

# **The Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee**

## **End Conversion Therapy/Practices Virtual Engagement Session in private with the Committee and Individuals with lived experiences**

**26 October 2021**

### **Committee Members - Joe FitzPatrick and Alexander Stewart**

The participant told us she has also provided a written submission.

The participant grew up in the Evangelical church. She knew early on, at around 8 or 9 years old, that she was gay and also knew that this was seen as unacceptable and problematic. From a young age she was praying that God would change her. The words “abhorrent” and “abomination” were often used. When she was 10 she looked up the word “abomination” in the dictionary as she knew that was associated with being gay and was really upset that she could be seen as someone who could cause hatred.

She was enrolled in a 6 week Alpha course about what views Christians hold and what to expect from church and they were encouraged to go as teenagers as a way to become spiritually mature. The course covered a lot of topics including the afterlife, forgiveness, abortion and also homosexuality. In the session, there were around 20 people in the room and the Minister talked about his experience of gay Christians. The tone was homophobic from the start. He spoke about being greeted by gay men and how repulsed he was by a gay man wanting to shake his hand. He refused to hug a gay man with the undertone being to prevent sexual assault. He opened the floor to give their experiences of homosexuality.

The participant told us she was upset as she felt exposed and devastated and had to leave as she felt it was obvious that she was gay. Within a week someone had told her father and his response was very violent. Things then “kicked off” at home with control and violence being used to vent his hostility at finding out she was gay. She told us she was repressed in that part of herself and was not embracing it so it was a confusing time.

She was asked to come to church and was told it was to volunteer but when she got there she was told that someone at the Alpha group had brought it up as they thought it was inappropriate that she should work with children. She used to do this in the holidays. The participant told us it was totally humiliating and like an “out of body experience”. She felt she was being made to defend something she hated. She said the group’s decision was that she could work with children if there were two other adults present but she could not take them to the toilet. It was said in a way that she should understand their thinking that she was a sexual predator.

She was only 16 or 17 and had a difficult family life so the church was her community and felt like family. She had nowhere else to go so she stayed. She

began to view herself in the same way as these people did. She self-harmed and she was trying to punish herself into changing. For the next 5 years she told us that she was pulled into meeting after meeting to have the spirit of homosexuality cast out of her.

She was told that if she did not repent then her husband and children that God had for her would not come to be. She told us this made her feel guilty. She was taken to conferences all over Scotland and was paraded in front of people to show that if she didn't repent she would go to hell. She said she was receptive to this and felt it was something in her that was wrong as she still had feelings for women. She thought the fault was in her and she found that very distressing. She attempted to take her own life at one point.

She told us at age 21 she was sent to a residential facility in England who are an English church who would like to have a Scottish base too. She said it is relevant to this inquiry as lots of people are sent from Scotland to England. The course is marketed for "troubled" girls who self-harm or have suicidal thoughts but immediately it was clear that they thought being gay was a symptom for other problems in her life. She was not allowed to talk about it. The programme was extreme, no contact with the outside world, no TV, no music, no control of money and they controlled what they ate. It did not take long before she felt controlled by them. They then introduced anti-gay teaching and focused entirely on sexuality and on anyone who was gay or trans. Other issues were shelved. The participant was told she was a textbook case and as she was sexually abused as a child and her mother had left when she was a toddler, it made sense to them she would not be able to have a relationship with men.

She was told that homosexuality had a smell and that other Christians could smell her. She was given a book by a Christian author, Neil T Anderson called "A way of escape". They told her being gay attracted chaos. They focused on a fictional husband and children and would have visitors come for hands on prayer touching her womb and praying. They said choosing to be gay was the same sickness as being a paedophile. This made her feel disgusting and unclean. She told us that she had spent from the age of 10 praying that she would not be gay and was devastated to be compared to a paedophile and felt there was no hope for her. They gave her make up lessons, took her shopping for dresses and attacked every part of her identity and tried to mould her to be a perfect feminine standard.

The participant was part of the residential programme for seven months and by the time she left she was saying to them she was going to find a husband. She realised at that point that she had not changed but if they had been upfront about it being conversion therapy she would not have chosen to go.

Soon afterwards she realised it was all nonsense and that caused a mental breakdown. She could not leave the house for a year. The people around her seemed so happy that she had converted. She did not know who to trust. Eventually this led to her doing another residential programme. It took two years of her life and did not know if she was going to be okay.

The participant told us that it has taken ten years of good therapy before she could form a relationship. She was terrified that they were right and it took a long time for her to realise that she had been subject to conversion therapy and what she had been taught was wrong. Hearing blatant homophobia at 10 years old made her think she had AIDs as she had heard it so often. She read that conversion therapy was described as torture and that resonated with her.

She told us that the “So Mercy” programme call it reparative therapy not conversion therapy and that people do not know that this is happening in the UK. People do not know they are being put through it and there has to be some accountability for the churches as it is so damaging and can also cost people their faith. She told us so much damage can be done in a Christian environment. There is no regulation or public knowledge. She said she has heard from hundreds of people that this has happened to them. It is not spoken about so there has to be some sort of awareness of what conversion therapy is and that if you do not want to be a part of it you can step away. She told us it is “weaponizing” their spirituality and their faith.

In response to the question asked by one of the MSPs as to what measures should be put in place, the participant responded that it has to start with understanding and people who have been appropriately trained to know how to deal with those who have experienced conversion therapy. She told us “it attacks who you are” and it took her 10 years to find the right therapist. She told us she went willingly at the age of 21 so was not a child but she was still a vulnerable adult. She told us all the top bodies have said it does not work and only causes harm and so believes if you are seeking to have a part of you changed you are vulnerable no matter what age.

She said that she heard a statement that PM Boris Johnston made saying there would be some protection for churches for those going under “discipleship” who went as adults who wanted to change their sexuality and that troubled her as those people are also vulnerable. Most professionals she saw had never encountered it so having awareness of what CT is and not just the institutionalised view or that it only happens in America was important. GPs and health professionals need to be made aware.

The participant told us that there are ministries up and down the country and they are underground as they know they need to be. She told us she knows of ones in Glasgow and in Bradford and they are not advertised. They are aware that if these things are made public they would be under scrutiny and would not be allowed. She told us it is insidious and that they know they need to hide it and this has driven it underground. That is why so many people fall into it. She told us people are groomed into taking part.