



Buried Sexuality

The experience of lesbian, gay and bisexual young people in the Church of Scotland

Steve Mallon
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Imagine what it must have been like to be a young adult in the Church of Scotland, who is lesbian, gay or bisexual and for them to have witnessed the debate we had on Section 28, or Clause 2a, in Scotland a few years ago? Imagine what it must be like now for those same young people as they see the Church of Scotland continue to debate the "issue" of homosexuality in the context of a theological ping pong match with one side trying to drown out the other?

As someone who has worked with some of those young people for the last few years, perhaps I can claim to have more of an idea than most about how these debates have affected them.

If you are 18 years old, or just a bit older, then you are pretty much in a minority in the Church. If you are 18 years old and you happen to be a young gay man then you slide into an even smaller grouping, and perhaps it's a miracle you are involved in the Church at all.

Most young people who struggle with homosexuality and who have some kind of Christian faith find it difficult to integrate the two. This is because the Church and its teachings has never made such integration possible. The Church has not been willing to offer an integration of faith and sexuality to its lesbian, gay and bisexual (lgb) members and the consequences have been very difficult for some young people.

Many of the young people I've worked with over the years have felt the need to choose between their faith and their sexuality. While this may appear like a simple choice to make, the reality is that the two are inextricably linked. It is simply not possible to choose to ignore one without damaging the other and to suggest otherwise is cruel. Some of the young people I've worked with have chosen simply to pursue a relationship with God outside of the boundaries of the church. Do we care about that? The alternative, as they would see it, is that they have to bury a large part of who they are and why would anyone want to do that?

It's important to realise that this doesn't just affect the young people but also their families. In Tigert and Brown's book, *Coming out Young and Faithful* (2001), they quote the mother of a young gay man who says, "If we had rejected our son, we would have been accepted in our church."

Surely it's not right that we set conditions on lgb young people and their families that say they can be involved in the church only if they are to conform to an image of our making? What is that image anyway and who decided that it was the right one?

Marilyn McCord Adams (2006) points out that "lifelong heterosexual marriage is now the privileged norm" but that it comes with a very high price, paid for by those who cannot achieve it. At the moment there are many in the churches in the UK who continue to pin their hopes on the model of "Christian Marriage" and thereby offer little of use to those who are single, widowed or divorced. It has especially little of use to say to those who find themselves to be homosexual and lgb young people suffer most acutely as a result.

Suffering in silence

If you are an lgb young person in Scotland it is unlikely that you will get any positive or relevant sex education at school. When you are learning about sex education with your peers you will learn all about heterosexual sex, childbirth etc. While this isn't entirely pointless, there seems to be no room in the curriculum for lgb young people to get information of specific use to them and so they have to endure sex education as a meaningless chore rather than an empowering resource.

The down-side of this is that lgb young people may choose to pursue more risky alternatives when they want to find out about sex. Society has a responsibility to all of its citizens to provide appropriate care in this area and so far we are failing our young people. The Church also has a responsibility to nurture the sexuality of young lgb people, to help them understand themselves as sexual beings and to give them the tools to make good choices for themselves and others.

Nurturing lgb young people

The first thing we have to do if we want to nurture lgb young people in the church is to begin to acknowledge that they are there and to start talking about homosexuality in a more balanced, if not positive way. It seems to me that Jesus offers us all an unconditional welcome and that anyone who wants to attach

conditions is not only going further than is biblically permissible but is also putting their own salvation in jeopardy, "It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea, than that he would cause one of these little ones to stumble." (Luke 17:2, NASB).

Even if we don't agree that homosexuality and homosexual practices can be reconciled to the Christian way of living, whatever that is, then I am sure that we can still be generous to those who find themselves to be homosexual and not put any further difficulties onto their path.

In the research I did which formed the basis for my book, *Sexuality and Salvation* (2004), some key issues emerged.

First of all most of the lgb young people I spoke to had had difficult experiences in local churches when they had chosen to be open about their homosexuality or when someone had "found out" about them. One young man told me a story of a time at a bible study group he had been attending for many months as a new Christian. On this particular occasion one of the women in the group, someone with particularly strong views, announced that she could not take communion if the young man was allowed to participate. She would not share the bread and wine with him because he was gay.

When the young man in question - just 16 years old at the time - looked for support from his Minister, none was forthcoming.

This illustrates the second key issue which is that while many members of our clergy are personally supportive of lgb people, they often do so with one eye on their congregations for fear of what might happen if this becomes common knowledge.

The third key issue was that in a survey of clergy, youth workers and young people themselves, the vast majority of respondents - albeit in a small-scale study - suggested that their local churches would not be "safe" places for "out" lgb young people to be involved in.

A bruised reed

Marigold Rogers (1994:40) quotes a young lesbian she interviewed who talked about the only time that homosexuality was mentioned while she was at school: "'...and there is a theory that homosexuality,' and I perked up and listened, 'has something to do with the imbalance of hormones.' Then she moved on and I thought, 'Wow! I've been mentioned.'"

Epstein, O'Flynn and Telford (2003, p. 143) comment on this quote by pointing out the obvious that in spite of the fact that the young woman's sexuality is being discussed in a negative way, she is delighted that it is being discussed at all and that her "existence is being acknowledged".

There is something quite perverse about this situation but I can understand it. It shows us that we need to do better. Lgb young people in our congregations - whether we know they are there or not - need to feel welcome, need to be able to get as involved as they want to be and must not feel that any impediments are being put in their way.

If the only time they hear about their sexuality is in the negative then while they may feel some sense of affirmation at a base level, it cannot do their self-esteem and growth much good.

In Isaiah 42 we find the words, "A bruised reed he will not break, and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out." Lgb young people who have a Christian faith have this promise from God. It is time that the Church made the same promise. In the meantime, it is for those of us with open minds and warm hearts to encourage, challenge and irritate those who would rather see reeds broken and wicks snuffed out, to look at this situation differently, to admit that they, like us, may not have the whole truth and to commit to journeying with the rest of us who struggle with the enormity and beauty of sexuality.

Steve Mallon is the author of *Sexuality and Salvation*.

Sexuality and Salvation

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