

CAROL A SHEPHERD,
JOSÉ CALVO TELLO (EDS.)

BISEXUAL, CHRISTIAN, EUROPEAN

BISEXUAL CHRISTIAN LIFE STORIES
FROM AROUND EUROPE



[transcript] Queer Studies

Carol A Shepherd, José Calvo Tello (eds.)
Bisexual, Christian, European

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Finally, we extend our thanks to all our contributors and interviewees for generously sharing their stories.

Preface

Carol A Shepherd

Testimony, Theology and the Bisexual Christian Experience in Europe

This book began with a simple but urgent observation: bisexual Christians exist in every corner of Europe, yet their stories are rarely heard, their needs are rarely addressed, and their theological insights are rarely taken seriously. Despite bisexuality being the largest sexual minority within the LGBTQI+ umbrella (Yoshino, 2000;¹ Maliepaard & Baumgartner, 2022),² bisexual Christians remain largely invisible in both ecclesial and academic discourse. Their experiences are often subsumed under lesbian and gay narratives, or erased entirely through monosexual assumptions that dominate both queer and Christian spaces (Barker & Langdridge, 2008;³ Eisner, 2013).⁴

This collection of stories emerged from a desire to correct that erasure. It brings together sixteen bisexual Christians from across Europe (Germany, the Netherlands, England, Scotland, Poland, Italy, France, Switzerland, Spain, Russia, Sweden and beyond) each offering a deeply personal account of faith, sexuality and identity. Their stories are diverse

-
- 1 Yoshino, K. (2000) 'The epistemic contract of bisexual erasure', *Stanford Law Review*, 52(2), pp. 353–461.
 - 2 Maliepaard, E. & Baumgartner, R. (eds.) (2022) *Bisexuality in Europe: Sexual Citizenship, Romantic Relationships, and Bi+ Identities*. London: Routledge.
 - 3 Barker, M. & Langdridge, D. (2008), 'Bisexuality: Working with a Silenced Sexuality', *Feminism & Psychology*, 18(3), pp. 389–394.
 - 4 Eisner, S. (2013), *'Bi: Notes for a Bisexual Revolution'*, Berkeley, CA: Seal Press.

in age, gender, denomination, ethnicity and cultural background. Yet they share a common thread: each contributor has wrestled with the tension between their bisexual identity and their Christian faith, and each has discovered, in their own way, that these identities need not be in conflict.

The decision to present these narratives in the authors' own voices is intentional. Christian theology has always been shaped by testimony, from the confessions of Augustine to the spiritual autobiographies of Teresa of Ávila, from the liberation narratives of Latin American campesinos to the queer testimonies that shaped early LGBTQ+ theology (Goss, 1993;⁵ Cheng, 2011).⁶ Testimony is not merely descriptive; it is theological. It reveals how individuals encounter God, interpret Scripture and discern ethical meaning in the midst of lived experience.

The contributors to this volume are theologians in this sense. Their lives articulate a theology of embodiment, relationality and authenticity that challenges the church to expand its understanding of human sexuality and divine love. Their stories reveal the pastoral failures of churches that have remained silent on bisexuality, the psychological toll of erasure, and the resilience of those who continue to seek God in the midst of rejection. They also reveal the creativity, joy, and spiritual depth that bisexual Christians bring to the life of the church.

This book is offered to scholars, clergy, pastoral workers and all who seek to understand the complexity of bisexual Christian experience. It is also offered to bisexual Christians themselves, who may find in these pages echoes of their own journeys, and perhaps a sense of solidarity, validation and hope.

Dr Carol A Shepherd, February 2026

5 Goss, R. (1993) *Jesus Acted Up: A Gay and Lesbian Manifesto*. San Francisco: Harper-SanFrancisco.

6 Cheng, P.S. (2011) *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology*. New York: Seabury Books.

Introduction

José Calvo Tello & Carol A Shepherd

Bisexual, Christian, European: Lived Theologies

Christian theology has always been shaped by the lived experiences of believers. From the early church's testimonies to the writings of mystics, reformers and liberation theologians, the voices of those on the margins have repeatedly expanded the church's understanding of God, humanity and morality. This anthology, *Bisexual, Christian, European*, stands within that tradition. It gathers the testimonies of bisexual Christians from across Europe—voices rarely heard, often misunderstood and historically excluded from both queer and Christian discourse.

These stories are not simply autobiographical reflections. They are lived theologies: embodied interpretations of faith, identity and divine presence. They reveal how bisexual Christians navigate the tensions between doctrine and desire, tradition and authenticity, silence and proclamation. They expose the pastoral failures of churches that have too often ignored or erased bisexual experience, and they offer new theological insights born from the margins of both church and queer community.

This introduction situates the anthology within contemporary queer theology, bisexual studies and European Christian contexts. It identifies recurring themes across the chapters, articulates the theological significance of bisexual lived experience and argues for the necessity of bisexual-specific theological engagement. In doing so, it frames the book not only as a sociological contribution but as a theological intervention, one

that challenges the church to listen, repent of prejudice or wilful ignorance and be transformed.

Why Bisexuality? Why Christianity? Why Europe?

Across Europe and beyond, bisexuality remains the most common non-heterosexual identity. Yet bisexual Christians remain the least acknowledged, least researched and least pastorally supported group within churches. Contributors such as Andreas in Germany, Marilene in the Netherlands, Jaime in England and José in Spain testify to the profound loneliness that arises when one's identity is erased or misrepresented. Their stories reveal a consistent pattern: bisexuality is frequently misunderstood as promiscuity, indecision or a transitional phase. Within Christian contexts, these misconceptions are amplified by theological conservatism, purity culture and the persistent influence of monosexual norms. The result is a pervasive silence, a silence that communicates that bisexuality is unspeakable, unthinkable or incompatible with Christian life.

Europe provides a distinctive landscape for exploring bisexual Christian identities. Its deep Christian heritage, traditions including Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant and Free Church traditions, shapes the contributors' experiences in diverse ways. Catholic contexts inform the stories of Benedetta, Anna, Victoria, Luis and Marilene; Orthodox traditions shape Kamilla's journey from Russia; Evangelical and Free Church settings frame the experiences of Andreas, Cathy and José; and Lutheran and Anglican spaces become sites of refuge for Christelle, Daniela and Will. Migration also plays a significant role, with several contributors describing how moving across borders opened new possibilities for self-understanding and spiritual belonging.

The anthology format is itself a theological statement. Christianity is a tradition built on testimony, the testimonies of prophets, apostles, mystics, martyrs and ordinary believers. To gather bisexual Christian testimonies is to claim that these lives, too, belong within the story of God's people. At a time when queerphobia is resurgent in parts

of Europe, when churches remain divided on sexuality and when bisexual people continue to experience disproportionate mental-health challenges, these stories are both timely and necessary.

The Erasure of Bisexuality: A Quantification

Some may argue that bisexuality is not invisibilised, whether in Christian contexts or elsewhere. Yet invisibility is, by its nature, difficult to measure. To explore this phenomenon, we compared the cultural presence of terms related to homosexuality and bisexuality across three languages central to this anthology: English, German and Spanish. Two types of large-scale resources help illuminate these patterns: linguistic corpora and national library catalogues.

Linguistic corpora, that is, collections of texts designed to reflect language use considering decades, genres and registers, offer a useful starting point (O’Keeffe and McCarthy 2022).¹ For English, we consulted the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA);² for German, the Digitales Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache (DWDS);³ and for Spanish, the Corpus del Español del Siglo XXI (CORPES XXI).⁴ In each case, we searched for the roots *homosexual* and *bisexual*, adding a wildcard (e.g., *homosex**) to capture related forms such as *homosexuality*, *homosexuals* and *homosexually*. Although each language includes other terms with similar meanings, e.g. *gay* in English and Spanish, *schwul* in German, we deliberately excluded these because of their multiple, unrelated uses and because *gay* often functions as an umbrella term, complicating direct comparison.

Figure 1 shows the differences between the three corpora. Across all three corpora, the pattern is striking. In Spanish and German, terms re-

1 O’Keeffe, Anne, and Michael McCarthy. (2022) *The Routledge Handbook of Corpus Linguistics*. Routledge Taylor & Francis Group.

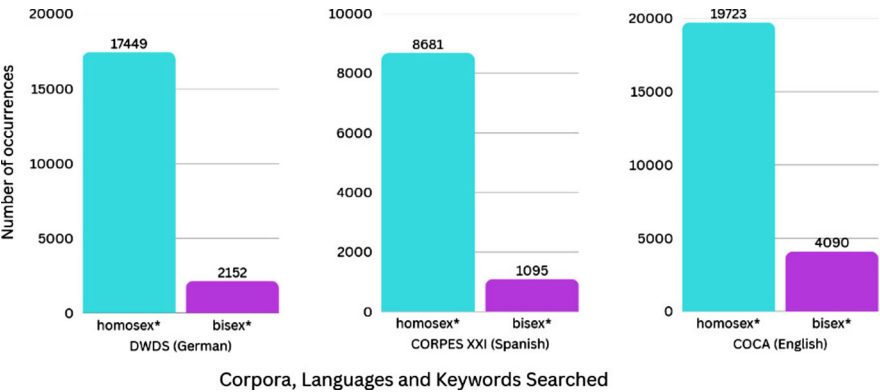
2 <https://www.english-corpora.org/coca/>

3 <https://www.dwds.de/>

4 <https://www.rae.es/corpes/>

lated to homosexuality appear around eight times more frequently than those related to bisexuality. In the English-American corpus, the ratio is approximately 5:1.

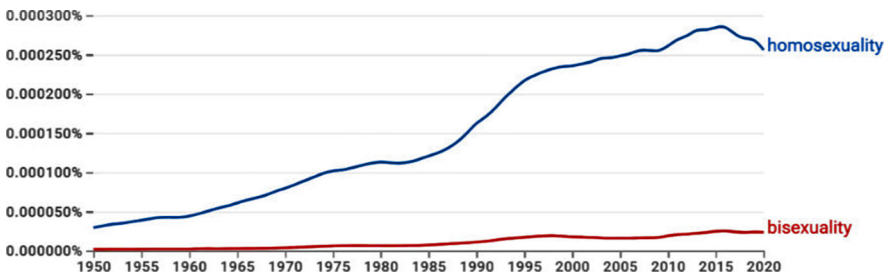
Figure 1: Number of Occurrences of Terms related to Homosexuality and Bisexuality in Linguistic Corpora in English, Spanish and German



To gain a historical perspective, we also examined Google’s Books Ngram Viewer, which tracks the frequency of terms in digitised books over time. Because the tool does not support wildcards, we searched for *homosexuality* and *bisexuality* specifically. The results are consistent across English, Spanish and German: between 1950 and 2020, *homosexuality* appears at least twelve times more often than *bisexuality*.⁵ Figure 2 shows the distance of the frequency in the vertical axis with a historical overview with the year of publication in the horizontal axis.

5 https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=homosexuality%2Cbisexuality&year_start=1950&year_end=2022&corpus=en&smoothing=3

Figure 2: Development of Frequency of Homosexuality and Bisexuality in Google Ngram Viewer between 1950 and 2020



These findings rest on necessary simplifications. A more nuanced linguistic analysis would likely reveal an even greater disparity. In many contexts, discussions of homosexuality rely solely on the term *gay*, whereas no equivalent widely used term exists for bisexuality. Moreover, the meaning of *bisexuality* has shifted over time: before the 1990s, it was used primarily in biology to describe organisms with two sexes. Excluding these biological references would further reduce the apparent presence of bisexuality in historical texts.

A similar pattern emerges when examining the intersection of sexuality and Christian faith. Researchers in Digital Humanities increasingly use library catalogues to quantify the presence of particular topics in published works (Umerle et al. 2022).⁶ We searched the catalogues of three national libraries, namely the British Library (BL),⁷ the German National Library (DNB)⁸ and the Spanish National Library (BNE)⁹, for titles containing *homosex** or *bisex** alongside *christian** (*christlich** in German, *cristian** in Spanish). The results shown in Figure 3 reveal a stark im-

6 Umerle, Tomasz, Giovanni Colavizza, Elżbieta Herden, et al. (2022) *An Analysis of the Current Bibliographical Data Landscape in the Humanities. A Case for the Joint Bibliodata Agendas of Public Stakeholders*. Zenodo. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.6559857>.

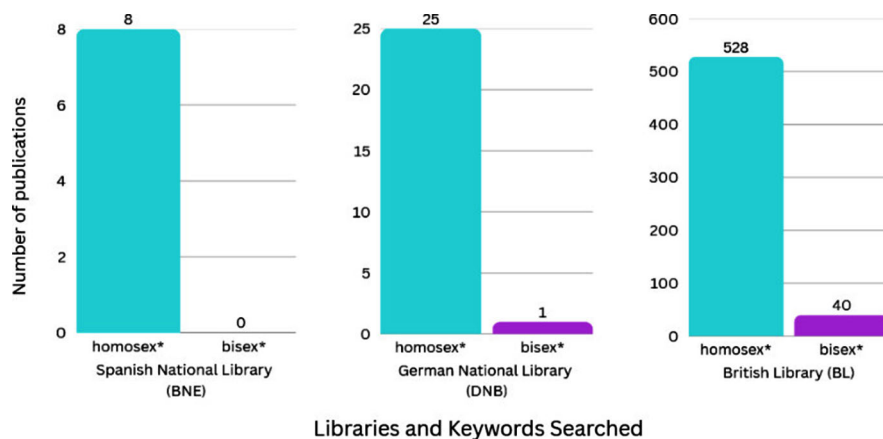
7 <https://catalogue.bl.uk/>

8 <https://portal.dnb.de/opac/showSearchForm>

9 <https://catalogo.bne.es/>

balance once again: the Spanish library lists no publications on bisexuality and Christianity; the German library lists one; and the British Library shows a ratio of thirteen publications on homosexuality and Christianity for every one on bisexuality and Christianity.

Figure 3: Number of Occurrences of Terms related to Homosexuality and Bisexuality and Christianity in the Library Catalogues of National Libraries of Spain, Germany and UK



These searches inevitably miss relevant works; for instance, a book titled *Bi People: A History in the Church* would not appear, nor would *Gay People: A History in the Church*. Our aim is not to identify every publication, but rather to illustrate the scale of invisibilisation by comparing the situation of bisexuality with that of homosexuality.

Across all measures, the conclusion is clear. Although demographic studies consistently show that bisexual people form a larger group than homosexual people, bisexuality remains significantly underrepresented, culturally, linguistically and theologically, and is often much less visible.

Theological Themes from the Narratives

Although each chapter is unique, several theological themes recur across the anthology, revealing how bisexual Christians are already doing theology, often implicitly, sometimes explicitly, through the very act of living faithfully in the face of erasure/invisibility.

The goodness of creation emerges as a central theme. Contributors describe rediscovering themselves as created good: Andreas's reflection on Genesis, Daniela's "joyful a-ha moment," and Victoria's revelation that God "dreamed her LGBTQI+" all affirm sexuality as part of God's good creation. These journeys challenge doctrines that frame bisexuality as disorder or instability, instead presenting it as a site of divine creativity and relational richness.

Silence as theological harm appears throughout the narratives. Many describe how ecclesial silence produced shame, fear and the sense of living a "double life." Jaime's mixed-orientation marriages, José's "wall of silence" and Cathy's experiences of religious trauma illustrate the spiritual cost of this silence, which functions as a denial of the Incarnation—the claim that God enters and sanctifies human experience.

Scripture and interpretation also play a significant role. Some contributors grew up with literalist readings that condemned queer identities; others encountered queer theology that affirmed gay and lesbian identities but erased bisexual possibilities. Their stories reveal a hunger for hermeneutics that recognise fluidity, complexity and multiplicity—a bisexual hermeneutic attentive to the porous boundaries of human affection.

Embodiment and authenticity surface as sites of divine encounter. Accepting one's bisexuality or gender identity often leads to a deeper sense of incarnation, as seen in Luis's transition, Oliver's deconstruction of gender and Kamilla's journey across faith traditions. These stories challenge theologies that separate body and soul, desire and discipleship.

Community and belonging emerge as sacramental. Many contributors describe exclusion from their churches of origin, followed by the discovery of more inclusive spaces: Lutheran congregations,

MCC churches, Anglican parishes, queer Christian groups and online communities. These communities mediate grace, affirm identity and embody the hospitality of Christ.

Bisexuality as Theological Gift

One of the anthology's most significant contributions is its reframing of bisexuality not as a problem to be solved but as a theological gift. Bisexuality destabilises binary thinking, a mode deeply embedded in Western theology, and opens new ways of understanding God, neighbour and self. Contributors such as Will, Oliver and Cathy articulate how bisexuality resonates with theological understandings of the Trinity, incarnation and grace as dynamic, relational and fluid.

Bisexuality also expands the church's relational imagination. Stories of mixed-orientation marriages, late-life authenticity and unconditional parenting challenge narrow definitions of family, marriage and vocation. And bisexual Christians' liminal position, marginalised within both church and queer communities, mirrors biblical patterns in which God speaks through those on the margins, generating insight, resilience and prophetic critique.

Structure of the Book

The anthology is organised into four thematic sections:

- a) Politics, Activism and the Church
- b) Complexities of Identity
- c) Mixed Orientation Marriage
- d) Navigating Different Cultures

Each chapter stands alone, yet together they form a mosaic of bisexual Christian life across Europe.

Toward a More Faithful Church

The stories in this anthology call the church to repentance and renewal. They reveal the harm caused by silence, the violence of erasure and the spiritual cost of theological rigidity. Yet they also reveal the possibility of transformation, for individuals, communities and institutions. A faithful church listens to bisexual Christians, educates itself about bisexuality, challenges monosexual assumptions, develops bisexual-specific pastoral resources and recognises bisexuality as part of God's diverse creation. This anthology is offered as a step toward that vision.

Conclusion: Testimony as Theology

To read these stories is to encounter theology in its most embodied form. These are not abstract arguments but lived articulations of grace, struggle, revelation and hope. They remind us that God speaks through the lives of believers, including those whose identities have been marginalised or misunderstood. *Bisexual, Christian, European* is therefore more than a collection of narratives: it is a theological text, a witness to the God who meets people in their complexity, delights in diversity and calls the church to a more expansive understanding of love.

With that in mind, we welcome you to our stories!

Section 1: Politics, Activism and the Church

1.1 Bi Christian Activism – The Road Less Travelled

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.¹

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

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*,² is mandatory reading for those considering ordination.³ 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

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*.⁴

I set up Easy Yoke Publishing, based on the verse from Matthew 11:29⁵, 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.⁶ 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

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-

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

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),⁷ followed by a term as Secretary to the European Forum of LGBT+ Christian Groups.⁸ I am currently Co-chair and trustee of Open Table Network,⁹ a UK based LGBT+ Christian organisation. I would love to be involved again at international level,

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 Conference¹⁰ 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-

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.

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

1.2 From Russia with Love, Faith and Identity

Kamilla (interview), Russia

Nationality

I'm 41. I was born here in Russia, in Moscow, but it was the Soviet Union then. It was a very multinational and multi-ethnic country. And actually, I didn't know until I was six or seven that did not only have Russian blood in me. I have a father who would come and visit me – my parents were never married. And I thought, maybe it's just like this with fathers – they don't speak Russian well! That's what fathers do! But he was from Azerbaijan, one of the former Soviet republics. He's Muslim but he actually left Azerbaijan in the 50s. But I was born and raised here, in Russia. Russia is my country and I have never lived in any other country. But I wouldn't not always say I was Russian – it depends. It's important for me, actually, to mention that half my blood is Azerbaijani, because being Russian is a privilege in Russia, the same as being Anglo-Saxon is a privilege in the UK. And I think the voices of the underprivileged need to be heard. Sometimes when I know the person is a foreigner, they usually don't know what Azerbaijani is. But it's important. My girlfriend is English. I have a half-brother who is absolutely Azerbaijani. And he comes to fix her TV. And she once said to me: "A brown boy as your brother must feel unsafe on the streets..." And I was like, oh I never knew, we don't have this word in Russian. I never knew that, that Azerbaijani people are 'brown.' And then I started thinking, oh, we're brown. I'm also brown!

Sexual Orientation

I am bisexual, but almost all my life, I thought I was heterosexual. Now when I look back, like at my upbringing and just growing up, I realise I always had some crush on some actress, or a friend or a teacher. Teachers – they were a big thing. But in my lexicon, there were no words for describing this. I heard talk about lesbians, but lesbians... the perception of them was horrible. Women with very short haircuts! I knew that I was a bit on the autistic spectrum, not halfway, but still... and because of that, I felt that I was different. I've always felt that I'm different but I couldn't figure out where it came from. For pronouns, I use she, her and he, because I have never felt like a girl, but not a boy, either. So maybe I'm non-binary. I don't mind actually, how I'm called. It's more about my inner feelings.

Faith

I was born in an atheistic country, but it was the 80s. The historical events happened when I was two. I remember that my mum used to buy a kids' magazine for me and it had these bible stories. You had to make your own book out of it, just cutting the paper. And she used to make, I think, the whole Old Testament with pictures for kids and she used to tell me about God. She called him Bozhenka, which is like little cute God! So she basically told me this, I don't know, cuteish faith! This was during perestroika – it wasn't possible before perestroika. I was five, six or seven. Mum was a believer but she died when I was seven. Because of that, I was very angry – I was very angry with God, because of it. And I told him that if you do things like this, I'm not going to believe in you. And I began to be an atheist, a militant atheist.

My father was a Muslim, but in Azerbaijan, in the villages, in his remote village, they suffocated faith during Soviet times. His father died during World War II and their mother worked in a kolkhoz which is like a collective farm, where people share everything. So he was a Soviet. When

he was twenty something, he came here to Moscow and he lived there until he died – he lived all of his life here.

When I was an atheist, I used to read these books by communists from the Russian Revolution. They were very sophisticated, but with a great sense of humour. And not only was I an atheist myself, I would dissuade all my friends from believing. But when I was 14, I became a fan of a Russian rock group called Aquarium. Their leader was a kind of Russian Bob Dylan and actually wanted to look like him – he was a bit of a rip-off. He's quite famous. He's as brilliant as Bob Dylan in terms of his songs, but his voice is very, very special. But he was very interested in all forms and shapes of religion, but especially in Buddhism. And then when I was 14, I became interested in Buddhism, until I was 16.

When I was 16, I went to Vladimir, a small town in Moscow. I actually had a friend during this time and I was also asking her questions. She was an Orthodox believer, a Christian, and I would ask her some tricky questions, trying also to persuade her that Christianity and [Russian] Orthodox Christianity is a sham. Her priest even told her not to speak to this girl! When I went to this town, I had a friend there who wanted to play the *valtorna* (French horn). We saw that some American evangelicals, I think, were coming there to have some kind of event. And they had this French horn. We went there. And they had their usual... like first they play music, and then they ask the question, do you want to be prayed for? My friend, he raised his hand. They asked, do you want to be prayed for, do you have some questions. He raised his hand because he wanted to play French horn. So they came to him, and to me, because I was nearby, and they started praying. And at the same time, I felt that I needed to go to church and I needed to be baptised. At that time, I was thinking that it was because it was felt horrible, what they were actually doing. To this day, don't like this type of prayer where someone puts their hands on you and stuff. I think it was something during this event that got me pushing me back from then and it was what attracted me to the Russian Orthodox Church – I felt the urge to go to the Russian Orthodox Church itself, what was weird, because I had attended Catholic churches out of interest. I understood that the Catholic Church made more sense. But at that point, it was the Russian Orthodox Church, (that attracted me) and

now I understand that maybe it was like their prayers were heard and answered, because a non-Christian girl became Christian. God doesn't ask us about our preferences. And I went to Moscow and told my friend that I wanted to be baptised, and she didn't believe me! She thought I was pulling her leg! But that's how I came to be a member of the Russian Orthodox Church. I was 16 at the time.

I got baptised. My friend was from the traditional Russian Orthodox Church and there were different movements, ways, in the Russian Orthodox Church. But my friend went there, and I tried to be part of it. But it was very difficult. There were lots of traits in the church that appeared to be more from paganism. There was lots of praying to icons, celebrating days of saints, but not praying to God or to Christ. The name of Christ wasn't mentioned at all. But I still tried to put myself into this box, because my friend was there, but it was very hard. I was there for five or six years, but I just broke, because my understanding of the world and of God, of the logic of the world, just couldn't align with the mainstream orthodoxy. So I started to look for something else and I found more liberal orthodox churches.

The main thing that was tough was how the church treated human beings. They considered some people as non-important and you could treat them however you liked, demanding many things from them but giving nothing back. This was the main thing, but it was many other issues, too.

It was the senseless things, like in order to take communion in the Orthodox Church, you need to fast for four days during the week, not eating anything like animal products. You need to read, I think, 150 pages of prayers, not in the Russian language, but in a language more similar to the Bulgarian language or other southern Slavic language. You mustn't eat anything before communion. There are lots of these things that don't make much sense. So it was hard and I didn't hear anything about Christ. The further I have gone in my faith journey, the more I understand that he needs to be the centre – he needs to be. He isn't, not in the sermons, not anywhere.

So I started to look for something else and I found the church which Misza Czerniak attended all his life before leaving Russia. His father

used to do catechism classes there and the recordings were online and I realised this is the faith, this is the God that I believe in, the one he was talking about. Also this church did lots of charity work, and that was important to me, because the churches that I used to go to didn't do anything. But this church had a kitchen for homeless people a few times a day, where 400 people would come on a Wednesday and Friday. I wanted to be part of that. And so I started to go there and I met my future husband – my now ex-husband – at this kitchen. His twin brother was actually organising this soup kitchen.

I met him and we started dating. I met him when I was 26 and we got married when I was 28. I didn't date much before him, I think I only had one or two boyfriends. I think I'm demisexual. For me, to have any kind of romantic relationship is difficult, let alone a sexual one.

I was very jealous of him. At the time I thought it was because I was a jealous person, but now I think it was maybe because I didn't believe in our relationship, deep deep down. And he was stupid enough to tell me, when we started dating, that he used to like a girl in our church. He told me about her, and I'm very resourceful when I need to know something, so I figured out who this girl was. So it was difficult for me to attend church. Also, his brother and he were sort of famous people in the church, because they were twins, they were ginger, they were very smart and kind. He was 41 when we married and everyone was very surprised that one of the [gives surname] brothers got married. So everybody just treated me a little bit as [just] his wife. I also started to have some questions.

I work in a children's hospice. Once in a class at work we had a non-binary person who was talking about the sexuality of disabled kids and adults. Then we also started talking about gender theory and about sexuality and gender being on a spectrum. It opened a whole new world for me – though it was opening something that was inside of me already. I always felt that I was a kind of strange person until I knew that I was non-binary. I always felt that I didn't fit, among my friends, among girls. But then I didn't fit in around boys, either. It was only when I knew there was such a thing as being non-binary – *oh, that's about me!* – that I didn't feel like some kind of creep. It was, oh yeah!

At the same time, I knew that the Orthodox Church doesn't accept any type of queer identity. I think back then I already knew about Misza and about his struggles to find his place in the Orthodox Church in Russia, because we had many friends in common. Actually, there were many, many, many things that were difficult for me in all my time in the Orthodox Church. For example, this thing about saints. They celebrate saints almost every day. It was nonsense to me. There were many types of prayer – there's a prayer to a saint that lasts for 40 minutes. It tells the story of a saint in the form of a song. There are many, many things that Orthodox people love and they enjoy it. I think in a sense it's a way of controlling people, because it sometimes occupies the mind space of a person. If a person needs to sing this song five times a day and read a hundred pages of some prayers, it means that the person doesn't have any bandwidth for anything else.

But the main thing that I want to say about the Orthodox Church, and why I didn't leave until recently, is because the first thing that is said to a person who enters a traditional Orthodox Church, is that there's no worse crime than to go to any other Christian church, even just to enter the church, even just to be in the building. These buildings don't have any spirit or their spirit is evil. Even if you go there just to watch, it has already done something to you spiritually. It's been ingrained in people's minds, all over the Russian Orthodox Church. And that's why, although I was feeling very ill in the church for years, for dozens of years, I couldn't leave it, because it's what you're told.

I'm actually a historian by training – I'm a history major. When I studied the history of religions, I was thinking, oh the Anglican Church, it sounds so nice, they're not so crazy as Catholics, they're not so crazy as evangelicals. It sounds very nice. But I couldn't even think about trying [to go there]. The Lutherans also sounded quite good in comparison, but I never even thought about it. So I think about five years before the war, I just didn't attend any church, because there were too many things that would forbid me from going to the Orthodox Church, and this indoctrination didn't allow me to go to any other.

But in February 2024, the war started and our church, the Orthodox Church, behaved horribly, supporting all that was happening. For me, it

was like this allowed me to explore other options. I was very angry and I told them in my mind, *piss off, I will go, I will find some other church*. Because when your country starts the war, the most important thing that you actually need is faith. It was true for many Russians. But they did not go to the church, because the church was behaving horribly. And I decided that if my church behaves in this way, it allows me to go and find something else. It was obviously God showing me that I was allowed, finally, to find something else. People either stopped going to church totally, or stopped and started inventing some other forms of spirituality, either finding some rare churches with nice priests that were normal, that would hate the war and everything connected to it. But actually, many of these priests were then abolished from the priesthood. Some of them live now in Europe. The priest from my home church, he's Italian and an Orthodox priest. He's now a priest in Paris, I think.

I started investigating and researching churches, and I was more inclined to go to the Lutheran church, just because the Lutheran church is Russian speaking in Russia. But I saw some kind of... it wasn't like a verbal support of the war, but something like we don't approve of our bishop, who was Russian-German and left Russia just when the war started. And they said something bad about him, so I thought, no, it's not safe. I knew that the Anglican Church in Russia is like visiting the Russian Orthodox Church. It was one of the rules that the Anglican Church in Russia doesn't do any evangelism and they always pray in English in order not to attract Russians. I knew that this was a church of ex-pats, and surely ex-pats are not going to support the war. So I decided to go to the Anglican Church, but almost at the same time, I got a cancer diagnosis, so I didn't go to the church, until I had finished my first chemo. Then I could just breathe out and start attending the church.

Back then we had a very nice English priest with an amazing wife, who was also like a priest to us. They were both British. I'm still at this church. This priest had to leave though, because now with the sanctions people can't travel back from Moscow to London. They have to travel for two days through five countries. They have relatives, kids in England, so they had to move. We had a year of interregnum, and now we have a

priest from India. He came a month ago. But back then, Father Malcolm was very supportive.

Then I was arrested. When the war started, I was very, very angry and I wanted to do something, so I just made some kind of banner, like 'No War' and I put it on my backpack. I also had a badge with a blue sky and a yellow field, resembling the Ukraine flag. But a person took a photo and brought it to the police and the police found me through face recognition. I was arrested and tried and Father Malcolm told me that if I went to prison, he would visit me in prison. I was just fined. All my friend chipped in, and actually I was sent three times the amount of money I was fined! I've never felt this amount of support.

I'm thinking about putting another badge on my backpack, because there is this law that if you reoffend during the year, after your first offence, you can go to jail. The year has passed already. If it was just for me, I wouldn't do it, but when I was wearing these badges, many people would come and cry. For people, it's important to know, because we have many, many people, they're the only people in their family, or in their workplace who are against the war. Just to see someone who is also against it, for them it's very powerful. It's the same with rainbow flags, because rainbow flags are often considered a symbol of some very scary international ideology.

I'm now with a woman, but I'm still married [to a man] in my documents, because it's difficult to get a divorce but I haven't been living with my husband for a year and a half, almost two years. At the same time that I started going to the Anglican Church, I started researching LGBT Christians, because I realised that this is my type of people. This was the community that I needed to find, because we share so many things. It was before the horrible laws, so I managed to find people online and to get to know them. I met my girlfriend in the church. She's English; she doesn't speak much Russian. We were doing gardening together. She's British, from Coventry. I haven't been to England but I would like to, though somebody told me the only nice thing in Coventry is the cathedral!

Sexual Voyage of Discovery

I had crushes on [female] teachers, I think it was at the beginning of primary school. But I thought, maybe I'm looking for a mother figure. That's how I explained it to myself. At the same time, this compulsory heterosexuality always surrounded me. My father married a year after my mother died, a woman from Azerbaijan. Although not Muslim, Azerbaijani society is still very traditional. So I was surrounded by that. But actually, when I look back, I was always friends with people who as grown-ups, turned out to be either bisexual, or lesbian, or transgender. But I was just thinking, I'm just grieving, it means nothing. My first crush, where I realised that this was a romantic crush on a woman, was when I was already working, when I was married. I was working in a hospice and I had a colleague who was very nice and unusual. You could tell that she was a lesbian. Even when I first saw her in a photo, I could tell. It was a very, very strange feeling for me, because I knew I had never felt like this towards a man. I felt that I shouldn't feel these feelings, because I'm married. But it was freeing at the same time. I didn't know why. But I didn't act on it, just because it was purely platonic. At that point, I started thinking that maybe I was homoromantic – bisexual or biromantic. Now I think that this demisexuality of mine doesn't allow me to understand myself, to know myself.

In the Orthodox Church, they just went on and on about how you needed to find a husband or wife. I didn't feel any attraction to my husband anymore. I realised that he was psychologically abusive towards me, and I had suffered from the beginning. He would say negative stuff about me and my family and the things I love and cherish, he would despise me for not being a virgin when we met.

For the first years we were together, we lived with his mum. She used to bully me and he never defended me. He always spoke in a very derogatory way about things that were very dear to my heart. For example, I like languages; I like the English language. I went to the English church and he would always say, this is a horrible language. He didn't like anything that I loved – and he was very vocal about it. It wasn't very nice. When

I realised that I was bisexual, it helped me to open my eyes and see our relationship as it was, and not as I thought it was.

After the [cancer] operation, it was obvious [that I was bisexual]. I can't imagine myself being with a man now. But at the same time, I know that there was a period in my life when I really fell in love with men. I can't just cross it out.

Queer Life in Russia

My girlfriend is safe in Russia. Russia is safer than people on the other side of the border think. For example, many people believe that our Prime Minister is gay, although he's never spoken publicly about it. My girlfriend is from a very dysfunctional family. Her mum was, in her own words, doolally. She was taken from the family – they used to live with dogs, on a soiled floor. She spent six years in care in some Anglican monastery that no longer exists and was raised by nuns in her formative years, in Coventry. She's also on the spectrum, more so than me, as well. She was given back to her mother; she was really a very crazy and very strange woman. But she was able to go to university and get an education degree, and when she was 25, she was offered a job in some country that she had never heard of, called Russia. She came here when she was 25 or 26 and she worked in a Russian-English speaking school first as a teacher. Then she did a nursery school job and was able to gradually build up her own nursery. It's English speaking. She's the main teacher and the owner of this small nursery. She says that she could never run her own nursery like this in England, because you would need to have some kind of support from the beginning. Because she's a business owner, she has employment rights, she has a work visa to be here. Because she doesn't own any real estate in England, she doesn't have the right to vote. She doesn't go back to the UK often, though she does have a sister somewhere near Birmingham who's deaf who she supports because the sister is disabled – if something horrible happened, she would go back for that reason. So she's totally fine with staying in Russia until she dies, we just need to figure out how to legalise her.

I think I am also happy to stay here. I realise that some circumstances may come up that force me to leave Russia, but if not, I am a children's hospice nurse and my patients, they don't go anywhere. They can't leave Russia. It's difficult for them to go to the countryside in summer, let alone change countries. There are other people that can't go anywhere and I think as Christians, we need to be near them – because Jesus didn't live in a nice happy country as well.

Ideal Church

I wouldn't say that my church is the ideal church, although it's nice – it's the nicest I could find. I believe that churches need to be inclusive, not only of sexual or gender minorities, but also of ethnic minorities and maybe economic minorities. The Soviet Union was very egalitarian and you can feel it to this day. Russia is quite egalitarian, compared with Western societies. For example, in our church, we are egalitarian in terms of ethnicities, because we have people from all over the place – but you can feel how people with more money are treated differently. That was weird for me, because it isn't like this in Orthodox churches – just because we are Russian and we are here.

Who is Jesus to You?

I think for me, he's my best friend, maybe, and someone I can rely on endlessly. Someone who can be with me when no-one else can be in the situation and moment, when no-one else can be near. He can handle it and he can do something about it. He's the one in whom everything makes sense in church and behind the church walls. He is meaning in human body.

What's the Best Thing about Being Bi?

In my experience – I don't know how it is in England [sic] – it's maybe totally different because the Russian lesbian scene must be different. But I notice sometimes that in lesbian communities, there is this fear of men, of all men, that can exist – and fear even of other women that deal ok with men. I think we can act as kind of bridges, because we can't show – but at least tell – lesbian girls that there are men that are worth talking to. Because of this, I think the LGBT community in general is divided. There are gay men that have their own culture and there are lesbians. I think that bisexual people and gender non-conforming /transgender people can act as kind of bridges that can unite people together.

There's an online community called Cheers Queers. It's not an organisation, but they have many talks which might result in movements emerging. I think now that when many, many LGBT people are outside of Russia, they can freely discuss many things that were silenced before, and bisexual voices are starting to be heard. There are other bisexual Christians in the queer Christian group I go to – and that's important, because many bisexual people feel that they do not belong and that they need to be silent about part of their experience.

What are Your Hopes for the Future?

I hope that people will be wiser in the future and will realise that many things divide us, but we didn't choose them. Nobody chose them. It's part of our history and our conditioning. When you understand why people are the way they are, you can accept the person as they are and we become closer to each other.

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

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.

1.4 Second-Class Citizen

Uschi (interview), Poland

Introduction

I'm 45 and Polish and I live in Warsaw. I'm Caucasian and identify as bisexual and cis female. My pronouns are she/her.

Faith

I was born and raised in a family of what we call in Poland 'cultural Catholics', which means people who go to church more or less regularly and baptize their children. Whenever I say Catholic, I mean Roman Catholic, unless I say otherwise. So I was baptised and went to the First Communion but I wasn't raised in a particularly religious environment. I attended religion classes which were not obligatory. My parents made sure that I attended them, but it was not a big topic in our family – God, religion or anything. By the time I was a young teenager, I had become involved in a local group in my parish. It was a movement for young Catholics that is specific to Poland – its official title is the Movement for Light and Life, but called Oasis for short, so an Oasis Group. I was a member of this group for a few years and these were my formative years in terms of becoming the Roman Catholic I am today.

This was the time when I had very emotionally intense religious experiences. I was a teenager, of course, so this was a very emotional time in general, but the groups meetings and the group activities were also very much focused on developing ourselves, thinking about our faith and

about religion. There were discussion groups, Bible studies. But it was also fun – you know, spending fun time together. When I was a member of this group, I was quite active, which meant going to meetings twice a week, and so on. So my parents were worried that this was some kind of sect and they weren't really happy about it. Although it's not a sect – it's a very mainstream movement in the Roman Catholic Church in Poland. But my parents didn't know about it. They were worried and they tried to discourage me from it.

This was the time when I was also getting into a very strong conflict with my parents – I would say, stronger than a regular teenager. Anything I did was rejected by them and anything they said was rejected by me, obviously. So the more they discouraged me, the more engaged I became. This also influenced my emotional life, in terms of relationships.

Sexual Discovery

At the time, I wasn't yet aware of being bisexual, because I was raised in a hetero world. So in my first relationships with men, I kind of repressed my sexuality, because this was how it was supposed to be – you know, sex only after marriage and so on. But coming back to the question of faith, later on as a young adult, when I realised that I was bisexual and when I came out to myself and saw myself as a bisexual person, I was immediately ok with it. So I didn't have any conflict about it. But, of course, I was aware of what the Roman Catholic Church says about same sex relationships and how excluding it is for LGBTI people. I'd say I was around 22 when I came out to myself, which means this was around 2002. So then I was aware that my church doesn't want me the way I am and the way I kind of accept myself. So this triggered in me the reaction of, *well, if you don't want me, I don't want you. I don't want to push myself in there*. Even though my personal faith was still very active and engaged – I read a lot, I prayed a lot – I didn't attend the church. I didn't go to Mass and I didn't take the sacraments. It was difficult, because sacraments are very important for me.

In the meantime, I started a relationship with my partner, whom I'm with right now. All the time, there was this feeling that my faith life was very vivid and really important and intense, but my religious life was kind of wavering. Sometimes I would attend the Mass, sometimes I wouldn't. I didn't take communion, I didn't take the sacraments, I didn't go to confession. Then there was a breakthrough moment, when I was asked by my partner's brother to become a godmother to his child. At first I said, *no, absolutely no way*. First thing, I'm not a regular church member and I wouldn't feel ok. You can treat the role of a godparent in Poland just culturally, and the majority of people treat it rather as a custom and maybe understand the role of a godparents as a bit like a support for the parents, in case something happens to the child – the godparents are supposed to take care of it. But not really in religious terms. But I wanted to be honest, and I knew that the role of a godparent is to bring the child to church and I kind of didn't feel up to it. Then we had a very important conversation in the family – and this is something that will stay with me forever – because we had a family dinner with my partner's family and the topic was again brought up. They requested that I was the godmother. I said, *no, come on, no way*, for various reasons. And my partner's grandmother said that if you asked to be a godmother, you don't say no! Then my partner's mother and her brother said a lot of nice things to me, like I was a responsible person and that they believed I would be a good godmother and that I would care for the child, and so on and so forth. I had this moment of recognition, that this was the Holy Spirit talking to me – like this was the Holy Spirit saying, *Come on, you have this child, you have the church. You have to make the church good for the child, to bring it to church. I mean, the church now is kind of shitty, but this is your calling to make it better for this child*.

I was 32, because the child is now 13. And I treated it just like a call of the Holy Spirit, so I kind of returned to the church, but on my own terms. This was also the time when I learned a lot about the idea in the Catholic Church of the primacy of conscience. This was the time when I began to engage in *Faith & Rainbow* and we talked a lot about this idea. The general idea of primacy of conscience is that conscience is the most important thing. It's more important than church teaching; it's more im-

portant than what the Pope says; it's actually *the* most important [thing]. Of course, in the Catholic Church there is this document called The Catechism of the Catholic Church and in the Catechism, there are all sorts of *yes, buts*. The conscience needs to be properly formed under the guidance of the Catholic Church, blah blah blah. But the main idea is that conscience is the most important. Now I have two god-children – one from my partner's family, the other from my brother's family – and I think it's important that the parents of these children are not very religious themselves. For them, it was more important that I was kind of a responsible person. They preferred that to someone who was radically orthodox.

Returning to the Fold

So as I said, this was the time when I returned to the Catholic Church, but on my own terms. I stood firmly by this opinion that there was nothing wrong with being queer, non-straight – or in my case, bisexual – that my relationship with my partner was not a sin, and so there's nothing to confess. So when I go to confession, I confess that I quarrelled with her or I didn't treat her with respect, and not that we had sex – because this is something that's good and beautiful.

So I kind of returned to the church with this mindset, and as a consequence, got engaged not only in *Faith & Rainbow*, which I will talk about later – it's important – but also in a movement of lay Catholics, the Congress of Catholics. Its name is significant in Polish as it includes both genders – male and female Catholics and it kind of stresses female participation in it. It's a Polish organisation that wants to improve the church from the inside, modernise it and make it more responsive to developments in the world. I was active in it for five years. I've only recently dropped out because I simply have no more time nor space for it. But I support them with all my heart. So my religious life is now quite regular, I would say, and intense in terms of being active in *Faith & Rainbow* and the Congress of Catholics and in various other activities and charities.

My faith life is also quite intense, because I try to attend Mass regularly, every Sunday. I pray a lot. I don't do any specific spiritual practices like meditation or specific prayers. I try to pray in the sense of constantly being in the presence of God, rather than saying prayers word by word. So this is a little bit meditative, but I would call it maybe mindfulness in the presence of God. I would say that's for me.

In terms of where I go to Mass, that depends. I have my local parish where I turn up from time to time at the Mass just to remind the parish priest that I exist, because he knows both of us. We have two parish priests and they both know us as a couple. So sometimes I go there, but I attend two other churches regularly that are not parish churches. One is a Dominican church and the other is kind of a community church for artists. Neither of them are parish churches. The artists' ministry church is quite open; the priest is open-minded and there's a supportive community. I really like it.

Sexuality

I'd like to share how my attraction to more than one gender developed and evolved over the years. As I said, I was brought up in a heteronormative environment so I believe that until my late teenage years, I didn't really know anything about non-straight people. I'd heard of gays somewhere but you have to remember, these were the 1990s in Poland, so not much was said about it. I was also brought up in an average sized town, maybe not a small town, but it was also not a city. My parents don't have higher education. They are reasonably open-minded, given their background, but I didn't know anything about LGBT people. It was only when I went to study in Warsaw that my horizons kind of broadened. I also started asking questions, started asking myself, *how do I feel, what are my sexual feelings towards women?*

At this time, I was also in between relationships with men, and I started treating myself with curiosity, looking at my reactions. At a certain point – I was in my early 20s – I realised that *yes, obviously I'm bisexual*, even though I'd had no experiences of romantic relationships with

women, or sexual relationships. I maybe had kind of infatuations, but nothing very serious. Then I realised, *yeah, I'm bisexual!*

So I was between relationships, and I realised that I could kind of be open to relationships with women and actually, after coming out, all of my serious and long-lasting relationships were with women, serious in terms of not just meeting once or twice, but really thinking seriously about them. For an outsider, it could look like I turned from straight to gay, because I only had relationships with men and then I only had relationships with women. But my identity is definitely bisexual, and my relationship with my partner is monogamous. I don't feel like I would like to kind of complete my sexual or romantic desires by having a relationship with a man, too. But I am bisexual and it's a very important identity.

In terms of differences between relationships with men and with women, I can't really name anything specific, definitely not that my relationships with women have been, for example, more emotional than with men. Of course, the dynamics are different, but they were both the same – satisfactory or not satisfactory – in the same way. With regard to my current relationship, we've been together for 20 years now. So this year we have an anniversary!

Coming Out

I came out when I was 20 something; it was around 2002. It was after I left my hometown (1998) and I started living in Warsaw. I went to study in Warsaw and I just stayed. At first I thought I would return, because when I started university, I was in a relationship with a man who lived back there. And the idea was for me to finish my studies and come back. But in the meantime, everything – and I mean everything – showed me that it was better for me to live in Warsaw, in terms of being away from my parents in terms of being independent, on my own, in terms of professional opportunities. All of it.

My coming out stories are very diverse, starting from the very traumatic coming out to my parents, to the absolutely non-traumatic coming

out in my work environment. My parents, as I said, are from a mid-sized town, but their backgrounds are rural – they are both from rural families. They are quite conservative; they are not narrow-minded, but they are kind of like *petit bourgeoisie* – you know, everything is supposed to be properly presentable, and the way people see us is very important. So for them, my coming out was a shock and they were very negative about it. I came out to them in a letter. I thought it would be a good idea to write it down, so that they didn't hear it from me, but had time to kind of cool down. It was a bad idea, as it turned out. I wrote that I am in a serious relationship with a woman, and that I wanted to be in serious relationship, and that I was bisexual. And I think it was all a shock and it really caused a very negative reaction. My mother didn't speak to me for eight years. I have always had better contact with my father than with my mother and even though he struggled with the situation really, he tried to maintain contact with me as much as he could. We would call one another once a week or every other week and he would just ask if I was ok and that was it. So that was a very difficult time.

In time, our relationship, my relationship, with my parents improved. Now we talk about things, we visit one another. They visit us; we visit them. But I don't have any kind of strong relationship with my mother. My partner and I started visiting them together a few years ago; it's important for me to stress that my parents' reaction was never about my partner, it was about me. And my partner is a nice person, she's likeable. So with time, my relationship with my parents ... I wouldn't say improved.... has normalised. My coming out and my relationship was the shattering of my parents' expectations. On a side note, my brother did the same shattering of expectations because he went to live abroad, and we don't have any other siblings. We're both kind of not directly available for our parents.

So our relationship with my parents is now ok, but I'm not really enthusiastic about it. My brother has always been very supportive; I came out to him a little earlier than to my parents, and he was totally ok. He's younger than me, five years younger, and he was totally ok with it all the time, very supportive. His wife was also very supportive. She was the one who tried to talk my parents into accepting me and she managed,

to some extent. The relationship with my partner's family is a totally different issue, because they had accepted her almost from the beginning, when she came out. Her whole family was either accepting, or didn't say anything. I had a very warm and really nice relationship with her grandmother before she died a few years ago. We're very much welcome and loved, and the family are here in Warsaw, so we have a very strong kind of safety net because of them.

Being Out as Bisexual

Our parish priests don't know I'm bisexual. The priests of our parish are very traditional and they obviously struggle with the idea of us as a couple. In Poland, we have a custom that once a year, the priest visits everyone in the parish. Then they make notes about each household in the parish files. Children are supposed to present their books and notes from religion class. It's ridiculous, nobody likes it. But it happens. They visit us every two years, because our parish is quite big. It's pretty awkward, but the priests try to be really brave. They come in and they either try to act like they don't condemn anything and don't say anything bad about us, they're not negative – but they're kind of withdrawn and very official and very formal. I think one of them said 'your partner' though, so it's not like 'your colleague' or 'your friend.' We are a couple and we present ourselves as a couple. I think that's a lot for them to take in. I don't really think it makes sense to try and explain to them what a bisexual is. At the artists' community church – I don't know whether the priest knows that I'm bisexual, I'll have to ask him – he knows that I'm in a same-sex relationship. He knows that I'm active in *Faith & Rainbow*; he knows all of this.

There have never been any issues at work; they know I'm bisexual – but then I am the most senior person in my company! The company is small, but apart from my boss, I have worked there the longest. I've always been there for everybody so nobody's going to trouble me. And it's always been obvious, because we are quite closely knit at the company, so we talk about family life, and so on. So everybody knows I'm with Magda,

that I'm her partner and so on. And I never kind of did any coming out, like *Hey, I'm Uschi, I'm not straight, I'm bi!* I'm always talking about my partner, it's obvious that I'm not straight. I never say, *Hi I'm bisexual*, but some of them know because, when we talk about our past relationships, I always mention I was in relationships with men. So some of them know, some of them don't.

I like my pigeonhole, I like my label, but it should be more relaxed. People should be less fixated on labels. If you see something in a person, don't assume that it's always been like that and it will always be like that – and that's not only about sexuality or orientation, but also gender identity or ability or disability or illness or health, or anything.

Just don't make assumptions.

The Ideal Church

An ideal church for me would be a Roman Catholic Church where I can get married to my partner and where I am just treated like another member – not only because of my orientation or my sexual relationship, but also as a woman, which is an issue in the Roman Catholic church. Being female and queer is just... difficult. I dream of a church of equals. That would be it. Everybody is equal and nobody is too stressed about judging others.

It's more difficult to be a woman than LGBT in the Catholic Church. I say this because I'm used to playing second fiddle to men at church, to being a second-class citizen. I'm quite ok in our society, as a woman, but as a LGBT+ person, I'm not. In the church, I'm neither ok as a woman nor as a LGBT+ person. In Poland, as a state, I'm a second-class citizen. So it's just the same in the Church and it hasn't really got any better. Right now we're fighting for a civil union law, which it is hoped will be adopted by the parliament, because at the moment we have a parliament that's more centre-left. However, we have a conservative president and a constitutional court and even if the act is adopted in the parliament, there's no way it's going to be signed by the president or at least by the present president. We're going to have a presidential election in May or June, so

we'll see. I've been fighting for same sex civil unions for the last 20 something years. I'm kind of tired.

I would consider leaving Poland if it was not safe for us to live here. But it would be very difficult, because my partner would feel very, very bad about leaving Poland. Sometimes we joke that if we had to leave, we would leave for two countries that start with the letter H in Polish – Spain and the Netherlands, “Hiszpania” and “Holandia”. So it would either be Spain or the Netherlands. These are the places that we would consider, but right now, we don't want to leave. I speak Spanish and we like Spain, but in the Netherlands we have a safety net – my brother and his family.

Who is Jesus to Me?

Jesus is God. I am very much into the idea of the Trinity. So he's not the most important, but he is God. He's the most male of the whole Trinity. I think maybe my relationship with Jesus is not as important to me as God the Father and the Holy Spirit, because for me, he's kind of in between. I'm not really sure whether he's human and I should treat him as human, or he's God and I should treat him as God. But I love reading the Gospel and I love reading what he said and what he did. Obviously, he is a God for me, but there is this kind of unclarity. So my relationship, in terms of the Trinity, is definitely strongest with the Holy Spirit.

Jesus definitely feels queer-friendly to me, because he was friendly towards practically everyone who was a good person. I have a problem with saying he welcomed those on the margins. Because saying that Jesus accepts us because he accepted everybody from the margins puts us at the margins – and I don't want to be on the margins. I want to be in the middle, in the mainstream. I think this narrative is in almost all the Christian churches, that we are on the margins, that the church should go to the margins and meet us and welcome us.

I have a problem with the story of Zaccheus, the one who climbed the tree to see Jesus, because he was a sinner and Jesus came to him. It's like when you say Jesus went out and welcomed sinners. Of course everybody is a sinner, but somehow the LGBT people are “more” sinners than the

rest. I have a problem with this narrative of Jesus coming to the people on the margins and Jesus welcoming the sinners, because then you assume that we LGBT people are on the margins and we are the only sinners, which is not true.

On Being Bi

I would say the bright side of being bi is the broader perspective. It's important for me that I have the experience of being in relationships with men and women. I think I have more experience, a broader perspective, but not in terms of what Woody Allen said, that you can date twice as many people! I'm not speaking about dating opportunities. It's more about knowing what it's like to be in a relationship with a man and with a woman.

In terms of being out as a bisexual person in the church context, I need to stress that I don't have a lot of social relationships in the church. I am, or used to be, active in various charities, and sometimes I socialise with people in the church outside of this context, but not much, apart from that initiative I mentioned earlier, the Congress of Catholics. And then I would say it is revolutionary that I say absolutely openly that I am in a relationship with a woman, whenever the context is appropriate, of course. I think that's shocking enough for people and usually I don't come out as bi. I don't have the energy to try and clarify that I am bisexual. It's enough that I am in a relationship with a woman. So whenever I'm asked about what I am, in such a context, I prefer to identify by being in a relationship with a woman. If there is space for it, then I clarify that I am bisexual. It's also quite difficult for me to explain it to children. For children in our family, or in our friends' children, for whom it's quite obvious that I'm in a relationship with another woman, it's kind of unnecessary to explain that I'm bisexual. Some teenagers will ask me about my past and I am totally open to sharing and to explaining, but very often I just feel there is neither space nor a need to do it.

Hopes for the Future

My hopes for the future are political and more related to me being in a same-sex relationship, than with me being bisexual. I hope for civil unions and I really hope for marriage equality somewhere in the future. Maybe I will live long enough to see that. And I also hope for more equality in my church, for the recognition of equality and equal dignity – for women, for LGBT people, for everybody.

I used to be more politically active, now I'm not so much, but it's always somewhere at the back of my mind. I try to do as much as I can as a member of the organisation, to do whatever I can. I'd say that when *Faith & Rainbow* started 15 years ago, we started as a self-help group. Now we're developing more into awareness raising and educational activities, though self-help and creating safe spaces are always the most important thing for us. But we're moving a little bit into awareness raising and educating society and religious communities. Recently, for example, we've had a very interesting awareness raising campaign about conversion "therapies" and other such pseudo-scientific psychological practices and how harmful they are. So we're trying to educate people as much as we can. There isn't so much conversion therapy in Poland but there is the Catholic Church and its teaching. It includes this idea that yes, some people are born homosexual and they should be treated with respect, but they are called to live in chastity. So you're not supposed to have sex and this idea fuels certain groups to try... it's not so much about trying to turn gays into straight people – although also happens – but rather into living a chaste life. There are some such groups in Poland (not many, luckily), and we have people who have been really damaged and hurt. I don't think in the Catholic Church it's on the same scale as in the evangelical churches.

Not everyone in *Faith & Rainbow* is Catholic. It is an ecumenical group and we stress it a lot; it's important for our identity. We don't really have non-believers, but we have non-denominational members, sure, and people who are searching or who are spiritual rather than Christian – seekers, maybe. We have a lot of supporters and allies who respect what we do, who support what we do, who are not necessarily

religious people. For example, from within the LGBT community, we have some supporters and some allies, who just don't get why we do the religion thing!

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

Section 2: Complexities of Identity

2.1 A Fulfilled Life. God Dreamed Me LGBTQI+

Victoria, Spain

My name is Victoria, and I am a bisexual trans woman, a practising Catholic and a mother of three children. I have testified and written about my transsexuality and various trans issues¹ and I have even dared to write about religion and transsexuality.² But the truth is, I have never written about my bisexuality, as it is somewhat overshadowed by my trans identity, although that does not make me any less bi.

And the trans issue, being a matter of identity, is always inseparably linked to my person. However, bisexuality, being a matter of attraction, was something more easily ignored. For, if we are only attracted to men and we are gay, we cannot ignore it, because, try as we might, there is no woman we are attracted to. But if we are bisexual and are attracted to both men and women, we can choose to ignore some crushes, leave them as platonic or very heartfelt friendships, but never go beyond that. This way we focus on the attractions that are socially acceptable and avoid complications. And at the end of the day we all want to avoid as many problems as possible.

1 Victoria: la Buena Noticia del evangelio para una madre trans con tres hijos <<https://crismhom.org/victoria-la-buena-noticia-del-evangelio-para-una-madre-trans-con-tres-hijos/>>. *Derecho a ser*, edited by Juan Ramón Barbancho, Algorfa: 96–105. *A diversidad como riqueza*, edited by Victoria Rodríguez, Encrucillada 234: 64–73.

2 Todos somos uno en Cristo, mujeres, hombres y eunucos de todo tipo y condición <https://www.religiondigital.org/teologia_para_una_iglesia_en_salida/Cristo-mujeres-hombres-condicion-imagenespages_o_2655034490.html>

Nobody becomes LGBTQI+ to attract attention, or to live life in a different way, or to look for complications because they are single and bored, although there are still people who accuse us of this. On the contrary, what we seek is to try to live our life in the simplest way possible, with the least problems, but obviously looking to be happy and authentic with ourselves, because otherwise happiness is impossible. And if we only like women and we are lesbians, either we resign ourselves to live single and alone or we dare to live our reality. But if we like women and we are bi, we can afford to ignore those crushes that are not socially acceptable, that can get us into trouble—those feelings which will most likely not be reciprocated by the other person, being straight. And in the end, we often don't go for it; we leave it as a special friendship, something platonic and there it stays, just a nice and different kind of crush, because to make it reality would only bring problems.

And that's what mostly happened to me. I already had enough problems with my own trans identity, which I kept completely secret. Trying to go out with some guy I found interesting (who was probably straight) was something I didn't even consider, because that would only serve to expose my trans secret as well. So although my orientation was bi and as a teenager I had a few crushes with girls and boys, the truth is that I focused only on girls. It's also true that I had more crushes on girls than boys, because bisexuality doesn't mean that we are attracted to all men and women, in the same way that straight people are not attracted to all people of the opposite gender. I felt that the way to avoid any problems was to stay in the closet as a straight guy. In addition, I also had a very strong maternal instinct; I wanted to have children and I knew that even if some crush with some guy worked out, the issue of children would be impossible. That's why I preferred to focus on women. It should be remembered that at that time, there was still no equal marriage in Spain, and it was certainly not possible for gay couples to adopt. And for this reason, even when I had the chance to have a relationship aged 18 with a friend of mine whom I suspected was gay (and in fact was), I chose not to take the step.

I dated a few girls and even married a woman and had my three children with her. In this way, I tried to minimize the problems of having

both a diverse sexuality and identity. I decided to focus only on relationships that were more socially acceptable in terms of my external identity as a man, which also allowed me have children, something that was very important to me. And the truth is that once I fell in love and had a steady partner, the fact that I hadn't fully explored my bisexuality was something that didn't keep me awake at night. It's like a straight man worrying that he hasn't slept with enough women. Once we find the right person, all other potential partners, regardless of gender, become irrelevant, at least to me. I had already found the right person, or so I told myself, and the possible "what ifs" were not important. Besides, with her, I had managed to satisfy my maternal instinct with three children. I had thus avoided one of the greatest fears of my youth—that having a diverse sexuality and identity would make it very difficult or even impossible for me to find a partner and have children.

So if I had just been a cis bisexual person (male or female), I don't think I would have ever written this text. Because I would have focused only on socially acceptable crushes. I would have married and had children and I would have never left the closet of my false heterosexuality to complicate my life unnecessarily. Because "half bisexuality" is already more than enough to lead a full and happy life. But I was not cis, but trans and although I also tried to ignore that, in the end I found it completely impossible. Inevitably, if you try to be what you are not, if you deny yourself by living the life that society tells you to live, but not the life you feel is your own, you cannot be happy and in the end even your own body rebels. I began to suffer blackouts and fainting, whose cause the doctors could only attribute to stress. And once I came out of the closet, the fainting and blackouts disappeared as if by magic. One thing that is very clear to me, is that closets kill. They kill slowly, taking away your will to live, to accept yourself as you are. And once you lose that interest in life, you may start to suffer from suicidal ideation, depression and even—as in my case—physical deterioration, due to the mental stress of having to endure all of those feelings.

When I finally came out of the closet as a trans woman, I wanted to get rid of that little thorn of bisexuality, since I had never been with men. The truth is that straight men still gave me a lot of qualms and even with

those who encouraged me to go a little further, I only had bad experiences. Some of them ended up offering me money or making references that indicated that they only saw in me a fetish to be fulfilled and not a person, much less a woman. And obviously, it was a total deal breaker when I went to sleep with someone for free and suddenly he would offer me money—amongst other things. In summary, it never went very well with straight men, but I felt far more comfortable and respected with gay men; without a doubt, I was much better treated. But when I was the one who came on to them, they told me that they were no longer attracted to me. And I guess that was actually affirming and showed that they saw me as a woman—but it was also frustrating. So, with men, nothing was happening.

Finally, I met a trans girl like me, and we started a t4t relationship (that's the name given to relationships between two trans people). It has lasted more than six years and we are thinking of getting married soon. And that has added one more letter to my person (as if I only had a few and was looking for more!) since t4t relationships are Queer (Q) relationships, where strictly speaking we can't be considered lesbians, since our story goes way beyond that. When we first met, we were still making our transition and from a legal standpoint we were two gay men. After that, we were a straight couple for a few months, since our legal status did not change simultaneously. Currently, we have been "lesbians" from a legal point of view for several years now, but in reality ours is a Queer relationship and not a lesbian one for many reasons.

As a conclusion to this first part, and before moving on to talk about my spirituality and its relationship with my sexuality, I would like to say that I believe many bisexual people in general experience "impostor syndrome." This syndrome consists of feeling that they are not bisexual enough, to the point that they may not even define themselves as such—even though they truly are. It happened to me. To avoid problems, I focused only on one gender, and in the end I didn't feel that I was "bisexual enough," even though I was. I am completely convinced that there are many "officially straight" people who are actually bisexual. But to avoid trouble, they did what I did: they didn't explore that part of their sexuality and left it as platonic feelings, "special friendships," and so on.

The fact that they had those “forbidden crushes”—even if they pushed them aside—is proof that they are really bisexual, not straight.

I want to tell you: it's okay. Don't feel guilty. I, and many other bi people, did the same thing, and it's okay. You are not more or less bi for having more or less experience—just as you are not less straight for being a virgin, for example. What matters is the kind of people we are attracted to, not whether we act on it. A 14-year-old boy is straight if he is attracted to girls, even if he is a virgin. In the same way, a person is bisexual if they are attracted to more than one gender, even if they have experience with only one—or none.

I would also like to clarify the difference between bisexuality and pansexuality, which are often confused. Bisexuality is the attraction to more than one gender. I am bisexual because I am attracted to both men and women—I find them beautiful, attractive, and desirable, each in their own way. In pansexuality, however, the important thing is not so much the gender but the person. Someone who is pansexual is attracted to another regardless of their gender, simply because of the way they are or act. My partner, for example, is pansexual and is attracted to me regardless of my gender—simply because I am me, whether I identify as a man, woman, or non-binary person. So, although the end result can look similar—and that's why the two are often confused—it is actually quite a different orientation. For a pansexual person, the focus is on the person as they are, beyond genders and labels. For a bisexual person, we are attracted to both male and female bodies, and of course also to non-binary people—why not? Personally, I would prefer to be pansexual, like my partner, because it seems to me a more rational and logical orientation. But some things are not chosen; they are simply felt. And I happen to be bisexual—not pansexual, and not straight.

And now, dear reader, comes the most important part of my story—the part I find most meaningful to share, and the one I believe can help the most those who read this chapter. It is the story of my faith: of how God was helping me and accompanying me at every step, even when I didn't see it that way, and even when I was angry with Him for having made me diverse, different from the rest—in short,

LGBTQI+. I often wished I could have been “just one more,” like everyone else. Man or woman, it didn’t matter to me—just “normal.”

So I spent much of my adolescence and youth angry with God, thinking that somehow He had “punished” me for being LGBT, as if to balance out other gifts He had given me. I believed it was a burden I had to carry simply because of how I was born, like someone born with a handicap. And although I told myself I accepted who I was—a person with a diverse sexuality and identity—in truth I would have preferred not to be. Deep down, I wasn’t really accepting of myself, nor was I happy or proud of who I was. And yet, even in those dark years when my faith was weak and I felt distant from God, He never failed to protect me through it. I had many suicidal thoughts, but I never carried them out—because deep in my soul I knew that was no way out. I told myself: if God had made me this way, He must have some plan for me, even if I didn’t understand it (or even want it) at the time. If I had not been a believer—if I had thought that after death there was nothing, as many non-believing LGBTQI+ people understandably think—I would not be writing these lines today. I would have ended my life long ago.

I’m sorry to stray a little from the bi topic, because I don’t think many bi people suffer suicidal thoughts, but it is something quite common among trans people, who endure much more pressure and criticism from society. I always felt sorry for people without faith, because faith is a gift—some of us have it and others don’t—and it is not due to our efforts at all. And as usual, I found myself complaining to God for not giving faith to all LGBTQI+ people, especially to trans people. Because faith would help them so much, just as it helped me, and many lives would surely be saved. But who can understand God’s will?

Over time, however, as I talked with many trans people my age, I realized that most of them were believers, at least to some extent. Maybe it was partly because of the circles I moved in, obviously, but I can’t help thinking it was also because to survive being trans, you need some faith—something that gives you strength and encouragement when everything else goes against you. Without that, sometimes you simply cease to exist, and that is a tragedy.

So I can say with certainty that even in my darkest times, faith kept me alive. And once those times finally ended, it was through faith that I began to blossom. I didn't understand God's plans for me, but little by little they took shape. As I said, I met a woman, fell in love, got married, and had children—real blessings from the Lord, who was slowly putting His plan into motion. But it was not His will that I live in the closet forever, even though in my cowardice I sought that path for myself. Eventually, a deep crisis in my marriage, combined with the fainting spells I was experiencing more and more often, forced me to a crossroads.

I had to decide what to do with my life—whether to continue as I had been, or to change and dare to face my fears, outing myself in public as a person with a diverse sexuality and identity. And to make that decision, I turned to God. Strange as it may seem when I look back now, I prayed and asked Him what He wanted me to do—whether to keep carrying my transsexuality as a hidden cross, or to come out of the closet and live authentically as I was, with all the consequences, good and bad. After praying, I opened the Bible at random, hoping somehow to receive an answer from God, like in some movie. I don't know where the idea came from; I had never done it before, and I've never done it again.

The truth is, opening the Bible at random can lead anywhere—often to passages with little or nothing to do with your question. In reality, it is usually better to rely on the discernment of the heart, the nudging or insights we feel in prayer, or the conclusions we reach when sharing life within our communities. But at that time, I knew nothing of that, and the Bible was the only resource I had. And somehow, the Lord smiled on me, because He granted me a miracle. Despite being far from Him, despite using such a clumsy method, despite feeling undeserving in a thousand ways, He had mercy on me. Out of all the countless pages, my Bible opened to the parable of the talents.

For those who don't know it, the parable of the talents tells of a master who gives ten denarii to one servant, five to another, and only one to the last. When he returns, he asks what they have done with them. The one with ten produces ten more, the one with five produces five more. But the one with only one, out of fear of losing it, buries it in the ground. This angers the master, who describes him as one who “reaps where he

did not sow and gathers where he did not scatter.” He takes away the one talent and punishes that servant, sending him “to the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

Reading that passage, I suddenly understood where all my problems had been coming from. Being diverse—being bi and trans—was a talent God had given me. And in my fear and foolishness, I had buried it instead of using it. That was the source of all my struggles. I felt God speaking to me clearly: “Unearth your talents. Show yourself as you are. Put them to use.” That was what He wanted from me, and that was what I did from that day on. That’s what I’m doing right now, for example, in telling this story. So I can say with joy that it was God who brought me out of the closet—or, less dramatically, that it was my faith that did it. Because the truth is, I didn’t see myself as capable. I was overwhelmed by the fear of losing my job as a high school teacher, of complaints from parents, of rejection from my family, especially my children, of losing everything—simply for daring to live as I really was.

My faith protected me in my darkest moments but also gave me the strength to come out. Once I read that parable and felt God calling me to unearth my talents—my sexual and gender diversity that I had tried so hard to hide—I also understood that He was with me in this, and that He would protect me from all harm. And indeed, although some minor bad things took place, they were nothing compared to what I had feared would happen. On the whole, I felt very protected and deeply loved by God throughout my transition and coming out. I was denied communion in my parish, but I soon found a group of LGBTQI+ believers in my city, called *Ichthys*, where I was warmly welcomed and could continue to live out my faith in community with others.

Once I came out, my faith grew and flourished—fuelled not only by my unshakable gratitude for that day of grace when God let me open the Bible to that very passage, but also by the Spirit-filled people I was meeting in LGBTQI+ believing communities and among allies. I began attending mass regularly, praying daily, and thanking God for making me the way I am. The Lord also began to change me, moulding me little by little, softening my heart, drawing me closer, and shaping me into a better version of myself—the one He had always intended me to be.

All this began seven years ago, and in that time I have changed so much, felt so much, grown so much, done so much—all thanks to Him—that I can only sum it up by saying I am madly in love with God. I love Him for all He has given me, for all He has changed in me, for all the wonderful things He dreamed for me, which I foolishly failed to understand or was too afraid to embrace. And yet it was such a beautiful dream...

To the believing LGBTQI+ people reading these lines, I can only repeat what Scripture says 365 times: do not be afraid. Don't be afraid—God is with you. God made you gay, lesbian, bisexual, asexual, transsexual, whatever you are. He did so because He had a precious dream for each of us, just as He had for me. But we must dare to live that talent, not bury it, as per the parable (Matthew 25:29). We must let our identity shine—because it is a gift from God. If we bury it, we lose it, and even the one who has it will have less. And then we live in “darkness and gnashing of teeth”—which is not hell, but the closet. Believe me, I was there for many years, and I know that place well.

It is impossible to capture in these lines all the precious things I have lived and done in these seven years, but I will attempt to briefly summarise. I was able to change my baptismal certificate to my real name, Victoria, while keeping a record of my previous name—an official recognition of my trans identity within the Church. I have shared my testimony in many places, even internationally, bringing joy and the Good News wherever I could. I met my partner and added another letter to my diversity—the Q—living a relationship like never before. I took part in World Youth Day in Lisbon, where we were warmly received by some and harshly rejected by others. I joined several spiritual retreats, each one filled with grace. I wrote articles on faith and diversity, including one sent to the Synod. I embraced Ignatian spirituality and joined the Christian Life Community (CLC). Through the Global Network of Rainbow Catholics (GNRC), I have met and supported people from as far as India, the Philippines, Ghana, and El Salvador. I am already preparing to attend the Jubilee in Rome in 2025 and to help organize a GNRC assembly in Spain.

But above all, I treasure the profound sense of peace and fulfilment that comes from knowing I am loved by God, from knowing I am where I need to be, carried by His wonderful plans for me. How could I not be deeply in love with God, after all He has done and continues to do for me? And if I share all this, dear reader, it is not to boast—because the most valuable thing of all is indescribable, my relationship with the Lord. Everything else is simply fruit that appears when one draws close to the good tree. The credit is not mine to take; the only credit I take is letting myself be loved by Him. I tell you all this only so that you may see that when we say God has dreamed and planned a wonderful life for each of us, we are speaking of something completely different—truly, and at another level, because He is divine and limitless. And the only thing He asks of us is not to be afraid, to let Him carry us, to let Him love us, just as I did. Everything else follows. All glory is His, and I know that.

Even so, if you are someone returning to the Church after being away, keep in mind that there are groups calling themselves Christian where very little of Christ remains—groups filled with abuse, machismo and a thirst for power. Their problem is not only lgbtphobia; scratch the surface and you see that the divine left long ago. But Jesus gave us an easy way to recognize them—by how they love (or fail to) and by their fruits. Just as I have spoken of the countless fruits of the spirit I have received, beware of communities where the fruits are bitter and not freely given. Even if they tell you, “Persevere, keep going, don’t leave—good things will come soon,” do not be deceived. The Lord is not there. That is not His dream for you. Grace is a gift, not something earned by suffering bitter fruit. That is the bad tree, the one Jesus asked us to avoid. For evil tries to disguise itself as good, but it cannot, because it does not know how to love. And we are bisexual—we know how to love. Don’t be fooled.

I would like to close with the words of saints—good trees we can safely approach—whose wisdom has been a source of inspiration and consolation to me over the years:

St. Catherine of Siena: “Be who God wants you to be, and you will set the whole world on fire.”³

St. John Berchmans: “Our true value does not consist in what human beings think of us. What we really are consists in what God knows us to be.”⁴

With this chapter, I only hope to return at least a little to the One who has given me so much—to sow where I had not sown, and to reap where I had not scattered. And if, dear reader, I can encourage you to set aside your fears and dare to live your life fully, just as God has dreamed it for you, then trust that the abundance He has given me will also be yours.

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

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- 3 Paraphrase of Catherine of Siena, Letter 368, in *The Letters of Catherine of Siena*, trans. Suzanne Noffke, O.P.
 - 4 Paraphrase reflecting the spirituality of St. John Berchmans, S.J., as recorded in early Jesuit testimonies.

2.2 The Ups and Downs of a Late Bloomer

Daniela, Switzerland

I am a Swiss cis woman in my mid-fifties, married to a straight man, and a late bloomer in two ways—at 33, I came to faith, and only 18 years later did I realise I was bisexual in the sense of Robyn Ochs' definition, namely I have the potential to be attracted to people of more than one gender. With few exceptions, I am still not out. I am a member of my church leadership team and am employed part-time as a pastor in training in a not fully affirming free evangelical church. I am currently in the process of becoming an ordained pastor.

How did it take me so long to realise that I was bisexual? I've often asked myself this question. Looking back, a combination of social circumstances, personal history and character are responsible for this—factors some readers may recognise in themselves.

Teenage Years in the Heteronormative, Homophobic 1980s

As a member of Generation X, my formative teenage years were spent in the 1980s. The music charts were topped by bands like Queen and Culture Club, with openly queer frontmen such as Freddie Mercury and Boy George, while androgynous solo artists like David Bowie and flamboyant stars like Elton John enjoyed success. And yet, same-sex relationships—let alone bisexuality—were virtually absent from public discourse and the media.

It was the same at home. I vaguely remember my mother once speaking positively about gay acquaintances, but queerness was not a topic. It

was a similar story at school. There were no visible same-sex couples. Rumours circulated about possibly gay or lesbian teachers and that was that. The subject of same-sex love only became more prominent with the AIDS epidemic. The tenor of the media at that time was extremely negative (“the gay plague”), with male homosexuality seen as particularly threatening.

This lack of visibility was partly responsible for me not realising when I was attracted to girls. Drenched in hormones like most teens, I usually fancied some boy and was obsessed with having a boyfriend. Only in retrospect do I realise that I was also fascinated by girls. I still remember some of them to this day, in terms of their personality and appearance. But I had no language for these feelings, and it didn't occur to me that this fascination might be attraction. In my mind, I simply admired and envied these girls, wanting to be like them. It was only when I looked back, that I realised what was really going on.

One experience from my childhood demonstrates to what extent societal homophobia shaped my sexual identity. Around age four, I became friends with a girl my age who lived in our apartment block. We went to pre-school and primary school together and were inseparable until I went to secondary school. We also shared our childhood crushes on boys. One day, we were playing “boyfriend and girlfriend” in our apartment block’s recreation. She played herself, and I played the boy she had a crush on. Somehow, we realised that what we were doing was strange, because we hid in a closet (!). Inside we held each other closely and I stroked her arm. At that moment, her older sister discovered us and, in a disgusted tone, asked if we were lesbians. We were nine or ten years old at that time and had no idea what a lesbian was, but her reaction was unmistakable—only lesbians did what we were doing, and they were disgusting. I don't remember if we ever talked about the incident afterwards, but we never played “boyfriend and girlfriend” again.

Other Inhibiting Factors: Demisexuality and Neurodivergence

Two other aspects probably contributed to my late coming out: I'm demisexual and neurodivergent. Reliable self-assessments indicate an elevated autism score, and I suspect, based on mixed symptoms, that I have both autism and ADHD.

As a demisexual person, the idea of wanting to be intimate with someone with whom I have not formed a mental and emotional bond is completely alien to me. If I meet someone on the street, no matter how attractive that person may be, I would never want to be intimate with them. My neurodivergent brain also means that I only 'click' with a few people. As a result, I very rarely meet someone with whom I can form a deep mental and emotional connection. And the fewer people I can make such a connection with, the less often I feel attraction and realise that I have feelings for someone—be it a man, a woman or a non-binary person.

One factor that also delayed my coming out by almost twenty years was—to use the fundamentalist expression—my late conversion. I grew up in a socially liberal, social democratic environment. My university years—prime time for exploring one's sexual identity—were mostly spent in a Catholic fraternity, where same-sex relationships were not present or discussed. However, it was here that I first came into close contact with a queer person—a new young man came out to me as gay and eventually chose me as his 'beer mum' (a godmother in the fraternity). In retrospect, his choice no longer seems so random to me.

At 33, I came to faith in a Pentecostal charismatic church. There, for the first time, I heard the teaching that God disapproves of homosexuality. I didn't understand why same-sex love was supposedly sinful, but I lacked both the biblical knowledge and spiritual maturity to challenge it. I simply filed it under "things about faith I don't yet understand."

Once again, I entered a world without openly same-sex couples. Everyone knew such relationships wouldn't be accepted. Occasionally, I heard testimonies in small groups from people who said they had "overcome" same-sex attraction, or rumours about members with "that

problem.” But since I didn’t think it applied to me, I didn’t think about it any further.

First Cracks in the Cocoon

Ten years after my conversion, I left that church on good terms and joined my current free evangelical church. Over the next decade, I took on increasing leadership responsibilities. In 2020, I began internal theological training that equipped me to critically examine Scripture. Around the same time, our movement began a serious conversation about same-sex relationships.

In 2022, I concluded for myself that God is not against same-sex relationships. I voiced this opinion and felt encouraged when trusted church members shared it. Without realizing it, my newly won “yes” to homosexuality created deep cracks in my heterosexual cocoon. It wouldn’t take much more for the truth to break through.

An “Internal Coming out” through Binge-Watching

The catalyst came in the form of two TV series. The first was Netflix’s *Heartstopper*¹, released in April 2022. I had just embraced same-sex relationships as valid, and I was curious about the LGBTQ+ world. I didn’t expect the show to strike me like lightning. I watched all eight short episodes repeatedly, not understanding what fascinated and touched me so much. What did the story of a sixteen-year-old boy discovering his bisexuality have to do with me?

My curiosity deepened into a neurodivergent hyperfocus. I watched YouTube videos about bisexuality from a real-life YouTuber featured in *Heartstopper*, then found reaction videos from queer creators watching the show. This was my first—albeit virtual—contact with the queer community, and their testimonies moved me deeply. They spoke of joy that

1 Netflix, 2022.

such a show now existed, but also of grief that they hadn't enjoyed such positive representation as teens.

The final crack came with *Sex Education*. I watched it for Nauti Gatwa, the future *Doctor Who*, but one therapy scene changed everything. Dr. Jean Milburn asks teenager Ola what kind of people catch her eye on the street. Ola answers, "Everyone." Jean explains that this isn't typical—that it suggests being bi or pansexual. My immediate thought was: *Well, of course*. And while Ola identified as pan, this label didn't really suit me. For me, gender does make a difference, but I am able to be attracted to people from every gender. In that quiet, undramatic moment, I realized: I must be bisexual.

The Importance of Art, Visibility and an Internal Coming Out

Let me take a brief detour, speaking as both a writer and someone profoundly influenced by books and films: The visibility of non-heteronormative relationships and life paths in art and entertainment is of vital importance and cannot be overstated. For me, these two series were the doorway to recognizing I'm queer.

We urgently need more books, artworks, games, comics, films and series that address these themes well—where queer protagonists are neither clichéd token characters nor tragic figures, but simply live their lives like everyone else, without being reduced to their queerness.

Looking back, I now understand why certain fictional characters and actors touched me so deeply. I was always most emotionally affected by films where I was drawn to both leads—like the 2005 version of *Pride and Prejudice*² or *Atonement*³ (two words: Keira Knightley!). Even though these weren't queer stories, they planted seeds that would later bloom into my "bisexual awakening."

Some realizations still make me smile—I only recently recognized how fascinated I'd been by Watts, the short-haired, leather-jacket-wear-

2 Working Title Films, 2005.

3 Working Title Films, 2007.

ing, drum-playing character in the 1987 teen romance *Some Kind of Wonderful*⁴. And even more moving to me was the relationship between Idgie Threadgoode—also played by Mary Stuart Masterson—and Ruth Jamsen in the film adaptation of *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café*.⁵ In Fannie Flagg's book, their relationship is clearly romantic; the film downplays it, but the sapphic tension is unmistakable.

Between Worlds: the Blessings and Burdens of my Situation

This delayed coming out has left me in a complicated place: I'm 55, out only to my husband and my queer Christian small group, yet also a church leader and part-time staff member in a denomination that allows some flexibility on inclusion, but officially teaches that same-sex sexual relationships go against God's will.

The hardest part is feeling “in-between”—the sense of belonging nowhere. It's a familiar bisexual experience: too queer for straight people, not queer enough for the LGBTQ+ community, doubted by both. For me, that's compounded by growing up outside the church, coming to faith late, masking my neurodivergence, and being demisexual: too religious for my non-church friends, too “worldly” for some church members; too odd for my neurotypical friends, yet too well-masked to be seen as part of the neurodiverse community; not asexual, but not fully allosexual either. I seem to belong to no-one, because my overlap with any one group is so small.

I sometimes grieve the fact that I didn't know or live out such a significant part of my identity for so long. I don't mourn missed physical experiences, but I long to explore and embrace this part of myself—at queer parties, in queer community, even outside Christian spaces. That's still possible. Yet I can't help wondering how my life might have been different had I known sooner.

4 Hughes Entertainment, 1987.

5 Universal Pictures, 1991.

Fear of Rejection and a Big “Yes, But”

Another heavy fear is whether the acceptance I’ve experienced in my church would vanish if I came out. I am, despite personal growth, still someone who craves harmony and hates conflict. I find it deeply stressful when someone is angry with me. In the congregation I’ve been part of for a decade—where I’ve taken on much responsibility and helped shape the community—I’m trusted, respected, and liked. Would that change? How would people treat me if they knew?

The greatest tension lies in how my queerness intersects with my sense of calling to pastoral ministry. Just before my 50th birthday, and before my internal coming out, I first had the impression that God might be calling me to be a pastor. I wrestled with this—especially because of my strong introversion—but received ongoing encouragement from internal theological training and other sources.

About a year ago, I began the denomination’s preparatory training for pastors to discern whether I am suited and called to the role. I received a big yes, both internal and external—except for the enormous *but* of my unspoken bisexuality. Would those who now see me as a pastor still think so if they knew? Would they take back their “yes”?

This raises a difficult question: is it necessary, important, or even essential to disclose my queer identity? I’m still torn. On one hand, I don’t owe anyone an outing. I’m married to a man, monogamous, and have no intention of changing that. By church guidelines, I am not “living in sin.” In theory, these guidelines allow someone who is homosexually or bisexually oriented to be ordained—as long as they don’t act on it.

But I dislike the situation because it feels inauthentic. I find it hard to bear not being open.

An Insider’s View on the Needs of Queer People

Alongside these challenges, I see positives—for both myself and the church. My internal coming out has sharpened my awareness of queer needs and the harm caused by non-affirming theology. I think often

about the effect on young queer people in our denomination, which spans a wide theological spectrum—some congregations are strongly rejecting, others are cautiously opening up within the limits allowed.

This means queer youth have vastly different experiences depending on their local church. Some hear that homosexuality is a sin; others hear more positive messages. But in both cases, they suffer from a lack of understanding—especially regarding bisexuality. Even in open churches, queer youth are often alone in their challenges, lacking older queer role models in the congregation. Most of those potential mentors have long left the church, after years of rejection or pressure to deny their identity.

I also think about the likely significant number of unconsciously bisexual people in churches like mine. Understanding of bisexuality is minimal—even well-meaning, educated Christians around me often believe bisexuals need multiple partners to be happy. Combined with the teaching that only heterosexual attraction is God's will, this has probably kept many from recognizing their bisexuality. As teens, they may have felt same-sex attraction but interpreted it as temptation, turning away from it in favour of the opposite sex—marrying, and living in heterosexual relationships. In their view, this was a healing brought about by faith and obedience.

Such hidden bisexuality may not be a problem for them personally, but it can hinder openness toward queerness in the church. To acknowledge bisexuality would mean facing the possibility that they themselves are bi—and that their “healing” never happened. This could shake their faith and self-image and may cause unconscious resistance to even talking about queerness.

The “Pro” Side: Joyful Coming out, Little Trauma

One great blessing is that I discovered my bisexuality only after I was on solid affirming theological ground. I believe that's no accident—without that inner “yes” to non-heterosexual relationships, my internal coming out would not have happened.

Because of that, my realization was not dramatic or painful—it was a joyful *aha* moment. I was glad to have learned something new about myself, something that explained so much of my past. I never wrestled with feeling “wrong,” but knew from the start that God made me this way and that it was good. I avoided the heavy baggage of trauma that many Christian queers my age carry. I know that’s a gift.

I see a strong parallel with my late conversion—coming to faith has been the greatest treasure of my life. Knowing that God says yes to me no matter my circumstances—that He made me as I am (quirky, introverted, queer)—has freed me in many ways.

Called to Build Bridges and Stir the Waters

All these unique traits strengthen my conviction to stay where I am: in my not-yet-fully-affirming church, in leadership, in pastoral ministry—and to tie my calling closely to LGBTQ+ advocacy. This is where I am meant to work for change. As someone between worlds, I am called to be a bridge-builder—fearlessly authentic.

For me, being myself has always been a non-negotiable need. That’s why I believe the time will come when I will be open about my bisexuality. Given my introversion and dislike of making a fuss, it won’t be a dramatic announcement—ideally, it will happen organically. I see it as a second calling to write books featuring queer characters, and for those to be taken seriously, they should be written by someone who can speak from personal experience.

Until then, I will live in this “twilight zone,” aware that part of my identity remains hidden and is rejected by my church. I must live with the uncertainty of when the moment will come to step into the light—and how people will react. But I trust, as I have since January 2004, in God’s guidance.

When the time comes, I will be ready—even if it means causing a stir, something I find uncomfortable. I dislike confrontation, taking up space, or disrupting the status quo. But even as I write this, I feel a growing conviction that this is part of my calling—to make people in my

church face the reality that those they admire for their character, gifts and maturity can be queer. To stand for queer people because I am one of them. To build bridges fearlessly and authentically, by stirring the waters.

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

2.3 A Transman's Journey of Deconstructing Gender, Faith and Sexuality

Oliver, Sweden

Introduction

When I was born, someone took a peek between my legs and concluded that I was a girl. That was written on my birth certificate and I was raised according to that information. With that came a whole lot of expectations from the world, alongside a tiny mould I was supposed to fit into. That mould included being compliant, nice, taking social responsibility, smiling at men, becoming a mother, being nurturing – and also being heterosexual. It wasn't until I seriously understood that there was an alternative to the gender I had been assigned that I realized I was also allowed to question the label heterosexual.

Expectations since Birth

My whole life, everything has worked together toward a single goal: to make me a woman and everything that comes with it. From a very young age, I was supposed to play house (where I was to be the mum and nothing else!), draw hearts around the boys I thought were cute in the school yearbook, and get my first innocent kiss from some boy in the next class, behind a fence in the schoolyard. As I grew up, I was supposed to start having more serious relationships with boys, go to the prom in a long, beautiful dress with a handsome boy in a suit. Eventually, I would meet

the one, get married, have kids with him, hopefully not get divorced, and then die at the same time and be buried in the same grave.

Shortly after my birth at the hospital, these expectations were already placed upon me. And all of these images already rush through a parent's head at such an early stage of their child's life. Some parents are probably quite aware of this. They may have a concrete goal they want their newborn daughter to live up to. Other parents are probably less aware of it. They look at their daughter and perhaps just feel love and wonder, take a picture and post it on Facebook with the caption "this is the most beautiful, cutest, most perfect little girl ever created" and maybe in that moment, they're only thinking about her round chubby cheeks. But somewhere in the back of their minds, a scene from her future wedding plays, where they stand at the front with tears in their eyes, giving her away to her Prince Charming.

Throughout my life, people have mostly read me as a girl. Sometime during childhood, I started thinking boys were cute, and with that, the world told me I was heterosexual. Straight. When the world told me that this was the truth, and I couldn't deny that I liked boys, I accepted their label. Even though the word "girl" never really felt right, I felt attraction to boys, and that must simply mean I was a straight girl. There were no other options.

Girls Kissing Girls

In middle school, some girls around me started dating other girls. They had previously shown an interest in boys, so I had assumed they were heterosexual. Around the same time, some church leaders told us that some girls our age experimented with other girls, often to get attention or because it felt exciting to them. The leaders were very clear that this was wrong. These were heterosexual girls who were straying from the path, going off-plan for a short time by flirting with other girls. Eventually, this youthful whim would be over, and they would find their way back to boys.

The leaders' words were internalized. I started to look at these girls, my friends, with contempt. In line with what I had been taught, I believed these "heterosexual girls" would soon realize their mistake and return to dating boys only.

The Trans Realization

Let's fast forward about eight years, to 2018. I was 24 and it was a September evening. I was sitting in the kitchen of the house I was currently renting for a ridiculously low price from a friend. This kitchen, with its bright pastel-colored wallpapers, was about to become the setting for the most significant night in my adult life.

I spent that evening watching random videos on YouTube, and on this specific night, I ended up in a trans corner of this diverse platform. I found myself watching video after video of trans people talking about their lives, about dating, working out, studying – just regular, everyday stuff. It was the first time I had ever heard a trans person talk about themselves, and I know instantly that what they were talking about was me.

During the coming weeks, I spent hours reminiscing about my childhood and found countless signs and patterns that suddenly made sense, looking at it with these newly found trans glasses. I understood why the word "girl" always felt so uncomfortable, why my body always felt foreign, and why the gazes from others hurt so much. I reevaluated everything I'd learned about gender, and with that, I built an entirely new, much more beautiful worldview. As I was deconstructing the gender binary that the world had spent so much effort convincing me was reality, I slowly started to realize that if gender isn't binary, then neither is sexuality.

Once I realized I was not a girl, the label heterosexual no longer fitted. If I'm a guy and attracted to guys, am I gay then? That would explain why I felt so much kinship with the gay men I read about in books or saw in films. It had felt so forbidden when, as a teenager, I watched a TV series about men who got sick and died from AIDS and I felt like one of

them. It didn't feel like I had the right to identify with them. Now that I understood that I was trans, I was still unsure if I could use the word gay. I didn't know if I, as a trans guy, was allowed to call myself gay. It felt like a term that wasn't meant for me.

At this time, I still thought that I only liked boys. I was not yet ready to question binary sexuality any further than that. I thought that I could only fall in love with a cis guy – or possibly with a nonbinary person who was assigned male at birth, if they're comfortable in their body. Society's disgust toward trans bodies was deeply internalized, and I couldn't see how a trans body could be attractive, handsome, even sexy. During this time, I saw myself as a trans guy who was attracted to cis guys or people with normative male bodies.

Friendship Turned Loveship

After realizing I was trans, I felt very alone. I'd barely met any other trans people and felt uncertain whether there were others like me – Christian transpeople. Maybe in the world, but were there any others in Sweden? In February 2020, I contacted the Christian rainbow movement – EKHO – and they connected me with Emanuel. Emanuel and I started emailing and quickly became close friends. Emanuel is also a trans guy and comes from a similar church background to me. We both grew up with strong expectations regarding gender roles and sexuality. We emailed, chatted, and video called.

Over phone calls while eating porridge or during long walks in the forest, we talked about our gender identities, the church and the Bible, about sexuality and expectations, and quite a bit about trees and nature. As I got to know Emanuel better, I also got to know myself.

Six months after our first email, I finally meet Emanuel for the first time, at the Finnåker Retreat and Conference Centre in the Swedish countryside. We were there to plan a conference for young Christian trans people, but I found it hard to focus because I was so preoccupied with Emanuel's presence. Something in me was drawn to him and I just

wanted more of him. We walked through the autumn leaves down to a nearby stream, and I wished the walk would never end.

Back home in Gothenburg, I reflected on what I'd experienced. What was I feeling towards Emanuel? Was it a crush? Was I a little smitten? A little bit in love? But was that even possible? Could I feel these things for someone like him? He's a *trans* guy. Up until this moment I'd been fully convinced that I couldn't be attracted to trans people, but these thoughts slowly started to unravel.

I started exploring this together with my friends. One day, I was sitting with an old cis female straight college friend in a park in central Gothenburg.

"Look at that guy over there, good-looking, right?" I asked.

"Yes, definitely," she replied.

"Would you still think that if you knew he was assigned female at birth?"

"Hmm, I don't know. I probably would."

"Would you still think that if you knew he didn't have a penis?"

I was so unsure about my own attraction and the definition of sexuality. Everything had seemed so simple when I was growing up. "You're a girl and you like boys, then you're heterosexual, end of story." Now, that felt so inadequate to encompass all of humanity and its variations. But what was sexuality, then? And which aspects define who we're attracted to? Is assigned gender important? Or is it how we perceive the person? Is the label important? Is it how the person themselves identifies? Is it important what the person's genitalia look like? Is it important if that specific genitalia were there at birth, or if it was constructed later on?

These thoughts kept running through my mind over the next couple of months. Sometimes, they were more intrusive, but often, they were further back in my consciousness. I had so much else to think about. While Sweden is often thought of as some form of queer utopia, that is far from the truth. Being trans in this country means that you're in a constant battle. In 1972, Sweden became the first country in the world to offer gender affirming care and the option of changing your legal gender. In 2020, this law had barely been amended and is now vastly outdated. Therefore, there were so many obstacles I had to focus on during

this period. I needed to go to doctor's appointments, join various queues for gender-affirming care, correct people who used the wrong pronouns when speaking about me, change my username and email address on all the thousands of websites I was a member of, register a new name with the Tax Agency, get a new bank card, take a new passport photo, put up a new name on the front door... the list felt endless. There's so much practical stuff to do as a newly out trans person.

Being trans requires energy in ways I didn't expect. Apart from all the admin that I needed to do, there was also emotional work that took up a lot of energy. Wherever I went, I was constantly on edge regarding my surroundings. It felt like I needed to convince people of my gender identity every time I entered a new room. Every day, I got questions related to my trans identity, but rarely did I face the same kind of questioning about my sexuality. Those thoughts simply sat in the backseat for the most part, while I concentrated on dealing with being trans.

My feelings for Emanuel grew each time we met. In August 2021, almost a year after our first meeting, we were at a camp together and shared a room with a bunk bed. One night, we were up for hours talking and giggling. On the way home, we cramped in the backseat of our friends' car, our thighs pressed tightly against each other. It felt like electricity, and I thought to myself, "I must enjoy this touch. I don't know if I'll ever be this close to him again."

Now, it was becoming very clear to me that I was in love with Emanuel. I enjoyed being with him, we laughed and could talk about almost anything, I thought he was handsome, and I got butterflies in my stomach when we touched each other. What else could this be if not infatuation? How Emanuel identified or how his body looked like felt unimportant.

Ten months after I first met Emanuel at Finnåker, we were sitting on a bench in the small village of Dals Långed where he lived. I had decided to tell him that I thought I was in love with him. I was no longer worried about whether I could feel this way about a trans person; I was sure what my feelings meant. With my eyes fixed on the conifer trees across the lake, I told him and he smiled. My feelings were reciprocated. We spent an intense two weeks together, and on September 17, 2021, he asked if

I wanted to be his partner. I said yes and since that day, we've officially been a couple.

Worries Regarding Body Parts

A small worry still lingered inside me and it concerned intimacy. Nakedness. There were many layers and aspects to this worry:

- a) I suffered from gender dysphoria and felt incredibly uncomfortable showing anyone my naked body. It was hard to even imagine letting someone get that close without feeling significant resistance to the idea.
- b) I also lived with the after-effects of a shame-based attitude toward sexuality from the church. Sex was forbidden, and pleasure was sinful. At this time, I had deconstructed my faith enough to no longer intellectually believe it was dirty to be with someone in that way, but my body still reacted automatically and in accordance with what I'd been taught.
- c) On top of those two very heavy sex-related burdens, I was also worried that the resistance I felt had to do with Emanuel's body. What if I actually needed the other person to have a genuine, normative penis in order for me to be aroused? What if it turned out that the attraction lies there after all? What if it simply didn't work for me?

It turns out that my worry was unfounded. After doing some work on my gender dysphoria and Christian sexual shame, there are no issues for me in that department. (It feels really weird telling you about this. I never talk about my sex life in my everyday life and don't feel comfortable doing so, but it feels important in order to tell this story.)

The Search for a Label

At that time, I still felt like I needed a label. Everyone in the LGBTQIA+ community seemed so sure of who they were. In my eyes, everyone embraced their labels by wearing them on a T-shirt or waving their corresponding flag in Pride parades. I thought that you needed to find the correct label in order to be a proud out queer person.

So what would my label be? I was with Emanuel and clearly attracted to him. We were two trans guys. Were we gay? We were definitely in a same-sex relationship, but that doesn't mean one is gay. My sexuality felt broader than that. It felt like I was more than that. But what did that mean?

The only other word I could think of at that time was bisexual. At first, I had a completely wrong idea of what it meant. Like many others, I thought that being bisexual meant you can be attracted to people of *both* genders – like there were only men and women out there. It felt so trans-excluding that I initially dismissed the term completely. But as I started talking more with my bisexual friends and reading more literature on the subject, I realized that bisexuality itself was not trans-excluding. I particularly latched onto the definition that the two in bi initially referred to being attracted to people with a *similar* gender identity to your own and people of *other* gender identities. That the binary, in fact, referred to your own gender and others, rather than a binary division of genders themselves. This fit me well because I was clearly attracted to people of a gender like my own (Emanuel), but I also thought I could be attracted to people of other genders.

Another misconception I had about bisexuality was that a bisexual person felt equal attraction to people of all genders – that the scale must be balanced. I really couldn't relate to that. Since I'd always been so convinced that I only liked men and had only just accepted the idea of my sexuality being a little bit broader than that, I was not yet ready to imagine being able to fall in love with people of *all* genders. For this reason, I believed that I couldn't be bisexual.

I also briefly considered the term pansexual, which had been described to me as someone who was attracted to people regardless of

gender. It felt like that's what happened with Emanuel. I fell in love with him, even though I didn't think I could be attracted to someone with his gender identity. His gender didn't seem to matter to me emotionally, even though I thought it did, intellectually.

Somewhere around this time, I also got tired and a bit sad when I heard about the conflicts in the community – that pansexuality and bisexuality could be pitted against each other, that people within the same community had prejudices about each other. This conflict also made me hesitant towards joining the community, for fear of getting pulled into this mess.

Another reason why I hesitated about using the term bi- or pansexual at the time was learning about bi erasure. I met countless people on the m-spec who talked about their frustration of being erased all the time, within and beyond the lgbtqia+ community. My heart broke for them, and it made me extra cautious around the steps I took. I didn't want to do anything that created further issues in the community. I believed that if I started identifying as bi or pan, but later realized I was not, then that might confirm people's misconceptions about that community. Or that if I started identifying as bi or pan, but wasn't bi enough, then I would erase the "real" bisexual people.

In 2024, the Christian Rainbow Movement, EKHO, started a new community for their bisexual and pansexual members. I was happy and spread the information to friends, but I didn't dare to join myself. I was unsure whether I was welcome there, whether I was bi enough. I knew people in the group had heard me call myself gay and I thought that meant that I couldn't also call myself bisexual or pansexual.

After a few months, I cautiously joined the group. I read others' introductions but didn't dare write my own. It still felt kind of good to be there, in a corner. It became a way to explore whether or not I belonged in that community.

Recently, I've started to calm down a bit about the whole "in search of a term" frenzy. I still try on different labels sometimes and while none of them feel perfect, all of them feel like they speak to one part of who I am. Some days I call myself gay; in some places I call myself bisexual. Sometimes I say that I'm on the m-spec. Oftentimes I summarize it with

the word queer. I'm telling myself that it's ok to not have one word that feels correct always. It's ok to jump back and forth and use a multitude of terms. It's ok to not be just one thing but instead use many labels to describe who you are. Because isn't that the most logical? We are complex human beings and the idea that one word can describe our full selves doesn't quite feel right.

I don't Need a Label

Some parts of me wish that I could end this chapter by saying that there's an end to this rollercoaster, that I've finally found one label that feels like me – a label that explains who and what I'm attracted to. That would have been a nice landing point after this slalom course I've taken you on! But that's not the case. I don't have one good word to fully describe my sexuality.

But I'm not thinking much about my sexuality today. It doesn't really matter that much to me. I know I'm in love with Emanuel and that's enough for me. If Emanuel were to swap his pants for a skirt and let his hair grow out, I would love him still. If he were to start identifying as non-binary or realize he wasn't trans at all, instead going back to identifying with the female gender assigned to him at birth, I would still want to be with him. What Emanuel has between his legs, how his body looks or how he identifies, doesn't matter to me.

When they took that peek between my legs at birth, they thought they could see my entire future. Today, I know that neither gender nor love is that simple. I'm in love with Emanuel – and that's enough.

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

2.4 The Long and Winding Road to Self-Acceptance

Luis (interview), Iberia & Scotland

Identity

I'm officially British but I did not grow up here. I was born in Iberia and lived there until I was 18. I lived in London for nine months and went to university. It didn't work out, so I went back home but then came back to the UK – to Edinburgh – for university again in 2005, when I was 21. I have been here ever since. I just love it and never wanted to leave and it feels like home. In truth, it feels like I have two homes. I have a cultural home in Iberia and then I have where I want to spend the rest of my life, in Edinburgh.

In terms of ethnicity, I usually say I am white British, because being Iberian versus British – you're still white you know? And because I have a British passport. But I'll say white European, if there's a choice.

With regard to sexual orientation, I'd say I'm bisexual currently. But it's taken my whole life, from kind of early teens to now, to accept that, I suppose. I've been through every other label in the meanwhile! But it's only been bisexual in the last few years, since being on testosterone actually. It's started to settle down; it's more about feeling comfortable in my own body. And therefore comfortable and free enough to be myself. That said, I'm still not open about it with family and other people, and I really only tell people if it comes up. And I would say I actually avoid mentioning it back home in Iberia because it's not really understood or accepted.

With reference to gender, I'm a trans man. I always use pronouns he/him. Sometimes I will say male on things, if I just want things to be simple. It's contextual, I suppose, but in reality I think that there's a difference between being trans and cis – not so much in terms of our innate gender identity, but in terms of life experience, how it colours that, affects that, how it manifests in your day to day life. Now that I am comfortable in myself and everything, I no longer feel that I have to fit the kind of alpha male type expectations, particularly of my culture, because I just feel more comfortable with myself and my gender. Being brought up and socialized as a female until I was finally able to come out at 25, colours everything and I no longer try to alter the way that I speak or my body language or anything because I don't think it really matters. It matters to other people and it does affect how people see you. But I think, since having my son particularly, I will talk to him, how it comes out. Other people in general look at you differently, but do I care really? As long as it doesn't affect him, I really don't care.

My Faith & my Grandmother

In terms of my faith, it's been very up and down over my life. I obviously grew up in a Catholic country. I would say when I was growing up, probably 90–95% of people were Catholic. Whether they were practising or not, obviously it's variable. So through school, I went through first Holy Communion, Confirmation, all of that. I had a very, very religious paternal grandmother and she was the most important person in the world to me growing up and, you know, really probably until she died.

Did I think about faith a lot? I had a lot of doubts, largely around how strict things were, how a lot was very condemnatory. For example, I remember when I was about 7 coming home from school crying and really scared, telling my mum, because the priest – all schools had priests in them, as well as teachers and stuff – had told me she was going to go to hell, because she was Church of England, and there's nothing I can do about it. I had a lot of confused feelings about my faith. I saw my grandmother and even though she was extremely strict and everything, [her

faith] brought her so much peace. [I saw it] in the way that she treated people, and the way that she loved so strongly. But she was very strict to the letter and what the Vatican said. And she grew up at a convent school and all of that. And I've read some of her old books, because when she died, I inherited them. There's a lot about how women should be and what sort of books [they should read] kind of comments. One of them was a convent's guide to how young women should grow up and how women should be as wives, very prescribed stuff about how you dressed, how you talked, about the prayers that you have to say and all of that. She obviously took all of that on board as exactly how things were. The books were in Spanish and actually they're quite interesting. I've got a few of her prayer books and stuff as well. A lot of them are very good, actually, if you remained fluent in Spanish. But I don't speak it

I was bullied a lot in my childhood for having an English mother and Iberian father. We can trace our family – we've done family tree going back 300 plus years. The only other blood has been from other parts of Iberia, though I think there were a couple of Italian women as well. So that's very pure, but I've never had any kind of emotional or even much practical connection with the English side of my family.

My grandmother was the one who was very influential on me. I felt like the way she behaved and stuff, ignoring all the strict bits, was led by her love for Jesus and sort of taught me a lot about who Jesus was really. I came out a few months after she died. I felt I couldn't come out when she was alive. I did attempt to come out as trans, sort of about every three years roughly throughout my life, but they were really much smaller attempts to come out. Usually I'd say something to my mum or a friend or something and then get everything just kind of thrown at me, like no you're not, blah. And I'd just have to kind of stick everything back in the box.

There were phases where I moved away from my faith because it was too difficult. In early childhood, I wrestled with it a lot, because of all the very prescriptive things and not feeling like I was truly accepted and all of that, but still believing and seeing something in it. So I did go through with my first Holy Communion and confirmation at age eight and twelve. So that was that. I mean, you don't really get a choice, but

I went through with it with the belief that you only go through your confirmation if you really mean it. So, after wrestling with it a bit, I did really believe it. I would say I stopped practicing somewhere in my teens, stopped feeling like I belonged and all of that.

My grandmother was the person in my family that understood my mental health issues and didn't judge me for them. She had something to do with a convent or a monastery, focusing on Saint Jude, and she would kind of give financial donations in exchange for them praying for her – and for me, too, which is a very strange thing – but she really strongly believed in the intercession of saints, and priests, nuns and all of that. So, she continued to have an influence on my faith. She is probably the reason I didn't step away from it, completely.

Because I always felt that I couldn't come out as trans [while she was alive], I had come out as a lesbian. She was capable of such unconditional love – it didn't change the way she loved me, thought about me. But it made her so, so sad, and have so much pain, because she genuinely worried for my soul. And that was a horrible thing for her, as well. I just thought, if I told her about the gender stuff, that would be even more incomprehensible to her. I was just so worried about the impact it would have on her. So I didn't tell my grandmother why I left my husband. Because I saw how she was when my female cousin came out. She's in her 90s; she's not going to be here forever.

Mental Breakdown & Exorcisms

At the age of 18, around the time of my A Levels, I had a suicide attempt. I have struggled with my mental health for as long as I can remember. So I had the suicide attempt and then three days out hospital, I started trying to get ready for my A Levels.

I was obviously very distressed. I spoke to someone I didn't know really very well at school, who took me to her church. It was a kind of non-denominational evangelical church, which was even more strict, as they're very full-on. My friends in general used to refer to this church as a cult, because it was happy, because it was evangelical in the extreme, lots

of dancing, and kind of crying out in prayer through the services and at other points, speaking in tongues laying on of hands and stuff. At a later point, I went through exorcism because of my sexuality. They had quite a hold on me for a few years. I think a lot of it was that I desperately wanted to belong and believe in something and I saw little pieces that were so good, like the reliance on Jesus and I suppose like the unconditional love for everyone. But it was conditional, because you had to conform and behave as they wanted. It was less stuffy and very much more emotionally expressive and all of that, than what I used to. And I liked the whole thing of having a personal relationship with Jesus, rather than it all being very removed through prayer to the saints.

They tried to exorcise same-sex attraction out of me; I wasn't identifying as trans at that point. This was when I was 19. After joining this church, I moved to London for university and I attended a very similar church. When I got back home, after a few months I met somebody. I went through a lot with this partner. She was my first kind of relationship, that kind of fitted the lesbian criteria, and we just ended up having this tremendous, passionate, but very all over the place, chaotic relationship. It was chaotic, largely because of the reaction we had to it (from others).

She was Iberian and she didn't have English connections – her parents were Iberian. It was really not normal to do kinds of things like holding hands in the street, which we did, or all of that stuff like being open about being in that sort of relationship. As a result, we had a lot of kind of conflicts with family, and with my church, which she did attend a little bit, even though she held on very strongly to her Catholic faith. She was a practising Catholic and she did come with me to my church, but mostly she went to Catholic churches. She had a lot of emotional conversations with priests and stuff about her own sexuality but ultimately they didn't try anything like that (conversion therapy) with her, which I think shows you something about this whole evangelical side of it being extra, strong love, but the extreme judgement, too. The emotions don't seem to be so open on either side of that in the Catholic church. I mean, she had people praying for her and stuff – mostly the priest in the Catholic church – but I think it's that whole thing of being more removed from things.

I ended it multiple times, but I just ended up going back to her many times. One of those times was when I'd been in London. Some things happened which actually meant the end of my studies, a traumatic event where I was raped by a partner, a male partner. It brought up a lot of childhood trauma. So when I got back to Iberia, my relationship with my ex was based on the fact that we could relate on those issues of childhood trauma and stuff. So in addition to lots of other stuff, that was a big help, but I was still all over the place. I was not dealing with it, and she was the only person I told about the childhood stuff apart from church.

So I think after I was back for about nine months, I ended up in hospital and was back and forth out of hospital for quite a lot of time afterwards. Because things were not happening, not working well, I was visited fairly early on by people from my church. We went off the ward but still on the hospital grounds and that's where the exorcism happened. They were talking about demons and Satan and all of that – they felt that it was demons getting into me because I was weak due to my mental health and trauma and all of that.

There was a lot happening within quite a short space of time. I started attending the church at 18 in Iberia then went off to London. I carried on attending a similar church and went back to the original one during the holiday. I carried on going to that church even when I was in hospital. I met my partner when I came back at 19 and I carried on going to that church until I was 20 or 21 – I'm really not sure – when I was subjected to the equivalent of ex-communication. I was expelled from the church and no longer welcome because I wouldn't repent of my relationship and be fixed, basically. I didn't know the whole time that this was going on. There was a lot of stuff about gender roles and stuff as well, because gender roles were very strong for them. Yeah. And one of the ways I attempted to fix everything for myself when I was 18 and joined the church was to become increasingly more feminine, like hyper feminine and kind of go the opposite way. Just to just try and get over it, I suppose. You know, like, *I'm not really trans, I'm really not trans. I can do this.*

So after kind of being expelled from the church, I had no connection to any church for quite some time. I tried to forget about faith. Obviously it was still there in moments in my head. You can't get away from that, if

you've ever believed, I don't think, but certainly I had more doubts than I ever had before.

Metropolitan Community Church & Transitioning

I moved here [to Scotland] at 21. Nine months into that, so probably not until I was about 22, I discovered MCC (Metropolitan Community Church). I'd attempted to go to a few different evangelical or maybe Baptist or whatever churches, initially, because I'd joined the University Christian Union. I was still looking for something, and about six months to nine months in, maybe a little before I was 2, I somehow read about or heard about MCC – whilst I was at Uni, I'm not sure – and the fact that the site is so close to the university.

So I started going to MCC and I was completely and utterly confused with the acceptance of sexuality and gender – though what I was mostly hearing at that time was about sexuality – and that was just completely revolutionary to me. Overwhelmingly this was in a good way. I finally settled down with my now ex-partner, whom I met when I was 19. We were together for twelve and a half years. She moved here to be with me. It took a year for her to settle everything back there, because moving away was a big deal. It's not something they do, unless they're going to university and coming back there, really. So she moved here and we lived together. And she came to MCC with me and she had much more of an *Oh my God, what do you think you're doing with the Bible* type reaction. She had some conversations with a lesbian couple that she talked to a bit, but in the end she felt completely uncomfortable with everything. And around this time, she started hiding her sexuality. When she started work here and stuff, she talked to absolutely no-one about it. She referred to me, or allowed people to think, I was her flat mate. You know, all of that stuff – my cousin, my bestie.

She did not feel comfortable at the time to go to MCC, so I carried on going for a couple of months on and off. But eventually I left it completely. And at the same time, I was going through things with the CU at University, towards the end of my first year. There was something that

came up called the Pure Course, which was eventually allowed to be held on university grounds. There was a lot of back and forth, but eventually they did hold it in people's homes, but kind of recruited from university and stuff. And the whole thing about sexuality and stuff evolved to gender roles as well. So eventually I stopped going to CU. I stopped going to MCC, which were very different things, but I stopped going to them roughly at the same time. After we stopped going to MCC, she convinced me to try and go to a Catholic church. The closest one to us was where we first worked. All the women were wearing veils and the Mass was in Latin with no English translation. Eventually I told her that I did not feel comfortable going, so we started going to the Catholic Cathedral, which was much better.

But we still couldn't be open about *the biggie*, the relationship. I did go to prayers and I used to say the rosary. I have quite a few different feelings about the rosary, but overwhelmingly, I don't have an issue with it and I felt it was helping me. With the prayer scenario, I don't pray to the Saints and all of that, but it's the whole thing of thinking about multiple things whilst you're saying the words. It gives you an ability to focus on a particular thing that you're praying for. In this case, it was always for my grandmother. She went through quite a lot of things in the years before she died with her health. So there were a lot of prayers for her. But ultimately I had no church, going forwards, until she died, nearly fifteen years ago.

After my grandmother died, a few months later, I had a massive breakdown in my mental health, so I ended up in hospital on a Section, for quite a while. I got to know the hospital chaplain there, who happened to have been at MCC when I was there. I hadn't seen him for a very long time, obviously, but he remembered me. He met with me a few times. Throughout this stay in hospital, I was doing things I had been doing for years. So in my spare time, I used to bind, for example. By the end of this hospital stay, I had made the decision to come out. It's a very awkward thing to do on a mental health ward, because I was being constantly observed, as well. I think talking to the chaplain had a huge impact on my feeling able to come out, and kind of made the decision

that I was going to come out, even make the decision that I was going to come out, even if it wasn't what everyone else wanted for me.

So I did start going to the MCC again, though by now it had merged with the URC. It took a couple of months before I did properly. A lot of [the reason] why I still wasn't going regularly, was because I was still with my ex and she was very much *not* accepting any of this. I think I took about seven years to move from social transition to medical transition. It was a long time, and a lot of it – no, all of it – was based on other people and acceptance. In those times, waiting times were quite different. Quite soon after hospital, I came out to my GP. She was very accepting, but because times were different, obviously 15 years ago nearly, she was sort of like, “Oh, I’ve never had a trans patient, but I’ll go and find out about all of that.” And she did; she was brilliant.

So she referred me to the Sandyford Clinic. Because she said I should go on both waiting lists because that was an option in those days. So I self-referred to Sandyford but she said, really, I should just refer you to the one close [to you], but see if you can get on that one and get there quicker. Now, the Sandyford waiting list was definitely quicker; it was six months at that point. This is the NHS; in those days there weren't any private clinics, though I think there was one in England. So that was not an option. But waiting times were very different. They've gone up and down over the years. Six months later, I had an appointment at the gender clinic in Glasgow.

That was difficult, because in those days, you had to do what was called the ‘Real-Life Experience,’ and I had met the two year's criteria. But they didn't count it, because my family and my then partner were still referring to me by my birth name. My choices were to cut everybody out [of my life] then. So that went nowhere. And then I moved down South in 2014 to start a PhD in England, which also went nowhere. But I went down [south] for that and came off all the gender waiting lists and everything. It was when I came back that I could start moving towards a medical transition; I had no prospects of medically transitioning [in England] because the waiting list in that city for that gender clinic was four and a half years. I would have been there for four years, if my mental health hadn't gone [downhill].

In science, everything's very strictly time controlled. I took three months off then had to start again with everything. When I got back [to Edinburgh], I went back on the waiting lists after about nine months, because I was still with my ex. There was still all of that stuff going on – lack of acceptance and everything. When I was in England, I wasn't completely free, but people treated me differently. It was a mixed bag, but within university, everybody treated me really well in terms of the gender stuff. Within the city itself – that was really awful actually – but I think that's a difference between English and Scottish culture.

So it was after I ended up in a toxicology ward, about nine months after returning back. At the time, the gender clinician at the Edinburgh clinic was the same psychiatrist [I saw on the ward]. She did two days at the gender clinic and two days within the hospital and so was regularly on the toxicology ward. So I spoke to her, but obviously didn't know who she was or anything. And all of this gender stuff just came out. And she was very clear. She moved me up the waiting list – obviously, that's not something that they can do anymore. But she did that, because she felt that if I didn't transition, I wasn't going to live.

Relationship & Family Breakdown

But in medically transitioning, my relationship ended. I had to leave it. I had to end things and move out, with nowhere to move to, because she wouldn't accept it. It all got very, very messy. I actually even had half a day, like a night, kind of street homeless. In the end, because I was scared, I ended up in A&E and someone convinced me to return and to just stay there until I had somewhere to stay.

I also lost contact with my dad for over a year. He was still around but we didn't speak at all. He couldn't handle it [the transition]. He couldn't accept it. My dad is not a practising Catholic; he's what my mother refers to as a 'just in case' Catholic. But it does mean that he's internalized a lot of the messages and stuff. He doesn't believe, but it's like he's taken in a lot of the social stuff.

Finding a Spiritual Home

I had only been going to the URC/MCC church on and off over the whole period. And I definitely didn't go when I was down in England. So it was very sporadic. But once I moved away from where I was living with my ex, very quickly after that, I started going to URC/MCC and have been consistently since then, I've been sort of finding my spiritual home, really. Now, particularly now, there are no longer any kind of conflicting messages coming in that I can buy into it. Church gives me a lot. It gives me a sense of community, a sense of acceptance – taking me and everyone else just as we are, with all of our differences and everything – apart from race. We have a very mixed congregation in terms of disability, age, gender and sexuality. I think it took me about two months to settle and decide that the URC/MCC was home. We were there this one day and we went on an autumn walk that used to be done every year, and I haven't seen it done since COVID at least, but it was generally just the older ones. I was the youngest person there. And we used to end up at the house of [names congregant]. I walked for a long way with [names older couple from church] and I'd always had that thing that people of a certain age or experience, of whatever, can't possibly understand, but they just taught me how wrong that was. I felt right, ok, this is it!

I love the fact that there's people of all ages, my son being so accepted, and involved and all of that, and how much he loves it – there's so many aspects to it. But it's not just the community, the teaching – particularly when [names minister] is teaching – I get so much out of that. I get so much out of every sermon, to be honest. Sometimes it's just one little thing and sometimes it's a lot, and things click into place. Some of it is difficult, but it all makes sense to me, and I don't feel any kind of personal attacks or anything. We are all moving to a better place in our faith. I just don't get the judgement. One of the things that I've always appreciated is where [names minister] says all are welcome before communion, all sexual orientations and genders. You can just be yourself. And I do. I feel like my understanding and comfort and relationship with Jesus, my faith, has just deepened and makes a lot more sense. I feel like we all try

to – not perfectly – kind of embody the sort of attitude and everything that Jesus had.

Identifying as Bi

Historically, I've had a very negative feeling about people being bi, not about other people being bi, but about myself. A sort of great wish to kind of remove myself, to distance myself from it, until very recently. I've not been willing to accept myself as bi, I think largely because of other people's lack of acceptance, both in society in general, but also specifically in my family.

I also feel like for people who know me, it would be sort of like coming out again, a kind of attention-seeking thing. A sort of like, can't you make up your mind? And also I think a lot of people, whether they say it or not, seem to think it's not a real thing. It's like anything that's a bit of both. It's like people who are non-binary get kind of invalidated – that's not a real thing – quite a lot. And I think sometimes being bi can be like that as well. People are sort of like, oh no, you're just gay and don't want to admit it. I think it's only in the last couple of years that I've started to accept for myself that I'm bi and view it as something that isn't a negative. It's not a positive either. It just is. It's just a thing. It's just reality.

I haven't specifically talked to family about being bisexual. It's more sort of general attitudes in other people that I've just sort of picked up from others, how they, they view things. But also when I was in my teens and dating – that was kind of perfectly acceptable – but being in a relationship with a woman is not acceptable. I've had the very distinct feeling from relatives, my mum in particular, that you can't go back. You can't swing between relationships with both. It's the idea that you're just confused, them needing you to be settled one way or the other. I think people like to put concepts, feelings, whatever, in boxes. And if you can't put someone in a box, that does make a lot of people quite unsettled.

I no longer see it [being bi] as a good thing or a bad thing. Some people are just straight, some people are gay and some people are bi and some people are neither. My brother is ace and again, that doesn't get

spoken about. It's easier for my family that he's ace rather than bi. Because he's a romantic asexual, all he has to do to get by it just not talk about it, and the family can just be like, oh well, he prefers to be on his own. He likes living on his own. People will still ask him whether he has a girlfriend, but decades down the line, they ask less and less. And my brother is not the sort of person who feels like he is ever going to be able to do that, so it's not so much of a problem for him. My mum does worry that he's going to be alone forever and be very sad and miserable in old age with no one around him kind of thing. It's all very dramatic and I'm kind of like, I understand where he's coming from. He doesn't need a romantic partner to feel connected to others. He doesn't need to live with other people to feel connected. I get that friends can do that just fine. I think one of the problems with me is that I am somebody who typically wants to talk about feelings and stuff like that. And obviously in many ways, I can't do that with family. Looking at my parents' generation, they're in their mid to late 60s. And I think the way people grew up or were brought up in those times was very different. It's sort of very practical and there was no real space to have feelings. I think that at least with my parents, they do have those feelings and they come out in different ways. But it's not always healthy and they definitely can't understand why they do certain things. It's not necessarily their fault but it does make life difficult, both for them and for others around them.

Thoughts on the Future

Mainly when I'm thinking about the future, I think about my relationship with my son – I call him my son because it's easier and because he likes and affirms being called a boy. Beyond that, I'm thinking about trying for another child. It's a complicated thing, with being trans and on hormones. There are all the practical aspects, plus the fact I had hypertension with [names child]. Then there's family attitudes again. And there's medical hoops to jump through, and it might not even work. But I feel like I want to give it a chance. If it doesn't work, that would be fine, but I'll regret it if I don't. I've got two frozen embryos and age is not a

factor any more than it was with [names child], because I was 35. Therefore, the embryos came from a 35-year-old person, so that's not an issue. The immediate plans for the future are to try [for a baby] but by the time [names child] is in school. He's at nursery now. People have questions, but he's not going to get bullied for it for the rest of his primary education, because none of those kids will be going to the same school as him. But there's an awful lot you have to factor in. I think being single as well is difficult. Being single and knowing that you're almost certainly going to have a debilitating pregnancy related condition as well. With [names child], I spent the majority of the time in bed or in hospital. So there's that, as well having a four-year-old.

When I think about the future, I think about family – as in me and [names child]. And possibly another. I think about career quite a lot as well because I haven't worked since the pandemic due to having a child and a disability, and just not having the capacity. But I massively miss having something that is purely mine, and something to do that I feel is giving back to society in a way, and something that I see has value. So when I think about work, I'm not thinking about any old job, I'm thinking about doing something that I'm passionate about, but it will be tricky to find, because it has to be part-time. It has to fit around childcare. I want something in the sciences, using my academic background.

I don't think much about romantic relationships because my focus is on [names child] and will be for some time. And everything else is secondary. My general feeling is that if someone came along, that would be fantastic, but if they didn't, that would be ok as well. I'm not actively looking for it. When [names child] is old enough to leave home and all of that, then I'll be thinking about it a lot more, I suspect.

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

Section 3: Mixed Orientation Marriage

3.1 A Mum in a MOM

Jaime, England

I was born on the Sunday after Easter in 1971, also known as Divine Mercy Sunday and more ominously as Quasimodo Sunday, which is a liturgical reference, I am told! It was the year Starbucks and Costa Coffee both set up trading, which is probably apt for this Java Junkie. I share my birth-date with the best Doctor Who, David Tennant, and now appropriately, I'm going to travel back in time.

My childhood was spent in Wales, though I later moved to England. I did not grow up in a Christian family. Though my parents did a great line in Victorian parenting, they were not church goers. My fascination with Jesus and burgeoning faith did not come from Sunday School or family traditions but from a Christian headteacher at my primary school, and later from picking up a free Gideons New Testament and reading it by torchlight under the bedclothes aged 17. There is no logical explanation to my coming to faith – I just knew Jesus was real and the incarnation of God. I started to pray and there began my walk with Jesus.

I have always prayed to Jesus more than God. Perhaps because in those early days of faith, where I was struggling with overwhelming same-sex attraction, Jesus felt like the loving welcomer of outsiders, intervening on my behalf to a more authoritarian God. Or perhaps I had projected my parents and grandparents onto God?

Coming to faith aged 17 was not good timing. I was due to start University in the South of England, where I had previously been looking forwards to exploring my sexuality, at least in word, if not in action. This was 1988, the year the Prime Minister of the UK, Margaret Thatcher, introduced Section 28, an act banning local authorities from promoting

homosexuality as a valid lifestyle (much like the laws in today's Russia and Hungary, though without such pernicious penalties). This was a time where it was deeply taboo to speak about same-sex attraction. Even speaking positively of LGBT+-rights would make a person guilty by association and socially shunned. I had spent my formative years in rough and tough South Wales, where homosexuality was totally off the table for discussion. I had no idea that gays and lesbians were supporting the miners in a mining town not far from my home in Swansea. This *minor* did not feel supported at all.

My fresher year at university saw me awkwardly approach both the university Lesbian and Gay Society (Bs and Ts only came later) and the Christian Union. There was no option to be part of both, as both parties concerned made abundantly clear. These two entities were mutually exclusive. You could not be Christian and gay. Everyone knew that. (At this point, I was not aware that I was bisexual or biromantic; I simply oscillated between honesty and dishonesty about my same-sex attraction).

In the end, given the pressure from family and evangelical church friends, I decided to bury that part of me that longed to be held by a woman, and – in the words of the Church of England's desperately ill-informed document, *Issues in Human Sexuality* (1991)¹ – abandoned myself to my 'heterophile leanings' and focused on the opposite sex.

Now I am older and a great deal more self-aware, I understand that I am bisexual. I also understand from experience that bisexuality can be fluid across the lifespan and that it exists on a spectrum that does not only run from left to right in Kinseyesque fashion, in terms of opposite versus same sex attraction, but also along a romantic-sexual intersectional plane. Now middle-aged, I can say with some certainty that I have always had sexual attraction to cisgendered men and androgynous trans or non-binary people. But I do not experience romantic feelings towards cis men. Whereas with cis women, or androgynous FTM trans individuals, I can feel both romantic and sexual attraction. This probably explains

1 Church of England. (1991). *Issues in human sexuality: A statement by the House of Bishops of the General Synod of the Church of England*. London: Church House Publishing.

why my current marriage to a lesbian feels a great deal more 'natural' and 'right' than my first marriage to a cis heterosexual male.

There is perhaps a little more to my attraction to women, that it would be disingenuous to omit; throughout most of my childhood and adult life, I have experienced a deep and often painful yearning to be held and protected by a woman. At times I have understood this to be a desperate longing to enjoy a dynamic entirely missing from my life (and still to this day) – the unconditional love of a mother. At other times, I have sexualised this longing. Mutual exclusivity is a mindset you get used to in a binary either-or world. Now with age, in alignment with my plurisexual identity, I recognise that possibly the two sets of emotions are not necessarily or always separate, but potentially all bound together in one organic, pulsating desire to be loved, held, and esteemed by a woman.

In the following I am going to chart my growing awareness – and comfort – with my bisexual identity, whilst touching on some of the difficulties I have experienced as a Mum in a MOM (or a Mom in a MOM, for American readers!). For the unaware among you, MOM is an acronym for a mixed-orientation marriage, for example (in my two marriages), a bisexual woman married to a straight man, or a bisexual woman married to a lesbian. It can be an incredibly difficult space to navigate, for both parties, and for this reason, both partners may keep this relationship information to themselves, to avoid adding the misunderstandings of others to their already considerable burden.

A number of secular books are available on the subject of marriages that failed when one partner came out the closet. But these books tend to focus on marriages or relationships where one partner has been closeted and comes out as gay, which usually means curtains to that particular coupling, rather than the more nuanced and complex situation such as I faced, where one partner is plurisexual (attracted to more than one gender, for example bisexual) and the other monosexual (attracted to one gender only, for example heterosexual or homosexual).

I was married to my ex-husband for over 20 years. I first met him at university at the age of 19. We dated for a few weeks, then I ceremoniously dumped him, telling him I had feelings for women and it wasn't

going to work. (This was before I realised having feelings for the same sex didn't automatically make me a lesbian). However, we drifted back together five years later, due to the machinations of a mutual friend, and married in 1996 when I was 25. It was the *Four Weddings and a Funeral*² era of my life when everyone was getting married. I later realised our marriage was more of a funeral – a death of honesty and self-awareness.

The week before my wedding I secretly let slip to my best friend and several church friends that I was having severe doubts, on account of my sexuality. But everyone encouraged me to just 'go for it.' God would be faithful and I was attracted to my husband-to-be, so it would work out. The pastor and his wife from the local Vineyard Church I attended shared a so-called 'word of knowledge' with me, that we would parent many children. Now I recognise that was probably a crude form of spiritual abuse, to encourage me to procreate and keep the lid firmly shut on those pesky same-sex feelings. We *did* go on to have three children, but I am not too sure what hand God played in that decision (which is not to doubt God's goodness, or regret our parenting journey, but rather to be honest about the spiritual foundation of our choice to have three children).

I actually cried walking down the aisle of the large Anglican Church in which we married that sunny September day. People interpreted that as wedding day nerves, which they were to a certain extent. But that didn't tell the whole story. Had I been bolder, I would have postponed the wedding. But I couldn't let my partner, his family, my family and the church down. And I did love him, even found him attractive with clothes on. It wasn't about him lacking in any department, other than the rather indisputable fact that he was not a woman, which he could do nothing about. So I just gulped, took a deep breath and went ahead.

From the very start, the elephant called Jaime's Same Sex Attraction was in the room – living room, kitchen, bathroom, bedroom, under stairs closet, hell the garden shed. With an ever-increasing regularity, the cycle of falling in love with a woman, becoming romantically but not sexually involved with her (I was a good Christian after all), owning up to my husband, repenting and throwing myself into heterosexual

2 Working Title Films, 1994.

marriage would repeat. At first my dalliances with the fairer sex would be like the Olympics – every four years or so. Then gradually I fitted in the World Championships, the Commonwealth Games, the British Nationals, until it was pretty much the whole time. Despite this, I loved my husband dearly and though he could be difficult to live with (as could I), we got on very well and we had three children together. By throwing myself into family life and anti-depressant meds, I somehow muddled through for the first 20 years of our marriage. The problem was, the dose of antidepressants was getting higher year on year and since starting a PhD on bisexuality and the church, I was becoming increasingly uncomfortable with masking my queer identity.

I began to feel really ill at ease walking down the street hand in hand with my husband, even though I loved him. I did not feel heterosexual and began to feel suffocated and lacking in integrity. I would feel insanely jealous if a same-sex couple walked towards me with arms entwined, or engaged in a public display of affection in my vicinity.

The watershed moment came at a gay colleague's wedding. It was the evening reception and the groom and groom were dressed in white naval uniforms performing a dance number, choreographed to within an inch of its life. It was so camp! But whilst the other guests clapped them on from the sidelines, whooping in delight, I ran out crying. I spent the rest of the evening outside of the venue, trying to make sense of my life choices. The embryonic sense of malaise at my marriage was rapidly developing into a fully formed foetus and was about to begin its descent into the outside world.

The decision to out myself in church was taken out of my hands, when my ill-judged liaison with the current church sex siren was unceremoniously dumped in the public domain via a poisonous anonymous letter sent to the Church Council. I have no desire (and no word count) to revisit this painful episode here, but if you want to read how the Anglican Church grossly over-reacted to a bisexual married woman kissing another bisexual married woman of similar age, then may I direct you to my autobiography, 119: *My Life as a Bisexual Christian* (DLT, 2018).

The marital fallout that followed saw my husband stand by me ultimately, but inside – on my more honest days – I knew this was the be-

ginning of the end. In April 2012, I stood on a beach on the east coast and picked up a small smooth red pebble. I clasped it in the palm of my hand and promised myself I would do right by me, whether that involved divorce or not. By the end of 2016, I had left my husband and in June 2018, I met my current wife. In August 2024, I revisited that same beach and picked up another pebble, similar in shape, to represent the resolution of my bi-lemma.

So here I am. It's 2025, and I'm happily married to a lesbian woman. She is younger than myself by over 12 years – not what I had planned. I asked God for an older woman to be my mother-come-lover, and what do I end up with? A petite, younger woman with a disability that means I cannot nestle up in her arms and be held very easily. I play the older, wiser (usually) more parental role. But it works, on the whole. She is clever, she is funny, she is faithful and faith-filled and she is darn sexy. She is also quieter than myself and tames my verbal wildness, when my extroversion threatens to get the better of me in social situations.

People generally assume I am either her mother or older sister, rather than her same-sex partner, when they meet us for the first time. It's the difference in age and body mass, I guess. So I can't really claim to feel suffocated by the misapprehension and misorientation of me as a lesbian, since the general assumption is that I am her mother, older sister or carer! But the more general point is this: unless a bisexual person walks around in pink, blue and purple tricolour knitwear with a large neon sign on their forehead flashing BISEXUAL, they are generally categorised according to the person on their arm. When I was married to a man, I was perceived to be straight. Now I am married to a woman, I have dramatically morphed into a lesbian (when not being misidentified as her mother!). Actually, I was bisexual then and I'm bisexual now. Should we have to dress our identity like insecure teenagers in the 6th Form college common room to be recognised for who we are? Having children tends to lead to an assumption of heterosexuality as well, though thankfully this is becoming less of an issue, at least in the UK and other European countries where same-sex parenthood is legal.

I find myself for the second time in a MOM (mixed-orientation marriage). I am also a mum within a MOM, being a parent to three adult

children. Two of my three children entirely 'get' and accept my bisexual orientation. I do not have a relationship with the eldest of my three offspring, which is a source of great sadness to me. Whilst I do not believe it has anything to do with my sexuality per se, more about my leaving his father (I to this day do not know the actual reason why my son stopped engaging with me nine years ago), it adds to the already painful gap inside of me, created by the absence of maternal love for most of my life, and rejection of me by various other family members. However, despite the painful burden I carry in terms of family rejection, overall I am at peace and feel an enormous sense of liberation in my current situation.

Not only have I met and married a person that I have the full set of romantic and sexual feelings for, I am gradually learning more and more what makes Jaime contented and at peace and thereby available for others. This involves a balance of work, creative activities, and beach walks with my wife. I have returned to some of the activities of my childhood that also brought me peace – knitting (I'm not very good – I call my products *Shitwear*, i.e. shit knitting) and learning guitar and songwriting. I am not that good at the latter, either, but that's not the point! These activities bring balance to my life and knitting in front of a good crime series in particular means I spend time with my wife. Like all offspring of narcissistic mothers (and that's another story for another book!), I have a tendency towards hyper-independence and enjoy my own company. This can make me seem remote, however, and I do not want to repeat the mistakes of my first marriage, where I led a kind of double-life emotionally and romantically.

Hyper-independence allied with an inbuilt sense of anxiety from my childhood (well-disguised by public self-confidence and antidepressants) has seen me leave my salaried role as a lecturer to become a freelance tutor and academic support worker. I just couldn't take the constant anxiety of checking my emails every morning to see which student was moaning or complaining. As any of you who work in state education will probably know – though I do believe this is more prominent in the ultra-student-centred UK education system – everything is *always* your fault as a teacher/lecturer. It's got to the stage now, unfortunately, where a failing student is unlikely to be asked to leave the

college due to concerns around student retention stats, and the blame falls on you for their inability to succeed. Such is the entitlement these days, often a student will simply resort to badmouthing the teacher, even lying, if it gets them off the hook and a pass. As someone who prides themselves on their integrity, but who also suffers from shame and anxiety, this is not a working environment conducive to mental, and ultimately physiological, well-being. I chose to leave it behind 18 months ago, with no regrets. Working mainly in the private and charity sector, I am appreciated for my experience, expertise and personality (most of the time!) and I am much happier.

I also find myself in a progressive and inclusive United Reformed Church with a female minister, who is a great ally to the LGBT+ community, with a trans man as Associate Pastor. I am part of the worship team, preaching and leading services, and also occasionally lead and preach at sister churches in the city. I co-lead the LGBT+ ministry with several others and am Co-Chair and trustee of a large national LGBT+ Christian charity in the UK. I continue to be involved in the European Forum of LGBT+ Christian Groups, where to my delight, increasingly more bisexual believers are attending as delegates.

I am not totally at peace; like anyone who has left a long-standing marriage with children, I carry guilt around that, though I do know I had no choice, as an individual and parent. I still lug around a great deal of pain regarding family rejection, particularly from my mother, brother and elder son. But we all have our thorns and crosses and I am no different.

I believe being bisexual gives you a unique mindset that carries over into other areas of life, giving you a foothold in both straight and queer spaces and those in between. I do not use my intersectional identity and my lack of visible queerness to hide behind heterosexual privilege. My existence between the tick boxes acts rather as a kind of metaphorical shield against the temptation to jump aboard the binary bandwagon of our current culture wars, the constant battle between the red and the blue corners, when it comes to politics, sexual or otherwise. I resist tribalism and believe that zero sum attitudes towards our fellow humans

are the scourge of society today. What links us is always more important than that which divides us.

Whilst being bi is not without its challenges, particularly around identity and acceptance, I would not choose to be any other way.

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

3.2 Being Christian and Bisexual

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 75th 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.

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

3.3 And God Looked at Everything He had Made – It Was Very Good

Andreas, Germany

Introduction

I am a man who loves a woman from the bottom of his heart, and at the same time I am more attracted to men. It took me decades of my life to formulate this sentence, especially the second part. And it's good that I've been able to call myself what I am for a few years now: a bisexual man with homosexual tendencies.

I've been falling in love with boys ever since I was at primary school. However, I didn't know this until my late 40s—or wasn't even allowed to think about it. My devout mind would not even countenance this subject.

My Background

Born in 1959 into a pietistic and pious Free Church family, I grew up with the dogma that any orientation other than heterosexuality is an abomination to the Lord God, a sin that cannot be forgiven. For decades, I therefore suppressed the whole issue.

This was reinforced by §175 of the German Criminal Code (StGB), which made all homosexual acts punishable until the early 1970s and was only finally abolished in 1994. Unfortunately, however, the “175” still impacts on the collective social memory today.

Family Ties

My parents were quite old when I was born; my father turned 50 a few weeks before my birth, and my mother was a few years younger. My siblings, who were already adults at the time, enrolled me in school in 1966, as our parents were on a three-month silver wedding anniversary trip to the USA.

We were close as a family. However, in hindsight, I came to understand that it was an unhealthy, codependent family dynamic, and I had to slowly and painfully distance myself from it over a long period of time. We didn't talk about conflicts, personal problems and negative feelings. Instead, we neatly put "the cloak of love" over them.

I began to realise painfully hard in therapy that my mother's behaviour could be seen as controlling and manipulative. As our father consistently lived out his rather phlegmatic nature, the two of them complemented each other perfectly in this respect: Mum planned and Dad did (what was necessary).

It was important that family life looked good, pious, and conformed to the norm, adhering to the motto, "What it looks like on the inside is nobody's business!" So the family presented itself as a community led by my father and living for God. Internally, on the other hand, my mother was the real leader.

As a small child, this was confusing for me because I learned that although men acted as if they were the doers and the strong ones, it was obviously only the women within the family who dictated how things should be done. This shaped my understanding of the roles of men and women for the first time.

Both my siblings left home at the end of the 1960s and got married a few years later. This freed up the role of my mother's *confidante*. Until then, the siblings, especially my sister, had held this position. Much later, in her last will and testament, our mother wrote that our father had never fulfilled this companion role.

So, at the age of ten, I was given the—from my current perspective, dubious—"honour" of being her *confidante*, with my mother sharing all of her innermost thoughts with me.

From then on, she consulted me on each and every family decision, shared her doubts and asked me for advice on questions of all kinds, teaching me to take responsibility for the family. Until I was about eleven years old, these topics were usually discussed on school-free Saturday mornings while cuddling in my mother's bed. Later, they became our "bedside chats" and, as I got older, these also took place on weekday nights—or indeed, whenever something "popped up" in my mother's mind. So basically, they took place pretty much every other day. I'm sure she was never even remotely aware that this was a form of emotional abuse.

This kind of "promotion" to mum's confidante again resulted in great insecurities regarding my concept of manhood. Nevertheless from then on, I realized that I was mum's "little man".

According to the rules in our family, my value was supposed to come solely from what I did outside the home. But now that I was becoming deeply involved in family matters, I began to question my role. Even though I was "just" a man, did I really have a place or a voice in the family? I had always believed that was a woman's domain. So how was I supposed to act, think, or exist as a man-in-the-making? Who was I, really—and what did I represent?

Friends

Only girls lived in our wider neighbourhood, and I enjoyed playing with them a lot. We were close-knit as a group. I had no shortage of female friends. As I was able to adapt well and empathise with other people, I quickly learned to understand the way my playmates thought and to integrate this into my inner world and my reactions. As a teenager and young adult, this made me the "womanizer" on the one hand but also the "softie" on the other.

However, I always secretly wished for a male friend, someone who was like me, with whom I could share what moved me, somebody who understood my thoughts and feelings. But such a person was not within reach for a very long time.

I did have a group of boys my own age in our church, but even there I was more of an outsider because I didn't like to take part in the boys' games. Being with the girls was much easier for me here, too. There were a few boys with whom I would have liked to have had more contact. But unfortunately, it was never mutual.

My musical talent meant that I was appreciated in some places, but lasting friendships with other boys didn't develop in this environment either.

When I started secondary school at the age of ten, my life fundamentally changed. The new school I was now attending was an all-boys secondary school. There were 40 pupils in my class. But here, too, I was the outsider, having never learnt to defend myself against any kind of exclusion. And so I had to deal with some of the worst insults you could receive in this environment right from the start:

"Are you gay?"

"Are you a 175er?" (according to §175 of the German Criminal Code)

"Are you a faggot?!"

As a sheltered child from a Baptist family, I had to struggle to find out what exactly these terms meant. I already had a vague idea, but of course it was never discussed in the family, let alone in the church. Just being insulted in this way caused an indescribable fear in me, as there was no way I wanted to be rejected by God. The idea that there might be some truth in what the other boys were calling me was buzzing around in the back of my mind. After all, I was obviously different from most of them. From that time on, the fear that I could simply be excluded by God because of my feelings, slowly but surely began to grow inside of me. However, talking about it was not an option, neither in my family nor in church nor elsewhere.

Teenage Struggles

When I was about 12 years old, I found hidden porn magazines in the house while dusting, which I looked at—secretly, of course. For sure, everything that was forbidden was very appealing to me. They were clearly

straight magazines. The fact that I always tended to look at the men right from the start was “natural” because a boy had to compare himself with other men, didn’t he?

I never had the opportunity to look at a naked male “live.” Although I went to an all-boys class, nudity when changing or even showering together after sports was an absolute no-go. And in my pious family, it was an unspoken taboo to even show yourself naked anyway. Just looking at yourself in the mirror was *wrong*.

The question of homosexuality came up again when I was a teenager, around the age of 14 or 15, because I was still only looking at men in the hidden porn magazines. Of course, it was clear that I couldn’t be attracted to men, because that was disallowed by the church and the Bible, so that couldn’t be happening.... Hence my pious self-declaration that “comparison” was important on the way to my identity as a “real” man was reinforced.

After graduating from high school, I began studying music. This was the first time that I was confronted with “real” homosexual people. As I was still looking for a friend to confide in, it was very nice for me that fellow students invited me out, where we had good conversations, and they enjoyed spending time with me. For me, these were simply pleasant, friendly encounters—until I discovered that the various young men found me desirable and were clearly courting me.

Without question, there was only one thing for me to do—to break off all contact immediately so as not to be led astray from the “right” path, and to remain in God. After all, I had learned that it is a thorn in the Lord’s side, for a man to be with a man! And it was clear to me that “they” could only be after that! This, of course, was an impossibility.

Married and with Family

Due to this fundamental fear of being rejected by God, which was always hovering in the background, I decided at the end of my teenage years that only a relationship with a woman could be an option for me. When I met my current wife a little later, a good 45 years ago, it was clear: “I choose

this woman as the love of my life” and I married her a few years later. The promise that I very consciously made to her before God and man at that time—*Until death do us part*—applied to me without reservation.

As our relationship grew, so did our love for each other, and even after more than 40 years of marriage, nothing has changed. We are very happy in every aspect of our lives and we live in harmony together. We now have three grown-up children of whom we are very proud. And we are also grandparents and enjoy being this so very much.

Fear-Driven Life

But for many decades, this fear that there was something in me that was not “right” continued to smoulder inside of me, namely, my affinity with men. Even in my mid-40s, I struggled to name it, due to my devout background, a background that still told me that such feelings were not right before God. I just wouldn’t have been able to name it until then.

In my family and church through the years, I only ever heard about heterosexual orientation. I categorized anything in me that was even vaguely non-heterosexual—especially later as a well-trained evangelical counsellor—as a “search for male identity”, “comparing myself to men” or “longing for a close male companion,” etc., so that I didn’t have to constantly hover on the precipice of hell.

This period was not only exhausting but also represented an incredible inner ordeal. After all, I was a responsible husband, family man and church worker. But I also lived with the dark secret that I watched—as often as possible, but for sure in secret—the soft porn that was now on private television and increasingly accessible on the gradually evolving internet. And of course I only watched men.

On the one hand, I experienced God blessing me in my tasks, bringing success and allowing others to experience God as a loving Father through me. At the same time, I was constantly expecting the big blast, that something in my family or church would burst open, or that even God would expose me. And that I would inevitably end up in hell...

The shame I felt regarding this “double life” was also immense. I kept feeling this longing for something that—as I’d been taught for decades—wasn’t allowed in God’s eyes. I tried to push the feeling down, ignore it—but eventually, it would come back. And while all of that was going on inside me, I had to look in the eyes of the people I loved and pretend everything was fine. I couldn’t say a word. It felt like I was stuck in a downward spiral, getting pulled further and further in.

Looking back, it’s still a miracle that I didn’t succumb to a mental illness like depression or psychosis over such a long period of time under such stress.

Steps to Freedom

When I finally sought Christian therapeutic counselling and advice for various problems in my early forties, it gradually emerged that I have homosexual feelings. This realization was both helpful and frightening. My 40-year-impression that it was an unforgivable sin, to even have homosexual thoughts, was so deeply rooted that I was not yet able to admit anything else. And then, out of nowhere, something like this surfaced.

In a vigorous learning process lasting several years, I was able to release my homosexual feelings more and more. However, if I had openly described myself as homosexual or bisexual during the first period of therapy, my place on God’s supposed “hit list” would have been absolutely certain due to the religious rhetoric I had been taught and deeply internalized for so long. Given such thoughts were “sinful” according to my understanding of the Bible, I could not meet with God as a beloved son. And so I had to continue to live with this conflict, which I still couldn’t resolve at that time.

The fact that I was able to get through this phase reasonably well was mainly thanks to my wife’s love for me. She carried me along, encouraged me, supported me, and just by being there, opened up avenues for me to consider new theological ideas.

Changes in the Church

This “being accepted by/rejected by God” dilemma continued inside of me at first. On the outside, i.e. in my family, job and church, I pretended to be a different person than I was in private. I looked confident. I knew how to act on stage or speak to large groups like the congregation. I ran seminars about personal growth and pastoral topics, led worship, and directed choirs. My career was going well. But underneath it all, the fear of being found out was always there, quietly burning. This conflict shaped my life for many years and cost me a lot of energy, which—in hindsight—I could have used much more profitably for my family, God and church, or in my job.

It wasn't until around 2012 that things started to shift. In our church leadership we began to talk seriously and openly about homosexuality over a span of several years, trying to find our way forward as a church. Through those conversations—and by God's grace—my spiritual and theological understanding of queerness changed in a deep and meaningful way. I was now able to recognize that even non-heterosexual feelings do not exclude a person from God, the loving Father of all. They too have their place and may, can, and should be lived out.

This journey was painful for me. It brought up so many questions that turned my old beliefs and emotions upside down:

- a) Had my faith been wrong all those years?
- b) What would my life look like if this vision had come to me forty or fifty years earlier?
- c) Had the way I was shaped robbed me of the chance to live as a joyful, bisexual Christian—maybe even married to a man?

I struggled and fought for answers—with God and with the diverse voices and parts of me. I know today that I didn't believe “wrongly” because I had a different, narrower, and certainly not very healthy image of God. But this cannot be labelled as right or wrong. Nevertheless, I had to question myself and my faith completely.

Whether my life would have turned out differently if I'd noticed my theological blind spots earlier is something I'll never truly know. Maybe I'd be living in a same-sex relationship now—but maybe not.

What I do know is that I made a very conscious and loving decision to marry my wife. That choice is—and always will be—something I'm deeply committed to. I'm a man of consistency, and loyalty means everything to me. So the idea of leaving my happy marriage has never once crossed my mind. That, to me, is a tremendous gift. I can also say with full honesty that I wouldn't have made it through this long, painful journey of discovering my identity without the unwavering support of my wife.

Despite everything, I still sometimes wonder if I've missed out on something. There are moments when I feel the desire to experience sexuality with a man. But I don't—and won't—make peace with that in my conscience. Thankfully, I'm hopelessly monogamous.

And the truth is, I don't feel like I'm missing anything in my sexuality with my wife. In the meantime, I can read homoerotic literature without guilt. It helps me not to be consumed by longings. I rarely watch gay porn, but when I do, I know that my heavenly Dad doesn't shame me. I'm still loved, accepted, and treasured—as the son He created, including my sexual orientation.

Today, I find it tragic that people can be plunged into such existential crises as I experienced through a literal understanding of the Bible. And compared to other people, my path has certainly been much easier in many places. Nevertheless, I would have liked to have discovered God's loving view of all of His creation—including me—much earlier.

“And God saw everything that he had made: it was very good.”
Genesis 1:31

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

3.4 A Balancing Act: Reflections on Being Bisexual in Church, Ministry, and Theology

Will, England

Being Bisexual

Bisexuality is a label of ambivalence, for me. It took me many years to find such a label helpful, when I wrestled with my sexual orientation and the attraction I felt for different people. ‘Gay’ and ‘straight’ often seem to be used to refer to polarisations of sexuality, absolute opposites of attraction. In reality, of course, many gay and straight people have more ambiguity in who they are attracted to, what emotions they feel, and their sexual desires. However, bisexuality – at least, for me – has always effectively captured the grey area in the middle. If one cannot *quite* pin down their attractions, if they feel ebbs and flows of desire rather than fixed ratios and percentages of same-gender attraction, then bisexuality is a helpful umbrella that encompasses much fluidity and ambiguity.

It is in this same way that I increasingly find myself coupling my identification as a bisexual with the word queer. Queerness, as a continually emerging term for those with non- or anti-normative sexual orientations and gender identities, helps encapsulate a diverse range of people, whatever the shape of their self-presentations, their relationships, their perceptions, and so on. Identifying as bisexual *and* queer helps summarise (if two words ever could) the fluidity and variability of my sexual orientation and how I name it. They help me, and others, grapple at something that often feels somewhat beyond sufficient description.

So, as a queer, bisexual man, I find myself in a balancing act in many ways. Not only am I a bisexual man, but I am a bisexual man married to a bisexual woman. I am a priest in the Church of England, ministering to the people and places in which I live. I am a PhD student in masculinities, trauma, and theology. I publish research and writing in the areas of gender and sexuality, and their intersection with theology and the Bible. My bisexuality shapes all of this – and all of this shapes my bisexuality. I find myself balancing different spaces, places, people, and opinions. Here, in this chapter, I offer some personal reflections on this.

Being Bisexual in Church¹

The problem with the definition of bisexuality I have offered above is that the description of fluidity and ambiguity has often amounted to bisexual people being understood as uncertain, unsure, and undecided on their sexual orientation. It is seen as a fad, a stepping stone of decision-making as one passes through heterosexuality towards homosexuality, or vice versa. Of course, this binary is not the reality for many bisexual people – including myself – who feel the push and pull of human desire for many different types of people, not remaining static or fixed in one direction or the other.

But such thinking has led to myths and misconceptions: bisexuals are ‘greedy’; bisexuals are ‘just going through a phase’; bisexuals ‘don’t really exist’. So many people who are bisexual, just like me, will have heard these ignorant bi-phobic phrases and have commonly experienced bi-erasure. The experience of what it means to be bisexual has been entirely misconceived and misrepresented, privately and publicly.

The Church, sadly, has often picked up and even fed these mistaken beliefs. In the Church of England’s principal authorised teaching doc-

1 Some of this section is re-produced with gratitude from Will Moore, ‘Being Bisexual in Church – A Balancing Act’, *Via Media News* (blog), 1 March 2022, <https://viamedia.news/2022/03/01/being-bisexual-in-church-a-balancing-act/>.

ument on sexuality published in 1991² (which held increased authority until it was discredited by the House of Bishops in 2023 as part of the Living in Love and Faith (LLF) process, and consequently removed as authoritative in the discernment process by General Synod in only 2025), bisexuality is described as ‘ambiguous’ and goes further in saying that ‘bisexual activity must always be wrong for this reason, if for no other, that it inevitably involves being unfaithful’. There is an assumption here that bisexual people cannot hold back their emotional, romantic, or sexual attraction and are always left unsatisfied. According to these understandings, bisexuals seem to experience some sort of greedy and lustful sexual attraction that is uncontrollable. But, just because bisexual people might have the capacity to fall in love with people of different genders, it does not mean that they are therefore proportionally attracted to more people or that they have more sexual desire that needs fulfilling. In the eyes of this teaching document, bisexuals are painted to be immoral, adulterous beasts that challenge the order of God’s faithful creation.

But surely the Church has moved on since then? Regrettably, not much. This document, *Issues in Human Sexuality*, remained the official teaching of the Church of England on sexuality for thirty years, though there has been some supplementary (but not authoritative) material since, most recently being *Living in Love and Faith*. (We, especially as clergy, are still waiting for pastoral guidance on relationships and marriage in place of *Issues*.) The Bishop of London (now Archbishop of Canterbury) was pressed on paragraph 5.8 of *Issues*, which derogatively addresses bisexuality, at meetings of General Synod in 2022, at which she dismissively responded that the document is ‘thirty years away’ from now – except, as an ordinand in 2021, I had to assent to live within the guidelines of this document in order to be considered to train to be a priest within the Church of England. Essentially, as a bisexual man, I had to agree to the premise that I am myself ‘ambiguous’ and will be

2 Church of England. (1991). *Issues in human sexuality: A statement by the House of Bishops of the General Synod of the Church of England*. London: Church House Publishing.

'inevitably [...] unfaithful' for simply being who God created me to be. Its repercussions are still felt.

Further, by agreeing to living within these measures, I was concurring with the sentences that follow, which recommend heterosexual marriage, abstinence, and even counselling as 'guidance' for bisexuals. These suggestions dangerously resonate with the motivations of conversion therapy, something that General Synod as well as the British Government has promised to ban. Many, like me, have agreed to *Issues in Human Sexuality* through gritted teeth, hurt by the words that refer to people like us, but as nothing more than a player in a tragic love story of dedication to the Church and its ministry. Although it seems the Church may finally be moving on after LLF and thankfully turning a new page on *Issues in Human Sexuality*, the damage and pain it has caused – especially to ordinands and clergy after the demands it placed on them – cannot be undone. The trauma of disrupting one's own complex identity in order to fit neater boxes that satisfy the Church's image is something that does not go away. In fact, the suppression and compartmentalisation of people's lives – for the sake of the Church's image – has caused brokenness beyond repair for many individuals and communities.

Being Bisexual in Ministry

However, ministry on the ground in churches across the country is very different. There are many queer people, lay and ordained, who are living out their calling and vocation in response to God, serving their communities and living their lives whilst flourishing in their identities.

A big part of my ministry in the people and places that I serve as a priest is to be a visible sign of hope and acceptance, especially for LGBTQIA+ folk. Society is becoming an increasingly toxic place, especially for trans individuals. So, as I put on my clerical collar, I often sport my progress pride flag (or bisexual flag) pin-badge too. I know how much damage and trauma the Church has caused to many and how triggering the sight of a clerical collar can be. I pray, that in these small efforts, those I encounter might be heartened to see that inclusion is a

part of my ministry and calling. This does not undo the harm caused by the institutional Church, as well as local churches, but it does demonstrate efforts to build bridges where these have been burnt. I pray, in the living out of my own vocation as a bisexual priest, I show signs of queer hope for Christians.

I know, of course, I can do this with some privilege. I am a bisexual man, married to a (bisexual) woman. People often misperceive me as an ally, rather than a member of the queer community. But, in some circumstances, this affords me more privileges to be listened to and to have constructive conversations, without seeming like there is anything 'personal' on the line. Of course, I have less to risk and less to lose because of the relationship I am in and how society (and the Church) perceives me/us. So, it is with that in mind, that I know it is part of my vocation to minister to those who have been broken, excluded, and traumatised by churches and their (often abusive) teachings on sexuality and gender. I am one of them, even if people do not perceive me as so.

Much of this calling hearkens back to a small church group I attended in Cardiff, Wales during my time at university. The Gathering met in the upper room of a local church and consisted of many LGBTQIA+ people who felt a connection to the Christian faith but had experienced hurt and confusion at the hands of churches and Christian communities. Here, instead, queer people were welcomed and encouraged. They had the chance to let out their anger and frustration, as well as ask their questions and concerns. At The Gathering, people's wounds were attended to and they had a chance to sit, breathe, and find God in it all. I remember once, coming home from a worship session at The Gathering, sitting down with a God-feeling in my gut and thinking 'I've got to do more'. The deep sense of vocation to my fellow LGBTQIA+ Christians has burned on inside of me ever since then. The Gathering in Cardiff still exists today and I am so thankful for the beautiful work my friends there do, and how they helped and inspired me.

Being Bisexual in Theology

When I am not in ministry, I do theological work. Not only do I publish regularly (from trauma theology and violence in the Bible, to gender and queer theology in *Barbie!*), but I am completing a PhD that looks at how masculinities have shaped theologies and what liberative possibilities there might be in a reimagining of their relationship.

One of my certain beliefs is that theology is produced through us and our bodies. The ways in which we think and talk about God are constructed because of who we are, the world we are in, how we see others, and how they view us. That is not a bad thing to recognise, although it obviously comes with its limits and biases. However, this means that aspects of our identity need to be noticed and acknowledged in order to understand how they inform our theological thinking, or ‘God-talk’. For example, I am a man. I am White. I am cisgender. I am able-bodied. Just these few social locators help track what might influence how I talk about God, theology, and the human life.

As I talk about queer identity and queer theology especially, my own queerness and bisexuality come to the forefront. The way in which I do theology matters because of the experiences I have had, the love I have felt, the people I have met, and the communities I have been a part of. It also changes because of the discrimination I have experienced, the hate I have received, and the feelings of fear I have known deep in my soul when walking through a town centre holding the hand of another man.

My bisexual identity has certainly shaped much of my theological thinking. Bisexuality does not sit in one camp or the other, nor can it be easily defined. It has helped me realise the limits to understanding the world through dualisms, an either/or framework. Instead, I am much more comfortable to sit in the grey areas, to not have answers to my questions, because I know my own identity does not comfortably sit in any camp. There is wonder in the unsurety, beauty in the messiness, potential in the chaos. Being bisexual helps me take an approach of generosity, of ambiguity, and of unknowing. Perhaps it is OK to say we do not know everything about God, about the world, and about ourselves. It is in the unravelling – the *revelation* – of the mystery that we find holiness.

In queer people's unravelling of their own self-knowledge, they unravel the mystery of God's image and beauty too.

Of course, theology has been dangerously weaponised towards many bisexual and queer folk. The Bible has been used as a tool to police gendered and sexual boundaries, and bisexual people are some of the biggest affronts to that regime because we do not conform to certain expectations. In other words, who knows what we are up to? That's what people wonder anyway (even if we are quite boring, in reality!). The perceived unknown and ambiguity of bisexuality is seen as a threat to theologies of gender and sexuality that seek to restrict and control people's bodies and relationships. As discussed above, it is often expected that bisexual people should not act on their desires and, instead, they should resort to the 'right' way of living: marriage between one man and one woman.

Instead, doing theology as a bisexual Christian, I am willing to wrestle with open-endedness, flexibility, and flux. If we truly recognise ourselves as God's good creation, made in the image of God – even us bisexual folk – then we have to recognise that what we feel and experience might reveal to us something of God and a way to do theology. There is generativity in a lack of answers; there is helpfulness in ambiguity; there is confidence to be found in unsurety. These are some of the values I hold as someone bisexual doing theology.

Being Bisexual in Life

I am a queer, bisexual man married to a bisexual woman. In life, we have often wondered – worried, even – that we are perceived as a heterosexual couple (something, of course, we are not!). We pride ourselves on our queerness, even if we *appear* to some as heteronormative.

When I first came out as bisexual, after an emotionally abusive and toxic relationship with a woman, I received a mix of responses. Some family members accepted me, fully without question. Some welcomed me, but couldn't quite understand why I was not just gay or straight. Others could not understand it at all. However, overall, I was very lucky with my coming out experience. Whilst there were only a couple of reactions

of resistance and discomfort, I was not rejected nor ostracised from my family or communities.

I have struggled since then, however, to work out my place in the LGBTQIA+ community as a bisexual man, especially when dating women. Am I still queer? Have I succumbed to the 'straight agenda'? Even the ways and wills of the Church? Do I need to give back my 'membership card' to the queer community and concede?

Almost ten years later, now married to a woman, and proudly and actively speaking for bisexual people in theology and the Church, I have realised the queerness of being bisexual and its various shapes and forms. I am bisexual, which means (to me) that I can be attracted to any person, regardless of their gender. That means there has been the potential for me in my life to be in a romantic and sexual relationship with men, women, and trans folk – people of all different identities. And (not but!) I am married to a woman. My relationship is monogamous and that is where my loyalty, and indeed my love, lies. That is not to contain or restrict my attraction or desire (in other words, that is not for my attraction for non-women to cease existing because of my partner's gender), but to show commitment to one person. Commitment does not change sexual identity, nor does it inhibit forms of attraction. My identity of bisexuality does not stop or cease because of who I am with, who I am date, or what I am doing with my body. Sexual identity is much more complex than simply 'active' relationships or practice.

There is something queer in that then, isn't there? I am not, for clarity, in a 'heterosexual relationship' – I am still bisexual, and so is my partner. Yet we are somewhat straight-*passing*, which means many might see me as upholding and perpetuating heteronormativity. Bisexuality often brings with it a fragility. Too often have I been accepted into rooms, spoken to as part of a community, with the awareness that I am in a relationship with a woman; too often have I then been ignored, as well as looked upon and spoken too differently, once I vocalise my queer identity underneath what sometimes seems to some like a disguise. Yet this uncertainty of queerness or not, when I present as a queer man and yet talk about my wife, brings with it a resonance of what being queer and bisexual means. That fluidity, that fluctuation, *disables* people from being able to decide

and assign my sexuality themselves – and that’s exactly the point. This is a queer relationship, because whilst seeming to be operating within the structures of binaries, our identities resist this. It is for this reason that I will not cease to identify as queer and bisexual, because it is doing the work of challenging heteronormative patriarchy, even from within our so-called ‘straight’ marriage.

Being Bisexual: A Balancing Act

Being and identifying as bisexual is an odd experience. Sometimes it perfectly articulates who I am and where I am at. At other times, I feel it is entirely insufficient. But, understanding bisexuality as a balancing act, something moving and unsettled, ongoing and in process, helps me recognise the unfixed state of my own identity and sexuality. And that’s OK. For now, labelling myself as bisexual, seeing myself as queer, will do.

In my teenage years, I gained an interest in LGBTQIA+ Christian stories and experiences. Everyone around me thought I was just passionate for justice; of course, I was coming to terms with the fact I was realising I was not straight. In reading *119: My Life as a Bisexual Christian*, written by Jaime Sommers³, I felt something of my own experiences; namely, the balance between being attracted to men and women, and indeed others beyond that spectrum. It was Sommers’ book, accompanying this scared and curious teenager in the quiet of my bedroom, that I was able to come to terms with the pain and potential of what it means to be a bisexual Christian.

So, I want to close this chapter by writing directly to those bisexual people who may not yet be sure of themselves yet, or sure of how to come out, or even be sure of God: You are loved. You are precious. And no one in this universe is made quite like you. May you settle in the ambiguity, may you cherish the grey areas, and may you find love and acceptance in yourself so that the rest of the world can see you shine. This balancing

3 Sommers, J. (2019). *My life as a bisexual Christian*. London: Darton, Longman & Todd.

act is one that takes time, that takes effort, that takes emotion – but it is beautiful, and it is worth it, and so are you.

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

Section 4: Navigating Different Cultures

4.1 You're Kind of Dismissed

Christelle (interview), France

Introduction

I'm currently 22 years old. I'm half French and half Madagascan and I live in Paris. I am mixed ethnicity and identify as European, black and biromantic. I've been questioning lately, but for now, I mostly go by she/her and identify as a woman – so, female cisgendered at the moment.

Growing up in Madagascar

I've been really into religion since an early age. For background, my mom is Catholic and my dad is Lutheran and it's in that church that I was raised in Madagascar. It's actually one of the biggest Protestant organizations. So I went to Sunday school from a very young age, where I was put with the kids. I've never really questioned my religion or anything. I was a believer from three, when I started Sunday School, to twelve, when I started middle school.

There was a point at which I started having my doubts, as I approached my preteens. I would encounter other friends with different religions and we would talk a lot. So at that time, I was very interested in other religions, but still going to Sunday School. My teacher at Sunday school really, really liked to debate issues at this time. So we talked about religion a lot and I think it was at that moment when my faith was the strongest, because she was very open-minded and talked about the fact that the church was improving and trying to move with social standards,

and how it had maybe not done good things in the past. How there are so many parts of the Bible and not every part has to be... I mean, everything has to be considered separately. So I think my preteens and early teens was the moment where my faith was the strongest, I would say between 12 and 16.

Then I started high school and that was when it was tough, because I realized that I also liked non boys. I had a non-binary friend then. I started having crushes on girls as well. Sexual orientation was not really a topic. Sexuality was talked about – I mean, obviously, some of my cousins they would have like boyfriends, girlfriends, but they were all straight.

I went to an international French school. It kind of helped me realize things because we had gay teachers that were out. I was actually raised in the Protestant church and it's my mom who's a Catholic woman. There was no religious agenda at the school, but most of my cousins were at Catholic schools. And it kind of gave me opinions outside of school. And so that's when I was questioning the fact that I think [liking girls] is bad and everything and it wasn't even a topic that I could ask my Sunday school teacher.

So it was really hard for me to put the two together [faith and sexuality], and I think I really kind of distanced myself from the church. I mean, I was still going because of my parents and everything but my personal faith was.... it was hard. , and it was at the time when I arrived in France, too.

Moving to France

It was after I arrived in France at 18 when I realized there were people who were bisexual or just in queer spaces in general, that had their faith. It really helped me to put the two together,

I still don't go to church spaces – maybe once a year or so with my family, for let's say Christmas or just on my own – but mostly, I pray by myself. I haven't really been involved with the church, but I am more [involved] in my faith, now, because I've been realizing that I could put it together. Also, I've seen some activists on social media and things like that,

who are very out, but also talking about their religion. It really helped me. For example, in France, there's but Floralie Resa. At the time, her name was Queer Chrétienne, but now she's changed her name.

I moved to France at 18. I've never been to any queer Christian organizations, but I'd like to. I am actually wondering now, why haven't I done it before? Because I really want to.

There was a time where I didn't know the difference between wanting to be really good friends with someone and actually having a crush on them. So that was me before, in middle school, I guess. There were these moments. But it was in high school that I really realized it – so in terms of age, 15 or 16. I realized, I don't only like guys – and actually, at that time I had a boyfriend. I came out to him and he was very, very positive. I think I was confused at first. Before I came out to him, because he was the first person I came out to, I was online, typing am I a lesbian, am I bi?

I used to have aches and pains, things like that, looking at it, but then I was like, yes, but I still like my boyfriend. I'm attracted to him. So yeah, I was just online, trying to find out. There were many resources, but not as many as there would be, if I did those searches now. So I just told him, hey, I like boys and girls, and also those people who are kind of in-between – I didn't know what non-binary was then – like this person. I said, I think that's bisexual. He was like, 'Oh, right, well do you still like me?' That was his question. I was like, 'Yeah, I still like you.' So that was really simple and easy – though I was very scared at the time. He's an ex now. But at the time, it was like, I want to marry this person and everything.

So that was when I was still in Madagascar and then I arrived in France. In Madagascar, he was actually the only person I informed about being bisexual, within my close circle, because people didn't talk about it. And there were no role models. Because I had a boyfriend, I could just not say it.

Feeling Safe

And after I actually arrived in France, from the get go, I felt much safer. For context, it's really not safe in Madagascar for queer people. Holding hands, they would just think you were friends, but kissing, you might get beaten. It's really bad. Some people are trying to change it, but it's still really bad, especially if you come from certain areas. There was that lesbian couple, where one of them ended up in prison. It was a lesbian couple and one of them actually tried to remove her girlfriend from a violent situation in her family. And the family heard that, they were really angry. They tried to put the blame on her, about alienating her from them and things like that. She ended up in jail because the girlfriend was 18 and the other was 17. So they said this is abusive, because she's a minor.

My parents don't know [I'm queer]. I have an older sister and she knows, and my cousins here as well. I'm not out at university – they don't hear about my relationships in general. I'm actually out to all of my friends. I came from a French international school and most of [my friends] are in France now, so these people, I came out to them. And also some cousins that are still back home, so my mother's side of the family because it's my mom who is French. They have all been fine about it. Both my parents are alive, though they're separated. They're both abroad now. I haven't come out to them.

Coming out

I would say I am biromantic. It's really easy for me to get romantic feelings for women, but with cis men, it takes a lot of time. I actually have to get to really know the person before I get romantic feelings, unlike with sexual attraction, where I don't really experience a difference. I have actually been questioning it a lot, because, for example, in lesbian spaces, they talk about compulsory heteronormativity. I've read about it, but I don't relate to it at all, so that's why I keep my labels as bisexual.

At first, I was only going to queer nightclubs. When I first arrived in France, it was during COVID, so I was mostly making online friends

then. At that time, also, when I arrived in France, I kind of started being really out. I would not say hello, 'I'm Christelle, I'm bisexual,' but I would mention it, without feeling like I did back home, to my friends – like my new friends or people who I just met, people who are in my life since I arrived in France, people I've worked with. At first, there was COVID, so there weren't really gatherings, and then I went to queer nightclubs and parties. And then I wanted to meet people outside of this time, just in normal life. I went to the LGBTQ Centre in Paris, for painting workshops and crocheting – those were the two spaces – also, sometimes on Discord. I haven't gone to the in-person meetings, but there's the Bi Cause association in France. We do online meetings and sometimes I join in. But most of my queer friends are atheist or New Age. I don't really have Christian queer people around me and I would like to have some more.

But my first time being into queer spaces was actually in Ireland when I did an Erasmus internship at a research lab. Back then, I went to a drag show and it was the first time I felt really safe in my identity. I think this event opened the doors for me, so I could join other spaces in Paris (the LGBTQ+ centres, nightclubs and workshops mentioned already). This happened around 2022, when COVID started to settle down.

Music is a very big part of my life (I was in the choir at church and learned piano and played in a band as well). I am very much into lyrics and listening to queer artists (mostly sapphics) has really helped me, plus I have made lovely friends at concerts.

In terms of my ethnicity, I don't think it impacts on matters of faith. On my Madagascan side – on my black side – people are very, very religious. So, I think it impacts my faith in the fact that at a young age, I didn't really know any different, maybe. The church is fundamentalist. Last year, some people gathered in the streets for Pride month. I mean no-one ended up in jail, but the general opinion, though I can only see what's on social media, was that it was really bad.

In church, they just don't talk about it. Last year was actually the first time I heard at least my church talk about it, the Lutheran Church. The leader of the national church actually made a statement – along the lines of "I don't care, so long as it's not in my space." Like, you should not be

mean to people, but you should not be soft. But if there's someone in the church, you can talk to them – which is like passive violence. It's the view hate the sin, love the sinner.

It can be harder to be black and queer than white and queer. For example, me and other black friends have been in racist encounters with people. That's actually why I'm trying not to go to queer nightclubs, because I've had verbal racism happen there. Sometimes, you have your own topics you want to talk about when you're non-white. Sometimes when you're trying to talk about some issues, like societal problems that are linked with being a person of colour, you're kind of dismissed.

An ideal church for me would be, first of all, accepting. It would bring people together, to study the scriptures, whilst really taking account of societal changes. I often talk about this person when I talk about my faith, but I'm still going to talk about this Sunday School teacher that I had back then, who said the church is slowly changing and maybe some things are not the way she'd like them to be. So, I think the ideal church for me is one which is accepting of this fact and which mostly focuses on the faith and Jesus. That would be the church for me.

For me – and I've always said this since I was a kid – Jesus is big bro. He's looking after me. And he's someone I can talk to. I can't put it into words, but I feel that he helps me in my life every day. I can't even explain it, but I feel the positive effects. Maybe for some people, it's meditation, or whatever, but praying helps me every day, as does the word of Christ.

Being Bi & Mental Health

Being bi does impact on my mental health, both in queer spaces and non-queer spaces. You're not taken seriously and it has even impacted relationships. One of my former girlfriends, she would either just say that I was a closeted lesbian, or biphobic stuff, like you're just going to leave me for a man. Those words weren't very good to hear. This has affected my mental health.

Now I'm in therapy, actually, which is a really good thing and those outside words don't upset me as much. But in non-queer spaces, but also in queer spaces, you feel like you don't fit.

I'm studying Health & Safety Management but I'm actually going to take a gap year, for my mental health. So I'm going to work on that too, through putting my studies on hold for one year.

The church has also helped me in terms of my mental health, especially when it comes to therapy. I grew up with a parent who was very anti-therapy, so the only way for me to get counselling was through the church. I neither felt the need, nor felt ready, to talk about my sexuality, so it was mostly on other personal matters, but it did help me. It was when I arrived in France though, that I finally went to a certified therapist, and my mental health has been so much better since then. I changed therapists many times and I wasn't out with some of them, but the ones I felt the most comfortable with knew and helped me navigate through it and even showed me ways for me to reconcile with my faith.

The best thing about being bi is probably seeing people as they are. I'm not saying that people who aren't bi doesn't see people as who they are, but I would say like it takes a lot of time to admit you're bisexual, at least for the people I know who are bisexual, and myself. There's a lot of questioning. I'm very self-aware and the experiences I've had with people, both romantically and non-romantically, have helped me. It was a struggle at first, but now I love being bisexual. It took some time, but now I fully embrace it.

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

4.2 Eternally Confused

Anna (interview), Poland

I'm 47 and I'm Polish, from Torún. I'm white and I identify as bisexual and female. My pronouns are she/her. I'm married to a man and I have one daughter.

The Catholic Church & my Grandmother

I was born and raised Catholic, and I was a very devout child. I loved church and I had an extremely religious grandmother that I spent a lot of time with. Both of my parents were working, so I was kind of bounced between one grandma and the other. One of them was extremely intelligent, very well educated and very, very religious. And she had a huge influence on me. So, I was reading the Bible with her and I actually really liked going to church. Then when I was ten or eleven, I went to music school. I started playing the flute and I played the flute in Mass most Sundays as well, which I absolutely loved. I discovered that I really liked being on stage! I enjoyed that sort of joyful way of praying and praising through the music.

That kept going until I was maybe sixteen. Then I went to high school and started thinking about the church and all that, and that I didn't understand quite a lot of things. For me, the Catholic Church often felt like one of the more oppressive expressions of Christianity. You basically go to hell for everything. And that's how I always felt. So you need to watch what you're doing. You need to watch what you're saying. It was totally to do with faith [not communism] – because when I went to high school,

communism was down already. I don't think I ever realized the part the church played in bringing communism down – it was a huge one and I will never deny it. Nevertheless, for me, the Catholic Church often felt like the main source of oppression.

Swedish Body Positivity and Homophobia

I never heard anyone mention bisexuality or homosexuality at church. When I was thinking about this and knowing we were going to do this interview, something popped into my memory. I was in Sweden, because my dad had a lot of siblings. At some point, my grandmother, the very religious one, moved in with my aunt, who lived in Stockholm. So we went there for the Christmas holidays or something like that. I might have been around twelve or thirteen. And I remember my aunt, my mum and I went to the swimming pool. I was amazed, absolutely fascinated. I really remember that, because when you went to the swimming pool in Poland at that time, women wouldn't change in front of each other. I think that was kind of the influence of the church as well, that you have to be modest, you shouldn't show yourself. And I remember all those women walking around completely naked. I was fascinated by it, but in a very positive way. It wasn't sexual at that point; I was just amazed by the beauty, the differences between women. And I was really excited about this. I really loved the freedom of it, I think. And then we went home and I was talking with my grandmother. I told her about it, then she just got furious and said, those women are going to hell. You shouldn't be doing stuff like this. You should always cover yourself; you shouldn't allow anyone to see you in this way. I remember that was the first moment – I kind of blindly looked up to her before that – when I felt, I don't agree with that. Why should we cover ourselves? I actually found it so beautiful and so liberating. So it was kind of illogical and irrational what she was saying. But I guess at that age, you just take in what these older people tell you, especially the ones you look up to.

High School & Homophobia

Once I started high school, I wasn't as involved in church as I was before. I was going less and less and I found other things more engaging – like smoking fags! Plus we moved house when I was around fifteen, and I just didn't want to go really – my parents weren't forcing me. My dad was sort of traumatized from his experiences as a kid. His mum was sick and his sister and him were placed with nuns until he was an adult. He didn't go to church and my mum wasn't really forcing me, except stuff like family gatherings, or when other people might see that I'm not going! I was quite defiant – now I know that I'm neurodivergent. So that also explained a few things. So that just caused a lot of drama until the point where I reached eighteen. We used to have family reunions with my dad's eldest brother every couple of years. One summer I said, I'm not going. At that point, I was already so against the whole institution. There was nothing that would drag me back.

You know that we have religion in schools as a subject? The priest that was the religion teacher in my high school said things that I found deeply troubling and misinformed. This was the first time I remember hearing claims from a teacher that gay people molest children, how they are all going to hell and how we need to be careful who we let into our houses, because those paedos might come and rape us and stuff like this. And telling us stuff that condoms work like erasers – if we use condoms, we might get all bruised and scratched, because if you put eraser against your skin, it will damage it. And this is how condoms work. And I was like, no, no, I don't want to be a part of it anymore.

Expressing Faith my Way

I pray in my own way. I do miss God and sometimes I do miss Well, I've been to church but not like attending mass. I've never been to a Catholic Church in the UK, only when I still lived in Poland. Poland has really beautiful churches. And I find churches peaceful and an absolute perfect place to just sit and contemplate, meditate, and pray – do whatever

you need to do. I used to go quite regularly to a place near where I used to work, near the old market square, where there are old churches. We had one baroque church where I did feel closer to God. Not only was it beautiful, but [I liked] the sound, the acoustics of the place. It is one of the few baroque churches in Europe. [omit] And it does make you feel closer to God.

For quite a long time, I officially described myself as a non-believer, or start off by saying this. But somewhere deep inside I knew that wasn't entirely true. I do need it, and I do want it. I would go to a church if it was progressive and LGBT affirming. Because of my grandmother, I read the Bible and I read it in different ways. I read the Bible as the word of God and I read the Bible as a piece of literature. I'm always curious about all those new testaments that weren't printed and we don't have access to. I always say, that if we all lived according to Jesus's preaching, we would live in the perfect world. Over time I began to feel that the Catholic Church had moved far away from the message of Jesus, and that the institution sometimes seemed more focused on power, wealth and control than compassion.

My Bisexuality

I always form romantic relationships with women. We're more understanding, but there's also been more drunk drama in my case! I do have romantic feelings for men, as well. I really started to put some labels on it, when I was in my late 20s, early 30s. In my life it was more like I was just having fun and experimenting and just trying new things, until the point when I actually realised that I was absolutely head over heels in love with a woman. From then, I started to realise, maybe it's not experimenting ... this experiment has gone on for a long time!

But I remember shit from high school, as well. I recently confronted one of the girls from my high school class about this, because she asked me – so at some point in high school, we used to be such good friends. what happened? I was like, so you don't remember what happened?

Every year, we went somewhere in the Polish mountains, for like four or five days, with our class. And we got drunk one night and there was one female and one male friend from my class. I was 17 or 18. So he just started playing around, kissing, all three of us were. Well, I was way more focused on her than him. Someone walked in on us and made a big, big fuss about it the next morning. The friend of mine, that was with me, she was sitting there at the table with that girl I told you about. I could hear her saying, 'I think you're disgusting, you make me want to vomit!' And it was not about the fact that the guy was there. It was about the fact that she did something with me. I got furious. Then other girls and teachers joined us at our table. Apparently, I divided the whole class at the end of high school, because of that. I didn't think we did anything wrong. But they made her feel so guilty. I think it's because I have always had quite a strong personality and it was easier to bully her than say anything to me. But that was one of the first moments when I thought to myself, "You are actually a thinking person. And why would you find a girl kissing another girl disgusting to the point that people want to make you throw up? Like you have nothing [else] to talk about anymore." And when I confronted her about this three years ago, she said, 'I don't believe this; I can't believe that I said stuff like this.' Well, you did. You were then all accusing me of dividing the class.

Then I also had my best friend, who wasn't in the same class as me. I was in an English class; she was in a German class. I remember she had her best friend in her class as well, but it was always the three of us going everywhere together. And we ended up kissing as well – only myself and my best friend. And the other one was like, *come on girls, you're disgusting now. Stop doing that, I'm not a fucking gay*. I thought about it, once I started realizing that I did have romantic feelings for women as well. I think I was just kind of looking for something. But it was the 90s, early 90s, and I don't think any of us actually thought about stuff like this. You couldn't usually find any information about that – not that I was really looking, because I liked guys as well. So for me, it was ok, it was just having fun, experimenting.

When I wasn't living with my parents anymore and I working in a bar, I met quite a lot of gay people – ones I actually had some meaning-

ful conversations with. I had already finished uni in Poland, so I was in my mid-twenties, I think. And this is when I started to investigate a little more. This is also the time when I met the girl that I later had feelings for. Oh Jesus, she was my customer in the bar – she was really nice. She was so gorgeous; she was lovely as well. But she dumped me, because her girlfriend that she was with two years before that, who was like in the States, and who wasn't supposed to come back, decided she wanted to [come back]. She was a better girlfriend – apparently, as well as – and this is going back to Polish Catholicism and the way most of us were raised – the amount of people that constantly slept in that small, little apartment that I was renting, because their parents kicked them out, when they came out. These were people I met in the bar or through other friends.

My neurodivergence also had some part to play in it. I never really wanted any relationships; I enjoyed sex with both sexes quite a lot, but I never really wanted anything romantic. Maybe because I kind of never felt like I actually had feelings for someone, except for [names previous female lover]. I think this was the first time that I was actually heartbroken. I wasn't a dumper, but even if someone dumped me, I was ok. But with her, I was really heartbroken.

Move to the UK and Marriage to a Man

I met my now husband online in 2009. We first married in 2011. Because I wasn't really doing anything meaningful in Poland, I decided to move to Ireland. Because he's Irish, I decided to move there. I lived there for a few years, and then we moved to Scotland when he got a job. He is Catholic but he doesn't go to church. But I did find it fascinating that Irish Catholicism is slightly different to the Polish one. On the outside, they seem to be far more open-minded and liberated, but once you actually start digging into it, it's actually worse. I come from the big city and he comes from a rural area and I think that changes the way people think, as well.

I remember I was in the pub with some wee guy sobbing into my sleeve, asking 'How can I come out here? This is crucifying me. I need to leave. I need to go to Dublin, I need to go to London. I can't stay here.' So it is the same [as Poland] in a sense. But in Poland, it's not as political as it is in Ireland. So I was trying to see it from both sides, from both perspectives but again not absolutely understanding it. Why is there so much hatred and pain? Because of religion. Both religions are Christian religions. Both believe in the same God, just in a different way. And that was the issue with christening my child, because I didn't want to do it, because I wanted her to make her own choice when she's ready. But for him it was political. So I did it for him. I think she was two and a half years old when I actually did it.

But I also agreed to this, because it was sort of during my grandmother's 90th birthday celebrations – not the religious [grandmother], the other one. She was religious, just not to the extent that the other one was. And she was so happy that my daughter got christened – it was like a birthday present. I only had one cousin from that side of the family, so I decided to make her a godmother. So grandmother was over the bloody moon, but for me it had nothing to do with religion. Nothing. Because I also don't believe in that, and logically to me it's a pile of poop, that a child wouldn't be able to get to heaven if it's not christened.

I think I got married because all of my friends already were. We did get along really well, like he's neurodivergent as well, so that does add a certain level of understanding. Although we didn't know it then, we know it now. I was quite up front about being bisexual; he never had an issue.

I'm out – for example at the high school reunion, the one I talked about, where I confronted people. I tell everyone that I'm bi and that if I got divorced right now, I would probably not pursue men anymore. But being bisexual wasn't really a thing when I was younger. Actually, I would say that at high school, you said bisexual if you wanted to have fun. And I was like, *I'm not going to be bisexual, I'm not going to be bisexual, I'm not going to be bisexual*. But there wasn't bi [as an orientation] and I think to some extent, it's still like that in Poland. It's just someone who doesn't really know what they want or a way to justify what you're doing. At the end of the day, you will end up with them anyway. And I don't really know much

about bisexual male experiences – only one, but he was in a gay relationship. And at that point, he used to prefer to be in a relationship with a guy. He liked some women, but it was kind of like the other way round. He was the only one I actually ever spoke to about that [bisexuality].

In my family, I only really spoken about it to two really close male cousins, who are like smaller brothers to me. They both know because they both met my girlfriend. My parents are alive and actually I told my mum three years ago. I told her that I liked girls and that I had always liked girls. To which my mum said only one thing: *That's fine. How are you actually doing that?* Mum, you actually want me to describe it to you?!

You know what, I think that I trained my parents well, because I was raised by homophobic and racist parents and now I have parents who are neither of these things. Well, when it comes to my dad and racism, sometimes we need to have a serious discussion about stuff, because he still finds jokes that were funny in the 70s funny now and they're not. I had so many gay friends and they used to come to our house as well. They [parents] just sort of got over it and it's not an issue anymore. And I was quite forceful about that as well, because my sort of reasoning behind this was that if you don't know something, you will never understand it. And what better than hands on experience? So I was inviting them [queer friends] for lunches, for dinners, forcing my parents at be at the same table with them.

Marriage, Children & Bisexuality

There's no contradiction between my faith and sexuality anymore. When I was in high school, I never really had conflict with myself, because I could tell myself that I was going to end up with a guy anyway, that's just a phase and there's nothing to it. I also had that grandmother voice in my head, telling me it was wrong, for quite a while.

My daughter knows that I'm bi, we talk about it a lot. She says she's bi as well. She's had a crush on a girl for quite a long time. She told me she had a crush on her friend – that just makes me feel so good, that

she trusts me, the fact that she doesn't even have to think about it, it's normal. She's nine years old.

But honestly, it wouldn't be the same if I didn't study sociology. I agree that everyone should do sociology. I actually think it's very, very important. I remember when I was choosing my course in Poland, when I finished high school. Everybody was saying, if you don't know what to do with yourself, go study sociology, But it was in a negative way. I don't think anyone is ready for the amount of thinking you actually have to do.

I think my husband knows that my daughter identifies as bi, but they don't really talk about it. We don't talk, so I don't really know, but I don't think he would be bothered about that. I read somewhere a few years ago, which was actually quite interesting, that neurodivergent relationships tend to fall apart when a third party appears – and ours would be the child. And that would be kind of 100% true for us. Plus, I think there's also a lot of blame towards me. I was told by my Polish doctor – they don't really know why – but it seems like I can't really have children. I had some miscarriages before. They don't really know where it's coming from, perhaps as a result of having celiac disease, which would be a perfect explanation as it can cause miscarriages, and an inability to conceive, to carry the pregnancy and so on. But it has been diagnosed so it's managed. And I got pregnant.

The Ideal Church

An ideal church would be one where I can see and feel that everyone is accepted, regardless of anything. It doesn't matter who you are, where you're from, how you look, who you love. Nothing else matters. Like Jesus said, we are all brothers or sisters. We're all human beings and we should treat ourselves with love and respect. We all deserve that. A place where I can openly discuss how I'm feeling, where none of my feelings are wrong, and all my feelings are valid. If I'm lost, I can discuss it with people that support me or help me find whatever I'm looking for.

Who is Jesus to You?

Jesus is a really cool guy. I love the way he talked, about how we should live – though I don't think you should tell anyone how to live. And then we took the guidance he provided and twisted it in so many ways. Yet we are still evoking his name. The Polish Church is great at that. It is so involved in politics and uses that to do horrible things, to oppress women and to oppress minorities.

Being Bisexual

I'm not sure I feel there are positives to being bisexual. I don't think it's positive; it's confusing. And sometimes I think it's actually difficult. I think it would be easier to be straight or gay, and I have always felt like that, especially within the gay community. It's just recently – maybe a year and a half ago – that I decided I'm going to identify myself as queer. Because I'm sick of not being accepted in one community and not being accepted in the other. And for straight guys, it's just a fun thing – ok, let's do a threesome. Fuck you, go away please! And for lesbian women, it's like hmm, not really, because you're bisexual and you're going to leave me for a guy. You can't win. The girl I was with, I know she had huge issues with that and I think ultimately, that's why our relationship broke down. Because the other girl was just safe for her. She never knew that she wouldn't find me – her words – “sucking someone's dick.” I was monogamous though, because I was besotted with her. I'm still getting that vibe that bisexual people are incapable of being monogamous. She was like, why can't you just be gay? Because I'm not. I just love people and I don't really care whether they're male or female. I don't care, and I actually do not care whether they're cisgender or transgender. And that's the thing – I just like humans!

Living in Scotland

No one makes a big fuss about being queer in Scotland, and I like that. I think I always need to watch who I'm talking to in Poland, if I want to talk about this. No-one cares really [in Scotland], or at least that's what I've found. Or maybe I was just lucky enough to be around people who don't care at all. It's definitely more open-minded, without the huge influence of the Catholic Church screaming at you from left, right and centre, that this is wrong, that gay people are depraving our children. For me, the sexual abuse scandals involving Catholic clergy in Poland have deeply damaged the credibility of the Church.

Hopes for the Future

I'm focusing on my education right now. I've just got a care job, where I'm going to be doing quizzes and fun stuff with elderly people. I'm actually quite excited about that. I went there to meet them all on Tuesday, and they were fantastic. They just welcomed me. So I'm going to be doing that – it's an internship. So, it's just for three months. It kind of involves sociological knowledge, but also what I'm doing now – political communication. I chose political communication and public affairs so that I can sort of use the sociological knowledge in practice. I'm interested in policy and I'm interested in changing policy. I'm interested in female issues and I'm furious about how medical science treats women, and how limited access to treatments are – for example, for the menopause, because I'm going through it. But also access to certain services – there should be equal access for everyone. So that would be something that would really, really Interest me.

I always wanted to be a politician since I was 18, but I don't think I can be a politician in this country because I'm not a British citizen. And I'm not going to lie, I don't want to [be a British citizen] because I have settled status, so I don't really have to. I don't want to be anyone's subject! I am morally slightly at odds with Great Britain. I don't think I want to

be part of a country that has colonized other countries around the world and never apologized.

Closing Thoughts

I think every single one of us, subconsciously, deep in our hearts, always know who we actually are. But then, it takes so much time – for me, it took so much time to admit certain things to myself, actually allow myself to open up to myself, it that makes sense. Actually it's been recent – the past four or five years. So I'm nearly fifty and I feel like I'm just slowly now uncovering everything that there is.

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

4.3 How Can Love Be Wrong?

Benedetta, Italy & UK

Looking Back, I Always Knew

How do you tell a twelve-year-old girl that the butterflies she feels for her best friend aren't wrong? That God's love doesn't come with conditions? That she doesn't have to hide who she is?

My name is Benedetta, and this is my story.

I was born in Italy and when I was ten years old, my family and I moved to San Cesario, a small village in the south of Italy, where life moved slowly under the bright sun. I don't come from a stereotypical family; I have seven siblings, so including me, there were eight children under one roof! We were loud, messy and inseparable. My mum was a single child and growing up, she always shared with us how much she wanted a big family. She was anchored in her faith, which she practised devoutly. She raised us with values that she lived out every day – kindness, selflessness, love, respect and a sense of providence.

Due to our involvement in the local catholic community, our lives were intertwined with the rituals of the Church. Sundays were sacred, filled with choir rehearsals, Easter plays, community events, and prayer. The church wasn't just a place of worship; it was an extension of our home. In this small village, everyone was involved in the community and everyone knew everyone – especially the elderly folks, who knew our every move. This tight community was where I made my closest friends, where I sang and laughed and prayed. In that small Catholic community, I felt embraced.

I was twelve when I started to think that something was wrong with me. As a girl, I was expected to act in a certain way, to be quiet, to help around the church and at events, and to be good in school. But something changed. It could have been the onset of puberty, but something was definitely changing. It started slowly. At first, I wanted to spend all of my time with my best friend and the time that we spent together was always playing in my head. Her laughter stirred something in me that I couldn't name. I was twelve, too young to understand the difference between love and friendship, yet old enough to know I was feeling something more. That strange blend of affection and fear settled inside me and unsettled me at the same time. What was wrong with me?

More time came by and more, I was quietly drowning in questions no one seemed willing to answer. *"Why do I feel like this towards another girl? This is not ok, all my friends have crushes on boys, why don't I as well? I need to conform. I will look for a boyfriend"*. I asked God to fix me, to take away the feelings and I begged Him not to let anyone find out. My attempt to find a boyfriend didn't sit very well with my mother. The idea of me having a boyfriend was not in her picture for me at this point – so can you imagine if I told her exactly how I was feeling towards Jessica?

Years passed, and I became an expert in hiding. In 2010 we moved to Rome to be near my grandparents. I always had a special bond with them. But as we moved, we had to start in a new place and where was the best place for us to start but the Church? The new church welcomed us, and I was really looking forward to making new friends. Unfortunately, there weren't many girls of my age in the community, so I decided to get involved in volunteering, Girl Guiding and the Church Choir.

I was sixteen when I fell deeply in love with a woman. Her name was Lucrezia and she was absolutely gorgeous. She had blue hair and the most beautiful smile I had ever seen. Time passed by and I started making friends outside church, but I still attended church because I enjoyed being involved with the community.

Coming out, Coming Home

One day, I finally plucked up the courage to speak to my mum. I still remember the saliva getting stuck in my throat as we went out for a walk. I spent minutes finding the courage to open the conversation with her and between all the different scenarios in my head, the only one that made sense was: *"Mamma, I think I like girls"*. With this sentence, she looked at me and stayed silent. I did not know what to expect. After a couple of minutes that felt like an eternity, she said: *"Ok, do you want to talk about it?"* This felt like the happiest day of life, when she uttered those words. I finally didn't have to hide anymore. I told her about Jessica and Lucrezia and how much I loved her hair and that I hoped one day to be able to tell her how I felt about her. My mum calmly listened to me and then she started to ask me specific questions such as: *"Who would bring the masculine energy to the relationship? You? I can't see you doing that."* At that point I was very confused. *"Masculine energy? What does that mean?"* I really didn't know how to reply. She then proposed that I went and spoke to our priest, who had dealt with many teenagers over the years and probably had more experience than her in such matters. She said it with love in her eyes, but it felt like betrayal. I knew what it really was to her – a confession she hoped I'd recant on.

So a few days after that, my mum and I went to church and I sat across from him in the sacristy, heart heavy and trembling, not really knowing what I was going to say. I told him I thought I liked girls. I didn't have the language for it. At the time I didn't even know the word bisexual. He listened quietly, then smiled gently, and said it was a phase, that he had experienced a similar journey when he was a teenager and that growing up gave him clarity. He said to trust the process, as I was probably confused, that I should pray and not act on it, as it would pass.

But it didn't pass. What passed was my trust in the one place that had once felt like home.

Hiding my True Self in the Military Community

For a while, I stopped asking questions. I tried to follow the script instead, as that seemed to be the only way that I was going to be accepted. When I was seventeen, I met the man who would later become my husband. At first, he seemed the perfect fit. He was a soldier, he was grounded, and he told me that he loved me for who I was. I told him about my identity, nervously. He said, *“It’s fine, you’re with me now, it doesn’t matter.”* At the time, I thought that was love. Looking back, I understand what it really was – convenience disguised as acceptance, a quiet dismissal of my truth. We got married. We built a life. I became a Military Spouse. On the outside, I looked like every other young Christian wife – smiling, involved in community life, raising children, showing up. But inside, I was still invisible, still playing a role that had never been mine to play. He didn’t have a faith and he never took my beliefs seriously. With time, I wasn’t only hiding my true identity, but I was also hiding my faith, for fear of being misunderstood and laughed at.

Then we moved again, this time into the structured, silent world of the military community, where tradition and roles form the foundation of these institutional structures. Being a wife meant being part of a quiet sisterhood, and everything outside the norm became the basis for a joke, or subject to suspicion. I tried to speak about who I was. I tried to make space for my truth. But the responses were always the same:

“But you’re Married to a Man, so you’re Straight now, Right?”

They never understood that identity wasn’t erased by circumstance, that being married to a man didn’t cancel out who I had always been. As years passed being part of the military community, I tried to find others like me. I couldn’t be the only bisexual woman among the spouses out there. I simply wanted someone to chat to, who was going through – or had gone through – a similar experience. At times, it really felt like a cage. You could meet other spouses and mothers for coffee mornings or toddlers’ groups, but there was no space for LGBTQIA+ people. The British military states it is inclusive, but I personally never felt included. I’ve always felt a natural connection to people in the LGBTQIA+ community, likely because of my own identity, which was trying to take root within

me, but I lacked the tools and guidance to let it take root. Years passed like this: smiling outside, aching inside, ignoring who I really was.

All the Colours I am

In 2019, I enrolled in college and met a lecturer who changed everything for me. She was unapologetically bisexual, unapologetically herself. She became a role model, a living example of how identity and faith can co-exist. Watching her live without fear gave me the courage to reintroduce myself to my faith, but this time, I made a promise to myself that I would not hide who I was anymore.

Beginning my university studies in Sociology not only brought me clarity but also helped answer questions about the social dynamics I had personally experienced. It is also where I had the opportunity to be my true self. This is where the gap between my husband and grew even wider and eventually, the marriage broke down. It broke down for many reasons. And when it did, I fell apart. All the guilt I had buried resurfaced. I had said vows. I had promised to be with him forever. I tried to repair something that had broken into a million pieces. And now, I was walking away. *“Was I sinning again? Was I breaking another sacred rule? Is this the right path?”* Now years later, I can say that it was. Even if I couldn't see it at the time. I remembered the phrase I'd heard so many times growing up:

“Forgive seventy times seven.”

But what if the person you're forgiving never really saw you?

What if the forgiveness you needed was your own?

How could I teach my children to live truthfully, to love freely, if I was still shrinking myself to fit someone else's vision?

After the separation, I entered one of the darkest periods of my life. I pushed everyone and everything away, including my faith. I was angry – at the Church, at myself, at the world that made me feel like I had to choose between my faith and authenticity. Then one day, a friend brought me to church again – the Church of England. Up until this point, the only church I have even known and experienced was the Catholic Church. I remember sitting back, not expecting anything and

asking myself what I was doing there. But someone approached me, asked how I was doing, and for the first time in twenty-six years, I told the truth. I opened up. I wept like a child. It wasn't about answers. It was about being heard. Maybe that's what healing looks like – not being fixed but being heard.

Being in the UK gave me the freedom to breathe, to explore and wear my identity with confidence without the fear of being picked on, of being verbally or physically abused on the streets. To speak without fear. In many parts of Italy, the bisexual identity is still not widely accepted. Many bisexual women report feeling more vulnerable to harassment or assault due to their dual identity. Even with this new chapter in my life, I know that if I was to return to Italy and say these things out loud, I would still be met with silence, mockery or worse, abuse. My mum still thinks it is a phase, and although I know she loves me with all of her heart, there are still some battles I choose not to fight. My mother still struggles to accept who I am. I don't think she ever truly will. But I know she loves me. And that love, however complicated, matters. I've learned not to seek validation from those who only love the version of me they can understand, because at least now I finally understand myself.

In Italy, bisexual women often find themselves caught between two pressures: the suspicion of greed and the discomfort caused by men who feel entitled to sexualize them. Misogyny and stigma walk hand in hand. And in the place that was once my spiritual home, I still hear the echo of that priest's words. I remember him saying, *"Don't act on it. Or you'll end up in hell."* But I no longer believe that hell is where love lives.

Faith, Love and Everything in Between

Three years after my divorce, I met someone. He's Christian, like me and bisexual, like me. From the outside, we might look like a typical heterosexual couple. But our story, our bond, is built on a deeper understanding, on a shared truth we both had to fight hard to embrace. We see each other. We live in that in-between space that many don't understand. But it's our space; it's honest and we understand it. It is also in this in-be-

tween space that we empower each other to be our best selves. Before him, I had never even imagined that couples like us could truly exist, let alone thrive. What strikes me most about him is his gentleness, his honesty, and the way he pours intention into our relationship every day. I sometimes wonder, *“What is it that he has, that so many others didn’t? What shaped his way of seeing the world?”*

His experience with bisexuality has been very different from mine – less shame, more acceptance – but we meet in the middle. Together, we try to bring awareness about what our love really is – not an exception, but a possibility. He understands me in ways no one else ever has, not despite our identities, but *because* of them. In him, I have found the kind of partnership I once thought was impossible, and a kind of faith that doesn’t deny us, but welcomes us in. For the first time in years, I don’t feel ashamed or afraid to talk about my bisexual experiences and how I lived them. The questions I once had about the possibility of being attracted to both sexes became something I could finally discuss with someone else – someone like me, who understands the struggle of accepting the fluidity of love.

I am a woman of faith. I am a bisexual woman. I am a mother. I am a survivor. I’ve spent a lifetime reconciling my truth with my beliefs. And I’ve come to this truth. This is my truth:

- a) God never asked me to be less. The Church did.
- b) I don’t belong to the Catholic Church. I belong to God.
- c) He has never stopped loving me.

As a bisexual woman and the mother of two young daughters, my greatest achievement will be to show my girls that they are loved for who they are, and not for who others expect them to be. In our home, we talk about faith, but we talk about it on our terms. We speak about God, not through the lens of an institution that, in my view, has for centuries oppressed women and marginalized voices like mine, but through the lens of respect, compassion, freedom, and acceptance. I am a positive, vibrant person, and I am endlessly grateful for every experience that has shaped me, even the painful ones. They taught me resilience. They taught me

grace. But most of all, they taught me never to deny my true self again. Ever.

Love, Always Love

When I was younger, I believed that love had to possess certain criteria. It was necessary for me to transform myself into a different person in order to gain acceptance from God, my family, and my community. I had to become someone quieter, the smaller of the two. But now I see the truth – love, genuine love, does not require you to be less than you are. It requires you to grow. Even though I am living my truth today, I am doing so not only for myself, but also for the two young children who call me “mamma,” to let them know that they are never too much, never too different, and never too anything to be loved just as they are. I want them to know that they are never too much. I want them to see a woman who has not allowed fear or shame to prevent her from experiencing joy. I would like them to understand that religion and honesty are not adversaries; rather, they are travelling companions on the same path.

This is only one of countless stories out there. But if sharing my story means that just one person out there feels less alone, more seen, or a little bit braver, then every moment of suffering, perplexity, and quiet submission has been worth it and my story has served a purpose. If you are someone who is going through a path of self-discovery, I want you to understand that there is absolutely nothing wrong with you. If you are reading this, I just want you to know that you are loved and the story you tell is worthy.

Faith is not about conforming to a pattern established by centuries of fear and silence. For me, faith is to about connection, compassion, and the courage to continue showing up as yourself. The way we love is not determined by any specific institution. Before the walls of any church were built, love existed, and it will continue to exist for a very long time. Because God is the source of love, and God is constant in His actions. You are not alone and you are not damaged. You are loved profoundly and unconditionally.

I have not yet fully figured out who I am. I am still learning and I am still healing. But for the first time in 28 years, I am not terrified. I am not hiding and I try in my own small way to make a change.

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

4.4 The Wall of Silence: My Story of Coming Out as a Bisexual Christian Man (and Some Things I Wish Someone had Told Me)

José, Spain & Germany

"I don't Get it. Why are You Coming Out?"

That was the question I got most when I decided to come out as bisexual. I was married, we have a lovely family together, I was happy in a passing "straight marriage". Why all the fuss?

The basic reason why I decided to come out was that I felt like an accomplice to queerphobia in many parts of society, especially in the church. My story is proof that what many churches state about queer-ness is ignorant and wrong. I wished I had known queer Christian people when I was a kid and a teenager. I cannot go back in time, but I can speak up now. And by writing it down, I am trying to reach other people in other places, as well as people in the future.

I have decided to tell my story. And my story involves the stories of many other people who have not decided to tell their side of their story. That is why I am not mentioning names nor going into specifics of who said what. To a certain degree, it doesn't matter. What I want to share is the kind of responses, positive and negative, that I got, so that you are better prepared than I was if you ever decide to come out.

I haven't sugar-coated my experience in this chapter. In today's society, there is a tendency to avoid negativity and many people expect me not to mention these negative reactions. For them, focusing solely on the positive demonstrates self-growth. But, in part, I think that is a form of

(internalised) queerphobia. Negative experiences are part of our lives, and we have to learn how to deal with them – learning from other people's experiences is also important and if we only share the positive, how do we learn? Nevertheless, I hope that the overall tone of the chapter is positive and constructive. Being bi is great, being out even better!

Coming Out to Myself

I was born in 1987 in Madrid, in a family with a lot of responsibility in a small evangelical church. With time, I have realised that it was a very conservative church in many aspects – although in comparison with many other groups and individuals we were in contact with, it was not ultra conservative. I was the only kid of my age, so from my youngest years I sat with the adults, listening to sermons which were not intended for my age-group. Homosexuality and abortion were very frequent topics in the sermons, presented as among the worst sins.

Not all was bad in evangelical circles, though. I grew up being loved, learning to cope with the feeling of being part of a minority, with many spiritual and cultural opportunities, where I learned about God and a special love for the Bible. I learned that we should be critical with traditions and love people around us, especially those in need.

Nevertheless, sex and how they deal with relationships was – and remains – a central aspect distinguishing evangelical from other Christians and the rest of society. We were expected to remain virgins until our wedding day, choose an evangelical partner, and only move in together after marriage. Masturbation was seen as bad or sinful. I remember workshops on sex where people who had several sexual partners in their life were compared to chewing gum chewed by several people. Any sexual practice that is not penis-in-vagina (such as oral sex or use of sex toys) was, and still is, considered sinful, questionable or unhealthy (allegedly).

If that sounds bad enough, the reality was actually worse. It was often the case that someone in our evangelical circles started a relationship with a non-evangelical person, or decided to live with their unmar-

ried partner, or got pregnant unmarried. And then the parents (often pastors or church leaders) of that person no longer spoke to their adult child. This person was not only excluded from friends and family but also omitted from conversation. The behaviour of their parents, family and friends was never questioned. It was like an emotional and social punishment that was inflicted on these people for not following the evangelical scheme of life (especially around sex and relationships), a kind of wall of silence that was built around this person. This wall of silence was used against me many years later. And it was a warning for everyone else. Deep inside it created the certainty that if we didn't follow the evangelical scheme of sex and relationships, we would be excluded by parents, family and friends, punished and hurt emotionally.

I wasn't even 10 years old, when I realised that I found female and male bodies similarly interesting and exciting. I have always liked to use categories and labels in order to better understand reality. I had probably read about bisexuality somewhere in a book or Internet site and I was happy that there was a label that could explain how I felt about my sexual orientation. I was like, "Great, now I know that I am bisexual. It's a great explanation. And now that I know, I will not talk to anyone about it for the rest of my life!" So, it's funny now to find myself writing this! I used to have crushes on both girls and boys. Many years later, I learnt about the distinction between romantic and sexual orientation. Although sexually I am quite bi, I have always tended to be heteroromantic, which means that I prefer romantic relationships with women, although relationships with men are entirely imaginable.

In 2005, Spain became the third country in the world to allow same-gender marriage. I was a teenager and the topic of homosexuality in sermons was exhaustingly frequent. For a while, I thought I should come out to a person who had certain responsibility in the church that I attended. I remember being sat in this green plastic chair in the church, looking at the big white floor tile and being disappointed in myself for not being brave enough to tell the truth about myself. Many years later, I came out to this person and I realised it was good that I didn't do it as a teenager. Remember, it's OK not to come out if you're in danger, including emotional danger.

No one in evangelical circles at that time was queer and when they talked about it, they spoke only of homosexuality. Bisexuality didn't even exist for them. I knew I was part of a bad category (queer) and somehow even worse than homosexual (which was already terrible), because by being bisexual, I was part of something that the people didn't even talk about. It would have been so helpful to have known that other Christian people were bisexual or somehow queer. Surprisingly (or not), some people that I knew back then now could, or indeed do identify now, as bisexual or queer.

I always knew that I could not be sincere with evangelicals about myself; I always saw myself as an outsider and I tried to make friends with other outsiders in evangelical circles.

Coming Out to my Partner

When I was 18, I went to England to a Christian organisation to learn English and have experiences abroad. This centre was a good example of the positive elements in Christian circles. Without this international network, it would have been much harder or impossible to spend time abroad.

There I met a German-Brazilian girl with whom I felt so comfortable talking about everything. She was another outsider in evangelical circles, and at one point, when we were talking about living outside the evangelical scheme, I told her I was bisexual. And she was surprisingly cool about it. She made me feel safe; she was the first person I felt comfortable talking to about cute girls and cute boys. She was the only person I felt completely safe with.

After our time in England, she decided to move to Madrid, where we began a relationship. A few years later we got married – young, (almost) following the evangelical scheme of life. But I always knew that I was not a good evangelical (I would have said that I was not a good Christian, too) and that I was hiding a part of myself. After a few years, we decided to move to Germany due to better economic prospects. We have lived close

to Göttingen for a few years now. Many of the things I describe in the next sections happened there.

I have thought so many times how glad I am that my orientation was never a secret or a big deal between us. It was part of me and played a very small part in our relationship from the beginning. She is my favourite person in the world and I thank God so often for our relationship and our story. Without her support, I would never have come out years later.

Purity Culture and Deconstruction

Deconstruction is the term used when people start to question aspects of their faith and religion, and it's particularly used for people raised in evangelical churches. Realising how wrong evangelical churches are about sexuality was a major step in my coming out process.

Like many other evangelical kids, I grew up hearing that any kind of sex (including masturbation) before or outside of marriage was sin. Save yourself for marriage and then the sex will be great. These are the two core ideas of the so-called purity culture that evangelical churches preach.

Many years later, I can say that purity culture is categorically wrong. It's not even biblical because it ignores the sex book of the Bible, *Song of Songs*. In my experience, some people who preach it are not transparent about their own experiences or views.

My wife and I went through some serious problems in our marriage, one of which was linked to sex. Because we had been taught that sex in marriage was supposed to be great, we found that we were not able to talk about sex, especially about problems and possible solutions. Our communication in general was good, but when we talked about sex it was terrible. So we looked for help in our evangelical circles – and this was when we realised how deeply problematic the evangelical sexual ethic is.

"If you look closely at almost every couple in the church, you will find messed up problems in their sex life." These were the words of a person who had been involved in couples counselling for many decades. But wait, you kept preaching that the sex life once married would be great!

In conversation with several people, a classic book on sexuality came up again and again: *The Act of Marriage* by Tim and Beverly LaHaye.¹ This is a book that almost every evangelical pastor has read and whose ideas are still very much kicking about today. In my view, it is a completely sexist book and wrong in many ways. Some examples: In this book, women are supposed to be multi-orgasmic in order to be considered sexually “well-adjusted.” Some critics have argued that parts of the book portray scenarios in ways that appear to blame victims of sexual assault. Other more modern classics (when it comes to evangelical books) such as Emerson Eggerichs’ *Love & Respect*² present sex as something for men only.

In conversations with several pastors, we realised that the majority of evangelical pastors nowadays don’t think that masturbation is wrong, but they are afraid of talking about it openly because conservative people in their churches would be upset. Moreover, they allow conservative people to keep saying that masturbation is bad, even though they know how badly these messages affect individuals, especially young people and singles. One example of this is Kari Clewett, a sexual coach from the US working in Spain, who publishes videos on YouTube in Spanish, which in my view, combine elements of purity culture with what I consider to be pseudo-scientific arguments – for example, the notion that masturbation leads to selfishness.

In my perception, some evangelical pastors may be reluctant to speak openly about sexuality because it could create instability in the congregation and even threaten their jobs, appearing to prioritise this above helping individuals resolve past and present trauma. While fear of losing their jobs is human, I personally see this as cowardly, cynical and inconsistent with the Christian values I was taught.

The same people who told us that talking openly about masturbation in church would cause too many problems are the same people who felt comfortable enough to suggest in sermons that people should abstain from sexual relations during Lent. Purity culture is not a phenomenon from the past; it is still very much alive in current evangelical churches

1 Study Resources, 1998.

2 Thomas Nelson, 2012.

in Europe, continuing to cause hurt to people (young and not that young) today.

My wife and I were involved in several sex-positive workshops at church. In one of them, sadly, we heard the same bullshit we had heard when we were young – masturbation was portrayed as bad, and people who were interested in practices such as oral sex or sex toys were shamed. We realised it was pointless to try to improve anything in evangelical circles. Conservatives keep preaching purity culture and liberals are too afraid to speak out.

When my criticism became clearer and stronger, people went silent. There it was again, the wall of silence. They did not want to talk about it. We realised that we were not going to get any help from the evangelical church in trying to resolve the traumas that evangelical teaching on sexuality has created for many people, including us. We were on our own, as the next generation of young people growing up in evangelical churches will be in a few years' time.

At one point, a pastor told me, "You put too much trust in the church; you really believed what they told you about sex" whilst admitting that he was afraid of talking about sex openly in the church. Although this could be seen as cynical coming from a pastor, it helped me. It helped me to see that the authority of the evangelical churches over sex was rotten and I came to see their use of authority on sexual matters as unethical and inconsistent with the Christian values I had been taught.

If they were so wrong about basic sexuality and sexuality in female-male-couples, what authority do they have about queerness? None.

My closet was already half open.

I just needed a good moment to come out.

Coming Out to Evangelicals

Trigger warning: this section contains some of the most hurtful, insulting and ignorant things I have ever heard about queerness in my life. By the end of this section there are some suggestions in list form of how to come out to evangelicals. Feel free to skip to that part or to the next

section. I considered not writing down these negative things, but I think it's important to provide proof of their discrimination. I describe them so that people can be prepared for these worst-case scenarios – however, even if they are hurtful, they are just words based on ignorance and arrogance.

In 2023, the group of evangelical churches in Germany under the umbrella of the *Bund Freier evangelischer Gemeinden* (FeGs) decided to start up a process on homosexuality to discuss if and how homosexual people should be accepted within their churches. We had been attending a local FeG church for years. My wife was a member, I was not; we as a family were regulars.

In March 2023, all members my FeG church received an email informing them of the process on homosexuality and discussions around unity and diversity. The email was signed by seven people, all heterosexual men, married, with more than one child, and all with German citizenship. A perfect picture of diversity in evangelical circles! In the e-mails and documents at national level, there was a coldness and distance towards homosexuals that was hurtful. Homosexuals were addressed in the third person, as if these people were somewhere, outside, far away. Until a few years ago, some churches within the FeG movement supported approaches aimed at changing sexual orientation, often described today as conversion therapy. The local church had silently but consistently rejected queer people as members up to that moment. There was no apology for any of that, no reference to the pain and rejection that churches cause queer people. In fact, the only reference to pain and rejection was about 'the pain of being gay'.

As I said, I was waiting for a good moment to come out. And that moment just appeared – I couldn't stand these men talking about homosexuality, queerness and diversity from their position of ignorance and privilege.

I came out to the pastor and then to other members of the church. My wife and I and a few other people insisted that the voices of queer people should be heard in such a process. Queer people should be invited to talk to the community, since only listening to heterosexual voices was about as unacceptable as a bunch of men talking about menstruation.

We believed that true diversity should be achieved and that other people besides the church leaders should be in a position to decide about the process.

Basically, all our proposals were silently rejected, often with the comment “it’s not off the table, maybe in the future”, and then we never heard anything again. There it was again – the wall of silence. In my opinion, they were erratic in their decision-making, saying in one meeting that we were at the beginning of the process and that there was no point in discussing details, and then in the next meeting saying that all the major decisions had already been made by the church leaders and the process was almost over. In my view, they did not seem equipped to lead such a process, neither emotionally nor in terms of their knowledge.

We invited the church leaders to an evening at our home where I, as an (almost) out queer person, stated my position and explained to them that the whole process was flawed and unacceptable. I think after that conversation they decided that the church was better off without us. By the end of the process, they were organising small meetings to discuss homosexuality more openly, although they acknowledged that these discussions would not make any difference to the final decisions. These talks were open to any person attending the church, not only to members. I expressed my interest in going. The day before the meeting the church leaders told me that I was not welcome. I responded to them that I understood this as discrimination and censorship against queer people. They didn’t reply. To this day, none of them have apologised.

A few weeks later we decided to leave the church and my wife cancelled her membership. In later conversations, the church leaders admitted that my not being a member of the church played a big part of my exclusion. This shows how unfair evangelical churches can be to queer people – they reject queer people as members but require queer people to be a member in order to be able to speak.

Parallel to this process in the local church, I came out to many evangelicals or people who had grown up in evangelical churches. The vast majority of these conversations went badly, but a few went much better than I expected. One of the exhausting aspects of coming out is that you never know how people will react. Each time you feel like rolling the dice

and the dice can surprise you. In general, evangelicals from Germany reacted better than evangelicals from Spain. Also, the more central a person is or has been to an evangelical church, the worse their response is likely to be. For example, many of the worst responses I received were from evangelical pastors or church leaders. In my experience, evangelical pastoral training often reflects theological positions that can be harmful to queer people. Even cool young pastors who seem very chilled with the topic can then defend very homophobic positions once you are out to them.

Some of the responses were just plain ignorant. For example, one pastor once compared being queer to liking heavy metal music in that their grandmother might be disappointed in them for it. Yes, we are at that level of ignorance when we talk to some evangelicals.

Although many people do argue that being queer is a sin, no one has ever told me “you being bisexual is a sin”. Of course, even for the worst kind of homophobic evangelicals, it’s difficult to say that to a guy who is living in a female-male-marriage with several children. For example, during discussions at a FeG Church, I heard statements such as “homosexuals choose a vicious way of life”, that queer people were abnormal or that “homosexuality comes from the devil.” Several of these comments came from people who preach in that church. When my wife and I posted information on social networks about my coming out as bisexual, some evangelicals called me a cheater or told my wife I was going to cheat on her.

The majority of the hurtful statements concerned comparisons evangelicals made when talking about queerness. A pastor compared being queer to being a prostitute, a thief, and a drug addict. Until today, this person hasn’t understood why this comparison is hurtful. Someone compared same-gender relations to humans having sex with animals. Another person compared the act of coming out to talking about the holocaust (in the sense that both things are awful and even talking about it can be difficult). If it wasn’t so real and insulting, it would be darkly comic.

Some people said they were fine with it, but they were really worried about the impact it might have on my immediate and extended family. I

always saw that as a contradiction – if you think this is dangerous for my family, then you are not totally okay with it, right? Some people asked me not to hurt my wife and family, because apparently that's what bisexuals do!

But worst of all was the combination of ignorance and arrogance shown by some evangelicals. Several people admitted that it was the first time in their lives that they had spoken to a bisexual person, but actually insisted on explaining things to me about my sexual orientation. A pastor who had never previously spoken to a bisexual person told me being bisexual was not an orientation, it was a deviation. A church leader asked me “why are you coming out?” and after I explained as best I could, he replied “I don't think that's the real reason” and then had the audacity to tell me the reasons I was supposedly coming out. That gave me the impression that evangelical leaders are not trained to listen to people, but to have all the answers and to give monologues.

Many of their responses were surprising to me, particularly the lack of compassion and love for others, and that they did not realise just how hurtful their responses were. Compassion and love should be what Christians are known for.

For example, the question about why I was *really* coming out came up again and again. If I am not interested in other relationships, why bother? The argument that rejection and discrimination against queer people is unacceptable did not convince many people. Probably they are fine with discrimination because it does not affect them.

One sad thing that happened frequently was that many questioned my faith as soon as I said I was bisexual. “Do you still believe in God? Do you believe in the Bible?”. The answers to these questions were obvious to them the second before I said anything about my orientation.

It was also surprising that many of them were seriously afraid of legal or political consequences. The word *discrimination* is particularly powerful because it's a word that's used in legal and political contexts. I think we need to work more closely with politicians and activists to curb discrimination in religious circles. I see that many evangelicals are reluctant to write anything on the subject. They are afraid of being accountable, both in the present and especially in the future. Many sense that their

homophobic attitudes are something to be ashamed of. In fact, some express fear that more queer people will be encouraged to write about their experiences – which is exactly what I am doing in this chapter.

Another thing I found quite shocking was the silence they exercised towards me – some for many months, some even years. Some told me they no longer wanted to talk to me. Some told me they did not want to talk to me about my queerness. Some asked me not to tell certain people. Some just did not respond, even after I asked repeatedly. There it was again, the wall of silence I had experienced in the past, in seeing how people who lived outside the evangelical scheme were treated, and during my criticism of purity culture. For a time, it felt like I was coming out of the closet but they were creating a new closet around me – that this wall of silence was becoming my new extended closet. Well, I decided to come out of that closet too, and editing and contributing to this book is a way of tearing down this closet.

The majority of liberal people who attend evangelical churches show some kind of empathy, but they prefer to do nothing and look the other way. But hey, probably I would have done the same a few years back, sadly.

But not everything was bad within evangelical circles. Some people responded positively and we were able to integrate my orientation into our conversations in a very natural way. I even had some good experiences with a few pastors and church leaders. I had long conversations with one of them and it was great training for talking to evangelicals. My parents-in-law responded warmly and my mother-in-law even knitted me a pair of slippers in the colours of the bisexual flag that I wear with double pride!

The support and love of my wife was vital to me during my coming out. Dozens of times I doubted whether what I was doing, what we were doing, was right. I could always come back to her love and understanding, to the stability of our relationship, recharge and prepare for the next emotional battle. I am aware that this is a privilege not everyone has.

Below are some recommendations when coming out, specially to evangelicals or people from whom you may anticipate negative reactions:

- a) Ensure you are grounded in theology and know how to respond to the “clobber passages.” But that alone won’t convince them, since many seem to operate within a culture where discrimination against queer people is normalised; many seem to believe that their religious convictions give them the right to exclude queer people (among other groups). Besides theological arguments, they need to give up their belief that they are better than us, that they can discriminate against us.
- b) The time and place of coming out is very important. Don’t rush, make sure neither you nor your loved ones are under any particular stress at that time. Give yourself time and do it in a safe and neutral place, for example, when taking a walk or in a park setting.
- c) Especially in the beginning, take care how often you come out to potentially queerphobic people. It’s exhausting; I needed days or weeks of emotional recovery in between. For a while, I decided to have no more than one conversation a week. Take breaks, do things that help you and give you strength.
- d) Control the narrative and conversation. You can say things like “You can’t talk to me like that”, “that’s discriminatory” or “that’s hurtful”.
- e) Many people have no idea how to respond to someone coming out to them. Lead them with phrases such as, “if you don’t know what to say, it’s ok, you don’t have to say anything.” Suggest taking a break or supply some questions or statements that you would like to hear from them (but be aware that they may not respond in kind).
- f) Find a welcoming church near you and consider therapy or pastoral care from a welcoming church. I did and it really helped me. We are not only called to love others, but also to love ourselves.
- g) It’s ok if your faith or your way of relating to God changes during this process.
- h) Have one or two people you can count on when you are feeling down.

Coming Out as a Father

I am the first person in several parts of my extended family to come out as queer. It would have been so great to have known that I was not the only person in my family who was not heterosexual, who was queer. Had I stayed in the closet, I would feel absolutely miserable and like an accomplice to evangelical queerphobia when people from the next generation of my family came out as queer. Nowadays, around 20% of young people identify as queer, with half of them being bisexual. For every five young people, we can expect one to be queer. We already have more than five people in the next generation of my family, so we can be pretty sure that one or more will be queer. It's not a question of whether someone in the family is queer, but whether they feel safe to come out. I want to tell these young people, but more importantly *show* them, that it is perfectly fine to be queer (and Christian). What is not acceptable is queerphobia.

I have come out to several young people and children in the next generation of my family. Some of the best responses and surprisingly wise ones came from them, especially when I compare them to the ignorant responses of people from older generations. In my experience, the next generation is much more open and less influenced by negative stereotypes.

Many bisexual people argue that they will come out to their children when they are teenagers or adults. But as I stated previously, I was under 10 when I realised I was not heterosexual. So I needed people to tell me about their orientation or queerness when I was around eight or nine. Anything else would have been too late. When coming out to young people, one possibility is to focus on the feeling of being queer, of being different. There are lots of stories and films for children with this focus, for example, Elsa from the film *Frozen*.³ We could read or watch these stories with them and explain how we relate to these characters through our

3 *Frozen*, 2013. Directed by Chris Buck and Jennifer Lee. USA: Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures.

queerness. A book that does just that is a children's book called *Perfectly Norman* by Tom Percival.⁴

In general, I think that queer people and especially bisexual people should act with more responsibility towards teenagers and children. If we want a future less affected by queerphobia, then we need to get more involved with young people.

Coming Out in the Lutheran Church

Coming out to people in mainline churches like the German Lutheran Church felt totally different from coming out to people in evangelical churches. The best and most valuable response I got was from my pastor at the local church. I was worried about some people having a problem with me being queer *and* working in the children's ministry. If that was going to be the case, I didn't want to start. She told me that my orientation posed no problems in that area, and that if I were to experience any discrimination in the church, I should go to her, and she would clear things with that person. Her response was amazing. I was not only being accepted, she was acknowledging my worries, and she was offering me her protection in possible future scenarios. This experience has changed my perception of pastors, who should not only be leaders, but also protectors of vulnerable people.

Sometimes I actually get overwhelmed about how open and liberal people in the Lutheran Church are. For example, some people in the Lutheran Church expected me to have an open relationship – some even encouraged it without knowing anything about me or about my wife.

When I complained that there was not any particular Christian organisation or event for queers in my locality, the pastor of the University church (ESG)⁵ asked me “What can we do about it? How can we change it?”

4 Percival, T. (2017) *Perfectly Norman*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

5 ESG is the “Evangelische Studierendengemeinde”, which translates as Protestant Student Congregation or Community.

Let's talk about queer services, for example." His speedy response and action overwhelmed me at the beginning, although it was also so cool to see that they were not only open to such an idea, but also wanting to change the status quo. A few months after that, we organized the first queer service in my local area, opening with the song *The Code* by Nemo and ending with a blessing where people could decide whether they wanted to be blessed, by whom and how (without touching, or with hands on their head, or with a hug...). It was amazing. A few months later, we started a monthly group for queer people to chat about topics relating to faith. They asked if I wanted to preach in a queer service. It was so strange to think of me preaching... But I kept thinking about what I would have liked to hear in those sermons in the past, and I realised that I had lots of ideas. So I did preach in the second queer service. And it was weird and cool and a blessing and I am so grateful for the opportunity!

Even though my experiences in the Lutheran Church have been in general very positive, I think there is still a lot to be done. I don't think the German Lutheran Church overall speaks about queerness in a very healthy way. A queer person once told me "everyone here is open to queerness, but no one talks about it." When Ralf Schumacher came out as bisexual⁶ and in a same-gender relationship, Thorsten Latzel, the Sports Commissioner of the German Lutheran Church, said that we must fight for a situation in which it is not necessary to come out.⁷ In my opinion, this idea is present in various liberal spaces, such as universities and mainline churches. And of course it is well-meant, but this perspective problematizes coming out. If I feel like coming out for various reasons, this statement could be interpreted as a critique. It makes certain categories invisible, supposedly because there is no need – or shouldn't be a need – to talk about them. I think this explains

6 Actually, to my knowledge, he has not yet used the label bisexual, although he has explained that he has been happy both in same-gender and different-gender relations.

7 <https://evangelische-zeitung.de/das-zitat-ekd-sportbeauftragter-latzel-zum-outing-im-sport>, <https://www.instagram.com/p/C-XMSRwN14D/>

why a situation has arisen, in which everyone is open to queerness, but nobody actually talks about it.

I am very vocal about my orientation, also in the Lutheran Church. In the same way that I talk about other parts of my identity (coming from Spain, being a foreigner, working in a library, having a PhD, etc.), being queer is a part of me that relates to many aspects of my life. I wished I had seen more queer people when I was younger, especially in the church, so I try to be coherent with that and be visible in the church.

Coming Out to Other People

Coming out in non-Christian circles was surprisingly easy, even though it is not common for bisexual married men to come out. People did ask why I was doing it, but it was easy to explain to them about the discrimination against queer people in Christian circles. In general their response was neutral, respectful or even encouraging. Some people came out to me and identified with a queer label; some mentioned the possibility of being bi even though they didn't identify as such at this point in time. Some people responded to my trust with a secret of their own, often unrelated to orientation or gender, like a way of sharing something that made us both vulnerable. I appreciated it, but sometimes I felt overwhelmed.

Something that happened almost every time I came out to people was the question of whether I was now going to have an open marriage. Regardless of their politics, gender, age, denomination, cultural level, queerness, almost everyone expected us to somehow have an open marriage. Some were neutral, some were concerned, some were encouraging. And it was very surprising because until that moment, as a presenting heterosexual person, no one had ever asked me that. It was obvious to everyone that my wife and I were not interested in an open relationship. There is a clear and strong expectation in society that bisexual people have problems with monogamy. In a similar way to how there are certain expectations that go along with cis-heteronormativity, there is also a kind of *queernormativity*, in which open relations are expected or

at least more likely. For bisexual people, this is even stronger. For many people, if you are bisexual, it means that you must either be a cheater, interested in casual sex outside your main relationship, or polyamorous. I think the bisexual community sometimes reinforces these prejudices: Julia Shaw clearly argues in favour of open relationships in her book *Bi: The Hidden Culture, History and Science of Bisexuality*⁸, and Robert Brooks Cohen's *Bisexual Married Men*⁹ further strengthens this argument. In my opinion, the bisexual community should challenge the expectation that bisexual people are unhappy in exclusive relationships. There were very few people for whom it was obvious that this was not an option for us, and I thanked them very warmly.

At some point I decided to include it in my coming out story, to tell people and correct the social prejudice from the start, like "I am coming out as bisexual and this has nothing to do with us having an open marriage, that is a prejudice in society against bisexual people, it has to do with..." and then explain it further.

Coming Out as Christian to Queers

A quick note on coming out as a Christian to queers. Part of my baggage of internalised queerphobia was that I expected that telling queers that I was a Christian would be problematic and that I would get negative reactions.

Nothing could be further from the truth – up to this point, I have not had a single negative experience. A lot of people were neutral and respectful, but a lot of people were also very positive about the fact that people could confidently combine these two labels, even if they personally were not interested in any form of organised religion nor faith.

8 Shaw, J. (2022) *Bi: The Hidden Culture, History and Science of Bisexuality*. London: Canongate Books.

9 Cohen, R.B. (2023) *Bisexual Married Men: Stories of Relationships, Acceptance, and Authenticity*. New York: Routledge.

Being Out

In this final section I would like to talk about the phase that comes after coming out: Being out. Because before you come out for the first time, you might think that coming out is something you do once and for all. And it's true that coming out to the first person is very different from coming out to the hundredth person. But you still get to come out to new people all the time. In the beginning it was very important for me to know who knew about my orientation, and at some point I decided to let go of that control and I wrote about my orientation on several social networks so that anyone could get that information if they did a little research. LGBTQ+ should be more visible in society and as an LGBTQ+ person, I have the opportunity to make my queerness visible and even have the privilege to do so without major negative consequences.

Actually, a rainbow on a piece of clothing on an ally had a major impact in the early stages of my coming out. I was in a café with a friend, and then someone came in with a cross with the colours of the progressive flag on a hoodie. And I was like "Oh my God! Should I talk to him? Is it weird? Do I come out right away? What do I say?" My friend kept talking to me, but I was not paying any attention, because I was lost in my own thoughts. So I did talk to this guy and I told him that I was interested in the interaction of queerness and Christian faith, but that I almost didn't know anyone in my part of town who was part of a queer-welcoming church. He told me that he was part of the local ESG, we exchanged our numbers and met a couple of weeks later. That led me to many important milestones which I have described in the above. That cross with the colours of the rainbow, this clear connection between Christian faith and queerness had a significant impact. Sometimes, making a difference can be that simple.

That is why I wear rainbows a lot – rainbow socks, rainbow T-shirts, etc. For the first queer service in my local church, we printed wristbands with the progressive flag and the verse Genesis 12:2, "I will bless you, and you shall be a blessing", which I wear pretty often. My wife and I, with the help of ESG, printed T-shirts with the verse Galatians 3:28 in the colours of the rainbow, which we wear at church-related events, espe-

cially. Such items attract people's attention to a certain degree. Of course, people don't see these things and think "Oh, look, José's wearing his rainbow T-shirt again, he must be bisexual," but they do know that queerness is important to me, to us, somehow. I think they assume that I'm a strong ally, or that someone in the family is queer, or that maybe I'm queer somehow, perhaps I relate to one of these confusing labels you see around! It doesn't matter that much. In any case, the result is that queerness and LGBTQ+ become more visible, so that other queer people are a little bit more comfortable about being queer and about coming out.

Another thing I experience this being-out phase is the integration into my life of different queer activities. For example, I am part of a local bisexual group that meets for brunches and meetups; I helped to migrate the library of the Queer Centre in my city to Zotero so that people can find books and DVDs more easily; I started working at ESG on behalf of the queer community; I started a group for queer people playing the Switch video game *Just Dance!* At some point, I realized that I had become a queer activist, especially in terms of the queer-Christian community – and this book is part of that activism. To be honest, I would have preferred to have just found a queer Christian community where I live and joined in. But there was none. So I decided to try and set one up, and God gave me the opportunity to find people who would support these activities in different ways.

These things are some options that work for me in this being-out phase. Other people can find their own ways. In any case, coming out and being out can make a positive difference, for the person coming out and for other people. I am not arguing for everyone to come out, there are good reasons for not coming out. But if we are safe, coming out as a queer Christian can be a way of loving God, loving ourselves and loving others.

And bisexual people in female-male marriages have a special responsibility. As far as it is possible for us, we should use the privilege of social recognition we receive and come out as bisexual more frequently. If just a small percentage of those people came out, we would be challenging both the stereotype of female-male-marriage in general and of queerness it-

self. We would be making the world a lot safer for many other people. And that is a world we would like to live in.

This chapter reflects the author's personal experiences, recollections and interpretations. Names and identifying details have been changed or omitted where possible, and descriptions of conversations represent the author's understanding of events.

Conclusion

Bisexuality as a Source of Hope

Carol A Shepherd

Across the narratives in this book, bisexual Christians describe lives lived between genders, between countries, between denominations, between inherited doctrines and embodied truth. They speak from spaces of tension rather than resolution. Yet it is precisely here, in lives shaped by contradiction and movement, that new forms of faith, theology and belonging emerge. This conclusion draws together the major themes that surface across their accounts: faith that survives institutional harm; the Church experienced as both a wound and a home; bisexuality as a lens through which to view the world; Europe as a site of both constraint and possibility; the personal cost of truthfulness; and the emergence of a queer, embodied hope that refuses to choose between faith and identity.

A Faith that Survives

One of the most striking features of these narratives is the tenacity of faith. Many participants endure experiences that would, by any reasonable measure, justify a complete rejection of Christianity. Luis survives exorcisms intended to rid him of his sexuality, carried out not by extremists on the fringes but within the heart of his religious world. Cathy describes leaving church one Sunday in physical distress after her priest openly campaigned against gay rights from the pulpit. José grows up under what he calls a “wall of silence”, where deviation from heterosexual and evangelical norms is met with emotional exile. Victoria speaks with

devastating clarity of the lethal effects of enforced concealment: “Closets kill... they kill slowly, taking away your will to live.”

But faith persists. Not as naïve loyalty or institutional obedience, but as something deconstructed, reconstructed and chosen. Benedetta arrives at the realisation that “God never asked me to be less. The Church did”, disentangling divine love from ecclesiastical control. Christelle describes her relationship with Jesus not in terms of lordship or judgment, but affection, calling him her ‘big bro’. Daniela interprets her late-blooming bisexuality not as failure or deviation, but as vocation, a calling to “make people in my church face the reality” of queer holiness.

These stories directly challenge the assumption that queer people leave Christianity because they lack faith. Instead, they reveal that faith is often stronger, more imaginative and more ethically grounded than the institutions that harmed them. For many, belief is not inherited but constructed – sometimes reclaimed from the rubble of trauma, sometimes rebuilt from fragments of childhood devotion, sometimes discovered for the first time in adulthood.

The Church as both Wound and Shelter

A second, recurring theme is the Church’s paradoxical role as both a source of profound harm and a site of unexpected sanctuary. Participants describe institutional Christianity as coercive, hypocritical and at times violently opposed to their flourishing. Anna names the Church in Poland as “a source of oppression” and delivers one of the book’s standout critiques: “The biggest paedophile gang in Poland is actually the Catholic Church.” Kamilla leaves the Russian Orthodox Church after witnessing its alignment with war and nationalism, describing its teaching as “indoctrination”. Carol reflects on official church documents that label bisexual people “intrinsically adulterous”, while Will recalls having to assent “through gritted teeth” to doctrines that portrayed bisexuals as “immoral, adulterous beasts”.

However, alongside these accounts of exclusion sit stories of refuge and healing. Luis discovers the Metropolitan Community Church and

describes the relief of being received without qualification. Kamilla, after being arrested for anti-war activism, finds a spiritual home in the Anglican Church in Moscow. José experiences liberation in the Lutheran Church after years of evangelical silent oppression. Marilene describes the European Forum of LGBTQI+ Christians as a “warm bath of comfort” after decades of isolation.

What emerges is not a simple story of rejection or belonging, but a picture of the Church as a place of tension and contradiction, a space where harm and healing coexist. Exclusion and affirmation operate side by side. In this unstable space, bisexual Christians are often the very people doing the work of transformation – staying, leaving, returning, resisting, reimagining.

Bisexuality as Epistemology

Across these narratives, bisexuality is repeatedly described not simply as a sexual orientation, but as an epistemology, a way of perceiving and living in the world. Carol speaks of bisexuality as a “plurisexuality of mind” that enables her to bridge ideological divides. Jaime describes living “between the tick boxes” as a form of protection against the polarising logic of contemporary culture wars. Will argues that bisexuality exposes the “grey area” of human attraction and in so doing, opens up new ways of understanding God. For Oliver, learning that “neither gender nor love is that simple” becomes both a theological and existential insight.

This bisexual experience sits uneasily with Christianity’s long reliance on binaries – male and female, gay and straight, orthodox and heretical, sacred and profane. Participants describe the exhaustion of being forced into false categories. Benedetta recalls years spent “quietly drowning” in a culture that demanded certainty, only to discover that her faith and identity could coexist once she rejected the demand to choose.

In these accounts, bisexuality becomes a spiritual resource rather than a deficit. It cultivates empathy, attentiveness and the capacity to hold tension and contradiction. It encourages relational thinking over

rigid categorisation. It resists both church and secular narratives that frame bisexuality as indecisive, immature or transitional, emerging as a way of navigating complexity. In this way, bisexuality serves as a source of hope to communities struggling with nuance.

Europe as Uneven Ground

In terms of the European context, participants' lives are shaped by political climates, migration, local culture and national churches. Poland emerges as a site of acute struggle; Uschi fights for a "church of equals" while feeling perpetually like a "second-class citizen"; Anna rejects institutional Catholicism while remaining deeply shaped by its moral language. Italy appears as a place of suffocating ritual, where Benedetta feels herself "quietly drowning" until migration offers a new opportunity for self-understanding. Indeed, migration becomes both a geographical and theological journey for many of the participants, allowing them to cross not only borders but internal thresholds of faith, identity and belonging.

Russia is marked by authoritarian religion and political repression, pushing Kamilla toward Anglicanism and activism. Spain's evangelical culture enforces silence around sexuality, while Scotland offers both refuge and new pressures for participants like Luis, Anna and Carol. The Netherlands appears more progressive, yet Marilene still witnesses deep resistance when a gay pastor is appointed to a local church.

Europe, in these narratives, is neither uniformly hostile nor progressive. It is uneven ground.

The Cost of Living Truthfully

A recurring theme across the narratives is the personal cost of authenticity. For some, this cost is relational. Luis loses a long-term relationship and, for a time, his father. Jaime loses her mother's acceptance and her relationship with her eldest son. Victoria risks the stability of her family.

Daniela fears the loss of her pastoral ordination. Marilene ends a forty-year marriage in order to honour what she calls her “true feelings and desires”.

For others, the cost is psychological or spiritual. Andreas spends decades expecting divine punishment, waiting for “the big blast”. Benedetta begs God to “fix” her. Christelle describes biphobia from partners as well as churches. Cathy carries the scars of purity culture and institutional misogyny. It takes José a long time to realise the oppression he has endured.

Yet alongside loss sits liberation. Victoria speaks of “profound peace and fulfilment” after embracing her identity. Jaime describes life after the closet as a rebirth. Andreas arrives at the conviction that everything God made, including himself, is “very good”. Oliver learns to find peace not in certainty but in complexity.

Authenticity, in these stories, is not a single act of disclosure but an ongoing practice. It requires courage, community and often a reimagining of faith itself.

An Embodied Theology

Participants in this book are not merely subjects of theology; they are its practitioners. Through story, metaphor, humour and re-reading of scripture, they engage in theological work. Victoria’s reading of the Parable of the Talents leads her to “unearth” her identity rather than bury it. Christelle’s “big bro” Jesus offers an intimate, relational spirituality. Carol’s concept of “sermodity” blends satire and exegesis to expose theological absurdities. Will locates holiness in “messiness”. Daniela frames her bisexuality as integral to her pastoral calling.

This is theology done from lived experience rather than abstraction – theology shaped by love, loss, desire, parenting, activism and prayer. Far from being marginal, this work is generative, offering hope for the future for all those who do not fit neatly into binary categories.

Resistance as Faithfulness

For many participants, activism emerges not from ideology but necessity. Silence becomes impossible. Uschi returns to the Church on becoming a godmother “to make it better for this child”. Carol challenges institutional biphobia through scholarship and publishing. Kamilla protests war and is arrested. José confronts evangelical hypocrisy. Cathy pursues a successful Clergy Discipline Measure case. Resistance is not framed as rebellion against God, but obedience to a deeper moral truth. Faith and justice are inseparable. As José puts it bluntly: “If they were so wrong about basic sexuality... what authority do they have about queerness? None.”

Hope Grounded in Reality

Despite trauma and loss, these narratives are marked by hope, but not sentimental optimism, rather hope grounded in lived reality. It emerges through community, chosen family, transformed relationships and queer love. It appears in Victoria’s sense of divine mandate, in Andreas’s rediscovery of goodness, in Marilene’s support of her sons, in the ordinary joy of partnership and belonging.

Hope also emerges from the recognition that bisexuality itself is a theological gift. It disrupts binaries, expands imagination and invites the Church to adopt a more honest position on love and sexuality.

A Collective Witness

Taken together, these stories form a collective witness. They show that bisexual Christians are not anomalies, but essential voices in the ongoing evolution of European Christianity. They demonstrate that faith can survive exorcism, silence, doctrine, political repression and family rejection. They insist that their experiences are not a place of confusion, but of revelation.

As Oliver writes, “When they took that peek between my legs at birth, they thought they could see my entire future. Today, I know that neither gender nor love is that simple.” This refusal to accept imposed boundaries captures the heart of the book.

Despite the title of this book, these stories are not only about bisexuality, Christianity or Europe. They are about the universal human longing to live truthfully, to love freely and to belong fully. They testify to the sacredness of complexity – and to the God who is found there.

