christian role models FOR LGBT EQUALITY





foreword



Bishop Christopher Senyonjo is an Anglican priest and ally for lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) rights in Uganda. He continues to risk imprisonment and his safety by speaking out against homophobia, biphobia and transphobia, and preaching a message of acceptance and inclusion. He has starred in two documentaries, 'Call Me Kuchu' and 'God Loves Uganda', and runs an LGBT-supportive ministry.

Sometimes it can feel like we have much to wrestle with in a changing world. While some of us find it easier to embrace greater diversity, seeing it as a part of God's great design, others can find it confusing and difficult. But to turn away from the realities of some of our fellow men and women is to close the door of the church to them.

The path for many Christians who are LGBT, and those who support them, is rarely easy. Faced with judgement and persecution, LGBT people have often felt excluded from the church. Sadly, some have turned away from the faith as a means of self-preservation.

As Christians, we must learn to accept people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or trans (LGBT) as children of God. There have always been LGBT people in the Church, and there always will be.

The 20 stories in this booklet tell of LGBT people who have reconciled their sexuality and/or gender identity with their faith, and of non-LGBT Christians who believe that accepting and affirming LGBT people is the Christ-like response. They represent diverse voices from across the globe - from Africa, the Americas, the Caribbean, Europe, Asia and the Pacific. Individually the stories are inspirational, but together they tell an incredibly powerful story of a faith that has withstood trials many of us would find hard to imagine — a faith that can move mountains.

I welcome you to this collection of testimonies and pray that you will read with an open mind and gentle heart. Their enduring belief, their understanding of God's love and their courage offer all of us an opportunity to adopt a deeper meaning of fellowship and acceptance. And as we fully embrace and accept each other, it is my prayer that we know a deeper acceptance of God ourselves. Our God is compassionate and loves inclusively.

Bishop Christopher Senyonjo



foreword



It will come as no surprise to some, and as a huge surprise to others, that lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans people exist in every community, in every workplace, in every region, from every ethnic background, and in every religion.

Religion is often the most sticky of these to reconcile. Some will say that LGBT people cannot possibly exist in faith communities; that faith communities do not accept same-sex relationships or those who transition; that LGBT people can be 'cured'. And of course these beliefs can, and do, exist. As a result, there are many LGBT people who reject their faith or feel an ever widening chasm between two parts of their core identity.

However, there are also many religious communities, groups and places of worship where these beliefs do not exist. This book focuses on the experiences of Christians from across the world. Their backgrounds and religious traditions are all different: some are priests, some are in relationships, some have been imprisoned. Some of the people in this book identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or trans, and others are the staunchest of allies. But what they all share is a belief that God is love and acceptance.

The people in this book come from 15 countries spread across six continents. In 12 of those countries, LGBT people are not protected under the law. When we began this project, our intention was to share the stories and experiences of a diverse range of participants, in order to demonstrate how the experiences of LGBT people of faith and their allies may differ, but also contain striking similarities.

However, as it progressed, we became acutely aware that publishing some of these experiences could provoke adverse reactions. The bravery and honesty of the people we interviewed was unwavering but, after much discussion, we made the difficult decision to anonymise stories from people who could not be guaranteed protection by the laws of their state. Others have chosen themselves to be anonymised. Our role is to empower others, but we must consider their safety as part of this process.

In 75 countries across the world being lesbian, gay or bisexual is illegal; in 10 it is punishable by death; and globally over 1,700 trans people have been killed in the last seven years. There is clearly still a long way to go before we can say that everyone, everywhere is free to be themselves, but that's certainly what we're working towards. We're looking to a future in which anonymity will no longer be necessary, and all people will be accepted - for their beliefs, their faith, their sexual orientation, their gender identity and everything else - without exception.

Ruth Hunt

Chief Executive, Stonewall



'God is against sin. That's all. And I see no correlation between sin and being LGBT.'

Mikhail Tumasov is part of the Russian LGBT Network. This human rights organisation provides social, legal and advocacy services, and develops regional initiatives, for LGBT equality. He lives, works and worships in St Petersburg.

I was a teenager during 'Perestroika' (the restructuring of the former Soviet Union) in the 1980s, when Christian churches came back to Russia after a long absence. I remember being curious about God and spirituality, good and evil, and so on. My family was bi-confessional — Orthodox and Catholic — and I chose to be Catholic.

My coming out journey is a long story. I was 13 when I began to feel certain 'inclinations' and thought, 'This isn't good'. As a Catholic, I wasn't supposed to be having sexual relations of any kind anyway, so it was fine to be single and celibate — it was expected. So I devoted my life to God and tried to ignore those feelings.

I went to theological college in Moscow to become a priest, but I quit because I couldn't reconcile my faith with my sexual orientation. Three years later, I'd accepted myself as gay and felt strong enough to return for a second attempt. I told my priest, an old Irish father who I really looked up to, that I was gay. He just embraced me and said, 'I'm sorry for you', because coming out as gay meant it was then impossible to become a priest. I left again and moved south, but the problem followed me; the bishop I'd worked for in Moscow told my new priest that I was gay.

I joined the youth group at my new church. Sometimes our meetings finished late and everyone would sleep over in the church building — but the priest would tell me to go home. I wasn't allowed to stay with other people, because I was gay. I tried to just focus on my faith, but it was awful and I attempted suicide. I thought that if I was going to hell anyway, I should just go there already. Looking back, it seems ridiculous that I thought this, but I was so isolated by what those priests had said. Church had been like my family, and to be cut from something so dear to me was devastating.

I met my first boyfriend in 2000, when I was 25. Up until this point I had been totally celibate. I went to confession and the priest (a different one this time) told me to stop seeing him, but I didn't want to. I knew it was the beginning of the end of me being a Catholic. My boyfriend was very Catholic, but I stopped going to communion and confession, and gradually I grew further away. It's difficult for me to say this, but these days I'm 'formerly Catholic'. Now I just describe myself as Christian.

As recently as five years ago I was still struggling with being gay and Christian. I still thought it was genuinely impossible to be both. I was invited to a forum for LGBT Christians from Eastern Europe and I went expecting to hate it. I thought it was pointless and that they were wrong — these gay Christians saying that it was okay to be gay and Christian. I had been a Catholic and I knew better! But

on the last day, a reverend from the Metropolitan Community Church spoke about how we can understand God's word as LGBT people, and something inside me changed. I began to question my assumption that being gay and being Christian couldn't fit — I needed to know more, to look into the translations of the Bible, to understand the theology around the issue, and I realised I might not be right after all. The way I interpreted Christianity began to change. Nowadays, I really cannot see any sentence in the Bible against LGBT people at all. What I do see is that God is against sin. That's all. And I see no correlation between sin and being LGBT.

My relationship with God has been a journey. We have argued a lot! I've always thought that God is my father and Jesus is my brother, and I might not be the best member of this family, but at least I'm part of it. And like any family, sometimes we disagree, but we talk to each other and usually we are very close. In difficult times, God is nearby, every time and everywhere. It surprises me when people say church is the only holy place; anywhere in the world is holy because it was all made by God. So you have to be the same person inside and outside of church.

I worship in a group of people from many different traditions. We have members who aren't Christian, but it's a safe place for them to follow other religions. And we have non-believers who just like being part of our meetings. Not everyone is LGBT; some members are straight. But everybody is welcome. We have groups in Moscow, St Petersburg and Vladivostok. We're not organised like a typical church, because some people have had bad experiences with churches and there are negative correlations to that. I understand how they feel, but I like being part of something. I cannot be a single Christian; I cannot survive without community.

Some LGBT people are not Christians simply because they don't believe, but many LGBT people have been told they can't believe, because somebody from a conservative church has said, 'You must choose between being gay or believing in God'. But you cannot choose to stop being gay. It's like trying to choose not to have brown eyes! It's not your choice.

As LGBT Christians we can help people see from a different viewpoint. I watched the film 'Brokeback Mountain' (about two men in 1960s America who fall in love) with a friend who is Muslim and straight, and he said to me: 'You love each other as we do?' It was only then he'd really thought about it and understood that one guy can love another guy and have the same feelings that he had for his wife. We're still good friends; I was Best Man at his wedding.

Do not be afraid of being LGBT and Christian. I know it's a challenge, and sometimes the LGBT community says that Christianity is guilty of many things. We need to talk together — but to talk, rather than shout. We need to listen, pray, and feel the movement of the Holy Spirit in all this. The purpose of life is to be real, not to lie to yourself. Understand what you are, and be who you are. You cannot lie to God.



'But I know God listens to me wherever I am and wherever He is. If He didn't love me or didn't like my sexuality, I wouldn't have been created.'

This is the story of a lesbian from Eastern Africa, who works with police, media, healthcare providers and religious leaders in understanding and advancing the rights of LGBT people.

I'm not 'out' out. You won't see me in the media, and, when I have to speak in public, I ask that they don't print my photograph. The reason for this is the job that I do; the moment I start discussing my sexuality, it becomes an issue and people immediately build a barrier and look at me differently. It hurts and it makes my work harder. Some people think the gay community is just a sexual thing, a community made for sex. But I look at my orientation as something that is just there. So I don't introduce myself as, 'Hi, I'm a lesbian'. Why should I say I'm a lesbian?

What stops people from coming out in Africa is fear; fear of being rejected, fear of being victimised, fear that everything will be negative. You worry that your family will reject you and that your straight friends will distance themselves from you. And there's the fear that people will take the law into their own hands.

I was born into a large family and raised in a rural town. I studied in the capital and then moved to a smaller city, where I became friends with a local gay group. I was a lesbian in a new town and I needed to find a family of sorts, people I felt comfortable with. They gathered every week to support each other against the violations they faced on the streets. They spoke of arrest, imprisonment, rape and police brutality. I would hear their stories and ask why they were taking this abuse so lightly. Their response was: 'We are used to it'. The then chairperson of the group invited me to join the organisation and help to build it into an advocacy group.

I work with the police, media, healthcare providers and religious leaders in understanding and advancing the human rights of LGBT people. When I first meet them, I don't tell them my sexual orientation - I just focus on establishing a relationship. They get to know me as 'the person who's supporting the process', not as 'the lesbian' or whatever label they may put on me. In doing so, they feel more comfortable to be challenged on their opinions and behaviour. Once we have established a foundation, I can disclose my sexual orientation more safely. People have told me that, if they knew I was gay, they wouldn't have met with me in the first place, but the fact they get to know me as an individual helps them realise that stereotyping LGBT people is wrong. It changes their perspective and we're able to work together.

Some gay male colleagues and I recently worked with a group of religious leaders, looking at the harm that their words and actions had caused for minority groups. For example, gay men had been attacked at a clinic after some religious leaders had led a demonstration to

drive LGBT people out of the city. We started a conversation with them to look back at the suffering that had occurred, and helped them see that if they make speeches against marginalised people, including LGBT people, people act on it and it can actually lead to someone getting killed. We asked them how that felt, and we talked about the role that religious leaders could take in preventing discrimination. We let them move at their own pace and reach their own conclusions.

Once we felt we'd built a working relationship with them, we decided to come out. It was a make or break session. We started by calling in a doctor who is gay, then a lawyer who is gay, and other professionals who happen to be gay, because to them gay people were just those they saw on the streets, 'selling sex' or whatever the media had portrayed. We wanted them to see that LGBT people exist in all walks of life. We invited them to ask us questions, and our discussion went on for four hours. We spoke of human rights for everybody — we didn't say, 'We're gay and we want gay rights for us'. There was a security strategy in place in case things exploded and we needed to get away, but thank God, it went so well they asked if we would teach others about these things, because before this they'd had the wrong idea about LGBT people. We trained six of those religious leaders on how to train others in LGBT acceptance. I've observed them doing their own training and I've been so impressed.

Even so, church is not the place for me. I'm a Christian, but I haven't been to church for years. When I saw Christians calling for folk like me to be arrested, I gave up. I felt that church was taken away from me by these people. I read the Bible daily and I listen to pastors online, but I can't pretend to sit in a church if the preacher is homophobic or if the congregation doesn't accept me. But I know God listens to me wherever I am and wherever He is. If He didn't love me or didn't like my sexuality, I wouldn't have been created. I don't think anyone should decide for me or decide for God whether I should live or die, because God has seen that I should be alive and be here. So I believe that God loves me the way I am, and that I can pray anywhere. That's how I've been able to continue and grow in my spirituality as a Christian.

When I look at the Bible I see a lot of love, more so than the killing and the stoning. I look at how the Bible guides me to be a better person in a society where there are a lot of bad things going on. I don't use my Bible to find reasons why I should hate my neighbour; I use the Bible for direction to help me forgive, talk to those I'm forgiving, and move on. If I didn't, I think I would have so many enemies. I'm happy and the Bible allows me to be happy.



T've been told: "Your view is not Biblical", but I think it's deeply Biblical."

Nicholas Holtam is the Bishop of Salisbury and formerly the vicar of two inner London parishes. He has taught and published on the subjects of Christian ethics, mission and ministry, and the place and purpose of parish churches. He is married with four children and has spoken in support of equal marriage.

I grew up in a North London family, who just had an acceptance of people as they are. My parents were brilliant at including all sorts of people, some of whom were, even to a young person, quite complex and difficult. They had a strong sense of neighbourliness and wouldn't have excluded anyone on the grounds of gender, race, age, and so on. I think my views come from their acceptance of everybody. Consider how offensive racism and sexism are — everybody's clear about that now. As a society we've been ambivalent about sexual orientation, but we've reached a point in Britain where in law we've almost resolved the matter and that feels to me a very good thing. It's a matter of justice. My views begin with my family, but are also deeply embedded in my faith.

Thinking back to my own journey, when I trained for ministry in the 1970s, there was a visible gay minority among us. In society and in the Church, people were pretty discrete and sexuality wasn't as talked about as it is now. As a curate, I had a colleague who was gay and in a relationship; he was open about who he was and who he lived with, and he was warmly accepted by our East London parish. I thought he and his partner lived a model life really, and I was struck by the 'ordinariness' of their relationship. I don't mean that disparagingly — what I mean is they were just getting on with life.

A change happened in the late 80s and 90s, when some of the clergy applying to work with me started to say, 'There's something I want you to know about me, because it's really important in terms of who I am. I'm fed up with being dishonest and I only want to do this job if I can be honest at least with you about this'. These were people tired of being unable to be fully open about themselves.

When an openly gay former colleague retired about 10 years ago, he held a farewell event in church. Not everybody there was gay by any means, but this was a group of people who could cope with difference; they could cope with people who were a bit edgy and they were good at making connections between the inside and the outside of Church. The occasion coped with the breadth and width of humanity as we really are, rather than as we might pretend to be. I recall sitting there in floods of tears, knowing that these were people I wanted to be with.

There was a visible minority of LGBT people in my last London parish. Some of them were fairly open about who they were, and then other people you'd have not the slightest idea about their sexual orientation. It's not the first thing people say about themselves when they come into a room, but a great variety of humanity exists.

I think it's the spectrum of sexuality that some people struggle with. Some Christians think: 'It would be so much better if you were straight, just choose to go that way. It'll be better for you and better for us'. We all like neatness and tidiness don't we? And we like people who are like us. But you can't choose to be gay or straight, you just are. So actually it's unkind to say to someone, 'Sorry, but you either must be celibate or you must behave as a heterosexual'. It is unnatural for that person. And God made us 'male and female', but what happens to that proportion of people who are intersex, who are indeterminately male or female? Whatever the small percentage, they are an enormous number of people.

I've been told: 'Your view is not Biblical', but I think it's deeply Biblical. I don't think you can decide the issue based on a few Biblical texts that mention homosexuality. They are not talking about faithful, loving relationships, but about promiscuity, adultery, exploitation, idolatry and that's different. They don't address the same-sex relationships of women, or that part of the gay community that is serious about faith. So for me, they don't produce knock-down arguments. It's more about the patterning of our Christian life.

One of my roles as Bishop is to keep the doors of the Church open and allow the movement in and out of people who enter and don't necessarily stay, but need feeding. There seems to me a pattern in the Gospels that it's the outsider who often teaches us the meaning of what we thought was an insider's story, and that's been my experience of Christian life. In 'The Good Samaritan', it's the outsider who teaches us the real meaning of the law. To exclude LGBT people as outsiders therefore damages the Church. The person different to you can be the person who brings the gift you most need. It's interesting that when Jesus visited Jerusalem he stayed in Bethany, which possibly means 'House of the Poor'. It's where his friends Mary, Martha and Lazarus lived, it was outside the main city and was the closest that lepers could stay to Jerusalem. There's a pattern of who Jesus is, who he kept company with, where he was at home.

Archbishop Justin Welby shows us it's possible to disagree over something, but still recognise the goodness in each other's view; where I can see the Christ in you and the integrity of your faith and vice versa — a way of 'good disagreement'. The Church has a history of division and a history of the ways in which we've been able to handle difference creatively. This issue shouldn't be one that divides us. In Christ we should be able to find a deeper reality. I think that's what we'd all look for.



Being attracted to people of the same gender is just who I am. It cannot be the will of God that I should have to force myself into a straight relationship.'

In this story, a gay man from the Caribbean tells of his personal journey in faith.

I grew up in a very conservative society. I attended Pentecostal churches as a young person, which were very anti-gay. My parents were considered pillars of the church and we never missed a service. I rejected my same-sex attraction for many years and fought against it. I believed it was a manifestation of evil.

As a university student, I was part of the missions group on campus and was actively in charge of recruiting people into Christianity. I thought if I immersed myself into my faith it would take the place of my homosexual attraction, but I would constantly have bouts of same-sex intimacy, followed by guilt. It was a very problematic time in my life, going in and out of the closet like that. I tried gay cures and even got married to a female friend to try to fix myself.

She knew about my sexual orientation, but we honestly believed that prayer and marital sex would cure me. I became even more involved in the church and took charge of the Sunday school and choir, but, no matter how hard I tried, of course it didn't work. I still desired men and I had to end the marriage. It didn't go down well with our church, but I didn't think it was fair to my wife; I was mentally cheating on her. To me, it wasn't what Christ would have wanted.

After we parted, I threw myself into ministering to other men who were trying to reject their sexual orientation. I held meetings at my home, but it didn't help us; in fact, we ended up coupling up, having flings with each other, then feeling guilty, then going off with someone else and repeating the cycle! But I never saw myself as a promiscuous person. It wasn't me. I wanted an intimate, longstanding relationship with someone, so I stopped. In time, I became a little more comfortable with my sexual orientation, but became increasingly uncomfortable with my spirituality, so I left the church.

Ironically, it was at an ILGA (International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association) Conference where I met the Christian man who would become my husband. When I found out that he had been a Catholic priest, I wasn't too keen on the idea, but I suppose my spirituality had never really left me. It hadn't died; it had just gone into hibernation

I moved from having nothing to do with the church, to church becoming a total way of life again. As a pastor's spouse, I support my husband's ministry and, as a member of our church, I receive counselling, spiritual assistance and support in return. My relationship with God is a very personal one; it's a conversation, it's a daily working out, it's

a peace. It's a relationship that I'm excited about, but I don't throw it in people's faces. I share the Gospel where necessary and through the work I get involved with. My faith and my relationship with God enable me to do the work I do. If God was willing to die for me, I must be willing to live for Him.

I think God wants us to be authentic, genuine and caring towards each other. As long as I'm not hurting anyone or being dishonest, then I really think those biblical functions that talk about love have the same meaning for me too. It's also about the specific cultural context; scriptures are interpreted based on where people are at the time. There was a time when slavery was spiritually and scripturally endorsed, but this is not the case anymore. We evolve, and, as we do, we develop a better appreciation of what the love of God is and how it should be manifested among us. We can't take parts of the Bible in isolation.

Being attracted to people of the same gender is just who I am. It cannot be the will of God that I should have to force myself into a straight relationship, and be deceitful towards the person I'm supposedly in that relationship with, just to please man. I just can't see that's what God would want. If anyone thinks that homosexuality is a choice, then I dare them, for just one day, to try and be attracted to someone of the same gender. They'll realise it's not possible to change the gender you are attracted to and hopefully they'll see it's not possible for me to be attracted to someone of the opposite gender. Sexuality is what it is.

We need more allies, and we need to amplify their voices to counteract the negativity that's out there. We must speak love louder than hate, so that we can help those who hate us understand they are no longer on the right side of history; they are now the minority and they must be silenced — not through fear, but through an overwhelming manifestation of love.



When folk hate or reject LGBT people, it affects the person who is doing the hating.'

Sister Simone Campbell has been engaged in religious service since the 1960s and is a long-standing member of the Sisters of Social Service. As Executive Director of NETWORK, America's National Catholic Social Justice Lobby, she leads her Sisters on annual 'Nuns on the Bus' tours to meet, support and advocate for those on the margins of US society.

I've been described as 'radical' by the Vatican; it's pretty funny really. I have no idea what some people find so radical about accepting 100 per cent of people on this earth.

As a movement, we relate to everyone in society and that obviously includes the LGBT community. I've witnessed the amazing courage of folks in the LGBT community, who have come out and spoken publicly and respectfully on what had been taboo subjects. Because of their bravery, all of us have discovered we know at least someone — a friend, relative, colleague, whoever — who is LGBT, and I think that's been huge in moving society towards greater acceptance. What has been the challenge, at least in the United States, was that, until the last few years, many in that community were hidden and discriminated against if they were at all public. What I see now is the former intolerance towards LGBT people being gradually replaced by an intolerance towards the opinion that LGBT people aren't equal or somehow don't deserve acceptance. That's progress.

I wonder if the challenge for some people in dealing with anxieties around sexual definition is their own lack of working through their sexual identity. When we're comfortable in ourselves, outside things can't threaten us. I know, when I'm nervous about something, it's usually got something to do with me and my own unresolved stuff. So I wonder that when folks are angry or judgemental or prejudiced if it's a reflection of their own insecurities. And I think there are some people within the Church, some priests and bishops included, that haven't wrestled with their own sexuality and instead spend a lot of time worrying about everybody else's. I think it comes from needing to judge others to feel better about oneself, or projecting onto others the things that one fears.

You know, the Bible doesn't really say anything about LGBT people. There is that line in the book of Leviticus, but really, give me a break! That is not the LGBT community as we in the 21st century understand it. Instead, what I see over and over in the gospels is Jesus walking towards all kinds of folks. The scriptures say repeatedly that you should walk towards everybody, no exceptions. If some folks have a sexual identity that's different to mine, so what? God doesn't make mistakes and if that's how folks are created, then that's a reflection

of God's love too. We need to wake up to the fact that love is a wonderful thing, building families is a wonderful thing, and there are a variety of ways to do either. I recently met someone whose priest had refused to marry their daughter because her fiancé was raised by two mothers; I was stunned. Finally they found another priest who was wonderful and worked with the family. To me, if folks have loving, supportive relationships, that's what matters.

On our last bus tour, I met a young woman who had escaped from a programme to 'cure' her of being gay. She's now married to her female partner and together they have a baby — she was just radiating joy! But then she started telling me that some years before, her Christian family had sent her away to a curing programme. Her father — a preacher — told her that she was possessed by the devil, and she even came to believe that herself for a while. I don't know how she had the courage to break out of it, but five months in she ran away and hasn't had contact with her family since.

I could feel her anguish in the judgement from her family, but also her relief in being true to herself and trusting that she wasn't wrong or crazy or possessed. And now she and her partner have created a wonderful new family. She is doing community organising now and said that she has come to realise that in many ways she's doing what her dad did in trying to nurture a community, but she hopes she's doing it with less judgement. It just brought tears to my eyes.

As a person of faith, I think we're called to radical acceptance of everyone, which means that I see God at work in all people, and if I'm busy fighting you, I'm actually fighting God. If I'm judgemental of you, just because of how you breathe and who you are, that anger will consume me and I can't be myself. When folk hate or reject LGBT people, it affects the person who is doing the hating. If you spend your energy being fearful and criticising others, that anger erodes who you are and really limits the joy and love that Jesus calls us to.

My advice to anyone who has a hard time accepting LGBT people is to get to know them and hear their stories. I think that's what Pope Francis is talking about when he says that to build a community of peace we have to understand that realities are more important than ideas. For me, that means we have to listen to people rather than making assumptions about them. Anyone can create their own theory and feel very sure about what LGBT people are or are not, but when you meet people it changes everything. Talk to people. Be open and accept the truth of who people are. That's all we need to do.



Please tell me if I'm reading the wrong Bible, because the Bible you're reading is totally different from the one I'm reading.'

This is the story of a Christian from the Pacific Region whose gender identity transcends male/female. She established an LGBT association in the 1990s (with other members of her community) and volunteers at her local church.

I was the first one to wear a dress to church. I still remember that blue pleated dress I wore, with my hair slicked back. I was 14 years old.

I walked into the church with my grandma. Mass had already started, but instead of everybody watching the priest, they were watching me. And of course, my grandmother sits at the very front! It was like the biggest floorshow, everyone's head was turned. I had a bit of fear, a bit of insecurity, but at the same time I said to myself: I am what I am, and no-one's going to change that. This is the life I want to live; I feel comfortable as a female and no-one's going to take that right away from me.

There's a lot more acceptance nowadays in 2015. The law still criminalises us, but it's not a law that's applicable to our everyday lives. It was a law brought in by the British and we're stuck with that, but things are totally different than what the law says. If my country was to go by the law, I would be in jail already — a long time ago!

I don't tolerate negativity. Every now and then I'll come across someone who is negative, but they can never say it to your face, that's the thing. Attitudes are a lot easier now, the younger generation are a lot more comfortable with us, but I cannot say that it's all good. Some families still stigmatise us.

We started an association for our LGBT community in the early 1990s and our first workshop was with church leaders. On the first day of our workshop, one of the older presidents of the Church said to our founder 'You're a sinful woman, why do you gather and encourage these people?' He went on and on — I was ready to explode! Our founder stood and said 'I'd like to ask you, which Bible are you reading? Because the Bible I'm reading says love one another, and I think it means to love whoever — everyone. These kids are my neighbours. My neighbour is not the person who brings me food, or lives next to me, or those I work with every day. My neighbours are these people, and I'm bringing them here so they have a sense of belonging, to support them, for them to know that they belong and they have a right to be whoever they want to be. Please tell me if I'm reading the wrong Bible, because the Bible you're reading is totally different from the one I'm reading'. Everyone applauded!

A few years ago, one of our parish fathers was interviewed, and he spoke about me, saying, 'What he does in his private life is not our business. Our business is encouraging his life to balance. And what he has given back to our church and our community is more important than what he does elsewhere'. This felt so lovely, I had such a sense of belonging. It encouraged me to do more and to accept the Church, the religion I'm in, and to be proud of it. If there are people that sit there and hate you, I think they shouldn't sit in the church at all!

We work closely with the head of the Church, our bishop; he's one of our biggest supporters. He blessed our new office a few years ago. Many people ask him, 'Why are you always involved with these people?' He said, 'We church leaders should take what the Lord has taught us and, if we see a soul that has been lost from our church, he should be the one to whom we give our all, to bring him back and make him feel he belongs. We cannot drive him away just because of who he is, because then he'll do worse things in life that will affect everybody else, his roots, his family. We should be the Good Shepherd and go do likewise'. So I'm proud of our bishop. The last three bishops have been our biggest role models.

A lot of us are very involved in our churches. Some of us are youth leaders, some are choirmasters. I must say, as a Catholic, I'm very comfortable with my church. Some other churches accept us if we dress as a man, but as for the Catholic churches, generally you see all the trans people in dresses; you don't see them in men's clothes!

When I visit the UK, I always attend church. Last time, I stayed with my cousin in Surrey and went to a local chapel. It felt like they were all looking at me. I don't know if they could tell that I'm trans or just think I'm different, but it felt very tense and brought back memories of being 14 and starting to wear dresses. I've learned to keep all of that away — I walk in with a wall around me. Whatever negativity comes from whoever is sitting there, I bounce it back to them. I shield it away. When I walk into church, it's just between me and God.

I thank God every day. There's never a moment when I don't thank Him for the life I have, what I have experienced and what I've got. I appreciate everything that my community has given me. Everybody should accept and feel good about whatever they are; celebrate the life that God has given you. You would not have come to this world if it was not for His creation. It was His plan, and everybody should respect that.



If the Church became more accepting of LGBT people, it would change our world because it has great power in many countries, communities and houses.'

This story comes from a young woman in Poland. She is part of Wiara i Tecza (Faith and Rainbow), a group of LGBTQ Christians and allies, who work for awareness, tolerance and acceptance in Polish society. They welcome Christians of any denomination, those searching for faith and those with no faith, for community and dialogue.

Nowadays, I don't identify with any particular church or denomination. I just think that I'm Christian and I've found my place in the Christian community that I'm part of. It's not a church as such; it's an allembracing, non-denominational, inclusive organisation.

As a young girl I was devoutly Catholic, but growing up I found it hard to agree with everything Catholicism taught. And I felt that if I didn't agree with something, there was no room for disagreement or debate — effectively, you excluded yourself if you gave a different opinion. This made it difficult to remain a member of a formal church, because I couldn't obey all the dogmas of the Catholic Church and be myself at the same time. But I still had my faith in God.

For about a year, I continued going to church, because I felt I wasn't a real Christian otherwise and was afraid of going to hell. But it didn't feel right and it wasn't the way for me to have a relationship with God. I decided not to identify with the Catholic Church anymore. Leaving it behind helped me from a psychological point of view and I started searching for another way of believing.

I considered converting to the Protestant Church, but choosing which kind of church to attend felt like choosing between political parties, and it didn't work for me. I felt like a guest visiting every house but not belonging to any. Instead, I found my own way of being a Christian. At the same time I was still figuring out my sexual orientation. It would be some time until I fully understood it.

I don't really tell everyone I meet that I am a lesbian, but I also don't hide myself. I represent the LGBT community publicly on behalf of the group, organising days of tolerance, debates about homophobia, and so on. My friends and family know about my sexual orientation, and about my partner, so I'm quite open about it.

Our Faith and Rainbow group meets to discuss the Bible, pray and support each other. I try to express my faith in everyday life, through how I relate to people, including through my relationship with my partner. Sometimes I'll quote the Bible and explain my faith to others and how it fits with my sexual orientation. There are many people who struggle to find a place in faith and we help them where we can. People struggle with reconciling their sexual orientation and gender identity and the Christian part of themselves, because they have been told that it's impossible. I too worried that I wouldn't be accepted by religious people, especially my religious friends. In the beginning I was afraid and presented my 'faults' to them as if I was ill or had

something wrong with me, because I couldn't accept myself at first. I wasn't just seeking their acceptance, I was seeking their compassion.

As time passed, I became more confident in my identity as both a Christian and a lesbian, and I started to think about myself in more powerful ways. I became happy with my sexual orientation, especially when I found my girlfriend. The LGBT community can be quite antireligion, so it was very important to me that she would understand my faith. She does, and being in a partnership has empowered me and helped me re-think how I relate to religious people. I'm outwardly happier, which has a positive effect on those around me. I believe that happiness comes from God.

My straight Catholic friends prayed for me, but I told them they didn't have to worry, I was happy. They are good people and they listened. They like me and they like my partner, but they can't accept that we have sexual relationship. They can accept it only as a 'friendship', but nothing more.

Our relationship shouldn't be dismissed as just sexual, or pretend. It doesn't bother me if people have this view, because I believe God accepts me as I am, and I feel strong in myself — which empowers me to have these conversations. Maybe it's easier to have these conversations as a woman who's in a relationship with another woman than it is for a man who's in a relationship with another man, I don't know.

I've experienced discrimination within the Christian community, at Christian conferences and so on. I've been told I'm a sinner who is going to hell, and that I can't be Christian. People take statements from the Bible to make their argument, but we (the Faith and Rainbow group) reply with our own reasons for why being LGBT does not condemn us.

We received an email from a man recently, asking how can we be Christian but gay at the same time. He said he'd pray for us — but he also asked us to pray for him, because he recognised we are believers too. He said he thinks there's a place in the Church for us, but we shouldn't live as couples and should see our 'condition' as suffering. I thanked him for his prayers and said we'd pray for him too, but that we do have our place in the Church, and that we think the Bible can be understood in different ways and gave him some examples. I try to be open to everyone, because building positive relations with others, whatever their view, helps us as well as them. It can bring us together somehow, if not as believers, as human beings.

If the Church became more accepting of LGBT people, it would change our world because it has great power in many countries, communities and houses. If it communicated a message of love and peace towards people with a different sexual orientation or gender identity, it could reduce crime and violence towards LGBT people everywhere. Lots of people would have happier, easier, more peaceful lives, and there would be fewer struggles within families. My faith is deeply connected with human beings and it's important to me that Jesus is a human being. Everyone can find his or her own way, his or her identity, and find the community that's right for them. The people around me are my church.



In my late 20s I began looking into the theology for myself and came to the unexpected conclusion that the Bible isn't against faithful gay marriage after all.'

Reverend Sally Hitchiner leads the multi-faith Chaplaincy for a London university and founded DiverseChurch.org.uk, a support group and online safe space for young LGBT Christians.

As a university chaplain, my role is to support university students in exploring faith and spirituality. As a Christian, as I came to terms with my own sexual orientation, I realised that the group who felt most excluded from mainstream faith in my university was the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender + society. So I offered to support their work in any way I could. As it happened, they were looking for a safe space to hold their 'LGBTea and Cake' welfare drop-ins, so they started to use my chaplaincy centre.

At first they were apprehensive, but gradually they realised I was genuinely on their side. When friends who were religious came out to them, they pointed them to me. The stories of the Christian young people were tragic: often they had thought about taking their own lives, and many felt that they had to give up their faith, as they were unable to get rid of being LGBT through prayer and counselling. I'm just an average pastor, but when faced with these 19 and 20 year olds, who felt they were riddled with the worst possible sin that life and faith contained so little hope, it was difficult to pass by on the other side.

The biggest thing they needed was simply to find they weren't alone. I looked around for something to link them into, but at the time there was nothing in the UK that was specifically for LGBT Christian young adults and would support them in both parts of their identity. So I set up a confidential Facebook group and added all the young people plus other LGBT Christians and allies.

The group quickly grew and we realised we had the potential to reach out to stop the cycle of self-hatred from starting in the first place. I felt it would be empowering for the young people, whether they were out or not, to get their voices heard, so we looked into how we could create platforms to enable this to happen. Some of the group were out and we invited six of them to tell their stories as part of a short YouTube film. It was one of the scariest things I've ever done. It was the first time it had been done from the conservative wing of the church in the UK and we didn't know what the consequences would be. However, the film went viral and had 2000 hits in the first four days. And the requests to join the closed group started flooding in.

I came up with the name Diverse Church to emphasise that we're not about LGBT supremacy, but about calling the whole wider church back to its call to be truly diverse, as a reflection of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who celebrate difference within the context of loving commitment. Instead of a strict mandate of action, we formed values that would infuse all the creative things we could do. Joy and celebration felt important along with community and solidarity. If you come out in most evangelical settings, the pastor or priest will usher you in to a back room, away from others and get out a box of tissues

for when you start crying. It's often well-meant, but we didn't see a reason to hide or to associate this with sadness or suffering in itself. A senior figure in the church said that she felt like we were turning a corner in the UK, where a group like ours didn't need to define itself as outside of the mainstream church. 'Please don't let them feel like they're exiles' she said. I realised a lot of people I knew, who were sympathetic to what I was doing, were in high office in the church and I started calling in favours.

Our first national meet-up included a welcome from St Paul's Cathedral in London. Two of their Canons hosted a meeting with about 40 of the young people, listening to their stories and showing they cared. Then they officially welcomed us at Evensong and had one of the young people in Diverse Church, who had been told that he was not allowed to speak in his church after he came out, to do the reading in the service. It was life changing for so many of them. They'd felt like lepers in their churches, but here, in the most famous church in the UK, they were welcomed with open arms.

This journey is changing me too. I grew up in a conservative church, but, though I've known I'm gay since my early teens, I've never felt like God didn't love me for it. At first I thought I just hadn't met 'Mr Right', then I assumed I'd be single - the maiden aunt who threw herself into her work. Then, in my late 20s I began looking into the theology for myself and came to the unexpected conclusion that the Bible isn't against faithful gay marriage after all. The gospel took on a new light and hope. The message that God really does love everyone made so much more sense without this seemingly arbitrary extra rule for one group of the population. In the meantime, I'd been promoted to quite a senior position in the church for my age. I'd been given a lot of opportunities to talk in the media and in organising general strategy within the wider church. I was advised to continue through life without sticking my neck out: 'let other people with less to lose fight the LGBT battles'.

But then I think God himself reached out to me. I was showing the film 'Les Miserables' in the chaplaincy, and there's a scene where the lead character realises another man will be charged for the crime he committed. He comes to the conclusion that God is calling him to be honest for the sake of the other — to stop him going to live a living hell. It hit me like a sledgehammer; a second conversion. I sat at the back of the dark chaplaincy unable to hold back the tears. I had to act. For the sake of the young people I'd met, I had to live openly and in trust that God, who had helped me so far, would help me as I helped others. And God has.

I've been amazed at how much God is using our little group. We seem to be at this point of history where a 19 year old, shaking as they tell their story of God's hope for their lives, is more powerful than the confident, booming, well-rehearsed arguments of bishops and theology professors. We see young people come back to life on a daily basis, and my faith feels more alive than ever. I wouldn't trade being part of this for anything.



I used to think I was evil for being what I am, but now I know that all people, including me, are saved by grace through faith.'

In this story, a Christian man in Western Africa discusses his views on faith and sexuality. He is not currently part of a church, but hopes one day to qualify as a minister.

I have been called gay and bisexual, but the truth is, I have no sexual orientation. Sometimes I feel it's better just to live my life and enjoy my sexuality without telling people what and why. I like men and I like women. I am also a Christian who believes in the Lord Jesus Christ.

I'm not currently part of a church, because I was rejected by my former church when they realised I work with LGBTIQ people and speak on the issues that affect our community. I saw one of the pastors from that church in a café recently and he treated me like I didn't exist. I tried to greet him and he ignored me. None of my old friends from that church have called me to ask how I am, and, when they see me in town, they treat me like an outcast. But I love God and He loves me back. That is my joy and it keeps me going. I don't really believe in human systems such as religions; they only separate people. I believe in spirituality, not religiosity. And I encourage all persons of whatever faith to know that God has His chosen people in every religion, not just one particular one.

Coming out has been a challenge for me. I quit my training to become a pastor, because I was afraid that I would be ridiculed once people found out about my sexual orientation. Because of this, I lost my chance of educational scholarships that were promised to me based on my role at my former church. My coming out has also caused my mother to face discrimination from the church, because they say if she had taken better care of me I wouldn't have become who I am.

I am not out to everyone, but I'm not hiding from anyone either. I just live my life and I don't feel like telling everyone about who I am. I am human and that is what's most important. I struggled with faith and sexuality earlier in life, but I have been able to reconcile both and now I live happily. But sometimes, when I think of the lost opportunities at church for me and my mother, I'm saddened for making her suffer because of me.

I don't believe in cure therapy. I believe in helping LGBTIQ youth to live positive lives and to embrace who they are, instead of self-stigmatising and not taking good care of themselves. There are LGBTIQ people on the streets selling sex and falling into crime because their options in life are so limited. I wish the Church would partner with us to create safe and enabling spaces for all young people, including them.

Discussing sexuality is a no-go conversation topic where I live, but I try to use my position in society to help people connect to both their sexuality and faith. I have counselled and prayed for friends who are married and have had problems in their relationships, and I've helped LGBTIQ people who have been disowned by their families.

Struggling with Christianity and sexual orientation is common in Africa. There's a myth that 'Africa has the most obedient and morally upright Christians', and 'People in the West have no morals'. I know lots of LGBTIQ Christians who love God and want to serve Him in their own way, but who struggle with the relationship between their faith and sexuality. I always tell them 'God loves you the way you are and does not need anything from you other than your heart'. I used to think I was evil for being what I am, but now I know that all people, including me, are saved by grace through faith.

I serve a God of love, who does not hate anyone but wants all to be saved. I believe God created everything and as the Bible says, 'Behold, they were good'. We are all created in God's image, and none of His creation is bad or sub-standard. And because of this, there is no space for hate, homophobia or transphobia among God's people. The one thing that keeps me going is knowing that God loves me no matter the circumstances.

I actually have a good relationship with some members of the Christian community. My non-LGBTIQ Christian friends sometimes invite me to their church to help with Sunday school and to share the story of my faith and spirituality with their members. But generally I now only visit churches through my work, because mostly I feel I'm not welcome there

I always tell people, 'I wouldn't have chosen to be in a minority if sexual orientation was a choice'. There's such a high level of stigma and discrimination, and there's death threats and actual physical attacks. And there's nothing to defend or improve our wellbeing and socio-economic situation. Being homosexual, bisexual or trans is for life and even though one can try to supress it, no-one can change it. But faith can change, according to the circumstances. For me, my faith is learned and practised, but my sexuality was already part of me.

I'll continue to fight to gain acceptance and respect. I hope I will survive the torture of living in an environment where no one accepts us. I hope one day I can finally go to Bible seminary and qualify as a minister. My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus Christ.



I realised that by transitioning I had come back from exile; from my body, from the Bible, from God.'

Father Shannon T.L. (Shay) Kearns is a priest in the Old Catholic Church, an independent social justice-focused group that ordains women and LGBTQ people. He started House of the Transfiguration, a church in Minneapolis, USA, and is co-founder of queertheology.com, a site for LGBTQ Christians.

For many Christians, I am too outspoken about my queer and transgender identity. For many queer and transgender people, I am too Christian. I have spent much of my life feeling like I don't fully fit anywhere.

I grew up in a rural fundamentalist evangelical church in Pennsylvania that did not ordain women and thought homosexuality was one of the worst sins. Even so, that church played a huge part in who I am today, and there are things about how it worships that I find lacking in liberal churches. It was there I felt my call to ministry. I was home-schooled, and church was my social life. I was there so often, they gave me my own keys! I wanted to be involved in everything, to speak up and be a leader. And they let me lead.

I went to a college affiliated with my church. Smoking, drinking, sex and dancing were prohibited. In my first year, I met a pair of women and for the first time felt I'd met someone like me. Two weeks later they were expelled for being lesbians and I got the message: I needed to shut up.

I began to doubt my faith; things weren't making the same sense they once did. I was trying to be someone I wasn't, but didn't understand who I was meant to be. I still felt called to ministry, but was criticised for my 'subjective view of scripture'. I was floundering and saw a therapist, but quit as soon as she brought up my gender presentation. I wrestled with God and wanted to ditch Christianity, thinking it was easier than trying to reconcile what I knew to be true about myself with what the Church held to be true. I desperately prayed God would fix me, make me normal, make me right. This back and forth with God would last for years.

Meeting some theatre kids at college saved my life — they let me be myself and didn't make fun of how I dressed. I wrote and directed two plays that drew on my issues with being an outsider. To see these played on my college stage was a huge deal for me. It was a way of taking my own mask off a little bit.

Everything changed when I interned at a United Methodist church in 2001. They profoundly affirmed my call to ministry, even though I was still perceived as female, and I began to see I could do the ministry I was called to do. I admitted to myself that I was gay (I still had no language for my gender discomfort), but was convinced I would have to be celibate my whole life.

After graduation, still celibate and not out, I became a youth pastor at an American Baptist church. The minister I worked with was amazing; he was the perfect role model and guide for me. That summer, one of our youth group kids came out. His family and our church accepted him, and I was amazed. I took him to gay youth groups and pride events. These kids were longing for someone religious to come alongside them and not hate them. I met gay Christians for the first

time, ministers who were accepting, and even gay ministers! It was so new to me. I abandoned my ideas of hell and embraced a God of love who maybe, just maybe wouldn't abandon me because I was gay. I also realised that sometimes you have to take an unpopular stand in church — a family left our church because I wouldn't teach their kids that homosexuality was wrong.

Three years later I met a woman and fell in love. It was a whirlwind and I became deeply depressed as I tried to be a closeted minister, a closeted child, and a partner. I ended up in hospital because of my anxiety and something had to give. My mom asked me if I was gay, and I came out to her. It was rough for a while, but she was pretty remarkable about it all. She welcomed my partner and included her in family functions.

I resigned from my church when they hired a new, homophobic minister. It was too dangerous for me to stay. Right before my final Sunday, I was outed by one of the youth, who had discovered my MySpace page. I was asked not to preach on my last day because it would set a 'bad example'. It was completely disheartening. My partner was with me and the grandparents of the young man who'd come out in my first summer there took me aside. They said my partner would sit with them, and that if anyone messed with her they would have to go through them. These were people who had been in the church for years and I realised then that I could be a gay minister.

A shift began to happen inside me. I took a year off, married my wife in Canada, and read every book about theology I could get my hands on. I started moving away from the emotional religious experience of my youth and steeped myself in education. I applied to seminary in New York and was accepted. I finally received the intellectual tools to understand my faith and was embraced as an out, queer person. I worked at a camp for queer Christian youth and it was amazing to tell them they were loved just as they were. And I was finally given space to deal with my gender discomfort.

I came out as trans the following year. The seminary was supportive, but didn't always know what to do with me. I had to deal with professors making transphobic statements, and classmates who, even after I had medically transitioned, still couldn't get my pronouns right. I had to be a walking explanation for what it meant to be trans. And because my faith had shifted from the emotional to the intellectual, I had nothing to fall back on. I had to find a way to engage my heart again without dismissing my head in the process.

Around that time we studied the story of Thomas in John's Gospel, and something changed within me. I realised that by transitioning I had come back from exile; from my body, from the Bible, from God. It was transformative for me. I graduated from seminary and my wife and I divorced. Following my transition we decided to part ways.

My faith keeps me queer and my queerness keeps me faithful. Both of these identities, at their best, are concerned with people on the margins and justice for all. Jesus cared about justice, overturning oppression and helping people be free. Followers of Jesus need to be about the same things. I'm learning to embrace my status as someone on the margins and I give thanks for the way this gift allows me to see things that other people are unable or unwilling to see.



It's important that people meet LGBTI people as human beings first and foremost.'

In this story, a South American Reverend and ally for equality gives her perspective. She works closely with the LGBTI community, and also leads an association which advocates for sexual health and family life services for all.

In my country in the 1960s and early 70s, being gay wasn't something people talked about much, either for or against. I had gay friends in high school and they were quite well integrated. No-one was really interested until the late 70s, and then violent opposition started to emerge. I was very conscious of this discrimination and I questioned it openly.

When I went abroad to go to university in the 1980s, it was even worse. The Dean of Studies from my campus was killed just for being suspected as gay or bisexual. We organised discussions and invited people from the LGBTI rights movement, and you know what happened? There was a big outburst and people turned up to cause violence. It was just atrocious, but it drew me in more closely and it became an area of work I had to get involved in.

I think LGBTI people have been singled out because it's about power, sex, how people see themselves, and people's perception of masculinity and femininity. When some people have a different lifestyle it causes an issue. This has to do with our whole colonial history, the missionaries and their interpretation of scripture. The colonial anti-gay laws controlled people and society, and we are still very slavish to them.

People who think gay people need to be cured have a lack of understanding. They think it's unnatural and so link it to being unhealthy, like an illness. I've worked with parents who have said that they would prefer to kill their gay child. They see them as - a word Christians love to use - an 'abomination'.

I lead an association that promotes and advocates for individuals and their families to have access to information and services to attain and maintain good sexual health and family life. A pastor on our board said all gay, lesbian and bisexual people should be sent to live on an island so they don't bring the wrath of God on the rest of us. The association sent out a strong statement in response and have met him and other pastors to discuss the principles of biblical interpretation. I mean, what did Jesus have to say about gay people? Nothing. It wasn't that important. There are many biblical laws, especially in the Old Testament; household rules and codes, but they have to be taken in context with people's understanding at a specific time and place. We all read with our own lenses and biases — it's who we are — but in terms of understanding the Bible, I don't think there's much to say that being LGBTI is against Christianity.

Some churches say it's acceptable to be gay as long as you abstain from sex. People are counselled into this, and for them to stay in the Church they have to suppress who they are and confine their lives. It's a slave mentality, adhering to faith from a place of fear. People are taught that being gay is sinful and they must turn away from it, but how can they? It's devastating and there is not enough open discussion in trying to understand people in terms of sexual diversity. We need progressive organisations and people who think differently to be leading the conversations on understanding LGBTI issues. Spiritual leaders have a great responsibility because we can really make a difference by embracing and protecting those who are cast aside and are bearing the brunt of so much pain. We can do a lot more.

People come with their own belief systems and what they understand as acceptable norms. As a reverend, in response to discrimination, I open up a discussion and I try to be patient with people. I do it in a light-hearted way; I meet people, have casual conversations, a coffee or something, or meet them in their homes. It takes perseverance to walk with people towards that kind of a change. You need to work with them to help them shift their own theological understanding. In trying to help others understand, we should avoid adversarial approaches and develop more critical, engaging processes – meeting people not only at the level of the head, but more so at the heart.

A few years ago, I organised a camp for youth from three churches and a network of young lesbian women. I brought them together just as young people; I didn't bring them in as representing any organisation or saying what their sexual orientation was, until the middle of the camp when people wanted to disclose this. And you know, it worked out well because when they first got there, they formed a group and just made friendships as human beings. So when they found out about each other's differences, it was easier to deal with. I mean, it wasn't automatically easy, but it was easier than if you meet someone and you're introduced as two people who are different. It's important that people meet LGBTI people as human beings first and foremost.

God created us all to live with dignity and be mutually accountable to each other; we all have this responsibility. John chapter 10 says: 'I have come so that you may all have life in full' – not some people, but all people.

We are all created equally, by God, in God's image, whatever our distinction or difference. That's the baseline — LGBTI people are also created in God's image and are given life to live in God's world. Working for the full inclusion of all people is our God-given responsibility.



In the Bible it is written that God is love, and I realised that if God created me and let me come to this world that means He loves me like He loves others.'

This is the story of a gay man in Eastern Europe, who is active in his church. He has not yet come out, but has come a long way in reconciling his faith and sexuality.

When my country became independent from Soviet rule in 1991, we had a rebirth of faith. The churches reopened and Christianity was back. I was a student at the time and didn't know anything about God, until one of my friends told me about a small Christian group that met a few times a week in a little place. They prayed, read the Bible, and talked about Christianity. I asked her to take me one day and she did.

After the meeting, I found a peace in me that was different to what I had experienced before, so I kept going. Two years later, the Apostolic Church offered training for Sunday school teachers, which I took up, and I worked as one for seven years. After graduating from university, I returned to my hometown and found a church in one of the villages. I started to attend and, in my early twenties, I was baptised, before doing two years of military service. After my service, I returned home.

One Sunday, the priest asked if I could help him with the service, because he knew I had been a Sunday school teacher. I was shocked and told him I was afraid to serve at the altar as a simple sinner who wasn't ordained, and I was afraid God would punish me. He reassured me and said he would teach me all I needed. So, I started to help him on Sundays, and I learned to do some of the duties of a deacon during the Liturgy.

But my involvement with my church wasn't always smooth; my relatives were worried I'd become a priest and not get married. It was very unusual for them, they didn't know who God is or what Christianity is. But I stayed strong in my faith and told them, 'You didn't have a believer in your family, but now you have and I am not going to leave my church'. Some years later, my relatives followed me, and my mother, sisters and nephews are now baptised too.

I was offered a place at a seminary but I refused. I'm active in my church and help with different activities, but I couldn't imagine being a gay priest. I have not yet come out. My family, most of my straight friends and my church don't know I'm gay. I don't know if I will ever be able to come out; I'm just too afraid to lose what I have gained all these years. I'm not sure I'd be allowed to participate in church services or whether my friends and family would still want to know me if they found out I'm gay. Many people in my country think that homosexuality is a sickness that has to be cured; that if you're gay you're a bad person and they want nothing to do with you. I can sacrifice myself, but not my mother. I don't want to cause her any problems.

When I realised I was gay, I already had my Christian faith and I had a battle in my brain. On the one hand I knew the view of the Church about homosexuality, and on the other hand I knew what my orientation was. I kept asking myself, 'Why me? Why can't I be the same as other people?' These questions stayed with me for years and I tried to find the answers. I searched the internet for articles about homosexuality and psychology and came to understand that I didn't become gay, I was born like that, but it didn't really help me to accept myself. I needed to understand more, because the two natures of me, the Christian and the homosexual, were struggling.

Luckily I found a gay Catholic priest in the USA to write to. He helped me see things from a different point of view and I came to understand Christianity is actually a very free and liberal religion. In the Bible it is written that God is love, and I realised that if God created me and let me come to this world that means He loves me like He loves others. I can say for sure that God is with me and will never leave me, He has saved my life. He lets us make mistakes and learn from our mistakes, but He always leads us. I know God loves me.

You start to accept yourself more as you get older. I can't say that my sexuality and faith are in harmony, but I try to be myself as a gay Christian. First of all I want people to see the human in me. The traditions here are strong, and attitudes can be very homophobic. As a gay person, I think differently from many of these traditions and I interpret scripture according to my own understanding — each person makes their own relationship with God. God examines our hearts and He knows who I am. I have a good relationship with God, but I know He wants me to be better. I hope He will help me to understand more and to get wiser.

I hope for a better time for all of us.



I was 17 when I came out to myself. It happened during a moment of prayer and, in a way, it was actually God who outed me.'

Stephen Lingwood has been a Unitarian Christian since his teenage years and became a Minister seven years ago. He ministers in Bolton, UK, is a chaplain at the town's university, and is former Chair of the Unitarian Ministry Strategy Group.

Growing up, I struggled with both my sexuality and with my faith in coming to terms with who I really was and what I believed. My dad is a vicar and I grew up in the Church of England, but I chose the Unitarian Church when I was a student. I also identify as bisexual. So my biggest question as a young man was what to come out as to my parents first — a bisexual or a Unitarian.

My sexuality and my faith are intertwined and that's where I start from as a LGBT Christian. Looking back at the journals I wrote growing up, they're two sides of the same coin for me. They always have been. As a teenager, I knew I was bisexual, but I repressed the attraction I felt towards men. I was 17 when I came out to myself. It happened during a moment of prayer and, in a way, it was actually God who outed me. I was on a pilgrimage to the Taizé Community in France, and one evening as I prayed I felt a real connection to God. Simultaneously, a good-looking man walked past and I had an attraction to him. Usually, I'd have repressed it, but in that moment I felt that God made me face up to it and I said to myself, 'OK, am I attracted to men? Yes. Am I attracted to women? Yes. So I'm bisexual and that's it'. It was a moment of huge relief and acceptance in the presence of God. It felt like God was showing me that I needed to learn about myself in order to grow and live the life that I was being called to - without knowing exactly what that meant at that time. I couldn't have moved forward with my vocation without confronting myself and receiving that healing.

During adolescence I questioned the Church of England faith that I had been raised in, which started a journey that led to where I am now. As I explored what spirituality meant to me, I was drawn to Quakerism, but I found my path in Unitarianism, partly because of their inclusive LGBT stance. I know there are churches and people within the Church of England that are LGBT-supportive, but ultimately I don't feel that the institution itself is, and some of their decisions led me to conclude that I couldn't be part of an organisation that wasn't LGBT-affirming throughout. As much as I respect those who stay and try to reform the Church from the inside, being part of a religious community that was wholly accepting was essential for me. I think I'd have moved to the Unitarian Church even if I wasn't bisexual.

As a religious leader, I've always been out. Before I was appointed, I wrote for Unitarian magazines and people knew I was bi. But about a year into my ministry, I needed to tell my congregation explicitly and so I preached about who I am and how I identify. It was a very

positive experience, and someone who hadn't even been at the service heard about it and gave me a big hug and said, 'If you need anything, let me know'. I don't talk about myself or LGBT issues every week, because there are other issues in life, but it was important they knew this about me. And I'm thankful that I've always received the unconditional acceptance that we try to give as a religious community.

When people in the LGBT community ask what I do for a living and I say I'm a minister, they're either shocked or think that I'm joking! But I'm happy to explain where the Unitarian Church stands. We're very much at the liberal side of Christianity. We don't have a creed that you have to sign up to to be with us. We encourage each person to find the spiritual language and practice that works for them. The most important thing is to love God and love your neighbour, and we don't make it any more complicated than that. When Jesus was confronted with a choice between real compassion for a human being in front of him or sticking to religious law, he always chose real compassion for the individual, and for us the law of compassion supersedes every other law. We are about oneness with God, with the world and with each other. And we are inclusive — we were the first denomination to have women ministers, over 100 years ago, and the first to officially welcome LGBT ministers in the 1970s.

To me, God is mysterious. I don't fully know who or what God is, and I say that to God all the time, but I remain in a relationship with God and I have moments of connection in daily life. I try to take notice when these connections happen and those times when I meet God, and I'll ask myself, 'Where have I met God today?' Those moments when it feels like God is listening can be rare but they are worth holding on to. I don't always understand the relationship, but it definitely gives me deeper purpose and joy, and leads me into interesting, exciting places and a more adventurous life. It's a relationship of love and it increases my capacity for love. So I work hard at it, I listen, and I keep returning to renew my connection with God in worship, prayer, meditation and noticing.

God does not ask us to be any less than we are, to leave any parts of ourselves at the door of the church, or to hide in the closet. God is a God of truth, who wants us to be fully alive and you can't be fully alive if you're denying or lying about part of yourself. So I'd say to anyone who thinks they might be LGBT, stay in a place of prayer and find people who have walked that path as LGBT Christians, who are able to listen and connect with people and connect with God. Don't be cautious about coming to faith. Let the truth come.



'A simple positive statement from religious leaders could make a huge difference to someone like me, who may believe God hates them because of what a few preachers said.'

This is the story of a lesbian woman who grew up in Eastern Africa. She has since gained asylum in the UK and helps other lesbian women, who are trying to do the same.

I grew up in a small African town and our home was a mixture of Christian and cultural beliefs. To a young person it could get confusing as to where one belief ended and another one began. But we were predominantly Christian.

It's illegal to be gay in the country in which I was born and raised, and there are harsh punishments. So I knew early on in coming to terms with my sexuality that who I am as a person was going to be a struggle in a church setting. Homophobic preaching was the norm, both in my local church and at my Catholic boarding school. And then there were the Evangelicals from the United Kingdom and America, who filled stadia to re-emphasise to thousands of people that being gay is the worst thing there ever was. It felt like a juggling act trying to reassure myself that God loved me no matter what and trying not to believe their preaching — that I was going to go to hell for just being me.

My partner and I were arrested and imprisoned because of our relationship. In the prison, gay people were treated worse than murderers. I finally succumbed to the preaching I'd received for so many years from church and school, and I came to believe that indeed God did hate me. And I must say, the feeling was mutual. I told myself that if He loved me, none of the things that were happening to me would be happening. Who loves someone and lets such things happen to them?

I wasn't on good terms with God for a long time. I couldn't understand why, if God talks through people to talk to us, the preachers and Evangelicals were spewing so much hate. I went through a phase of thinking 'What's the point?', because there wasn't anybody, among those who were supposed to be the voice of God, saying anything nice or good. I thought: 'Who can I look up to, to listen to God? If God wants me to hear something, surely He would send someone to give me His word, and if He is not doing that, then what's the point?'

There was and there remains so much hatred from people who are supposed to be Christians, who are supposed to preach the word of 'Love thy neighbour', but instead preach 'God hates you' and 'God hates this, God hates that'. I have struggled to see how they can reconcile the message of 'Don't judge others and let God do the judging' to them being the judge and jury. Their preachings would focus on one message from the Bible but ignore others. I found it so confusing and I thought: 'If they are choosing to ignore certain parts of scripture in favour of other parts, then what exactly am I supposed to believe?'

I've since learned not to listen to what the popular preachers, and those on television, say. I create my own relationship with God about what I believe and I focus on the good in people and how they act. For me, everyone reads the Bible in their own way. It's like a piece of art or a book; everybody will interpret it slightly differently than the next person. My interpretation is that we are supposed to love everybody, to not judge others and most definitely to not hate. So I choose to believe the good and I choose to be the good. I create my own relationship with God and His message and I relate to that, rather than to the human beings who preach it.

Eventually I was able to come to Britain to seek asylum. The journey was not the easiest or most straightforward, but on the way I met many people who didn't know me, but opened their arms and homes to me. They showed me that being a Christian goes far beyond just going to church and what you hear in church. It's how you conduct yourself as a person. And their behaviour is what I took on board more than the hate preaching I'd heard in the past. It's motivated me to try to live as a Christian example, and to be part of setting up an organisation to help other lesbian women, who have arrived in the country seeking asylum and probably feel like I felt back then: that everybody hates them.

Cliché as it may sound, I believe things happen for a reason and I'm now in a position to help other people that I would never have been able to help if I was still in Africa. I love making people feel like someone is in their corner, no matter what some others say. God has a purpose for me and I try to make a difference in my own way.

My hope is that we will see an increase in vocal, positive support for LGBT people from churches. While some churches might feel it's ok just to say nothing negative about gay people to their congregation, saying nothing at all is just as bad at a time when influential people like pastors, reverends and bishops are looked to for guidance. Many people struggle to reconcile their religion with their sexuality and go through life believing God hates them. They think their sexuality cannot co-exist with their faith. A simple positive statement from religious leaders could make a huge difference to someone like me, who may believe God hates them because of what a few preachers said.



I hope that LGBTQ Christians will show their love to those who hate us, because God's love can move the hearts of our opponents through our prayers.'

This is the story of gay pastor in Eastern Asia, who advocates for social justice. He founded an inclusive church, which now has three branches.

I found Jesus when I was 15. My family would scold me for going to church. This upset me and I'd walk silently to the bus-stop to go to church at weekends. But I found comfort and warmth as I got to know more of God, and discovered the peace and strength to worship Him. I even joined the choir despite not being a good singer!

At 16, I attended the International World Conference of Southern Baptist Churches. For three days, I had a feeling I can't describe; like a whisper to my ears, God was calling me. I felt really uneasy, and it wouldn't stop. On the fourth day, the pastor asked people to come to the stage to be blessed in Jesus' name and I stood up with tears running down my face. I felt like I'd been set free from my own prison and I stopped rejecting God's calling.

When I finished school and started thinking about work, that same Baptist pastor contacted me and said: 'Do you remember what happened a year ago?' He asked if I still wanted to be a pastor. I was worried it would be too difficult and that I wouldn't have enough money. But then one day, I was walking alone and a group of birds flew past. I thought of Matthew's Gospel: 'Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are ye not much better than they?' I went home and opened my Bible. The words 'Do not be afraid' kept striking me and I asked God: 'Do you really want me to be a pastor? My parents will say no.' But when I asked my parents, they said yes! I was overjoyed and worked as the pastor's assistant, until I was old enough to join the seminary.

During my training to become a Baptist pastor, I researched LGBTO issues and Christianity, but the texts were homophobic and I couldn't find anything to help me think positively about LGBTO people. Because of the teaching I'd received in church, I thought homosexuality was wrong anyway. I felt sinful and guilty, and started giving up on becoming a pastor. Then I heard about a minister from my country, who was part of an inclusive church in America. I knew I had to speak to him as my last chance to decide if I could be a pastor if I was gay. I was so confused and there was no-one else I could talk to. I needed advice from outside my church.

Meeting him was so affirming. He offered to help set up an LGBT Christian group when he returned home in a few years' time — but I couldn't wait, there were too many people struggling like me. With his support, I started a small fellowship group of my own. Our first gathering was at a fast-food restaurant. Following that, we met at my office after the pastors had gone home, and then at a member's house. Later, the American church helped us rent a place to meet, we were given contact numbers for other LGBTO Christians in my country, and we grew.

In 2008, my senior pastor asked me if I was gay. It was the second time he'd asked; the first was when I went to America. Back then, I told him I wasn't, but this time I admitted I was. He told me to resign from the Baptist Church immediately and ordered me to say it was due to 'personal reasons'.

He later found out about the LGBTQ Christian group. He frightened me and said if I didn't stop it he would tell my former congregation that I was gay. I refused to stop, and he actually did it. There were so many rumours about me, it was awful. But the LGBTQ group supported me, and having left the Baptist Church I started an LGBT-inclusive church. God had closed one door and opened another.

Establishing an inclusive church was tough. I had so much to learn about the diversity of love and different minority groups. I cannot fully understand everything, but I patiently listen to everyone's voices to improve my knowledge of our differences. Today we have three branches and I hope one day we'll have them all across the country. It was hard to raise money, as many funders don't support LGBTQ religious movements, and mainline churches have condemned me for ministering to LGBTQ Christians. I lived in danger that the churches and the authorities would have me arrested.

However, I put aside my fears and their criticisms. I would never give up doing this ministry, because there are still many LGBTQ Christians struggling in life. Churches and society condemn their faith and their true self. I've counselled people who want to give up on life and commit suicide. Their self-esteem weakens by the day and LGBTQ Christians from all over the country contact me for help. This is a difficult mission, but I hope other churches see our example and come to accept us.

I encourage my church members to support orphanages, older people, sex workers and single parents. I've seen how the LGBTQ Christian community is so full of love for our society and nation — whenever I'm involved in social justice activities, I see many LGBTQ Christians involved too. The Bible isn't the only source of faith and our experience is equally important. My experience is that God blesses us as much as He blesses straight people. God gives us choices, but He will never leave us, no matter what choice we make. God is always here with us, no matter where we are with Him.

I hope that LGBTQ Christians will show their love to those who hate us, because God's love can move the hearts of our opponents through our prayers. I am proud of what our inclusive church has become, and I thank God for the encouragements and blessings that have accompanied me on my journey. Every church has its problems, but these problems can strengthen and unite us. God will never give up on His precious children, whoever we are.



What I don't understand is that urge to condemn people to hell or a place of pain. It amazes me how many Christians do this.'

Reverend Rachel Mann is an Anglican parish priest, a Canon and Poet-in-Residence at Manchester Cathedral. She speaks and writes widely as an author, philosopher, journalist and theologian on the dynamics of LGBT issues and faith.

My given name was Nick. I was assigned male at birth and I grew up as a boy. In many respects I had a very ordinary upbringing, yet from a very early age I was extremely uncomfortable in my own body. From age four I felt I should have been a girl. My clothes, the way I was seen and the pronouns used to describe me just didn't make sense. I was too young to articulate it, but the sensation never went away as I grew up. It became worse in my teens as my body developed.

Running alongside that were all the teenage confusions that we all experience. In terms of my sexuality, I was mostly attracted to girls, and on the whole I appeared like a pretty ordinary young man – although many people have since said my behaviour was almost hyper-masculine; I always had to go further than any other guy, to prove how much of a man I was.

Our family home was pretty typical of 1970s Britain. We didn't go to church every Sunday, but we did for big festivals. As a child, I prayed every night for one thing: that I would wake up as a girl. It seems so pathetic now. As a teenager, I rejected God definitively because I thought, 'Either God doesn't exist or God is a sadist for making people like me.' I went off to university with this raging discomfort and reached a crisis point in my early 20s, because I knew if I didn't deal with it I was going to kill myself. By that time I had some pretty serious alcohol and drug issues, and was self-medicating just to cope. At 22 I finally came out as trans and began the process of transitioning.

At that time I didn't really believe in God, but nonetheless it was like God wouldn't let me go. And I felt there had to be something more to this world, that there was possibility. As a teenager, I'd been struck by the film 'The Last Temptation of Christ', in which Jesus says, 'God loves me. I know He loves me. I wish He'd stop.' I deeply related to that feeling of God almost putting His claws in me and not letting me go, but it wasn't until my mid-20s that I could even think about faith. Many people don't understand how we as LGBT people have to fight to find our own identity, and I had to work so hard to figure out 'What does it mean for me to see myself as a woman, and become a woman, and then what does that mean for me as a sexual being?'.

It wasn't until I was 26 that I had enough sense of who I was to offer myself to God, to this God who wouldn't let me go, who was always present. And it was one of the most terrifying experiences of my life to reach the point where I could not resist praying anymore. What I prayed was, 'God, if you are there then I am yours.' I was so scared, because what if God said to me, either in words or in a feeling: 'You're wrong, stop being a woman and find a way back to being the man you were born as' or 'You've got to be conventional in your sexuality as a

woman'? To my utter surprise, the God who encountered me – and God did encounter me – said: 'Actually, I love you, Rachel, in your deepest being and I accept you completely.' That itself was frightening in an unexpected way; I thought that I could never be accepted by God, and yet I was. Which led to the question: 'So what next?'

I returned to the Church of England of my upbringing. I needed others around me and I couldn't be a Christian alone. I was open about being trans and found quite an affirming home in an evangelical church. I think it helped that it was a young congregation and as a rock musician I could play in the band. They accepted me.

As my confidence as a woman grew, I started addressing my sexual identity. I was still attracted to women and my church wasn't pleased about that. Their view was, 'Rachel, yes you're a woman, but that means that you must conform to our very narrow idea about what being a woman means.'

I remember hearing a sermon that said gay people were sinful, and I simply couldn't reconcile that with my understanding of God. God wasn't going to say, 'I accept one bit of you,' God accepted the whole of my being and there was no sin in the fact I found other particular individuals attractive. So that led me to leave that church and explore a broader approach to theology.

I understand God as a force of energy and love; a personal, rather than impersonal God, who calls us into partnership, rather than us being kept as little children in the dark who get given nice things if we're obedient. It's about being called into what the Bible says is the 'full stature of Christ', and that as God's children we are grown-ups and called to take responsibility.

God is not a comfort blanket for me. That has to be true, otherwise I'm just using God for my own purpose. When we talk about the God of love, we sometimes turn that into a sentimental picture, don't we? Jesus told us, 'God doesn't promise everything's going to be OK, only that He will be with us in all things'. God for me is much scarier than we sometimes make Him. He makes demands on us and expects us to stand up for the hard things, for the persecuted and the lonely, and that's a difficult path in a world that wants comfort.

What I don't understand is that urge to condemn people to hell or a place of pain. It amazes me how many Christians do this; to me it's the opposite of what Jesus was about. In Christ there is no condemnation. It's noone's job to be going round judging people. Our job is to love people.

In my hardest times, the God I've experienced is one who is there with me in the dark, sharing my suffering. Not a 'nice' God or a 'safe' God, but sometimes a God who's in even more pain than I am and who's holding and sharing my pain.

Looking back, if I'd repressed my gender dysphoria it would've led to a life of doubt and self-loathing, and it would've been impossible for me to accept myself. Only in coming face-to-face with this fissure in myself could I truly encounter God.



People think that all churches are the same. It's difficult to convince them that they aren't and that there are pastors who understand Christ's call for everyone to be accepted.'

This story is from a Christian woman in South America, who has a gay son and attends a support group for other parents of LGBT children.

One night in 2012, I was having a heart-to-heart talk with my son, and he suddenly asked me: 'What would you think if I told you I liked boys?'

It didn't actually surprise me, I'd already sensed it was true. It simply confirmed what I knew, and he was glad I didn't make a big deal out of it. He was 18, and said that, if he'd known I'd understand, he'd have told me a long time ago. What I did feel, though, was concern, and I started thinking: 'So what now? Where do I go from here? Where can I find out more about this? Is there anyone who can really help me understand what homosexuality is all about?'

I became part of a support group that works alongside mothers who learn that one of their children is gay, lesbian, bisexual or trans. We meet once a month at the house of the mother of a gay man. We sit in a circle, we welcome people attending for the first time and we explain that this is a place for listening, for being heard and for learning. Some of us give our experiences about how we came to terms with the fact that we have a son or daughter who is gay, lesbian, bi or trans. Mothers attending the meeting for the very first time can share their experiences with us if they want to. It's also a space for members of the LGBT community to learn how to explain their sexual orientation to their parents. That's basically what we do.

I was taught that 'God loves the sinner but hates the sin', and that it was better to steer well clear of LGBT people, so I never imagined I would find myself working alongside them. However, I found it quite easy to accept that my son was gay, as did my second husband and younger son. I sought advice from a priest, a pastor, a psychotherapist and a cousin, who's a lesbian, and they all helped me. We've always had a good mother-son relationship, and now I know he's gay we are even closer. I cherish the fact that he felt able to confide in me, and I'm now more open to telling him about things that happened to me when I was a teenager and about my own emotional life. I've always been a warm, affectionate, loving mother, and that's never going to change. As a family, we've talked about what action we could take to support him, such as accepting his friends, taking an interest in his life, going on marches and attending meetings promoting LGBT rights.

But it's been very difficult for his father (my first husband), who thinks being gay is a mental illness requiring treatment and cure. He refuses to accept that his son is gay and is in denial. He even goes as far as threatening not to pay for his son's university education.

My husband and I are members of the family ministry in our parish. I found the idea of telling the pastor about my son quite daunting, as I was worried he might tell me that I had to leave the parish. When I eventually did tell him, he put the following questions to me: 'How does he behave at home? What's he like as a brother, a son, a grandson and a student?' When I answered, he said: 'You're his mother. You need to carry on loving and supporting him.' He said my son could come and talk to him anytime he liked, but added that it was unnecessary for me to mention it to anyone in the family ministry, which saddened me, as I wanted to share it with my brothers and sisters in faith.

After a year had gone by, I finally told two close friends of mine in the ministry, as one of them was poking fun at gay people. I assumed they would understand, but they kept their distance. If the people who knew me reacted in that way, I wondered what sort of reception I could expect from the rest of my brothers and sisters? But my faith has never wavered, and my relationship with God remains strong.

At our support group, people talk about how their churches have rejected them and, as a result, they generalise and think that all churches are the same. It's difficult to convince them that they aren't all the same and that there are pastors who understand Christ's call for everyone to be accepted.

I've been able to help other families by listening to them, sharing my experiences, and providing the information they need. There's an opportunity to help families in these situations. Some parents with gay children may initially feel ashamed, and mothers and fathers of trans children may find it difficult to comprehend that they have a daughter instead of a son, or vice versa. In the end, we appeal to them to consider that if we, their parents, don't give them love and acceptance, where will they get it from?

A number of things give me cause for hope. Societies are becoming more advanced and better informed, progressing from ignorance to knowledge, to tolerance, and eventually to acceptance, respect and, finally, recognition. Those high-profile members of the LGBT community who are active in the fields of politics, society, art, academia and sport are helping this happen. More and more pastors and religious leaders are spreading a message of acceptance, including Pope Francis himself, who said: 'Who am I to judge?'

The power of prayer, the work of the Holy Spirit and the support of organisations, such as the one I belong to, can change hearts. When people say that being a member of the LGBT community is incompatible with being a Christian, I tell them that Christianity is founded on love, whereas homophobia, lesbophobia, biphobia and transphobia are founded on hate. It's love and hate that are incompatible.



For the churches we are "too gay" and for the gays we are "too churchy". Acceptance from both religious and LGBTI communities needs to work both ways."

Reverend Judith Kotzé became one of the first Dutch Reformed Church female ministers in South Africa, aged 26. She is Director of Inclusive and Affirming Ministries, South Africa.

I'm one of identical twins. As early as six years old, I experienced being called to serve. Over the last couple of hundred years, we've always had ministers in the family. As we finished school, my twin also felt the calling.

Growing up, I didn't know I was a lesbian. It was enough for me to be focused on my journey with the calling, because back then there were no women ministers in the Dutch Reformed Church. During my university years, the attraction did surface, but I didn't know what to do with it. It scared me, because I thought if I was gay, I couldn't live my calling. I prayed daily that God would give me the gift of celibacy.

I qualified as a minister in 1995. The Church had opened the door to female clergy, but few congregations were calling us to serve, so I joined a specialist ministry instead — many of us did. Around that time I also became involved with Inclusive and Affirming Ministries (IAM) and began to meet people that had integrated their sexuality with their spirituality.

In 1998, my twin sister started a relationship with a woman and came out to our family. It was hugely challenging for our parents, and seeing their reaction, I thought I could never come out myself. It was so traumatic that my sister and I agreed that the best way forward was to just keep quiet about it.

But a year later, I fell in love. Even at 30 years old, I was so naïve and overwhelmed by my, formerly celibate, sexuality being awakened. And I thought that, if you had sex with somebody, it meant you would marry that person, so I thought, 'Ok, I'm now committed to you for life'. Within three months it blew up totally. But I felt I'd received the answer that my path didn't have to be one of celibacy, and, as I became more involved with IAM, I became better at integrating my sexuality and spirituality. I started to make peace with how my calling was affirmed.

I met the woman who is now my partner in 2000 and we married in 2007, shortly after South Africa's Civil Union Bill was passed. Up to a month beforehand, I didn't know if my parents would come. But in the end they did, and it was a milestone not just for me but for them. We'd turned the corner, but it took years. In 2011 my mother died and it was such a relief that we hadn't given up on the journey, because by the time she passed we were through on the other side. That's the reality of how long this journey can be, even with the people who've known you your whole life. It took ten years, but we came through. And I'm very grateful to have a life partner.

At IAM we take so-called anti-gay texts and look at them from both the literal and the contextual interpretation. Sexual orientation isn't something the Bible witnessed on; it wasn't part of the context.

But by witnessing today we can translate it in line with what is inspired by God – and that is to not hurt each other, be faithful, take responsibility, treat your body and sexuality as a gift from God, and honour God through that. We were not made to be alone.

I've seen people forced into splitting themselves when they've been told they can be Christian or gay, but not both. If people stay in the closet, it breeds internalised homophobia which is very damaging. Some people go the other way; I've seen LGBTI Christians come out of the sexuality closet, but go into the faith closet, denying that part of them because they see religion and institutions of faith as the enemy. We can get caught between: for the churches we are 'too gay' and for the gays we are 'too churchy'. Acceptance from both religious and LGBTI communities needs to work both ways.

I've learned to be careful when journeying with faith communities, because when you mention same-sex issues, people rally against it. It ignites so easily. I know what it is to try and work with people that don't understand, and I've been hurt when people have prayed for me to be 'healed', or 'in God's name' rejected IAM's ministry and me. You're up against the tradition of thousands of years.

I've found it's better to talk about equality, and our experience of inequality. This journey is one slow step at a time. Worldwide, I'm really concerned about where we're at, because rights-wise we are losing ground. Not only LGBTI people will suffer — wider human rights are being eroded. Fundamentalist Christians have connected from America to Africa and their alliances are working against us. So we're forming alliances to counteract this and find common ground on shared family values.

Without role models to give me strength on my journey, I wouldn't have survived. Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Thabo Makgoba, the current Archbishop of Cape Town, give me hope. When Makgoba spoke against the anti-gay laws in Nigeria and Uganda, you had a heterosexual senior Christian saying: as an ally, I stand with you. He's an example for others.

Finding common ground is important. We stood together against HIV and made it safe to start discussing sexuality. Then, in a sensitive way, we shared the experiences of LGBTI people. You have a starting point and many can join you on that point. Even if we differ on how we interpret God and the Bible, it offers the opportunity to stand together.

I'm more compassionate now because I've had to learn how to be compassionate with myself, to forgive myself for all those anxieties and fears, and for what I did to myself by being so scared. I've learned that I can make opponents understand and be willing to engage. I've learned not to be so overly sensitive that I can't even enter the presence of homophobes. As a minister, I conduct same-sex marriages and every time I'm in that privileged position of solemnising a partnership, it's a rite of passage not only for the couple but for their whole family.



It is un-biblical and un-Christian for people to close the door of fellowship against anyone on the basis of their sexual orientation or gender identity.'

This story is from the founder and senior pastor of an inclusive church in Eastern Africa. He also educates the wider community on accepting LGBTI people.

We are a small congregation of about 50 people and some of our members are lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans or intersex (LGBTI). It's a church with open doors, open minds and open hearts. We don't discriminate against anyone on the basis of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Our church's mission is to reach out to people through counselling and teaching acceptance, just as Christ did. We aim to reach out to the whole world, without discrimination.

When I was at high school and university, I saw LGBTI people who were being persecuted, and they were really suffering. Some of them were friends of mine. When I started teaching and working as a counsellor I came across more and more cases of discrimination against LGBTI people. I found out that some of them had even tried to commit suicide. So, when I started ministry and preaching, I knew these were people I needed to work with.

At theological school, I didn't learn very much about how to help LGBTI people because the curriculum was very homophobic, so I started developing my own point of view and I met with people who had experience of working in programmes for LGBTI people. Then I felt a calling — God spoke to me that I need to serve these people with a message of love, to counteract the message of criticism that they were receiving from other people. So I founded the ministry, starting from my house.

It's a fact that LGBTI people exist in every society and every culture. It is un-biblical and un-Christian for people to close the door of fellowship against anyone on the basis of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Fellowship should allow everyone communion with God, to worship God as they are, no matter who they are. The Bible is very clear that we should not judge others, and we know that Jesus would not discriminate Himself; Jesus came for all people. I've seen first-hand that excluding LGBTI people from Christianity causes them to hate the Church; it kills them spiritually and distances them from our God of love. These people need our support, inclusion and spiritual counselling. We should follow the example of Christ by reaching out to the marginalised, to the people that other people don't want to look at or hear about. And so the door of our church is open to all.

Being LGBTI does not affect your relationship with God, but reconciling faith and sexuality in society has not been easy, especially in Africa. I have seen both spiritual and physical violence. Homophobia in Africa goes back to when the missionaries came, and their interpretation of the Bible. But if you look at the Bible and go back to its early translation, you can see that even the word homosexuality is a new

invention. The Bible doesn't discuss sexual orientation. People talk about the acts of the towns of Sodom and Gomorrah in the book of Genesis, but they never talk about two people loving each other in terms of a same-sex relationship. People take the issue of sexuality and make it a bigger thing.

We've done some research and analysis, looking at what the Bible says (and doesn't say) about homosexuality, including those passages that people refer to when they try to say 'it's a sin to be gay'. We've also created some resources on LGBTI issues and faith. Our aim is to educate people and remove the ignorance around issues of sexual orientation, so it's not seen as a sin or some kind of demon that causes someone to be gay.

I have worked with families across the country to help prevent them from pushing an LGBTI son or daughter out of the family. We often start with the mothers, one-on-one, talking through issues of faith, sexuality and the nature of sexual orientation, and we give them some literature. We have counselled parents, friends, cousins and brothers too, to create understanding, reduce ignorance and educate them on the matter. And we've helped some LGBTI people to accept the way they are.

We go further and we talk to churches as well — because they are families too. We've helped religious figures to learn things they didn't know about LGBTI people. All this has helped to tone down some of the hatred, the discrimination and the isolation of LGBTI people within church and family settings in our community.

Many do not agree with us and say we are misleading people, but we have managed to have a dialogue with some people who are more open to try to understand that sexuality and faith co-exist. It has not been easy, but this has not stopped us from going forward and doing the work that God has called me and our ministry to do.

There are still some people who have a different opinion, who don't accept some individuals, and that is going to go on for a while. The future is still not clear, but the percentage of people who accept LGBTI people is going to increase slowly, through educational awareness, through reading, through exposure — and maybe through our work. Through our counselling and interactions, we are living ministries and we continue going on, trying to teach people about the love of our Lord Jesus Christ. Whether one is LGBTI or not, all of us are children of God.



People ask me how I deal with my faith and my sexual orientation. Personally, it has never been a conflict for me.'

André Musskopf is a Brazilian theologian.
A lifelong Lutheran, he writes widely on the dynamics of sexual orientation, gender identity and faith. He is a Theology Professor at the Lutheran Theology School in São Leopoldo, Brazil, and is part of the Global Interfaith Network.

I chose to study theology, because I felt the commitment and calling to be a pastor. When I finished my studies, I went through the process to become ordained, but in the end it didn't work out. I was never really told why I wasn't going to become ordained, just that it wasn't going to happen. I couldn't understand what was happening. There is no document, there was no decision, there isn't anything that says why I was denied ordination. I wasn't openly gay at the time, but everybody kind of knew; my first book on Gay Theology was about to be published. It was a long and painful period that went on for months, because the institution worked on the idea that, if they kept ignoring me, at some point I would go away.

I was very lonely and had to find another job, because I had been ready to go to a parish and suddenly I wasn't going anymore. My whole future changed. Emotionally, I couldn't understand why I was being punished, and for what. It was just very, very painful. I even considered committing suicide.

I got a job, took some time off, and then decided to take a master's degree. I wrote a thesis on the ordination of gay people, which became my second book. It was my way of dealing with the experience and explaining the problem to myself, to the Church and to other people.

As a Latin American liberation theologian, I explore ways of reading the Bible in context. The question for me is not just what the Bible says about homosexuality, but how do we find meaning about our LGBT experiences when reading the Bible. If I compare those texts that supposedly condemn homosexuality against my own experience, I question not just the text but the way it is read and has been interpreted along history. It doesn't refer to our experience as LGBT people nowadays; it refers to a completely different context.

Just to take one example — people like to think that Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed because of homosexuality, but I don't see the experience of gay men as getting together in gangs and going around abusing or violating other men, which is what happens in the narrative if you want to understand it from the perspective of men having sex with other men. That's not what we do; it's not what we understand as homosexuality. So, we deal with those texts and we also try to find meaning in other texts, for example how the narrative

of David and Jonathan, the story of two men who loved each other, can help us as LGBT people live our lives and our faith in the best way we can. The real question is how we can read the Bible seriously, honestly and in relation to our life experiences; our needs, desires and hopes. Not just for ourselves, but for all humanity.

People ask me how I deal with my faith and my sexual orientation. Personally, it has never been a conflict for me. The problem was not my faith and sexuality and how they relate to each other; the problem came when I was confronted with institutions, particularly the Church, because then the way I understood my sexuality and faith was put in question. Sometimes it's been a lonely journey to try and survive in those institutions. Debates on faith, sexual orientation and gender identity often assume there's something that needs to be reconciled, that these parts of our lives are separate. I feel we don't need to reconcile our faith and our sexuality, but rather, as LGBT Christians, we need to heal, because people have hurt us.

I think religion could play a really important part in overcoming homophobia, biphobia, transphobia and the human rights violations of LGBT people — it could transform the situation for LGBT people in different parts of the world. We need to shift the way we talk about sexual and gender diversity in relation to faith. I see no theological argument to state that a sexual relationship between two men or between two women, or between a trans person and another person, is in itself sinful, as long as those practices do not dehumanise or diminish the people involved. Homophobia, biphobia and transphobia, on the other hand, do dehumanise people and it is against the will of God to make other people suffer because of the way they understand themselves as human beings.

Recently in Brazil, some gay people were assassinated. It's important that people speak out and condemn acts like this. There are lots of allies that understand discrimination towards us is not an issue just for LGBT people, but an issue for all humanity. It's all about how we relate to one another and how we are going to live together. The role of allies is fundamental, because they broaden the movement for equality and acceptance, and broaden our partners for dialogue.

What I hope for, and what I work for, is a time where we respect, love and care for each other. There is still a long way to go and I hope right now that this movement in civil society, in government, and in academic studies grows stronger and deeper, so that we can get through the struggles we have before us.

stonewall resources

Engaging the UK Government: A Guide for LGBT Activists Worldwide

This guide helps LGBT people and their allies to access support from the UK Government overseas. Engaging the UK Government: A Guide for LGBT Activists Worldwide is available to download in English, French and Spanish. http://www.stonewall.org.uk/our-work/international/international-resources

Working with Faith Communities

A UK guide for faith schools and schools with large faith communities, which provides practical tips and examples of tackling homophobic bullying in a religious context.

http://www.stonewall.org.uk/sites/default/files/working_with_faith_communities.pdf

Love thy Neighbour

Research about the attitudes of people of faith in the UK to homosexuality (conducted in 2008). http://www.stonewall.org.uk/sites/default/files/Love_Thy_Neighbour__2008_.pdf

Religion and Sexual Orientiation: How to Manage Relations in the Workplace

Guidance for equality and diversity managers on managing issues between people of faith and lesbian, gay and bisexual people.

http://www.stonewall.org.uk/sites/default/files/religion_and_sexual_orientation.pdf

other useful links

More information about the work of Stonewall International http://www.stonewall.org.uk/our-work/international-work-1

ILGA – the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association is the world federation of national and local organisations dedicated to achieving equal rights for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and intersex (LGBTI) people.

http://ilga.org

Inclusive and Affirming Ministries (IAM) has a vision of faith communities in Africa that are welcoming and affirming; where Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex (LGBTI) people can participate fully and be strengthened in their spiritual, psychological and sexual identity as human beings.

http://www.iam.org.za/about-iam/mission/

The European Forum of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Christian Groups is an ecumenical association of LGBT Christian Groups in Europe.

http://www.euroforumlgbtchristians.eu/index.php/en/

Metropolitan Community Churches is an inclusive denomination with a network of 172 affiliated churches worldwide. Their website contains a comprehensive (but not exhaustive) database of contact details for inclusive churches in every region of the world.

http://mccchurch.org/overview/ourchurches/find-a-church/

But I know God listens to me wherever I am and wherever He is. If He didn't love me or didn't like my sexuality, I wouldn't have been created.'

When folk hate or reject LGBT people, it affects the person who is doing the hating.'

'A simple positive statement from religious leaders could make a huge difference to someone like me, who may believe God hates them because of what a few preachers said.'

I was 17 when I came out to myself. It happened during a moment of prayer and, in a way, it was actually God who outed me.'

It is un-biblical and un-Christian for people to close the door of fellowship against anyone on the basis of their sexual orientation or gender identity.'

CHRISTIAN ROLE MODELS FOR LGBT EQUALITY

Interviews by Richard Cooper Produced by Richard Cooper & Kit Dorey Edited by Jasmine O'Connor & Rachel Cohen Designed by Alex Long

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christian role models FOR LGBT EQUALITY

