

God is love, and all of us were created in God's image. Jesus taught us that the love of others is necessary in the lives of all Christians. Love doesn't make victims and it doesn't oppress, because to love like God is to believe in equality. Remember that the will of God is that we love each other

LOVE DOESN'T MAKE VICTIMS



A Reflection on Equality

THE LATINO/LATINA
ROUNDTABLE PROJECT

of the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies
in Religion and Ministry

LOVE DOESN'T MAKE VICTIMS

A Reflection on Equality

This booklet is for you, for your family, and for your church.

Read it slowly, think about what you are reading, talk it over with your family and friends, but above all: put it into practice!

1. **God is love, and all of us were created in God's image. That's why all of us have the same dignity.**

Christians¹ believe that God loves all human beings, always and everywhere, without limits, without conditions, and without exceptions.² Why? Because Christians have always held that the God they believe in IS compassionate love. And if God IS love, then God can never act in any way or with any motive contrary to limitless love.³ In fact, if God were to ever act in any way or with any other motive besides love (or contrary to love), God would stop being God... and that is impossible.

That's why Christians have always trusted God to forgive and understand them. That's also why the main and most important commandment Jesus taught us was to love God and neighbor—regardless of who that neighbor is.⁴ Jesus accused of being hypocrites those who would first look at the neighbor and his/her behavior before deciding that the neighbor was “worthy” of love.

To love others without limit, without conditions and without exceptions, is to try to imitate how God IS and loves. And those who imitate God can't go

¹ By “Christian” in this booklet we mean all the churches and all persons who self-identify as “followers” or “disciples” of Christ. That's why in this booklet we regard as “Christian” the churches that call themselves Episcopal, Catholic, Orthodox, Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian, Baptist, Evangelical, Pentecostal, etc., and their members.

² Romans 8:35, 38-39. The references to biblical texts, mentioned in notes throughout this booklet, are just a few examples among the many more biblical texts that could be listed.

³ I John 3:11-15. I John 4:7-8.

⁴ Matthew 22:36-40. Mark 12:28-34. Luke 11:25-37.

wrong, even if they cannot “explain” the reasons for that love. As an old Spanish saying goes: “Deeds are love, and not its good reasons.” In other words, love is action, life, commitment—not the nice words or the good explanations we might give about love.

Respect for the equality of all (and among all) humans is one of the consequences of knowing that God IS compassionate love. Why? Because we were ALL created in the image of God—we are human beings because we are images of God, and we are the images of God *because* we are human beings!⁵ That’s why in our innermost being we carry the imprint of love. That’s also why we are all equal in dignity and rights.

Unfortunately, lots of people throughout the history of the world (and throughout the history of Christianity) have not hesitated to appeal to the name of God to create divisions and inequalities. Throughout the long history of Christianity, many of its followers have used the Bible and faith to create deep divisions among human beings and groups, pretending that some have more rights and more dignity than others. That attitude and that behavior, on the part of so many Christians, have led to terrible atrocities throughout history.

It could be our opinion that some persons don’t act morally well, or that they don’t believe in God as they should, or that they have little faith, and so on. Those may be *our* opinions. But we *don’t* have the right, based on *our* opinion or on what we think is correct, to hurt others or deny them their dignity and their rights. Because the rights of humans and their dignity come from God, and not from human opinions, decisions, or laws. Because all of us are images of the *same God*—and that God has no illegitimate children. God does not create garbage, so no human being is garbage in the eyes of God. No human being may be treated as garbage, in the name of God. On the contrary, God only sees the object of God’s love when he sees any human being--because God IS love and *all humans* are images of the same God.⁶

Do sinners have the same dignity and rights as the saints? Absolutely! Because

⁵ Genesis 1:26.

⁶ If your Bible has a book called Wisdom, go to Wisdom 11:21-26.

the dignity and rights of all persons come from God, and not from human laws or decisions, or from our good or bad behavior.⁷ There are too many historical examples of Christians who have believed themselves to be better Christians because they attack, persecute or disdain others, or because they deny others their rights and dignity. There are too many cases in history of Christians disdaining and abusing those whom *they* have accused of being “sinners.” All too often Christians end up being ashamed by how wrongly they treated their neighbors and how terribly they misjudged them. These Christians forgot that Jesus very explicitly and insistently taught us to love everyone and never to judge others.⁸

“Don’t judge” is a commandment that Jesus repeated with much insistence—although it seems that many Christians have preferred to forget this commandment in order to make themselves feel superior to and better than others. Unfortunately, that behavior among so many Christians has been the cause of terrible suffering in human history.

We can’t forget that we must *not* judge others, because we *must not* forget that God IS love. “Don’t judge” is the first step on the way to loving our neighbors. “Don’t judge” is also a necessary first step on our way to respecting the rights and dignity of others.

2. Jesus taught us that love of others is necessary in the lives of all Christians. But this Christian love is not only for those worthy of it.

It’s obvious that it’s easier to love those who also love us. It’s easier to love people who are good, honorable, decent, and admirable. No doubt. And Christ wants us to love them too.

BUT if we only or mainly love those who love us and treat us as we want to be treated, then our love would be no different from everyone else’s love.⁹ In other words, there is nothing particularly special in loving those who love you,

⁷ Acts of the Apostles 10:9-17. Luke 19:1-9.

⁸ Matthew 7:1-5. James 4:12. Luke 6:37. Matthew 5:21-22.

⁹ Matthew 5:43-48.

because most people do that.

To love those who love you is great, and there's obviously nothing wrong with that. But this is not the love on which Christianity was founded. What was the love that Jesus taught?

The love that Jesus spoke of, to the point of making it the first commandment and most important behavior by which the whole world should recognize Christians, is to love (without limits, without conditions, and without exceptions) everyone who does *not* deserve to be loved.¹⁰ That is how God (who IS love) loves *us*.

More exactly, the love Jesus spoke of is our love (and God's) towards those whom we say don't deserve to be loved by us (maybe by God, but not by us). We might say or think this because we see in other persons what we think is a "sinful" behavior of morally bad people, or because the color of their skin is darker than ours, or because they belong to a different religion or a different church, or because they don't have legal resident papers, or because they are immigrants and speak or behave strangely, or because they are poor, or because they are homosexuals, or because they live in a bad area of the city, or because...whatever.¹¹

There was a time, really not that long ago, in which the vast majority of Christians (basing their actions on how they read the Bible and on the doctrines of their churches) justified the slavery of persons who were black. The Christians who enslaved millions of human beings sincerely thought that the Bible and their doctrines clearly taught that the enslavement of blacks was allowed or even encouraged by God—and they would cite many biblical texts and many doctrinal statements in order to prove it. Meanwhile, how many millions were tortured, enslaved, abused and made to suffer horribly by those Christians who were so sure that they understood and correctly interpreted the Bible and the will of God? Christian churches today would not support or condone slavery; and yet, they once did. And they did it because they were convinced that *their*

¹⁰ Again, Matthew 5:43-48, and also Matthew 5:23-24 and I Corinthians 13:1-13.

¹¹ Matthew 11:1-6. Luke 4:16-21. Luke 6:27-38. Luke 7:36-47.

reading of the Bible and *their* understanding of doctrines were correct and allowed them to know God's will.

There was a time, very close to our own time, in which violence by men against women, and by whites against black, was justified in the name of God. Many Christians justified it by quoting the Bible or quoting doctrines. Many Christians (including women and blacks!) really thought that the Bible clearly taught women to be submissive to men and blacks to whites. Because both groups, albeit in different ways, were (by God's will) inferior to white men. And yet, again, these Christians were (and are) completely wrong—although there are still a few Christians who hold on to such dangerous nonsense.

Unfortunately, those are not the only two historical examples we could recall, examples of Christians sincerely using the Bible and the doctrines of the churches to horribly oppress and do great harm to others, and then later to realize how terribly wrong those biblical interpretations and those doctrines were. And this after millions of human beings had been made to suffer untold violence and misery.

That awfully mistaken attitude is still present among many Christians. Today many who claim to be followers of Christ still persecute (or applaud those who persecute) immigrants, undocumented persons (whom they call "illegal"), the poor, homosexuals, blacks, and many other groups--and they still say that they are only following the will of God. The Christians who disdain any or all of these groups are again using the Bible and their doctrines, "demonstrating" (or so they say) that God stands against immigrants, undocumented ("illegal") workers, the poor, homosexuals, and so many others.

It seems that many Christians haven't learned the lessons of Christian history. They appear not to notice that every time Christians have appealed to the Bible and/or to doctrine to persecute, disdain or do violence against others, it's those very Christians who were wrong. They haven't learned from the horrors caused by that mentality and that way of reasoning.

3. An example from today.

Why would we put undocumented (so-called “illegal”) workers and homosexuals in the same category?

Because they are. Because, ultimately, it's human interpretation (often expressions of social prejudices) that “judges” these two groups as engaging in morally unacceptable behavior. And because of this judgment both groups are persecuted, repressed, and made unacceptable as equals to the other members of our society.

Think for a moment about the arguments used against undocumented workers, and you'll see how much these arguments parallel the ones used against homosexuals.

It is said that the undocumented violate laws that the American majority have voted for. It is said that the undocumented are changing the nature of our society, “darkening” its racial, ethnic composition. It is said that the undocumented do not understand the history of the country or the American way of life, and that they are abusing our democratic institutions. It is said that the undocumented are taking the country to financial bankruptcy, because they receive services for which they do not pay because they do not pay taxes. It is said that the undocumented are corrupting society because they are criminals who come here to steal and do violence. It is said that the undocumented are almost always immoral and social undesirables. It is said that the undocumented don't want to study or better themselves in this country because they are usually people inclined to bad living and laziness. It is said that the undocumented take jobs from citizens who want to do those jobs. It is said that the undocumented come to have their children here, using their kids to obtain visas for which they would qualify if they would only go through the legal process. It is said that if God had wanted the undocumented were here, God would have made them be born here.

In other words, these accusations against the undocumented paint the picture of a human group who is against the will of God, against the laws, against society, against moral conduct, who are a cancer in society and who have no right to be here.

If you believe that those accusations are true, then stop reading this booklet! Because you first need to go and personally meet and relate with the people you are so willing to judge—to see if they really are as your prejudices create them to be. Stop reading this booklet, because you need to open yourself to love before you can understand anything about it. But first and foremost, you need to let God help you understand *why you need* God's love.

But if, on the contrary, you realize that all of those accusations against the undocumented are exaggerations and/or lies, then keep on reading. Because something about truth and justice is speaking to you, rather than falsehoods, prejudices, or accusations.

Facts do not support the accusers of the undocumented—except “doctored” facts. However, many of those who oppose undocumented workers and their families (and who don't hesitate to support those who would arrest and persecute the undocumented) believe to be doing what is good and honorable. They go to their churches on Sundays and probably believe that they are good Christians. Yet *because of them*, there are children without their parents and mothers without their children, people in jail because of the “crime” of needing to work in order to support their families, young people who can't study and thus without a future because they come from families who dared dream in a better future.

Those who are opposed to undocumented workers and their families don't see them as their neighbors. Those who oppose the undocumented see them merely as “cases” of illegality, as individuals who violate the laws that were designed to defend the country. Those who oppose the undocumented don't see or understand that any parent's responsibility for his/her children is morally much more important than any human law, than any border or any danger.¹²

Are they morally right, the ones who place human laws above the obligations God has placed in our hearts because we are images of God? Are they morally right, the ones who are willing to kill, persecute or jail their neighbors (or are willing to applaud people who would do it in their name), so as to defend a

¹² Luke 10:25-37.

border that is no more than a political decision made among the powerful? The ones who oppose the undocumented think they are morally right, and act as if they had a clean conscience, and go to their churches and thank God for having made them such good Christians.¹³ Fortunately, they are very wrong.

How could someone who claims to be Christian be morally right by persecuting the poor and/or by supporting those who persecute the poor? How could someone be morally right by harshly judging the undocumented without, first, making sure that his/her accusations are not the result of blinding prejudices? How could someone be morally right who doesn't care to know the undocumented personally, and hear from them about poverty and life and family, because supposedly the undocumented have nothing to teach? How could people be morally right who think it's possible to be a good Christian while—in their name, by their vote, and with their support—*their* neighbors are being persecuted for the “crime” of wanting an opportunity to work or study in order to honestly support their families? Could someone be a good Christian and be willing to sacrifice the life of others (who are also God's images) in order to support passing human laws that could change tomorrow?¹⁴

How could someone really believe that it is possible to be a good Christian—an image of the God who IS love—and behave that way? Some people believe they are acting in a way that does not contradict Christianity. To believe that, they must forget or downplay that God IS love. They also need to forget or significantly downplay that both the undocumented and those who persecute them are all sons and daughters of the same God who IS love, and that they are images of God. Those who persecute the undocumented, or who support the ones who do, either forget or must water down the importance of what Jesus taught as the reason for his first commandment—that God IS love, and therefore loves everyone without limits, *without conditions* and *without exceptions*. In other words, God loves the undocumented workers and their families because the love of God doesn't care about documents or visas, and doesn't follow human laws or prejudices.

¹³ Luke 18:9-14.

¹⁴ Luke 11:37-52.

It's really sad to see how many persons who claim to be Christian have yet to discover that God has no prejudices, that God has no "illegitimate" sons or daughters, that God loves everyone without conditions—not because people are "saints" but because God IS love. God IS love! There is no deeper description or better Christian definition for God.¹⁵ And if we would only stop and understand, we would realize that the only morally acceptable Christian behavior is to imitate God—to love like God loves. Certainly not to persecute, deport, or offend. By deporting the undocumented poor we are deporting Christ too, even if we don't realize it.¹⁶

The love that Jesus taught is the love of God, not ours. The love of God is the love we need to imitate. That is the love that Jesus referred to when he asked us to love everyone. We are to love everyone else not because they are morally good, look or behave like us, speak our language, share our religion, have our same nationality and citizenship, or because they love us. Instead, we are called to love them because by doing so without limits, conditions or exceptions, we are imitating the love with which God has always and will always love us.

4. Love doesn't make victims and it doesn't oppress, because to love like God is to believe in equality.

When we take Christianity seriously we begin to realize that God IS love, and that nothing and no one is as important (within Christianity and beyond it) as God and God's love. We also begin to realize why Jesus said that the world would recognize us as followers of Christ because of the intensity and authenticity of our love.¹⁷ Because, as the old Spanish saying goes, "Deeds are love, and not its good reasons."

To speak of love is not the same as love—it's simply to talk. To discuss how to love is not the same as love—it's simply to discuss. "To love" is a verb and involves action, commitment, and risk.¹⁸ That's why, according to Christianity,

¹⁵ I John 4:8, 10-11.

¹⁶ Matthew 25:31-46.

¹⁷ John 13:12-15, 31-35.

¹⁸ James 2:14-26.

the most crucial moment in which God demonstrated God's love without limits, conditions or exceptions, was when Jesus was crucified. Jesus risked his life and paid his life for what he taught about love. Jesus knew how to love.

And because he knew how to love, Jesus could teach us that love creates no victims and doesn't oppress. On the contrary, *real love defends the victims of the powerful*¹⁹ *and of those who think themselves morally better than others.*²⁰

But didn't Jesus condemn certain behaviors? Yes, he did. He condemned the behavior of those who believed they had the right to judge or disdain others. Jesus condemned the behavior of those who put religious observances or requirements above the love of neighbor. Jesus condemned those who looked down on others because they were sinners, yet refused to see the humanity of the sinners or their suffering. Jesus condemned, by calling them hypocrites, those who judged others using biblical texts or doctrines, and he also condemned those who judged others for not fulfilling religious obligations or not following religious or moral precepts. Jesus was more interested in, and more attentive to, the hearts of people, their deeper and sincere motivations, and he didn't care much for the blind application of texts, doctrines, or precepts.²¹

Jesus was frequently accused of wrongly interpreting biblical texts (which both he and his contemporaries did not doubt were inspired by God). Jesus was often accused of acting in direct violation of what were the Bible's explicit commandments. But, if we pay attention, we would realize that Jesus never hesitated, despite everything that was said against him. Because he really believed, taught and lived that *God IS love, and that God is transforming our world according to God's will, and that the will of God is compassionate love, because God IS love.*

That's why Jesus taught that whoever believes this and is willing to follow him, has to take the risk of loving as God loves. And God loves everyone without

¹⁹ Luke 1:46-55.

²⁰ John 8:3-11.

²¹ Matthew 5:38-6:6. Matthew 23:2-34.

limits, without exceptions, and without conditions. That's also why Jesus taught that love is the greatest behavior demanded and expected of his followers. Love without conditions or exceptions is the criterion by which God one day will decide whether someone has contributed, or not, to the construction of a new world according to the will of God.²²

Ask yourself sincerely, before God: Do you think it's possible to be Christian while you judge or persecute others?

If you have understood what we have been discussing in this booklet, you know that God IS love, and that to be human is to BE an image of THAT God who loves us madly, without limits, without exceptions, and without conditions. This is the God who loves us that way *not* because we might be good, but because that's how God IS.²³

If you have understood what we have been discussing in this booklet, you also know that a follower of Christ *has to love* in imitation of God (because we are God's images). You also know that there is nothing and no one—within Christianity or beyond it—more important than God and God's love.

You also know that love creates no victims. Love does not persecute, or disdain, or abuse, or harm others. On the contrary, love liberates us from those who would judge and condemn us. And it makes us free to build, with Jesus, a new and different world in which all human beings will respect each other and will acknowledge each other with the same dignity and the same equal rights, because all humans are images of the same God.

It is God who wants all, without exception, to be God's images and God's daughters and sons. No one has bought or earned the love of God. *God doesn't love us because we are good but because we are human.*²⁴

It would be ideal if all human beings agreed on everything. But that's not how reality is.

²² Matthew 25:31-46, and again James 2:14-26.

²³ If in your Bible you have a book called Wisdom, again read Wisdom 11:21-26.

²⁴ Romans 8:31-35, 37-39.

However, reality (at least for those who seriously claim to be Christian) is that *we are all equal before God*. All of us have the same dignity and the same rights. Not because there are laws that decide who is better than others, but because ALL humans are daughters and sons of the same God—images to one another of the God who IS love.

Our dignity and our rights (because we are human) are given to us by God. Not by laws.

5. So, let's think about consequences...

Let's do an examination of conscience, of our lives, and looking frankly at ourselves.

If you agree with what we have been discussing in this booklet, then *ask yourself* if you, your family, or your church still harbor prejudice against some human groups. Because, as we learned too from the Spanish proverb ("Deeds are love, and not its good reasons"), love is not a reflection about love, or even a good feeling.

Why ask the question if you agree? Because it's not enough to agree with what we have been discussing while, in our real lives, we might continue despising others. *Prejudice against any human group will end up justifying in your mind that it's okay to be prejudiced against someone*. It's not okay. Prejudice is against the will of God.

It's unfair to use Jesus and his message to justify our disdain for or persecution of others, or to nourish bigotries and biases against *any* human group. There is no value—indeed, it is worthless—to applaud and sing of the love of God when our daily lives contradict what we affirm with our lips and minds.

Therefore, sincerely recall which groups your church, your family, or you still regard as "undesirable," "sinful," and "immoral." It would not be a surprise if (for some churches and for some persons) homosexuals would be among those groups.

It would not be surprising that many would say, in their churches and in fami-

lies, that to recognize the dignity and rights of homosexual persons would be an attack against the family, against marriage, and against society. It would not be surprising if in churches or families some people still say that to acknowledge the dignity and rights of homosexual persons would be to support crime and violence—for some, it's almost like the end of the world! But don't you see that those accusations are similar to the accusations against undocumented persons and their families? These are accusations, but where are the unquestionable, factual proofs? This is also what happens regarding the accusations against the undocumented; lots of things are said, lots of things are repeated, lots of things are assumed to be true, but little is true—there are no proofs.

Fact and reality *demonstrate* that homosexual persons, because they are homosexual, are no better or worse than anyone else. They are good, bad or mediocre—exactly like heterosexual persons.

Homosexual persons have families and friends, they have jobs and professions, go to churches and participate in faith communities, they love God and love their neighbors, they are students or teachers and professors, they are moms and dads (and brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, grandmothers and grandfathers, and cousins). They are members of *our* families because they were born and grew up among us. They also go to birthday parties and family Christmas dinners, they are young and old, they go shopping and take vacations, they have to pay their monthly bills and their yearly taxes. In other words, homosexual persons are just like everyone else. No better and no worse.

Therefore, think again about everything you have read in this booklet. Because if you still think that your interpretation of the Bible and of the doctrines of your church are more important than the love of God and more important than facts, or if you still think that a few biblical texts or a few doctrines can justify your disdain of *these daughters and sons of God* (who are as much images of God as you and every member of your family and church are), then you haven't understood.

Why? Because God IS love, and the love of God does not make victims and it does not create persons for us to disdain. The love of God is without limits,

conditions, or exceptions. Love does not justify prejudice or bigotry against anyone, regardless of who they are.

To say that God cannot love homosexual persons, or to think that they cannot really love God, or to suppose that because they are homosexuals they cannot be sons and daughters of God like you and your family and your church, or to demand that before God could love them or before you (or your family and church) could respect and accept them that they first have to become heterosexuals and “repent” from being homosexuals—to say *any* of those things is as wrong as all the arguments that were used in the past in favor of slavery, as justification of violence against women, as reasons for bigotry against blacks, Latinos/as and other minorities, or as the excuses to reject and persecute undocumented workers and their families. Exactly the same!

Christians have to acknowledge that any doctrine or biblical interpretation that (in practice or theory) contradicts or makes exceptions to the love of God, regardless of anything else, *cannot* be a correct or truthful doctrine or interpretation of the Bible. God IS love, and Christians believe in THAT God, and *not* in *their* interpretations of texts and doctrines.

The church and society cannot choose among people, and decide who among them God may or may not love. The church and society cannot decide who is capable of loving God and who isn't. If *they* could decide then, in fact, they would be *denying* that God IS love and that God loves all human beings without limits, *without conditions*, and without exceptions. To deny this is to directly contradict what is most fundamental in Christianity.

Christians can't again go back to using biblical interpretations and doctrines—still convinced that they understand the will of God—in order to hurt, disdain, and even justify violence against another human group, especially when that group's “sin” is only to be as God made them. Christians cannot pretend that it's okay to engage in the hypocritical attitude that Jesus so criticized and condemned.²⁵

²⁵ Matthew 15:1-9.

²⁶ Wisdom 11:21-26.

Human beings don't choose their race, cultural ethnicity, or chromosomes. In exactly the same way, human beings do not choose their sexual orientation. To be homosexual is not a "preference" or a "choice," just as being heterosexual is not a preference or a choice. We were all born with a sexual orientation, and one day we discover what that orientation is. Our sexual orientation is a fundamental component of who we are, and of who we become.

Or put differently, our sexual orientation is part of our being as creatures of God, it is part of who we are as persons called by God into life, because God wants us to be alive that way.²⁶

But doesn't the Bible say that homosexuality is a sin?²⁷ Or is it, instead that those eight biblical verses have been interpreted to force them to refer to homosexuality? Would those eight (incorrectly interpreted) verses be more important than the very many other verses in which Jesus explicitly commands us to love others *without conditions* or exceptions, and the very many verses in which he also commands us not to judge others? Are not the very many verses on love, forgiveness, and not judging also in the Bible?

Ask yourself, sincerely, *with your feet on the ground and the eyes of your faith only on the God who IS love*: Could it be the will of that God that you disdain or be bigoted against someone? Could it be the will of God that you deny equal dignity and rights to another human being? Could it be the will of God that you harbor and nourish prejudice or hatred against someone else? If you honestly believe *with your life* that God IS love, your answer must be "no" to all these questions.

God IS love. And love doesn't create victims and it doesn't justify prejudice. On the contrary!²⁸

²⁷ There are other booklets, in Spanish and in English, that can help you better understand homosexuality from a Christian perspective. All these booklets are part of a collection written by the members of the Latino/a Roundtable of the "Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies in Religion and Ministry," of Pacific School of Religion, Berkeley, CA. One of those booklets, in fact, explains all the biblical texts that are said to refer to homosexuality. That booklet is *Neither Judgment nor Condemnation: Reading Again the Biblical Texts on Homosexuality*. You can request copies from the address that appears on the back of this booklet, or you can look up the complete text (of all the booklets) at the webpage address that also appears on the back cover.

²⁸ Romans 13:8-10.

Remember your reflections, and the discussions you found in this booklet, next time you say the prayer Jesus taught us, especially when you say:

Our Father in heaven...thy will be done on earth...

Remember that the will of God is that we love each other *without limits, without conditions, and without exceptions*. That's what God wants because that's how God loves us. And that's what Jesus taught us.

No human law or prejudice can destroy what God has done. All human beings are equal in dignity and rights, because that's how God made us.

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The CENTER for
LESBIAN and GAY STUDIES
in RELIGION and MINISTRY
at Pacific School of Religion

1798 Scenic Avenue
Berkeley, CA 94709
Main office: 510/849-8206
Toll-free: 800/999-0528
Fax: 510/849-8212
Email: clgs@clgs.org