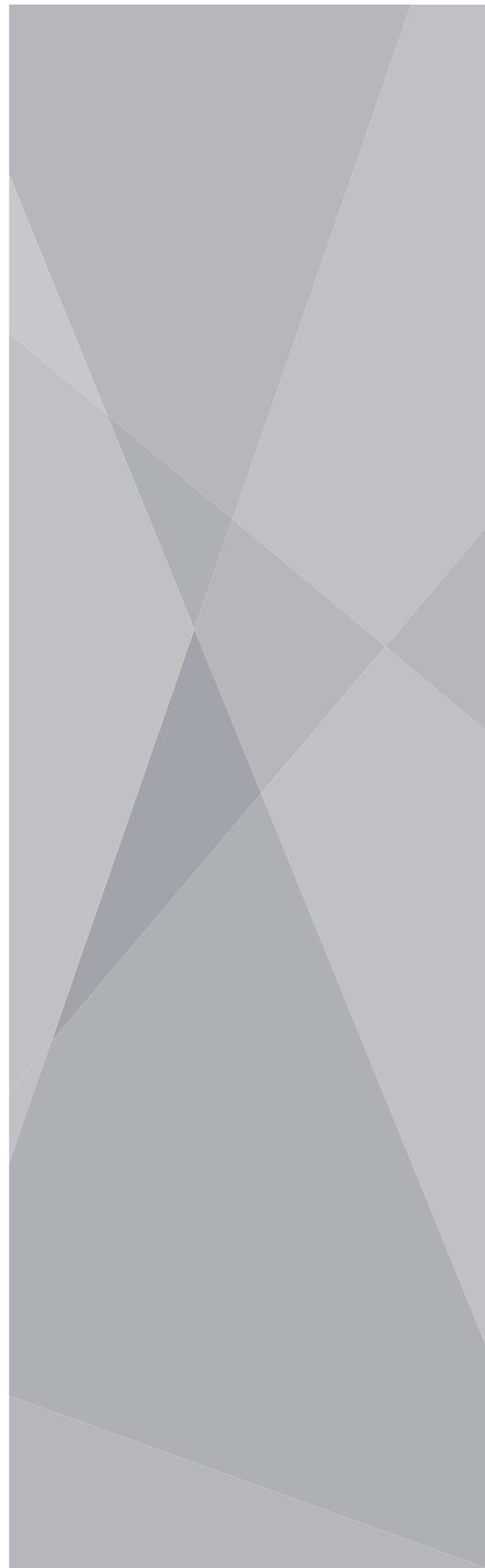


christian role models

FOR LGBT EQUALITY



If the Church became more accepting of LGBT people, it would change our world because it has great power in many countries, communities and houses.'

This story comes from a young woman in Poland. She is part of Wiara i Tecza (Faith and Rainbow), a group of LGBTQ Christians and allies, who work for awareness, tolerance and acceptance in Polish society. They welcome Christians of any denomination, those searching for faith and those with no faith, for community and dialogue.

Nowadays, I don't identify with any particular church or denomination. I just think that I'm Christian and I've found my place in the Christian community that I'm part of. It's not a church as such; it's an all-embracing, non-denominational, inclusive organisation.

As a young girl I was devoutly Catholic, but growing up I found it hard to agree with everything Catholicism taught. And I felt that if I didn't agree with something, there was no room for disagreement or debate – effectively, you excluded yourself if you gave a different opinion. This made it difficult to remain a member of a formal church, because I couldn't obey all the dogmas of the Catholic Church and be myself at the same time. But I still had my faith in God.

For about a year, I continued going to church, because I felt I wasn't a real Christian otherwise and was afraid of going to hell. But it didn't feel right and it wasn't the way for me to have a relationship with God. I decided not to identify with the Catholic Church anymore. Leaving it behind helped me from a psychological point of view and I started searching for another way of believing.

I considered converting to the Protestant Church, but choosing which kind of church to attend felt like choosing between political parties, and it didn't work for me. I felt like a guest visiting every house but not belonging to any. Instead, I found my own way of being a Christian. At the same time I was still figuring out my sexual orientation. It would be some time until I fully understood it.

I don't really tell everyone I meet that I am a lesbian, but I also don't hide myself. I represent the LGBT community publicly on behalf of the group, organising days of tolerance, debates about homophobia, and so on. My friends and family know about my sexual orientation, and about my partner, so I'm quite open about it.

Our Faith and Rainbow group meets to discuss the Bible, pray and support each other. I try to express my faith in everyday life, through how I relate to people, including through my relationship with my partner. Sometimes I'll quote the Bible and explain my faith to others and how it fits with my sexual orientation. There are many people who struggle to find a place in faith and we help them where we can. People struggle with reconciling their sexual orientation and gender identity and the Christian part of themselves, because they have been told that it's impossible. I too worried that I wouldn't be accepted by religious people, especially my religious friends. In the beginning I was afraid and presented my 'faults' to them as if I was ill or had

something wrong with me, because I couldn't accept myself at first. I wasn't just seeking their acceptance, I was seeking their compassion.

As time passed, I became more confident in my identity as both a Christian and a lesbian, and I started to think about myself in more powerful ways. I became happy with my sexual orientation, especially when I found my girlfriend. The LGBT community can be quite anti-religion, so it was very important to me that she would understand my faith. She does, and being in a partnership has empowered me and helped me re-think how I relate to religious people. I'm outwardly happier, which has a positive effect on those around me. I believe that happiness comes from God.

My straight Catholic friends prayed for me, but I told them they didn't have to worry, I was happy. They are good people and they listened. They like me and they like my partner, but they can't accept that we have sexual relationship. They can accept it only as a 'friendship', but nothing more.

Our relationship shouldn't be dismissed as just sexual, or pretend. It doesn't bother me if people have this view, because I believe God accepts me as I am, and I feel strong in myself – which empowers me to have these conversations. Maybe it's easier to have these conversations as a woman who's in a relationship with another woman than it is for a man who's in a relationship with another man, I don't know.

I've experienced discrimination within the Christian community, at Christian conferences and so on. I've been told I'm a sinner who is going to hell, and that I can't be Christian. People take statements from the Bible to make their argument, but we (the Faith and Rainbow group) reply with our own reasons for why being LGBT does not condemn us.

We received an email from a man recently, asking how can we be Christian but gay at the same time. He said he'd pray for us – but he also asked us to pray for him, because he recognised we are believers too. He said he thinks there's a place in the Church for us, but we shouldn't live as couples and should see our 'condition' as suffering. I thanked him for his prayers and said we'd pray for him too, but that we do have our place in the Church, and that we think the Bible can be understood in different ways and gave him some examples. I try to be open to everyone, because building positive relations with others, whatever their view, helps us as well as them. It can bring us together somehow, if not as believers, as human beings.

If the Church became more accepting of LGBT people, it would change our world because it has great power in many countries, communities and houses. If it communicated a message of love and peace towards people with a different sexual orientation or gender identity, it could reduce crime and violence towards LGBT people everywhere. Lots of people would have happier, easier, more peaceful lives, and there would be fewer struggles within families. My faith is deeply connected with human beings and it's important to me that Jesus is a human being. Everyone can find his or her own way, his or her identity, and find the community that's right for them. The people around me are my church.