“The Prevention of Discrimination and Spiritual Abuse Requires Active Value-Based Choices.”



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Spiritual abuse targeting LGBTQIA+ people is a widespread phenomenon and also occurs within the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland, not only within revivalist movements.



Findings of the Master's Thesis
Survey Results
Progress and Areas for Improvement
Support

THE CONCEPT OF SPIRITUAL ABUSE

(Source: EVL; Kirkkohallitus; Linjakumpu 2015, Iivanainen 2023)

Empowering religiosity and spirituality can support a person's well-being and bring joy to life.
By contrast, **harmful religiosity and spirituality** can cause psychological trauma, anxiety, depression and mental health problems.

- Religion can also be connected to a person's deepest values and the formation of their identity, either positively or negatively.

The primary aim of a perpetrator of spiritual abuse is to break down what they perceive as another person's misguided worldview, way of life or opinions.

- The perpetrator also believes that acting in this way is in the other person's best interests.

The Interconnection between spirituality and community:

- People have a fundamental need to feel that they belong to a group, a need that throughout history has also been essential for survival.
- This need remains just as relevant to people today.
- Many victims of spiritual abuse do not dare to leave a harmful community because they fear being left alone.

PREVENTING SPIRITUAL ABUSE REQUIRES EXAMINING ALL THE FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE WHETHER A VICTIM OF DISCRIMINATION AND ABUSE FEELS SAFE ENOUGH TO SPEAK ABOUT THEIR EXPERIENCES.

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DIFFERENT FORMS OF SPIRITUAL ABUSE

- **Psychological abuse, and in some cases physical, sexual, and financial abuse. Conversion practices, in which an outside person attempts to change someone’s sexual orientation or gender identity. Important! These practices can also lead individuals to attempt to change themselves.**

- **Multiple forms of abuse can occur simultaneously.**

- **Spiritual abuse can occur in any religious community, including the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland.**

- **Jeopardises the safe and healthy development of children and young people.**

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WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO RESEARCH THIS TOPIC?

European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) Survey:

- Only 8% of sexual and gender minorities who answered the survey in Finland feel safe enough to be themselves at work, and 13% experienced discrimination in their workplace during the previous year (FRA 2020).

Leaders play a key role in creating safer workplaces:

- Changes in workplace practices and colleagues' attitudes start with leadership. These changes then influence employees' attitudes throughout the organisation and are reflected in everyday interactions and behaviour in the workplace.

(Gold & Mia 2019; Lehtonen 2006; Leppänen, Karvinen, Rekola & Torniainen 2019; FRA 2020)

RESULTS: DOCUMENTS

(Iivanainen 2023)

There are significant differences between dioceses within the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland, both in their practical work and in their equality and non-discrimination policies and documents.
Not all dioceses explicitly address measures to promote equality and non-discrimination for LGBTQIA+ people and employees in their official documents or on their websites.
Not all dioceses provide information on preventing spiritual abuse in their official documents or on their websites.

Equality and Non-Discrimination Legislation: Employers are legally required to actively promote equality and non-discrimination, regardless of the number of employees.

FINDINGS FROM INTERVIEWS WITH BISHOPS: THERE IS A WILL TO ACT *(Iivanainen 2023)*

- **A shared framework to guide congregations and support their work would be valuable.**
- **The most important thing is to ensure that the framework is put into practice in congregations.**
- **The most significant gaps in diocesan equality and non-discrimination documents concern the position of sexual and gender minorities. And also in the work carried out in congregations across the dioceses.**
- **Examining and evaluating human dignity, equality and equal rights within the Church through the framework of contextual theology.**

SPIRITUAL ABUSE AND CONVERSION PRACTICES REMAIN WIDESPREAD, INCLUDING WITHIN THE EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH OF FINLAND.

Malkus ry / Voimavaraksi -project Survey
64 responses on conversion practices

European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights Survey 2023
31% of Finnish respondents have experienced conversion practices (approximately 2,665 people).

Survey research I conducted for a non-fiction book
169 responses on spiritual abuse

There are many LGBTQIA+ people. There are many victims.

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SPIRITUAL ABUSE AND CONVERSION PRACTICES TARGETING LGBTQIA+ PEOPLE AND CHURCH EMPLOYEES.

(Iivanainen 2025)

A TWO PART SURVEY WITH A TOTAL OF 169 RESPONSES.

- ***1. The first survey, on forms of spiritual abuse, received responses from 117 LGBTQIA+ current or former members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland. Of these, 47 are or have been employed by the Church.***
- ***2. The second survey, on perpetrators of spiritual abuse, received responses from 52 people, 26 of whom are or have been employed by the Church.***



Spiritual abuse occurs both in congregations and within church workplaces



Conversion practices also occur in Evangelical Lutheran congregations.

THE PREVALENCE OF SPIRITUAL ABUSE

(Iivanainen 2025)

More than half of the respondents in both groups had experienced spiritual abuse or conversion practices in the past year.

Members of Evangelical Lutheran Church

12 %	in the past week
17,1 %	in the past month
22,2 %	in the past year
20,5 %	in the past 5 years

Employees of Evangelical Lutheran Church

12,8 %	in the past week
23,5 %	in the past month
19,1 %	in the past year
19,1 %	in the past 5 years

SPIRITUAL ABUSE EXPERIENCED BY CHURCH MEMBERS AND OTHERS INVOLVED IN CONGREGATIONAL ACTIVITIES *(Iivanainen 2025)*

The spiritual abuse people experienced took many forms, was far reaching and occurred both in the everyday life of congregations and within families.

- Threatening someone with hell
- Describing someone's identity as a sin
- Describing someone's identity as an illness
- Excluding someone from the community because of their identity
- Praying for someone against their wishes in an attempt to change their identity
- Using Bible verses and religious language against someone's identity
- Stating during services, events, camps, group meetings or similar activities that only heterosexual relationships are in accordance with God's will
- Stating during services, events, camps, group meetings or similar activities that only men and women are in accordance with God's will regarding gender

A third of the respondents had been told that they would not experience spiritual abuse if they kept their identity private. Open ended responses included homosexuality being equated with bestiality and blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Some respondents had also been subjected to exorcisms and told that they were a sign of the end times.

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SPIRITUAL ABUSE, CHURCH EMPLOYEES

(Iivanainen 2025)

The spiritual abuse experienced took many forms and was widespread, perpetrated by both colleagues and chiefs. Some of the abuse met the criteria for conversion practices.

CO-WORKERS AS PERPETATORS

50 % One or more colleagues have expressed that there is something wrong with the respondent's identity.

50 % One or more colleagues have expressed that the respondent's identity goes against God's will.

35,7 % No one has said anything directly to the respondent, but they have heard colleagues speaking about LGBTQIA+ people in a discriminatory way or seen them write about them in ways that condemn their identities as contrary to God's will.

78,6 % Expressed regret about what had happened and supported the victim.

42,9 % Expressed regret about the incident but took no action to support the victim.

CHIEFS AS PERPETRATORS

35 % The chief has expressed that there is something wrong with the respondent's identity.

25 % The chief has expressed that the respondent's identity goes against God's will.

35 % The chief has not said anything directly to the respondent, but the respondent has heard the chief speak about LGBTQIA+ people in a discriminatory way or seen them write about them in ways that condemn their identities as contrary to God's will.

75 % Expressed regret about the incident but took no action to support the victim.

25 % Belittled the incident

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EHEYTTÄMISTÄ KOSKEVAT VASTAUKSET

(Iivanainen 2025)

- **Conversion practices take many forms, are widespread, and occur in the everyday life of congregations.**
- **Conversion practices do not take place only at so called “conversion camps” or only within revivalist movements.**
- **They occur wherever LGBTQIA+ people are pressured to “give up” or “change” their identity.**
- **Conversion practices always involve at least brutal psychological abuse that damages the person’s sense of self and psychological well being.**

INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

- Told that they must “give up their identity” to be saved
- Told that people are praying for them so that their identity will be “healed” or they will “give up their identity”
- Pressured by being told that their identity is a sin and goes against God’s will
- Left isolated within the community because of their identity
- Recommended pastoral counselling intended to “cure” their identity

FAMILY / PEOPLE CLOSE TO RESPONDENTS

- Loved ones, such as family members, pressured because of the respondent’s identity
- Loved ones, such as family members, told that the respondent’s identity is wrong and goes against God’s will
- Loved ones, such as family members, asked to pray for the respondent’s identity to change
- Family members expressing that the respondent’s identity goes against God’s will
- Family members threatening to cut ties unless the respondent “changes” their identity
- Family members cutting ties because of the respondent’s identity

PERPETRATORS OF SPIRITUAL ABUSE AND CONVERSION PRACTICES

(Iivanainen 2025)

- **The perpetrators were most often fellow congregation members (73%), church employees (40%), or people close to the respondent (approximately 30 to 44%).**
  Other perpetrators included chiefs, pastoral counsellors and therapists.
- **Among church employees, the most common perpetrators were priests (approximately 65%) and youth workers (approximately 46%).**

  Other perpetrators mentioned included deacons, children's activity leaders, family work coordinators, cantors, caretakers, seasonal workers, office staff and elected parish representatives.

REASONS FOR NOT SPEAKING OUT? MANY HAVE SHARED THEIR EXPERIENCES BUT RECEIVED NO SUPPORT *(Iivanainen 2025)*

Reasons for not speaking out included:

- **Shame**
- **Guilt**
- **Fear**
- Not knowing whom to turn to
- Believing that no support would be available even if they spoke up
- Being forbidden to tell anyone
- The entire community and their friends being involved in the spiritual abuse or conversion practices

The abuse had been reported to various people and organisations, including:

- Chiefs
- Colleagues
- Partners
- Family members
- Friends
- Members of the community
- Therapists or other professionals
- Peer support groups
- Bishops or church employees

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WHAT KIND OF SUPPORT DID THE VICTIMS NEED?

(Iivanainen 2025)

Support needs varied, but one thing was common to all: there had not been enough support.

- Family members, loved ones, colleagues, or supervisors **actively intervening** in cases of spiritual abuse and **actively supporting** the victim.
- The person the victim confided in **publicly stating that spiritual abuse and conversion practices are wrong and prohibited**.
- **Bishops issuing a clear statement** that spiritual abuse and conversion practices are not permitted in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland and that such practices will be actively addressed.
- **Training** for employees and elected parish representatives in every congregation on spiritual abuse, conversion practices, equality, and minority stress.
- **An anonymous and publicly accessible feedback channel** for reporting experiences of spiritual abuse and conversion practices in congregational activities.
- **Clear instructions** on every congregation's and diocese's website **explaining whom to contact** if someone experiences discrimination, spiritual abuse, or conversion practices.

BARRIERS TO ADDRESSING SPIRITUAL ABUSE AND DISCRIMINATION IN THE EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH OF FINLAND

(Iivanainen 2023, Iivanainen 2025)

The practice of religion has been exempted from legislation and its enforcement. Religious communities can decide for themselves to what extent they apply these laws and which provisions they consider applicable to their activities.

Discrimination, harassment, and abuse in church workplaces often also have a spiritual dimension when LGBTQIA+ people are involved. This makes them forms of spiritual abuse. These issues cannot be addressed separately. There are significant gaps in recognising these forms of abuse and providing training on them.

- It is particularly concerning that church employees feel their supervisors lack the skills and willingness to intervene in conflicts, or that supervisors themselves engage in discriminatory behaviour.
- Equality and equal treatment in relation to the rights of sexual and gender minorities are not consistently upheld across congregations in Finland.

Spiritual abuse remains hidden because it is not systematically investigated. The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland also lacks a binding framework for addressing spiritual abuse targeting sexual and gender minorities.

- What is needed is a shared set of concrete, binding safer space principles, together with clearly agreed consequences for violations.

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PROGRESS MADE AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVING PRACTICES

(Iivanainen 2023, Iivanainen 2025)

The Church wide guidelines for an operational gender equality and non discrimination plan are a good starting point. Concrete action by supervisors is needed to ensure that the guidelines are implemented in congregational work throughout Finland. Cooperation with other organisations and public institutions is an important source of support in this process.

Some congregations and parish unions have well organised, systematic LGBTQIA+ inclusive work based on continuous learning, with designated LGBTQIA+ contacts and training.
→ Successful practices should be adapted and adopted by other congregations.

It is important to regularly gather feedback through anonymous surveys from LGBTQIA+ church employees, congregation members, and elected parish representatives. Gender minorities in particular face a greater risk of discrimination because awareness and understanding of gender diversity remain limited.

Clear objectives must be established, progress towards them monitored, and practices adjusted based on the results.

Both congregation members and church employees want bishops to take a clearer stand on the harm caused by spiritual abuse and conversion practices.

Excluding religious practice from equality and non discrimination planning allows spiritual abuse and discrimination against LGBTQIA+ people to continue, because most congregational activities and much of church employees' work involve religious practice.
→ Religious practice should therefore be explicitly included in the guidelines.

INFORMATION AND SUPPORT IN FINLAND

- Uskontojen uhrien tuki ry: Support organisation for people harmed by religion
- Sateenkaariyhdistys Malkus: Promotes the spiritual well being of sexual and gender minorities. Does not take a position on anyone’s spiritual or religious beliefs.
- LGBTQIA+ contacts in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland
- Seta: Finnish LGBTQIA+ rights organisation
- Gender Diversity and Intersex Centre of Expertise (SMOK)
- Sinuiksi ry: LGBTQIA+ support organisation
- Municipal LGBTQIA+ services and activities
- Family Relations Centre and Sateenkaariperheet ry (Rainbow Families Finland)

SILENCE PERPETUATES SPIRITUAL ABUSE AND DISCRIMINATION.

CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGY, ACTIVE SUPPORT, AND INTERVENTION PROVIDE HOPE AND PRACTICAL TOOLS FOR PREVENTING SPIRITUAL ABUSE.

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