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SALZBURG GLOBAL LGBT\* FORUM

GLOBAL ONLINE FORUM  
ON LGBT\* AND FAITH

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# GLOBAL ONLINE FORUM ON LGBT\* AND FAITH

**AUGUST TO NOVEMBER, 2020**

<b>FORUM CHAIR</b>	Klaus Mueller
<b>PROGRAM MANAGER</b>	Antonio Riolino
<b>RAPPORTEUR</b>	Isabelle Weber
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*\* LGBT: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender. We are using this term as it is currently widely used in human rights conversations on sexual orientation and gender identity in many parts of the world, and we would wish it to be read as inclusive of other cultural concepts, contemporary or historical, to express sexuality and gender, intersex and gender non-conforming identities.*

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## INTRODUCTION

In 2020, the Salzburg Global LGBT\* Forum began a new initiative to address issues of religion, cultural history, and LGBT inclusion (and exclusion), convening LGBT human rights defenders and cultural and religious leaders across faiths, geographies, and generations. Following a blog series, public discussions and two online gatherings of Fellows, a public webinar shared outcomes and discussions with the aim to strengthen inclusive cooperation between religious and LGBT leaders, and their communities.

***“Worldwide, LGBT people are insisting on their inclusion in faith communities and cultural traditions. Many religious congregations have begun to interpret their own beliefs in more inclusive ways.”***

Launching with the first blog post in August and culminating in a public webinar in November, the *Global Online Forum on LGBT\* and Faith* strived to document that a respectful, humane and global conversation on LGBT equality and inclusion in and across faith communities is not only possible, but indeed has already begun in many places. By bridging divides and creating an open online space together with our Fellows, the [Salzburg Global LGBT\\* Forum](#) aims to strengthen inclusive cooperation between religious and LGBT leaders, and their communities, and to expand global connections, supporting the next generation of LGBT leaders.

A core part of our 2020 program was the weekly publication of 16 blogs by our Fellows from all parts of the world, reflecting on current questions, changes and challenges for inclusive approaches within faith and LGBT communities.

The 2020 Forum brought together Fellows across continents to take part in two online conversations over the course of three months. Their discussions, panels, and breakout conversations were structured around their personal journeys with faith, religion and LGBT inclusion. The key themes they identified were further explored in the public webinar, which was designed to engage a broad, global audience on inclusive approaches.

Worldwide, LGBT people are insisting on their inclusion in faith communities and cultural traditions. Many religious congregations have begun to interpret their own beliefs in more inclusive ways. Based on our work to strengthen fundamental human rights, we support these emerging positive changes to advance LGBT equality globally.

The outcomes of this year's conversations will serve as a roadmap for the continuing work on the **Faith is...?** initiative. **The Faith is...?** initiative is building on the experience gained in the Salzburg Global LGBT\* Forum's "**Family is...?**" project, which explored the definition of family and the position of LGBT family members, including in their families of birth, their families of choice, and the families they raise. **Faith is...?** adheres to freedom of religion as a principle that supports the freedom of an individual or community to worship and practice their religion, the freedom to change one's religion, and the freedom to not practice a religion.

## **BACKGROUND: ORIGINS OF THE FORUM AND 2020 ONLINE PROGRAM**

The Salzburg Global LGBT\* Forum was formed in 2013 to establish a truly global space to reflect upon and advance LGBT and human rights discussions around the world, as well as to form a network of international leaders from diverse fields – including human rights, legal, artistic, and religious backgrounds. Founded and chaired by Dr. Klaus Mueller, the Forum currently includes representatives from more than 76 countries on six continents.

Since then, the Forum has held programs in Austria, Germany, Thailand, and Nepal; our 2020 program was the first that took place exclusively online, in the midst of worldwide travel restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Instead of hosting the Forum Fellows at Schloss Leopoldskron in Salzburg, Austria for an in-person program in July 2020 as initially planned, the online program brought together Fellows from 17 countries in our Online Forum. This new online platform offered the unique opportunity to not only engage with the 2020 program's Fellows but also all Fellows of the Salzburg Global LGBT\* Forum through our shared webspace, and others outside the network through weekly Facebook debates. Despite the different onset, Fellows were able to create an environment rich with debate, collaboration, and mutual learning.



Ecuadorian photographer Paola Paredes documented her coming out to her parents in the experimental photography project “Unveiled” (2014) and presented her new project on illegal conversion clinics in her blog, *These Staged Images Allow Us To See What Was Never Meant To Be Seen*.

## BLOG SERIES

Starting at the beginning of August through to the public webinar in November, the Salzburg Global LGBT\* Forum published weekly blogs from Fellows of the [Global Online Forum on LGBT\\* and Faith](#), focusing on two leading questions:

- What is needed for religious communities and leaders to be instrumental in promoting the wellbeing, equality, and inclusion of LGBT people in faith communities and society?
- How do LGBT people, today and throughout history, enrich and change the religious communities of which they are a part?

The blogs were published on SalzburgGlobal.org and then posted on the [Facebook page](#) of Salzburg Global Seminar as well as on other social media platforms where they were shared further by individual Fellows and their organizations. Our partner ILGA Asia also

### REACHING 25,000 PEOPLE

Through this virtual medium, the Salzburg Global LGBT\* Forum was able to reach over 25,000 people through the Facebook posts alone, with an average reach of over 1500 people per blog post, not including when individuals shared the blogs independently. On Facebook, a conversation was established with over 1200 interactions, including likes, comments and shares, from readers. The blogs were also shared further on other social media platforms including Twitter, LinkedIn and Instagram.

republished the series on their Facebook page. Fellows, many of them with a large network, also re-published the blogs series for their communities and reported back that this led to new and encouraging conversations with faith leaders they otherwise would not have had. These blogs generated comments from around the world and established a dialogue between Fellows and a broader audience. Readers could also subscribe to the [newsletter](#) to be alerted to each new blog. The blog series thus achieved its goal in broadcasting the personal faith and inclusion journeys of Fellows. By using a social media platform, an outside audience could be brought in expanding the conversation and dialogue.

Through the social media blog series, the Salzburg Global LGBT\* Forum developed a space for reflection and gave visibility to voices of established and emerging leaders. This blog series hosted the stories of 16 of our Fellows, who came from a variety of ethnic, sexual orientation, gender identity, and faith backgrounds. They courageously shared their personal journeys and obstacles to advance inclusive approaches.

This series allowed Fellows and their stories to connect to a global conversation and engage with each other. Throughout the 16 blogs, there were many key takeaways that, although the authors differ in culture, religion, and geographic location, connect our Fellows together on their separate faith journeys. The diverse histories of religions offer additional unique challenges in the fight for inclusion around the world. Understanding the unique cultural heritage behind each religion is a necessary step in finding LGBT inclusion not just within a religious community but throughout society. Religion impacts everyday community life and LGBT inclusion on the religious frontier can make a difference throughout cultures. Fellows have found that the hard work of inclusion does not require a theological revolution, but a new mindset within the community itself that decouples social community from these theological imperatives.

Many LGBT people of faith face dual-ostracization in society: they are rejected from their religious communities for their LGBT identity and from their LGBT community for their faith. In the face of animosity, LGBT people insisting on inclusion in faith spheres is the driving force for change. As they tell their stories, religious communities can open their minds and listen, potentially finding that they are able to find love, compassion, and empathy for LGBT people, recognizing that our diversity is what makes our communities stronger.

The personal journeys shared in the blog posts prompted the dialogue of the online convenings of Fellows that took place over the past three months. The resulting guiding questions and lead themes from these convenings were integral to the development of the public webinar.

## TELLING OUR OWN STORIES

[Joy Ladin](#), the first openly-transgender professor at an Orthodox Jewish institution based in the United States wrote a blog post entitled, [“Religious Communities and Leaders Need to Stop Seeing LGBT\\* People as Other, as Them, and Start Seeing Them as Us”](#), which centers on how recognition and appreciation of our differences can make our communities stronger and more diverse.

[Giti Thadani](#), a founding member of the first Indian lesbian archive Sakhi, focuses on cultural heritage and the long history of nonbinary traditions in Hinduism in her blog entitled [“A Global Conversation on Faith and LGBT\\* Needs to Begin Opening Up to Complex Questions”](#).

[Lebohang Matela](#), from Lesotho, works as the regional coordinator of FOCCISA Health and Gender Justice Network, based in South Africa. Her blog post, [“If Religious Leaders Can Speak with One Voice Together with the LGBT\\* Community, then the Battle is Won.”](#) centers on the impact religion has on everyday community life. She highlighted how carefully planned gatherings of faith organizations and LGBT leaders can strengthen the message of LGBT

inclusion throughout community culture.

[Sukhdeep Singh](#), the founder and editor-in-chief of Gaylaxy Magazine based in India, wrote the blog post, [“I Want To Assure Other Young Queer Sikhs That One Could Be Gay and Sikh”](#), which connects his personal journey of being a gay Sikh man with the dual-ostracization many LGBT people experience: Being rejected in their faith community due to their LGBT identity; and in their LGBT community due to their faith.

[Ahmed El Hady](#) is a research scientist at Princeton University. Born in Egypt and today based in the United States, his blog, [“I Would Love To See Many Members of the LGBT Community Revolting Against the Predominant Religious Discourse but Who Will Defend Them?”](#) addresses the complexity geopolitical positions can add to already challenging conversations when religion and politics are closely linked and makes a case for the secularization of politics and society as the only way to achieve LGBT inclusion.

[Fr. Thomas Ninan](#), general coordinator of the ESHA Project of the Christian Service Agency based in India, wrote a blog post entitled, [“I Started To Ask Myself, What Is Stopping Me](#)



Romanian LGBT rights activist and practicing Christian Victor Ciobotaru attended Bucharest Pride in July 2019 holding a poster with the message: “Sunt gay, Sunt Crestin, iubesc.” – “I am gay. I am a Christian. I Love.” – as he explains in his blog, *The More I Prayed, the More I Became Aware That I Am Gay and I Will Never Change*.

[\*\*From Genuinely Loving LGBT People?\*\*](#) In this piece, he describes his journey of acceptance of LGBT people as an Indian Orthodox priest, based on the recognition that prejudice endangers what each faith aspires: love.

[\*\*Rev. Ecclesia de Lange\*\*](#), director of Inclusive and Affirming Ministries (IAM) based in South Africa, entitled her blog post, [\*\*“I Lived in Denial of Who I Am and I Settled for a Life of Celibacy and Secrecy.”\*\*](#) She reflects on her difficult journey – from being suspended as a Methodist minister for her LGBT identity, to finding love and acceptance within herself and her community, to actively advocating for LGBT acceptance within faith spheres.

[\*\*Saskia Wieringa\*\*](#), renowned anthropologist and professor at the University of Amsterdam in the Netherlands, wrote a blog post entitled [\*\*“All Religions Have Their Progressive, Human Rights-Oriented Sides”\*\*](#), which depicts her faith landscape through Protestantism/Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam and makes a strong case for documenting the rich traditions of gender diversity, transgender practices and same-sex relations in religious traditions.

[\*\*Brenda Rodriguez Alegre\*\*](#), member of the Board of Directors of The Society of Transsexual Women Advocates of the Philippines (STRAP) and Southeast Asia representative of ILGA Asia based in Hong Kong, entitled her blog post, [\*\*“As a Child I Would Pray to God ‘to Make Me a Woman One Day.’”\*\*](#) As an academic, activist, and expert of Filipino transgender history, Brenda uses her blog as an encouragement to Filipino queers to claim their history and place in religious traditions.

[\*\*Tashi Choedup\*\*](#), resident Sangha member at the Root Institute for Wisdom and Culture in India, wrote a blog post entitled, [\*\*“My Faith Has Helped Me With My Queerness and My Queerness Helps Me In Making My Faith Inclusive.”\*\*](#) As a Buddhist monastic, Tashi shares their journey of forging healthy relationships between their queerness and their faith.

[\*\*Simon Petitjean\*\*](#), the senior advocacy manager at The Global Interfaith Network, reflects on his personal and professional journey of faith in his blog entitled, [\*\*“I am a Trans Man of Faith”\*\*](#).

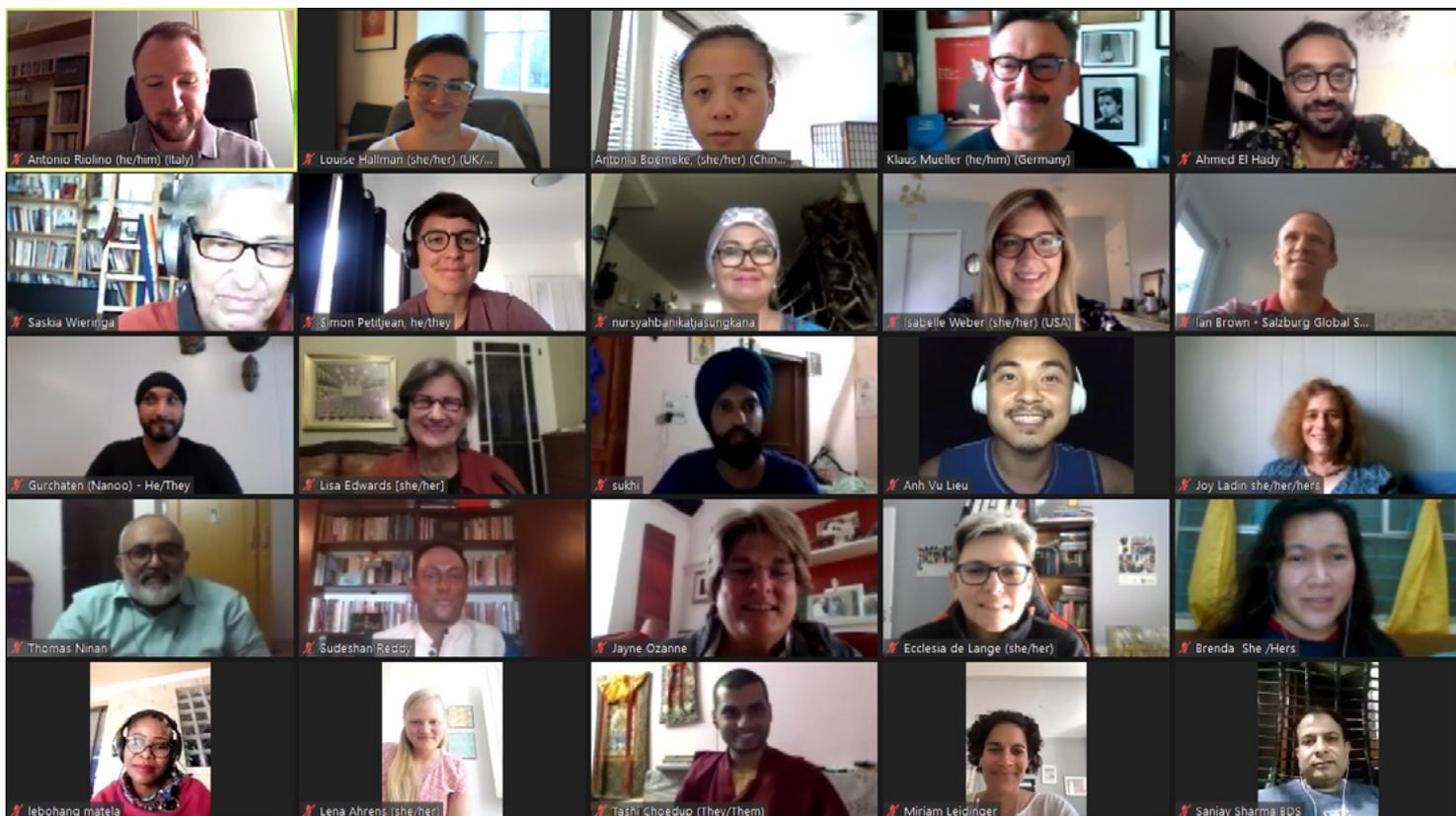
[\*\*Rev. Brandan Robertson\*\*](#) is the lead pastor of Missiongathering Christian Church and the executive director of Metanoia. His blog post entitled [\*\*“As a Christian Minister, I Believe that Queer People \(and All People\) Are Created in the Image of God”\*\*](#), explores the tensions and intersections of his sexuality and faith.

[\*\*Victor Ciobotaru\*\*](#) is a Romanian human rights activist and a member of the ACCEPT association. He runs a local LGBTI Christian Group in Budapest. In his blog post, [\*\*“The more I prayed, the more I became aware that I am gay and I will never change.”\*\*](#), his experiences as a pastor-to-be as LGBT Christians reach out to him for support.

[\*\*Saira Mujtaba\*\*](#) is an English News Anchor at All India Radio. In her blog post, [\*\*“I Loved My Uncle, I Mourn His Loss, I Wish He Could Have Lived a Happy Life”\*\*](#), Saira recounts the death by suicide of her gay uncle and calls upon her Muslim community to include and protect LGBT family members.

[\*\*Paola Paredes\*\*](#) is a photographer who blends traditional documentary photography with staged imagery to highlight the many issues LGBT communities face. In her blog post [\*\*“These staged images allow us to see what was never meant to be seen”\*\*](#), she describes her experiences creating her project *Until You Change* which documents illegal anti-LGBT conversion clinics in Ecuador.

[\*\*Scot Sherman\*\*](#) is the executive director of the Newbigin House of Studies and cofounded the Fellowship for Faith, Peace and Justice in 2010. He is a candidate for priesthood in the Episcopal Church. His blog post, [\*\*“I Could No Longer Unsee What I Was Seeing, or Unhear What I Was Hearing”\*\*](#), centers on how disruptive empathy and storytelling are required for faith communities to move forward with inclusion and change.



## ONLINE CONVENINGS

Two online convenings brought together all the Fellows for an interactive exchange based on panel discussions and breakout rooms. At each convening, Fellows discussed five posts of the blog series and hosted a panel of the Fellows who authored these pieces to discuss further the motivating themes of their stories.

### SEPTEMBER

At the first online convening in September, the Fellows reflected on the personal stories of their peers and identified several unifying themes:

- ***Secularization:*** The importance of the secularization of government was highlighted as a necessary step to foster dialogue. When governments are aligned with religious institutions and ideologies, there is a notion of “purity” that seems to cut across faith traditions and regions. This translates notably to very patriarchal and heteronormative societies.
- ***Sharing our stories:*** Whether a society has complete secularization or a theocracy, LGBT communities face challenges. As our societies navigate this strong interdependence between politics and religion, Fellows highlighted the importance of empowering LGBT communities to be a part of a dialogue by building their skills and being involved in conversations both with the government and their faith communities, and discussing issues that affect them on a regular basis. Sharing lived narratives and stories with faith leaders in safe spaces has proven an effective technique in fostering dialogue and progress to inclusion.

- ***De-colonialization:*** Several Fellows stated that colonization often had the effect of destroying gender-diverse practices; that process has been perpetuated by many postcolonial leaders in the name of “restoring tradition.” Fellows agreed, stating that postcolonial thinkers calling upon (colonial) traditions continue this destruction by reinforcing oppressive practices as an act of anti-colonialism, using an enhanced and institutionalized patriarchy.

Finally, as a collective, Fellows reflected on the lingering question: When thinking about the journey to inclusion is the glass half empty or half full? As a group, are they optimistic or despairing? Some Fellows shared a feeling of optimism, others a sense of despair. The challenges that activists face when dealing with faith communities are large and they strongly depend on regional as well as geopolitical developments. In some regions of the world there has been rapid progress towards LGBT inclusion in faith communities, whereas in others there is severe backlash.

As LGBT people in faith communities across the world increasingly insist on their inclusion in religious and cultural traditions, many individuals and communities of faith have begun to re-interpret their own beliefs in ways that are more inclusive. Fellows thus concluded that progress is happening – but all too slowly. The group agreed that they need to continue to “refill their glasses” by conversing with others and fostering dialogues between groups who are working on similar issues.

[Download the full report of the September online convening](#)

## OCTOBER

During the second online convening in October, Fellows reflected on the personal stories that their peers shared and identified several unifying themes and challenges for inclusive approaches in faith communities, building on the previous month’s discussion:

- ***Faith and Change:*** Fellows highlighted the importance of remembering that all religions go through phases. When a religion feels that “all has been revealed,” and that it is certain of “the truth” rather than an idea, it becomes closed to critical thinking. Faith itself is a process of learning and therefore it can change. In settings where religion, culture and traditions reinforce each other, it is important to understand that these factors are dynamic and ever-changing.
- ***Self-Acceptance:*** Fellows found that highlighting LGBT experiences to transmit the expertise gained with challenges overcome on the path toward self-acceptance is important. The personal experiences of LGBT individuals are powerful and remain a

core of queer theology. LGBT individuals need to be encouraged to find self-acceptance within both their LGBT and religious communities. Queer people are not coming from outside of mainstream religion but grow up within and are an integral part of religious communities.

- ***Inclusive Readings:*** Fellows discussed the necessity to contextualize and interpret religious scriptures, texts, and histories. Decolonizing and deconstructing doctrines that restrict LGBT persons within faith traditions or even expel them from their faith community form an important step to come to inclusive readings of religious texts. Fellows identified the “movable middle” in faith communities as the group of individuals who might be more open to dialogue and supporting LGBT inclusion into their system of belief. Providing inclusive readings of religious texts can help bridge and ease these conversations.
- ***Empathy, and the limits of conversations:*** Fellows from different faith communities shared that the transformation process is complex and requires patience. Listening and empathy are key in understanding where members of faith communities are in their own journeys. Fellows exchanged about the need to allow time for change but also raised the challenge of remaining empathetic when facing contempt. While some Fellows emphasized that change needs time to be sustainable and substantial, others reminded us that in many countries LGBT people are confronted with and persecuted by religious dogma.

[Download the full report of the October online convening](#)



A statue of the transgender deity Guan Yin stands in the center of a chandelier in the Chinese Room of Schloss Leopoldskron, home of Salzburg Global Seminar. Dutch anthropologist Saskia Weiringa explains their significance – as well as sharing her own personal faith journey – in her blog *All Religions Have Their Progressive, Human Rights-Oriented Sides*.



In his blog *I Want To Assure Other Young Queer Sikhs That One Could Be Gay and Sikh*, Sukdeep Singh explains how courage can be infectious.



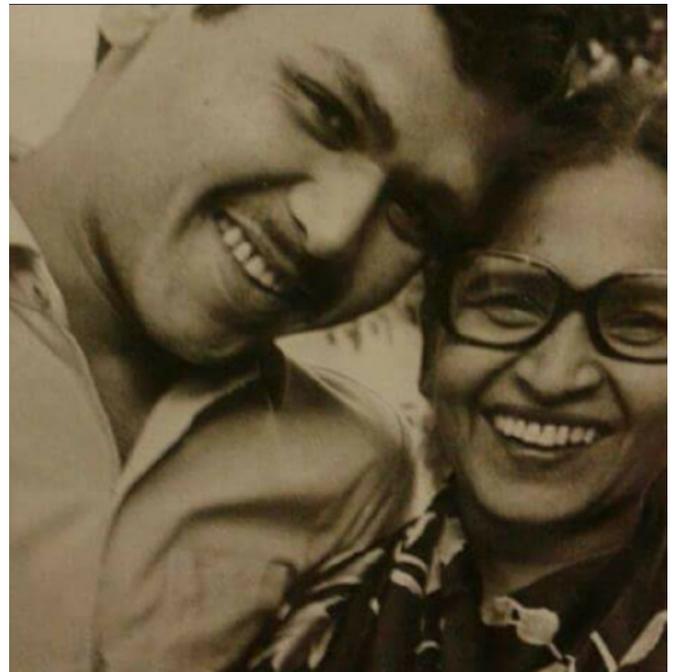
Colonialism erased much of the representation of pre-colonial queer Filipino identities – a process that needs to be reversed argues Brenda Rodriguez Alegre in her blog *As a Child I Would Pray to God “to Make Me a Woman One Day”*.



Lebohang Matela explains the value of facilitating direct dialogues between LGBT persons and pastors in her blog *If Religious Leaders Can Speak with One Voice Together with the LGBT\* Community, then the Battle is Won*.



Rev. Scot Sherman's wife's quilts join vintage fabrics and modern materials together, an artistic embodiment of the beauty of the processes of “ressourcement” and “aggiornamento”, the meanings of which he explains in his blog *I Could No Longer Unsee What I Was Seeing, or Unhear What I Was Hearing*

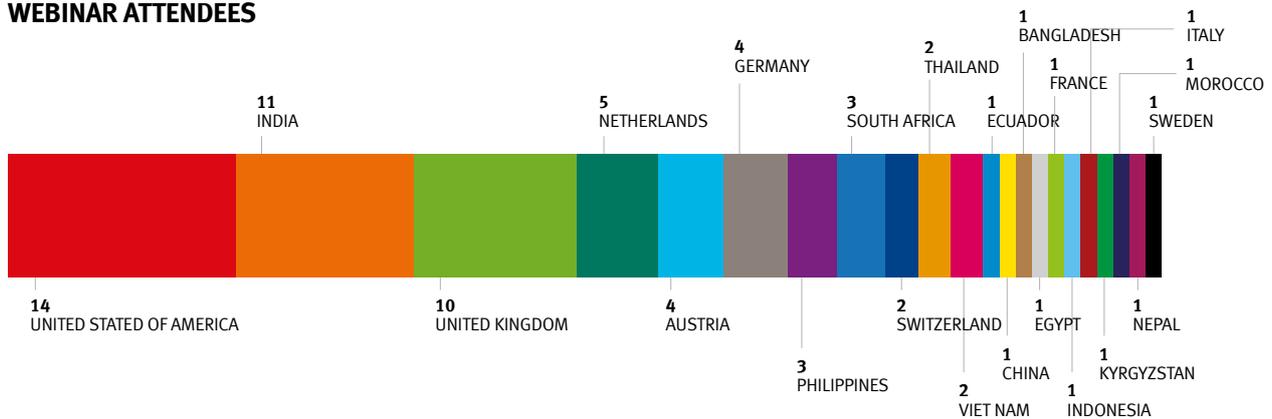


Saira Mujtaba's uncle Mohammad Aslam in happier times. Saira tells of the impact of his death by suicide on her family in her blog *I Loved My Uncle, I Mourn His Loss, I Wish He Could Have Lived a Happy Life*.

## PUBLIC WEBINAR

The public webinar hosted in November brought together over 65 individuals from 23 countries to interact with our Fellows. Over half of the attendees were not previously engaged with the Forum. Hosting a webinar open to the public allowed the Forum to actively engage with an even broader audience in intimate conversation.

### WEBINAR ATTENDEES



The webinar consisted of two panel discussions that featured seven Fellows who authored blog posts where they were able to discuss their stories as well as the major themes that were identified during the two online convenings. Bringing together both LGBT activists and faith leaders, the webinar showed that a conversation around faith and LGBT can happen with respect and civility. Common ground and understanding can be forged between the two groups leaving a sense of optimism and hope for the future. In their discussion, Fellows highlighted many the themes that have been integral to the fight for LGBT inclusion in faith spheres:

- ***Faith vs. Religion:*** Fellows highlighted the difference between faith and religion; religion and faith are different entities that can coincide but are not mutually inclusive. Religion is dependent on faith, but faith can exist outside of the confines of a religious institution.
- ***Intentional Dialogue:*** Throughout their work, Fellows have learned that dialogue needs to be an intentional, collaborative effort. There needs to be a willingness to participate in the process of bringing diverse people together towards greater understanding and reconciliation.
- ***We vs. Them:*** The need to get rid of the “we” versus “them” distinction was emphasized as well as accepting that LGBT individuals are already part of our faith communities

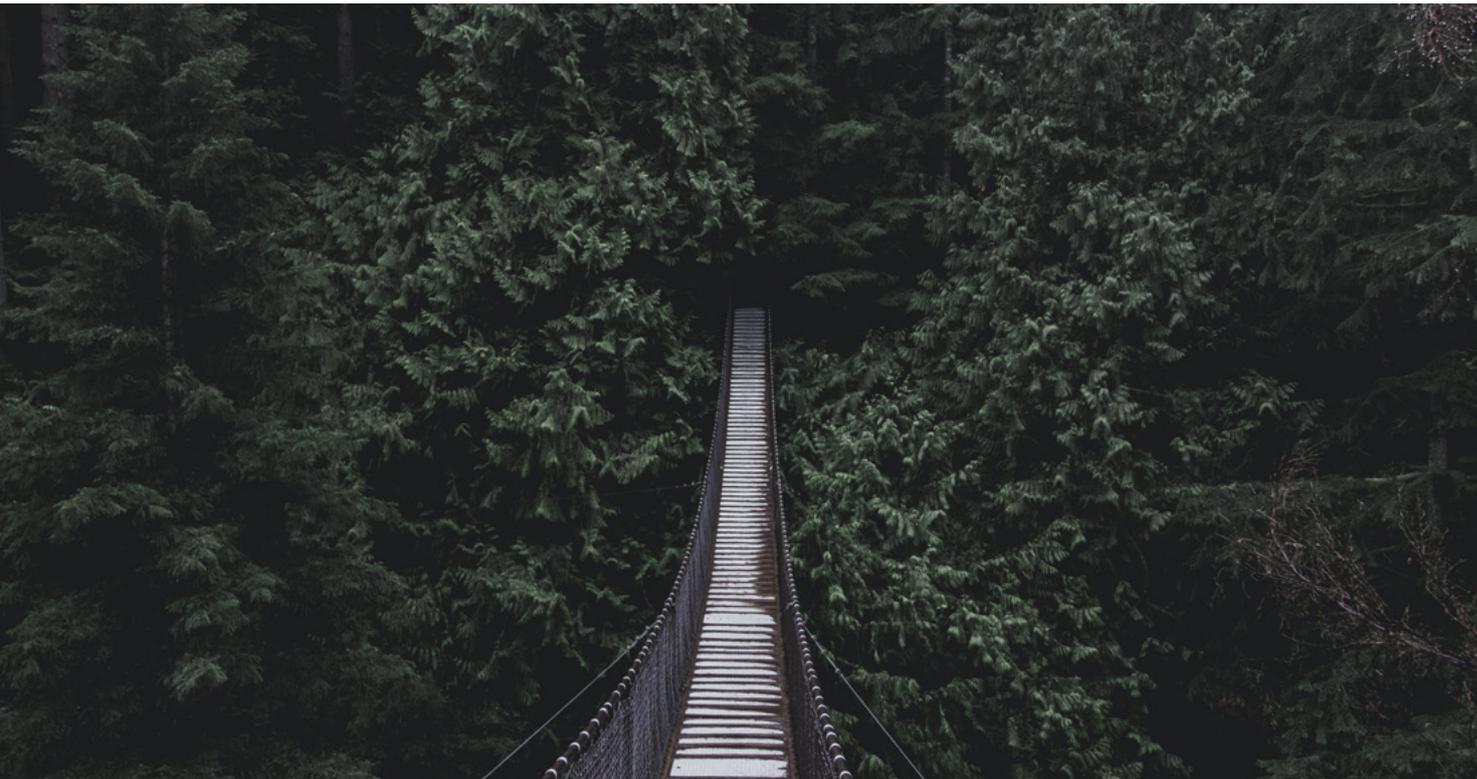
and not a secular incursion or invasion by outsiders. Developing this sense of “us” within religious communities and traditions can be a difficult but necessary process.

- **Storytelling:** For many religious leaders, hearing the personal stories of LGBT individuals was the first transformative step towards acceptance and inclusion. The courage of these individuals to share their stories brought about a new understanding of reality that could no longer be ignored as these were not secular intrusions into their communities but internal testimonies of siblings in faith.
- **The Limits of Conversation:** Although queer storytelling can be a spark for empathy, in many geographic locations this dialogue is impossible as LGBT lives are under direct threat. The danger posed by political and cultural exclusion in a geographical context is not unique and can be found across the globe, particularly in locations where religion plays a key role in politics. The safety of LGBT human rights defenders must be carefully monitored and secured when engaging in change-making conversations.
- **Queer History:** Fellows found that homo- and transphobic religious authorities, communities, and political leaders often use “tradition” as a basis of an argument that perceives LGBT issues as alien to their religion, culture, and sometimes nation. Regarding LGBT issues as a Western import, religious groups create distance between themselves and their local LGBT communities. In reality, queer people have existed throughout time and have a history and story to tell across cultures. The LGBT community can find connection and trust in the fact that they are not the first to walk this path and they will not be the last.

In each of the panels, Fellows shared their personal journeys of faith with great honesty. Despite differences in cultures, geographic locations, age, and religions, many of the Fellows faced similar challenges when navigating both their religious and LGBT identities.

[Download the full report of the November webinar](#)





“The photo of a swinging bridge for me depicts a path into the unknown... Life is in constant movement which asks of us to move with it to bring harmony between one’s sexuality and spirituality,” explains Rev. Ecclesia de Lange in her blog *I Lived in Denial of Who I Am and I Settled for a Life of Celibacy and Secrecy*.

## **MOVING FORWARD**

*by Klaus Mueller, Founder and Chair, Salzburg Global LGBT\* Forum*

This year, the Salzburg Global LGBT\* Forum started a new initiative on LGBT and Faith, convening human rights defenders, and cultural and religious leaders across faith communities, geographies, and generations.

Our weekly online blog series on LGBT\* and Faith ran from early August to late November 2020. The series began an inclusive global conversation bringing together faith and LGBT communities. In our reports we share some of the outcomes, mindsets and themes of our online blogs and group discussions. These reports also benefit from the discussions that took place following each blog on Facebook and during our webinar.

### **WHERE DID WE START?**

We started by stating the obvious: We all, to varying degrees, live in cultures and societies that were and are formed by religious traditions and expressions of faith. LGBT people are increasingly insisting on their inclusion in faith communities and cultural traditions. In response to these calls and actions, many religious congregations have begun to interpret their own beliefs in more inclusive ways.

Based on our work on securing fundamental human rights, Salzburg Global supports these emerging positive changes to advance LGBT equality globally and within faith communities.

Geographically, our program connected Fellows from 17 countries from Asia, Africa, South and North America, and Europe. Our webinar audience was even more diverse, coming from 23 countries.

Thematically, our Global Online Forum on LGBT and Faith brought together members and leaders of faith communities from within Judaism, Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism, as well as agnostics, atheists, anthropologists, and cultural believers.

### **WHAT DID WE LEARN?**

Listening to each other, we learn not only that, but how we live in cultures shaped by religion and faith.

Many Fellows shared with great honesty their personal journeys of faith; the obstacles and opportunities they have faced and are facing; their ideas for change; and whether they have experienced progress or backlash.

Listening to their life stories, we understood: Faith communities that are unresponsive to the needs of their LGBT members counteract their core values of love, inclusion, and community. The engagement by readers of these blogs in the comments section reminded us of the shared experiences of exclusion and marginalization – but also of resilience and resistance.

The blog series has confirmed that reality: If we do not actively engage with faith communities as supporters and allies, it will be difficult to make long-term progress on LGBT equality.

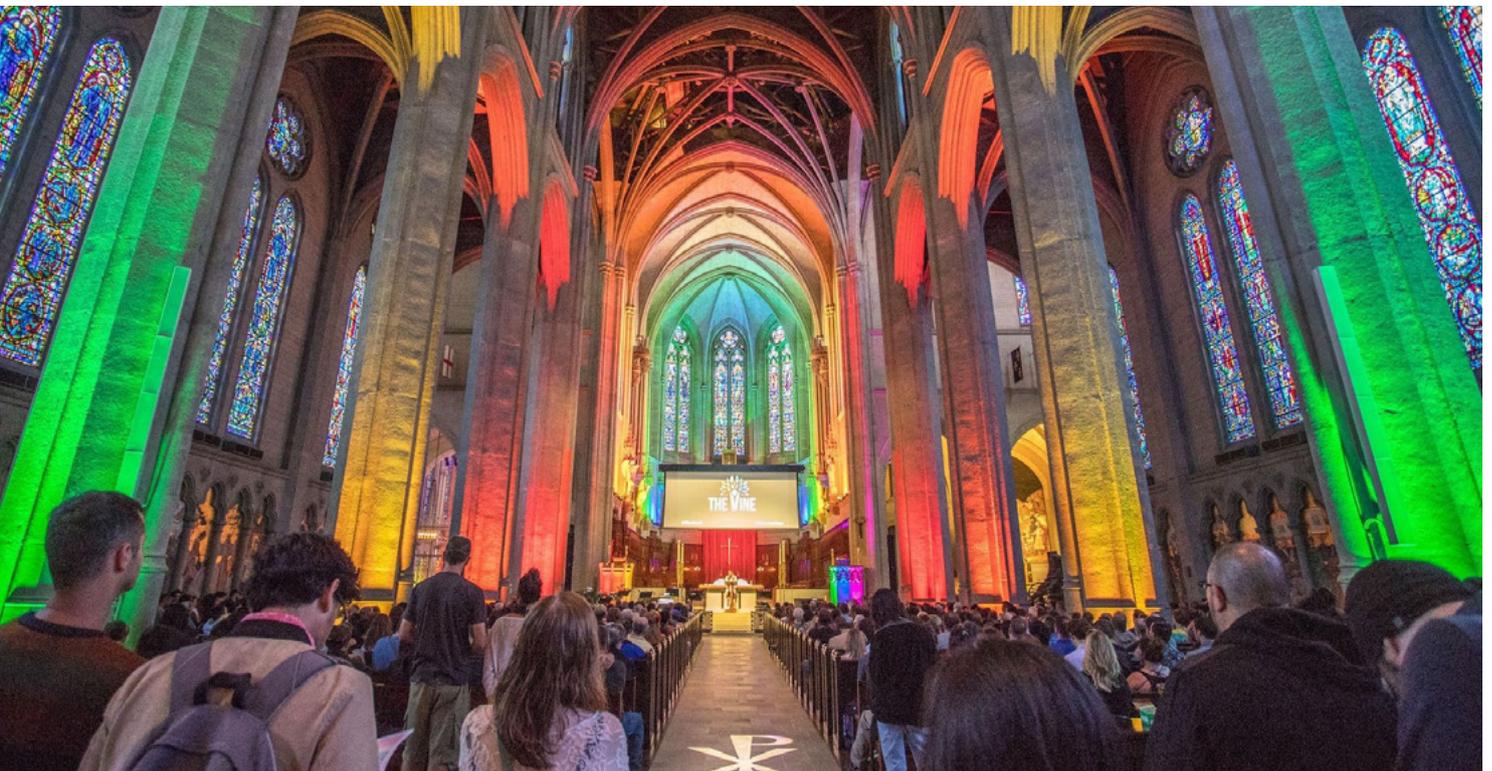
We also hear: LGBT communities – emphasizing and valuing their diversity – are in a constant process to make space for all within their communities. But there can be friction when LGBT people of faith come out as such within LGBT communities. It is important to address this also. LGBT communities fight for the right to define one's own gender identity; for marriage equality; for the right to have families. Supporting our sisters and brothers who strive for inclusion in their faith communities is an integral part of this call for equality.

**“LGBT people have been, are and will be part of faith communities, and people of faith have been, are and will be part of LGBT communities. We are not strangers to each other.”**

Freedom of religion means that an individual or community has the freedom to worship and practice their religion, the freedom to change their religion, and the freedom to not practice a religion. Freedom of religion is a fundamental human right for all. And it cannot and should not be taken away because you are LGBT.

“*Learning*” would be my keyword of what happened over the last months, as well as a sense of global connection within the group of Fellows: unexpected synergies, new bridges, a growing understanding of joint themes and perspectives despite working in distinctively different environments.

When we started our **Faith is...?** initiative, in part we mentally still held on to an imagined separation of LGBT and faith communities as two communities in opposition to each other. Listening to our Fellows, it became obvious that this juxtaposition, however, is part of the problem. It does not do justice to the lived reality for many LGBT individuals around the world.



Rev. Brandon Robertson preached on the spiritual importance of coming out at the Sister Act Pride Mass at Grace Cathedral in San Francisco, CA in 2019 – a transformative moment he reflects on in his blog *As a Christian Minister, I Believe That Queer People (and All People) Are Created in the Image of God.*



Egyptian lesbian Sarah Hegazy died of suicide alone in exile in Canada. Her friend Ahmed El Hady remembers her in his blog *I Would Love To See Many Members of the LGBT Community Revolting Against the Predominant Religious Discourse but Who Will Defend Them?*



Buddhist monastic Tashi Choedup shares their journey of forging a healthy relationship between their queerness and their faith in their blog *My Faith Has Helped Me With My Queerness and My Queerness Helps Me in Making My Faith Inclusive.*

In fact, this supposed opposition between LGBT and faith communities is often used by a globally connected movement towards more intolerance, misusing religion and the so-called “protection of the family” and pushing a strong anti-gender agenda.

## WHERE DO WE GO?

Many of our Fellows urged society to rid itself of such long-held and deep polarization – otherwise the polarization will persist. Communities often describe themselves by defining who belongs (we) and who does not belong (them). But LGBT people grow up within their families and often are raised within faith communities. They are not coming “from the outside.”

We strongly believe that bringing together LGBT and faith leaders advances inclusive approaches and strengthens LGBT equality. As we embark on our second year of our Online Forum on LGBT and Faith, we thank our Fellows, partners and donors who have made this first step so successful. We will engage with them to look at our collaboration in 2021 and the direction we propose. We aim:

- to continue and extend our blog series thematically to grow as a new platform for a civil, open and joyful conversation on advancing inclusive approaches;
- to make the work of our fellows more accessible through a variety of venues and media;
- to engage in new partnerships with transnational and global initiatives, foundations and NGOs working in this field and to share the vision our fellows are developing; and
- to further deepen our collaboration with partners in faith and LGBT communities.

# APPENDIX

## PARTICIPANTS

### **Lena Ahrens**

*Advisor, Sector Programme  
Human Rights, GIZ,  
Germany*

### **Brenda Alegre**

*Lecturer, University of  
Hong Kong, Hong Kong  
(Philippines)*

### **Tashi Choedup**

*Resident Sangha Member,  
Root Institute for Wisdom  
Culture, India*

### **Victor Ciobotaru**

*Member, ACCEPT  
Association, Romania*

### **Ecclesia de Lange**

*Director, Inclusive and  
Affirming Ministries (IAM),  
South Africa*

### **Lisa Edwards**

*Jewish Lesbian Activist, USA*

### **Ahmed El Hady**

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