

*I used to think I was evil for being what I am, but now I know that all people, including me, are saved by grace through faith.'*

In this story, a Christian man in Western Africa discusses his views on faith and sexuality. He is not currently part of a church, but hopes one day to qualify as a minister.

I have been called gay and bisexual, but the truth is, I have no sexual orientation. Sometimes I feel it's better just to live my life and enjoy my sexuality without telling people what and why. I like men and I like women. I am also a Christian who believes in the Lord Jesus Christ.

I'm not currently part of a church, because I was rejected by my former church when they realised I work with LGBTIQ people and speak on the issues that affect our community. I saw one of the pastors from that church in a café recently and he treated me like I didn't exist. I tried to greet him and he ignored me. None of my old friends from that church have called me to ask how I am, and, when they see me in town, they treat me like an outcast. But I love God and He loves me back. That is my joy and it keeps me going. I don't really believe in human systems such as religions; they only separate people. I believe in spirituality, not religiosity. And I encourage all persons of whatever faith to know that God has His chosen people in every religion, not just one particular one.

Coming out has been a challenge for me. I quit my training to become a pastor, because I was afraid that I would be ridiculed once people found out about my sexual orientation. Because of this, I lost my chance of educational scholarships that were promised to me based on my role at my former church. My coming out has also caused my mother to face discrimination from the church, because they say if she had taken better care of me I wouldn't have become who I am.

I am not out to everyone, but I'm not hiding from anyone either. I just live my life and I don't feel like telling everyone about who I am. I am human and that is what's most important. I struggled with faith and sexuality earlier in life, but I have been able to reconcile both and now I live happily. But sometimes, when I think of the lost opportunities at church for me and my mother, I'm saddened for making her suffer because of me.

I don't believe in cure therapy. I believe in helping LGBTIQ youth to live positive lives and to embrace who they are, instead of self-stigmatising and not taking good care of themselves. There are LGBTIQ people on the streets selling sex and falling into crime because their options in life are so limited. I wish the Church would partner with us to create safe and enabling spaces for all young people, including them.

Discussing sexuality is a no-go conversation topic where I live, but I try to use my position in society to help people connect to both their sexuality and faith. I have counselled and prayed for friends who are married and have had problems in their relationships, and I've helped LGBTIQ people who have been disowned by their families.

Struggling with Christianity and sexual orientation is common in Africa. There's a myth that 'Africa has the most obedient and morally upright Christians', and 'People in the West have no morals'. I know lots of LGBTIQ Christians who love God and want to serve Him in their own way, but who struggle with the relationship between their faith and sexuality. I always tell them 'God loves you the way you are and does not need anything from you other than your heart'. I used to think I was evil for being what I am, but now I know that all people, including me, are saved by grace through faith.

I serve a God of love, who does not hate anyone but wants all to be saved. I believe God created everything and as the Bible says, 'Behold, they were good'. We are all created in God's image, and none of His creation is bad or sub-standard. And because of this, there is no space for hate, homophobia or transphobia among God's people. The one thing that keeps me going is knowing that God loves me no matter the circumstances.

I actually have a good relationship with some members of the Christian community. My non-LGBTIQ Christian friends sometimes invite me to their church to help with Sunday school and to share the story of my faith and spirituality with their members. But generally I now only visit churches through my work, because mostly I feel I'm not welcome there.

I always tell people, 'I wouldn't have chosen to be in a minority if sexual orientation was a choice'. There's such a high level of stigma and discrimination, and there's death threats and actual physical attacks. And there's nothing to defend or improve our wellbeing and socio-economic situation. Being homosexual, bisexual or trans is for life and even though one can try to suppress it, no-one can change it. But faith can change, according to the circumstances. For me, my faith is learned and practised, but my sexuality was already part of me.

I'll continue to fight to gain acceptance and respect. I hope I will survive the torture of living in an environment where no one accepts us. I hope one day I can finally go to Bible seminary and qualify as a minister. My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus Christ.