

Repository

LGBTQ Religious Archives Network

<https://lgbtqreligiousarchives.org/>

Title

Pauli Löija Oral History Interview and Transcript

Date

August 5, 2025

Extant

97 minute interview and 1 transcript

Abstract

In this oral history, LGBTQ RAN intern Elina Mäkinen interviews Paul Loija, Finnish LGBTQ religious figure and author. In it he discusses homophobia leading to failure to be ordained in the Lutheran Church, his human rights activism in Finland, parish work and leadership with the European Forum.

Biographical

Pauli Löija (he/him) was born in a small rural municipality called Veteli of Central Ostrobothnia, Finland, in 1965. Almost everyone in the Veteli community belonged to the local Lutheran parish, as the area was deeply religious. As a child, Pauli remembers wanting to be a mother during 'home play' with his three-year-old sister and her friends. During this home playing, Pauli had stuffed his sister's doll under his shirt and lay on his back on the bed, declaring that he was giving birth.

Pauli felt very lonely until he went to confirmation camp at the age of 15, in 1980. Almost by accident, Pauli joined the congregation's youth activities simply because he made friends there for the first time in his life. In the 1980s, Pauli had a crush on a boy who was a little older, yet this feeling lacked words as he could not understand nor name the feeling as a crush. During this time, Pauli was also bullied at school. This is when Pauli heard the word "gay" for the first time. It was an insult, which meant he did not understand. Pauli watched other boys during school gym classes with interest, as it was normal to him. Back then, his heart's curiosity and the word "gay" did not connect.

Bullying and being called gay at school continued, so Pauli decided to find out what the word meant. The library's encyclopaedias revealed the word's meaning to him. Pauli was horrified and troubled to realize that he was homosexual, as he was interested in other boys and not girls. During that time in the library, Pauli learned from the encyclopaedias of that time,

considered homosexuality as a disease, which was caused by either a hormonal disorder during the mother's pregnancy or educational reasons. Pauli started reading the Bible readily. He came across a passage that talked about men lying with men and how they deserved death. This disheartened Pauli significantly and led to a realization that he could not tell anyone about his homosexuality, because it was considered a forbidden sin and a disease according to the literature at that time.

Nevertheless, Pauli finished his compulsory education with surprisingly good exam grades and was accepted directly into studying at the University of Helsinki, Faculty of Theology in 1984. Moving from Veteli to the capital city of Helsinki was an impactful shift in Pauli's life at 19. Pauli actively participated in spiritual student activities. Students of theology who had previously moved from his home municipality were also involved in the same activities. The group's spiritual ideology was very conservative for many. This felt foreign to Pauli. Nevertheless, he continued to build walls around himself and could not admit his identity as a gay man to either himself or the people around him. Pauli tried to have a romantic relationship with a woman twice, because he thought it was possible to heal himself that way. Those attempts failed and were short-lived. During his student years in the 1980s, Pauli was contemplating suicide almost continuously. The situation continued similarly until the early 1990s.

Pauli graduated in May 1991 during a deep economic recession. This affected the Evangelical Lutheran Church severely, as there was no possibility of getting ordination for the Lutheran ministry then. Pauli had received a position to work in the faculty of theology as a secretary, which he continued. Subsequently, when the opportunity opened once more to get ordained, Pauli was already officially known as gay, so he could not get ordained anymore.

At the beginning of December 1992, Pauli had finally admitted to himself being homosexual. The reason was a Helsingin Sanomat newspaper article written by a well-known doctor, Jorma Palo, titled "Incurably Healthy". After reading the article, Pauli went to look at himself in the mirror. He admitted to himself that he was gay, and it was as if Pauli could hear the walls he had built in his experience, crumble down finally. Fundamentally, Pauli was then immediately flooded with feelings of relief and amazing lightness.

Just two weeks later, Pauli told his good friend, whom he had known for half a year to be gay that he was also gay. At first, the friend did not believe this. The confession was made at a party while quite drunk. Afterwards, the pair of friends left the party together towards Pauli's friend's place. Pauli's friend did not go to sleep in his bed but leaped naked next to Pauli on the sofa. Pauli felt a lack of feelings of guilt about lying with another man. They both studied theology at the University of Helsinki at that time. This is how Pauli's first relationship started.

In 1996, there was intense media discussion in Finland about homosexuality.^[iii] Pauli felt angry and aggravated about the discussion, so he wrote to the Finnish main newspaper, Helsingin Sanomat, which was published then. This sparked media publicity and also the interest of a documentary filmmaker. The filmmaker, Markku Heikkinen, decided to make a film about that discussion, which resulted in a documentary called Ristiriita (in English: A Conflict), which was later published and shown on Yle News Channel to a wide audience. In the late 1990s, it was

rare to have a person to come out publicly with their name and face, which resulted in Pauli being interviewed in numerous television programs, radio programs, and major magazines. Because of the publicity, Pauli began to receive death threat calls. Additionally, he also received letters unsigned through television program production companies, wishing him a terrific journey to hell and quoting the Bible.

Pauli's parents supported and accepted his homosexuality. Yet, his only sister cut off contact with him immediately after hearing about it. She was afraid of being associated with him because of their uncommon surname. She worked in a highly respected position as a judge, so she resulted in shunning Pauli for his public coming out.

At the turn of the millennium, Pauli was asked to become the editor-in-chief of a Finnish magazine focusing on sexual and gender minorities. During the job interview, his qualifications were questioned because he was a theologian. The interviewers seemed to be afraid that Pauli would turn the magazine into a church devotional publication. Pauli felt like an oddity in the gay community, as he was still a member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church and a confessing Christian. Pauli experienced not belonging with Christians because he was homosexual, and correspondingly, he lacked feelings of belonging within the homosexual community because he was a Christian.

Shortly before, Pauli had been establishing a group for sexual and gender minorities studying for church positions and working in church positions. Pauli was also active in regular rainbow church services and masses from 1999 onwards. In 1999, he preached at the first rainbow church service held during Helsinki Pride. There were just under 20 participants. Nowadays, Rainbow Mass activities have spread across the country, and around 200–250 people participate in the Rainbow Mass held during Helsinki Pride.

In 1998, Pauli participated in the European Forum of LGBT Christian Groups conference as the first Finnish participant.^[iii] Pauli recalls having enjoyed this European Forum conference intently because he felt a profound sense of belonging there, which felt amazing to him. When the conference was held in Järvenpää, Finland, for the first time in 2009, Pauli was the secretary of the organizing committee. Additionally, Pauli was chosen also as the main coordinator for the European Forum 2025 Turku Conference in Finland.

Nowadays, Pauli Löija works to fulfil his younger self's dream to become a published author. In 2019, Pauli Löija received an incurable cancer diagnosis which he now considers a gift from God. He has authored books like *'Huonoja uutisia, hyviä hetkiä'* in 2022, also published in English with the name *'Bad News, Good Moments'* in 2024 (Netherlands: Esuberanza Publishing). Moreover, Pauli published a sermon collection called *'Kehnon miehen postilla – armon sanoja armoa kaipaaville'* in 2023 (Finland: Herättäjähdistys and Pauli Löija). Now, Pauli looks enthusiastically forward to his publishing agreement, which was signed at the beginning of July 2025. Pauli Löija's 770-page manuscript will be divided into a noble trilogy book series.

Currently, Pauli Löija looks forward to seeing what new challenges life brings him as a Christian and a homosexual. Pauli underscores that he cannot see any contradiction between them, as

he has found from the Bible's merciful God, who is always on the side of those who are discriminated against and rejected. Pauli reflects that he would love to give courage to other LGBTQ+ people to be just yourself openly, because this helps in truly living your life.

[ii] See the Ateneum Art Museum. n.d. "The Story of Ateneum | Ateneum Art Museum." Accessed 12 August 2025. <https://ateneum.fi/en/the-story-of-ateneum/> .

[iii] Friends of Queer History Association. 2023. "Finland's Queer History Timeline". Accessed 12 August 2025. <https://sateenkaarihistoria.fi/en/finlands-queer-history-timeline/>.

[iiii] "European Forum of LGBTI+ Christian Groups. About us." n.d. Accessed 12 August 2025. <https://www.lgbtchristians.eu/about-us/> .

(This biographical profile written by Elina Mäkinen from an interview with Pauli Löija and was edited by Löija.)

Biography Date: August 2025

Scope and Content

In this oral history Long-time Finnish LGBTQ religious figure and author Paul Loija described painful bullying as child and theological study but refused ordination after coming out in 1992. He recounted how he spoke as an open gay man on a national news program/documentary at a time when few gays appeared in public media. He continued parish work in a homophobic church as an openly gay man to further change within the Lutheran Church, He described the decades of work in the LGBTQ religious organization European Forum. After a cancer diagnosis in 2019, he completed three books of essays and sermons published in Finnish.

Access

Open to all researchers at <https://lgbtqreligiousarchives.org/oral-histories/pauli-l-ija>

Reproduction and Use

Copyright has been transferred to LGBTQ Religious Archives Network. See LGBTQ-RAN Terms of Use at <https://lgbtqreligiousarchives.org/terms-of-use>.

Languages

Collection material is in English

Cite as

“Pauli Löija| Oral History”, *LGBTQ Religious Archives Network*, accessed DATE,
<https://lgbtqreligiousarchives.org/oral-histories/pauli-l-ija>.

Digital finding aid created by Doris Malkmus, 2026

Tags

Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland | Activist (religious institutions) | Theology |
Author/editor | Finland | Helsinki | Löija, Pauli