

christian role models

FOR LGBT EQUALITY



'But I know God listens to me wherever I am and wherever He is. If He didn't love me or didn't like my sexuality, I wouldn't have been created.'

This is the story of a lesbian from Eastern Africa, who works with police, media, healthcare providers and religious leaders in understanding and advancing the rights of LGBT people.

I'm not 'out' out. You won't see me in the media, and, when I have to speak in public, I ask that they don't print my photograph. The reason for this is the job that I do; the moment I start discussing my sexuality, it becomes an issue and people immediately build a barrier and look at me differently. It hurts and it makes my work harder. Some people think the gay community is just a sexual thing, a community made for sex. But I look at my orientation as something that is just there. So I don't introduce myself as, 'Hi, I'm a lesbian'. Why should I say I'm a lesbian?

What stops people from coming out in Africa is fear; fear of being rejected, fear of being victimised, fear that everything will be negative. You worry that your family will reject you and that your straight friends will distance themselves from you. And there's the fear that people will take the law into their own hands.

I was born into a large family and raised in a rural town. I studied in the capital and then moved to a smaller city, where I became friends with a local gay group. I was a lesbian in a new town and I needed to find a family of sorts, people I felt comfortable with. They gathered every week to support each other against the violations they faced on the streets. They spoke of arrest, imprisonment, rape and police brutality. I would hear their stories and ask why they were taking this abuse so lightly. Their response was: 'We are used to it'. The then chairperson of the group invited me to join the organisation and help to build it into an advocacy group.

I work with the police, media, healthcare providers and religious leaders in understanding and advancing the human rights of LGBT people. When I first meet them, I don't tell them my sexual orientation - I just focus on establishing a relationship. They get to know me as 'the person who's supporting the process', not as 'the lesbian' or whatever label they may put on me. In doing so, they feel more comfortable to be challenged on their opinions and behaviour. Once we have established a foundation, I can disclose my sexual orientation more safely. People have told me that, if they knew I was gay, they wouldn't have met with me in the first place, but the fact they get to know me as an individual helps them realise that stereotyping LGBT people is wrong. It changes their perspective and we're able to work together.

Some gay male colleagues and I recently worked with a group of religious leaders, looking at the harm that their words and actions had caused for minority groups. For example, gay men had been attacked at a clinic after some religious leaders had led a demonstration to

drive LGBT people out of the city. We started a conversation with them to look back at the suffering that had occurred, and helped them see that if they make speeches against marginalised people, including LGBT people, people act on it and it can actually lead to someone getting killed. We asked them how that felt, and we talked about the role that religious leaders could take in preventing discrimination. We let them move at their own pace and reach their own conclusions.

Once we felt we'd built a working relationship with them, we decided to come out. It was a make or break session. We started by calling in a doctor who is gay, then a lawyer who is gay, and other professionals who happen to be gay, because to them gay people were just those they saw on the streets, 'selling sex' or whatever the media had portrayed. We wanted them to see that LGBT people exist in all walks of life. We invited them to ask us questions, and our discussion went on for four hours. We spoke of human rights for everybody - we didn't say, 'We're gay and we want gay rights for us'. There was a security strategy in place in case things exploded and we needed to get away, but thank God, it went so well they asked if we would teach others about these things, because before this they'd had the wrong idea about LGBT people. We trained six of those religious leaders on how to train others in LGBT acceptance. I've observed them doing their own training and I've been so impressed.

Even so, church is not the place for me. I'm a Christian, but I haven't been to church for years. When I saw Christians calling for folk like me to be arrested, I gave up. I felt that church was taken away from me by these people. I read the Bible daily and I listen to pastors online, but I can't pretend to sit in a church if the preacher is homophobic or if the congregation doesn't accept me. But I know God listens to me wherever I am and wherever He is. If He didn't love me or didn't like my sexuality, I wouldn't have been created. I don't think anyone should decide for me or decide for God whether I should live or die, because God has seen that I should be alive and be here. So I believe that God loves me the way I am, and that I can pray anywhere. That's how I've been able to continue and grow in my spirituality as a Christian.

When I look at the Bible I see a lot of love, more so than the killing and the stoning. I look at how the Bible guides me to be a better person in a society where there are a lot of bad things going on. I don't use my Bible to find reasons why I should hate my neighbour; I use the Bible for direction to help me forgive, talk to those I'm forgiving, and move on. If I didn't, I think I would have so many enemies. I'm happy and the Bible allows me to be happy.