

## 3.2 Being Christian and Bisexual

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*Marilene, Netherlands*

### **Bisexual Awakenings**

I am Marilene, a 64-year-old Dutch woman. Several times in my life I have fallen in love with a woman, starting when I fell in love with a girl when I was 15 years old. I met her at the Girl Scouts; she was a few years older than me and very beautiful in my eyes. However, I wrote in my diary, 'I'm definitely not lesbian.' I wrote it in Greek letters, as I was learning ancient Greek at school, the only one in my family to do so. This was to ensure that nobody could understand it, even if he or she secretly read my diary!

In the years that followed, I attended Youth for Christ summer camps several times. I don't know why this only happened in summer camps, but it was during these that I fell in love with girls multiple times. One girl had really big blue eyes and I wanted to gaze into those eyes all day! At another camp I also fell in love with a girl, but with brown eyes this time. I always lay down next to her in the tent. And I remember that we sometimes prayed in a circle, holding each other's hands. This might last at least half an hour. I intentionally sat next to her, more aware of her hand than of the prayer. But that was it, nothing more happened, as I was too shy and she did nothing either. One year later I had a boyfriend, and he fell in love with the same girl. The confusing aspect for me was that I also fell in love with boys – or they fell in love with me – and I had a few relationships with them. However, the longest lasted only half a year.

Youth for Christ, of which I was an active member, was *not* a gay friendly environment. I became a leader of the local YFC in my town. I remember that someone from the COC, a Dutch organization for gay people, called me. He asked me if they could come to a meeting to provide some information. I said: 'Yes, of course.' However, someone from the national Youth for Christ leadership tried to forbid this. Nevertheless, we invited the people from the COC. I found nothing wrong with that.

## Bisexual Attractions in Adulthood

When I was 21 years old, I met Jaap at another Youth for Christ camp. He was 25 and was there to find a Christian wife, ultimately choosing me. He was very friendly and humorous and I fell in love with him as well. We married after three years together and I was happy with him. Our relationship was amicable; we did a lot of activities together and took longer trips together, for example to the United States. We had three children and raised them in a happy household.

During my marriage, I occasionally fell in love, mostly with women, and only once with a man. I felt both physically and emotionally attracted to both, and I would try and physically touch these people as much as possible, for example, allowing my legs to brush against theirs under the lunch table, and noticing when the other person reciprocated. I concluded that I was bisexual, but I was also very faithful, so nothing ever happened.

When I had been married for about fifteen years, I wanted to learn more about my bisexuality. There was an organization called 'De Kringen' (The Circles) where gay, lesbian, and bisexual people met in small groups in or near their hometowns. People just chatted there. I participated in this for a year, but the focus was more on their individual problems, and I didn't share much about myself. Jaap knew I was attending. At first he was shocked, but he accepted my desire to learn more about myself. Once I went to a LGBT bar, but I knew no-one and felt lonely. I also found a lesbian woman online' We exchanged emails and had one

date at a restaurant. We felt no attraction towards each other and that was the end of it.

## **The Church: Homophobia & Acceptance**

I remember times in my life when I thought a lot about gay rights, even when it didn't directly involve me. In our church, we were looking for a second pastor. Jochem, who is also active in the European Forum, was the best candidate. However, he was openly gay and had (and still has) a relationship with Bart. Our church organized two evenings on this topic because some members struggled with it. I recall questions like 'Can't we have a normal pastor? One is divorced, and one is gay.' The chairman of the church council was very opposed, exclaiming that the church council should avoid making this mistake. Others stated: 'If Jochem can't serve because he is gay, then I will leave this church.' Eventually, Jochem was accepted, and the chairman resigned. However, initially Jochem had to deal with some church members who refused to attend his services or receive visits from him. Thankfully, most members were enthusiastic about Jochem, since he did his job so well. Jochem and Bart also married in our church, and I still feel emotional thinking about them entering the church hand in hand.

A lesbian couple also married in our church. They asked me to be the elder in the service. After the service we drove to the reception. Two of my children were sat on the backseat, still young enough to find every experience normal. I said to Jaap: 'That was very special.' One child asked: 'What was special?' I answered: 'That two women could marry in the church.' The other child asked: 'Why was this special?' I replied: 'Because not so long ago it wasn't possible for two women to marry in a church.' The final question: 'Where were they supposed to get married then?'

I'm an author of teaching methods for newcomers to the Netherlands. During that period, I wrote a book of information about Dutch society. I was writing a chapter about relationships, including homosexual relationships. I asked both Jochem and Bart as well as the lesbian cou-

ple if I could write a text about them. And they agreed. Since 2008 about 100,000 copies of these books titled 'Welkom in Nederland' have been sold.

## Two Gay Sons and a Straight Daughter

Life went on and our children grew up. My oldest son, Maarten, was 19 years old. He had never had a girlfriend, which surprised me, because he had many female friends. He lived in a student house but was home on a Saturday evening. He said: 'Mum and Dad, I have to tell you something. I'm gay. Am I still the same person to you?' I still feel tears when I recall that question, because we had always spoken positively about homosexuality. However, for a child it remains hard to share this with his parents. He had known this for a couple of years, but had never told us, nor had he even confided in his best friend. A few years later it became clear that our second son, Thijs, was also gay. He too had a difficult time coming out. Again a few years later my daughter Marije came to me: 'Mom, I have to tell you something ....' This is number three, I thought. But then she said: 'In our family there is a time to announce which gender you're attracted to. I think I'm straight; I'm in love with a boy!'

My elder son Maarten went on an exchange to Mexico, where he met Ricardo and they fell in love. However, after half a year Maarten returned to the Netherlands. The relationship ended, because they lived too far apart from each other and they believed they had no future. Seven years later, however, Ricardo came to London for his master's degree. This was relatively close to the Netherlands, so they made contact again. Later they told me about the moment they met each other again at the station in Utrecht. Ricardo was still in the train while Maarten stood on the platform. They saw each other again after seven years and at that moment they both decided to stay together for life! Ricardo moved to the Netherlands and they started living together.

Jaap, myself, Thijs and his boyfriend also went to Mexico, where we visited Ricardo's parents and sisters. During that holiday, Ricardo's father was working a lot, so he didn't join us on most of our trips. However,

I also knew he was not used to seeing his son with a boyfriend. On the last day we were having drinks on a terrace. Suddenly he said: 'I want to share something. I was raised as a Catholic and homosexuality was not accepted in my church. But now I have seen how happy my son is with his boyfriend, and I have also seen how you (Jaap and I) treat them as a normal couple. From now on, I want to accept my son the way he is, as a gay man.' Tears ran down my cheeks, when I saw Ricardo's happy expression!

In 2020, one day before COVID lockdown, my son and Ricardo married in the Netherlands in a wonderful wedding, surrounded by their Dutch and Mexican families. And In 2022, their daughter Juna was born, carried by a surrogate mother, who had been a good friend of Ricardo since their childhood. Juna is now two years old and for her, it's normal to have two daddies who love her. She's now consciously aware of this. She recently said, "I have two daddies. And Oma (Grandma) Lene," that's what she calls me. So now I have two sons, one daughter, three sons in law and a grandchild!

The story about Juna surprises people. Sometimes people ask me questions like, 'Who is the real father?' or how they did it technically. To which I answer, 'both are real fathers and she also has four real grandparents!'

## Questioning my Marriage & Creating Space

The previous section focused on my gay children, but now back to my own process. I became friends with a female couple from my (Protestant) church, Ineke and Jenni. They are active in the European Forum of LGBTQI+ Christians. I told them about the probability that I might be bisexual, although I didn't have any experience with women. One time, members of the board from the European Forum visited them for a couple of days. They also came to our church. After the church service I joined them for coffee in the couple's house. There I also met Carol. She asked me the question: 'Are you straight?' My answer then was: 'I think I am bisexual, but I'm also married to a man and I'm very faithful.' I then became interested in the activities of the European Forum. In

the first year of COVID, the conference was online. I attended some workshops and I also had a video call with a German bisexual woman, at her request. She told me she had a girlfriend who was also married to a man, and that she only saw her one evening a fortnight. I found that very sad and thought: ‘Why doesn’t her girlfriend make a choice?’ And that became a question for myself, as well.

So this experience also made me think about my marriage with Jaap. Although we rarely argued, I noticed more and more that we were simply good old friends, rather than romantic partners. We had grown apart emotionally. This was a separate issue from my feelings about women. Since our children had left home, it was just the two of us. But we rarely had deep conversations and we also had less and less physical contact. He seldom took the initiative, with all holidays and other plans together organized by myself. I increasingly made plans with female friends. We had been in relationship therapy for a while, but it hadn’t ultimately helped us much.

In 2021, Maarten and Ricardo decided to sell their small house and to buy a bigger one. Their small house had been my mother’s home before she passed away. It was in a village near a forest and Jaap had been saying for a long time that he wanted to move to that village, because he really enjoyed being in the forest there. I thought: ‘This is a chance to separate during a housing shortage.’ I didn’t want to divorce yet – it was more a way to create my own space. However, I still felt responsible for him and was afraid to hurt him with my plans. At first he was shocked, because it would change his familiar life completely. We didn’t have much time for the decision, as Maarten and Ricardo needed to sell their house before they could buy a new one. In addition, other people outside of the family wanted to pay a better price for it than we could afford. But after an evening of talking with them, including many tears on my part, we decided to buy it at market price as a new home for Jaap.

That summer he moved and although there also were some sadness and loneliness, I felt it had been a good decision. We stayed friends and saw – and still see – each other almost every weekend, when we have dinner together, the two of us, or with friends or our children. Our conversations became deeper, our friendship remained strong. I still do his

laundry weekly and he maintains my garden. We celebrate birthdays and parties together with our children. However, after spending a few hours together, I'm always glad to have my own space again.

## Coming Out as a Bisexual Christian Woman

In 2023, there was another European Forum conference in Venlo, in the Netherlands and Ineke and Jenni invited me to join them. I thought: 'Well I have nothing to lose, if I really don't like it, I can leave the conference and go home.' In the meeting for first-time attendees to the conference, I was surprised to encounter people from all over Europe, including countries that were not gay-friendly like Russia, Poland and Armenia. I introduced myself as: 'I am Marilene, mother of two gay sons.' And immediately I realized, if there's anywhere where I am safe to be honest, it's here. Suddenly, I began to cry and said, 'Well, I'm also here a bit for myself.' Immediately the people around me supported me and I felt a hand on my shoulder. I felt like I was in a warm bath of comfort. At that conference, I met many people with whom I could share my story and I also learned how they navigated their process of being Christian and members of the LGBTQI+ community.

In 2024, I went to the conference in Milan and had a similar experience. Jaap and I had lived separately for almost three years by then. I realised more and more during that conference that if I wanted to give myself the chance to experience a relationship with a woman, then I first had to end my marriage – not just live separately, but also divorce, because I still felt unfaithful to Jaap when I thought about starting something with a woman. At this conference – and also the online one in 2021 – I heard about polyamorous relationships, but that's not for me.

Last summer I went with a group on a hiking holiday. There was a lesbian woman in that group. She was single and I felt attracted to her. We also shared a lot of work-related experiences and similar interests. We took a long walk together in September, after that a holiday – just the two of us. After that, I noticed that I no longer had those feelings. In

a way she disappointed me. Maybe these feelings had just been present in the holiday environment. We both decided not to meet again. However, the experience of having these feelings for a woman, in a situation where I was no longer in a relationship with Jaap, helped me make the decision to finalize the separation from Jaap and get a divorce.

## **Closing One Chapter, Opening Another**

And that's what I did last autumn – with Jaap's consent, I divorced after a marriage of 40 years. But although we both thought it was the right decision, there was also sadness for both of us. The day we signed the documents with the lawyer, Jaap came to pick me up. As soon as I saw him, I fell crying into his arms. I asked the lawyer to take a picture when we signed the documents and I posted it on Facebook writing honestly about how I felt. A lot of people were surprised by the way I did this, but they supported me.

The weekend before the divorce I was at a writers' retreat in a monastery. There was an exercise which involved writing about your 75<sup>th</sup> birthday, which was somewhere in the future for all participants – who would be there and what you would say in a speech. I wrote that I was on a Greek island with my wife and family. After the exercise the leader asked who wanted to read theirs aloud to the group. For me it felt like a coming out. I thought, 'What am I afraid of? I'm only here for a weekend and I will probably never see these people again.' It made me aware that you are always vulnerable, when you speak about your true feelings and desires. But I received only positive reactions once I'd read it out. On the last day of the retreat, a woman next to me said during the meal that she was also divorced and was still in mourning. I asked her, 'Do you still have contact with him?' She corrected me, 'Her! I don't see her anymore.' I was surprised and a bit ashamed of how heteronormative my thinking was, despite my 'coming out' the day before. I apologized and shared my feelings.

This is the point where I am right now, two months after my divorce. My wedding ring has been remade, combined with my grandmother's

ring in a knot. My grandmother's name is Helena Maria; I am named after her – Maria Helena. I never knew her; she died in an accident when I was two months old. The inscription on the ring is Lena and a date in 1924, 100 years before my divorce. The exact same week that I took the rings to the jeweller with the request to combine them, my grandchild called me 'Oma Lene' (Grandmother Lena) for the first time!

Thinking about a real relationship with a woman is a process; I believe I am growing into it. There is no longer any objection on my part – and I don't think God has ever had any objection to it. It both feels exciting and vulnerable. I don't think a dating site or app would be right for me, though. I would find it hard to turn anyone down – or indeed, to be turned down. Perhaps it's too early yet, and I need more time; I only got divorced two months ago. When it's meant to be, and the time is right, perhaps I'll meet her at an unexpected time and place.

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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.*