During the Berlin conference of the European Forum in 2011 many people reported that they are confronted in society and in their churches with the strong prejudice that homosexuality is a disease and that it can be cured by some sort of reorientation therapy.

An e-group exchange was initiated by the co-president Michael Brinkschröder in September on this issue, this report being a summary of the discussion. A workshop is being arranged for the Forum conference in Amsterdam in 2012, where this topic can be discussed and ideas for activities and strategies can be developed and useful resources shared.

RESISTING THE PATHOLOGIZATION OF LGBT PEOPLE
Michael Brinkschröder (Arbeitsgemeinschaft Schwule Theologie EV, D)

1. See: Describing the discourse on homosexuality as pathology

The Hammarberg-Report of the Council of Europe writes: “LGBT persons were, and many still are, regarded as being ill or suffering from a disease. Only in 1990 did the World Health Organization (WHO) remove homosexuality from the International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems (ICD). The American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality (which was defined as a mental disorder) from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) in 1973. Despite the removal of homosexuality from the list of diseases, this report has found evidence that in some member states of the Council of Europe health practitioners, official health policies and some textbooks in schools still apply these outdated classifications leading to factually incorrect information on homosexuality. This is compounded by the fact that public opinion in many member states considers homosexuality as a biological disorder or an illness that needs to be cured.
In a similar manner, systems for classifying mental disorders have a direct impact on the way transgender persons are perceived by society.”¹

**Examples**
Examples may illustrate the situation:

- In 2008 70 per cent of the population in Serbia thought that homosexuality is a disease.²
- The Medical University of Poznan (Poland) allows Joseph Nicolosi, inventor of the so-called “reparative therapy”, to speak at a conference about the therapeutic treatment of homosexuals, granting him an image of “scientific” legitimation.
- In Malta, a Pastor offers “spiritual therapy” in order to heal LGBT people.

2. Judge

**Ideological abuses of homosexuality**
This discourse on homosexuality as a disease has many facets, e.g., homosexuality is regarded as being an addiction, a mental illness, a gender disorder, a contagious disease, a demonic possession, the result of seduction, a perversity, an abnormality, as being against nature, as causing degeneration, etc.

While the scientific research of medicine, psychiatry and psychology has clearly stated that a homosexual orientation is not a disease, many people ignore this scientific knowledge and believe the ideological prejudices spread by the media.

These discourses are ideological insofar as they use homosexuality as a symbol or a metaphor for things beyond same-sex love and same-sex sexuality. This may be the weakness of the nation or of the national economy or of patriarchal masculinity. It may refer implicitly to the change of the traditional gender order or the strengthened social position of women. Homosexuality can be misused as a powerful symbol for very many things...

**Reorientation therapies are dangerous**
The pathological discourse is dangerous for LGBT people, because it is a means to deny their dignity and their human rights treating them as infectious, dangerous or irrational.

The pathological discourse almost automatically leads to the conclusion that the disease must be cured. Some psychotherapists offer a kind of reorientation therapy as a remedy for this supposed illness. Homophobic Christian groups sometimes combine the idea of reorientation therapy with their traditional understanding that homosexuality is sinful in itself, creating a religious motivation for attempts like these.

But scientific research has shown that sexual orientation is such a deep core element of personality that it cannot be changed voluntarily through therapies of whatever sort. Moreover, many victims of this treatment gave testimony that it has produced enormous harm to their well-being and their psychic integrity.

**Jesus healed the illness, not the sexual orientation**
Christian groups sometimes state that homosexuality is a sin, so that everything should be done to avoid it, including reorientation therapy. They may also refer to Jesus as healer and exorcist of demons. But in the

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¹ Thomas Hammarberg: Discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity in Europe, Council of Europe 2011, p. 23.

story of the centurion of Capernaum (Matthew 8.5-13) we have the situation of a Roman centurion, whose slave is paralysed. It is obvious to some that the centurion has a very special relationship of love with his slave (or boy as he is called several times in the text). In any case, Jesus heals the slave from his paralysis, but not from his homosexuality. Followers of Jesus should respect this as an important example that homosexuality is not a disease that should be healed.

3. **Act: Resisting and fighting against a homophobic discourse**

- Inviting psychiatrists or physicians to present the scientific state of the art in public lectures.
- Preparing a leaflet with critical information about prejudices and scientific research that is easy to understand and that gives warnings about the dangers of reorientation therapies.
- Discussing with pastors their understanding of LGBT people and their pastoral “treatment”.
- Writing letters to newspapers that spread incorrect information about LGBT people.

**REORIENTATION THERAPY - A CRITICAL EVALUATION**

*Reinhold Weicker* (HuK, D)

Reorientation therapies want to “change” the sexual orientation of a person. In the minds of those who are for it, this is change in direction to a “normal”, *i.e.*, heterosexuality or, at least, change away from homosexuality.

**The Claims**

1. *“Science has shown that change is possible”*

   Which science?
   - Robert Spitzer in 2001 (200 persons) only considered “success cases”. However, he has since retracted the results of his study.
   - Shidlo/Schröder (202 persons) noted a failure rate of 87%.

2. *Jones/Yarhouse: there were just 98 persons in the sample at the beginning, tailing off to 73 by the end. All were selected by Exodus who also financed the study. The study resulted in only 9-10% successful “conversion”. Those who dropped out were counted as “non-successful”. Exodus president Alan Chambers has said that 99.9% of those people that he knows and that have tried to leave homosexuality have been unsuccessful.*

   All studies that consider themselves scientific come from the United States of America. In Europe there are many claims, but no scientific studies.

   **The removal of homosexuality from the catalogue of diseases** *(American Psychiatric Association (APA) 1973; World Health Organisation) WHO 1975)* happened under pressure from gay lobbyists, in politically turbulent years

   However, this was explicitly endorsed by the Board of Directors of the APA in 2000 and 2009. Authors such as Nicolosi are obviously a minority among the experts.

   Calling such efforts at change as “therapy” is based on a specific view of diseases. It means that an important part of our personality is considered ill. This is invalid and offensive.

3. **“There are thousands of successful changes”**

   What is listed repeatedly are the same people, a small number.

   In the United States of America there are 311 million people (209 million if children and seniors are not counted). Where are the thousands?

   **“There are at least some people who are changed successfully”**
For the majority of those “success” stories in the studies, this means “celibacy”.

Of course it is possible to suppress one’s sexuality, but can this truly be called “success” for something that is called “change”?

“There are many examples of successful changes”

In Europe and the United States of America, most of the people who are named as “success cases” are also those who offer “therapy”. Of course, all persons can contribute, but, if such cases constitute the majority, then the story is suspect. Two of the five “successful conversion” persons quoted in the Jones/Yarhouse study said that they were “going into the ministry”.

Sexuality is colourful and manifold. It is to be admitted that especially in cases of bisexuality a decision for different ways of life is possible, and that it can change in the course of a lifetime. This is possible in all cases.

“Help is offered only to those who want to change”

The organisations that offer such services are often active, at the same time, against equal rights, minority protection and similar things. This suggests a hidden agenda: the desire to keep the “good old” (patriarchal) world.

Everyone has the right to try changes in their lives. However, there is no protection against the possibility that such organisations put theories such as “homosexuality is dangerous” first. Many who seriously wanted to get rid of their homosexuality, in retrospect, say that their desire was based on the sentiments expressed in their (conservative) religious community. The active organisations in Germany (DIJG, Wüstenstrom) officially emphasise that they only want to help those who themselves wish to overcome their homosexuality. They do not, in official statements, say that homosexuality is a disease. Bund katholischer Aerzte agrees with APA that homosexuality is not a disease, but states that it can be addressed therapeutically for those that feel plagued by it by prayer, psychotherapy or homeopathy.

“To attempt reorientation therapy does not hurt”

There are documented cases of psychological damage. Even Jones and Yarhouse name such cases.

Everyone is entitled to hurt him/herself. However, when it comes to actual damage, each case is one too many.

Often we hear the argument that, even if change should not be possible, we still must listen to God’s word. But what is “God’s word”? As Christians we know God’s Word. It is not a book, but a person - Jesus Christ (John 1.14), the first thesis of the Barmen Confession of 1934.

THE EXPERIENCE OF COURAGE
Jeremy Marks (Courage, GB)

I founded Courage in the UK in 1988; this organisation was founded on a traditional evangelical approach to homosexuality which believed that its existence was indicative of the moral collapse of society, homosexual practice being evidence of society’s depravity and rebellion against God. So our aim was to help Christians who were “afflicted” by such “temptation” to grow in their discipline of Christian discipleship, live celibate lives and even, if possible, to seek change of orientation to become “normal”, i.e., heterosexual, according to God’s Creation plan, as we then understood it to be.

Seven years later, we closed our residential discipleship houses and I was already beginning to have some extremely serious doubts about what we were doing, but maintained the same outlook publicly, as a member of
Exodus International – the coalition of “ex-gay” ministries of which we were a member. By the end of the century, I had become convinced not only that the pastoral approach we had used was damaging and very unhelpful, even abusive, to LGBT people, but that the only people who were doing “well” were those who accepted their same-sex orientation and embraced this as God-given. By the end of 2000, I had published the fact that we had rejected our former understanding of the nature of homosexuality and would now be fully affirming of same-sex partnerships - as being appropriate for gay people and something to give heart-felt thanks to God for. Needless to say I then became a pariah amongst all evangelicals and was asked to resign my membership of organisations like Exodus, and the Evangelical Alliance in the UK, which I was happy to do. Since then I’ve had no regrets whatever about running a fully gay-affirming ministry and Courage has gone from strength to strength, providing pastoral care and practical support to thousands of LGBT Christians over the years.

In 2008, I published a book entitled Exchanging the Truth of God for a Lie, subtitled, One man’s spiritual journey to find the truth about homosexuality and same-sex partnerships. Dr Roy Clements wrote a foreword for the book. My purpose was to challenge the traditional churches and theologians by telling them how we tried to work within their theological understanding and the pastoral guidelines they insisted upon – and this is what happened - disaster for all involved! Needless to say the book has remained unread by most traditionalists and only a few have ever given me any feedback, most of which has been along the lines of “We can respect the fact that your journey has illustrated the difficulties involved, but we cannot accept your revised theological approach”.

I know two gay men who have experienced “change”; in each case, after about twenty years of being in a committed same-sex partnership, they felt compelled to separate because of a growing need for a relationship with a woman. And both are now in heterosexual relationships. They tell me that they still experience homosexual feelings from time to time, but are basically happy they made the decision. However, most significantly (I believe), both came to their conclusions entirely on their own, without any pressure from churches, counsellors etc., and only after very many years in same-sex partnerships in which they felt entirely accepted as gay men. It seems to me that maybe they had been bi-sexual all along and their heterosexual potential emerged unexpectedly somewhat later in life. But the fact of feeling totally accepted as they were seemed to me to be a key factor in being able to discover their latent heterosexual feelings: a lesson that would be well observed by exponents of the ex-gay ministry process. Moreover, this is only two situations out of very many thousands of gay people I have known, and the opposite experience is far more common – i.e., of men who believed they were straight (or more likely suppressing their same-sex attractions) and then discovering their latent homosexuality and leaving their spouses for a same-sex partnership.

'GAY CURE' ADVERTISING PROVES MISLEADING

Savi Hensman, Inclusive Church, GB

‘Ex-gay’ movement advertisements which were to have appeared on the sides of London buses have been blocked by the Mayor of London, to the relief of many. Mayor Boris Johnson is chair of Transport for London. However Mike Davidson of the Core Issues Trust, which placed the ads with backing from Anglican Mainstream, accused him of “censorship”.

Tension can sometimes arise between freedom of expression and protection of sections of society from discrimination and the wider public from offence. Getting the right balance in such instances can be difficult.

What is surprising in this case, however, is that the Advertising Standards Authority had apparently cleared the ads in the first place. These read “Not gay! Post-gay, ex-gay and proud. Get over it!” This implies that, if one is attracted mainly to the same sex, changing one’s sexual orientation is possible and desirable.

This is borne out by Core Issues Trust’s commitment to “support men and women with homosexual issues who voluntarily seek change in sexual
preference and expression”. The *Anglican Mainstream* website, announcing the advertising campaign, claims that “sexuality is far more fluid than has hitherto been thought”.

So the claim touches on science, as well as religion and ethics. And on this basis, since matters of fact as well as opinion are involved, this campaign would have fallen foul of the rule that advertisements must not mislead.

Over the past century, numerous methods have been used to try to change people’s sexual orientation. Prayer, willpower, hormonal treatment, psychotherapy, aversion therapy, reparative therapy and other approaches have however proved generally ineffective, and often resulted in harm.

There may be minor changes in some people’s sexuality, and a handful may experience a more noteworthy shift. But for the vast majority, sexual orientation has proved to be more or less constant, though how this is expressed may be culturally influenced.

Many Christians and other people of faith now believe that loving, committed same-sex partnerships can be spiritually as well as emotionally positive. Even those who cling to the belief that homosexual feelings should not be physically expressed often suggest that lesbian and gay people should try to stay celibate, though this can also be problematic.

A few however still insist that gay and lesbian people can and should be ‘cured’. This ignores huge amounts of evidence. Even a study cited by the groups behind the advertisements does not bear out the exaggerated claims made. It is not surprising that so many leaders of the ‘ex-gay’ movement have abandoned it and apologised for the damage they have done.

If an advertisement were to urge short-sighted people, on religious grounds, to stop wearing spectacles, treating the resulting inconvenience and risk as a sign of devotion to God, this might indicate a flawed theology. However if it implied that the faithful should throw away their glasses and could rely on prayer and psychotherapy to give them good eyesight, it would clearly breach the rules. This is not to say that sexual orientation is equivalent to myopia – far from it. But in both cases, pseudo-scientific claims would violate advertising guidelines, whether or not an advertisement was too offensive to appear on London buses.