



The Personal Repercussions of being Lesbian in the Church of Scotland

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I was born into the Church of Scotland and baptised before I was 2 months old. My parents and grandparents were all members of the Kirk. Mum and Dad sang in the choir (and still do); my brother and I sat with my grandparents in the congregation until we were old enough for Sunday School. I loved the church - it was my family. Nearly all my friends went to church. I joined the Girls' Guildry (giving away my age here!) which became the Girls' Brigade and stayed in that organisation until I was 17. I only left when I moved through to the east to study at university.

My years in the church were not all idyllic. I found some of the teaching very challenging and would question the minister because I thought he knew more than he was telling! My God is a God of love - unconditional love - and I have known this from the beginning. But I'd been taught that the only physical expression of our human love was within marriage, one man and one woman. I was not very interested in boys so I never felt tempted.

But when I went to university the world opened up to me and I realised that I was different. I still wasn't interested in boys but I was having huge crushes on women. I'm sure crushes, by their very nature, are often painful but I was in agony. I was "one of them". At school we used to say that. If any of us girls showed any affection towards another girl someone would say, "Oh, you're not one of THEM, are you?" and we'd all laugh loudly.

I was one of them, I was sure of it. But I didn't know what to do about it. I couldn't be gay and Christian so what did I want most? To stay in that loving supportive family of God's

¹ As with the other personal story told on the OneKirk website, this story is not just the author's story, but also a story affecting other family members, and so the author would like to remain anonymous.

people or to cast myself adrift into the unknown? There was no contest. It was too scary. I just had to try to ignore these feelings for other women and find myself a nice Christian boyfriend.

But that didn't do it for me. I went to church less and less because I didn't feel able to be a part of the church family while I had these powerful feelings. I wasn't doing anything about them but I was ashamed of them. I was in the wrong - I couldn't understand how it had happened but it had.

I couldn't ignore my feelings for ever. Eventually, after a few false starts, I fell in love with a woman and we decided to live together. My parents were very welcoming of my "new flatmate" and assumed she was just that. We made the pretence of having separate bedrooms and, when my parents came to stay over they always thanked my "flatmate" for giving up her room for them.

After five years our relationship ended and I was deeply saddened at the loss of my first true love. I found it hard to be around my parents as they knew something was wrong but I couldn't bring myself to tell them about the nature of my distress - I couldn't risk being rejected by them.

I began to feel a deep longing for something, aware of a hole in my life. I was restless, uneasy, I needed something. I took a while to work out what I needed. I needed to worship God again with a worshipping community. God had remained in my life and I had relied on strength from God during my searching and struggling. But I needed more. I went to church one Sunday, somewhere where I thought I could be anonymous. I didn't want dragged back in again against my will! The only church tradition I knew was the Church of Scotland. The service was very traditional, church organ, CH3, no surprises - except the sermon. The elderly minister seemed to be expounding the virtues of independence for Scotland! And yet, despite all this I was touched to feel God's presence around me and within me: I was moved to tears. I wanted to come back.

I visited my local church and liked what I heard. The minister wasn't much older than me and he spoke normally! ("What's that about?", you might ask.) He didn't speak in sonorous tones or use antiquated language in his prayers, no "Thees" or "Thous", not even a "dost". How refreshing! I attended preparation classes for membership and had some lively debates within the group wishing to join the church. I met the minister's family and really liked them and felt I'd found my church home.

Soon after I joined I started to hear the minister preach against homosexuality. This was around the time of the public debate on the repeal of Section 28 (or Clause 2a in Scotland). At first I felt uncomfortable, then victimised, then excluded. But church was too important for me to walk away from it.

The Alpha course reached Scotland and I signed up for it. Surely I would find acceptance here. I went to a few sessions at my home church but they didn't run it like an Alpha course. There was no meal together and very little debate. We watched the video, had a cup of tea and went home - empty.

The following year my boss was running an Alpha course in her church and she asked me to come along. I participated in the first course, played in the Praise band on the second, led a group on the third and was part of the team for a few more. I enjoyed each course but the people running the course always seemed to shy away from the Holy Spirit element of this course - and this was what I longed for.

I went with my Alpha friends to a meeting in Fife which was being led by a group from the Toronto airport church. The praise and worship was amazing but I was still uneasy about being amongst Christians who didn't know that I was lesbian. The leaders invited people to stand in the middle of the room to be prayed over. I'd seen this on telly and was NOT for being knocked over by some mass hysteria or whatever! I stood at the side making it obvious that I didn't want to be part of this.

Suddenly the room was pitch black and I was terrified, not of the darkness but of the closeness of God. For one instant I thought I was going to be "struck down" as a sinner. (I don't normally use this language of judgement and punishment.) But I wasn't struck down - I was bathed in love, such a powerful experience that my eyes fill up and I get a lump in my throat even writing about it! I was bathed in God's love and I knew for certain that God loved me.

I became aware that I was crying, quite loudly. I hate to cry in public but I couldn't stop, tears of joy running down my face, bubbling up as powerful sobs. I tried to open my eyes but it was almost like I didn't want to leave that place and "come back" into the room. Then I was aware of someone holding my hand. I opened my eyes to see my friend smiling broadly at me.

You cannot hide from God because God wants to know you, to know all of you. I knew then I didn't want to try to hide any of me from God. I started reading books by gay Christians and by straight but gay-affirming Christians. If anyone is reading my story and thinking about exploring for themselves, a book I found most helpful was *Homosexuality and Christian Faith* edited by Walter Wink.

I spoke to one of the elders in my home church who was also part of the Alpha group. She sympathised with my struggle but discouraged me from speaking to the minister. "He's hurt you enough already from the pulpit. I don't think you'll change his mind." She wanted me to stay in the church but to stay quiet about my sexuality. She said she believed that God loved the sinner but hated the sin! Ouch!

I found the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) on the internet. They met in Edinburgh in the Quaker Meeting House. I thought about it and prayed about it and eventually plucked up the courage to go to a service. The strap line for the Church is "Living Christ's gospel of love and liberation for all." I was greeted at the door by two people who looked genuinely pleased to see me. That night there were 6 people in the congregation and I was the only woman. And every time I heard the word "you" I smiled. "You" included me! Before in the Church of Scotland I may have believed for a while that I was included but I never heard inclusion for gay people preached from a Church of Scotland pulpit. At best I was a poor misguided sinner, someone to be pitied or put back on the right track.

It was at MCC that I met my new partner. I fell in love suddenly and deeply and I knew this was the real thing. I was happier than I'd been in years! I wanted to share my happiness with my parents - but I'd never told them I was gay. At 45 years of age I decided to come out to my parents. (My brother is gay too and we'd come out to each other about 20 years ago.) I prayed with my partner and with my MCC pastor. I was scared my parents would reject me. Dad was still an elder in the Kirk and both Mum and Dad were active in church activities.

I came out to them on Easter Monday. Dad cried and hugged me and said he was relieved I'd told him at last. He'd worked it out for himself years ago. "Now we can be real with each other." But Mum wasn't so accepting - she was embarrassed, ashamed of me. She went to bed and cried. I tried to comfort her but I realised I couldn't change anything for

her. She had been taught that homosexuality was wrong, I was in the wrong. What could she do? She cried at God's judgement on her. "What did I do wrong that I had two gay children?" "What's wrong with me that this is all I could produce?" These questions really hurt me but I knew that she was struggling with two "truths" that didn't match. The Bible says...

My partner and I had our relationship blessed by our pastor in a ceremony in MCC. I invited my parents to attend. They said they'd think about it and I was hopeful they'd come. But a few days later my mother phoned me up and said they wouldn't be coming. "It goes against everything we've been taught. It's wrong." I cried and cried. I haven't cried like that since I was a wee girl.

The ceremony was wonderful, 95 friends and family helped us celebrate. But Mum and Dad weren't there and I missed them.

We've struggled to stay in relationship with them and that struggle is paying off. My parents are faced with the truth that our relationship is as valid to us as theirs is to them. In June we celebrated our Civil Partnership. I asked Dad if he and Mum would come but he said he didn't want to upset Mum so didn't ask her. My brother was one of our witnesses and lots of friends and family celebrated with us.

I believe that religious homophobic teachings kept my parents away from my "wedding." And yet God is love. God accepts me as I try to live a life of integrity. I believe the gay Christian community are today's scapegoats. Christians through the ages have used the Bible to justify slavery, to justify the subjugation of women in the church and to exclude openly gay Christians from their fellowship. Slavery would be abhorrent to most (all) Christians today. Women are allowed to speak in church, even allowed to be Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland! And I believe that, in years to come, Christians will look back on this struggle for acceptance by gay Christians and wonder what all that was about.