

**Christian Responses to Issues of  
Human Sexuality and Gender Diversity:  
A Guide to the Churches in India**

To Joseph,  
for your contribution  
and friendship.  
Thank you for being you!

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— ECC, Bangalore, Nov 2011



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## Disclaimer

This Guide or Handbook is meant to help readers understand same-sex sexual orientations and gender identities in order to help them know more about their own sexualities, help them with their interpersonal relationships and to deal with the complexities given by their own faith traditions. Even though it is intended primarily for Christians, Christian organizations, and the Church, it can also be used by parents and teachers, as well as family and friends of the sexual minorities. Anyone can read it, to gain better skills in interacting with people of diverse sexualities and gender identities, and to use the correct terminologies- not because they are 'politically correct', but because one needs to be sensitive with others walking in the same sacred space.

As you read, you will see that this book provides new theological and biblical insights. It also includes scientific and legal information from credible sources, but it is not to be confused for a medical or legal peer-reviewed journal, or to be used in place of psychotherapy in a clinical setting.

We have made every possible attempt to ensure the information in this book was correct at the time of going to press. However, the Editor and the Publisher do not assume - and hereby disclaim - any liability to any party caused by errors or omissions, whether such errors or omissions result from negligence, accident, or any other cause.

We pray this book will not hurt anyone's sensibilities, rather that it is able to shed light on the sensitive subject of human sexuality and gender diversity, help elucidate the complexities of the matter, and help the reader see that when it comes to personal struggles with sexuality, people are more similar than different, in reality as much as in God's eyes.

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## Re-reading the Bible and Re-writing Worship

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### Realising a True Family of God

*Joseph N. Goh*

*While he was still speaking to the crowds, his mother and his brothers were standing outside, wanting to speak to him. Someone told him, 'Look, your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you.' But to the one who had told him this, Jesus replied, 'Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?' And pointing to his disciples, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.'* (Matthew 12:46-50 RSV)

I begin this biblico-pastoral reflection with an imaginative reconstruction of an incident in Matthew 12:46-50, during which the author of the gospel paints Jesus as deeply engrossed in preaching. Jesus was probably so caught up in expressing the exuberance of his love for God and fighting for justice on behalf of the disenfranchised that he was oblivious to the arrival of his mother and relatives. Probably exhausted by the journey to see Jesus and eager to reconnect with him, they must have motioned to one of the disciples to tap him on his shoulder and draw his attention to their presence. "Your

family is here," this disciple must have whispered to him. "They have been standing outside patiently for a long time, and they are exhausted from the journey to see you. They want to talk to you, especially your mother."

Being a brilliant, creative and resourceful preacher that he was, Jesus must have seen in this exchange a crucial opportunity to expound on what I offer as the aim of my reflection: to unpack ideas of realising—of making real—a true family of God. I imagine Jesus spinning around, smiling broadly and raising his voice saying "Well, if you do God's will, you are my mother and my brothers and my sisters" (Matthew 12:49-50). As a Jewish itinerant preacher who was steeped in his particular socio-cultural milieu, Jesus embodied and preached about God as his 'Abba'. True to the language of his time, the male and female siblings of Jesus are referred to as 'brothers'. I am certain that what Jesus said was not a dismissal of his family. I am even more certain that after he had made his point, he took a break from preaching, and rested and feasted with them.

It is very probable that Jesus was preaching on the loving fatherhood of God when his family arrived. I am fascinated by the idea that Jesus took advantage of their arrival to talk about family. Perhaps in saying what he said, Jesus was attempting to stretch the minds of people who lived 'in a society that placed a very high value on blood relationship' (Harrington 1992, 881). These were probably people who lived very exclusive, insular and close-knit lives, who perpetuated the idea that blood relations were 'insiders' while non-blood relations were 'outsiders'. Jesus would have been very much against any ghettoisation, discrimination or exclusion of this sort.

Mujerista theologian Ada María Isasi-Díaz's thoughts are useful for thinking over this issue. She speaks of a 'kin-dom' rather than a kingdom of God. For Díaz (2008, 380), 'kingdom' implies 'a sexist and classist term that does not convey today what it did at the time of the gospels'. The notion of kingdom thus hints at oppressive power plays at the expense of the downtrodden. Conversely, it is the kin-dom of God that Jesus preached and sought to establish as a familial praxis of justice, care, truthfulness and liberation. In other words, kin-dom is a space in which 'family' is less a matter of blood ties than it is a matter of doing God's will.

The carrying out of God's will was concretely and substantially exemplified in the inclusive, non-judgemental and unconditionally loving attitudes, teachings and practices of Jesus. The preacher of Nazareth incarnated the face and gentle caress of God to the people who were the most ostracised in his day, notably the tax collectors, women, lepers and non-Jews. Hence, the 'true family of Jesus' consists of a 'spiritual family' (Harrington 1992, 881) that bursts the fixed kinship categories of conventional consanguinity. An introverted pride in resemblance gives way to a celebration of dissimilitude when there is a recognition and embrace of Jesus' vision that individuals and communities are eligible to claim kinship with Jesus—with God—based on the criterion of '[doing] the will of [his] Father in heaven' (Matthew 12:50).

This vision is one that is powerful and revolutionary, yet simultaneously arduous to personify, as the followers of Jesus need to emulate his vision of kin-dom that 'loyalty to justice and truth supersedes the traditional family' (Bohache 2006, 509). The journey of realising the true family of God requires a sincere and wholehearted embrace of both traditional and non-traditional spiritual family members, of 'insiders' and 'outsiders' who are invested in doing what is just, caring, truthful and liberating.

Who are traditional and non-traditional spiritual family members? I suggest that traditional members consist of people who are considered as 'insiders' because they adhere to social compliance and respectability in terms of gender and sexuality. These include people who are comfortable with, and express themselves according to the gender assigned to them at birth, or people in opposite-sex relationships who may also be parents. Who then, are non-traditional members? Here, my thoughts turn to 'outsiders, or gender variant and sexually diverse people. These are transgender men and women, and people who do not identify with a particular gender or live as two genders, or people who feel romantic and sexual attraction to people of the same sex like gay men and lesbian women, or people who feel that they can love men and women, like bisexual people. Such people often feel excluded from the true family of God due to accusations of deviance and sinfulness by Christian individuals, communities and churches that are struggling to understand them.

Yet these gender variant and sexually diverse people may be devoted to living out the kin-dom of God in various ways. They may be fighting for justice and the right to live without fear of persecution. They may be involved in caring for partners, children, the ecology and the underprivileged. In many cases, they are struggling to be truthful to themselves after years of self-loathing and trying to conform to mainstream gender and sexual norms, roles and expectations. They are people who attempt to experience true liberation in societies and religious communities that desire only to 'repair and reform' them before they can be accepted. They are well aware of their status of 'outsider' simply on the basis of their gender and sexual identities. Nevertheless, if their actual lives reflect the kin-dom that Jesus preached despite being non-traditional, they must then still be part of the family. To exclude them as family members is to go against the inclusive spirit of Jesus. It is vital to remember that the loving and unconditional acceptance of God, who is 'not merely God *for* the world, but also God *with* us and the world' (Athappilly 2014, 88; original emphasis), is the entitlement of each and every human person.

How can we as Christian individuals, communities and churches in any part of the world realise a true family of God that has room for everyone? How can we establish again and again the kin-dom that Jesus envisioned? Despite doctrinal and theological differences, how can we create spaces where gender variant and sexually diverse people can breathe in a genuine air of welcome, acceptance and non-judgement?

There are neither simple nor singular solutions to these questions. Nevertheless, the words ascribed to Jesus in Matthew 12:46-50 can hold meaningful guidelines that can be translated into concrete action for us. Jesus always spoke as someone who lived and practised what I refer to as a methodology of 'love seeking understanding' and 'listening from the heart' (Goh 2016, 17). As followers of Jesus, it is incumbent on us at all times to imitate Jesus by preserving an acute awareness that the kin-dom which Jesus believed in, abided by and died for points to a mandate to realise a sense of family that goes beyond conventional boundaries of identity and expression. The proclamation that whoever does the will of God is part of Jesus' family cannot be taken as a sole reference to people who are aligned

to mainstream expectations of gender and sexuality. Such an understanding does not reflect the values and hopes that Jesus harbours for human persons who have always demonstrated, and will always demonstrate untold diversity. We know from our experiences that family members are often very different, but they are still family.

As followers of Jesus, we need to dismantle insider/outsider binary, and an 'us-versus-them' mentality. We need to recognise that the ultimate criterion for being a member of the true family of God is the desire and the commitment to execute the will of God according to one's circumstances and location in life by being as inclusive, non-judgemental and unconditionally loving as Jesus was. God calls all people to live by God's will regardless of gender or sexual identity. If we extend this vision in an impartial way to each and every human person, including those who are gender variant and sexually diverse, we are participating in realising a true family of God.

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## Special Worship Orders

Order of Worship during Dialogue  
'Church Leaders and Key Affected People'  
On June 2nd, 2015: Organised by  
Kerala Council of Churches (KCC) and NCCI

### Invocation song

#### *Call to Worship*

Leader : We come into God's presence naked, as we are

All : God come into us

Leader : We crave to feel God's fondling and caressing in our lives

All : God spread in us

Leader : We are committed in long lasting working relationships

All : God partner with us

### Prayer of Adoration

Leader: God, the gardener of loving relationships, we are enjoying your stimulating presence amidst us. We adore and praise your arousing presence in all the walks of our life. We thank you for your everlasting love towards us amidst our unfaithfulness. Seal our lips with kisses of understanding and multiply in us the attraction to one another that we may authentically celebrate your loving witness among us. Amen

### Confession

All: O God, our companion and mate, as we trace back our memories we confess that we have failed to realize and acknowledge the diversities that

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