time enables parents to realize that the daughter or son they have always loved is still the same person, and to learn about the reality of LGBT persons, often in contrast to negative stereotypes many of us unconsciously assimilated from society and/or the Church.

Gender and age do not matter



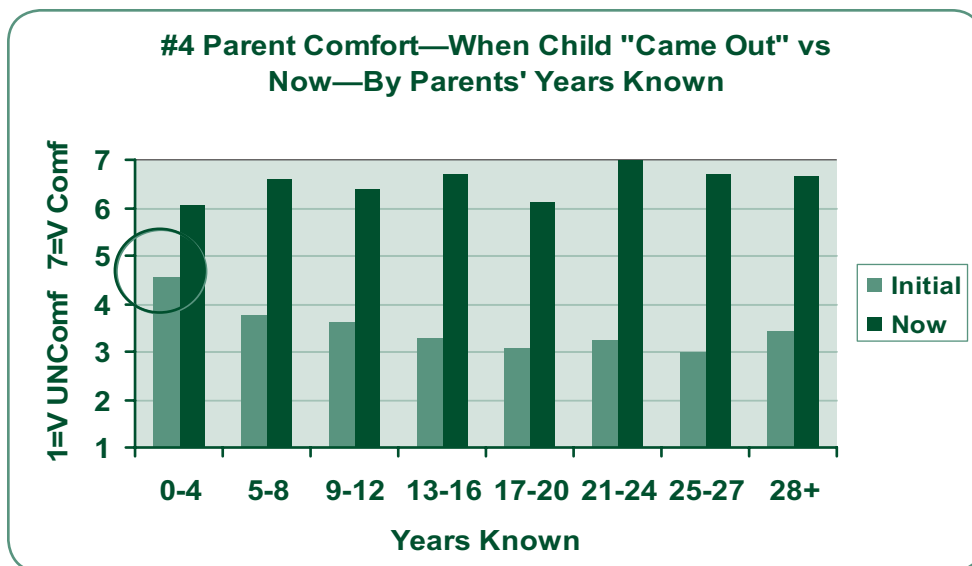
FINDING—Charts 2 and 3:

Parents in all age categories grew significantly more comfortable and now have a high comfort level (dark bars)—both with having and with others knowing.⁷

There is also no significant difference in comfort level between mothers and fathers.

For parents today, age and gender have little impact on their comfort. Though this is counter to societal stereotypes, stereotypes seem not to apply when it is personal.

Length-of-time known plays early role



FINDING—Chart 4 (dark bars):

Parents now are, on average, quite comfortable with having a LGBT child.

FINDING—Chart 4 (circle):

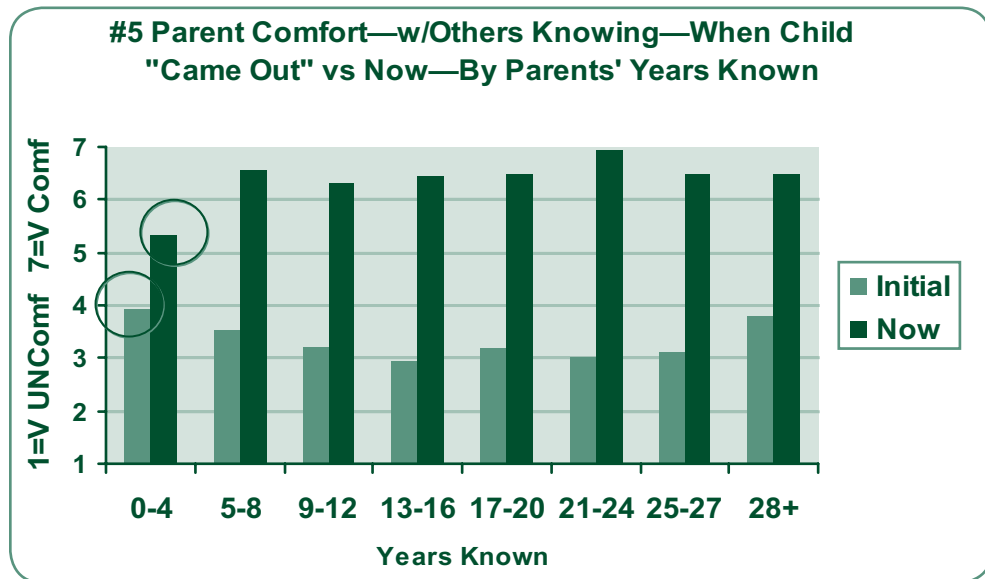
Also, parents who have known they have a LGBT child for 4 years or less were initially more comfortable with having a LGBT child than parents who knew for more than 4 years.

Why might this be? Our ministerial experience suggests it is because the silence is broken! The journey of understanding of parents who learned more recently that they have a LGBT child coincides with:

- 1) The emergence from the closet of the subject of homosexuality, now often a common topic in the media and even in some churches;
- 2) More LGBT people emerging from the closet; and
- 3) A corresponding growth in and availability of good support resources.

⁷ Interestingly, parents who are 80+ are significantly more comfortable now with others knowing than all younger age categories.

As a result, parents who have recently learned are more likely to know LGBT persons, know more about them, and know other parents.



FINDING—Chart 5 (dark bars):

Parents are also, on average, quite comfortable now with others knowing they have a LGBT child.

However, parents who have known for four years or less (upper circle) are slightly, but not significantly, less comfortable now with others knowing than parents who have known longer. But there is some indication that parents who learned less than two years ago may be significantly less comfortable NOW even though the small sample did not yield statistical significance. In our ministerial experience, early discomfort is typical.

FINDING—Chart 5 (lower circle):

Similar to comfort levels with having a LGBT child (chart 4), chart 5 (lower circle) shows that parents who have known they have a LGBT child for 4 years or less were initially more comfortable with others knowing they have a LGBT child than parents who knew for more than 4 years.⁸

The hypotheses for this finding are the same as they are for the chart 4 finding.

Comparing charts 4 and 5 is interesting. While not statistically significant, wherever parents are on this journey, they appear to be more comfortable with having a LGBT child than to be “out” about that. Fear of others knowing may be due to internalized homophobic feelings that there is something wrong with having a homosexual orientation and/or the corresponding awkwardness, embarrassment, or concern for privacy a parent may feel believing he or she had a part in causing this.

⁸ Parents who have known for 28 or more years had initial comfort levels with others knowing that approached the levels of parents who have known four or fewer years.

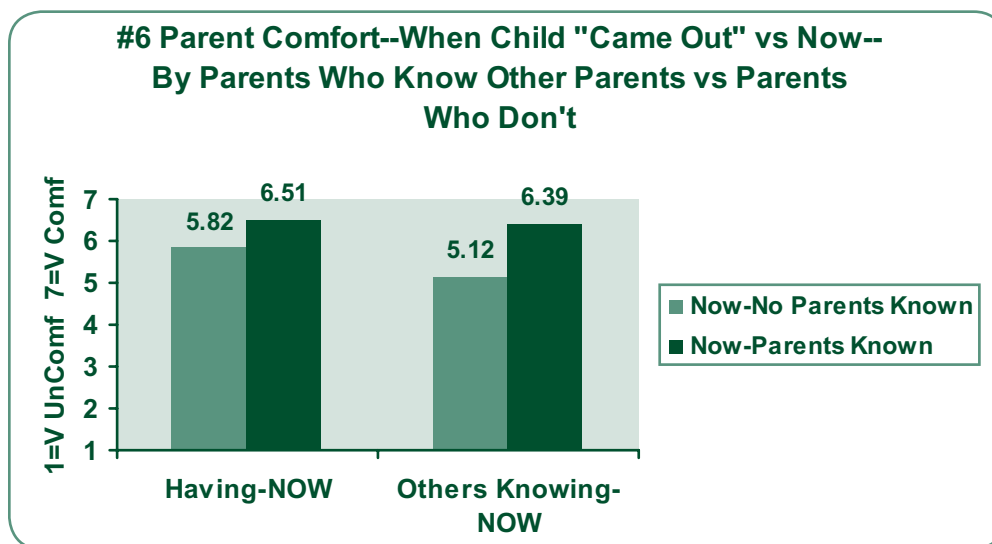
On the other hand, some discomfort may be due to legitimate concerns about their child's safety, job security, or potential harm due to societal or religious discrimination.

Peers, Catholic or not, help

Parents were asked: *How many other parents of LGBTQ persons do you know? AND How many are Catholic?*

Parents currently know an average of 16.6 other parents with LGBT children, 9.0 of whom are Catholic.

There is no significant difference in comfort levels whether the other parents are Catholic or not.



FINDING—Chart 6:

Parents who currently know at least one other parent of a LGBTQ person are significantly more comfortable now—both with having a LGBTQ child and with others knowing—than parents who do not know other parents.

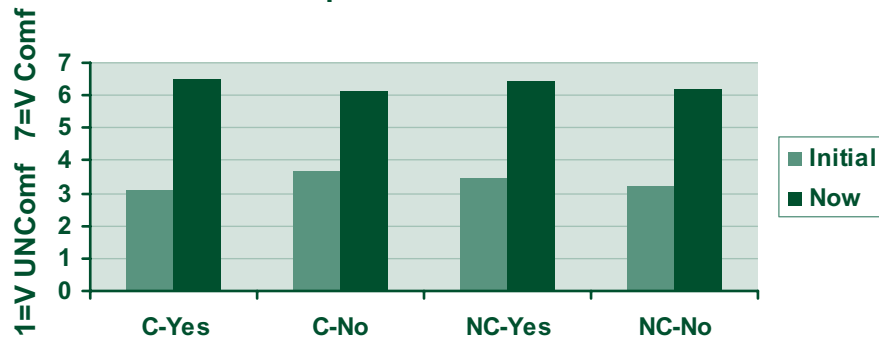
This is compatible with the previous finding that parents who learned more recently (Charts 4 & 5) are initially more comfortable because they are likely to know other LGBTQ persons and parents. Isolation inhibits the transition to understanding and acceptance, and especially to advocacy.

“It helps so much to know there are others out there who did or are going through the same pain. Sharing helps the pain tremendously.”

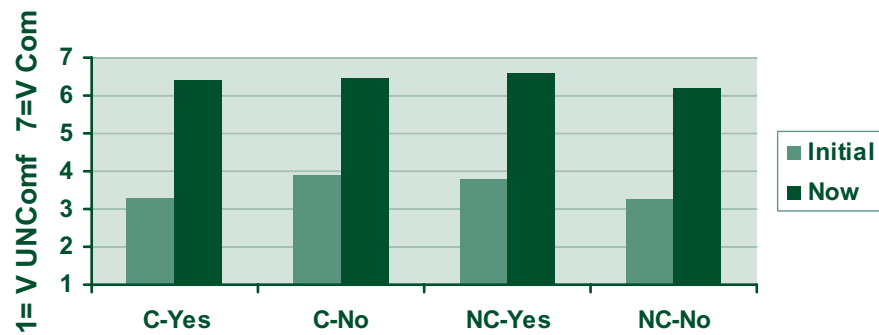
The jury is still out on the effect of support group involvement on comfort level

Parents were asked: *Are you, or have you been, part of a Catholic-based support group for parents of LGBTQ persons? AND Are you, or have you been, part of a support group—not Catholic-based—for parents of LGBTQ persons?*

#8 Parent Comfort w/Others Knowing--When Child "Came Out" vs Now--By Parent Involvement in Catholic (C) or Not-Catholic (NC) Support Group vs No Involvement



#7 Parent Comfort—When Child "Came Out" vs Now—By Parent Involvement in Catholic (C) Support Group or Not-Catholic (NC) Support Group vs No Involvement



FINDING—Charts 7 & 8:

Parent comfort increased significantly and to a high level—both with having and with others knowing—whether or not parents had support group involvement.

Lack of precise data may be the reason for this unexpected finding. Approximately half of the parents were or are in a support group—51% in Catholic groups, 48% in groups that are not Catholic-based (nearly all PFLAG). However, we do not know when or for how long parents were involved in these groups. Also, some parents participated in both Catholic and Not-Catholic support groups.

“The Support Group at [parish] was of tremendous help and support.”

Though not statistically significant, the results suggest a hopeful sign. Parents who have been or are involved in Catholic support groups (left-most bars on both charts) seem to have both grown the most, and to the highest comfort level, with others knowing.

Our ministerial experience suggests that Catholic support groups do indeed encourage and enable Catholic parents to share their stories. That's how the Church and society are influenced to be more welcoming and to embrace our LGBT daughters and sons as Jesus would.

“Have resources available to parents, especially small support groups so parents can voice their concerns and hear what other parents are going through.”

Most helpful group? PFLAG!⁹

Parents were asked: *What groups or organizations have been helpful to you?* They were given a checklist listing groups, and asked: *How well do you know them?* (with boxes to check, saying: *Well, Somewhat, or Don't*); and *How helpful were/are they?* (with boxes to check, saying: *Very, Somewhat, or Not at all*).

“I did not seek help from the Church, but instead from PFLAG.”

FINDING—Table A:

PFLAG was known well by the most parents and considered very helpful by the most.

Comparing the “Know Well” numbers to the “Very Helpful” numbers shows the institutional Church is comparatively less helpful than other organizations. While 62 parents know their parish well, only 35 found it very helpful. Similarly, while 40 parents know their diocese well, only 24 found it very helpful. Contrast that with the results for New Ways Ministry and Fortunate Families. For each of these groups, the Very Helpful number exceeded the Know Well number.

Table A			
Group (ranked by Know Well #s)	Know Well # (%)	Very Helpful # (%)	Not at all helpful # (%)
PFLAG	82 (54%)	76 (63%)	9 (7%)
Parish	62 (55%)	35 (37%)	34 (36%)
New Ways Ministry	53 (35%)	65 (54%)	23 (19%)
Fortunate Families	41 (31%)	60 (61%)	17 (17%)
Diocese	40 (35%)	24 (25%)	56 (59%)
HRC	36 (27%)	25 (27%)	23 (25%)
Dignity	31 (23%)	32 (37%)	22 (25%)
NACDLGM	22 (17%)	24 (31%)	27 (35%)
GLSEN	17 (14%)	17 (25%)	31 (45%)
NGLTF	5 (4%)	6 (10%)	31 (53%)

Sharing is important and it helps

Parents were asked: *What sharing was most helpful to you? Which are the most important for parents? Which are you likely to do?* They were given a checklist of sharing possibilities;¹⁰ a column to check (or not) saying: *Helped you*; columns for importance saying: *Very, Somewhat, or Not at all*; and columns for likely to do saying: *Did it, Very, Maybe, or Not*.

⁹ PFLAG= Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays. Other listed groups include: HRC= Human Rights Campaign; NACDLGM= National Association of Catholic Diocesan Lesbian and Gay Ministries; GLSEN= Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network; NGLTF= National Gay and Lesbian Task Force.

¹⁰ With slightly longer descriptions than shown in the table.

FINDING—Table B:

Parents with a higher comfort level now were more likely to have shared their story, to have found the sharing helpful, and to feel sharing is important.¹¹

There are no surprises in the five most frequent “sharing done” (bolded). However, two of the most frequent “sharing done”—with Catholic priest/pastoral minister and extended family—were not as helpful as others done less frequently. For example, sharing with a LGBT person (Catholic or not) was more helpful.

There are also no surprises in least frequent “sharing done,” and these were also the least helpful.

In terms of the helpfulness of Catholic support (bolded and italicized), the most helpful sharing was done with Catholic parents (ranked 3rd) and with Catholic LGBT persons (5th). The institutional Church fared relatively poorly with regard to helpfulness. Sharing with a Catholic priest/pastoral minister (ranked 10th), with a Catholic psychologist who may or may not be part of the institutional structure (16th), and with a bishop (17th and last) were the least helpful.

Sharing done (ranked by Helpful #s)	# parents who did (rank)	Helpful rank (%)	Very Important rank (%)
• Friend	170 (2)	1 (96%)	7 (73%)
• Immediate family	182 (1)	2 (95%)	2 (87%)
• Catholic parent	154 (4)	3 (95%)	1 (88%)
• Non-Catholic LGBT person	137 (8)	4 (88%)	4 (78%)
• Catholic LGBT person	147 (6)	5 (92%)	3 (79%)
• 1-to-1 with anyone	139 (7)	6 (92%)	8 (71%)
• Confidential setting	133 (9)	7 (90%)	6 (77%)
• Non-Catholic parent	87 (12)	8 (77%)	5 (78%)
• Extended family	154 (5)	9 (85%)	10 (62%)
• Catholic priest/pastoral minister	155 (3)	10 (82%)	9 (68%)
• Co-worker	118 (10)	11 (79%)	17 (42%)
• Non-Catholic clergy	111 (11)	12 (77%)	11 (59%)
• Publicly	87 (13)	13 (69%)	13 (49%)
• Non-Catholic psychologist	65 (14)	14 (62%)	14 (46%)
• Civic official	51 (16)	15 (57%)	15 (47%)
• Catholic psychologist	44 (17)	16 (55%)	16 (46%)
• Bishop	59 (15)	17 (47%)	12 (49%)

“To break the silence is to come to terms with the truth that one holds in sacred trust. It opens the door to love an understanding of the true meaning of the gospel—Jesus’ good news of inclusive love, and extends that love in today’s world, family, society.”

The results raise a concern. If parents are to make society and the Church better places for their LGBT children, more sharing may need to be done precisely with those with whom parents felt it least important to share—bishops (#12), general public (#13), civic officials (#15), and co-workers (#17).

“I generally believe that the world would be a better place for we ‘Fortunate Families’ and our LGBTQ kids if we would shed the cloak of secrecy and openly tell our stories. But...I will not do so if I feel I’ll be chastened or belittled. If only the world could shout ‘Ready-Set-Go’ and have every LGBTQ person and their family come out all at the same time. There would be such security in doing it that way and eyes would be opened.”

Several themes emerged from parent comments about sharing

FINDING:

The main theme emerging from an analysis of parent comments about sharing was the importance and the necessity of sharing their story. Parents found this sharing necessary for themselves, for their LGBT daughters and sons, and for other parents; and an important part in making the Church and society more accepting.

“It took me a while but once I came to terms with it, I decided I needed to share my story with others. I was asked to share at a Lenten Prayer evening and reflect on the story of Lazarus. I related Lazarus being in the tomb with Christ calling me to also ‘come out.’ It was a huge blessing to me. I try to be as open as possible for our daughter’s sake and all of the LGBT persons who continue to be marginalized.”

Other prominent themes were:

- Sharing is a personal decision. Individual circumstances may limit a parent’s ability and/or willingness to share.

“Everyone has to decide for themselves who they come out to and how public they can be. I feel it is very important to be out there as much as you can so everyone knows there are sexual minority persons in the community and they are intelligent, compassionate citizens worthy of equal rights and should not be discriminated against.”

- Sharing needs to be done within the person’s comfort zone. Parents might be more willing to share with some people, not others, and in some circumstances, not others.

“Sharing your story is not something you do in the beginning. It takes time and is probably related to the reaction you have received from sharing. It has been my experience that most people are accepting of you when you share with them. I am not a crusader, however, if the topic comes up in a negative way, I speak up and, if appropriate, talk to the person one on one.”

- Unconditional love of their children is a motivator for sharing. Some parents feel a need to witness to God’s unconditional love by publicly sharing about their unconditional love for their LGBT child.
- Parents were reluctant to share with their bishop and the hierarchy due to lack of trust.

Experiences/activities parents did or found helpful, were not necessarily most important

Parents were asked: *What experiences and/or activities were most helpful to you? Which are most important for parents? Which are you likely to do?* They were given a checklist;¹¹ a column to check (or not) saying: *Helped you*; columns for importance saying: *Very, Somewhat, or Not at all*; and columns for likely to do saying: *Did it, Very, Maybe, or Not*.

¹¹ Percentages are based on only those parents who responded to that particular item. Some parents skipped some items, and ¹² skipped the entire section.

¹² With slightly longer descriptions of the experiences / activities.

FINDING—Table C:

Attending a workshop was done most frequently and it was the most helpful. However, the two activities parents ranked most important were advocating for justice in society and advocating for justice in the Church.¹³

Note that four of the five activities done most frequently by parents (bolded) were also among the most helpful, and three of them were ranked Very Important (bolded and italicized).

While advocating for justice in society and the Church were rated most important (underlined), parents might be more effective doing that if they do things they feel are least helpful—write (or talk with) priests, bishops, civic officials, secular or Catholic magazines and newspapers, and supply resources to libraries, schools and parishes.

Activities (ranked by most Helpful)	# parents who did (rank)	Helpful rank (%)	Very Important rank (%)
• Attend workshop	105 (1)	1 (92%)	4 (78%)
• <u>Advocate for justice in society</u>	84 (6)	2 (89%)	<u>1 (89%)</u>
• Wear symbol of gay support	97 (2)	3 (86%)	11 (55%)
• Publicly challenge anti-gayness	94 (4)	4 (85%)	3 (81%)
• Attend Catholic support group	95 (3)	5 (81%)	5 (77%)
• <u>Advocate for justice in Church</u>	63 (9)	6 (80%)	<u>2 (84%)</u>
• Attend parents retreat day	72 (8)	7 (79%)	6 (70%)
• Attend secular support group	87 (5)	8 (78%)	8 (60%)
• Attend Gay Pride Parade	83 (7)	9 (74%)	17 (48%)
• Walk in Gay Pride Parade	63 (10)	10 (73%)	15 (49%)
• Write civic officials re LGBT issues	54 (14)	11 (64%)	12 (54%)
• Give resources to public school/library	28 (17)	12 (64%)	9 (58%)
• Write priest/pastoral minister re issues	58 (12)	13 (63%)	10 (55%)
• Write family/friends re LGBT issues	59 (11)	14 (63%)	18 (45%)
• Give resources to Catholic parish/school	25 (18)	15 (62%)	7 (61%)
• Write secular media re LGBT issues	39 (15)	16 (57%)	16 (49%)
• Write Bishop re LGBT issues	55 (13)	17 (56%)	13 (53%)
• Write Catholic media re LGBT issues	30 (16)	18 (49%)	14 (51%)

“I believe we as Catholic parents not only have the duty but also the responsibility to educate the institutional Church, our families, friends, colleagues, physicians and all those we meet each day. Our children are good and loving human beings who have had the courage to speak truth, they deserve respect and justice.”

Though the question specifically asked “what was most helpful to you,” some parents may have answered thinking about what was most helpful for society and the Church. However, advocating for justice might actually be helpful for parents too. They could both benefit from changes and take pride in knowing they helped bring them about.

“I want to educate and advocate.”

Parents want to listen to and talk with other parents

Parents were given a checklist of projects with slightly longer descriptions than in the accompanying chart, and asked: *Which of these types of projects would you be willing to work on?*

FINDING — Table D:

About 50% of parents who submitted a survey (87% of those who answered the question) are willing to peer counsel¹⁴ other Catholic parents, and 84% of these (willing to peer counsel) are also willing to publicly identify as Catholic parent peer counselors.¹⁵

Second to peer counseling, parents most want to help with Catholic parish workshops. That’s not surprising given that the data show that 105 attended such a workshop and 92% of them found it helpful. Note that when given the choice, parents prefer working with others. Most

parents, when they initially discovered their child’s homosexual orientation, felt alone and isolated. They know the value of having someone share the journey.

A number of parents said they would not or could not work on projects. Some were frustrated with the Church’s response and felt it was not worth the effort. Some were constrained by age, health, work, or family responsibilities—although some of these said they would do what they can. A few did not feel ready to do anything.

Table D	
Project	# selecting this
• Counsel other parents as peers	124
• Plan Catholic parish workshop—with others	105
• Publicly identify as peer counselor	104
• Maintain/supply LGBT resources to Catholic parents—with others	102
• Form Catholic support group—with others	102
• Staff resource table at parish forum—with others	97
• Draft letters on LGBT issues—with others	93
• Plan/implement parish workshop—with others	90
• Organize parents—with others—to walk in Gay Pride Parade	73
• Maintain/supply LGBT resources to Catholic parents—alone	73
• Find funding/give resources to parent-supportive groups—w/others	60
• Draft letters on LGBT issues — alone	56
• Write reviews of LGBT-related books, films, etc.— with others	49
• Staff resource table at parish forum— alone	47
• Write reviews of LGBT-related books, films, etc.— alone	35
• Organize parents— alone —to walk in Gay Pride Parade	30
• Maintain/supply LGBT resources to Catholic parents— alone	19

“Ask me—whatever’s needed. I can try.”

“My husband and I are not able to physically be active in gay related projects, but we speak out to defend our very pro-gay stance. Our conversation with the Bishop was polite, but futile.”

Parents want the institutional Church to be more accepting

Parents were asked: Is there anything else that would be helpful to you at this point in your journey?

13 Percentages are based on only those parents who responded to that particular item. Some parents skipped some items, and 29 skipped the entire section.

14 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.

15 65 parents skipped this entire section.

FINDING:

A theme analysis of parent responses showed one theme eclipsed all others: Parents want the institutional Church to be more accepting of LGBT persons.

Relative to what would be helpful to them, parents said things like:

- More pastoral approach from hierarchy
- Church leadership that was honest and there to serve the community
- Stop the hypocrisy of saying ‘they must be treated with respect and dignity’ and then seeing what the reality is
- Change rhetoric presently coming out of the Church
- Church to act like Jesus would
- Hearing a homily that is direct and supportive
- Understanding and supportive pastor

The clear message was that support in the Church for parents and their LGBT children is scarce, localized, and a hit and miss proposition.

Use the parish bulletin to make people aware of supportive ministers and resources

Parents were asked: In what ways can the church (i.e., priests, sisters, and other pastoral ministers, your faith community, and the larger church) make people aware of supportive ministers and resources?

FINDING:

By far, the most frequently mentioned way to make people aware of supportive ministers and resources was the use of the parish bulletin.

Here are a few other representative comments.

- Simply using the words gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender from the pulpit.
- Talk, talk, talk, and talk some more. The more conversation we have the better.
- Our parish is big on social justice issues however nothing is ever brought up about the gay/lesbian issue.
- By speaking out about the obvious sin of homophobia, and holding the institutional Church accountable for its own internalized homophobia which has devastated the lives of countless people everywhere.
- Have the Church be open and honest. Priests come out. Bishops too. Stop the hypocrisy.
- Listen to us. Don’t just send us away.
- Could start out by letting people know they care! I just see hatred advocated and financed.

The underlying basis for many of these suggestions was to break the silence within the Church, and 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 and comfort that parents went through.

Always Our Children is helpful, but falls short

Parents were asked: *Have you read Always Our Children (AOC), the U.S. Bishops' "Pastoral Message to Parents of Homosexual Children and Suggestions for Ministers."? If yes, do you believe AOC is helpful for Catholic parents with LGBTQ children? Please elaborate:*

FINDING:

Slightly more than 75% of parents read Always Our Children, and about 75% of those who read it believe it is helpful for Catholic parents. A majority of parents who read it and commented indicated it was somewhat helpful but it "fell short."

This despite *Always Our Children* being the most LGBT-positive official document issued by the U.S. Bishops or the Vatican.

"It is the high-water mark of Episcopal recognition for the pastoral needs of gays and their families, and of the innate character of the orientation. It falls short, of course, but it is as good as it currently goes."

Resources found helpful are not what parents are most interested in

Parents were given a checklist of "Types of Resources" and asked: *In the areas listed below check the appropriate box if: 1) You found the resources helpful to you. 2) You're interested in resources in that area. 3) You'd work with others to identify or develop such resources for parents. (check all that apply).*

FINDING:

Parents are most interested in Catholic/scripture-related resources, yet the resource areas parents found most helpful are not related to Catholic teaching or scripture (except for Primacy of Conscience).

The most helpful resources areas were: Social sciences on coming out as a LGBT person, and on sexual orientation; stories of Catholic and other LGBT persons; and stories of Catholic parents of LGBT persons. Eight of the ten least helpful resources were Catholic teaching related or scripture related, including Catholic perspectives on same-sex parent adoption and same-sex unions/marriage—the bottom two. Catholic parents keep looking for Catholic resources that are helpful—they are hopelessly hopeful!

"The church really needs to educate the members and society that GLBTQ persons are no different than themselves other than who they love."

Be active and advocate for LGBT persons

Parents were asked: *Given your circumstances, and those of your LGBT child(ren), and considering the importance of the activities you rated above, what three things (not limited to those listed above) could you do to enhance the physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being of LGBT Catholics?*

FINDING:

The primary theme emerging from parent comments on what they could do to help LGBT Catholics was to be active and advocate for LGBT persons.

Here is a sample of what parents said they could do:

- Continue to tell our stories as parents within Catholic settings to provide an experiential framework for a greater understanding of the lives of GLBT persons and their families. Continue to let bishops know about our children and our concerns that they be treated with justice.
- Attend support groups. Answer other parents' questions.
- Place a copy of *Always Our Children* in our Sunday bulletin.
- Continue to support our fragile underground, local parents' network, including occasional parish and retreat-house initiatives. Continue to support New Ways and similar substantive Catholic organizations supporting movement in the Church. Challenge, on a selected basis, public positions of Church officials that are especially harmful.
- Peer counseling. Make info on workshops available.
- Become better informed. Communicate with and support other parents. Compile resources to share.
- Be open about being a parent of gay sons. Be proactive in the diocese. Be proactive in the parish.

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, call the institutional Church to be responsible and pastoral in the language it uses in relation to LGBT people.
- When talking with or about LGBT people, always talk about them as persons and not in abstract doctrinal terms.

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.



FORTUNATE FAMILIES

MISSION

Fortunate Families serves as a resource and networking ministry with Catholic parents of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender children.

We promote and facilitate personal, meaningful, and respectful conversation, especially within our parishes and with our pastors and bishops. We stress the significance of our personal stories as a source of grace within our families and as a witness for justice in our civic and faith communities.

We hold fast to the truth that our children are, in the words of the United States bishops, “child[ren] of God, gifted and called for a purpose in God’s design.”

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