

## Conference series to address sexual diversity

Alice Popovici | Sep. 6, 2011



Paul Lakeland (Photo taken from the Fairfield University Web site)

Four universities in the New York City area will collaborate this fall on a conference series to address lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender issues in the Roman Catholic church, looking at the spiritual, pastoral and legal aspects of sexual diversity.

Held at Fordham University, Columbia University's Union Theological Seminary, Yale Divinity School and Fairfield University, the "[More Than A Monologue: Sexual Diversity and the Catholic Church \[1\]](#)" discussions will bring into the open a variety of perspectives on same-sex marriage, youth suicide, homosexuality in religious life and other issues, according to program organizer Paul Lakeland.

"In the Catholic tradition, in the Catholic church, there is the official teaching of the church, and there isn't really anything else, at least public," said Lakeland, a professor of Catholic Studies at Fairfield University in Fairfield, Conn. "Our agenda is to have as many voices as there are to be heard, heard."

The series opens Sept. 16, with a conference titled "Learning to Listen: Voices of Sexual Diversity and the Catholic Church," held at Fordham's Lincoln Center Campus in New York. Next, on Oct. 1, Union Theological Seminary in New York will host "Pro-Queer Life: Youth Suicide Crisis, Catholic Education, and the Souls of LGBTQ [lesbian, gay bisexual, transgender and queer] People."

On Oct. 22, Yale will host "Same-Sex Marriage and the Catholic Church: Voices from Law, Religion and the Pews" in New Haven, Conn., and on Oct. 29, Fairfield will host the final conference of the series, "The Care of Souls: Sexual Diversity, Celibacy, and Ministry."

Kelby Harrison, organizer of the conference at Union Theological Seminary, said the discussion will focus on how administrators of Catholic parochial schools can address the emotional and psychological well-being of students in light of the schools' "fairly condemning theology toward LGBTQ identities."

The program, which will include remarks by nationally-syndicated sex advice columnist Dan Savage (he founded the It Gets Better Project after hearing the stories of gay teens who committed suicide), came together

after a string of teen suicides brought into focus LGBTQ awareness in public schools.

Harrison added that Catholic schools "have a lot of responsibility over a lot of young souls, and there's just as many LGBT kids in parochial schools as there are in public schools."

During the "Care of Souls" conference at Fairfield, Lakeland said speakers -- including Loretto Sr. Jeannine Gramick of New Ways Ministries, Mark Jordan of Harvard Divinity School and *National Catholic Reporter* columnist Jamie Manson -- will delve into the roles and responsibilities of LGBT Catholics in church ministries.

"There's the question of -- how do they handle the relationship between their personal sexual identity and their religious commitment?" Lakeland said.

Lakeland, who said he and representatives from the other universities began planning the program more than a year ago, called the forum "unprecedented" in the sense that it is the first collaboration of its kind between Catholic universities (Fairfield and Fordham) and nondenominational divinity schools (Yale and Union Theological Seminary).

He said the program was inspired, in part, by what he perceives as a shift in American society in recent years, which has led to the legalization of same-sex marriages and civil unions in some states.

"There's clearly something afoot in American society that is making people less prejudiced about gay and lesbian people -- in general, not just Catholics -- than they used to [be]," Lakeland said. He cited a recent survey by Georgetown University's Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate in Washington, which found that 74 percent of Catholics support either same-sex marriages or civil unions. What this means, he said, is "there's something to talk about."

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[1] <http://www.morethanamonologue.org>