

OSCE /HDIM

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Presented By: Reverend Elder Diane Fisher, Metropolitan Community Churches

Greetings Mr. Chairperson and Honoured Delegates and NGO's;

I am Bishop Diane Fisher with Metropolitan Community Churches, an International Christian Denomination with a unique ministry affirming Lesbian, Gay, Bi-Sexual and Transgender persons. I want to begin by thanking ODIHR for its commitment to explore all forms of discrimination and intolerance.

In civil societies around the world, one of the most treasured freedoms is the right to practice one's faith freely. Faith helps to set the moral compass of a society and all faith traditions include directions on how we are to treat one another. This information is not new or revolutionary.

It is also not new to recognize that as societies, we create cultures of those who have and have not, those who have freedom unchallenged, those who do not; those who have enough to eat, those who do not; those who expect violence and discrimination, those who do not. The Helsinki Accord, Human Rights and Anti-Discrimination legislations seek to create societies where the new norm is mutual respect and understanding.

Yet, still within many societies, the right to practice one's faith freely is denied to some; the right to be recognized as a religious body by the state is denied because of unreasonable quotas or definitions of "church". For example, Romania requires .1% of the population to be members of a religious body before they can be recognized and yet an NGO needs only three people to become registered, this creates a situation where some religious traditions are seen as valid while others are excluded. This is not Freedom of Religion.

Gays, lesbians, bisexuals and Transgender persons have been removed from their religious bodies because of who they love or because of their gender identity. The LGBT community is guaranteed rights in some societies and yet denied access to their religious traditions.

Since the beginning of time faith traditions have been persecuted by those who disagree or misunderstand that particular faith. Religious wars plague our world and yet, still we persist in being intolerant of difference. We are torn apart in the name of our faith. Churches preach intolerance of Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals and Transgender persons from their pulpits. The crime is one of love, who a person loves or our gender identity does not underlie if we are worthy of God's love or of our right to religious freedom.

In Chisinau recently, I was present to attend a gay pride event and asked to share a worship experience with the LGBT community. A branch of the Orthodox Church called for my arrest for holding an illegal worship service. In Moldova, a religious body must be registered with the government to be free to assemble and worship God.

This cuts across two fundamental rights, freedom of religion and freedom of assembly. The local LGBT group had to be careful to describe the worship service as a workshop. Additionally, the local police visited the landlady of the apartment we were renting in Chisinau. They informed her that we were holding illegal worship services in her home, which was blatantly untrue. It was done to intimidate and threaten.

Some religious bodies have stood side by side with politicians calling for the freedom of assembly to be denied to LGBT people of faith. This is unthinkable. Freedom of religion is for all people not only those with unique privilege.

*It's time for this abuse of power to stop...* and for religious groups to stop fanning the flames of anti-gay prejudice. The sad reality we live with every day is this: Far too much of the violence directed against God's gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender children is rooted in religion-based fear and misunderstanding.

- Ensuring freedom of religion and assembly, protecting all people equally does not "*persecute*" those who hold differing views on religion
- Enacting legislation at the local and federal levels to allow all people, inclusive of the LGBT community, to experience freedom of religion and assembly *protects* all of us, regardless of our differing beliefs and convictions.

I call on those gathered here to ensure that all people, including the LGBT community, have the right to Freedom of Religion and Assembly without persecution.

No one is safe from hatred's reach until everyone is equally valued as a human being and equally protected under the law.      Thank you.