

*It is un-biblical and un-Christian for people to close the door of fellowship against anyone on the basis of their sexual orientation or gender identity.'*

This story is from the founder and senior pastor of an inclusive church in Eastern Africa. He also educates the wider community on accepting LGBTI people.

We are a small congregation of about 50 people and some of our members are lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans or intersex (LGBTI). It's a church with open doors, open minds and open hearts. We don't discriminate against anyone on the basis of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Our church's mission is to reach out to people through counselling and teaching acceptance, just as Christ did. We aim to reach out to the whole world, without discrimination.

When I was at high school and university, I saw LGBTI people who were being persecuted, and they were really suffering. Some of them were friends of mine. When I started teaching and working as a counsellor I came across more and more cases of discrimination against LGBTI people. I found out that some of them had even tried to commit suicide. So, when I started ministry and preaching, I knew these were people I needed to work with.

At theological school, I didn't learn very much about how to help LGBTI people because the curriculum was very homophobic, so I started developing my own point of view and I met with people who had experience of working in programmes for LGBTI people. Then I felt a calling – God spoke to me that I need to serve these people with a message of love, to counteract the message of criticism that they were receiving from other people. So I founded the ministry, starting from my house.

It's a fact that LGBTI people exist in every society and every culture. It is un-biblical and un-Christian for people to close the door of fellowship against anyone on the basis of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Fellowship should allow everyone communion with God, to worship God as they are, no matter who they are. The Bible is very clear that we should not judge others, and we know that Jesus would not discriminate Himself; Jesus came for all people. I've seen first-hand that excluding LGBTI people from Christianity causes them to hate the Church; it kills them spiritually and distances them from our God of love. These people need our support, inclusion and spiritual counselling. We should follow the example of Christ by reaching out to the marginalised, to the people that other people don't want to look at or hear about. And so the door of our church is open to all.

Being LGBTI does not affect your relationship with God, but reconciling faith and sexuality in society has not been easy, especially in Africa. I have seen both spiritual and physical violence. Homophobia in Africa goes back to when the missionaries came, and their interpretation of the Bible. But if you look at the Bible and go back to its early translation, you can see that even the word homosexuality is a new

invention. The Bible doesn't discuss sexual orientation. People talk about the acts of the towns of Sodom and Gomorrah in the book of Genesis, but they never talk about two people loving each other in terms of a same-sex relationship. People take the issue of sexuality and make it a bigger thing.

We've done some research and analysis, looking at what the Bible says (and doesn't say) about homosexuality, including those passages that people refer to when they try to say 'it's a sin to be gay'. We've also created some resources on LGBTI issues and faith. Our aim is to educate people and remove the ignorance around issues of sexual orientation, so it's not seen as a sin or some kind of demon that causes someone to be gay.

I have worked with families across the country to help prevent them from pushing an LGBTI son or daughter out of the family. We often start with the mothers, one-on-one, talking through issues of faith, sexuality and the nature of sexual orientation, and we give them some literature. We have counselled parents, friends, cousins and brothers too, to create understanding, reduce ignorance and educate them on the matter. And we've helped some LGBTI people to accept the way they are.

We go further and we talk to churches as well – because they are families too. We've helped religious figures to learn things they didn't know about LGBTI people. All this has helped to tone down some of the hatred, the discrimination and the isolation of LGBTI people within church and family settings in our community.

Many do not agree with us and say we are misleading people, but we have managed to have a dialogue with some people who are more open to try to understand that sexuality and faith co-exist. It has not been easy, but this has not stopped us from going forward and doing the work that God has called me and our ministry to do.

There are still some people who have a different opinion, who don't accept some individuals, and that is going to go on for a while. The future is still not clear, but the percentage of people who accept LGBTI people is going to increase slowly, through educational awareness, through reading, through exposure – and maybe through our work. Through our counselling and interactions, we are living ministries and we continue going on, trying to teach people about the love of our Lord Jesus Christ. Whether one is LGBTI or not, all of us are children of God.