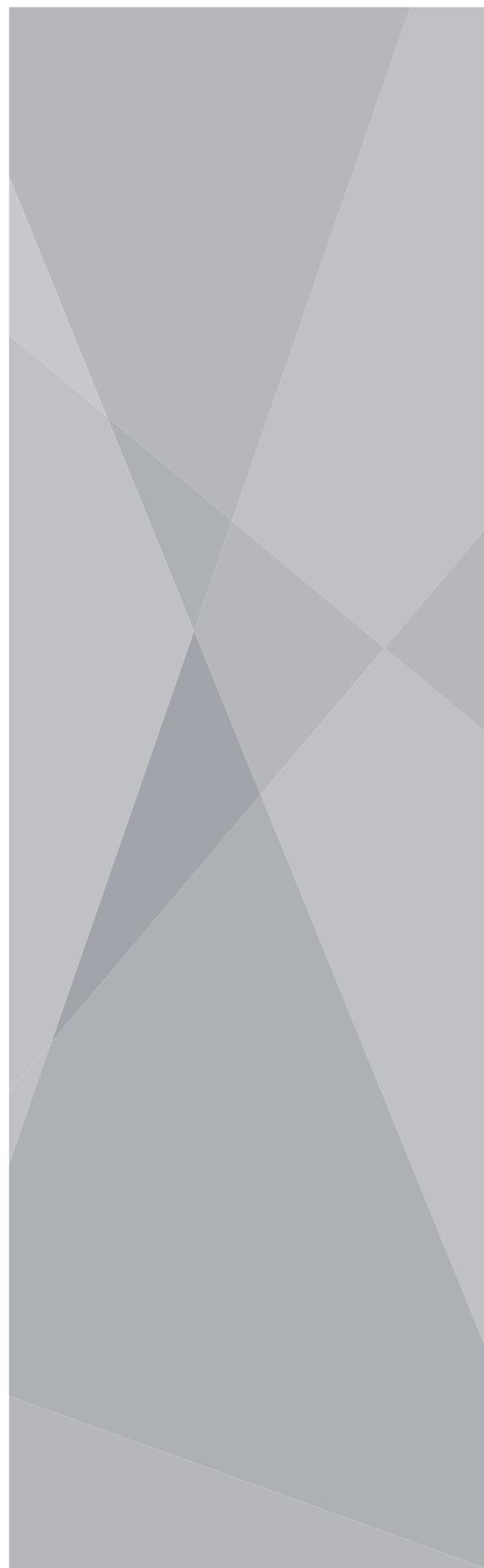


christian role models

FOR LGBT EQUALITY



‘God is against sin. That’s all. And I see no correlation between sin and being LGBT.’

Mikhail Tumasov is part of the Russian LGBT Network. This human rights organisation provides social, legal and advocacy services, and develops regional initiatives, for LGBT equality. He lives, works and worships in St Petersburg.

I was a teenager during ‘Perestroika’ (the restructuring of the former Soviet Union) in the 1980s, when Christian churches came back to Russia after a long absence. I remember being curious about God and spirituality, good and evil, and so on. My family was bi-confessional – Orthodox and Catholic – and I chose to be Catholic.

My coming out journey is a long story. I was 13 when I began to feel certain ‘inclinations’ and thought, ‘This isn’t good’. As a Catholic, I wasn’t supposed to be having sexual relations of any kind anyway, so it was fine to be single and celibate – it was expected. So I devoted my life to God and tried to ignore those feelings.

I went to theological college in Moscow to become a priest, but I quit because I couldn’t reconcile my faith with my sexual orientation. Three years later, I’d accepted myself as gay and felt strong enough to return for a second attempt. I told my priest, an old Irish father who I really looked up to, that I was gay. He just embraced me and said, ‘I’m sorry for you’, because coming out as gay meant it was then impossible to become a priest. I left again and moved south, but the problem followed me; the bishop I’d worked for in Moscow told my new priest that I was gay.

I joined the youth group at my new church. Sometimes our meetings finished late and everyone would sleep over in the church building – but the priest would tell me to go home. I wasn’t allowed to stay with other people, because I was gay. I tried to just focus on my faith, but it was awful and I attempted suicide. I thought that if I was going to hell anyway, I should just go there already. Looking back, it seems ridiculous that I thought this, but I was so isolated by what those priests had said. Church had been like my family, and to be cut from something so dear to me was devastating.

I met my first boyfriend in 2000, when I was 25. Up until this point I had been totally celibate. I went to confession and the priest (a different one this time) told me to stop seeing him, but I didn’t want to. I knew it was the beginning of the end of me being a Catholic. My boyfriend was very Catholic, but I stopped going to communion and confession, and gradually I grew further away. It’s difficult for me to say this, but these days I’m ‘formerly Catholic’. Now I just describe myself as Christian.

As recently as five years ago I was still struggling with being gay and Christian. I still thought it was genuinely impossible to be both. I was invited to a forum for LGBT Christians from Eastern Europe and I went expecting to hate it. I thought it was pointless and that they were wrong – these gay Christians saying that it was okay to be gay and Christian. I had been a Catholic and I knew better! But

on the last day, a reverend from the Metropolitan Community Church spoke about how we can understand God’s word as LGBT people, and something inside me changed. I began to question my assumption that being gay and being Christian couldn’t fit – I needed to know more, to look into the translations of the Bible, to understand the theology around the issue, and I realised I might not be right after all. The way I interpreted Christianity began to change. Nowadays, I really cannot see any sentence in the Bible against LGBT people at all. What I do see is that God is against sin. That’s all. And I see no correlation between sin and being LGBT.

My relationship with God has been a journey. We have argued a lot! I’ve always thought that God is my father and Jesus is my brother, and I might not be the best member of this family, but at least I’m part of it. And like any family, sometimes we disagree, but we talk to each other and usually we are very close. In difficult times, God is nearby, every time and everywhere. It surprises me when people say church is the only holy place; anywhere in the world is holy because it was all made by God. So you have to be the same person inside and outside of church.

I worship in a group of people from many different traditions. We have members who aren’t Christian, but it’s a safe place for them to follow other religions. And we have non-believers who just like being part of our meetings. Not everyone is LGBT; some members are straight. But everybody is welcome. We have groups in Moscow, St Petersburg and Vladivostok. We’re not organised like a typical church, because some people have had bad experiences with churches and there are negative correlations to that. I understand how they feel, but I like being part of something. I cannot be a single Christian; I cannot survive without community.

Some LGBT people are not Christians simply because they don’t believe, but many LGBT people have been told they can’t believe, because somebody from a conservative church has said, ‘You must choose between being gay or believing in God’. But you cannot choose to stop being gay. It’s like trying to choose not to have brown eyes! It’s not your choice.

As LGBT Christians we can help people see from a different viewpoint. I watched the film ‘Brokeback Mountain’ (about two men in 1960s America who fall in love) with a friend who is Muslim and straight, and he said to me: ‘You love each other as we do?’ It was only then he’d really thought about it and understood that one guy can love another guy and have the same feelings that he had for his wife. We’re still good friends; I was Best Man at his wedding.

Do not be afraid of being LGBT and Christian. I know it’s a challenge, and sometimes the LGBT community says that Christianity is guilty of many things. We need to talk together – but to talk, rather than shout. We need to listen, pray, and feel the movement of the Holy Spirit in all this. The purpose of life is to be real, not to lie to yourself. Understand what you are, and be who you are. You cannot lie to God.