

## Testimony of an Elder

I met my partner 7 years ago which was a turning point in my life. I'd been struggling with my sexuality for many years, had been very depressed about life and then met my partner and finally accepted that I had to deal with my sexuality and live my life.

The Bible says that the women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones: well, men never came naturally to me – being with my partner was the most natural thing in the world – like coming home and discovering myself. We have lots of straight friends who are very envious of our relationship as it is easy and uncomplicated and we are the best of friends above all else. We have loads in common, including a passion for working with people, a love of travel and commitment to God. There are none of the gender complications and differences of mixed gender couples.

Have I always known I was gay? Looking back the signs were all there. I was always a tomboy who liked playing with toy cars, getting into fights and going fishing, even though my dad hated taking me because I was a girl! My preferred idols were all women. Although I had posters of male movie stars and singers I also had as many of women and I was very drawn to Martina Navratilova from an early age! I always knew that I did not get the whole boy / girl relationship thing and avoided it like the plague for the most part. However, growing up in the Highlands I can't say I was exposed to any kind of alternative lifestyles until I was an adult so would have had difficulty in identifying with the idea of being gay. When it did dawn on me I took a very long time to reconcile it with my faith – partly because it had always been such an important part of my life and I struggled to get my head round it all and partly because I really did not want it to be so! I wanted to get married and make babies and be a stay-at-home mum like my own mother. That was the only real ambition I ever had. In other words I had a deep desire to be normal, to have my dad walk me down the aisle and be proud of me. It was just the guy bit I struggled with!

Accepting your sexuality as a Christian is hugely painful and is definitely not a choice that any sane person could make. If you get past the concept that it's a choice then where does that leave you? Either with the idea that a God of love would condemn something he has created – "You knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you Lord for I am fearfully and wonderfully made" (Psalm 139) – or with the idea that I am maybe some kind of mistake. Is it a disability or an illness or a hormone imbalance or a genetic condition? I definitely don't know. I just know it is neither my fault nor my choice. I would not have chosen it. I would not have chosen to make my life difficult, to distress my family and to lose my chance to be a mother for a whim or a desire to be different. I am in fact very conventional – I want an easy life. It just didn't happen that way.

Coming out as a Christian was incredibly hard as I dreaded what people would think. In all the other areas of my life it was not a problem – people in the secular world just don't see that there is an issue. The kids I worked with were curious and slightly fascinated. My family also accepted it without difficulty once they got over the initial shock and they love my partner as one of their own.

It took me a long time to summon up the courage to tell Christian friends - but they are my friends and at the end of the day they love me for who I am and have accepted us. It still hurts to know how much some of them struggle with their own thoughts on the issue and I dread that phrase "love the sinner and hate the sin". If I was born gay, as I believe, then I would be in essence the sin itself, not the sinner!

The church is the one place in life where I feel that you should be able to be completely accepted as you are and yet it the place where you have to be so guarded. Before I came out I immediately identified with other Christians at a deep level. I worked abroad in three different countries for churches or church organisations and so that tie was very important to me. However, as a gay Christian there is a whole new level of caution when I meet Christians - you have to do some wary investigation of their background – liberal or traditional, accepting or condemning? Do I dare tell them anything about my personal life or just keep it detached and impersonal. At the moment it is incredibly painful to read the comments in letters and blogs and to see names of people I know and care who are anti-gay.

Within my own church, for a long time I avoided being in any way public about my relationship and was never entirely sure who knew and who didn't, despite the fact that my partner came to church with me from very early on. The turning point was our Civil Partnership Blessing. We had initially kept it pretty quiet – not wanting to cause any fuss. However, it gradually leaked out and more and more people came to tell us they had heard the news and were delighted for us. In the end we had over 90 people, including many members of the congregation, with us to celebrate. It was a profound moment of acceptance for us despite the fact that the civil partnerships issue was just about to be debated at The General Assembly. Having our partnership blessed in Church was hugely important to me at every level. As a public statement of faith to God and commitment to each other, as a stance against those who said it was wrong and also as a symbol of acceptance by our community and those we love. Our minister's words at our ceremony touched everyone there, whether or not they were believers, and meant the world to us.

Being ordained as an elder has further confirmed my sense of belonging and acceptance within my congregation and is hugely important to me. I feel supported, protected and secure within my own church but am hugely aware that that is not the case for many other people within our denomination. It seems so sad that many people feel the need to be protected from other Christians. Most gay people have always accepted that there is no place for them in the church and long ago turned their backs on it, viewing it as a source of rejection and pain. What a tragic indictment of the Christian church! My partner was amazed initially to find I went to church and to find a church where we could be accepted. Affirmation Scotland extended that sense of belonging for her so that she is now a member and regular attender with a deep faith of her own. She believes passionately in God's love and is distraught at the current debate. For her, and no doubt for many others, a move from the Church of Scotland towards excluding gay and lesbian people from the ministry would effectively be a statement that none of us are welcome within the church, leading them to a decision to abandon a church which has abandoned them. And what would Jesus say about that?



## Testimony of a Church of Scotland Minister (1)

I know there are people within the church who believe I am making a wrong choice in my life. I, of course, don't think I am making a *choice*. I am merely being the person God created me to be. But in spite of knowing and believing with all my heart that God loves me still my heart races and my pulse quickens when the issue of homosexuality and the church comes up for discussion.

Why should that be? Because the condemnation of others *and I don't choose that word lightly* sometimes – for a moment - outweighs the love of God.

I have no intention, in this testimony, of going into deep theological argument about Scripture and how it is regarded and interpreted; these discussion run the danger of polarising the church even further. These topics are found elsewhere and people have their own strongly held views. Simply consider my experience of being a gay Church of Scotland minister.

First, you might be interested to know that I had not recognised my sexuality before being called to the ministry. That side of my self was quite dormant and unexplored until a number of years *after* my ordination when I realised that I was gay. On recognition and acceptance of my sexuality it felt like another part of the jigsaw that makes up my life had been put in place.

So, what is it like to be a gay person serving as a minister in the church?

**The church has made me into someone I am not.**

**The church has made me into someone I have no wish to be.**

**The church has caused me, a person struggling to be honest, to be a person who feels that I need to be less than honest about one of the most important aspects of my life.**

I have come out to myself, to my family and friends and a wide circle of people but day and daily I have to stuff myself back in to the closet when it comes to the church.

You see, I am not looking to be *tolerated* like a bad smell or a nagging tooth ache. But rather I am looking to be *accepted* as I am - the child of God I was created to be.

So again how does it feel to be a gay person working in the church?

It is a range of feelings:

*Accepted* by those who know me as me and not a label.

*Valued* by colleagues for the calling God had placed on my life to serve in the church.

*Tolerated* by some who wish I would remain invisible.

*Condemned* by others - who do not know me at all but hold a certain view which they see as the only interpretation of Scripture.

Above all it feels *intolerable* to be forever hiding who I am.

My sexuality is part of me - as integral as my eye colour and my blood group. I know for some Christians this is not how they view the issue of sexuality and I try to be gracious to their right to hold whatever view they believe. I only ask that they too honour my right to hold my beliefs.

For their view of Scripture is not more valid than mine.

My God is not more accepting than theirs.

For in the last analysis I believe we worship and serve the same God.



## **Testimony – the Mother of a Lesbian**

### **(A Roman Catholic Perspective)**

I am the mother of a daughter who is a lesbian. I am also a practising Catholic with a commitment to daily Mass. There is a perception today that the two journeys cannot move along together which is why I mention it.

I first knew of Frances' sexual orientation when I received a telephone call from her. She was seventeen and the conversation took place at one o'clock in the morning. As I sat on the bottom stair in the hall my first thought was a prayer to God that I did not 'put my foot in it'. The only response that I could give was that I loved her just as she was. From that moment my journey was one of learning what it meant for her to be gay, what my daughter's journey was, who her friends were and what they wanted out of life. I also had to look at my own reactions and my faith journey and understand how they could be reconciled.

The initial response was one of concern because this was part of my daughter's life which I had never known before and of which I had no real understanding. There were the negative reactions of people around me, including fellow Catholics. One response was, "How dreadful. I am so sorry this has happened to you." My internal reply was, "Why are you so sorry. My daughter is beautiful, intelligent and gifted and a good person as well." Another person said to me, "Perhaps you can persuade her to get psychotherapy and she can be cured." In conversations with LGBT people I have been told this is the most frustrating and damaging thing to be told. My husband's response was to say that Frances was his daughter and he loved her just as she was.

Initially there was a sense of fear that I would face exclusion and punishment for supporting Frances and her friends. One of the most beneficial but also difficult things about the Catholic Church is that its teaching is very upfront and explicit. There is no way anyone can fail to understand what is being said! This is difficult for a gay person because they need to discover who they are and can only do that through discussion and acceptance. In a book written by a lesbian nun in America I read this, which made me aware of what I was asking the Church to do to help me:

*"Attempting to discern God's will demands honesty and humility and is best done in the context of community.....I feel like a lone voice in the wilderness but I am also aware that we must initiate conversation around this topic if we are ever to move out of the harmful silence that holds all of us captive."*

Bearing in mind that the Church's teaching was very definitely against homosexual relationships I feared for Frances' salvation and her future happiness. But more powerful than that was the fact that I love her and her friends.

I knew that the most important thing I had to do was to disentangle myself from the surrounding judgemental attitudes within and without the Catholic church and get to know my daughter and her friends deeply and to accept without judgement who they were, believing that as God had created them they were full of potential goodness. I was made aware of the importance of valuing my daughter as a gift from God while reading the Catechism of the Catholic Church's teaching on the Ten Commandments:

*"A child is not something owed to one, but is a gift. The supreme gift of marriage is a human person. A child may not be considered a piece of property, an idea to which an alleged 'right to a child' would lead. In this area only the child possesses genuine rights: the right to be the fruit of the specific act of the conjugal love of his/her parents, and the right to be respected as a person from the moment of his/her conception."*

I would take this further and say that if the child leads a life which is not accepted by the church as a good choice, the right to be listened to and treated with love and respect is one which benefits the child and the Christian community to which he/she belongs. Change and understanding does not happen through ignoring a situation or forcing an ideal on a community without understanding.

Another quote from Sister Janet takes this idea further:

*“Until we are able to put into words what troubles our hearts, biases our thinking and inhibits our action, we will not be able to move beyond these barriers. ... We need to see these issues in the light of the Gospel”.*<sup>iii</sup>

Some of the most profound understanding came through sharing Scripture, prayer and faith-sharing with LGBT groups. The sharing of faith journeys enabled me to grow and understand myself and my concept of God. People whose lifestyle was condemned by the Church were teaching me to really look at my relationship with God and enable me to open myself to spiritual growth. There was a freedom in being myself and allowing myself to love as I believed God wanted me to love, not only others but myself. If everyone agrees with you, you are never challenged to grow spiritually.

I believe that individuals within the LGBT community who want to live a Christian life should be seen as an asset to the church. There will be differences in the way they think and the orthodox church community thinks, but in accepting and sharing in open discussion I believe that both groups would benefit. There is a benefit in holding two different ideals in balance, praying about it and waiting for God to enlighten. By contrast argument and confrontation often bring confusion.

I do not believe that separate churches for LGBT Christians is the way forward because they can become ghettos where there is no challenge to encourage growth. There is, however, a need for safe places to share and pray. I believe that LGBT Christians should go to their individual churches and be an important part of the mix that encourages creative community which responds to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

*“I think the point of intersection in all of these things is at the place where, in the spirit of Jesus, we are called to accept differences, nurture inclusiveness, welcome the stranger and celebrate the gifts of diversity. Wherever we take steps to break the barriers of fear, exclusion and oppression, we unleash freedom and energy for love and for God’s work in the world.”*<sup>iv</sup>

The term ‘Jesus Forsaken’ used by the Focolare movement to describe the times of loneliness, suffering and pain people experience, is a spirituality which the LGBT community can share with the rest of us and help us to be more honest with ourselves and open our hearts to the expression of the Gospel for our day. When we have this openness then real pastoral care for all of us is possible because we are given the freedom to be accepted as we are.

I was given great hope by an elderly priest who said to me, when I told him about someone who felt they could not be part of the Sunday worship, “Tell them to come to Mass. Tell them to receive Our Blessed Lord in Communion. Tell them God loves them.”

My daughter views belonging to the church community as a matter of justice and respect for the person, “Mama, my sexual orientation should not be a problem. This is who I am.”

These are my thoughts which I share after much prayer and listening. They do not represent the views of the Catholic Church which is, never-the-less, my chosen spiritual home and one which has nurtured my journey for almost forty years.

1 Sister Janet Rozzano RSM, Out of Silence God has Called Me, (New Ways Ministry, 2008) p13

1 Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraph 237 (Geoffrey Chapman, 1994)

1 Sister Janet Rozzano RSM, Out of Silence God has Called Me, (New Ways Ministry, 2008) p14

4 Sister Janet Rozzano RSM, Out of Silence God has Called Me, (New Ways Ministry, 2008) p17



## Testimony of a Church of Scotland Minister (2)

There are three strands to my identity which sometimes find it hard to get along together: I'm gay (and in a partnership), I'm a Christian and I'm an ordained minister of The Church of Scotland. None of these on its own entirely sums me up and, indeed, I'm much more than one or all of these. When I say my prayers, however, what's paramount in my thanksgiving is the love God has for me and the love my partner and I share for each other.

I was ordained to the parish ministry before I knew I was gay and I think I'm glad it happened that way around. If I'd known I was gay first of all, I doubt I would've gone forward for ordination. At the same time, the climate in the church was very different 25 years ago. I think there was a greater sense of collegiality and mutual respect amongst ministers at that time and, while many colleagues today do know that I'm gay, I wouldn't trust many others to respect my relationship and my faith.

Throughout my training for ministry I often discussed matters of sexuality with fellow students; I was happy to speak up for lesbian and gay people – who were usually reluctant to speak for themselves due to prejudice. In those discussions I frequently had this nagging feeling at the back of my mind that homosexuality was not just an issue of justice or academic interest for me – there was a personal matter at stake too. I read a number of books about sexuality and got my head around the theological and Biblical questions. It took me some years, however, to resolve it all personally and I did so with a sense of relief.

Acknowledging to myself the fact that I'm gay made me a better minister. An internal pressure was released; a part of myself was becoming integrated into the rest of me and I had more energy for pastoral work. I felt more rounded as a person and aware of my own and other's emotional needs.

There was another gay minister in the Presbytery I belonged to; it was widely known, I think, that he was gay but most everyone abided by an undeclared policy of 'don't ask, don't tell' – it's not an entirely honest way to deal with each other but it's certainly better than blatant hostility! I got in touch with this colleague to seek his support for myself and he introduced me to an ecumenical support group for gay ministers and priests.

This was a valuable group to belong to and a place of much laughter, honesty and faith-sharing. The life of the group came to a natural end a few years ago, I think for several reasons. One, ministers and priests were finding support and affirmation in other areas – friends, family and sometimes congregations; so there was less need of such a group. Also, some ministers and priests were simply giving up on the church altogether because of distressing experiences of disrespect, hostility and even hatred. There was also the fact that some gay ministers and priests were simply too scared to meet together – and an increasing anti-gay voice in the church did nothing to ease that feeling. The group never had in its membership any women and I was never sure why that was; there were and are lesbian ministers.

I do wonder if, in the present climate, there is a renewed need for a support group – Affirmation Scotland tries to offer this to clergy and lay alike.

Although I'm not a Parish Minister now, many members of my former congregation know that I'm gay and live with my partner. That quiet respect and genuine interest in who I am has been heartening; no-one has tried to cause trouble for me. In my current workplace my sexuality is simply not an issue and colleagues, most of whom are not involved with the church, simply can't understand what the fuss is all about. As one person once said to me, incredulously, 'Isn't the church meant to be a place of inclusion and care?'

Throughout my theological education I had an inquiring approach to faith and the Bible. As Christians we live by faith, not certainty, and one of the crucial gifts the Reformation gave to the church was the permission to read the Bible for ourselves and not be told what we had to believe. This requires the church to be a community that's able to live graciously and generously with difference of opinion. For me, the core of the Christian faith is the Word made flesh in Jesus Christ, witnessed to by the Bible and by the inner testimony of the Spirit. The central missionary task of the church, I believe, is to create communities of love and justice, which are a witness to the world of the generous love of God. There's nothing in my understanding of Jesus or in my experience of the love of God, which makes me conclude that I'm unacceptable to God.

My partner and I made our relationship legal two years ago by entering a Civil Partnership; after twelve years together and buying a house it was a sensible thing to do. We're very grateful for the changes in UK legislation which have encouraged equality and inclusion in society: the church used to be at the vanguard of these issues, but no more it would seem. Many years ago, when homosexuality was illegal in the UK, that climate created situations of blackmail, fear and dishonesty and covert expressions of sexuality. It's a better society we live in today. Is it a better church?

Since our Civil Partnership we've been asked by many friends if we had, or plan to have, a Blessing Service. We actually don't want to do this and the reason is quite simple: we feel ourselves blessed by God already. We met because of the Church; we have experienced support and inclusion in the congregation to which we belong; we have family and friends who have been unquestioning in their love for us.

When Jesus invited people to gather with him at a table, to share his fellowship, he didn't ask about their personal relationships – the only criteria he set was, 'Do you want to sit with me and with these others?' Jesus didn't exclude people – people were excluded by their own inability to sit alongside one another. I pray that the Church of Scotland could embody that sense of welcome and diversity and so be a church for all the people of Scotland. If lesbian and gay people are treated with suspicion and rejection by the Church of Scotland it will not help anyone to believe in God or follow Christ.

