



Listening for the truth in love

**Worcester Diocesan Listening Process
on Human Sexuality**



Songs of experience

***Four people tell their stories, and how their experience
has shaped their understanding.***



The faith journey of a lesbian laywoman

I am a Christian. I'm also gay, but that came later, it's my faith I want to tell you about first.

I was brought up in a middle class rural village, my parents were older parents, my mother having been 43 and my father 51 when I was born. My brothers were choristers at Durham, my father was the treasurer of the PCC. We went to church on Sundays and we came home with the collection and the curate to count the money before lunch.

I started a very everyday relationship with God at the age of four. He is in my life at every step. My sexuality, something I had always taken for granted as the default heterosexual status, was called into question when, at 17, I fell in love with a woman – she was 38, married to a violent alcoholic and had three young children.

It began as I saw the Jehovah's Witnesses visiting her on a daily basis and decided it was my duty to buy her a Good News Bible and tell her not to listen to them until she'd read a recognised version of God's word and made her own mind up. We became friends and sat up talking until the small hours about the Bible and what God would want her to do about her marriage.

Four months later she got a court injunction to keep her husband away from her, and two months after that we became lovers. Neither of us saw it coming, it just happened. My church was not supportive, but I was off to university anyway. I just found a new church and didn't tell anyone.

I was so confused at the beginning I went to find a catholic priest to talk to, hoping I would get a good telling off and find my way out of my darkness, but the priest could see that we loved each other, could see that we found comfort, love, friendship and compassion in each other and sent us on our

way with a warning to take care of each other and always treat each other with respect. So my Anglican priest made me feel unwelcome and sent me away until I gave up my sin and the Catholic priest reminded me of Christ's prime directive to love. I didn't become a Roman Catholic, but I decided there and then that the Church of England obviously didn't know Christ very well.

I am a Christian, that is the definition of who I am, and if the Church of England ceased to exist I would just worship him somewhere else. God is my judge, and I know when I have let him down. I'm far from perfect but I am certain that my Lord weeps when I utter a harsh word to one of his children but delights in the love I show to my partner.



A 30-something gay Anglican man's story

I cannot remember exactly when I first started having homosexual feelings but they certainly became stronger during adolescence when they started taking the form of fantasies and masturbation. I have always felt ashamed of them.

I was not a Christian in my teens and this shame did not come from any moral censure from the Church - it just seemed to be an intrinsic feeling associated with them. I didn't act on these feelings at the time. I read about homosexuals in the newspaper and then concluded, in my late teens, that I was one of them.

Although successful academically, I had few friends at school. At university I met up with a bunch of people who loved me and accepted me. They were Christians and during my first year I too put my faith in Jesus Christ.

The homosexual feelings did not go away. In one sense they got more intense as I suddenly started to develop crushes on various men. At this time, my father died and the sexual feelings and fantasies all became more intense, associated with feelings of depression and shame. I had to re-take a year of studies and went on antidepressants. I had some counselling and for the first time, shared with someone else about this aspect of my thought-life.

I shared too with a mature Church pastoral figure. These conversations helped me to see that the homosexual desires were temptations, and as all Christians were tempted, I was never encouraged to feel any less normal as a Christian for having them. At this time I also contacted The True Freedom Trust, and found the support and fellowship with other Christians who struggled in this way very encouraging. I felt less isolated.

There have been problems too. Meeting with other young Christian men who also have homosexual feelings, it won't be long before you find someone with whom you have a mutual attraction! I did fall in love and we went too far. The relationship had to dramatically change which was painful at the time.

However, the process was a huge learning curve for me. It was an opportunity for me to re-visit and re-affirm what I believed about Biblical teaching in this area. My confidence in and love for Jesus is stronger as a result.

After 15 years of being a Christian I can say that the traditional Church teaching against homosexual activity has not let me down. Quite the reverse. It has been the path to understanding greater the grace and love of God. It is the 'narrow road' and involves cost and pain at times, but its rewards far outweigh them all. It has enabled me to have friendships which are better for having clear boundaries. I am more confident of who I am than I have ever been before in my life. I am less fearful of anything that I will face in this life. I sleep better. I enjoy life and friendships! I am more at peace. These are the fruits of gospel teaching.

I have discovered more of how much of a deceitful sinner I really am, even as a Christian believer. But with this, I have experienced more of the truth of how much I am loved and forgiven by God.



A mother's story

I am the mother of two children, both of whom identify as gay. I have been married to their father for 35 years. Our son is 32 and 'came out' before he was 18 and our daughter is 34 but didn't 'come out' until she was nearly thirty at the millennium. They were brought up as young Anglicans, in Sunday school and in the choir, and they are now both communicant members of churches in other parts of the country, where they are accepted for who they are.

It took me some years before I stopped denying that my son was gay, or thinking it was part of his growing up, or that he was mistaken. I felt catapulted into a different world – a 'parallel universe' was how I described it. I felt ejected from 'normal,' blessed, heterosexual society and noticed that other people did not ask after him, once they became aware that he was gay. His old Sunday School teacher ignored him.

I felt to blame for his sexuality, but since having educated myself, I now know that people are created the way they are and that for neither of my children has their sexual orientation been their choice. For many years I was a committed member of the Anglican Church serving in many leadership roles. However I felt my position within the church became increasingly untenable and painful as I saw the insensitive treatment that is meted out to gay and lesbian people by others in the Anglican Church. I couldn't remain involved in parish life and dropped out of church for a while. It felt like my son was criticised for being himself! Contrary to common myths about gay people he is not promiscuous, nor a paedophile. He tells me he was not abused and did not have difficult parenting.

Our daughter arrived home just before her thirtieth birthday very tearful, with something of importance to tell us. I was alarmed—had she been sacked from her teaching job, was she pregnant, was she in trouble with the police? She said that it was about time she was honest with herself as she was nearly thirty and

the millennium was approaching. She bravely told us through her tears that she was gay. I felt great relief on this occasion as I had in fact already guessed. She had spent all her youth trying to deny her true nature. I am sad that she had to wait until she was nearly thirty because she had seen my poor reaction some ten years earlier to my son's coming out and she did not want to believe that she was also gay. By this time I had moved on in my understanding, so we were able to open a bottle of champagne to celebrate that at last she could be the person she is meant to be and to commend her bravery.

I remain a Christian, but I am a counsellor and do not wish to be associated with the homophobia, judgmentalism and ignorance I see demonstrated by the Church. I struggle with tears if I attend church services.

My children's honesty has precipitated me into researching counsellors' attitudes and perceptions of lesbian and gay people. Many lesbian and gay people value me as an accepting parent – as so many feel condemned by family and church. I thank the Lord that I have gay children and I would not now want them to be any different. I joined a local Parents' Support Group and hear many sad tales of gay children who were bullied at school and are still being bullied by their churches. Many of the gay people I am privileged to know are in committed stable relationships, which have lasted longer than many marriages, and demonstrate the love of God in their concern for each other. These relationships, now affirmed by civil ceremonies, contribute to the stability of society.

As a family we are all much closer since my children's revelations. My life is enriched by them and I have a much broader perspective – I have learnt to accept people in their diversity and never make assumptions. I am grateful for my involvement with the gay community and the insights and awareness they give me about membership of a marginalised group, of which I am one.

The experience of a partnered gay priest



Now in my late fifties, apart from six years in higher education, I have lived and worked all my life in one diocese. From before my teens I was aware that I was 'different'; by the time I turned twenty I had 'named the name' and knew that I was homosexual. In my naivety I had no idea that anyone might think my sexuality incompatible with vocation as a priest. In those gentler times I cleared all the hurdles of selection without ever facing a personal question I couldn't answer. There seemed to be trust that being satisfied about a candidate's personal integrity embraced their sexual life as well.

I have served as a priest for 33 years to date in four different parishes. Until fifteen years ago I was single but wishing I wasn't. Ironically, having turned forty, I had just begun to accept that my singleness might be permanent, when I met my partner. We have lived together at the Vicarage since 1991: some parishioners are explicitly aware, and some may be implicitly aware, of the nature of our relationship; most I believe wouldn't dream of speculating. I am convinced that not only has my life been immeasurably enriched through being shared with a partner, but also my ministry has benefited too, not least because with the occasional well-judged 'Come off it!' he has helped me stay firmly in touch with reality!

Compared with many gay priests or ordinands I am extraordinarily blessed: I have never, at home or school or church, been loaded with sexuality-specific guilt; and I have served throughout in a diocese which in its absence of extremes and appreciation of difference is a safe place in a way that many are not.

I know colleagues who live in constant denial and dysfunction because they dare not reveal their true nature for fear it cost them their jobs. I also know ordinands who have given up pushing at the door because they cannot face the choice between lying to get by or risking all by being open. The damage to

the former and the waste of the latter amounts to a crime for which I find it hard to forgive the Church.

When I recovered from cancer twenty years ago, I knew that I must not waste opportunities. I was further radicalized when Jeffrey John was forced to withdraw his nomination as Bishop of Reading, and vowed to make a contribution to change within the Church, witnessing to my conviction that God means us to be enriched not threatened by difference. As a partnered gay priest I know my possibilities of movement are limited: perhaps no other diocese would take me on. I also resent having to feel glad of a freehold I do not believe in. But because my lot has been cast in such a fair ground, my real distress is for colleagues condemned to live fearfully and furtively, and for all the good priests there will never be because they happened to love the wrong person.

The four stories in this booklet are told anonymously. However, the people who tell their stories here are known to different members of the group that has prepared this pack, and were specifically invited to make these contributions to our diocesan process.

We should make it clear that protecting their anonymity was our decision, and the promise we made them in asking them to tell their stories. We thank them for the candour of their varied contributions.

