

1.3 Bisexual, Bigender, Bi(be)loved

Cathy, England

Your real job, if you are free, is to
free someone else. And if you have
power, then your job is to empower
someone else.

Toni Morrison

Infant School, 1982: Kiss Chase

I am five years old in an infant school playground. It's on the edge of the industrial West Midlands, an area of coal mines and people drawn here from Britain's former colonies on the promise of a better life – a life as yet unseen. Traveller children come here to do their 100 days of schooling. We learn to play steel pans, visit temples, read Anansi stories, accept and value difference. By the age of eight, I can draw a reasonable map and explain the triangular trade of ships and the enslavement of peoples. I learn early about other faiths, other parts of the world and Britain's hideous history.

At dinner time we play the game 'kiss chase.' The boys run after the girls, and if they catch them, they kiss them. The girls skip away squealing and are not supposed to be caught.

I soon tire of the passive shrieking and running away.

I swap sides.

I join the boys' team and start to chase the girls.

In Wolverhampton, in 1982, this is NOT acceptable.

It's my earliest memory of realising that I'm a bit different.

This difference is not one that's celebrated, and I don't have a word to describe myself.

It will be a long time before I find one that fits.

Cycling Home from an LGBTQ+ Social, March 2025

"You Fucking Queer!"

It's night-time and I'm cycling home through what's commonly called Vimto Alley in Manchester. It's close to the gay village and the LGBT foundation. The area is usually full of stoned teenagers, so my main initial reaction is one of surprise.

"PARDON?"

The guy mumbles something.

My trusty steed Mrs. Pankhurst (an old Claude Butler bike that belonged to my mum) has carried me onwards, into a safer and better-lit space, before I have a chance to analyse the unusually blatant queerphobia that's just intruded on my merry thoughts.

I'm pleased I spoke out, stuck up for myself, although there are other things I could have replied to *You Fucking Queer!* Yes. Or, well spotted.

Since I'm currently single, technically I'm a non-fucking queer just now.

I decide I'm happy enough that I didn't take the abuse lying down and continue cycling.

Up the hill behind the railway station, I ponder – well, ever since I came out, I've been trying to dress more queerly. CLEARLY, it's working. That may mean attracting attention from the wrong quarters sometimes, but I'm not going to change.

On my bike rather than my feet, and facing only one man, I'm ok. The danger's when there's more than one man slagging me off and I sometimes feel unsafe out and about. If you're read as a visibly queer woman, this shit is EXHAUSTINGLY common and of course you're more likely to experience it if you travel about independently on your feet or a bicycle or by public transport, whether for reasons of fitness, environmental

concern, poverty or a mixture. I've experienced a multitude of negative comments, pointing, barking.

Yeah yeah, #notALLmen, but it is ALWAYS MEN that do this when I'm out and about on the streets of my city.

Years ago, I was walking home through the northern quarter holding hands with a girlfriend, when some men drove their car up onto the pavement very close to us to make us run away whilst shouting "you fucking slags!" and laughing out the window. I'm hyper alert to this kind of trouble and have all the short cuts and escape routes mapped out.

Tonight though, I've spent the evening volunteering in the foundation and painted a coaster in the colours of the bisexual flag saying *Joy*, decorated a jam jar with colourful fruits and a little glass milk jug in rainbow colours that now reads *Drink Tea and Smash the Patriarchy*.

I'm very pleased with my efforts, and nothing's going to steal my queer crafting joy.

I'm keen to get home to read another chapter of *Hijab Butch Blues* by Lamya H,¹ which has quickly shot into my top twenty favourite books EVER. I love how this writer has insisted on her right to be both queer and Muslim, and how she thinks about the stories behind the Qur'an's major and minor characters. I hadn't realised how many stories our faiths share, and I LOVE her feminist and queer interpretations of the characters. She reads the Qur'an how I read the Bible these days.

It wasn't always so.

Cause the Bible Tells You So: Conservative Evangelicalism in the 1990s

My dad's family is firmly non-practising English Protestant and my mum's is Lapsed Irish Catholic. As a child, one gran took me to Mass and the other gave me an illustrated children's bible; I wasn't raised in a church-going family as the Protestant / Catholic (and the class) divide was quite tricky for the family to navigate.

1 Icon Books, 2024.

I've always had two backgrounds, two histories. Always been both/and.

I was converted to (conservative) evangelical Christianity by an early 90s mission to 'unchurched' kids when I was around twelve or thirteen. Simultaneously, I became a royal pain in the arse. I was zealous for the gospel, dragged all my friends to church and was bound and determined to save everyone I knew from the depths of hell that the legalistic teaching in the church I belonged to told me that they were headed straight for.

As a young queer Christian feminist, without the ability to express this just yet, I got stuck in the mire of rampant misogyny and homophobia, and was damaged by the straitjacket boxes for girls, the purity culture, complementarian theology, male headship and the fire and brimstone preaching about a wrathful God.

In my Baptist youth group, we followed the *Lessons in Love* designed for Christian teenagers. The girls and the boys were separated, and the girls got a LOT of modesty rules about how to dress so's not to tempt the boys to sin. The overarching message was that it was the girl's responsibility to stop a boy from going "too far" – i.e. total female responsibility for male sexual behaviour. I now recognise this as a key feature of rape culture (analysed in Emily Joy Allison's excellent book *#ChurchToo*,² and in the documentary *Hillsong: A Megachurch Exposed*).³ It caused real problems in terms of the youth group boys' behaviour to the girls.

This was all at odds with secular culture where marital rape had recently been recognised in UK law. However, in both places, LGBTQ+ relationships were never mentioned by adults in charge, Section 28 was in full swing at school and the idea of consent was nowhere to be seen.

I was always a booklover and got called a 'square' (we'd now say 'nerd') at primary school. In my teenage years, I had to work hard to keep up with the other girls. My all-girls state grammar school was clear on its messaging that women could do and be anything they wanted, so I was

2 Broadleaf Books, 2021.

3 Discovery+ channel, 2022.

experiencing a lot of cognitive dissonance between religion, education and home.

Aged 15, In the summer of year 11, I got a pair of Doc Marten boots, started drinking alcohol, going clubbing and kissing boys and then some girls and no one called me a square anymore.

The pastor in my Baptist Church was incensed by the campaign to equalise the legal age for sex for gay men going on in the early 90s, (it was still 21 in contrast to 16 for straight people, and women having sex with women were invisible in the eyes of the law back then).

One summer evening in church, the pastor preaches on the abomination of homosexuality.

It's hot in the church and the sermon is long. There's a lot of Leviticus. I stay in my seat holding on to my secret – that I fancy my female Bible studies teacher. She's only a couple of years older than me, a teenage girl with short hair and a cool mid-wash blue denim jacket.

I worry that I'm going to go to hell and tell no-one about this for decades.

The pastor makes an altar call in the middle of a church service, to sign his petition against lowering the age of consent for gay sex.

He demands compliance from the flock.

As the people I worship with file obediently down the aisles to sign it, I tiptoe out of the building, and vomit in the car park.

Then I run away.

It will be over a decade and a half before I try to return.

Love in the 90s

Girls who are boys who like boys to
be girls who like ...⁴

I have an on-again, off-again boyfriend throughout sixth form. It's not a match made in heaven. He's cute with the trademark floppy haircut

4 Lyrics from *Boys & Girls* by Blur (Parklife, Parlophone, 1994).

of that decade, somewhat sulky, and says he will vote Tory. It's a testament to how attractive I think he is that I don't break up with him immediately he says that. He's not Christian and it's not acceptable to have a non-Christian boyfriend in this church culture. People at church express concern that I will be "dragged down" by him.

They're kind of right, and I have a lot of fun.

We break up and I cheer myself by experimenting with kissing other boys and occasionally girls on nights out. Anyone can say they didn't know what they were doing, or don't remember, that it doesn't mean anything. Everyone drinks too much alcohol, and it provides helpful cover.

At university, I take the opportunity to separate myself from church spaces and enjoy making friends with lots of different sorts of people. Before I realise I'm queer, I join in the 90s ladette culture with gusto. I particularly loved a drinking game that involved burping, scratching one of your tits, and shouting "imbibe, wench!" at various female friends. I enjoy the escape from the imposed femininity of my younger years.

I kissed girls and I liked it. But I didn't ask myself what this meant.

Born this Way: Bisexual

It's not until I meet my first openly bisexual friend many years later that I realise what I am.

"But all women fancy other women as well as men," I say when we're talking about bisexuality and gender fluidity, after a fictional character comes out as such in a creative writing class we're both in. "They just get with men 'cos it's more socially acceptable and if they want to have babies."

My friend gives me a look, followed by one of the most enlightening lectures of my life.

Oh, I say. I didn't realise.

I just thought I was a REALLY good ally.

Being bisexual for me is something innate, that's been a part of me my whole life. I discover rather than become and start to understand what it means when I have the language to talk about it.

It takes me a few more years to tell anyone I'm bi, the repression of my younger years tying my tongue and at first, I shake every time I try to speak about it. But I fight this, and start the process of coming out to myself, my friends, my colleagues, and eventually my family. The reactions from people I love are overall positive. A surprising number of my female friends confide in me that they are also bi, or pan, and in various stages of coming out. Three friends come out to me as trans, and I do my best to support them on their journeys.

Colleagues from the refugee charity I work for are the first workplace friends I come out to. I'd previously spent four years working in sub-Saharan Africa and been a teacher for six years in the UK before I came out. I was never comfortable with schools knowing.

A few friends are curious about how nervous I am about coming out. "But surely you know we'd be supportive?" they ask me. And I do think they will be, it's just I am still scared and scarred by the church and the effect of the 1980s. My family's attitudes to LGBTQ folk have changed dramatically alongside UK culture.

"We love you anyway," says my mum, "whether you're queer or trans or ... bilingual."

Mrs Malaprop, eat your heart out.

Being Bigender

The images that fucked ya / Are a patriarchal structure⁵

2012 is the year I start writing, and long-distance hiking, and coming out to myself. It's also the year I go back to church, as an adult.

5 Lyrics from *Black Tie* by Grace Petrie (Queer as Folk, Grace Petrie Recordings, 2018).

Between 2012 and 2017 I write my first (as yet unpublished) novel *Aid Games*.

I start writing from one point of view, a straight character called Ella. After some work, I realise I need to split the action and perspective into different characters, so the creative process undergoes a kind of fission where out of the original female, two more characters are formed: a gay woman and a straight man appear.

I am not my characters, and my characters are not me.

But that was how I realised that the point of view characters in my first finished novel mirrored my own gender identity: straight woman, gay woman, and male.

Bisexual, bigender.

Queer.

She Who Would Valiant Be: A Queer Pilgrim's Progress

Coming out to myself happens in the form of many journeys, physical and psychological and spiritual.

I'm lucky to spend some time on Iona with queer Christian groups and love the people I meet in that space. It's there that I find the word bigender and adopt it as a self-descriptor.

I hear the 'Call of the Camino' and walk the pilgrimage route from Pamplona to Santiago de Compostela in Spain in 2013.

Before the first pilgrimage, I decide to go to my first and only confession in a Catholic church. The combination of my neurodivergent brain, Catholic guilt and conservative-evangelical fear of hell means that I attempt to write down every 'sin' I think I've committed since I left church in the nineties before I start.

Writing the list leads me to make important distinctions. Some things on the list are sins I need to repent of. Some items, particularly connected with being queer, are things I realise are just a part of me and I no longer consider to be sin at all. Other things are sins against me, that are weighing heavy on my soul but that don't belong there.

The priest is kind, asks me if I'm returning to the faith, and doesn't make me read out my list, which stretches for several pages. Instead, he gives me a light penance of a few Hail Marys, Our Fathers and Glory Bes.

I skip out of the church with my heart as light as a feather, into an unusually sunny Manchester.

That first pilgrimage, first Camino de Santiago is also the first time that I can hear my own soul speak.

On that first pilgrimage I light candles across the entire camino for my grandparents, say prayers for their souls and for my whole family. In effect, I take the red pill and step out of the matrix. I begin what is the ongoing, deep spiritual journey of my life – beginning to recognise the extent of intergenerational family trauma, having therapy and working on myself, breaking the cycle, learning to forgive and walk forwards into a future of restored and healthier relationships with my family, my friends, myself and God.

I thought I would walk one pilgrimage, but that's not what happened. That particular call hasn't stopped since, so over the next twelve years I cycle the Portuguese route from Porto one winter to Santiago, and onto Muxia and Finisterre, and walk the French Way again, then the Primitivo, cycle the Camino Mozarabe and walk the Camino to COP⁶ from my home in Manchester to pray and protest and perform around COP 26 in Glasgow. In 2024, desperate to do something in solidarity with Gaza, I cycle from John O Groats to Lands' End raising money for the Amos Trust and Medical Aid for Palestine.

I carry a notebook and the name of everyone I love, anyone who wants pilgrim prayers, and anyone who wishes to be in my notebook on the journey.

They say that God hears the prayers of pilgrims, and the journey frees my soul to find the words to pray and to write.

In 2015, I'm working for a refugee charity, in a team that's part of the United Nations resettlement programme, when the body of little Alan Kurdi washes up on a beach in Turkey – a Kurdish-Syrian child fleeing the war with his family. The image of the doll-like child in his red t-shirt,

6 <https://caminotocop.com/>

so reminiscent of the little girl in the red dress in the film *Schindler's List*, galvanises activists into refugee support.

When the programme I'm working on comes to an end, I decide to take some time out. I want to find out what it's like to travel a continent by human power, so in 2017, I cycle 3400 kilometres to Greece via Germany, France, Italy and a boat to Corfu.⁷ I spend the summer volunteering in a refugee community centre in Exarcheia, Athens.

I meet people from many parts of the globe, including LGBTQ+ refugees, who've fled persecution.

The eyes of those who've had friends and lovers disappeared (and most likely executed) in and outside of Tehran will remain with me forever.

Queer Solidarity Knows NO Borders

Last year, I joined with Migrants Organise, Solidarity Knows No Borders and Right to Remain to fight the now-defunct deportation to Rwanda bill. I write letters in support of asylum for LGBTQ+ refugee friends and pray for a different world. On researching the new and deeper repression and dangers LGBTQ people in parts of Africa are experiencing, I discover an Amnesty International report on ultra conservative American evangelical groups who have spent \$54 million dollars in Africa, lobbying governments for these repressive new laws on homosexuality.

Don't believe anyone who tells you we can hold space for 'both sides' of this argument. These are real people, bleeding, weeping and dying because of this utterly toxic mistranslation and weaponisation of the Bible (I won't call it 'theology').

Only one side is getting beaten up. Only one side is murdered, or forced to flee.

7 <https://curlycathycyclelikeagirl.wordpress.com/2017/08/08/solidarity-and-sunshine-greece/>

Let's be on the right side of history and offer support and solidarity to our LGBTQ refugee siblings, for we are all God's children, made in God's image.

Don't Stop Us Now

Sweeping changes have come to the UK over my lifetime, for which I'm intensely grateful – for all those who came before me, who fought for the rights of everyone in the LGBTQ+ community so that we can live our lives in the freedom and security we have now. The end of Section 28, the equal age of consent for straight and LGBTQ people, gay adoption, civil partnerships, same sex marriage – and maybe more importantly the Equality Act 2010 that protects our rights and make discrimination illegal in housing, employment, health. I'm so grateful, and in turn use my own energies to stand with my trans siblings in solidarity and protest at their treatment.

These freedoms not only have yet to enter large swathes of the church, but the church is also exempt from the Equality Act 2010.

The freedoms I cherish in my own life and studies and work and play stop the second I enter a church in England – any church.

Churches are legally allowed to discriminate against us.

#ChurchToo: Religious Trauma in Adulthood

As an adult, I go back to church.

I walked into the local Church of England church, the closest to where I was staying at the time in Manchester and attended faithfully for two years.

I had no idea of the heated warfare over 'LGBTQ issues' that large swathes of the Church of England are conducting (as though we rainbow humans can be relegated to a yes/no box on a form).

After an altar call for those who are "struggling with their sexuality" to come to the front and be prayed for (for which read conversion therapy,

public shaming and/or potentially a witch hunt to encourage the queers to out themselves), I realise I must leave church again.

Immediately.

I'm not struggling with my sexuality.

This church is.

I exit the building and run away.

Encouraged by a hefty amount of Inclusive Church and Church for Everyone! marketing, in January 2019, I join an Alpha course and begin attending a Church of England church in Manchester that has recently adopted a more liberal stance on human sexuality.

The people I meet in the evening congregation are lovely. I believed I had found a place to belong and practise my faith safely.

One week the team vicar invited people who felt called to do so to join a Foundations for Ministry course run by Manchester diocese. I ask to go, and she's delighted to support me.

As a minor aside during the history session, one of the course leaders described the church's mission to Africa in the 1800s – via an almost-life-size picture of Livingstone on his slides, a tiny photo of around 30/35 or so unnamed African peoples in Victorian western garb, and with enormous missionary logos stamped across the edges, and a merry jump back to the Lambeth Quadrilateral.

I raised my hand and gently said: "I'm sorry. That was really difficult to sit through. That's not what we talk about when we talk about the history of the church in Africa. There was no mention of colonialism, or slavery, or the church's involvement in both." After a conversation in which the local ministry officer behaved in ways I experienced as hostile and told me that if I wasn't careful people would think I was a feminist to which I replied – that's excellent, I am a feminist – he later "discerned" that I was not allowed to continue his course.

I went back to the team vicar to raise my concerns, conscious that I'd been sent on the lay ministry course. Her response was to ask me to attend one-to-one sessions in her house under the guise of "discerning" whether I could continue the course. This felt extremely unsafe, as she still held very evangelical attitudes to LGBTQ persons (stereotypes of drug-taking, promiscuity, and poor mental health) and was creating

dynamics that felt coercive and unsafe to me. I stopped attending these sessions.

All was quiet for a couple of months, then a certain member of the clergy wrote a public blog that I recognised as referring to me. I experienced the way I was described – including the implication that I was gay, rather than bisexual – as inaccurate and hurtful.

I. AM. BISEXUAL.

I experienced the blog as biphobic and misrepresenting me and this precipitated a mental health crisis. A friend nominated herself to check in on me morning and evening for a few weeks.

I had some helpful therapy from the LGBT Foundation in Manchester. Realising I am cheerfully, queerfully and *intentionally* made as a bisexual and bigender human, I now worship God in my own way, challenge oppression (including that perpetrated by the church), and stay active in working for change. I volunteer for the LGBT Foundation as I want to give something back to the organisation that helped me so much when I faced online and offline biphobic abuse from a CofE vicar.

I went to the rector of the church. I desperately wanted a resolution where the events were dealt with appropriately, and I could stay in the church. After months of weak promises for action that never materialised, pressure for secrecy and eventually obfuscation – behaviour which I experienced as confusing, contradictory, and emotionally destabilising – I went to the Parish Safeguarding Officer for advice (the archdeacon had reported these events to diocesan safeguarding).

But when I spoke to the Parish Safeguarding Officer, it appeared they were not yet aware of the concerns I had raised.

This church has adults who may be vulnerable – LGBTQ+ young people, and refugees. Around this time in a public space, I observed a situation in which a clergy member referred to someone's personal information in a way that I felt could place them at risk, given their country of origin. This deeply concerned me.

I sensed the rector was angry at me for reporting safeguarding issues to his safeguarding officer. When the rector told me he was not aware of any safeguarding problems in fifteen years, I struggled to reconcile that with my own experiences. It left me feeling that our perspectives on safeguarding were very far apart – as though my presence had suddenly caused one, rather than the online queerphobic abuse from his team member.

To me, this claim felt implausible and raised concerns about safeguarding culture. Can open, worms ... everywhere.

Over time, I came to feel that the rector was not able to offer the support or action I hoped for, and that my concerns were not being meaningfully addressed. The diocese had bounced me between the archdeacon and him presumably hoping I'd give up at the institutional walls that were closed and locked before me.

I chose to report the blog to the police. They recorded it as a homophobic incident, which reflected how I had experienced it.

I also reported all events to the NSPCC, due to the lack of independent safeguarding in the church which greatly concerned me as a former teacher. The NSPCC advised me on how to raise my concerns, and my submission was passed on to the Past Case Review 2 process – an independent investigation into safeguarding failures in the Church of England, who recorded it there.

I reported the course content to the Anti-Racism Task Force appointed to the Church of England at the time, who were great and followed up with the diocese. The content of the course has been changed.

An entire year later, I received a grudging apology letter from the lay ministry officer who had told me in person that I was not allowed to continue his course and warned me that people may think I am a feminist.

The letter said, "sorry if you FELT excluded."

I also sought a clergy discipline measure (CDM) as there was no other way to get any action taken to protect others. It's a deeply biased process. The team vicar was allowed to offer character references, yet I was not.

During the CDM process, I read statements from the rector that did not align with my recollection of events, which was distressing.

It was this that caused the trauma. **In a church so keen to wave rainbow flags and talk about its journey to inclusion and love for its LGBTQ+ congregants, it turns out that dissenting voices must be silenced by any means necessary.**

I often felt discouraged by the way the process unfolded, and at times it seemed as though I was being steered away from pursuing the CDM. This went back and forth for a while. In my final letter to the bishop, I wrote –

“What I am seeking by bringing a CDM is effective and proportionate action to protect others from [team vicar’s] behaviour. There has been so much documented around the risks that homophobic behaviour poses to LGBTQ+ Christians, especially to young people and young adults (especially that which is cloaked in the robes of religious authority and therefore can appear as outright rejection by God himself, outing LGBTQ+ people without their permission, casting them out of church and worse). The responsibility of protecting them from the horrors that my generation of LGBTQ+ Christians have suffered lies squarely on our shoulders and I don’t have words strong enough to warn you of the potential dangers inherent in this situation if such behaviour from clergy is allowed to go unchecked in a church of this kind.”

The Clergy Discipline Measure was awarded in my favour.

The vicar was given substantial re-training and a rebuke.

I am one of 2% of laity in England to win a clergy discipline measure (statistic taken from Fiona Gardner’s excellent book *Sex, Power and Control: Responding to Abuse in the Institutional Church*).⁸

Throughout this torturously long process, the diocese kept pressuring me to have a conciliatory meeting. I repeatedly said I would be happy to attend mediation with this vicar, AFTER proportionate action had been taken to protect others.

A little while after the CDM process ended, I offered a mediation meeting. So sought after by the diocese BEFORE the CDM, this was refused by the team vicar, and the archdeacon supported her refusal.

8 Lutterworth Press, 2021.

In my opinion, the Church of England's ongoing attitude and behaviours to survivors of clergy abuse, pushing for forgiveness from the victims with no action to effect change, is in itself abusive, and is unlikely to change without entirely independent safeguarding.

During this period of time, I had contacted two organisations for help, organisations whose logos are plastered all over that specific church's social media outlets.

Firstly, the CEO of a leading UK Queer Christian grassroots charity told me he couldn't offer me support during the CDM process. During that time, he instead offered support to the rector by making a marketing video about how "inclusive" that church is. The CEO of this organisation and the rector both appear in this material, alongside some LGBTQ Christians they had borrowed from elsewhere, who did not attend our church.

Secondly, in full knowledge of these events and the CDM outcome, another large inclusive organisation later endorsed the same clergy member to a visible representative role at national level. Given my own experience, I found this difficult and painful.

A couple of years on:

- The team vicar is retiring.
- The rector is moving to Scotland.
- No notes.

Can you be bisexual and Christian?

Of course. God made us, exactly the way we are.

Can you be bisexual and attend church?

I read somewhere recently, that if you're a good person, you don't lose people. They lose you.

Ongoing chURCh Trauma

Over the last six years, more gingerly, I've tried out different church denominations. But I have found that the pernicious conservative evangel-

ical teaching on “biblical sexuality” along with behaviours and assumptions about LGBTQ+ folk (plus attitudes to women, and people of colour) bleeds into the more liberal denominations and causes us trouble in multiple institutions, including in the United Reformed Church, where I became lay preacher in early 2022 and spent four years from 2021 as a Safeguarding Officer in my (now-closing) LEP church (I had to put all that learning to good use somewhere).

In one educational space where the URC is a partner, oversees and hosts the course, I’ve experienced very conservative evangelical views expressed by leaders on men’s and women’s roles. Excessively binaried and rigid gender roles are exclusive of the LGBTQ community (particularly trans folk), and harmful to everyone. There’s been quotes from Mike Breen, who has been the subject of public allegations regarding coercive disciplining methods,⁹ as well as uncritical mentions of *Soul Survivor*.¹⁰ One teacher quoted Jordan Peterson, a highly controversial figure whose views many critics describe as misogynistic and aligned with far-right discourse. They also referenced ‘the white church’ which horrified me, as I experienced it as having clear racist overtones.

The initial response to my raising these issues was defensiveness, followed by an attempt from the course leader that I interpreted as an attempt to throw me off the course. I escalated concerns but faced stonewalling and ghosting (a refusal by those overseeing the course to follow up with me about any action taken) about the comments that I experienced as having racist or exclusionary overtones. This is in direct conflict with the URC’s stated aims of being an actively anti-racist organisation.

I completed the course and raised the issues again in formal feedback. I received an apology about the attempt to exclude me and there are some changes, but the speaker referring to ‘the white church’ remains a teacher on this course in 2026.

9 See <https://protestia.com/2024/01/25/pastor-mike-breen-leaves-apex-church-after-confessing-to-sexual-misconduct/>

10 A British conservative evangelical youth organisation and national conference.

The URC offers an opportunity to lay people to do a youth work course, which I took up. I realised that new lay youth leaders were being exposed to extremely homophobic content in the accompanied printed booklet whilst training on this course. One example for discussion was a “problem card” of a 14-year-old girl admitting to a youth worker that she is “struggling with same-sex attraction.” (I have yet to meet any real life 14-year-olds who use this phrase).

I raised this with the course leaders but got deflection and defensiveness and so I escalated this problem of homophobic content to a more senior person. We know that young LGBTQ people are more likely to self-harm and commit suicide than their straight counterparts; we also know that young LGBTQ people in religious spaces are the group at the greatest risk.¹¹ It deeply shocked me that the URC was choosing to use a resource this problematic.

I succeeded in getting the toxic theology in this booklet removed, but it came at a cost. It was stated that I was too ‘vulnerable’ to provide pastoral support to others at this time.

Implying that an LGBTQ course participant has mental health problems such that they are unable to fulfil their roles because they voice objections to the use of toxic homophobic content – in a denomination that widely advertises LGBTQ+ inclusion – felt like gaslighting.

I discovered recently that despite doing the appropriate training, DBS check and a lot of work for both roles – shortly after the events above, my name had disappeared from my synod’s lists of local safeguarding officers and locally recognised lay worship leaders. At the behest of the local moderator, my roles were retrospectively revoked by two years (which apart from my interpretation of this as bullying, feels like absolutely appalling safeguarding practice as neither myself nor key people in paid safeguarding roles were informed, including the safeguarding lead for the region at that time).

11 Jadvā, V., Guasp, A., Bradlow, J.H., Bower-Brown, S., & Foley, S. (2023). Predictors of self-harm and suicide in LGBT youth: The role of gender, socio-economic status, bullying and school experience. *Journal of Public Health*, 45(1), 102–108. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pubmed/fdab383>

To me, this felt deeply queerphobic.

I am aware that URC churches and synods vary in inclusivity and I am not claiming that the entire URC denomination is systematically racist or homophobic. But I can only tell my truth as I see it, and what I experienced in my local context is that the URC is not fully inclusive. We need a space to grow and include LGBTQ leaders. We particularly need a space that supports QTPOC (queer and trans people of colour) into leadership roles. QTPOC people are completely absent in paid URC roles.

Living with the Questions

I do not believe for a second that these behaviours reflect God's attitude towards me, or us – or in fact have much to do with the God I know and love, in any way at all.

But if some of the human “representatives” of God on earth behave like this, and it's incredibly bad for my emotional, spiritual, psychological and physical health to be anywhere near this behaviour, it does beg the question: what am I doing in church?

What am I doing in these institutions that intentionally discriminate?

Do I believe that people who behave in this way ARE God's representatives?

In some so-called “inclusive” denominations and churches, religious leaders have done so little work on deconstructing harmful constructs, that the rainbow flags are besmirched and all the same oppressive theologies remain. They can be just as unsafe and just as dishonest as places that don't claim LGBTQ+ inclusion.

I've encountered views that, to me, carried white-supremacist, misogynist or queerphobic overtones being upheld by religious leaders in multiple church spaces. Whenever I express concern about this, I am met with what feels like ostracism, exclusion, and attempts to discredit me, plus the ever-present threat of further abuses of power from those religious leaders who are unable to accept much-needed challenge, however gently and prayerfully given.

Whilst carrying deep religious trauma, I haven't lost my faith in God.

I have lost my faith in the institutional church and many of its leaders.

Religious trauma tears the soul.

And I wonder: does my presence as a visibly queer person lend some kind of credence to the lies being told about love and inclusion?

Do I need to leave the rigidity and unkindness of formal institutional structures and spaces so's to find the freedom and love and fullness of life promised by Jesus?

I've got stuck on this question, which is really: do I need to choose between practising faith in a church and my own emotional and spiritual safety?

Significant parts of, and leaders in the denominations I have spent any time in fail to recognise the validity and beauty of the God-given lives and loves of queer folk within and outside of their walls.

I don't give credence to the thin-lipped disapproval of religious leaders and their dislike of me, a queer human who's happy instead of cowed by them and doesn't wish to be under their control.

If we're trying to follow the One whose whole life was spent on the margins, on the road, in freeing people from all kinds of oppression, walking free and unhindered across the earth with a band of close friends, teaching and learning and travelling onwards – can we even imitate this in institutions with all of their complex layers upon layers of power?

I want to follow this Jesus. I do this by asking questions about social justice, repeatedly getting into trouble for calling out racism in church. I refuse to be closeted as a queer person or silenced due to my gender. I have zero interest in submitting to the powers of this world and too much enthusiasm for flipping tables and empowering ordinary folk to hear their own souls speak. I love too loudly, and the powers that be just don't like me.

The pyramid structures, and hierarchies of all organised religion seem to fundamentally clash with who I've come to believe Jesus is.

The abuse of power in a system of hierarchy and control is always how we are harmed.

Healing, Exodus, and Holy Resistance

Our wings were never meant to be clipped, for we are all God's beautiful, bi, beloved children. And we sense deep in our souls where God is, and where God is not.

God is Love

Love is Love

Wherever there is love, there is God

Wherever there is God, there is love

Outside of the institutional church, my life is full of joy. Queer hope and joy and love; friendships, resistance, resilience, protest, activism, literature, books, writing, author talks, travel, festivals, music and gigs, dancing, a deep love and a zest for life, laughter, a dog (obviously!), camping, hiking, cycling, curiosity, compassion, kindness, a community garden, a deep appreciation for the earth and all creatures who call it home, new experiences, volunteering with the LGBT Foundation and a women's adventure group, anti-fascist kick-boxing, the best queer coffee shop in the north west, and life-long learning, both academic and experiential.

There's a gaping chasm between church spaces and the activist community and learning spaces I exist in, working for change and justice and peace and a life within the earth's ecological limits, alongside others, as part of a whole, challenging ourselves and each other to be better, and do better.

We begin from the perspective of a deep love for the earth and all the life that's here. I learn together with others about each other's needs, the needs of our communities, of the earth in this time of the Anthropocene – of man-made climate change. There's a strong emphasis on care and building communities, with the freedom to become the people we want to be in all our diversity.

Maybe we need a completely new way of doing things. A circular church community, like a circular economy, not a triangular hierarchy of domination stamping its boots down hard on anyone who's a bit different.

For God wants to empower us ALL to do the work that is so needed in the world. To be the hands and feet of Christ, working to bring love and healing and new life. And God's grace and love hold us all.

Jesus came to bring us freedom – to be ourselves, to love ourselves and each other, freedom from the economic system that traps the poorest and most marginalised in terrible conditions and dehumanises us all, freedom from the unjust religious practices and systems of his time AND our own.

I've still got hope, faith and love. The communities I belong to are made up of people who are queer, people of colour, women, people with disabilities, neurodivergent folk, refugees and asylum seekers, people who live in poverty. We can reach out and touch the world that is to come in faith and hope and love, and learn to dismantle oppression, together.

A friend collected LGBTQ+ Christian advent reflections and published them in a booklet called *There all Along*.¹² My reflection reads:

I love the story of the midwives defying Pharaoh. Shiphrah and Puah rescued baby Moses from the decree of death, and gave us the story of the exodus, the liberation, and the chance to remove our shoes and stand on holy ground.

What if we are all midwives birthing the new kin-dom into life? Never underestimate women and queer folks and migrants. We are all rain-bows and rebels and refugees, walking together into the promised land.

My journey so far is an exodus from church spaces which cause trauma.

I hope I find church spaces which bring life and exist as communities of hope. It's difficult to trust as I'm so wary and so burned. And I know some good ones, people in faith leadership who aren't grasping for power-over and do genuinely want to make space for us. I really value continued discipleship, theological learning, participatory spaces to grow in faith, and I need to pray for our world with others. I also remain clear on my own calling:

12 <https://www.amazon.co.uk/There-all-along-reflections-narrative-ebook>

I will live for liberation, for I know why I was made.

The liberation of us ALL, including the most marginalised people in my communities and the earth herself.

I found out I'm not walking away from God, but towards her, so I wrote this poem about that journey.

I hope this brings blessing and comfort to the other exiles.

Journey into God's Heart

We journey ever deeper
Into the heart of God.
Into recovery and healing,
Closer to the Source,
Where we can hear our own souls:
Longing to be our best selves –
Pilgrims, artists, activists.

We walk this journey alone
and with others,
Working to see ourselves and others
as God does:
Chosen,
Precious,
Beloved.

Learning how to live with
And how to build community with
people burned
or burned out
or bored by church as it is now –
Learning how to survive what comes next.

What will arise from the ashes of the old empires?
Those f-ked up
corrupt
institutions, governments, churches?

We don't need to go on fighting for acceptance and pleading to be included by those
 who consider us somehow lesser. We can open our souls and let the light of God
 shine in and out for ourselves. We can be comforted, challenged, and consoled.
 We can build each other up in the beloved community.

Some tables need flipping over:
 Others need extending.

It's time to build something new.

In the garden,
 We plant seeds and watch them grow.
 That which rejuvenates our soil
 Renews our souls,

Enables us to hear our own souls clearly,
 And the voice of God in us
 And we in God.

Finding the thin places,
 Knowing we are beloved,
 Refugees, rainbows and rebels
 Working together for justice, joy, and the freedom
 That comes at the edges.

The misfits and the mischief-makers
 Lighting candles against the darkness.
 We plant seeds of shalom,
 Transform our city,
 Reclaim the night
 And our rights to the commons –
 The local and the global commons.
 Our land, energy, water and air.
 Our lives slow to match the rhythms of the seasons
 Bringing joy.

Learning to alchemise our anger against injustice –
and build the kin-dom we long to see,
Knowing our liberation is bound up in the freedom of one another.

Taking only what we need on this journey,
Our compassion; courage; curiosity –
We let go of that which does not need to be carried into the future.
Always remembering:
Resistance is the secret of joy.

Beloved
Be loved
Be who you are
Be everything you were created to be.
Wild and holy,
Precious, chosen, and honoured in the sight of God.

Loving God,
Be near to the broken-hearted
Bind our wounds,
Attend to our tears,
Heal our hurts,
Console us in our fears.

Walk with us –
Behind us, before us,
Night and day,
To guide and cheer.

That we,
knowing ourselves beloved,
treasured,
valued beyond all measure,
Our names engraved on the palms of Your hands,
May walk the life-long journey together –
Ever deeper into the heart of God.

* * *

This chapter reflects the personal experiences, memories and interpretations of the author. Names and identifying details have been changed or omitted for privacy.