

The Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee

Video testimony – experience of conversion practices – viewed by Committee Members in private

23 November 2021

Participant: G

G confirmed consent and was invited to outline what their experience was and how it happened and by whom and in what setting.

G was brought up in a traditional middle-class family setting where parents went to church. G went to Sunday school and started helping out at the age of 13-14. That led to G becoming a member of the youth group.

The church ran a summer holiday club, run in conjunction with Scripture Union Scotland and a local evangelical church. G was invited to help out at the summer holiday club. Had a great time and made lots of new friends. But the thing that really impacted G was the people and their Christian belief and faith.

Approx 3 or 4 years later G became part of an evangelical church and by the time G was at university had a very firm Christian faith. But at the same time, he had a parallel going on.

He realised he was gay when he was 13. He had to get his head round this extra thing. It was an isolating and lonely experience. G did not come out at high school or uni, so had this “gay secret”.

The teaching at the church was very clear that being gay was sinful and wrong. “I put the gay thing to one side and thought my faith is important and this is how I want to live my life.”

Worked with Scripture Union Scotland during his year out. They brought in a gentleman from the True Freedom Trust. They spent the whole day telling us that being gay was sinful and not what God intended for us, and as a Christian it's important to live how God wants you to.

G felt ashamed and a bit of a fraud. “It made me feel wrong. I was evil in some way, or letting evil into my life”. He picked up lots of leaflets and literature. The impact of that day was significant.

It was feeding on those feeling of shame, as an impressionable and vulnerable young person. Went to a church in Glasgow, which had very lengthy prayer meetings, laying on of hands etc.

At one meeting a gentleman said he had a word from God and said to G "I believe you're living under the lie of homosexuality". At the time it was embarrassing as G was outed without being able to say it himself. But there was 'hope' that he could be different and change. It's easy to go along with what people say.

Conflict between faith and sexuality became intense. Contacted True Freedom Trust who put him in contact with an organisation that conducted conversion counselling sessions. It felt like an easy road to go down. It all seems reasonable and respectable. Counselling went on for years, moving from different places and locations. As G was trying to suppress his gay feelings he found they would arise elsewhere and he realised he needed to embrace it. Having to lead a celibate life was beginning to tear him apart.

Talking therapy was very subtle to begin with, but over time became quite explicit about changing sexuality. Part of G was quite excited about the possibility of change, but then realised nothing was changing. It was difficult to address issues of sexuality and his core identity. Eventually a gentleman suggested there was a lady G would be compatible with. G 'went along with it' for a short period of time. Went on first date and felt sick to the pit of his stomach. "This isn't me. I'm not enjoying this". He realised he was not attracted to any women at work and then beat himself up about that.

G ended the 'relationship'.

He was heavily involved in court ministry, internationally. But he told the lead pastor that he wanted to leave the ministry. The pastor said that was the right decision. In other words, if G hadn't gone, the pastor would have pushed him out.

The process is slow and incremental but is essentially like saying to a straight person that you're going to counsel and support them to become gay.

He lost his ministry, friends, social structure. Everything disappeared overnight.

G became quite severely depressed. Went from being sociable and busy to shutting himself away. His job gave him routine and structure, but interacting with people was exhausting. The main impact though was physical. He went from being very fit to experiencing stress reactions. A result of the realisation of having suppressed his feelings and denied who he was for so many years. He was suffering mentally, emotionally, socially and physically. Went from being happy to being a bit of a wreck.

That is why conversion practice is so dangerous, because it can totally strip away all the good bits of you and leave you desolate and completely isolated. When G got to his darkest place he went to the Forth bridge twice and looked over the edge. All hope had been extinguished.

Then G realised he had to re-evaluate everything about his life and start from scratch to heal the damage that had been done to him through the conversion practice. There was a lot of anger, frustration and hurt built up. He wanted to take responsibility to change. Slowly, over a number of years, he started finding a philosophy for life. It's about looking at living life in the modern world.

It took a good ten years for G to recover from the conversion practices. But he met his husband and got married, which is the single best thing to have happened to him. Going from being so alone to slowly building his life back and not being ashamed of who he is at his core, G feels really privileged to live in Scotland as it has shown itself to be progressive.

“We’re normal people, same as everybody else. We all have that in common. Some are gay. Some are straight. Some have blue eyes. Some have brown eyes.”

As much as I’ve gone through this hellish journey, I feel lucky where my life is and where we are as a country. The danger is, people aren’t aware that conversion practice happens in Scotland. We have to make people know. The church gets hung up on sexuality in general, but it’s only one small part of us as human beings. “I don’t think there’s a theological basis for that”. G just wants people to be more educated about it. This is a real thing still happening to real people in this country. The government needs to end this practice, because people need protected, It’s not acceptable for people’s core identity to be challenged.

Steve Chalk, president of oasis trust, said “a right to exercise religious freedom never includes the right to discriminate against others based on our religion. So if our religion requires us to stigmatise, ostracise or exclude others based on their sexuality or gender expression, it’s time to rethink our religion”.

A fundamental human right to be yourself is above everything else.