



christian role models

FOR LGBT EQUALITY

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Reverend Sally Hitchiner leads the multi-faith Chaplaincy for a London university and founded DiverseChurch.org.uk, a support group and online safe space for young LGBT Christians.

As a university chaplain, my role is to support university students in exploring faith and spirituality. As a Christian, as I came to terms with my own sexual orientation, I realised that the group who felt most excluded from mainstream faith in my university was the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender + society. So I offered to support their work in any way I could. As it happened, they were looking for a safe space to hold their 'LGBTea and Cake' welfare drop-ins, so they started to use my chaplaincy centre.

At first they were apprehensive, but gradually they realised I was genuinely on their side. When friends who were religious came out to them, they pointed them to me. The stories of the Christian young people were tragic: often they had thought about taking their own lives, and many felt that they had to give up their faith, as they were unable to get rid of being LGBT through prayer and counselling. I'm just an average pastor, but when faced with these 19 and 20 year olds, who felt they were riddled with the worst possible sin that life and faith contained so little hope, it was difficult to pass by on the other side.

The biggest thing they needed was simply to find they weren't alone. I looked around for something to link them into, but at the time there was nothing in the UK that was specifically for LGBT Christian young adults and would support them in both parts of their identity. So I set up a confidential Facebook group and added all the young people plus other LGBT Christians and allies.

The group quickly grew and we realised we had the potential to reach out to stop the cycle of self-hatred from starting in the first place. I felt it would be empowering for the young people, whether they were out or not, to get their voices heard, so we looked into how we could create platforms to enable this to happen. Some of the group were out and we invited six of them to tell their stories as part of a short YouTube film. It was one of the scariest things I've ever done. It was the first time it had been done from the conservative wing of the church in the UK and we didn't know what the consequences would be. However, the film went viral and had 2000 hits in the first four days. And the requests to join the closed group started flooding in.

I came up with the name Diverse Church to emphasise that we're not about LGBT supremacy, but about calling the whole wider church back to its call to be truly diverse, as a reflection of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who celebrate difference within the context of loving commitment. Instead of a strict mandate of action, we formed values that would infuse all the creative things we could do. Joy and celebration felt important along with community and solidarity. If you come out in most evangelical settings, the pastor or priest will usher you in to a back room, away from others and get out a box of tissues

for when you start crying. It's often well-meant, but we didn't see a reason to hide or to associate this with sadness or suffering in itself. A senior figure in the church said that she felt like we were turning a corner in the UK, where a group like ours didn't need to define itself as outside of the mainstream church. 'Please don't let them feel like they're exiles' she said. I realised a lot of people I knew, who were sympathetic to what I was doing, were in high office in the church and I started calling in favours.

Our first national meet-up included a welcome from St Paul's Cathedral in London. Two of their Canons hosted a meeting with about 40 of the young people, listening to their stories and showing they cared. Then they officially welcomed us at Evensong and had one of the young people in Diverse Church, who had been told that he was not allowed to speak in his church after he came out, to do the reading in the service. It was life changing for so many of them. They'd felt like lepers in their churches, but here, in the most famous church in the UK, they were welcomed with open arms.

This journey is changing me too. I grew up in a conservative church, but, though I've known I'm gay since my early teens, I've never felt like God didn't love me for it. At first I thought I just hadn't met 'Mr Right', then I assumed I'd be single - the maiden aunt who threw herself into her work. Then, in my late 20s I began looking into the theology for myself and came to the unexpected conclusion that the Bible isn't against faithful gay marriage after all. The gospel took on a new light and hope. The message that God really does love everyone made so much more sense without this seemingly arbitrary extra rule for one group of the population. In the meantime, I'd been promoted to quite a senior position in the church for my age. I'd been given a lot of opportunities to talk in the media and in organising general strategy within the wider church. I was advised to continue through life without sticking my neck out: 'let other people with less to lose fight the LGBT battles'.

But then I think God himself reached out to me. I was showing the film 'Les Miserables' in the chaplaincy, and there's a scene where the lead character realises another man will be charged for the crime he committed. He comes to the conclusion that God is calling him to be honest for the sake of the other - to stop him going to live a living hell. It hit me like a sledgehammer; a second conversion. I sat at the back of the dark chaplaincy unable to hold back the tears. I had to act. For the sake of the young people I'd met, I had to live openly and in trust that God, who had helped me so far, would help me as I helped others. And God has.

I've been amazed at how much God is using our little group. We seem to be at this point of history where a 19 year old, shaking as they tell their story of God's hope for their lives, is more powerful than the confident, booming, well-rehearsed arguments of bishops and theology professors. We see young people come back to life on a daily basis, and my faith feels more alive than ever. I wouldn't trade being part of this for anything.