

Ascend

The True Freedom Trust Magazine

Autumn 2021



All together now

Christians are called to reflect God's abundant love for His people. Before the pandemic, I assume you (like me) were doing this in some capacity, serving each other and enjoying fellowship in person. But we have been forced, for better or worse, to communicate with each other more via Zoom, phone calls or social media. How can we truly love each other as Jesus does for His church, especially in the aftermath of COVID-19? How can we break our isolated lives after being socially distant for so long?

Let's be clear, Christians are called to love each other radically and sacrificially. We love God and our neighbour in the power of the Spirit as Jesus teaches in scripture. John stresses the importance of love so strongly that he says we are murderers if we hate a brother or sister and we will not inherit eternal life (1

John 3:15). Powerful stuff! Yet the good news is that our love for each other does not come through gritted teeth. It comes from the gospel radically transforming our disobedient and deceitful hearts; we know that even while we still were rebels against God, Jesus died for us (Romans 5:6). Since God loved us so much to give His Only Son, we love one another as we live for Him.

But we return to our earlier question: How can we love each other now? We first need to enjoy being with each other again in person. Let's be honest, it is hard. I am naturally an extrovert, but even I'll admit, along with introverts, that being online has significant advantages. On Zoom, we can remember people's names because they're in the corner of each person's screen. You can dial into a conversation wherever you live in the country. You

can end discussions with the click of a button. But being in person means you can hug, visibly show emotions and comfort one another. You can play games, pray with each other and sing together without technological difficulties!

Loving sacrificially

We also need to remember the sacrificial love found in the church. We are part of God's extensive family. Families work best where everyone chips in and works together as a functioning body. We must resist falling into the trap of thinking church is a spiritual top-up service to make us feel good. We don't attend church to be religious; we come together to be fed from God's Word and live it out in love by serving each other.

"Jesus was never too busy for anyone"

But how can I think of others' needs when I'm busy? I'm barely hanging on myself! I would say in response Jesus was *never* too busy for anyone, whether that be little children, a Samaritan woman or any non-Jew. The only reason that Jesus withdrew from people was to spend time with His Father. If we want to become more like Christ, we need to model His kind of love. It may mean re-evaluating the importance of things in our life. What can we cut out to make space to serve others? As an example, I purposefully keep my Tuesday evenings free to invite church family members to my house during the week. Even when we're struggling, God desires us to serve and be as selfless as our saviour was for us.

I realise we need to be careful and prayerful in this. We shouldn't help others out because of a 'saviour complex', to feed our pride or tendency to please people. We are part of a church family for a reason; there are others who can help. We are to bear each other's burdens. But we should be willing to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters, otherwise how can the love of God be in our hearts (1 John 3:17)?

Practical steps

So here are my humble suggestions, as small steps, to put this into practice. As John writes: "Let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth" (1 John 3:18). Instead of just promising to pray for someone, write the prayer request down and commit to pray for one week before speaking to the same person again the following Sunday. Organise a coffee trip with two or three people and get out your diaries to make it happen. Ask your pastor or minister who in the church is currently in need. Don't simply sign yourself up to a rota, but be intentional about practically caring for others.

Thinking on a larger scale, grab a couple of people for a games evening or BBQ social. Invite people around to your house for food after a Sunday service, and it doesn't need to be fancy! I've asked friends before to act as my sous-chef when people have come around to mine. Some in TFT have a biological family, so purposely organise your calendar so that hospitality becomes part of your routine. You may think hospitality is not your gifting, but it is something we are all called to do as faithful believers (Romans 12:13, Hebrews 13:12). Show this love to those who are different from you, and those who might give you nothing back.

One family from my church invites anyone to their house for lunch each week, and it is a great witness to me of their care for outsiders. Whatever God has gifted us with materially, we can use it to love others, for it is Jesus we serve. For you introverts out there, you might demonstrate your love to others by lending out your car, dropping a meal round or sending a thoughtful message.

“What can we cut out to make space to serve others?”

When we care for each other, especially those in the church who live alone, it shows that we care for each other much more than ourselves. We put our money where our mouth is and people desperately want to see authentic love shown. My hope and prayer is that I've given you some thoughts as to how you can do this too. So will you take up this opportunity to serve and care for others? Will you love others just as Christ loves you and His church?

By Jamie

Jamie is the Youth and Children's Minister for a small church in Basingstoke. Nicknamed 'Captain Keen', he enjoys singing, socialising, board games, films and TV. He likes visiting friends and family, especially his god-daughter Cara.

This edition looks at the matter of caring for one another. You might wonder what there is to say – after all, aren't we all routinely told to “take care” or “have a nice day”? Well, the book of 1 Peter teaches us that true Christlike care comes out of a life that is obedient to God: “Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for each other, love one another deeply, from the heart.” (1 Peter 1:22)

After a year of isolation, Jamie's article encourages us to practical acts of kindness, inclusion and hospitality. Rita asks whether we can truly care for one another when we only connect online at a distance. Simon considers whether TFT risks harming people when we point them to Jesus' invitation to live costly lives of obedience. And Trevor shows us we are in good company, as Jesus' closest disciples often accused Him of not caring. Of course, Jesus cares deeply for us, but this doesn't mean He always rescues us in the way we want Him to.

I hope we will be able to put on a safe in-person National Conference this autumn, which for many of us is the highlight of the year. The welcoming, joyful, loving community that comes together each October is always for me a taste of heaven. This year will be extra special, having had to meet online in 2020. I hope that many TFT members can join with us then.

By Stuart, TFT Director



"Box Hill stepping stones" (www.flickr.com/photos/dgeezer/44773770015) is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

A support group in every church?

TFT: Brian, you are a church leader who doesn't experience same-sex attraction yourself. What is your experience of operating a support group for same-sex attracted believers within a church?

Brian: It has been a joy right from the very first group that we did. I remember sitting there the first evening, and it dawning on me just how big a step of faith it had been for each person to come. I felt, "Wow, I'm handling something here that's very precious, and I don't want to blow it." I wanted to handle the trust that these men (they were all men) had placed in one another and in me with great respect. And I felt, right from the beginning, a sense of privilege.

As the group's members shared their stories, experiences and battles, I felt so lucky to hear what God had been doing in their lives. For many of them, it was something that they had never really talked about with any other person before. For them to feel free to speak in a context where no one was going to laugh at them, and no one was going to make fun of them, where no one's going to be horrified, was significant.

So, to be a part of that was amazing for me. I think I've learned more than

anyone else in the group. As someone who teaches and preaches the Bible regularly, it was just amazing to get insights into what's going on in the minds and hearts of those to whom I'm seeking to teach, and then to understand what was both helpful and unhelpful for them.

For them, the opportunity to talk about these things in a group where there were rules and safety was very liberating and encouraging.

"Many in the group had never really talked about their sexuality with anyone before"

TFT: What did you cover in the group meetings?

Brian: In this group, I did very little teaching. All I've tended to do is enable the meetings to actually happen. I ensure that anyone new to the group knows what to expect. I also remind everyone of our values and how we're going to go about doing things, which would be very similar to a TFT Barnabas Group.

In a typical meeting, someone brings along a thought from the Bible they have found encouraging. Someone else might suggest we read an article or a chapter of a book and then discuss it. Or perhaps we watch a television programme in advance and then discuss that. I think I probably add value by being in the room, but mainly it's the guys working through things together. As I'm listening in, I find it tremendously helpful. Above all, it's incredibly moving for me because I hear some things I just wouldn't have heard in any other context.

TFT: Do you think every church should operate such a group?

Brian: I think that every church probably needs to do something like this, but maybe as a stepping stone. Having the group helped to dissipate some of the loneliness members had experienced. As a church grows better at looking after everyone, including those who are same-sex attracted, it gets to a point where honesty about sexual struggle is not a huge thing for anybody. If you're same-sex attracted, you can talk about that within the small group, just as you can talk about a range of other issues there. But we need to recognise that same-sex attracted people have had too many bad experiences of trying that with other church small groups or with other people within the church. They may need to grow in confidence, being vulnerable for a season within the safety of such a dedicated group. One of the great ways to prepare the whole church is for one of the primary Bible teachers to attend the group and learn something of what it's like to be same-sex attracted so that, in preaching, the church can be equipped.

Our own experience has been that, as the church has grown in its competency to care for same-sex attracted people, the support group has become less necessary. We don't need to meet as frequently as we did, simply because our members are getting more support within the wider church in other ways.

TFT: Is there a risk, with such a group, that it causes the participants to focus excessively on their sexuality?

“Group members discovered common ground with those in the church not experiencing same-sex attraction”

Brian: They're not a group of identical people; each person has their own stories and their own set of struggles. As you start to go deeper, there are points of commonality between them and others in the church who don't experience same-sex attraction. For instance, in our church, we have someone who is same-sex attracted and committed to celibacy; the thing he finds hardest about this is that he is expecting not to marry, and there's a whole experience of intimacy that he feels that he is going to miss out on. In that respect, he is not unique. Many people in our church would like to marry, or maybe they have been widowed and experience the same kind of loneliness. There's another man who struggles to control his sexual desires, which creates a deep frustration within him. But, as he reflects on that, he realises he also needs to be just as self-controlled when his work is frustrating. In that battle of self-control to respond positively to temptation, there are



massive points of commonality with other people in the church.

The funny thing is that, whilst the guys have same-sex attraction in common, they have also realised that other things are very different about each other, and they can help one another because they may see things more clearly than someone else. As they get to know each other, different idols are underlying some of their desires. They learn that to help one another, they need to talk about slightly different things and pray for different things. In those respects, there will be other church members outside the group who can be of more help than those within the group. As we've got to know one another better, it has become complex. However, that has enabled better points of connection between those within the church who experience same-sex attraction and those who don't, which has been especially healthy.

When you get into those other issues, the handling of their same-sex attraction often feels more doable day by day. I think they have worked out for themselves that going after these other issues, which often are much easier to talk about with anyone, is what will really help them. I guess they have learned to put their same-sex attraction increasingly in context, and that's one way that getting together and talking about it has helped. I don't think they would have been able to do that if they

had just been left to work it out privately with the Lord.

TFT: The group you describe was all men. Do you think it could have worked as a mixed group, given that the chemistry between the sexes will be different in a group of same-sex attracted Christians? If not, do you think churches might need to set up a separate women's group?

Brian: I don't know. Over the years, I have known of same-sex attracted women in the church, but none have ever wanted to come to the group. Perhaps I should have done more to understand why.

I always wanted the group to be mixed because I felt different perspectives would be enriching. But there is probably a trade-off between that and how easy everyone finds it to be honest. I can see how, in God's providence, it has been good to be single-sex. In that vein, I could imagine a women's group being helpful, but we have never seemed to have the critical mass to set one up.

By Brian

Brian is one of the pastors at St Philemon's, an inner-city church in Toxteth. He is married to Alice and they have three young children. His hobbies are now entirely decided by other members of his family.

Exiles Conference - Worth the wait!



Last year, we faced the irony of being too scattered and similarly too exiled (in pandemic terms) for our joint TFT and Living Out conference, 'Exiles on this Earth', to go ahead. June 2021 brought the same challenge, but an extra year's experience in hosting virtual events. Thank you to the teams at TFT and Living Out for a virtual conference that was perfectly blended, ran seamlessly and was well worth the wait.

'Worth the wait' was something of a conference theme. Andy Robinson's talks in the morning from 1 Peter 1 assured us that feeling strange is normal for the Christian and that Jesus knows what it is like not to fit in. Alongside the grief of being an exile, we should expect joy. This comes from knowing that we have a "living hope" in Jesus, an "inheritance" that is guaranteed, and that eternity will be long enough to make amends. While we are waiting for the day when we hear "well done, good and faithful servant", we can rejoice because our perseverance and counter-cultural living as same-sex attracted Christians show "the proven genuineness of our faith".

Stuart Parker's talks in the afternoon helped us see that being an exile isn't just about not fitting in on earth; it is also about recognising we have citizenship in heaven. Continuing to 1 Peter 2, Stuart showed us we are "royal", even though we

don't always see our royal robes. He also highlighted that we are a "priesthood", as we represent God to the world, and that we are already God's "special possession". Stuart then drew on Deuteronomy 11 to help us apply truths about who we really are. What are the modern equivalents of binding God's words onto our foreheads, hands and doorposts? Do we wear anything to help us remember or have any verses up in our homes? Stuart also advised us to take the 'slow cooker approach' to meditating upon God's word, trying to slow down and intentionally spend more time thinking of our real home.

As ever, the joy and relief for me was in being surrounded by others who 'get it'. I connected with the speakers' illustrations, the powerful testimony, the women in my discussion group and those who posted and upvoted questions for the Q&A. It makes a difference to me to know that others sometimes feel like a minority within a minority, and that I am not the only one to find disagreement among Christians on sexuality more painful than thinking differently to non-Christian friends. I'm also, clearly, not alone in finding Pride month and the rainbowing of everything, confusing. Note to the organisers, June is the perfect time of year for this joint conference!

By Hannah



EXILES ON THIS EARTH

Thriving as God's people in challenging times



Book Review

"No Longer Strangers: Finding Belonging in a World of Alienation" by Gregory Coles

(IVP US, 2021) 216 pages

£11.99 paperback, £8.91 ebook

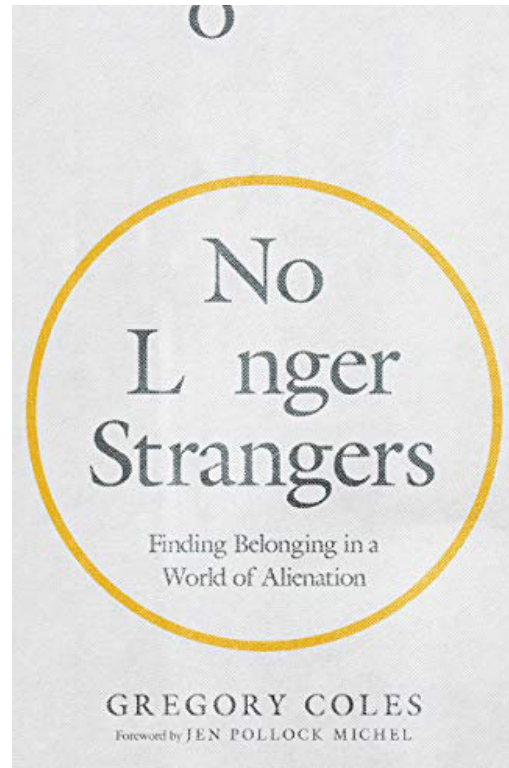
In 'No Longer Strangers: Finding Belonging in a World of Alienation', Greg Coles (author of 'Single, Gay, Christian') explores what it means for us to belong; where we belong, to whom we belong and to what we belong.

The book is written in a semi-autobiographical style as Greg relates key anecdotes, memories and experiences from his life. The autobiographical sections are interspersed with Greg's reflections on how he learned to seek God and find his 'all in all' in Him. The book is warm, humorous and colloquial in style; it almost feels like having a deep conversation with someone over coffee rather than wading through a theological tome. But it by no means lacks meaningful theological content. Greg has a great deal of biblical wisdom to share, that has clearly been gained through years of tough and precious experience, trusting in Jesus.

Greg was born in the US and his early years were spent 'roving the contiguous United States in a brown van', as his parents were part of the Jesus Movement, which necessitated a nomadic lifestyle. When he was three years old, the family moved to Bandung in Indonesia to pursue a calling from God, whilst taking periodic trips back to the US on furlough.

The first part of the book, therefore, focuses on what it means to belong in a place, and Greg draws on his experiences of trying to understand his

cultural identity while growing up. Chapter 5 explores some of Greg's struggles with coming to terms with his sexual attractions as a teenager, and his observations of how some Christians can embrace a 'gospel of uniformity' and observes '...the gospel of uniformity isn't actually good news. Or rather, it's only good news for the people who already fit the bill, the people who can be fully honest while also remaining in the majority by every meaningful measure.' But he then points out 'But God – the real God – has only ever been



interested in loving us, redeeming us, in transforming us. He has no interest in an army of clones...'

Part 1 of the book ends in chapter 7, with Greg thinking about how our sense of searching for somewhere to belong is inherently linked with our fall from the garden of Eden, and the fact that if our identity is in Jesus, then this world isn't our permanent home. He says, 'Instead of fleeing from something, I think we're searching for something, pining after an impossibly better world. Homesick for a home that was lost before we were born... There's a kind of homelessness in the waiting between the first Eden and the second Eden. But it's not so impossible to belong like an alien in the meantime, once you know what you're waiting for.'

Part 2 of the book addresses our sense of who we belong with, and our relationships with family and friends, and particularly the family of God. Greg has some interesting observations on friendships; the importance of the different kinds of friendships we can have with people across all ages and backgrounds, and the changing nature of human relationships. He relates several experiences and stories about various friendships that he has struggled with, and also people by whom he has been immeasurably helped, in difficult circumstances. In chapter 12, he points out, 'The people we linger with are the people we grow to love. There is no deep belonging without deep lingering.' He speaks of the importance of taking time to linger deeply with God and enjoying time to savour belonging with your creator. He also discusses his experiences of belonging in churches, both when he kept his same-sex attraction hidden (or very private), and then subsequent to writing his first book 'Single, Gay, Christian.'

Part 3 of the book looks at to whom we belong, and Greg speaks more about Christian celibacy, and his experiences of understanding sexuality and belonging, both growing up and more recently. In chapter 18, he writes, 'I'm not saying that our relationship with Jesus is meant to be sexual. But I also don't want to make the mistake of skipping over the metaphor too quickly. Our betrothal to Jesus isn't less than sexual – it's more than sexual, a promise of love so deep and all-consuming that sex is merely a pale human precursor. Those of us who are celibate have the privilege of announcing this betrothal with our bodies now. We get to anticipate the consummation of heaven with a holy longing on earth.'

Those who dislike anecdotal writing or prefer a more structured prose style may struggle to connect with the book. It should also be noted that the book contains some swearing and, in chapter 18, Greg's choice of wording might be disliked by some when describing his relationship with God.

Overall, the book explores the theme of belonging in a really warm and engaging way; it's very easy to read but is full of meaningful help. Greg says in the introduction, '...come journey with me. Learn to belong alongside me. Gasp in wonder with me. Let's be aliens together.' Greg is a great companion and friend to walk with through this book. If I had to describe it in one sentence, I would say this book is, 'chicken soup for the soul struggling with identity, loneliness and discouragement amid same-sex attraction.'

By Jools



Is TFT helping or harming?

As the debate around sexual ethics intensifies in churches across all denominations in the UK, it is perhaps unsurprising that we sometimes receive comments, and concerns, suggesting that True Freedom Trust (TFT) and, more broadly, traditional biblical teaching is harmful. Some have even suggested that TFT is homophobic, coerces people or operates from a place of fear. Such concerns are important to reflect upon. It's a tragedy whenever someone purporting to be a disciple of Christ subjects others to pain, trauma or distress. So, how does TFT protect those that it comes into contact with from harm?

Respecting Choice

TFT exists primarily to support Christians who are gay (or would describe themselves as same-sex attracted) and yet believe the traditional biblical teaching on sexual ethics. Almost everyone who contacts us is already convinced of this position, and

we always seek confirmation of this before we admit anyone into our membership. Any pastoral support a person might receive prior to becoming a member usually only extends to us signposting resources for self-directed study or providing the opportunity to talk to one of our volunteers about their experience.

“Costliness does not equal harmfulness”

Many of our staff and volunteers are same-sex attracted themselves, myself included, and therefore can share transparently from personal testimony both the joys and difficulties accompanying this specific lifestyle choice. We recognise that following the traditional sexual ethic is costly. In Luke 14, Jesus is candid that there will be a cost for those who follow Him, but we don't believe that costliness equals harmfulness. Jesus does not ask us to

give up anything that we need to survive. We don't need sex to flourish as human beings. And, where Jesus asks for a sacrifice from us, He gives us back more than we can possibly imagine (Mark 10:29-31).

TFT is not a campaigning organisation. We don't consider it our aim to 'win' anyone over to our position. The transparency mentioned above is important to avoid the sort of coercion that we sometimes hear about in the media where LGBT people have been forced into programmes or have treatment that they neither wanted nor needed. For someone unsure of where they stand on this issue, we offer our stories and our view on the importance of this issue, but respect the freedom of everyone to live as they choose before God.

Encouraging Togetherness

When thinking about possible lifelong singleness/celibacy, the first cost that comes to many people's minds is loneliness and isolation. As human beings, we crave relationships and intimacy with others. There's no question that to deny a person these things in their entirety would be harmful. However, we believe sexual intimacy is only one of the many forms of intimacy that God has created for us to experience. Jesus serves as the perfect example of living out the Christian faith, yet he never had sex. Jesus experienced the same longings and feelings as we do (Hebrews 4:15), and had to have his own needs for intimacy met in other ways. This needs to be possible, or else God leaves those Christians who are single without hope.

One of the greatest blessings of being in relationship with God is adoption into His family. When we come to Christ, we gain a whole host of brothers and sisters

with whom we get to spend eternity worshipping God. God has given us the Church to be the primary place that people should find their needs for general intimacy with others met. The latter part of Ephesians 2 illustrates beautifully the responsibility that those in the body of Christ have toward one another. Sadly, many of our churches don't do a good job of fostering this type of environment. Many in our membership join TFT precisely because they long for that kind of community. We regularly receive feedback from our members that TFT serves as a real lifeline for them, because they struggle to find this sort of fellowship elsewhere, where they are accepted and free from rejection and shaming.

Advocating God's Love

It's lamentable that the church has often offered no hope alongside its teaching on sexuality. It has also often failed to articulate the difference between action and attraction, leading some to feel God would exclude them from a relationship with him on the grounds of sexual orientation alone. Some people have experienced outright homophobia in the church. I remember once hearing someone described as "disgusting" by another church member because they were gay. At the time, I wasn't 'out' about my own sexual orientation, and you can imagine hearing a comment like that made me reluctant to tell anyone about my situation. These things are clearly wrong and have left people feeling isolated, rejected and ashamed. We aim to equip UK churches to teach well in this area, so no one is left feeling this way. We also stand against things we believe God would not want to see in His Church, such as prejudice, hypocrisy and ignorance.

What we do know is that God loves

people. He created them, values them and desires that all should come into relationship with Him (2 Peter 3:9). A former colleague of mine used to say that no other worldview thinks as highly of LGBT+ people as Christianity, a claim that is undoubtedly right considering those truths. When we interact with others, regardless of who they are, we need to show them the sort of compassion Jesus would have shown, in the light of knowing how God sees them. Jesus was full of grace and truth (John 1:14). He didn't switch between the two. He was fully both, all the time. We can be pleasant to be around, while also

“We need to be careful to ask no more of a person than scripture already requires”

holding convictions. We can articulate what we think about the gospel and sin. When we do this, though, we should not add any more offense to the truths of the Bible in the way that we present them. A judgemental tone or inflammatory language can cause offence unnecessarily, as can being dogmatic over aspects of sexuality that are not of primary importance, such as insisting upon certain words to describe gay feelings. We need to be careful to ask no more of a person than scripture already requires.

Conclusion

Far from harmful, there are many people out there that find the Christian sexual ethic liberating, a stance with which I agree. That doesn't mean there isn't a minority who takes the Christian ethic, and uses it as a weapon for coercion and rejection. Such an approach can contribute to emotional and spiritual harm, but I would argue that these people have lost sight of the three principles outlined above.

In that big debate going on in our churches at the moment, there is actually one thing that people of all convictions agree on. No one wants to cause anyone any harm. It feels like the thing driving most division in churches, whatever views a person holds, is seeing alternate views as being ones that cause harm. We know that the government is discussing legislation in this area. I fear that if they outlaw the good work of churches and ministries that hold to traditional convictions, people like myself could be left with nowhere to go. And that could be very harmful indeed.

By Simon

Simon looks after our speaking work, outreach & IT systems at TFT. He recently moved out of the city and has spent his summer amazed at how much maintenance his garden needs.





God loves me as I am

When I was in my early 30s, I pastored a church plant. I was also struggling with the guilt I felt with the same-sex attraction I continued to experience as a teenager. I was in a relationship with an older man in my 20s and occasionally engaging in other same-sex behaviour. Although now in a heterosexual marriage, I would still gain sexual pleasure through homosexual fantasy.

Desperately wanting to change

I desperately wanted to change and be what I considered 'normal' but had no clue how this could happen. I had a strong faith in God and His ability to change me but, however hard I prayed, it didn't seem to happen. Then I heard about a ministry to homosexuals who wanted to be free from this issue in their lives. Having plucked up the courage to meet the man who ran the organisation, I met with love and acceptance. Looking back now, I also realise that what I was being offered was what is now called 'conversion therapy'. I must emphasise that I received only love and respect. However, there was a genuine belief and expectation that my sexuality could and should be changed. When I shared with someone the most secret part of me (my wife knew nothing of my same-sex attractions), this sense of release caused

me to believe that my sexuality had changed. I received counselling for over a year and, at the end of this, declared that I was free from same-sex temptations. I even wrote a testimony for the ministry to this effect.

However, it soon became clear to me that I still experienced same-sex attraction. I would look at men and fantasise, recall old encounters and give myself sexual pleasure thinking about them. But I did not feel able to tell my friends from the ministry that really there had been no change. I didn't want to hurt them. So I lived like this for another 20 years or so whilst also being happily married.

No pressure to change my sexuality

In the last few years, I have engaged more with True Freedom Trust (TFT). I had been receiving their magazine but not actually taken things any further. Whilst in a desperate, guilt-ridden state, I contacted the office, and a local volunteer got in touch with me. Again, I received only love, respect and acceptance. But the difference is marked. I feel no expectation that my sexuality should change. Yes, the emphasis is on living a holy, God honouring life, but on no different

terms than all Christians should strive for. My sexuality is in some ways not seen as the issue; it is more about how I work it out in practice. At TFT, my ongoing same-sex attractions do not change the fact that I am accepted as a child of God and a fellow brother.

The TFT volunteer and I meet regularly, often phone or text each other with no expectation other than we will support one another and encourage each other in our Christian lives. As well as this, I have been able to join some online conferences recently, as well as being a member of an online Barnabas Group. Again, there is no emphasis on changing sexuality, and I can be totally at ease with the person I am.

TFT has helped me realise that my previous goal of 'normality' is not what following Christ is about. I am no less of a Christian because of my same-sex

attractions, and they do not make me a failure.

My spiritual, emotional and mental health has changed immeasurably because of the approach of TFT. I no longer feel I have to fight myself all the time or keep a part of me distanced from God. Of course, I still have to deal with temptation, but that would be the case whatever my sexuality. TFT is not there to change your sexuality but to support you in living a life that is honouring to God.

By John

Are you ready to share your story?

We are always in need of more people to share about their experiences - this can be over video, audio or via a traditional written testimony. Hearing how God is working in individuals' lives is compelling and encouraging for others.

We can help you put your script together and record you sharing what God has done in your life. Or you might feel more comfortable writing it down as an article for Ascend or the website. Alternatively, you might be interested in being interviewed for our in-depth Ascend Higher podcast.

Please do get in touch with one of the staff team to explore how we might be able to help you to put your story into words.

"Encourage one another and build each other up" - 1 Thessalonians 5:11



Women's Conference Review



I've always experienced deep, emotional friendships and connections with women. Before Jesus met with me and saved me, those friendships would often lead to a sexual relationship. After I was saved, I didn't really know how to handle a deep female friendship anymore and therefore, with a few 'safe' exceptions, I purposefully stayed away from them! Since getting in touch with TFT, God has blessed me with some amazing female friends, and I've been much more open to pursuing deep and meaningful relationships with them. So, I signed up pronto to my first TFT's Women's Conference when I heard about the topic for the conference: "In Pursuit of Biblical Friendship".

Jem gave four brilliant talks: "Friendship Foundations", "Biblical Friendship", "Friendship Difficulties" and "Overcoming Issues & Building Healthy Friendships". One key point that resonated with me was how we all crave to know, and be known, on a deep level. When we find one friend that meets that need, it is easy to want that friend exclusively and sometimes become attracted to them. But Jem talked about the importance and joy of having multiple deep, healthy friendships that are like good sibling relationships. These will be people who will speak the truth

to us when we need to hear it, and vice versa!

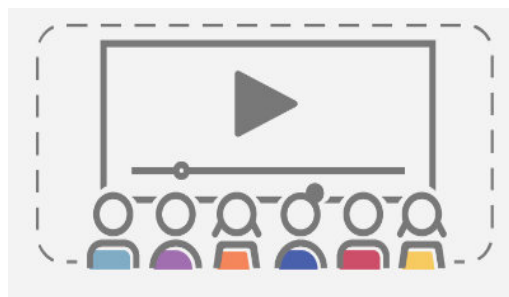
We spoke about the value and struggles involved in building friendships within our church family and God's design for friendship with people of all ages, and with the opposite sex. This is a joy that I have recently discovered; it is so uncomplicated!

Ruth and Sandra told us their stories of how God has walked with them through some challenging situations and how He has powerfully and faithfully worked to bring them through, even when it has been painful. It was so moving to hear them speak of His goodness and their trust in Him.

I was in a breakout group with other married women, and we discussed how we could include our husbands in our friendships. We also looked at the difference between love for friends and love for our husbands, and how we can face these things together in a marriage. Sometimes that is not easy, so it was good to hear the other ladies' experiences.

Jem ended the talks speaking about our greatest friend, Jesus. It made me think of Genesis 16:13, 'You are the God who sees me.' He is the only one who sees me 'completely', and there is no limit to the time I should spend with Him. He will only ever be good for me. In the words of Elizabeth Charles, "Come and rejoice with me! For once my heart was poor, but I have found a treasury of love, a boundless store."

By Jools





Caring well for LGBT people

Jesus calls us to care for others within the church. He tells us that this deep love for one another is what sets us apart from the world:

“A new command I give you: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” (John 13:34-35)

Within our churches, pastoral care is central as we seek to help each other grow.

Pressure on pastoral care

Some more extreme pressure groups are campaigning to outlaw any pastoral care (or indeed any teaching) that is within the context of advocating the belief that sex is to be kept solely for the marriage of one man and one woman. Whilst it is good for pastoral care to come under scrutiny, this move is clearly an attack on the liberty of conscience. It will be a dark day indeed when any group in society dictates what beliefs another person may hold, or the support they may seek. Some people make their sexual orientation or gender identity the defining part of their

identity, while others make their religious convictions uppermost in their lives. We should all respect other people's freedom to receive the support they seek.

However, it's easy to dismiss those pushing for a ban on religious freedoms as having a purely malicious purpose. The more uncomfortable reality for Christians to consider is that those who campaign hardest on this often speak from their own painful experiences of church. This might involve having been judged, marginalised or told (perhaps implicitly) that they will only be welcome once their sexuality is 'healed.' A desire to avoid the same happening to other people motivates much of this criticism.

It can be easier for us as Christians to fire one another up to fight for our rights than for us to listen openly to criticism and discern humbly how we can improve the care we offer. This article encourages us to listen to the criticisms and perform a health-check on the pastoral care we offer. In particular, we need to review the care that we offer to those struggling with

	Caring for everyone....	Caring for LGBT people...
C onsent	Explain what you mean and ask for consent before praying for or touching the other person etc	Design pastoral meetings to maximise safety/respect and minimise any perceived imbalance in power
O utcomes	Wait patiently for God to work in the person's life rather than forcing any change upon them	Reassure the person that there is no expectation that their sexual desires need to change
W ellbeing	Seek the person's physical, spiritual and emotional wellbeing	Recognise that the person may have experienced (including at church) shame, rejection and bullying because of their sexuality
T heological balance	Provide care that is consistent with the balance of biblical teaching from the church leadership	Avoid elevating the sinfulness of same-sex behaviour above other sin
A ccountability	Submit to church leadership oversight, receive training and embrace safeguarding procedures	Identify and challenge any prejudice (unconscious bias) across the church towards LGBT people
I nclusion	Confront shame and build the person's sense of value and belonging within the church community	Aim for godly maturity rather than conformity to gender stereotypes. Respect an individual's preferred terminology to describe their sexuality
L istening	Listen to each person's unique experiences, without being judgemental	Avoid making simplistic and unscientific generalisations about the cause of a person's sexuality

their sexuality or gender identity. The following guidance is for leaders or regular church members who want to provide ethical and godly pastoral care to a person facing same-sex attractions.

COW TAIL: 7 principles of caring

At one level, the way we care for LGBT people within our churches is quite

simple: just treat them the same way as anyone else! However, unless your church has a long-standing reputation for being entirely free from prejudice, LGBT people entering your church might have understandable reservations about asking for pastoral support around their sexuality. Keeping both these points in mind, the table featured

in this article sets out some broad principles for general pastoral care, along with some specific advice for how to tailor the support towards LGBT people. The seven points start with the letters from the memorable words: COW TAIL. Now you can understand the strange picture that accompanies this article!

“Reassure the other person that their sexual desires do not need to change”

What celibate gay Christians want

In their book “Costly Obedience”, psychologists Yarhouse and Zaporozhets outline their research study of 300 “celibate gay Christians”. They asked this group what they need to feel pastorally supported in their churches and these were the consistent themes:

- To feel listened to, wanted and have their stories made visible
- To have churches that feel like family, particularly for single Christians
- To hear biblical teaching on sexuality that is balanced and consistent
- To have church leaders focus on helping individual people rather than fighting culture wars

Overall, Christians experiencing same-sex attraction want to feel welcomed and valued. There is implicit criticism in the four points above, showing that this has not been the experience of church for many of these believers.

Conclusion

Those who have responsibility for pastoral care in religious communities

needn't get defensive about what we do. The government recognises that religious communities do a tremendous amount of good in our society, including all those mainstream churches who hold to a traditional view of marriage. We should, though, keep our practices under review. In recent years, the UK church has made huge steps forward in developing and deepening its safeguarding practices. As a result, children and vulnerable adults are safer within our communities. Likewise, we should respond positively to criticisms around pastoral care rather than reacting with fear and defensiveness. We should ensure that all our pastoral care is always seeking the best for the recipient and not giving any fuel for criticism. Like Paul advises Titus,

“In everything set them an example by doing what is good... so that those who oppose you may be ashamed because they have nothing bad to say about us.” (Titus 2:7-8)

Let's work hard to train our pastoral care teams in good practice and help our churches to grow as communities that welcome and care for the LGBT members of our churches.

By Stuart

Stuart is TFT's Director and the editor of Ascend magazine. His winters are spent longing for the summer, but then spends most of July hiding from the sun.

Film Review

“Boy Erased” directed by Joel Edgerton, 2018

Buy on DVD. Rent on streaming services



In the Summer 2019 edition of Ascend, Ed Shaw and I both extolled the virtues of “promiscuous reading”. That is, to read and study widely about human sexuality, even when the views expressed might challenge our own convictions. We need to do this wisely and carefully, recognising our weaknesses, but understanding that the counter-arguments to traditional Christian teaching help us remember why we believe what we do, and keep us ready to “give an answer... for the hope you have” (1 Peter 3:15).

With this in mind, I finally plucked up the courage to watch “Boy Erased”, an account of a young man’s experience of what is commonly called conversion therapy. The film was released in 2018, and has proved to be an influential contribution to the political debate about conversion therapy. Although TFT is clear that we do not offer or endorse conversion therapy, many will

incorrectly conflate what TFT believes and practises with what we see in the film. For this reason, I would encourage those who feel they can see the film, subject to the content warning below. However, the challenging material means this is probably one to watch with wise Christian friends, and to talk through afterwards.

Background

The film is based on “Boy Erased: A Memoir”, written by author and activist Garrard Conley, detailing his experiences in 2004 at Love In Action, a residential programme in Tennessee. The programme was designed for Christians with same-sex attraction and was focused on changing sexual orientation, what we would now call conversion therapy. The author, Garrard Conley, and the film’s director, Joel Edgerton, are clear that both the book and film support the campaign for a ban on conversion therapy.



Names in the film have been changed, so the real-life Garrard Conley becomes the film's Jared Eamons, and John Smid (the leader of Love In Action at the time), becomes the film's Victor Sykes.

Content Warning: Before I summarise the plot, it is worth saying that the film contains homophobic language, religious bullying and abuse, and sexual violence, which some may find distressing.

Synopsis (contains spoilers)

The film opens with Jared rising early for the long drive with his mother, from their home in Arkansas to the Love In Action campus in Tennessee. Parents must stay outside, and attendees must not discuss the programme outside the building. The staff confiscate phones and examine notebooks, with "offending" pages then torn out. There are many rules and restrictions, such as insisting that delegates only go to the bathroom accompanied by a staff member. From the outset, the atmosphere is intimidating and controlling. There is a great deal of shouting. Group therapy sessions distort established therapy techniques into something coercive and brutal.

Then time rewinds, and we see how Jared came to be at Love In Action. Growing up in a conservative Christian family in the Bible Belt of the southern United States, he struggles privately with his sexuality. He has a girlfriend, but their relationship falters. Upon going to college, Jared grows close to fellow Christian student Henry. In their dorm one night, Henry rapes Jared. A traumatised Jared seeks the solace of his family home to recover. In a hideous act of victim-blaming, Henry tries to cover up his crime by posing as a college counsellor and outing Jared to his parents. In a scene with which many of

us will empathise, Jared's world implodes. Jared's father summons the church elders, and implores him to seek change through the Love In Action programme. Although Jared agrees to attend, he understands that the alternative would be losing his family, home and future.

Back at Love In Action, the intimidating atmosphere escalates. The staff force the delegates to do sport, and teach them to adopt stereotypically "masculine" postures and behaviours. In the film's most troubling sequence, a delegate (Cameron), is humiliated and isolated during a group therapy session. Sykes tells him, "God will just not love you the way you are now." Then, in a shocking ritual, a tearful Cameron kneels before a coffin while Sykes screams at him, "Is this what you want?" and calls his family forward (including a small child) to hit him repeatedly over the head with a Bible. He then leads Cameron to another house and dunks him into a bath full of water. Later, we hear Cameron has killed himself.

"It is entirely right to be appalled by what the film portrays"

Jared decides to leave the programme and call his mother, although the staff try to stop him. They restrain him, and he only escapes after his mother threatens to call the police.

The story moves forward a few years, and we see Jared living happily with his boyfriend in New York. He writes his account and, on a visit home, tries to persuade his father to read it. Jared then confronts his father about what had happened, and the two reach an uneasy

truce.

A post-script tells us that Garrard Conley has now married his husband in real life, and that the former leader of Love In Action, John Smid, now lives in Texas with his husband.

My thoughts on the film

“Boy Erased” is a well-made and compelling film. I had not expected an easy watch, but I was taken aback at how unsettled it made me feel, and I did not sleep the night after viewing it. Only when a vicar friend saw the film and commented, “that wasn’t therapy, it was abuse”, that I realised it is entirely right to be appalled by what the film portrays. For nearly two hours, we witness vulnerable people being treated without dignity or compassion. Additionally, the film brought back uncomfortable memories of my time at school, with the shame and fear I felt about my emerging sexuality. I hated being made to do sport, and had an overwhelming feeling that I did not fit in with the prevailing definition of manliness. My story was different, though, as I have shared elsewhere. In God’s grace, I experienced freedom from shame and fear; from the church, I received acceptance; in TFT, I found a lifeline.

I also wondered if things were really as bad as portrayed in the film. Surely Christians could not have behaved this way. My subsequent research confirms that the film is true to Garrard Conley’s memoir (except for the coffin and bath-dunking scene, which is fictional). Whilst the melodrama and creepy music are obvious embellishments, John Smid himself accepts that the film is not far off how Love In Action operated. Other delegates of Love In Action have described similarly traumatic experiences, although some were more favourable in their reports. Even

allowing for artistic licence, it seems fair to conclude that questionable techniques were used to control people and created an unsafe environment.

Lessons for TFT

We should do everything we can to protect our vulnerable members and contacts. If we see unsafe or abusive behaviour, we must challenge it. With this in mind, we train and supervise all of TFT’s volunteers. Within the constraints of protecting our contacts’ confidentiality, we are transparent about our work, and we have a robust and publicly available Safeguarding Policy. Simon writes more fully about TFT’s approach in his article, “Is TFT helping or harming?”

Beyond policies, though, we simply need to treat people Christianly. In the book of Colossians, Paul exhorts us to “clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience... and over all these virtues put on love” (3.12,14). It was so sad to see these virtues entirely lacking in the film. If we can embody Christ’s grace in TFT’s work, then, as Paul says of the fruits of the Spirit, “against such things there is no law” (Galatians 5.22).

By Donald

Donald works for the NHS in the North of England and is TFT’s chair of trustees. He enjoys collecting three-letter airport codes.



“Boy erased”: recommended viewing?

To explore the themes from the film review of “Boy Erased” in more depth, listen to the discussion between Donald and Peter, in the latest episode of the ‘Ascend Higher Podcast’



truefreedomtrust.co.uk/podcasts

Light
To The
World

National Conference 2021
Friday 1st - Sunday 3rd October

National Conference 2021

During the weekend’s teaching, our speaker Anne Witton will be exploring how we can be a ‘light to the world’ when we live out our sexuality in God’s holy way. We will see how the biblical sexual ethic is distinctive and life-giving for everyone. In particular, if we are willing to trust God in living sexually pure lives, we can challenge the wider church to deeper discipleship and dependence on God. In this conference, there will be encouragement and challenge for all of us, whether we’re single or married, same-sex attracted or otherwise.

Theme: “Light to the world”

Dates: 1st - 3rd October 2021

More details and sign-up: truefreedomtrust.co.uk/national-2021



Don't you care?

Caring has been captured. I haven't seen it reported in the news, and many remain unaware, but I see signs of it everywhere. Caring is variously defined as 'displaying kindness and concern' or 'feeling or showing compassion'. But the way that the term 'care' (and the words used to define it) has been adopted by lobby groups in recent years gives it a political edge that is anything but kind. Under the rubric of compassion in its name, one such group is advocating the legalisation for doctors to be able to assist their patients in killing themselves. An opposing group, using care as the antithesis of killing, perhaps inadvertently suggests that anything short of killing constitutes care. Of course, this kind of linguistic power-play happens in parliamentary lobbying all the time. But, when the language of politics permeates the pastoral care of souls, winning for the cause can override the provision of help to people in need.

Contrasting Cares

In the sense of showing kindness and compassion to others, caring is (of course) a biblical concept, though one shared by the three Abrahamic faiths. The New Testament (NT), however, shines some explicitly Christian light on the concept. The NT uses the two Greek words most frequently translated as 'care' in English in apparently contradictory ways. This is helpfully made explicit in 1 Peter 5:7, where the two most familiar Greek words helpfully both appear in the same verse, "Casting all your care (*merimna*) upon Him, for He cares (*melo*) for you" (NKJV).

Merimna most frequently refers to our anxieties and things that concern us (i.e. we care about). Jesus uses this word in all three accounts of the parable of the sower in the synoptic gospels when He refers to those who hear His word, which is subsequently choked by their cares and riches of this world (Matt

13:22; Mark 4:19; Luke 8:14). Paul also uses *merimna* when he talks about all the many difficulties he has had to face in his ministry. He adds, as the grand finale, “besides those, the daily care of all the churches” (2 Cor 11:28).

In contrast, *melo* (and its cognates) is the word of choice for expressing compassion, and providing practical and emotional support and help. This is shown in the parable of the Good Samaritan, where the Samaritan brings the man ‘who fell among thieves’ to an inn and ‘took care of him’ (Luke 10:34) and instructs the innkeeper to take care of him as well (Luke 11:35). Paul also uses *melo* when he asks if God cares for oxen (1 Cor 9:9). The clear implication is that He does indeed, and so how much more does He care for us to whom He gives His word about caring for animals. This passage echoes Jesus’ words about our heavenly Father feeding the birds and clothing the flowers of the field, so how much more will He do the same for us. (Matt 6:26-30).

**“It is never a caring action
to encourage sinful
behaviour – sexual or
otherwise”**

The two senses of “care” in the English language are mirrored in our practical experience of caring. Showing concern and kindness to others comes with a cost, and caring people are often prone to experience their care and compassion for others morphing into burdens for themselves that they cannot carry. No wonder then that Peter reminds us in 1 Peter 5:7 (referred to earlier) that God’s care in His loving kindness and compassion motivates us to share the weight of our concerns and anxieties

with Him. When care burdens us, often from caring for others, our Lord Jesus tells us to come to Him and take His yoke on us and learn from Him. His yoke is easy, and His burden is light because He carries it with us (Matt 11:28-30).

The Uncaring Christ?

What recently struck me the most about the use of *melo* in the gospels is that it is most often used negatively in a context of not caring. Examples include the reference to Judas not caring for the poor because he was a thief (John 12:6), or where Luke recounts that Gallio didn’t care about Sosthenes being beaten up when he had done nothing wrong (Acts 18:17).

Strikingly, however, the person most frequently accused in the NT of being uncaring is Christ Himself. “Teacher, don’t you care if we drown?” (Mark 4:38), the disciples accusingly ask Jesus as they wake Him up from His sleep. They fear for their lives in events over which they have absolutely no control, and don’t believe that Jesus has any control over it either. Sound familiar? Equally accusing is Martha’s complaint to Jesus about her sister’s perceived neglect of her in paying so much attention to Him, “Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!” (Luke 10:40). Her telling Jesus what to do by ordering Him about in her parting shot is instructive here. She accuses the one who was to lay down His life for her, of not caring about her. But she was really trying to impose her will on Jesus. ‘Not caring’ was just a form of emotional blackmail. Later on, in John’s gospel, both Martha and Mary imply Jesus had been neglectful of them and their dead brother Lazarus when they both independently say to him, “If you had

been here our brother would not have died.” (John 11:21,32). In their loss and grief, even the sister who had sat at Jesus’ feet, and the one who was too distracted by serving, both consider that Jesus didn’t care.

Uncaring Christians?

If Jesus Himself was accused of being uncaring by those facing a crisis point of overwhelming emotions, it is perhaps not surprising that those who seek to follow Him face similar accusations today. Nowhere is this more apparent than in relation to sexual expression. God’s gift of marriage between husband and wife should be understood as a parallel of the relationship between Christ and His Bride, the Church (Ephesians 5:32-33). But, so often today, it is seen as an uncaring limitation to be overridden by those who want to express their sexual desires outside of marriage. Almost any form of sexual boundary is challenged as uncaring (at best) and repressive and harmful (at worst).

Scripture unequivocally describes sex outside of the husband and wife relationship (e.g. in Matt 15:19, 1 Cor 6:15-18, Col 3:5, Gal 5:19) as *porneia*. This Greek word is shorthand for any kind of sexual immorality, and our word ‘pornography’ comes from it. Living a life of sexual purity, free from all the

perils of *porneia* is increasingly difficult in our Western society where people are sexualised from infant school. This increases the cost of Christian discipleship, but does not alter its terms. We can protest about our sexual plight in the light of scriptural norms, but we all need to exercise sexual restraint for much of our lives, and for some, it is lifelong. However, when such a calling is due to being gay or lesbian, uncaring and even hateful attitudes are still sometimes expressed within churches.

However, this should not be so, and it need not be so. TFT has been a source of support since I first encountered it as a young Christian, and I have met no abusive practices in the churches I have attended. It is never a caring action to encourage sinful behaviour, sexual or otherwise. Our profession of faith is determined by our obedience to Christ’s commands. These mean, however, that we are consistent in expressing the care and compassion that we have received from Christ in our attitudes and actions towards others. As Christ Himself put it, “Love one another as I have loved you.” (John 13:34).

By Trevor

Trevor is a health care professional who loves cooking at home but also eating out with others.



God Restored Me

I have been a Christian for over 50 years. I was born into a Christian family, but that didn't make me a Christian. I then heard a simple yet profound message based on John 3:16:

"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believes on Him shall not perish but have eternal life".

Although I was only 9, I knew I had been born in sin, as we all are, and the only way to be right with God was to ask Him for forgiveness. That is when my Christian journey began. The Saviour I came to know then has never left me but always held me, even during my rebellious times. These times occurred when I went against God's truths in His word. When I was 16, I stopped going to church and told my friends and family I no longer believed in God. But it still amazes me that so many people I met at work were Christians, and it was through talking to one of these Christians (who is still a friend) that I

started going back to the church, which I still attend today.

The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

When I think about friendship, three words came to mind: 'The Good, the Bad and the Ugly', and that is how I would sum up my friendships. I knew during my teen years that I became over-obsessed with some female friends or teachers. I would want their attention and long to be with them. One was a PE teacher. I loved PE and was in many school teams, so it was easy to be in her presence. Another was a science teacher. I wasn't very good at chemistry, which was her subject, so I misbehaved to get her attention. I could not understand why I developed these attractions. Once, I tried to share this with someone and their reply was, 'Oh, crushes are natural at your age'. But at that age, I had no idea about same-sex attraction or what being gay meant. I was 18 and a nurse when someone mentioned another member of staff was gay. They then explained to me about a gay lifestyle,



and, for the first time in my life, I thought maybe this is why I am attracted to certain women.

By this time, I had also been in relationships with guys, as that was what people expected, especially Christians. I am thankful that I met my husband, to whom I am still married some 38 years later, and am blessed with a beautiful family. It would be great to end my story here and say, 'we all lived happily ever after', but my attractions continued. I would spend days and months of my life attracted to certain women who were usually confident, educated and gifted. I would dream of how I could be with them and how I could make them like me.

“I had always labelled myself a ‘weirdo’ because I had no one to talk to about my feelings”

One of these attractions brought me to TFT; it was the ugliest and most damaging attraction/relationship I have ever had. In 2005, I met a gay woman. I planned to leave my family and home city and move down south with her. I was in mental anguish, as I knew the hurt I would cause my family. I heard 'the voice of God' telling me this was wrong, and I would never be truly happy. My family found out about my plans, and that was probably the lowest point of my life, as I recognised the hurt and turmoil I caused them. But God, and a wonderful Christian friend, spoke to me, and I knew what they said was true. I would never be content if I pursued this relationship. I realised that being a child of our Saviour, and yet living a life that His word forbids and

hurting so many people, was making me mentally ill. At one time, I contemplated suicide as I felt so alone and unable to cope.

Joining the fellowship of TFT

That is why and how I came to the wonderful fellowship of TFT. I was very broken, and quite ill. I met Martin Hallett, and was blessed to attend a Barnabas Group and meet other people who, like me, were same-sex attracted. I always had really disliked myself, and my self-esteem was so low, but through TFT God helped me to accept myself as I really am. I had always labelled myself a 'weirdo' because I lacked understanding of my attraction to women, and had no one to talk to about my feelings. But at TFT, at last, I found this understanding and empathy.

With the help of TFT, God restored me to Himself. He forgave me and has helped to heal my family relationships. As a result, now my family has chosen to forget the past, and I know they love me dearly.

Flagging up risky friendships

I have had friendships since then that I know were going the wrong way. Some have lived in my mind only, but others I have allowed to get too close. I always know that someone means more to me than they should if I think about them too much. I get excited just being with them and, if they cancel a meeting, I feel very disappointed. I found it helpful reading Jeanette Howard's idea of the flag or point system. A simple explanation (and my version) of this is thinking of each friend as having a flag. Most are white ones, and these are safe friends to whom I am not attracted. But some of my friends can have yellow flags. I do not meet them too often, and don't spend too much time thinking

about them. Others can have red flags, and I know, sadly, that I cannot be friends with them. Many of my friendships are precious, and I aim for them to stay that way. I don't have best friends, and certainly not ones I spend lots of exclusive time with, because from my own experience I know these can turn bad or even ugly.

**“Through the help of TFT,
God restored me and has
helped to heal my family
relationships”**

I could write a book about my experiences as a same-sex attracted Christian, the mistakes I have made and how God has restored me. I tried to let Him go, but His love for me is perfect. It's restoring, and it's constant. Praise Him.

I want to end by quoting Hebrews 12:1. This is my favourite Bible verse:

“Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a crowd of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.”

To act on my same-sex attractions is sinful. Even being attracted to someone for me is a heavy weight I have to cast aside. I have to run my Christian race with no baggage on my back. Jesus endured the cross for me. He died for me, knowing He, and I, would be with His Father in Glory. When I am weary, I look to heaven and see myself with my Saviour, who loves me unconditionally.

By Liz

Liz is enjoying retirement. She loves walking in the countryside, spending time with her family and supporting her local football team from the stands when she can.





Do you remotely care for me?

Living in France, I have been benefiting from TFT's amazing remote ministry for a year now. I received so much great help and comfort from the organisation that I had to be careful not to get too used to this, but to keep looking for fellowship closer to home. Being cared for by a remote ministry got me wondering about God's ministry to us. Is it a near or a remote one?

Welcomed to TFT

In summer 2020, I was lost and shaken in my faith, as I struggled with strong sexual temptations. Knowing too well how sin gets comfortable in the darkness, I knew I had to bring this struggle into the light and talk to someone. My battle was so intimate and unusual that I really wanted to talk to someone who could actually relate to me, and point me to Christ. I found TFT's ministry through a book I was reading at the time. It was such perfect timing that I knew that only God could

have led me to find it.

With TFT, I found a community of people living with the same struggles as me, who all wanted to honour Christ and walk the path of purity. I joined in with online conferences I could never have been able to attend if they were held in person. I joined an online book club, where I found trustworthy women who cared for each other, and to whom I could openly share my temptations. There was also a Facebook group for women where we could share some thoughts, articles and videos, and send prayer requests. The TFT women's worker was also always available for a text or video chat on WhatsApp if needed.

It was amazing to see how God's family knew no borders. I was experiencing His stunning plan of forming a community of people from all nations.

Getting too comfortable

The danger was, I felt so comfortable that I was not seeking to share the same love and support with my local church family anymore. Instead, I was happy sharing with people remotely, and then I could also avoid sharing with people who were nearer to me.

I did not have to confess my sins to people who were close to me anymore. I could share some of my sins with my remote family and hide other sins that were just as ugly. From far away, apart from our common struggle, we all seemed perfect and holy. We had no opportunity to forgive, no opportunity to bear with one another, no opportunity to love when we are difficult to love:

“Bear with each other and forgive one another... And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.” (Colossians 3:13-14)

By living as the Church only through remote ministry, we don't fully live as the Church in the way God intended.

When I was going through the COVID crisis, and we were in our third lockdown in France, I could not meet up with my local church. The UK was lightening the restrictions, and people

could finally start meeting. People from TFT who were living close to each other in the UK began to make plans to meet up again. It made me feel sad and lonely, and I also started longing to meet the people with whom I had been forming a remote family for a year.

Like the Apostle Paul, when he was away from the Thessalonians, I felt orphaned, and I wanted to see my family again, both the remote one and the close one: *“But, brothers and sisters, when we were orphaned by being separated from you for a short time (in person, not in thought), out of our intense longing we made every effort to see you.”* (1 Thessalonians 2:17)

**“From far away, apart
from our common
struggle, we all seemed
perfect and holy”**

It was so hard not to see, not to touch, not to laugh, not to cry with my fellow Christians. I understood that although I could get comfort, love, support and even encouragement from afar, I also really needed people close to me with whom I could share, cry, pray and grow in Christ.

Paul could not leave the Thessalonians



alone for so long. Later in the letter, he finally sent Timothy to encourage and strengthen the Christians:

"We sent Timothy... to strengthen and encourage you in your faith, so that no one would be unsettled by these trials." (1 Thessalonians 3:2-3)

Just like the Thessalonians, we also need a close ministry to strengthen and encourage us in our faith, so we can stand firm in trials when the devil comes whispering lies in our ears.

Jesus came close

But Paul was just a follower of Christ, as we should all be. Did not Christ leave His glory, descended from heaven to become flesh for us, so He could closely minister to us? And because He gave himself away for us, because of His death, we can now closely approach God's throne.

And now that Christ is risen, sitting at the right hand of God in the heavenly realms (Hebrews 12:2), He gave us His Spirit, so that from far, He is still close.

I am so grateful for TFT; both the organisation and the people have helped me tremendously in a time of greatest need and sorrow. As I need multiple brothers and sisters in my life to bring out different and less apparent sins in me, I will continue to attend TFT conferences and regular online meetings because I also need brothers and sisters who can relate to the specific struggles TFT helps me deal with.

As the in-person fellowship is also really important, I need to stop making excuses not to reach out to my local church family. I need to stop believing the lie that I don't need people close to me. If COVID taught me anything, it is that I was not called to be alone. I am

meant to form a body with my fellow Christians:

"So in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others." (Romans 12.5)

I cannot easily run if my left foot is in one place and my right in another.

So, I'll intentionally take part in my local church gatherings, and intentionally reach out regularly to brothers and sisters close to me because I need them.

One of my pastors said:

"'Para-church' exists for the local church. They are not on equal footing despite having some overlapping qualities. As long as your 'remote ministry' helps you live more effectively a Christian life in your immediate context within your local body of believers, the 'para-church' is doing its job."

If the remote ministry serves its purpose well, it's a blessing to have both a remote and a close ministry just like we have the Father (in heaven), the Son (who came down) and the Holy Spirit (who lives in us). The Trinity work together, both remotely and closely, so that we can progress in being blameless and holy in his sight.

By Rita

Rita lives in Bordeaux, France. She works in administration & HR in a tech company specialising in wine. She does love wine and enjoys drinking some with her coworkers (and her boss) at work or with her friends at home accompanied with a great home-made meal.



Book Review

"Jesus, lover of my soul" by Julian Hardyman

(IVP, 2021) 197 pages

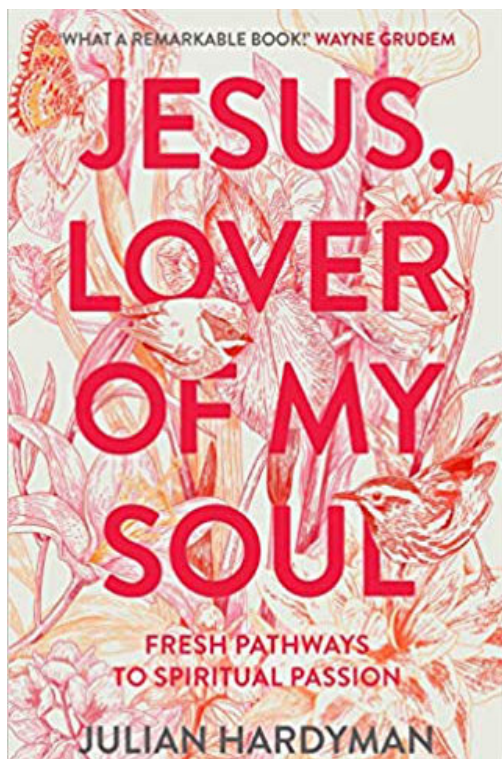
£9.99 paperback, £5.67 ebook

If asked to consider some words to describe my relationship with Jesus, top of my mind might have been Saviour, Friend, Redeemer, Comforter or Brother. There are many other wonderful descriptions I might have thought of but, if I'm honest, I'm not sure "Lover" would have come up.

Julian Hardyman's book "Jesus, Lover of My Soul: Fresh Pathways to Spiritual Passion" recognises that this is true for many of us and deep dives into the idea of Jesus as a Lover, primarily through the Song of Songs. Hardyman takes care to show how "the Song" (as he refers to it) is not just an exploration of human love but also divine love, not just in terms of Jesus' love for the church, but on an individual and very personal level.

I often teach about human sexuality and how it points to our longing for Jesus and eternal fulfilment in the new creation. Whilst absolutely true (and indeed this is explored by Hardyman in the book), what is taught less is the concept that, if we are in Christ, Jesus also desires us and finds us desirable. Hardyman invites us to hear Jesus tell us in the Song, "Ah, you are beautiful, my love; ah, you are beautiful" (Song of Songs 1:15 NRSV). When we are clothed in Jesus' righteousness, Christ looks at us and sees His beauty. One picture of this that I found helpful was the idea of our inner life as a garden and Christ as a gardener. Like gardens, we take work and are a bit of a mixture. There may be

weeds and slow-to-grow fruit trees, but then there are also beautiful flowers. Christ, as the gardener, sees it all and is the one that creates this beauty in us. Given that when we look at ourselves, we often do so in judgement, Hardyman takes care to unpack these ideas, anticipating the reader's "surely not?" when we are described as beautiful. He underpins all points with clear evidence from scripture, including dedicating a chapter to the biblical arguments for a spiritual reading of the Song.





As well as the love and delight that awaits us in Christ, Hardyman also helpfully acknowledges the distance we sometimes feel in our relationship with Jesus, highlighting how this is also reflected in the Song. It was reassuring to see how the Bible acknowledges this as a normal part of the Christian life. Like in our earthly relationships, there are times of distance and also of closeness. When Christ seems distant, we need to persevere and trust He knows what He is doing as we seek Him again.

“Song of Songs is not just an exploration of human love but also divine love”

In a book about love, longing, desire, and sexuality, I was initially surprised that Hardyman had no references specifically to same-sex attraction. I don't, however, feel like this was an omission. All the truths still wonderfully apply, and there is an underlying assumption that we are all broken and sexual sinners, regardless of our sexuality or relationship status. We've all “spoiled the garden” and need Christ to make it new. Given that the surface reading of the Song is about human relationships, there are some applications included for both singles

and married couples especially, yet Hardyman intentionally keeps these brief before moving on to focus specifically on our spiritual relationship with Christ. One topic addressed for slightly longer is pornography use, acknowledging it as a huge issue and linking it to the idea of unfaithfulness to Jesus as our Lover. Whilst there was no scope for an in-depth exploration of the topic, Hardyman goes straight to the heart of the issue in a firm, loving, and practical way.

Given that the Song of Songs is not the most accessible part of the Bible, I found having a tour guide to help navigate some of the archaic similes of love (think pomegranates, doves and goats here) useful and, without Hardyman's help, would have missed many of the spiritual implications of the Song. The book is very readable, with short chapters followed by brief questions and prayers. There are as many references to song lyrics from The Killers as there are Puritan writings, which help keep things light. I would recommend this book; take your time with it, read it alongside the Song of Songs, and allow it to grow your heart's understanding of Christ's love for you.

By Ruth O



Church Leader Online Workshops Review

A few months ago, I devoured David Bennett's "A War of Loves", and felt deeply convicted the whole way through the book. Considering David's story, I was consumed by the question of how our church could be welcoming, compassionate and inclusive whilst still holding to biblical values. I really felt that we needed to do better, but did not know where to start! In an online search, I came across the TFT training workshops for church leaders on caring for same-sex attracted Christians. It looked like they'd be so supportive in answering my questions. I approached the elders in my church, and urged them to sign up alongside me. Five of us signed up and attended the weekly, hour-long sessions on Zoom.

The sessions comprised teaching from the TFT team, discussion with other attendees, and a Q&A time at the end. We covered four different topics over four weeks: "Making disciples of same-sex attracted Christians"; "Particular struggles for same-sex attracted Christians"; "What to do if someone 'comes out' to me"; and "Supporting friends and family of same-sex attracted Christians". I couldn't believe how much we covered in one hour, which was conveniently timed during my lunch break. The teaching from the TFT team was incredible. They gave practical

advice and powerful personal testimonies. During the discussion time, we were in small groups with other attendees. I met church leaders from all over the UK (and from further afield) who also wanted their churches to be safe spaces for same-sex attracted people. The workshops themselves were safe spaces, where all of us could be open about our personal questions and struggles as church leaders.

I joined the TFT workshops having questions that were completely overwhelming. I left with simple, practical steps that we as a church leadership team can take to be more inclusive whilst not deviating from biblical teaching. We have already made some changes in the church, and we feel more equipped to help same-sex attracted people who may come through our church doors in the future. Our most significant change is now developing a positive teaching series on sexuality and gender, rather than speaking about them during random sermons. If you're involved in church leadership in any capacity, I would encourage you to sign up for future TFT church leader workshops. They have been invaluable for my church and for me. Thank you so much, TFT!

By Emma

CHURCH LEADER ONLINE WORKSHOPS

In May this year, we piloted our first series of online workshops, which aimed to equip leaders to teach and pastor on biblical sexuality within their churches. All are welcome to attend either individually or as a team. We have listened carefully to feedback, and these workshops are now being offered in a slightly extended format on Monday evenings this November.

These workshops will be delivered via Zoom with a balance of taught content and interactive groupwork. Each session will have some general principles presented by our staff along with questions and case studies for small groups of participants to discuss and apply to their own church contexts.

Theme: "Caring for same-sex attracted Christians"

Dates: (all Mondays): 1st, 8th, 15th, 22nd November 2021

Timing: 7:30 – 8:45pm

More details and sign-up: truefreedomtrust.co.uk/events

Cost: £12 per person for the series of four sessions

5 years of Ascend

2021 marks five years of Ascend magazine. The first edition was in Summer 2016 and was 20 pages long and featured the three birds logo for the first time.

We recognised that we needed to update the look of TFT, and the shift from a simple newsletter to a professional-looking magazine was one result of that. In particular, we needed to make the ministry have a fresh appeal for younger people. After we circulate Ascend to its readership of around 2200 people, we then publish most of the individual articles/reviews/testimonies on the website.

The magazine is an easy way of introducing people to TFT's work and keeping them updated with what we're doing. There is also a short webform to receive Ascend by email on our website, under the "Resources" menu.



New Staff Member

Since the appointment of Simon to Speaking Team Manager in April, we have been recruiting for the role of *Team Administrator* to free Simon up to coordinate the speaking work.

In addition, Harry moved on from TFT in June, where he has served us very well in the role of *Digital Media Engineer* since the role was first established in 2018. Harry will be now working full time as a church leader.

Because of these changes, we have been recruiting for the two part-time roles of *Team Administrator* and *Digital Media Technician*.

Following interviews in July, we are delighted that Owen Leadbetter joins the staff team this autumn in both roles. Based in the Wirral office, Owen will handle our finances, as well as designing Ascend magazine and producing other audio-visual resources. He will join in time for the National Conference, and so will meet many members there.

Owen writes: "*I'm really looking forward to starting with TFT. What a privilege it is to serve the wider church family. I'm looking forward to learning and growing together as part of God's people.*"



Running an event online?

Did you know TFT has a team of speakers who can speak at a variety of events both online and in person? As many churches of all denominations across the UK think through issues of sexuality, gender and identity over the coming months and years, TFT speakers are happy to share their own experiences of being same-sex attracted alongside explaining biblical teaching.

Whether you are looking for someone to drop into a session on Zoom to share testimony, or teach on Sunday morning, we'd love to help. Please get in touch with us:

truefreedomtrust.co.uk/speaking

or call us on 0151 653 0773.

