

The Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee

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

23 November 2021

Conducted in interview format, facilitated through the Equality Network

Participant: L

Facilitator: B

L confirmed consent to the interview and for it to be sent to the Committee.

B: Tell us about your experiences of conversion practices. Only share what you feel comfortable sharing. You might want to include where it took place; what type of setting; who did it; when it happened, and over what period of time.

L: It's happened to me a few times in a few different places. The first time was when I was a student at college in south Wales. It was people from the Christian Union (CU), that I had been quite involved in but less involved in the final year as I was a bit disillusioned with it.

I'd been struggling with my mental health and trying to come out as lesbian at the time. Two people from the CU came to my room and basically prayed over me to stop me coming out and, in their sort of language, they were casting out demons and other sort of things like this. I have few actual memories of that part of it. I think I've disassociated, as it was so distressing.

After that, I had a real sense that this wasn't ok in my Christian community, and God didn't think it was alright, so I didn't come out.

Later that year I went to Spring Harvest, a big Christian conference with lots of charismatic worship. I had a similar experience there. I was once again trying to come out. But after that I just felt worse; more and more detached from God, more and more in the wrong and that it was something I shouldn't talk about. I should actively try and change.

This just comes back to me. I had applied to do a year's youth ministry work. I went to the selection weekend. Because I'd been open in my application about my sexuality, they still accepted me for the weekend, but their feedback was no because I had an "unteachable spirit", whatever that meant. But, you know, it meant I wasn't suitable and they had made a severe judgement of me. That was very painful indeed, as I'd really hoped to do that.

After I finished Uni I moved to Bristol and lived with a family who had been involved in the youth group that I was involved with before I went to Uni. Stayed with them about four months. It had all sort of gone under the radar – I hadn't really let myself think about it anymore. I just had this feeling that it was wrong and I had to somehow not give in to it. My mental health was pretty poor because of that.

Then I moved to another flat with people from the church I had started going to, which was pretty negative on being gay. Well, very negative. They didn't have to say that; it was just...obvious? I never heard a sermon being preached, but I just 'knew' it wasn't alright.

In 1989 it was all bubbling under for a while. I just got to the stage where I knew I had to come out. I told the pastor I was going to "live a homosexual lifestyle" – hadn't got a clue really – and he was horrified and said I mustn't take communion or discuss it with people, you know. At the time I volunteered at the church office and was quite involved with playing my guitar in worship. So it was my whole community. All the friends I had were all connected with the church. It suddenly felt like that was cut off. I went to the church office to give in my key. One of the staff "how could you do this, this terrible thing?" I was like, "well, I didn't do it on purpose".

A few days later I had a fairly major suicide attempt, where I think I nearly died. After I'd taken tablets and drunk quite a lot of alcohol. I phoned this youth leader who went to a different church. She came over and took me to hospital. But, you know, it was a pretty dark and horrible time and I suddenly just felt all alone and it was overwhelming.

So I did come out around that time. But I found it hard to get to know people. I shared my experience with other gay people, but they were very anti-church so didn't really understand the magnitude of it.

So that was my experience of CP around my sexuality. Later, in 1992, I'd been in a psychiatric hospital and ended up going to a day hospital for a couple of years. There, I did sort of therapy around my gender identity. I hadn't articulated that I was trans, but with my key worker I tried to come to terms with being a woman and getting more in touch with that. It was sort of unspoken that maybe my gender was not as it should be. That had a big effect on me. It meant I didn't come to a realisation of my gender identity for a good few years after that. I had this ongoing struggle around what I was supposed to be like and how I actually felt inside. I was really conflicted about that. That made me feel really low and I struggled with my mental health. I mean, I've struggled with my mental health for various reasons my whole life, but this has all contributed to it quite significantly.

Since I came out as trans I've had some good experiences of church. I got involved with Metropolitan Community Church. There I heard, actually it was ok to be gay, God was almost pleased you were gay you know? You know, it was like, this is a gift from God, and to be celebrated. That began to heal some of the wounds I had experienced previously.

B: Did you have any support? What support would you have liked?

L: I didn't really have any support, because that church was my support but there was so much of myself I had to keep hidden that it wasn't supportive. That's what led to the suicide attempt – I just felt alone and there was nowhere for me to belong. I couldn't live in the flat I was in with other members of the church. That was just really destabilising at a time when I was trying to figure out who I was. Yeah, I just didn't have any support.

B: What kind of support do you think could have helped?

L: I think somebody to talk to about it. And somebody who wasn't going to judge me. Someone who was going to say that it was ok, that I could be Christian and gay; that they weren't incompatible; that it wasn't some sort of moral failing.

I began to get that when I found MCC. That provided some of what I needed.

B: What would you like to see happen now?

L: I think evangelical churches need to shift their treatment of people who are LGBTQ+. But that would involve a whole shift in theology and I can't see them doing that. There's something about how people get treated and how damaging that is. The level of suicide is high in the community anyway, but that part of it – people who are leaving faith communities, it's even worse because of this thing of having belonged somewhere and felt connected to God, but then that's taken away from you in a very painful way. If there was legislation stopping conversion practices – I'm not sure how you would monitor it, because it's all very hidden. You know, in the UK there's less of that sending you away to get "de-gayed". It's more at an individual level. Some sort of intervention from a leader of a church and being prayed over. The whole notion of having demons cast out of you is quite common, which is pretty awful.

So something that would stop that happening. I'm not sure how you would construct that without having a huge shift in theology. For young people, Christian role models who are gay can be really important, because then they would see you can come out and still be connected to the church. You just need to find a church that's going to affirm who you are, rather than one who's going to tell you all the time you're wrong.

There needs to be a lot more education about what makes people LGBTQ+. It's not a choice. It's part of your make-up. If those churches began to realise that, they might behave differently.

B: And what do you think in terms of legislation

L: Gosh. Something to stop those practices. You can't stop those churches believing that, but if they just left people – not leave them alone exactly, because people need support. But I just can't see them doing that. It's going to be tricky. There's no point passing a law you can't enforce. But equally all this conversion stuff is wrong. It does a great deal of harm. It leaves people feeling, just 'less than'.

So legislation has to be carefully drawn up, that is going to grasp the subtleties of all of that. Not sure what it would look like, to be honest with you.

B: What other measures do you think could be put in place?

L: Mental health services need to be more aware. I don't know that they're very good at helping people come out. Not so much in Scotland, but when I was trying to come out, it just wasn't part of the picture.

There need to be more churches that are affirming and promote more widely so people know there's somewhere they can go. You know, it's so fundamental to people who have a faith, that the feeling that the connection with God has been broken is really terrible.

Some kind of counselling and support that is going to affirm people in their identity.