

*I was 17 when I came out to myself. It happened during a moment of prayer and, in a way, it was actually God who outed me.'*

Stephen Lingwood has been a Unitarian Christian since his teenage years and became a Minister seven years ago. He ministers in Bolton, UK, is a chaplain at the town's university, and is former Chair of the Unitarian Ministry Strategy Group.

Growing up, I struggled with both my sexuality and with my faith in coming to terms with who I really was and what I believed. My dad is a vicar and I grew up in the Church of England, but I chose the Unitarian Church when I was a student. I also identify as bisexual. So my biggest question as a young man was what to come out as to my parents first – a bisexual or a Unitarian.

My sexuality and my faith are intertwined and that's where I start from as a LGBT Christian. Looking back at the journals I wrote growing up, they're two sides of the same coin for me. They always have been. As a teenager, I knew I was bisexual, but I repressed the attraction I felt towards men. I was 17 when I came out to myself. It happened during a moment of prayer and, in a way, it was actually God who outed me. I was on a pilgrimage to the Taizé Community in France, and one evening as I prayed I felt a real connection to God. Simultaneously, a good-looking man walked past and I had an attraction to him. Usually, I'd have repressed it, but in that moment I felt that God made me face up to it and I said to myself, 'OK, am I attracted to men? Yes. Am I attracted to women? Yes. So I'm bisexual and that's it'. It was a moment of huge relief and acceptance in the presence of God. It felt like God was showing me that I needed to learn about myself in order to grow and live the life that I was being called to – without knowing exactly what that meant at that time. I couldn't have moved forward with my vocation without confronting myself and receiving that healing.

During adolescence I questioned the Church of England faith that I had been raised in, which started a journey that led to where I am now. As I explored what spirituality meant to me, I was drawn to Quakerism, but I found my path in Unitarianism, partly because of their inclusive LGBT stance. I know there are churches and people within the Church of England that are LGBT-supportive, but ultimately I don't feel that the institution itself is, and some of their decisions led me to conclude that I couldn't be part of an organisation that wasn't LGBT-affirming throughout. As much as I respect those who stay and try to reform the Church from the inside, being part of a religious community that was wholly accepting was essential for me. I think I'd have moved to the Unitarian Church even if I wasn't bisexual.

As a religious leader, I've always been out. Before I was appointed, I wrote for Unitarian magazines and people knew I was bi. But about a year into my ministry, I needed to tell my congregation explicitly and so I preached about who I am and how I identify. It was a very

positive experience, and someone who hadn't even been at the service heard about it and gave me a big hug and said, 'If you need anything, let me know'. I don't talk about myself or LGBT issues every week, because there are other issues in life, but it was important they knew this about me. And I'm thankful that I've always received the unconditional acceptance that we try to give as a religious community.

When people in the LGBT community ask what I do for a living and I say I'm a minister, they're either shocked or think that I'm joking! But I'm happy to explain where the Unitarian Church stands. We're very much at the liberal side of Christianity. We don't have a creed that you have to sign up to to be with us. We encourage each person to find the spiritual language and practice that works for them. The most important thing is to love God and love your neighbour, and we don't make it any more complicated than that. When Jesus was confronted with a choice between real compassion for a human being in front of him or sticking to religious law, he always chose real compassion for the individual, and for us the law of compassion supersedes every other law. We are about oneness with God, with the world and with each other. And we are inclusive – we were the first denomination to have women ministers, over 100 years ago, and the first to officially welcome LGBT ministers in the 1970s.

To me, God is mysterious. I don't fully know who or what God is, and I say that to God all the time, but I remain in a relationship with God and I have moments of connection in daily life. I try to take notice when these connections happen and those times when I meet God, and I'll ask myself, 'Where have I met God today?' Those moments when it feels like God is listening can be rare but they are worth holding on to. I don't always understand the relationship, but it definitely gives me deeper purpose and joy, and leads me into interesting, exciting places and a more adventurous life. It's a relationship of love and it increases my capacity for love. So I work hard at it, I listen, and I keep returning to renew my connection with God in worship, prayer, meditation and noticing.

God does not ask us to be any less than we are, to leave any parts of ourselves at the door of the church, or to hide in the closet. God is a God of truth, who wants us to be fully alive and you can't be fully alive if you're denying or lying about part of yourself. So I'd say to anyone who thinks they might be LGBT, stay in a place of prayer and find people who have walked that path as LGBT Christians, who are able to listen and connect with people and connect with God. Don't be cautious about coming to faith. Let the truth come.