

*It's important that people meet LGBTI people as human beings first and foremost.'*

In this story, a South American Reverend ally for equality gives her perspective. She works closely with the LGBTI community, and also leads an association which advocates for sexual health and family life services for all.

In my country in the 1960s and early 70s, being gay wasn't something people talked about much, either for or against. I had gay friends in high school and they were quite well integrated. No-one was really interested until the late 70s, and then violent opposition started to emerge. I was very conscious of this discrimination and I questioned it openly.

When I went abroad to go to university in the 1980s, it was even worse. The Dean of Studies from my campus was killed just for being suspected as gay or bisexual. We organised discussions and invited people from the LGBTI rights movement, and you know what happened? There was a big outburst and people turned up to cause violence. It was just atrocious, but it drew me in more closely and it became an area of work I had to get involved in.

I think LGBTI people have been singled out because it's about power, sex, how people see themselves, and people's perception of masculinity and femininity. When some people have a different lifestyle it causes an issue. This has to do with our whole colonial history, the missionaries and their interpretation of scripture. The colonial anti-gay laws controlled people and society, and we are still very slavish to them.

People who think gay people need to be cured have a lack of understanding. They think it's unnatural and so link it to being unhealthy, like an illness. I've worked with parents who have said that they would prefer to kill their gay child. They see them as – a word Christians love to use – an 'abomination'.

I lead an association that promotes and advocates for individuals and their families to have access to information and services to attain and maintain good sexual health and family life. A pastor on our board said all gay, lesbian and bisexual people should be sent to live on an island so they don't bring the wrath of God on the rest of us. The association sent out a strong statement in response and have met him and other pastors to discuss the principles of biblical interpretation. I mean, what did Jesus have to say about gay people? Nothing. It wasn't that important. There are many biblical laws, especially in the Old Testament; household rules and codes, but they have to be taken in context with people's understanding at a specific time and place. We all read with our own lenses and biases – it's who we are – but in terms of understanding the Bible, I don't think there's much to say that being LGBTI is against Christianity.

Some churches say it's acceptable to be gay as long as you abstain from sex. People are counselled into this, and for them to stay in the Church they have to suppress who they are and confine their lives. It's a slave mentality, adhering to faith from a place of fear. People are taught that being gay is sinful and they must turn away from it, but how can they? It's devastating and there is not enough open discussion in trying to understand people in terms of sexual diversity. We need progressive organisations and people who think differently to be leading the conversations on understanding LGBTI issues. Spiritual leaders have a great responsibility because we can really make a difference by embracing and protecting those who are cast aside and are bearing the brunt of so much pain. We can do a lot more.

People come with their own belief systems and what they understand as acceptable norms. As a reverend, in response to discrimination, I open up a discussion and I try to be patient with people. I do it in a light-hearted way; I meet people, have casual conversations, a coffee or something, or meet them in their homes. It takes perseverance to walk with people towards that kind of a change. You need to work with them to help them shift their own theological understanding. In trying to help others understand, we should avoid adversarial approaches and develop more critical, engaging processes – meeting people not only at the level of the head, but more so at the heart.

A few years ago, I organised a camp for youth from three churches and a network of young lesbian women. I brought them together just as young people; I didn't bring them in as representing any organisation or saying what their sexual orientation was, until the middle of the camp when people wanted to disclose this. And you know, it worked out well because when they first got there, they formed a group and just made friendships as human beings. So when they found out about each other's differences, it was easier to deal with. I mean, it wasn't automatically easy, but it was easier than if you meet someone and you're introduced as two people who are different. It's important that people meet LGBTI people as human beings first and foremost.

God created us all to live with dignity and be mutually accountable to each other; we all have this responsibility. John chapter 10 says: 'I have come so that you may all have life in full' – not some people, but all people.

We are all created equally, by God, in God's image, whatever our distinction or difference. That's the baseline – LGBTI people are also created in God's image and are given life to live in God's world. Working for the full inclusion of all people is our God-given responsibility.