

*People think that all churches are the same. It's difficult to convince them that they aren't and that there are pastors who understand Christ's call for everyone to be accepted.'*

This story is from a Christian woman in South America, who has a gay son and attends a support group for other parents of LGBT children.

One night in 2012, I was having a heart-to-heart talk with my son, and he suddenly asked me: 'What would you think if I told you I liked boys?'

It didn't actually surprise me, I'd already sensed it was true. It simply confirmed what I knew, and he was glad I didn't make a big deal out of it. He was 18, and said that, if he'd known I'd understand, he'd have told me a long time ago. What I did feel, though, was concern, and I started thinking: 'So what now? Where do I go from here? Where can I find out more about this? Is there anyone who can really help me understand what homosexuality is all about?'

I became part of a support group that works alongside mothers who learn that one of their children is gay, lesbian, bisexual or trans. We meet once a month at the house of the mother of a gay man. We sit in a circle, we welcome people attending for the first time and we explain that this is a place for listening, for being heard and for learning. Some of us give our experiences about how we came to terms with the fact that we have a son or daughter who is gay, lesbian, bi or trans. Mothers attending the meeting for the very first time can share their experiences with us if they want to. It's also a space for members of the LGBT community to learn how to explain their sexual orientation to their parents. That's basically what we do.

I was taught that 'God loves the sinner but hates the sin', and that it was better to steer well clear of LGBT people, so I never imagined I would find myself working alongside them. However, I found it quite easy to accept that my son was gay, as did my second husband and younger son. I sought advice from a priest, a pastor, a psychotherapist and a cousin, who's a lesbian, and they all helped me. We've always had a good mother-son relationship, and now I know he's gay we are even closer. I cherish the fact that he felt able to confide in me, and I'm now more open to telling him about things that happened to me when I was a teenager and about my own emotional life. I've always been a warm, affectionate, loving mother, and that's never going to change. As a family, we've talked about what action we could take to support him, such as accepting his friends, taking an interest in his life, going on marches and attending meetings promoting LGBT rights.

But it's been very difficult for his father (my first husband), who thinks being gay is a mental illness requiring treatment and cure. He refuses to accept that his son is gay and is in denial. He even goes as far as threatening not to pay for his son's university education.

My husband and I are members of the family ministry in our parish. I found the idea of telling the pastor about my son quite daunting, as I was worried he might tell me that I had to leave the parish. When I eventually did tell him, he put the following questions to me: 'How does he behave at home? What's he like as a brother, a son, a grandson and a student?' When I answered, he said: 'You're his mother. You need to carry on loving and supporting him.' He said my son could come and talk to him anytime he liked, but added that it was unnecessary for me to mention it to anyone in the family ministry, which saddened me, as I wanted to share it with my brothers and sisters in faith.

After a year had gone by, I finally told two close friends of mine in the ministry, as one of them was poking fun at gay people. I assumed they would understand, but they kept their distance. If the people who knew me reacted in that way, I wondered what sort of reception I could expect from the rest of my brothers and sisters? But my faith has never wavered, and my relationship with God remains strong.

At our support group, people talk about how their churches have rejected them and, as a result, they generalise and think that all churches are the same. It's difficult to convince them that they aren't all the same and that there are pastors who understand Christ's call for everyone to be accepted.

I've been able to help other families by listening to them, sharing my experiences, and providing the information they need. There's an opportunity to help families in these situations. Some parents with gay children may initially feel ashamed, and mothers and fathers of trans children may find it difficult to comprehend that they have a daughter instead of a son, or vice versa. In the end, we appeal to them to consider that if we, their parents, don't give them love and acceptance, where will they get it from?

A number of things give me cause for hope. Societies are becoming more advanced and better informed, progressing from ignorance to knowledge, to tolerance, and eventually to acceptance, respect and, finally, recognition. Those high-profile members of the LGBT community who are active in the fields of politics, society, art, academia and sport are helping this happen. More and more pastors and religious leaders are spreading a message of acceptance, including Pope Francis himself, who said: 'Who am I to judge?'

The power of prayer, the work of the Holy Spirit and the support of organisations, such as the one I belong to, can change hearts. When people say that being a member of the LGBT community is incompatible with being a Christian, I tell them that Christianity is founded on love, whereas homophobia, lesbophobia, biphobia and transphobia are founded on hate. It's love and hate that are incompatible.