News



by Sarah Mac Donald

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The synod of bishops on young people, which begins today in Rome, is "a once-in-a-generation moment" according to Tiernan Brady of Equal Future, a coalition of 100 LGBT groups and Catholic religious from over 60 countries.

Brady believes the synod could herald change that will "be felt for years to come across the world." Changing negative attitudes in the church towards LGBT people is the reason he is spearheading a campaign to help LGBT Catholics tell their stories to synod delegates of how they have been damaged by church teaching and attitudes. The website — Equalfuture2018.com — allows LGBT people to identify their country or region representative at the synod — the "decision-makers" — and send the delegates an account of their experiences as an LGBT Catholic.

Brady, 44, said the synod is the "closest thing the church gets to a democratic process" and that it is an opportunity to discuss real challenges of young people and the exclusion that young LGBT people face.

"It is an opportunity to highlight the damage and ask people to consider what they want to do about that," Brady said. "This absolutely is not an anti-church campaign — it is not a 'gay versus God' discussion. It is about the reality of the damage done to people across society. The church, as a major leader in the world, can do

something powerful to end it."

The County Donegal-born Irish activist was director of the referendum campaigns for same-sex marriage in Ireland and Australia which pitted him in opposition to the Catholic hierarchies in both countries.



Tiernan Brady (Provided photo)

"I come from a very stereotypical Irish family," Brady told NCR. "My late father and my mother, a retired religion teacher, were very religious people. My uncle is a priest in Peru — so I am out of Hollywood central casting when it comes to Irish families."

He has "never thought anti-church campaigns are useful" because "there is plenty of overlap" between the church and LGBT people. "You don't have to pick one or the other," he said. For Brady, the question is "how do we, as a society, make sure everybody feels cherished?"

While campaigning for same-sex marriage rights in Ireland and Australia, he met "powerful voices among people of faith in the area of social justice." It is, he said, a "crying shame their voices aren't heard more." One of the reasons he wanted to be part of the Equal Future campaign was the "amazing Catholic advocates for LGBT equality out there" and his desire to help "give them a platform."

"The church isn't going anywhere, and neither are the gays; so, the question isn't how does one side crush the other — that makes no sense," he said. "Winning will not be about beating the other side. Winning will be about persuading people, and the question is how do we create the tone and space that allows that to happen."

As far as Brady is concerned, both sides in this debate have "plenty of extreme voices," and the challenge is to make space for the middle ground, "the people who have yet to change their minds on the LGBT issue."

Brady hopes this campaign will give a platform to the "massive invisible support within the church" for LGBT people. Polls of Catholics in different countries, he said, have shown that despite the support, there is a lack of any structure for people to express their views.

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Before the synod, the church consulted widely with young Catholics who conveyed very clearly that the issue of their LGBT friends, brothers and sisters was important and something they wanted discussed.

"Young Catholics do want this issue to be talked about, so the challenge for the synod is to listen and engage with this issue," he said. "All we can do is continue to highlight the truth to the people in power, and hopefully they will listen to that truth as relayed through individual stories; but change can be hard, and it can be slow."

Brady believes change should be quicker now that some scientific studies have shown that "being an LGBT person is a natural condition."

"Now we know that, the question is how do we change our approach and our rules to reflect reality — and that is what people in the church and many priests across the globe understand — but the hierarchy has yet to catch up with that," he said. "It was 500 years before the church apologized to Galileo — we can't do that to LGBT people. The youth synod is a once-in-a-generation moment where we get to reflect on our knowledge and for the hierarchy to listen to the people of the church. In the end, the hierarchy can't wilfully ignore its members forever."

During the course of the synod, Equal Future is set to unveil the findings of a new international poll of Catholics around the world on the LGBT issue. According to Brady, the initial indications are that by a margin of 2:1 or 3:1, practicing Catholics say the church's teaching has to change, and that current attitudes are creating real damage to LGBT people.

"Human stories are the single most powerful way to allow others understand the damage and why it needs to be addressed," he said.

Brady hopes that during the synod there is a recognition that LGBT people "are entitled to the same respect and dignity and the same aspirations in society as everybody else." The church teaches that LGBT people should be treated with respect and dignity, but Brady questions if that is the experience of LGBT Catholics. The marginalization and mental health impact on LGBT Catholics would suggest that the church is "failing to reach its own low standards." "The poverty of exclusion is profound," he said, emphasizing that some in the church paint the picture that being LGBT is a misfortunate or disappointment.

Ultimately there has to be "a huge conversation" about the rules, the teachings and the tone of the teachings, which he stresses "are all too often very damaging to people." The church hierarchy has to face up to the fact that across the world Catholics are leading the change in accepting LGBT people.

"They understand that anybody can be LGBT and that everybody deserves to be cherished. What we are seeing is that Catholics are one the religious groups most likely to support equal dignity for LGBT people," he said. "The people in the church have moved and are moving, and the hierarchy has got to catch up with its own flock on this issue."

[Sarah Mac Donald is a freelance journalist based in Dublin.]

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