

NAVIGATING TENSIONS CONCERNING HOMOSEXUALITY IN FREE EVANGELICAL CHURCHES

GUIDING RECOMMENDATION – ORIENTATION GUIDE (PART I) AND GUIDELINES (PART II) OF THE EXTENDED FEDERAL LEADERSHIP OF THE FEDERATION OF FREE EVANGELICAL CHURCHES

FOREWORD

In April 2004, the Federal Leadership adopted a statement entitled "Homosexuality as a potentially controversial issue in the context of church and society". This paper was helpful for many local congregations. Others pointed out weaknesses in this statement. Today we are presenting a new orientation guide.

Although social developments are not the reason for the new text, they form the background. For example, the legal situation in Germany has changed: Since October 2017, same-sex couples have had the right to civil marriage. The Protestant Church in Germany and many of its regional churches offer church blessings for homosexual couples. These examples illustrate the interactions between social developments and legislation and their influence on Christian communities. The Federal Leadership felt challenged to reconsider the topic and formulate answers based on the Gospel. As a result, we are presenting a guideline that explains biblical, systematic-theological, pastoral and practical issues and replaces the 2004 statement.

One task of the Federal Leadership is to make groundbreaking recommendations on ethical issues. Ethics deal with the question of how human life can succeed and what God in his goodness wants for human life. The Federal Leadership presents its view of what it considers to be biblically required and therefore trend-setting for the Federation of Free Evangelical Churches.

The responsibility of the local congregations must be distinguished from this. They are responsible for clarifying what the church leadership must specify, where consensus processes lead to common ethical guidelines, what is left to pastoral, individual application and what is left to the conscience of the individual.

The aim of the guide is to promote consensus within the Federation of Free Evangelical Churches and at the same time to strengthen responsible leadership and pastoral care in local congregations. The following is a brief introduction to the text.

KEY POINTS

The key messages include:

- We read the Bible as the Word of God. It is the basis for faith, teaching and life in the Federation of Free Evangelical Churches. In the basic text "God's Word in human terms", the Federation Leadership has formulated its understanding of Scripture. It also makes it clear that we read the Bible with Jesus Christ as center and foundation of everything.
- The love of God, the liberating gospel of Jesus Christ, applies to all people. We must never lose sight of this as the core of the biblical message and of our life. Whenever we consider an ethical issue, we are dealing with people to whom this gospel applies.
- Lifelong marriage between a man and a woman and living together as a family represent the guiding principle from a biblical perspective. It is assumed and founded in the Old and New Testaments (Genesis 1-2; Matthew 19).
- As a result of all interpretations of the Bible, homosexual behavior is not compatible with this model.
- From a human scientific perspective, it is not possible to clearly explain how homosexual identity develops.¹ For example, it is possible for some to change their sexual orientation from homosexual to heterosexual, but obviously not for others.²
- Sin is always to be considered in its two dimensions, a fateful/general and a personal/individual one. Both sides must be taken into account when it comes to ethical issues and pastoral care.
- For people with a homosexual orientation who have come to the conclusion, based on their life history and self-perception, that they must and/or want to accept their homosexuality as unchangeable, the challenge lies in renouncing the practice of this orientation on the basis of the biblical guiding principle and living a sexually abstinent life.

Following these key statements, we turn our attention to the issues that need to be discussed in the local congregations.

¹ The Federal Council also made this clear in its 2004 statement, but then elsewhere created the impression that homosexuality is primarily a relationship disorder (point 3.1; p. 7 in "Homosexuality as a potentially controversial issue in the context of church and society", Statement of the Federal Council 2004). Furthermore, the statement insinuates that human scientific studies which conclude that homosexuality is not a disease are politically motivated (point 1.2; p. 2).

² The 2004 statement assumes a high possibility of change in homosexual tendencies. From today's perspective, the use of this data seems questionable. The study used by Spitzer has since been called into question by the researcher himself.

LOCAL COMMUNITY AND APPLICATION

Decisions regarding specific life situations are made locally. In a union federation of independent local congregations, it is therefore necessary to teach a biblical view on marriage and family in the congregations and for the members to discuss what God's will means for their lives. Congregations have the freedom and responsibility to clarify what they regard as a non-negotiable part of discipleship of Jesus and which decisions are left to the individual. Both the exegetical community and the conscience of the individual are important in the Federation of Free Evangelical Churches.

It is also important to distinguish between the task of leadership and the task of pastoral care.

- Leadership must manage and take responsibility for processes concerning the entire congregation. This can also mean that if the congregation has not managed to reach a consensus leaders must decide on how to proceed in conflict situations.
- Pastoral care focuses on the individual and helps them to navigate their lives. Pastoral care can help to promote the development of one's own identity. It links the biblical guiding principle with the biography of the person seeking advice³, it confronts and encourages through statements from the Bible and helps them in their decision-making.

Very different issues arise in communities local congregations due to the individual situations and biographies of people who are either already a member of the church, have grown up in it or have joined it at some point in their lives.

Even though the biblical guiding principle is rather clear, we are still dealing with individuals, so this is a process that cannot be exhaustively covered in any statement by the Federal Leadership. For example, there is a difference in talking about a 13-year-old who has homoerotic experiences, a lesbian couple who have been living together for years and have adopted the biological children of one partner and are now coming into contact with the church and Jesus, or a person constantly changing partners.

Accompanying these people in a wide variety of situations from the perspective of the Gospel is the beautiful, challenging and sometimes burdensome task of local pastoral care.

NAVIGATING TENSION

The tension that can arise when the lives of individuals deviate from the biblical model guiding principle is part of our lives. We are convinced that the Gospel of Jesus Christ should be in the center of this tension. It establishes a new reality of life, heals wounds, provides orientation, challenges and is always more fundamental than a single life issue.

Because we have this guiding principle, it is important to avoid signals that may lead to the conclusion that people can deviate from the guiding principle at will. At the same time, it is important that there

³ In the 2004 statement, pastoral care is described exclusively with the aim of changing homosexuality and therefore appears to be greatly reduced. Today, we would broaden the possible goals of pastoral care, as those seeking advice may be more interested in working on the question of their identity or how to shape their lives. The question of sexuality can possibly be assigned to this.

is room for development and that congregations do not place rigorous expectations on homosexuals, thereby ignoring their individual situation.

We confess that homosexuals were discriminated against in our congregations or with our consent in the past. Even today, homosexuals face threats to their lives in other countries. We want to raise our voices against this. The rejection of homosexual practice must not lead to the rejection, discrimination or even persecution of people.

This guide consists of three main parts:

PART I: GUIDING RECOMMENDATION – GUIDANCE | 2019

I. Introduction: Hermeneutic prerequisites

II Systematic theological foundations

III Ecclesiological and practical theological foundations

PART II: GUIDING RECOMMENDATION – GUIDELINES | 2023

How we as the Federation of Free Evangelical Churches in Unity and Diversity deal with homosexuality

**The Federal Leadership of the Federation of
Free Evangelical Churches on December 7, 2018**

Clarification of theses III. 13. and 14. on March 7, 2019

**Extension of the orientation guide after the FeG discussion process
to include the guidelines of the FeG Federal Leadership in November 2023**

SYSTEMATIC-THEOLOGICAL AND PRACTICAL-THEOLOGICAL GUIDELINES ON HOMOSEXUALITY

PART I: GUIDING RECOMMENDATION – ORIENTATION GUIDE

I. INTRODUCTION: HERMENEUTIC PREREQUISITES

The systematic-theological and practical-theological considerations on homosexuality are committed to the scriptural principle of the Reformation and therefore take up the relevant statements of the Bible on the subject as fundamental and guiding.

The scriptural principle of the Reformation is characterized by "solus Christus" ("Christ alone") and "sola scriptura" ("Scripture alone"). The basis and object of the Christian faith is God's self-communication and his invitation of community in Jesus Christ. We only know about this through the biblical traditions. Therefore, the Bible, as the Word of God, is the norm and judge of all Christian doctrine because of the content it testifies to.

"Christ alone" should be the cause, content, standard and Lord of our salvation and the church. "Scripture alone" should be the source, orientation and binding guideline for our teaching and preaching, our ethical orientation and way of life. Neither (free) church traditions nor an orientation towards the customs of contemporary society nor the claim of subjective revelation and inspiration may come close to the authority of the Bible as the Word of God.

From the perspective of the Christian faith, the Bible points the way to understanding and living sexuality. It must be listened to carefully as a starting point for ethical orientation and must point the way for all attempts at clarification. Historical, hermeneutical and ethical reflections are indispensable. It is a matter of reconstructing the reference to the subject matter and the temporality of biblical statements without dismissing them as time-dependent statements. In addition, from the perspective of Christian faith, biblical texts must always be read in the context of the inalienable content of the Gospel of Jesus Christ as the unique Word of God and related to it.

A systematic-theological and practical-theological perspective on the phenomenon of homosexuality, which is not considered as an independent theological topic in the Bible⁴, must be related to a comprehensive biblical-theological understanding of sexuality and humanity.

⁴ Biblical scholars (see bibliography in the appendix) point out that the biblical authors address homosexual practice, but not same-sex orientation and its relevance to identity. This connection is a modern issue and emerged at the end of the 19th century. The Bible rarely mentions homosexual practice and does not treat it as a topic in its own right. Two Old Testament Bible texts record an attempt at homosexual rape by a group (Gen 19:1-25; Jdg 19). In the third book of Moses, we find two different formulations of the law (Lev 18 and 20) that also expressly prohibit male homosexual intercourse. We find statements on same-sex sexual practice in the New Testament in the Corpus Paulinum in three places. In 1 Corinthians 6:9f. and 1 Timothy 1:10, a corresponding practice is listed in a catalog of vices. No reasons are given here as to why same-sex sexual behavior is considered a sin. In Romans 1:26f, however, Paul goes into this in more detail. There are no statements on the subject of homosexuality in the Gospels.

The relationship between fallen and liberated creation must be taken into account and the will of God revealed in Jesus Christ for the coexistence of human beings must be examined.

II SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

Anthropological theses

1 According to the Bible, every human being is a constitutively corporeal and, in their physicalness, a constitutively sexual being.⁵ Sexuality is one of God's good gifts, given as part of his good creation⁶ that shapes the entire life, experience and coexistence of human beings from birth to death. The fact that humans are sexual beings from the beginning to the end of their lives is the result of a clear or diffuse sexual identity, specific sex hormones and their mental and physical effects, as well as their ability and willingness to have pleasurable, body-oriented relationships.

2. Sexuality is anchored in the physicalness and the psychosocial development of human beings. This means that it depends on biological factors, but is also influenced and shaped to a large extent by social and cultural factors. Sexuality is given to humankind as something that develops, as something that can be influenced and as something that can and needs to be shaped. Sexuality is a task of education and maturation, it is sexuality in the making.

3. A person's sexual identity can be differentiated into their biological identity (man or woman) and their sexual orientation (heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual). A distinction must also be made between sexual orientation and sexual practice. There are individual cases of neurotic homosexuality. Furthermore, there is no medical basis for labeling homosexuality as an illness.

4. Extensive research into genetics, neurological research, hormone research and twin studies has not yet led to the conclusion that homosexuality can be attributed monocausally to biological causes.⁷ No theory about the origin and nature of homosexuality is convincing enough to lead to a consensus among recognized scientists. However, many years of research indicate that homosexuality is acquired in a complex developmental process. "Sexual orientation develops ... continuously and is influenced by individual sexual and emotional experiences, social interactions and cultural frameworks."⁸ Characteristics such as a child's innate high sensitivity can lead to a greater openness to homosexual development. Without real clarity on the question of causation, it is difficult to say that sexual orientation is fundamentally changeable, although such changes have been documented in individual cases. If we want to break down the results of these various studies into their most general

⁵ Cf. Wilfried Härle, *Ethik*, Berlin/New York 2011, pp. 304-327. See also the references there.

⁶ As a good gift of creation, sexuality is also affected by sin (see II.6/7).

⁷ Martin Dannecker, *Sexualwissenschaftliches Gutachten zur Sexualität*, in: Jürgen Basedow (ed.), *Die Rechtsstellung gleichgeschlechtlicher Lebensgemeinschaften*, Beiträge zum ausländischen und internationalen Privatrecht 70, Tübingen 2000, p. (335-350) 339.

⁸ Kelly K. Kinish/Donald S. Strassberg/Charles W. Turner, *Gender differences in sexual orientation flexibility. A multidimensional retrospective study*, in: *Journal of Sex Research* 17, 2004, pp. (26-45) 27.

common statement, it is this: it has neither been proven that a homosexual orientation can be changed in every case, nor that it cannot be changed in every case.⁹

Systematic theses on the coexistence of the sexes and homosexuality

5 From the perspective of the Christian faith, human beings are created in the image of God as male and female.¹⁰ Humankind as the image of God in their unity of male and female thus assumes a distinction between the sexes. (cf. Gen 1:26-28). In the biblical accounts of creation, the duality of humanity is directly related to the basic elements of sexuality: the creation of life (Gen 1:27) as well as pleasurable and all-encompassing communion (Gen 2:24). The fact that sexuality as God's gift to man and woman is not limited to the biological function of procreation is particularly evident in the wisdom literature of the Old Testament, in which the sexuality of man and woman is celebrated and reflected upon (cf. the impressive texts from "The Song of Solomon"). All human life comes from this sexual communion between man and woman. Every human being is descended from it. Human sexuality finds its fulfillment in it.

The biblical statements on creation do not (yet) explicitly refer to marriage and family – as historically and culturally variable forms of cohabitation – but merely to the significance of the sexual community of man and woman for humanity. "But the depth of the physical bond that arises through sexual communion" and finds its social form in leaving father and mother (cf. Gen 2:24) "tends of itself to a lifelong responsibility for the other person with whom one has become so familiar." Jesus' words on marriage in Mt 19:5 (cf. Mk 10:8f.) refer to this. The apostle Paul sees the marriage between a man and woman as the legitimate place of lived sexuality (cf. 1 Corinthians 6:16; 1 Corinthians 7). In this respect, it can be said that a model for sexual communion based on the Bible should be oriented towards the model of marriage between a man and a woman. (Quotes from EKD text, Living with Tensions, 2.2 Biblical statements on sexuality,

6 Sexuality, like all created things, is deeply affected and influenced by the intrusion of sin and evil into creation. When the Bible and the Christian faith speak of creation, they always place it "beyond Eden" (Gen 4:16). They also speak of a "fallen creation" or broken reality. One of the consequences of sin mentioned in Genesis 3:16 is the woman's unquenched desire for the man as well as his dominion over her. Wherever sin intrudes into the good gifts of creation and expresses itself as an unrestrained demand, it takes the form of a sexuality that uses and abuses the partner or one's own body as an object to satisfy lust and desire in a self-serving way. This leads to a detachment of sexual acts and practices from a partnership context. The warnings against adultery and the rejection of divorce (Mk 10:1-12 par) and homosexuality as well as the warning against sexual intercourse with close relatives (Lev 18:6-18; Deut 27:20.22f.) are related to this.

7 Every person finds aspects of the broken reality of the world as God's creation around them and also within themselves. In a fallen world, humankind constantly has to deal with sin; first and foremost because they suffer it, find themselves surrounded by it (cf. Gen 8:21; John 8:34) and because it prevents them from living out their destiny as beings created in the image of God – also with regard

⁹ See also below II.12 with footnote 9.

¹⁰ This explicitly includes intersex people who do not have a clear gender because they have chromosomal, gonadal, hormonal and anatomical deviations. On the phenomenon of intersexuality, see the German Ethics Council's opinion on intersexuality of February 23, 2012. <http://www.ethikrat.org/publikationen/stellungnahmen> (last accessed on June 9, 2017).

to sexuality.¹¹ Therefore, in relation to sin, a distinction must be made between sin as a part of the human fate and reality and individual sin.

8 Through the Gospel, i.e. through God's salvation work in Jesus Christ, a new fellowship with God becomes possible and real through faith. In Jesus Christ, God grants humankind forgiveness of sins by grace without any preconditions, which becomes available through faith. This breaks through and overcomes the threat of irrevocable exclusion from the community of God associated with the law. In this context, God's good, healing will is summarized in the New Testament – by referencing and combining Old Testament commandments – in the two great commandments of love. They are not one commandment among others, but the epitome of God's will as it has found concrete form in the individual commandments, e.g. the Decalogue or the Sermon on the Mount.

9 Paul describes people who have been freed from the power of sin through God's grace in Jesus Christ as a "new creation" (cf. 2 Cor 5:17 and Gal 6:15).¹² At the same time, the final renewal of life and perfection of the world is still to come (cf. Rom 8:20-25; 1 Cor 15:20-49). This is why regulations such as those relating to divorce in the Old and New Testaments are also relevant for Christians. On the one hand, adultery and divorce are characterized as an evil that contradicts the will of the Creator; on the other hand, this can be a lesser evil under certain circumstances due to human hard-heartedness and flawed human behavior. Such regulations not only help to shape life in the tension between creation and fall, but also between redemption and perfection. However, the Bible does not make any such provision for lifelong partnerships of homosexual people.

10 From a systematic-theological perspective it must be clarified, not least against the background of the biblical statements in 1 Cor 6:9f. and 1 Tim 1:9f. how the salvation given to humankind by God in Jesus Christ and practiced homosexuality are related to one another. In doing so, the biblical-reformation distinction between the individual and their actions must be observed. The urgent seriousness inherent to the demands of the catalogs of vices with regard to the question of attaining the salvation and respectively the kingdom of God belongs is part of the dialectic of promise and demand of the Word of God, which the apostle Paul describes in Philipians (cf. Phil 2:12f.). It is God alone who saves and liberates us through his grace alone in Jesus Christ and at the same time we are called upon to obey as people liberated by him. This tension between demand and fulfillment is not resolved in our lives as Christians.

11 The catalog of vices in 1 Corinthians 6:9f. is related to the fact that the church has been justified and sanctified by Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit (v. 11) and that Christians no longer belong to themselves, but to Christ, who bought them at the price of his life, so that they may glorify God with their bodies (v. 19f.). Paul explains his experience that people can also change their sexual behavior through faith and baptism.

¹¹ Therein lies the lasting significance of the distinction between *peccatum originale/personale* and *peccatum actuale* or between fundamental sin and act sin. Cf. Wilfried Härle, *Dogmatik*, vierte, überarbeitete Aufl., Berlin/New York 2012, pp. 488-491; Wilfried Joest/Johannes von Lüpke, *Dogmatik II: Der Weg Gottes mit dem Menschen*, fünfte, völlig neu überarbeitete Aufl., Göttingen 2012, pp. 66-70; Otto Weber, *Grundlagen der Dogmatik Bd. 1*, unaltered ND of the seventh edition of 1987, Neukirchen-Vluyn 2013, pp. 658-683.

¹² Cf. Jürgen Roloff, *Die Kirche im Neuen Testament, Grundrisse zum Neuen Testament 10*, Göttingen 1993, p. 91.

12 Romans 1:18-32 is of particular importance for the systematic theological evaluation of homosexual practice, as Paul uses it here as an example in an exclusively theological context. Same-sex intercourse is clearly condemned. This is the most important example of the sin of humankind who rebels against its Creator. Homosexual practice is understood here as a symptom of the original sin or as a consequence of the actual sin, namely the violation of fellowship with God. The decisive aspect in Paul's explanations is that the disorder in the relationship between humans and God corresponds to the change from "natural" sexual intercourse to "unnatural" (v. 26f.). The verb "exchange" or "swap" has the role of a key word (taken from Psalm 105:20 Septuagint version). After humans "exchanged" creator and creation (Rom 1:23) by worshipping (the images of) creatures and thus "exchanging" the truth of God for lies (Rom 1:25), God abandoned them to their desires and passions, as a result of which they "exchanged" (Rom 1:26f.) the natural intercourse between man and woman for homosexual intercourse.

The basic idea is therefore that the exchange of creator and creature entails (as a consequence) the exchange of the sexes. This could be based on the idea that a person who turns away from God as their creator in order to idolize and worship their own kind is therefore also oriented towards their own kind in sexual terms and loses their orientation towards the opposite sex. The decisive conclusion of Romans 1-3, as drawn in Romans 3:9-20, is in any case the general entanglement in sin. In Romans 1:24-32, Paul explicitly refers several times to "desires" and "shameful passions", i.e. to elements that can also occur in heterosexual relationships as well as in other areas of life.

13 It should be noted that there are no biblical statements that positively evaluate practiced homosexuality. The focus of interest here is homosexual practice, which – in accordance with the general biblical statements on sexual communion – is qualified as contradictory to God's original creative will.

14 A systematic theological judgment on homosexuality and homosexual partnerships cannot be based solely on individual biblical passages, but must be supported by an assessment within the broader context of ethical principles based on the Bible as a whole (understanding of creation and marriage, understanding of sin, commandment of love and principle of justice, identity in Christ, etc.). In addition, human scientific research results, to which we owe the knowledge of the interweaving of sexuality with the personality structure or human identity¹³, as well as the limits of therapy and pastoral care with regard to changing a sexual orientation must be taken into account.¹⁴

¹³ Annette Barkhaus et al. (eds.), *Identity, Corporeality, Normativity*. Neue Horizonte anthropologischen Denkens, Suhrkamp-Taschenbuch Wissenschaft 1247, Frankfurt a. M. 1996.

¹⁴ "It should also be noted - not least for education - that even genetic dispositions of feelings and behavior in puberty and adolescence show a high degree of plasticity, so that on the one hand it is possible that homosexual inclinations are consolidated through homosexual behavior, but on the other hand homosexual inclinations can also be influenced in such a way that an orientation towards the opposite sex becomes possible. Nevertheless, it cannot seriously be claimed that the door to change is open to all homosexual people. There are clear limits to therapy and even more so to pastoral care." (Ulrich Eibach, *Homosexualität und Kirche*, in: *ThBeitr* 25, 1994, p. [192-211] 196).

Ethical implications

What ethical implications are contained in these anthropological and systematic-theological principles for interpreting homosexuality?

15 From the perspective of the Christian faith, marriage and family, which are based on reliability, mutual recognition, love and a public-law act, are the theological and social guiding principles for people living together, especially with regard to generativity and sexuality. The biblical testimony of God's will for human coexistence as revealed in Jesus Christ corresponds to the characterization of marriage as a lifelong, comprehensive partnership between a man and a woman under public law, which forms the context for these two people in which sexuality is experienced and children can be born and grow up in security and freedom.

16 In addition to this model, there is room for other forms of life, such as those living alone or singles, for reduced family forms such as single parents or single-parent families, who are also under God's blessing applies and who are to be honored and supported by the church of Jesus Christ.

17 With regard to homosexual people, it is essential to differentiate between people who can fully identify with their homosexual orientation and others who suffer from it and hope for change through therapy or counseling; between people who live their homosexual orientation in secret and others who consciously "come out"; or between people who want to live a committed homosexual partnership and others who change sexual partners frequently.

18 For homosexual people who, on the basis of their life history and self-perception, have come to the conclusion that they must and/or want to accept their homosexual orientation as unchangeable, the challenge lies in renouncing the practice of this orientation on the basis of the biblical guiding principle and living a sexually abstinent life. There is no denying that this is an ethical possibility, not only for homosexuals but also for heterosexuals. In many life stories, sexual abstinence is the only ethically responsible option for a shorter or longer period of time. The claim that sexual abstinence is impossible or leads to personality deformations must be contradicted. Numerous people who remain celibate, people who live alone, deaconesses, priests, but also people who were and are required to be sexually abstinent due to an illness or disability of their spouse or themselves are proof of this possibility. However, they are not free from temptation and danger.

19 The apostle Paul writes with regard to heterosexual people: "But if they cannot abstain, let them marry; for it is better to marry than to be consumed with lust" (1 Cor 7:9). However, people who see themselves as homosexual see heterosexual marriage as impossible for them.

20 A same-sex partnership that is based on the criteria of a heterosexual marriage (public-law act, exclusivity, lifelong duration, love and fidelity) is to be defined ethically as a deviation from the biblical-theological guiding principle of heterosexual marriage. Such a binding cohabitation is ethically less negative than homosexual acts with changing partners, even if it contradicts the biblical-theological foundations of marriage between a man and a woman.

III Ecclesiological and practical theological foundations

The practical theological questions arising on the subject of homosexuality and their clarification must be considered in relation to the ecclesiological foundations of Free Evangelical Churches. For this reason, the foundations for understanding the constitution of Free Evangelical Churches will first be laid out before conclusions and guidelines for action on the topic are considered and developed.

From a practical theological perspective, a distinction must be made between considerations of church leadership (cybernetics) and pastoral care. Particular attention must be paid to the fact that cybernetic and pastoral care mandates can contradict each other and can lead to a problematic diffusion of roles in pastoral work. The instrumentalization of pastoral care for cybernetic goals should be rejected.

Ecclesiological foundations of Free Evangelical Churches

1. Free Evangelical Churches see themselves as a community of believers. The foundation in Christ is considered to be so strong that the community is not called into question by differing views on individual issues (e.g. the question of baptism). Whether someone is a Christian and therefore also belongs to the community of believers in Christ is determined solely by their relationship of trust in Jesus Christ as Lord of the community. This relationship of trust, which manifests itself in a life of discipleship, is founded and sustained by God's act of salvation in Jesus Christ, which absolutely transcends and encompasses human and therefore fragmentary trust.

2 On this evangelical basis, we as members of Free Evangelical Churches constantly reflect on the personal responsibility of the individual before God and before His Word for life in discipleship. The preamble to the constitution of our Federation of Free Evangelical Churches states: "In matters of scriptural interpretation and practical application of the Holy Scriptures, the conscience of the individual, bound to God's Word, is respected."¹⁵

3. Membership in a Free Evangelical Church includes the willingness to be challenged to form an ethical judgment based on the Word of God through the ethical mission statements of the congregation and to participate in the mission statement processes of the congregation.¹⁶

Cybernetic orientation

4 The leadership of a congregation has the function of supporting the congregation in finding its way in their committed walk with Jesus Christ. To this end, church leadership also demands and promotes the ethical judgment of individual church members. This is done in particular by the church leadership demanding and promoting ethical mission statement processes in the church. The ethical judgment of the individual based on the Bible as the Word of God should be related to the ethical judgment of the exegetical community based on the Bible as the Word of God, which represents a jointly responsible ethical model. Ethical models formed in this way by the congregation do not have a

¹⁵ Preamble of the Constitution of the Federation of Free Evangelical Churches of September 21, 2018, para. 3.

¹⁶ The ethical model on which this text is based is marriage as a lifelong, comprehensive partnership between a man and a woman under public law (see thesis 15 above).

magisterial function for the ethical judgment of the individual based on the bible as the Word of God; they are intended to challenge and promote it.

5. Congregations and church leaders are faced with the challenge that there are different ethical convictions regarding homosexuality, which equally refer to the Bible as a common basis for ethical judgment. The following should be noted for such a conflict of ethical convictions:

- a)** The common conviction that the Bible, as the Word of God, should be the binding basis for faith, teaching and life, challenges us to continue the constructive dialog about a biblically and theologically based assessment of homosexuality, even if there are different ethical convictions in the congregation. Differences in ethical judgments call for mutual biblical-theological justification and learning processes.
- b)** A constructive dialog requires all participants to be willing to self-reflectively clarify the conditions of their own decision-making processes, to justify their own ethical convictions and to shift their perspective in order to understand other, foreign or opposing justifications.
- c)** A conflict regarding ethical convictions cannot always be resolved in such a way that a common biblical-theological judgment is reached through constructive dialog. Such a disagreement should be accompanied by standards that regulate life together in mutual respect despite differing ethical convictions.

6 Since even a homosexual partnership that is intended to be lifelong, caring and faithful contradicts the biblical statements against homosexual practice and does not correspond to the model of a marriage between a man and a woman, the church cannot bless homosexual partnerships if it agrees with the ethical model of marriage on which this text is based. It can support those concerned in love and include them in its intercession.

7. It should also be expected that the congregation's guiding principles are fundamentally recognized if someone wishes to assume responsibilities within the congregation.

Theses on pastoral care

8. Pastoral care can be understood as an offer of interpersonal support, communion and interpretation of life within the horizon of the Christian faith with the aim of strengthening people's certainty of life and faith.¹⁷

Homosexual orientation does not automatically lead to a demand for such pastoral care. Not even if one's own homosexual orientation is experienced as conflictual. There is therefore no direct path from a homosexual orientation to pastoral care.

In the following theses, however, some fundamental aspects should be considered in the event that pastoral care is sought. The specific paths that the counseling session will then take in each case

¹⁷ Based on Michael Klessmann, Seelsorge: Begleitung, Begegnung, Lebensdeutung im Horizont des christlichen Glaubens. A textbook, fourth edition, Neukirchen-Vluyn 2012, p. 8.

depend on the situation and history of the person being counseled, as well as on the competence of the counselor and the work of the Holy Spirit, and therefore cannot be outlined in this basic text.

9 Pastoral care creates a space in which a person can confide in someone and talk openly. In the face of personal rejection, which they unfortunately still sometimes experience in society, at work, in the family, but also in the church, homosexual people need to experience solidarity and community.¹⁸ The fundamental Protestant recognition and acceptance of the person seeking pastoral care includes the fact that a pastoral counseling session can also have challenging or confrontational parts in addition to empathic parts.

10 The fact that the wording of several biblical passages characterizes homosexual practice as a sin presents those affected with the challenge of clarifying how they reconcile their own homosexual form of partnership with the normative authority of the Bible as the Word of God. There is therefore a need for ethical guidance. Although pastoral care does not have the task of producing a certain ethical conviction and should be kept free of cybernetic objectives (see above), ethical orientations are nevertheless an important dimension of Protestant pastoral care.¹⁹ The primary aim of pastoral care is to promote the conversation partner's independent ability to form an ethical judgment and, secondarily, to accompany him or her in specific ethical conflict situations.²⁰

11 In order to successfully support and accompany the conversation partner, it is necessary for pastoral caregivers to act neither moralistically nor libertunistically. This needs to be explained further here, as it is encountered in relation to homosexuality. Moralism judges and measures the conversation partner against supposedly fixed, situation-independent behavioral norms whose historical and cultural conditionality is not critically perceived. Hedonistic libertinism declares everything that brings pleasure or benefits the conversation partner²¹ to be good and devalues traditions as fundamentally restrictive.²² Rather, the ability to form ethical judgments is promoted by the fact that pastoral care opens up a space for discussion in which the conversation partner can become more aware of their own ethical conflicts and the manner of (and perhaps also the blockages in) their decision-making. Such a space cannot be created through quick answers, but through patient listening and careful questioning. At the right time, it is also beneficial for pastoral caregivers to add their own ethical judgment, based on the Bible as the Word of God, to the dialogical conversation. Not to cover up the other person's judgment, but to stimulate it.

12. Such a gospel-based session of pastoral care and support does not claim to be therapeutic and is to be distinguished from psychotherapeutic work.

¹⁸ However, enabling such experiences of solidarity is an urgent task for the entire community and not just for pastoral care.

¹⁹ See, for example, pastoral care as orientation work in Jürgen Ziemer, *Seelsorgelehre, dritte, durchgesehene und aktualisierte Aufl.*, Göttingen 2008, pp. 117-122, and orientation work in pastoral care in Michael Klessmann, *Seelsorge* (see note 14), pp. 112-114.

²⁰ Cf. Jürgen Ziemer, *Seelsorge* (see note 16).

²² The moralistic counselor will not pursue the goal of encouraging the interlocutor to make ethical judgments, but will instead prescribe the "correct" ethical judgments. The libertinist counselor will completely withhold himself and his own ethical judgments and devalue any ethical argumentation of his own as inadmissible interference. Cf. Michael Klessmann, *Seelsorge* (see note 14).

13 Homosexual orientation is profoundly linked to identity formation. Identity characteristics as integrated components of the personality are hardly accessible to therapeutic efforts to change, which are therefore generally not helpful. However, homosexual people who experience their sexual identity as uncertain or conflictual can undergo a professionally supervised clarification process. Accompanying this process requires special skills that are beyond the capabilities of pastoral care workers without appropriate professional training.

14 Occasionally, homosexual people enter into a heterosexual partnership in the hope of having a "normal" and "accepted" family life. It is not uncommon for both spouses to be overwhelmed with this situation. We expressly do not recommend this.

The Federal Leadership of the Federation of Free Evangelical Churches on December 7, 2018

Clarification of theses III. 13. and 14. on March 7, 2019

HOW WE DEAL WITH HOMOSEXUALITY AS A UNION OF FREE EVANGELICAL CHURCHES IN UNITY AND DIVERSITY

PART II: GUIDING RECOMMENDATION – GUIDELINES

Classification

In 2019, the Federal Leadership made a groundbreaking recommendation on homosexuality in Free Evangelical Churches ("Dealing with tensions" | [verlautbarungen.feg.de](https://www.verlautbarungen.feg.de)). As the federal leadership, we emphasize and recommend it again when people and local congregations deal with the topic of homosexuality.²³

As already stated in the foreword to this guide, we acknowledge and deeply regret that homosexuals have been degraded and defamed in our congregations or with our consent in the past. This is in no way acceptable and we raise our voice against it.

Some questions relating to the coexistence of congregations in the federation of Free Evangelical Churches as a spiritual community of life and ministry remained unanswered, for example: To what extent can congregations take different paths when dealing with the topic of homosexuality? How should the tensions that arise be dealt with at a national level? In essence: What does it mean to deal with the topic of homosexuality as a federation of congregations in unity and diversity?

At their meeting in September 2022, the Federal Parliament therefore instructed the Federal Leadership to conduct a broad-based discussion process on these issues and to present the results in turn. This was done in the following year through online forums, discussions in districts and committees and at five regional conferences. The discussions were constructive and characterized by mutual appreciation. We were able to learn from each other and experience the high value of our community of life and ministry. As a result of the discussion process, the Federal Leadership presented a draft of guidelines to the Federal Parliament in September 2023 with a request for feedback. This feedback was in turn incorporated into the considerations for the guiding recommendation that is now available.

The Federal Leadership is therefore presenting a guiding recommendation in the form of ten guidelines on the issues mentioned above and discussed in the discussion process. They are to be understood as a concretization of the biblical guiding principle outlined in the 2019 orientation guide. These guidelines are intended for adoption by the local congregations. They support unity as a community in diversity. This applies regardless of the theological weight that congregations attach to dealing with the topic of homosexuality and also regardless of which views on homosexuality are dominant in local congregations.

²³ The discussion template from January 2023 ([gespraech.feg.de](https://www.gespraech.feg.de)) also offers helpful key points on biblical-exegetical and human scientific findings, as well as on the understanding of faith and the covenant. It was not published as a groundbreaking recommendation, but supported the discussion process at the time and is a supplementary source for a more in-depth discussion.

If a congregation chooses a practice that does not comply with individual guidelines, it is still expected to conform to them as much as possible and to show consideration for the covenant community. The resulting tension is significant and yet endurable.

Guidelines

1. Every person is a beloved creation of God. God's grace in Jesus Christ applies to every person, regardless of personal characteristics such as origin, gender, sexual orientation or social status. We reject any form of degradation and defamation.
2. Homosexual partnerships are not approved of from a biblical perspective. However, the biblical testimony also makes it clear that personal experiences of life and faith must be viewed in a differentiated way and accompanied by pastoral care.
3. Homosexuality is unchangeable for many individuals. When dealing with people who experience this and live in homosexual partnerships based on fidelity and mutual responsibility, we are called to adopt an attitude of respect.
4. Due to the biblical guiding principle²⁴ of a marriage between man and woman, we are faced with the challenge of refraining from sexual communion with people of the same sex, even if there is a homosexual disposition and orientation in terms of sexual identity. However, a celibate lifestyle can only be lived in the form of an individual affirmation.
5. Congregations are challenged to recognize homosexuality as present in our world and to welcome every person who seeks the community of faith and believers. For the gospel and the fellowship of God apply to all people. It is the task of the congregations to find suitable ways of providing pastoral care and integration for homosexual people.
6. Since homosexual partnerships do not correspond to the biblical guiding principle, Free Evangelical congregations are called upon to refrain from wedding services or blessings of homosexual couples.
7. People in church leadership have a formative role model function. This also applies to the area of marital and family life (1 Timothy 3:1-13). For this reason, Free Evangelical churches are called not to appoint people who live in a homosexual partnership into church leadership or as pastors in view of the biblical guiding principle.
8. Dealing with homosexuality is a tense topic for the Federation of Free Evangelical Churches because it affects the topics of understanding faith, biblical hermeneutics and ethics. For the Federation, however, it is not an issue that is fundamental to the gospel of Jesus Christ and the Christian faith in God.
9. It is understandable how, under the common premise that the Bible is the "basis for faith, teaching and life" (preamble), more open or more reserved opinions on dealing with homosexuality can

²⁴ Cf. orientation guide "Dealing with tensions", p. 11 | verlautbarungen.feg.de

arise. As the Extended Federal Leadership, however, we do not consider them to be trendsetting for the Federation of Free Evangelical Churches.

10. Moved by God's love, our love for one another and our witness to the world should always speak more clearly and loudly than any theological position could ever do, however justified it may be. Therefore, the most important task of the Federation of Free Evangelical Churches is to found and develop congregations in which people find communion with God and each other.

**The Extended Federal Leadership of the
Federation of Free Evangelical Churches | November 2023**

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