

# 1.1 Bi Christian Activism – The Road Less Travelled

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*Carol, Scotland*

## Introduction

At the time of writing, I am a 54-year-old bisexual, cisgendered woman living in Scotland, pronouns she/her. I only anticipate my age will change in the years ahead, but who knows the plans the Lord has for me?

I wear many hats, as a teacher, tutor, writer, church worship leader, wife and parent, but the hat that maybe sets me apart is that of bisexual Christian activist. The current hat I wear is a pink beanie hat, emblazoned with the slogan for my stage show, *Binocchio the Bisexual Liar*. It's a 45-minute stand-up comedy show with music, that I took to Edinburgh Fringe Festival last year (2024), in which I explore the various anomalies of living with this particular intersectional identity.

## Activist beginnings

My bi Christian activism really started just over a decade ago, when I started a literature review for my PhD proposal. I wanted to explore sexuality in Scripture and the possibility of creating an affirming theology for bisexual believers – cue attempting to get my hands on anything relating specifically to bisexuality and Christianity in combo. There was literally nothing beyond rather new-agey pseudo-spiritual writings on the topic. On one hand it was dispiriting, on the other it gave me a clear

path to trailblazing glory! And it is now, eleven years later, that I have the immense privilege of being told my monograph *Bisexuality & The Western Christian Church: The Damage of Silence* has been a gamechanger and inspiration for many.<sup>1</sup>

## Academic Activism

Ignorance of the bisexual orientation was rife, it seemed, even in academia, where my first supervisory team of globally renowned academics actually cast aspersions on my bisexual credentials, being married to a man as I was at that time. It seemed that bisexuality was not an orientation but a sexual practice. Fortunately, I was head-hunted at an academic symposium by a leading American sociologist who promised me funding from his good friends at the American Institute of Bisexuality. I swapped supervisory teams and faculty and within two years, I was on a field trip to the US, interviewing bi Christians and those who pastor them on the liberal east coast and in the Texan Bible Belt, as well as back home in the UK.

Both sides of the water, I uncovered a staggering rate of ignorance among church leaders on bisexual issues and an even more staggering rate of mental illness among bi Christians that I spoke to, directly linked to stigmatisation and denial of their reality.

My findings were controversial and I was signed up immediately by a large academic publisher. This gave me the platform I required to be invited both home and abroad to deliver keynote talks and workshops on the topic of bi Christian intersection. These include the first ever bisexual workshop in the 44-year-old history of the European Forum of LGBTQ+ Christian Groups in Gothenburg in 2016, and the first ever Bisexual Research Conference (BiReCon) in Amsterdam, later that year. I have also spoken at ILGA Prague and been invited to present at many

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1 Shepherd, C.A. (2018). *Bisexuality in the Western Christian Church: The damage of silence*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

more academic and secular LGBT+ conferences, as well as at queer Christian events.

Am I a particularly gifted public speaker? In all fairness to myself, public speaking is my strong suit, as I am able to combine humour with hard-hitting facts about the bi Christian experience. But it is the USP (unique selling point) of identifying as bisexual and Christian that probably makes me most attractive to event organisers, rather than any particular talent I hold. It is hard to find bi people of faith willing to raise their head above the parapet, such is the stigma attached to bisexuality. This is particularly the case within the state church in the UK, the Church of England, where the infamous 1991 document, *Issues in Human Sexuality*,<sup>2</sup> is mandatory reading for those considering ordination.<sup>3</sup> In a nutshell, this document, in just one paragraph, denounces bisexual people as intrinsically adulterous and suffering from a personality disorder! There is a common misconception that all bisexual people are polyamorous which of course poses a challenge to the monogamous, monosexual discourse of the Church.

While some bi Christians certainly engage in consensual or non-consensual non-monogamy as do individuals from every sexual orientation, I can tell you from personal experience that it is errant nonsense to suggest that all bi people are adulterous, or polyamorous, or undecided, or secretly gay, or any of the other stigmatising labels that are attached to us. For as long as I can remember, I have been sexually attracted to both male and female bodies, though I generally only have romantic feelings for cis women. I have been married to a cis man and I am currently married to a cis woman. I have not transitioned from straight to gay; I was bi in my first marriage and I'm still bi now!

I shall continue to fight in verbal and written formats, so long as purportedly affirming Christian books and conferences routinely ignore or under-engage with the B in LGBTQIA+. Indeed, that is a large factor

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2 An online copy of this document can be accessed at <http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/228886>

3 Editor's note: This document was finally shelved by the General Synod of the Church of England in July 2025.

in why I have decided to co-edit and contribute to this very tome on bi Christian stories along with José Calvo Tello of the University of Göttingen.

Alongside my monograph, *Bisexuality in the Western Christian Church*, which compared experiences of bisexual Christians in the UK and USA, I have also published a study on European bi believers under my own independent label, Easy Yoke Publishing. This book is available at all the usual online outlets (and can be ordered from bookstores) and is titled *Bi the Way – Pastoring Bisexual Christians in Europe*.<sup>4</sup>

I set up Easy Yoke Publishing, based on the verse from Matthew 11:29<sup>5</sup>, with a view to publishing my own works, and those of others who share my vision of a progressive, affirming and most importantly, *kind*, Christianity. So far I have published several books pertaining to LGBT+ and faith, as well as works of fiction by two other authors, with an autobiography of a late trans activist in the pipeline. I have also published a gay football love story, as well as a trilogy of cosy crime novels I wrote in the early 2000s, featuring dermatologically challenged Christian detective, Mark ‘Pizza’ Parlour! All of these books can be found on my website or Amazon homepage.<sup>6</sup> I crowdfunded my ‘freebie’ book, *Blood on its Hands – The Church & LGBT Youth* and have so far donated over 100 copies to people, churches and bible colleges. A kind reviewer stated “This book will save lives” – I sincerely hope it does. Get in touch if you’d like a copy – [bispacemission@gmail.com](mailto:bispacemission@gmail.com)

I have always been a wordsmith, a language lover, and I cannot see this changing, though as the writer of Ecclesiastes notes, there is a time and season for everything. Sometimes I write, sometimes I speak, some-

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4 <https://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/bi-the-way-carol-a-shepherd/1138010991?ean=2940164627355>

5 Take the yoke I give you. Put it on your shoulders and learn from me. I am gentle and humble, and you will find rest. (Matthew 11: 29 CEV)

6 See <https://www.carolshepherdbooks.info/> or [https://www.amazon.co.uk/stores/C-A-Shepherd/author/Bo89WCX4WZ?ref=ap\\_rdr&isDramIntegrated=true&shoppingPortalEnabled=true](https://www.amazon.co.uk/stores/C-A-Shepherd/author/Bo89WCX4WZ?ref=ap_rdr&isDramIntegrated=true&shoppingPortalEnabled=true)

times I hide away, sometimes I like to make people laugh.... which brings me onto the next section.

## Activism through Comedy & Song

As well as being bisexual for as long as I can remember, I've also been a public speaker pretty much all of my life. Some of it is a God-given talent, but some of it is a reaction to my childhood, where I was so painfully shy, I would actually vomit if left with strangers! What a great babysitting gig I was. But on a more serious note, I saw first-hand how fear and anxiety had debilitated my parents and rendered their lives a misery. So I made a conscious attempt to push through the barrier.

Jesus states in John 10:10 that he came to help us live life to the full. I have been determined since a young age, though I didn't discover this Scripture until I came to faith aged 17, that I was going to be different from my parents. I was going to seize hold of all that life offered me. *Carpe diem* and all that jazz. This led me to taking as many subjects as I could manage at school, and this desire to learn and study has never left me. Even now, I study social sciences and languages for fun! It also gave me a desire to travel at any opportunity.

I discovered quite early on in life that I have the ability to make others laugh, and this was my saving grace at secondary school, where bullying was always just around the corner for me, being top of the class in most subjects and having a Scots accent in a Welsh school (my parents moved from their home in Strathclyde to South Wales when I was a small child). As one peer commented: "Carol's a bit of a swot, but she's a good laugh." Maybe they could inscribe that on my gravestone.

In my late 20s, I started preaching and leading services at my local Anglican Church in Southampton, on the South coast of England, where I would incorporate biblical exegesis with observational humour in my sermons. This combination – which I have informally patented as *Sermody* – has served me very well over the years, and continues to do so, now that I find myself again part of a Christian worship team at my United Reformed Church in Edinburgh.

The foray into comedy has been a recent affair, prompted by feedback on sermons and talks I have delivered more recently. Despite my best efforts to portray an intellectual and spiritually mature image, pretty much everyone sees me as hilarious first and foremost, whether I am trying to be funny or not. A few times after preaching or leading services, I have been asked if I'd ever considered a career in comedy (which may or may have not been a compliment). I have been told on more than one occasion that I bring joy into a room, which is kind of interesting, as we portman-teau-ed our maiden names to Joyner when I married my wife in 2022 (though I retain my previous married surname for academic purposes). And as one (actually) spiritually mature person pointed out at Taizé this year, intellectualism is not a gift of the spirit, whereas joy most definitely is.

So, I put down some of my sketches on paper and bagged myself some guitar lessons. Perhaps it was all that 70s childhood exposure to Scottish comedian Billy Connolly in his banana boots, but it seemed to me that stand up needs an extra ingredient in the form of song. And while I need gazillions more guitar lessons before I'm even fit to lick Connolly's boots, it's a start!

In Spring 2024 I had an exploratory chat with the artist liaison team from the Edinburgh Fringe group that handily operate out of my church building. They were absolutely delighted at the prospect of an actual congregant performing with them and encouraged me to 'go for it.' Before I could talk myself out of it, I signed up to perform in The Snug, aka the Christian Aid back office at my URC church, during Week 1 of the Fringe.

My 9-day stint at the Fringe didn't begin too well, with a rather ropery preview show. (Well hey, I guess that's what preview shows are for!). There were five in the audience to hear me play an untuned guitar badly, my fingers so sweaty with nerves and the heat from the intense spotlights that they wouldn't hold the frets down. I had also mistimed my practice runs at home and had to omit a sizeable chunk of my material, making the whole thing rather disjointed. To make it worse, the Fringe had sent a few "volunteers" down to bolster numbers. One of them glowered at me murderously for the full 45 minutes, which added to my anxiety. My humour also fell largely flat, mainly due to the

demographics of those in the room, and the lighting was so bright that two of the audience members had to face away from me. Or at least, that was their excuse. I was mortified, though my wife and son assured me it hadn't been that bad, and at least I could use the experience as the basis for a future sketch. With supporters like this, who need enemies?

Probably the highlight of the week, alongside the presence of so many friends and students of mine, was the surprise appearance of my good friend, Hilde Vossen, of the European Bisexual Network, who flew in from the Netherlands on Tuesday to catch my show. Let's just say, a few beers were sunk after the show.

Since Edinburgh Fringe, I've performed at several more events. Though I enjoy making people laugh, it's writing and performing songs that have recently come to mean more. Whilst I am very much a novice at the art of singer-songwriting, the act of creating songs that express my politics, spirituality and sexuality, feels liberating and a coming full circle back to my childhood, where I would sit in my bedroom composing tales of childhood angst!

## Activism through Trusteeship

I suppose it's because there's not many of us Bi Christians about (or at least *out* and about), that I have had the good fortune to have been invited to be a trustee of several leading LGBT+ Christian organisations. Whilst I am aware that a three-legged goat identifying as bi would probably be asked, to fulfil the diversity quota, it still feels like a privilege. In the mid-2010s, I served as Vice-Chair of the Lesbian & Gay Christian Movement in the UK (now One Body One Faith),<sup>7</sup> followed by a term as Secretary to the European Forum of LGBT+ Christian Groups.<sup>8</sup> I am currently Co-chair and trustee of Open Table Network,<sup>9</sup> a UK based LGBT+ Christian organisation. I would love to be involved again at international level,

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7 See <https://www.onebodyonefaith.org.uk/>

8 <https://www.lgbtchristians.eu/>

9 <https://opentable.lgbt/>

however responsibilities at home make that difficult at present. I'm currently focused on extending queer Christian worship provision beyond the central belt in Scotland. This is challenging due to the population dispersion beyond the main cities of Edinburgh and Glasgow, particularly in the Highlands and islands.

I am not a flag-bearing, shouty activist type. I prefer to present as an everyday professional person than a rainbow festooned queer unicorn. I resist popular bandwagons and try to think through issues for myself. I see my independence of thought and anti-ovine traits as plus points. There's something about being bisexual that gives you the innate ability to see multiple viewpoints and bridge the divide. It's a kind of plurisexuality of mind, too, I guess – a mind that is comfortable with holding seemingly opposing ideas. Sadly, though, I find there are less and less people holding the middle ground. In today's flag-bearing, shouty, polarised culture, it's not an easy place to be. In fact, it can feel quite unsafe. When I was growing up, extreme positions were seen as dangerous. These days, it feels like the measured, intelligent response is demonised by red and blue corners alike.

I have often used my role as trustee to advocate for bi rights. It is not enough simply to be the B on the board of trustees. Perhaps my most notable appearance was at an Oasis Conference<sup>10</sup> run by public-facing evangelical ally Steve Chalke ten years ago. Steve Chalke was encouraged not to sit on the discussion panel and to give up his place to a member of the queer Christian community. My name was put forward as a bi unicorn and I duly took my place next to Vicky Beeching and some other speakers. Let's just say I took my opportunity to speak my mind on the church's attitude to the LGBT+ community and my assertion that expecting queer Christians to attend a non-affirming church and suck it up, was like expecting a black person to work for a racist organisation. I was much quoted. I also challenged popular American theologian Tony Campolo at this conference (on live link from the USA) to consider whether he would leave his wife of many years, if someone told him his relationship was sinful (as many queer Christians are expected to do, on enter-

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10 <https://www.oasisuk.org/>

ing the church or pulpit). He was actually rendered speechless and said he would have to think about that. I can't take sole credit (though my ego would dearly love to) but not long after, he made an about-turn on LGBT+ Christian rights, much to the consternation of the Evangelical Church.

I was also the person on the panel at ILGA 2019 who (ironically, given the above) had a fractious live debate with a black activist from the Netherlands, who accused me of white academic privilege in front of a huge in-person and online audience, when I spoke of the values of diplomacy and professionalism in LGBT+ advocacy work. That did not feel good, I have to say, but interestingly many people commented on how refreshing it was to see people speak their mind on such panels, rather than engage in bland platitudes. But if I'm honest, I felt well and truly crushed under the wheels of the shouty rainbow bandwagon gathering momentum that day.

All of these various trustee roles have given me a platform to write and record in the name of bi Christian activism. I have been invited on podcasts both home and abroad and asked to contribute articles to publications both in the UK and in continental Europe – from Rotterdam to Russia! It seems that the average person struggles to get their head around bi Christians, undoubtedly fuelled by the common misconception that all bi people sleep around. Actually, I could count the number of sexual partners I've had in my life on the fingers of one hand.

## Activism in my Job Role

My paid employment involved teaching students, from 16 upwards, in a variety of settings – 121 online, at the local university, or in Adult Education centres. I make it clear through references to my everyday life, that I am both a member of the queer community, and a Christian. I think it is important to mention both, and particularly in the same breath, as it signals to LGBT+ students that they have someone who understands, but also serves to dispel many of those stereotypes about the Christian faith.

Unfortunately, few young people these days explore Christianity for themselves, and all too often, it is the fundamentalist homophobic version that shouts loudest, drowning out more progressive expressions of faith. Many students I teach have never come across an LGBT+ affirming faith community and they still view queer identities and faith as two mutually exclusive entities.

I see my role as an educator to educate beyond the limitations of the particular academic curricula being studied – fortunately teaching Social Sciences gives rise to wider societal debates in any case. But even teaching English or modern foreign languages (MFL) – another sideline of mine, can be used to discuss gender and sexuality – the pronoun issue for example, or a critique of heteronormativity in language textbooks!

## Future Plans

I have always had the feeling that I was going to do something big with my life. My therapist tells me that this is just a reaction to being ignored as a child (I think she believes I'll grow out of it!). I suppose I have achieved a lot in my 54 years on God's earth, and cumulatively I've done big things. I'm proud of the way I've overcome a difficult upbringing and partial family rejection, extended grace to those who have hurt me, and turned my life around following my divorce. I've also survived a seismic attack on my sexuality and integrity in a church setting, lifted myself (with God's help and Venlafaxine) out of a deep depression and had several books published. Living by faith, I've relocated 447 miles north with no job or accommodation in place and more than survived. I've taken the plunge and left a salaried role for a more precarious (but infinitely more rewarding) freelance life. And yes, I've made some stupid mistakes and I've broken a few hearts along the way, including my own. But whilst I am not materially wealthy, my life is rich. I am happily remarried, have three wonderful adult children and a house within shouting distance of the sea and Scotland's beautiful capital city. I'd certainly have taken that, as a discontented teenager trapped in a soulless housing estate in South Wales.

I don't know who's right about my life calling – my therapist or me.  
But God knows.

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