

*For the churches we are “too gay” and for the gays we are “too churchy”. Acceptance from both religious and LGBTI communities needs to work both ways.’*

Reverend Judith Kotzé became one of the first Dutch Reformed Church female ministers in South Africa, aged 26. She is Director of Inclusive and Affirming Ministries, South Africa.

I’m one of identical twins. As early as six years old, I experienced being called to serve. Over the last couple of hundred years, we’ve always had ministers in the family. As we finished school, my twin also felt the calling.

Growing up, I didn’t know I was a lesbian. It was enough for me to be focused on my journey with the calling, because back then there were no women ministers in the Dutch Reformed Church. During my university years, the attraction did surface, but I didn’t know what to do with it. It scared me, because I thought if I was gay, I couldn’t live my calling. I prayed daily that God would give me the gift of celibacy.

I qualified as a minister in 1995. The Church had opened the door to female clergy, but few congregations were calling us to serve, so I joined a specialist ministry instead – many of us did. Around that time I also became involved with Inclusive and Affirming Ministries (IAM) and began to meet people that had integrated their sexuality with their spirituality.

In 1998, my twin sister started a relationship with a woman and came out to our family. It was hugely challenging for our parents, and seeing their reaction, I thought I could never come out myself. It was so traumatic that my sister and I agreed that the best way forward was to just keep quiet about it.

But a year later, I fell in love. Even at 30 years old, I was so naïve and overwhelmed by my, formerly celibate, sexuality being awakened. And I thought that, if you had sex with somebody, it meant you would marry that person, so I thought, ‘Ok, I’m now committed to you for life’. Within three months it blew up totally. But I felt I’d received the answer that my path didn’t have to be one of celibacy, and, as I became more involved with IAM, I became better at integrating my sexuality and spirituality. I started to make peace with how my calling was affirmed.

I met the woman who is now my partner in 2000 and we married in 2007, shortly after South Africa’s Civil Union Bill was passed. Up to a month beforehand, I didn’t know if my parents would come. But in the end they did, and it was a milestone not just for me but for them. We’d turned the corner, but it took years. In 2011 my mother died and it was such a relief that we hadn’t given up on the journey, because by the time she passed we were through on the other side. That’s the reality of how long this journey can be, even with the people who’ve known you your whole life. It took ten years, but we came through. And I’m very grateful to have a life partner.

At IAM we take so-called anti-gay texts and look at them from both the literal and the contextual interpretation. Sexual orientation isn’t something the Bible witnessed on; it wasn’t part of the context.

But by witnessing today we can translate it in line with what is inspired by God – and that is to not hurt each other, be faithful, take responsibility, treat your body and sexuality as a gift from God, and honour God through that. We were not made to be alone.

I’ve seen people forced into splitting themselves when they’ve been told they can be Christian or gay, but not both. If people stay in the closet, it breeds internalised homophobia which is very damaging. Some people go the other way; I’ve seen LGBTI Christians come out of the sexuality closet, but go into the faith closet, denying that part of them because they see religion and institutions of faith as the enemy. We can get caught between: for the churches we are ‘too gay’ and for the gays we are ‘too churchy’. Acceptance from both religious and LGBTI communities needs to work both ways.

I’ve learned to be careful when journeying with faith communities, because when you mention same-sex issues, people rally against it. It ignites so easily. I know what it is to try and work with people that don’t understand, and I’ve been hurt when people have prayed for me to be ‘healed’, or ‘in God’s name’ rejected IAM’s ministry and me. You’re up against the tradition of thousands of years.

I’ve found it’s better to talk about equality, and our experience of inequality. This journey is one slow step at a time. Worldwide, I’m really concerned about where we’re at, because rights-wise we are losing ground. Not only LGBTI people will suffer – wider human rights are being eroded. Fundamentalist Christians have connected from America to Africa and their alliances are working against us. So we’re forming alliances to counteract this and find common ground on shared family values.

Without role models to give me strength on my journey, I wouldn’t have survived. Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Thabo Makgoba, the current Archbishop of Cape Town, give me hope. When Makgoba spoke against the anti-gay laws in Nigeria and Uganda, you had a heterosexual senior Christian saying: as an ally, I stand with you. He’s an example for others.

Finding common ground is important. We stood together against HIV and made it safe to start discussing sexuality. Then, in a sensitive way, we shared the experiences of LGBTI people. You have a starting point and many can join you on that point. Even if we differ on how we interpret God and the Bible, it offers the opportunity to stand together.

I’m more compassionate now because I’ve had to learn how to be compassionate with myself, to forgive myself for all those anxieties and fears, and for what I did to myself by being so scared. I’ve learned that I can make opponents understand and be willing to engage. I’ve learned not to be so overly sensitive that I can’t even enter the presence of homophobes. As a minister, I conduct same-sex marriages and every time I’m in that privileged position of solemnising a partnership, it’s a rite of passage not only for the couple but for their whole family.