

# Ascend

The True Freedom Trust Magazine

Spring 2022



## Who's missing from our churches?

At the start of each new year, I find myself reflecting. Reflecting on what I have learned in the year previously, what God has been teaching me and what goals I want to set myself for the year ahead. It is common to make New Year's resolutions, even if we know that the likelihood of keeping them is slim. However, while this personal introspection and planning is good and natural, new seasons also mark a good opportunity for our churches to do the same sort of reflection, but corporately.

It marks an opportunity to think especially about how we grow God's kingdom and show more of who Jesus is in the year ahead. How do our churches subscribe to God's will for His people? While we ultimately find the answer to this in Scripture, there are things we can learn from outside our church walls. In

particular, the current cultural striving for diversity and representation is something we should be intentionally facilitating within our congregations. In fact, this is one area where we can learn from our secular counterparts in the LGBTQ+ community, for whom 'intersectionality' is a common buzzword, and a consistent goal. 'Intersectionality' is the privilege and discrimination that a culture gives to certain people because of their race/gender/sexuality/class etc. By considering 'intersectionality' in our churches, we can consciously work to reduce these inequalities.

True Freedom Trust has worked hard to encourage an authentic, compassionate and radical welcome in the UK church. However, the welcome in our churches

must be wide enough to include those who are not white who also experience same-sex attraction or gender dysphoria. It may feel like a weighty task, especially when appealing to different minority groups comes with unique challenges. However, it is an area in which the Church needs to grow. I must emphasise that this desire for racial diversity in our churches isn't just fed by a cultural phenomenon. It is an example of Christians being counter-cultural. This distinctiveness comes from the example and teaching of Jesus. Our motive is the fact that this diversity is a biblical imperative. Here are three examples from Scripture that point towards the goodness of inclusion and diversity in the Church.

### **1. We are all made in the image of God (Gen 1:27)**

*“So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created him.”*

In the very first chapter of the Bible, we learn that God made us human beings in His image. Understanding this is to understand the inherent worth and dignity of all humans regardless of their race, sexuality, class, or anything beyond their control. Because those factors were under God's control, part of his great design for humankind, all the inherent differences that make us uniquely ourselves still reflect the image of God. In Romans, we learn that even those who repress knowledge of God will still have the remnants of this fractured image in their character. We welcome siblings in Christ from all backgrounds into our Church, because all reflect the image of God.

### **2. Unity and diversity make the Church stronger (1 Cor 12:12-27)**

*“Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptised by one Spirit so as to form one body – whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free...”*

In his letter to the Corinthian Church, Paul roots his central encouragement in a desire to see the Church united in love, without division, for Jesus' sake. However, he does not encourage this unity solely by reminding this church of all their similarities. On the contrary, chapter 12, which begins with a passage concerning the variety of spiritual gifts the apostles had received, and continues into this analogy of the body, hangs on the idea that differences are not only to be expected in the Church, but honoured! The visceral imagery of different parts of the body telling each other they are not needed can seem ridiculous, but it is very vivid in its reminder that we need our differences to create a rounded, wiser Church, that better reflects the Trinitarian nature of God, with its individual parts coming together. Paul also points out here that this includes both Jews and Gentiles – breaking down any room for racial exclusivity in the gospel. Our brothers and sisters with different cultural lenses will have experiences that reflect a differing bias in their approach to Scripture, and these varying readings can help us have a fuller understanding of what God's word means.

### **3. He calls all nations to him (Rev 7:9)**

*“After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and*

*language standing before the throne and before the Lamb.”*

In the last book of the Bible, as John reveals to us what God has shown him of the heaven to come, he looks around and sees people from all nations, tribes and tongues alongside him. This picture of worship in the new creation represents the diversity of human creation. It is depicted as not only good, but perfect. When we are looking around our churches, I wonder if we see the same diversity that John sees here. And if we aren't, then who is missing? How can we attempt to ensure that the missing demographics would feel welcome and united with the majority of our church?

There are many reasons why our churches may fall short in this, such as local demographics or a preaching style that's better suited to certain groups a disproportion of those who feel equipped to serve in visible ways. However, let our lack of diversity never be down to seeing it as a 'world issue' rather than a biblical one. Let it never be down to a lack of scriptural foundations of the knowledge of God's desire for 'intersectionality' in our churches. This year, let us commit to seeing who isn't in the room at our churches, asking why and praying that God would help you welcome those groups well.

*By Rehana*

*Rehana is in her mid-twenties and her two greatest loves are Jesus and films. She also loves talking about them to anyone who'll listen, and writing about them for anyone who'll read it!*

**This edition of Ascend is on the theme of diversity and inclusion. At a recent staff away day, we searched for instances in Mark's gospel where Jesus encountered the marginalised, the sick and injured, women, the poor and low-waged and those of different ages and cultures. We listed so many accounts! In Mark 1:29, Jesus heals Simon's mother-in-law and was filled with compassion when he found a man with leprosy on his knees before Him (v40). Jesus appoints 12 apostles who were not wealthy – fishermen, tradesmen and a despised tax collector. He encourages children to come to Him (10:13) and commends the widow's offering (12:41). We are to follow Christ's example of reaching and including all people.**

*In his article, Ryan expands on the story of the Syro-Phoenician woman and discusses how Jesus crossed physical and cultural boundaries to answer her prayer. Anna gives her testimony of God's goodness when faced with health and learning challenges, which could have stymied her education. Read about her courage and how God opened doors. Roger writes about how honesty opens up conversations and brings light into darkness.*

*At our local conferences in the Spring, we will be teaching from selected Psalms on God being our refuge. Please do join us at these events where we can be a welcoming and all-embracing community.*  
**By Ruth, TFT Women's Worker**



## I was a male ballet dancer

**A**s you're reading the title of this article, I wonder what pictures, stereotypes and thoughts come to mind?

Although not the most helpful or accurate medium for gauging the sum of a person, in my case the word 'stereotype' is probably an accurate description of that part of my life.

Before wearing tights, throwing girls around and dancing to classical music for a living, I attended a ballet college for three years and, before that, a performing arts high school. It was during the latter when I first realised I wasn't straight, and the former where I came to faith. But let me start at the beginning.

Growing up, Christianity was not a completely alien concept. My family attended a Catholic church every Sunday morning, so I too attended a Catholic church every Sunday morning. However, I wouldn't have been able to tell you the first thing about God, Jesus, the catechism or anything of the sort. The church was as irrelevant to my life as football is to a goldfish. I had no faith and no interest in faith. I was an aspiring

dancer, and that was most of my life. Growing up dancing meant I was constantly told, "you're gay" and other less tasteful descriptors by school friends and occasionally family members. That paired with various degrees of trauma in the early years of my life and the years to come, alongside my chemical, biological and psychological makeup, made for what we could say was an interesting time growing up and learning about the world and myself. If Paul became all things to all people, I became all gay stereotypes for the sake of all people. In my quest to discover myself, and as I matured as a human being, I found my own way of expressing my sexuality through a experimentation and a bunch of relationships with members of both biological sexes, and that continued until ballet college, where my life took a turn that I would never have expected, towards Jesus.

It was in November of my first year of ballet college and I was surrounded by people just like me, as in my close circle of friends were all gay. I was often out with them at the clubs in Soho on all kinds of dating apps, and unbeknown to

them or anyone else I suddenly found myself at a church on a Sunday evening, after being invited by some family friends to a youth group which happened after the service. My social anxiety was at a high. I was sitting next to great people, but people I didn't know all too well, unsure of what would happen. In God's providence, it turned out that I'd come to the first of a few Sunday evening talks about various cultural issues, and of course, as you could imagine, I sat in this service, living life as an openly bisexual guy, listening to a talk about homosexuality.

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**“I sat in the service as an openly bisexual guy, listening to a talk about homosexuality”**

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After all the years of going to church, I realised two things as I sat there waiting to be smitten or outed and asked to leave the premises. Firstly, I had never been taught what the Bible said about this topic at church. Secondly, I had never heard about the Jesus I was confronted with. However, the evening didn't just have a talk. It had a Q&A time for the members to ask the elders particular questions relating to the topic. The questions irritated me and I was confused, annoyed and angry. I also fundamentally disagreed with the worldview presented to me, and I didn't engage honestly at the youth group afterwards. However, I knew just enough about Jesus to understand

that people who follow Him are meant to love and care for others, and what I could not deny was that behind the talk and every question were hearts yearning to love people better. The assistant pastor took my number and extended a warm welcome to come back the following week. Everyone seemed pretty friendly, and I ended up coming back the week after, but the topic was on abortion. Being offended by their biblical response to that topic, I didn't go back to that church for a while.

It was in those months that God started to work in my heart. I'd experienced nothing negative relating to the church personally. However, people close to me and particularly in my friendship group at college had experienced rejection from family and friends because of their sexual orientation, based on religion. When I told them I had gone to church, they warned me. They voiced concerns I hadn't found a way to express: *“God hates gay people. Christians hate gay people. The Bible is against gay people.”*

It may just be my stubbornness and inquisitorial nature, but my first experience with Christians hadn't been all that bad, albeit they did not know who I was. But I'd also heard about Jesus in a way I'd never heard before, a Jesus who wasn't just a fable with the goal of making me a better person, but Jesus who was God among us (Col 2:9), a Jesus who was perfect and loving and holy (Hebrews 4:14-16), who through the

cross offers forgiveness to all, and who calls all to repentance (John 3:16-17).

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**“People close to me had experienced rejection because of their sexual orientation”**

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Now I had no idea what any of that meant, or how that applied to my life, so I started digging deeper. Finally, I had somewhat of a revelation in my attitude of the claims of Christianity. I knew I had my biases, but I wanted to be as objective as possible, so I promised myself not to look at Christianity through the lens of my sexuality. I started watching debates online about the existence of God, consumed a plethora of Christian articles, and ended up coming back to church and youth group months later. I raided my assistant pastor’s bookshelf and started meeting him for a 1-2-1’s, going through the Gospel of Luke. These times included discipleship and friendship, which God has used in my life repeatedly, and for which I am so grateful. My assistant pastor’s loving, committed discipling, a book by John Stott and the love I felt within the church, helped erode my preconceived views of Christians being homophobic and bigoted. Alongside reading the Bible and God’s work in me, I came to faith.

However I realised fairly quickly that being a Christian in the ballet world

would not be popular or easy. Now, professing faith and living it out are two different things. I had thought little about how my sexuality was to factor into this new way of life until I found myself in a relationship with a guy a few months later at the same time as reading through the book of Romans in my 1-2-1, thinking “*What am I to do?*”

As the assistant pastor and I studied the passage, I became increasingly aware of what it might mean to deny myself and follow Christ in a way which I had buried in the recesses of my brain. However, I wanted to know his opinions because I wanted to know if Christians really believed that the Bible was the final authority on this issue. I wanted to share my particular struggles with this, as I hadn’t before. Mostly, I was expecting the worst, expecting to receive ridicule or condemnation. After all, my friends had warned me that if people at church found out, they’d surely kick me out. But I am happy to say that wasn’t my experience. They helpfully took me through scriptures like Romans 5:8 and 8:1. They guided me toward great resources written by Christians who could understand same-sex attraction being something that they too were fighting in their lives.

Coming to terms with what God had to say on this whole matter did not happen overnight, and I can see how I used my uncertainty or stubbornness regarding this issue to compromise my faith, mostly behind closed doors. If sexuality

isn't something that's talked about much in churches aside from lazy illustrations or in fighting the culture, it is the same with ballet and Christianity. It is not something people want to discuss, but I truly believe that God will use the few Christians in that sphere for His glory.

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## “Coming to terms with what God had to say did not happen overnight”

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Since taking early retirement from the performing arts world, I started working for my church where God has blessed me with wise, godly people to chat to, pray with, and have accountability alongside. It has been a few years, a lot of mistakes and many doubts since I first started to reconcile my sexuality and faith, and becoming a sinner saved by

grace. I know that even though I don't have all the answers now, even though I will continue to mess up, Jesus paid it all, forgiveness is available, and the Spirit is at work with His sanctifying power.

*“But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.” 2 Corinthians 12:9-10*

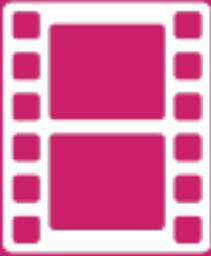
*By Connor*

*Connor loves poetry, prose and the colour yellow, so naturally joined a Korean martial arts club in the hope of evangelising people as he beats them up or (more likely) as he gets beaten up!*

## Help us to produce free resources

*At TFT we are continually working to make more resources available on line. To do so, we need continued funding in order to develop resources and to make these freely available to all. If you are able to support our work financially, we really appreciate it.*

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## Film Review

“Pray Away” Directed by Kristine Stolakis.

Available to stream on Netflix

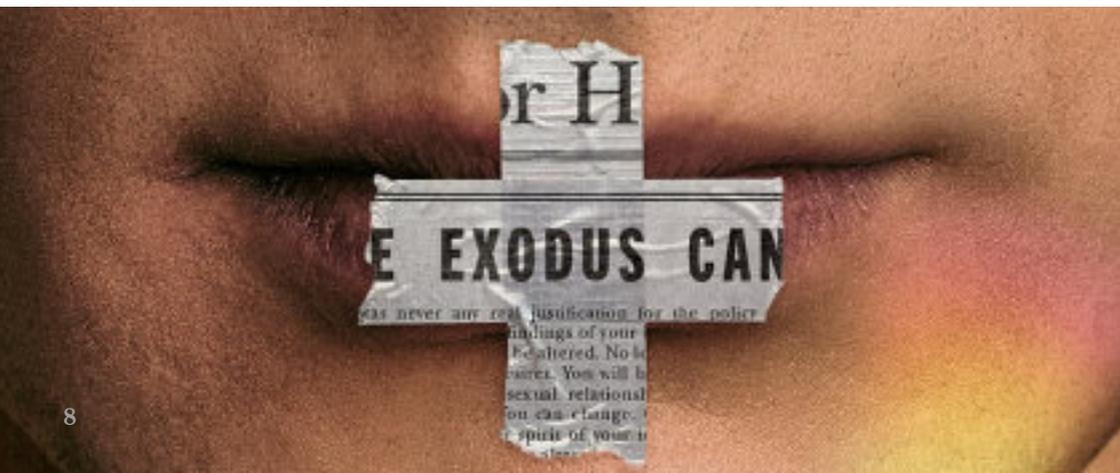
The documentary film “Pray Away” is an unflinching critique of the American ex-gay movement, told through footage of its former leaders. The secular press has largely applauded the film. However, it makes uncomfortable viewing for Bible-believing Christians. As we watch, we need to work hard to untangle the ex-gay movement’s foundational biblical beliefs from the unethical practices of some of its ministries.

The film makes extensive usage of archive footage, much of it from the 80s and 90s, when the ex-gay movement was in its heyday. These clips, often featuring ex-gay ministry leaders in full flow, are punctuated by modern-day interviews with the same leaders now looking back with regret at what they did and said. Many of the leaders featured were big names, such as John Paulk,

Michael Bussee and Alan Chambers. Interwoven with these is the voice of a former protégé of the ex-gay movement, Julie Rodgers, who contrasts her current revisionist views on sexuality with her previous negative experiences as a resident of the live-in programme, “Living Hope”. The film shows with great sympathy the wedding preparations of Julie and her same-sex partner. Having rightly criticised the ex-gay movement’s idolising of opposite-sex marriage, it seemed ironic that the film falls into its own trap by idealising same-sex marriage. There is no consideration in the film of those who are instead called to singleness and celibacy.

### The portrayal of ex-gay practices

The film rather caricatures the American church’s response to LGBT Christians by focusing exclusively on abusive and pseudo-



scientific ex-gay practices that elevate traditional marriage as the goal for everyone. As the narrative progresses, it keeps returning to the story of John Paulk, who was a poster-boy for the movement. Exodus International held Paulk, a gay man, as a living example to show that people's sexuality could and should change. However, the modern-day interview with Paulk concedes that his marriage was a sham and that he used gay pornography throughout.

The film strongly contrasts the modern-day versions of these leaders with their younger selves, whom it portrays as zealous, naïve hypocrites. The modern-day footage shows them as sophisticated and wise. Each of them has clearly come on a journey to their current revisionist views because of the failings of the ex-gay movement. The two reasons presented in the film were that ex-gay ministries failed to change people's sexualities, and that their practices were abusive and damaged mental health.

Another contrast in the film is with the lone modern-day voice for change in the film, Jeffrey McCall. His ministry is to the transgendered rather than the same-sex attracted. However, instead of bringing balance to the film, the purpose of McCall's inclusion seems to be to convey the message that abusive practices continue today. In addition, the choice of McCall plays into American stereotypes of the unsophisticated lower classes: he is

overweight and has a strong Southern US accent. He also appears in extensive out-of-context footage of passionate prayer and singing with other like-minded believers, implying a cult-like devotion. In contrast, the footage of a former ex-gay leader's participation in an affirming church service portrays a much more reflective and considered time of worship.

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**“If you watch this film, see it with other thoughtful Christians”**

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### **What we can learn from the film**

Some critiques of the ex-gay movement in this film are valid, and follow similar lines to the 2018 film “Boy Erased”. The emphasis on sexual orientation change as the key goal for LGBT Christians is not biblical. The Bible clearly calls some Christians to lifelong singleness (e.g. 1 Cor 7:8) and celibacy (e.g. Matt 19:12). It also is clear that God will sometimes leave us with our struggles despite our wholehearted desire for change (e.g. 2 Cor 12:7-10). When ministry leaders promised change to people that they could not deliver, this was clearly discouraging and sometimes damaging.

Another valid lesson to learn from the film is not to put leaders on pedestals. John Paulk's elevation, hypocrisy and eventual fall remind us of an all-too-familiar story with

prominent Christian leaders. The one person whom we should aspire to be like is Jesus. Everyone else is fallible. The way we present any role models should reflect this reality.

### Should I watch this film?

I agreed with my Barnabas Group in Guildford that we would watch the film together and discuss what issues it raised for us personally. We watched it over three evenings, giving plenty of space for reflection and prayer. We used the pause button extensively, stopping firstly to notice the frustrating bias in much of the film, but also to recognise the valid criticisms that it brings to those of us who minister to the same-sex attracted. It was interesting viewing, but we were all glad when it was over.

One member of our group felt particularly troubled by the fear that he might one day have an epiphany, like the leaders in this film. His concern was that he would eventually see the orthodox biblical position as outdated and harmful. It is helpful to recognise how powerful and influential films can be. We found it good to stop the film regularly and explain how the director manipulated us and presented her particular narrative. She achieved this through unbalanced editing, emotive music and the contrast between the people featured (articulate progressives versus unappealing traditionalists).

Instead, we should remind ourselves of the true epiphany, which is the manifestation of Jesus Christ to the

entire world. No other new experience can trump this one. If we are Christians, we need not fear future revelation undermining our faith. Hebrews 3:12 sets out instead what we should fear: “*see to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God.*”

I found the film provocative, thought-provoking and a subtle apologetic for revisionist thinking. This is not a must-see film. I would advise anyone who struggles with same-sex attractions to think carefully before watching it. Furthermore, I would recommend viewing with other thoughtful Christians if you do watch it. Take time to notice the propaganda and manipulation woven into the film. It is entirely negative about prayer, seeing it as powerless (at best) and abusive (at worst). I would also suggest that you pray for one other as you watch it. Remind and encourage one another that hope is neither found in a change of sexual orientation nor in a same-sex relationship. Rather, we find hope in the truth of the Bible and, in particular, in the person of Jesus Christ.

*By Stuart*

*Stuart is TFT's Director and the editor of Ascend magazine. He enjoys a good film but, when he's feeling lazy, he prefers to browse trailers and just watch the exciting bits!*



## Jesus loves the “not-quite-normal”

In the Bible, there are warm words spoken of eunuchs, those people who did not quite fit into the male/female division of humanity. One such is the Ethiopian official (Acts 8:26-40), who had probably been castrated as a boy without his consent.

We find this worshipper of the Jewish God returning home from Jerusalem. His blemished status under Jewish law must have made his pilgrimage an unsatisfying experience. However, he still holds a scripture scroll in his hands on his way home, presumably purchased in Jerusalem. He is reading aloud, in Greek, a passage that describes someone who had suffered the injustice of a shearing, like a passive sheep, humiliated and with no prospect of descendants.

The Jewish faith he had adopted had no consensus about an afterlife. So, as someone who was unable to have children, what meaning did the eunuch's sterile life hold in the face of mortality? It was natural for him to feel sorry for himself as “just a dry tree”, like the eunuchs of Isaiah 56:3. The verses he was reading seemed so relevant to the sadness of his own life that the man in the chariot could

have wondered if the prophet might be talking about eunuchs.

However, this Ethiopian, whom the law supposedly kept from joining the assembly of God's people, was so precious that God sent a servant, one who He had used to speak to crowds (Acts 8:6), into the desert, alone and on foot, simply to bring a message to him. It was a message of acceptance, love and understanding. The passage the Ethiopian is puzzling over speaks of the Messiah himself, who had experienced something that somehow put Him alongside this eunuch, having “chosen to live like a eunuch” (Matt 19:12). The official, whose sense of loss had not been eradicated by the temple ceremonies in Jerusalem, now undergoes a hasty baptism by the road and goes on his way rejoicing, no longer reflecting on his misfortune.

The New Testament gives this African, who had felt excluded, the honour of being the first person from outside Judea and Samaria to be recorded as receiving the good news of repentance and faith. This story should encourage others who feel they don't quite fit our culture's gender norms.

*By John*



## Finding my safe place

**TFT:** Anna, I know you experience same-sex attractions. Can you tell me what other challenges you have faced in life?

**Anna:** I have dyslexia and, until they diagnosed me, my teachers just thought I was being lazy. I actually knew that I wasn't being lazy because there was a family history of learning disabilities. So primary school was pretty difficult.

Secondary school was all right. When I was a kid, I didn't know what it meant to be 'gay', so I didn't really think there was an option. Plus, I wasn't the kind of kid to have crushes or anything.

**TFT:** When did you first recognise that your feelings were more towards other girls than boys?

**Anna:** When I was about 14, but I had so much other stuff going on in my life that I didn't have time to get too stressed about it. I just pushed the feelings down and pretended that I had a crush on one guy at school who was way out of my

league so that no one else would pester me! I also started having epileptic seizures at around that age, and I was getting bullied. Everything started happening about then. Being gay really wasn't the top of my priority list, if that makes sense.

**TFT:** You could kind of just put a lid on it and just get on with everything else that was happening?

**Anna:** Yeah, although it affected me one time because the crush I had was in my church youth group. I became a Christian when I was five, so I've always been part of the church. We went away for a weekend and I caught her kissing a boy. I got so upset! I didn't tell her who I liked until four years later, after I finished having a crush on her.

You have to understand I was being really badly bullied, and as a side effect, I had an eating disorder. I was self-harming, and I hid that as well. So, I was pretty good at hiding stuff.

**TFT:** Do you remember what you were being bullied for?

**Anna:** I was being bullied for pretty much everything. Mainly it was just the way I looked. And if they could find something they could bully me for, they would, including my grades. In fact, everything. I definitely found support in my church youth group. The church was my safe place. One of my friends from church rode the bus with me. She didn't stand up for me on the bus. But she just sat next to me. And she didn't stop sitting next to me. The bullying went on from the last term of year 9 to the beginning of year 11. My dad drove me to school in year 11, and I caught a different bus home.

**TFT:** Okay, so you avoided the bullies. Do you think your same-sex attraction was contributing to your poor mental health?

**Anna:** I think so. In the background, I knew it was there. I had a friend who was out at school but not at home. This was because he went to a church, which wasn't accepting. It was a Catholic church, and he knew his dad was very homophobic and, if he came out to his dad, then he would kick him out. And I thought, what if that happens to me? I was sitting there in church, and the people were talking with hate, not hate towards people but hate towards what these people want and their lifestyles. And I felt like this was the lifestyle I wanted. So, this place, which had been very safe, now

became a place that felt hateful. They weren't hateful people in my church. They were really loving; they still are really loving. They're very supportive of me now, but they had never met anyone who was a gay Christian.

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**“I was being badly bullied, had an eating disorder and was self-harming”**

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**TFT:** So, what happened? How did you tell someone?

**Anna:** So fast forward a couple of years. I was around 18, maybe at sixth form college. I came out to a couple of my non-Christian friends as “bi”, and I told them not to tell anyone else, which they respected. And I had a few boyfriends that didn't last! Then in the September of that year, I told my entire church youth group in one night, one by one, going around telling each of them. I didn't tell them I was gay. I told them I was ‘bi’, which wasn't 100% true, but it meant that I might still marry one day. And I also said, “Oh, and I'm not acting upon it”, which also wasn't 100% true. I didn't tell any of the leaders. I just told the young people that I'd grown up with.

**TFT:** How was that received?

**Anna:** Really lovingly. But when two people told me to call one of the youth who was missing that night, I ended up telling her, and she said, “I'm the same, and I have a

girlfriend!” So this was my friend who had protected me from my bullies at school, so we both thought, “this is crazy!” But it’s weird now, because now she’s still living with a girlfriend, and I’m part of TFT. So we both respect each other, and she even came to my baptism with her girlfriend a couple of years ago.

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### “My mum was told by someone that I shouldn’t have shared my testimony”

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**TFT:** When did you tell others about your same-sex feelings?

**Anna:** A few months later, I told the church, but I had told my parents only a day before. They were loving, but they did ask if I had to tell the church. They worried about negative comments. However, I think our pastor had prepared the church enough. We had someone from ‘Living Out’ come a few weeks before. And our pastor preached a sermon or two on it. I did a question and answer testimony with the youth coordinator. I wasn’t scared because I knew I was following the church’s beliefs. I knew that the elders, the pastor and everyone were backing me. I knew I could handle any questions. I could either give an answer, or I could point to resources. I know that my pastor and the elders had also prepared themselves for questions. One thing, my parents hadn’t prepared themselves for questions, but they were the ones

who got them! And my mum was told by someone in unpleasant terms that I shouldn’t have done my testimony. They thought it was a shameful thing, and that people should keep silent.

**TFT:** And how did your parents deal with this?

**Anna:** My mum cried. My dad got angry. My dad told me, and I got angry and told my pastor. And my pastor spoke to that person. We got a really lovely apology from his wife, and she was one of my biggest prayer partners and financial supporters when I went on my mission trip the following year.

**TFT:** Good to hear that there was some healing there. What about the epilepsy, dyslexia and mental health? Did these continue to be challenging as well?

**Anna:** After all of that, the church felt like a safe community. Mental health has always been a challenge, and still is. Self-harming is behind me. I’m still recovering from an eating disorder. With epilepsy, I’m a year and 14 days clear of seizure. So, I can legally drive as soon as I get my provisional license through the post.

**TFT:** That’s exciting. A few years ago, with your dyslexia, would you have believed that you’d now be a student at Bible College?

**Anna:** No way. I don’t even have any GCSEs. The college said that they would accept me, but I’d need to

write a book review and gave me lots of books that I hadn't read just five days before the deadline, because I applied really late. I said the only book that I'd read recently was "The Plausibility Problem" by Ed Shaw, because we had just studied it in our Barnabas Group. So I did an essay on that, and got into Bible College. At the end of my review, I wrote a bit about how the book relates personally to me. So that is something where being same-sex attracted has helped me.

**TFT:** And in terms of in terms of relationships, are you expecting to remain single?

**Anna:** Yeah, probably. Right now, I'm okay, and I'm used to it. Sometimes it can feel really lonely. But I live with my parents now, so

I'm not constantly alone. I struggled a few years ago with the thought of it. As I said, right now, I'm okay, because I'm still quite young. But I go through waves of being like, "Oh no, I don't want to be single for my whole life." Being single doesn't mean that I can't adopt kids and stuff. But that is way into the future.

**TFT:** It is helpful to hold on to the idea that being single doesn't mean you're isolated or alone.

Thank you, Anna, for being so open and honest about the various challenges you've faced in life, as well as how God has surprised you and opened doors for you.

*Anna is 24, a student at Cliff Bible College and an intern at her local church. For Christmas, she was delighted to receive 48 cans of Pepsi Max*



## “Finding my safe place”

The interview above with Anna is a shortened version of a much longer interview with her. To listen to the whole conversation between Anna and Stuart, you can subscribe to "Ascend Higher" on the major podcasting platforms. Alternatively, try listening directly from the TFT website using the link below:

[truefreedomtrust.co.uk/podcasts](http://truefreedomtrust.co.uk/podcasts)



## Jesus loves outsiders

It is common to hear the claim, or even feel the sentiment ourselves, that Christianity is not inclusive. Some claim that Christianity is exclusionary, trans-exclusionary, homophobic or hetero-normative. But, are these claims true? What if Christianity is actually more inclusive than we think? What if Christianity's founder, Jesus of Nazareth, is more radically inclusive than we realise?

### The woman's request

Consider an encounter with Jesus in the Gospel of Mark, where He appears at first to be anything but inclusive:

*“Jesus left that place and went to the vicinity of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know it; yet He could not keep His presence secret. In fact, as soon as she heard about him, a woman whose little daughter was possessed by an impure spirit came and fell at His feet. The woman was a Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia. She begged Jesus to drive the demon out of her daughter.”*  
(Mark 7:24-26)

A woman comes to Jesus, asking Him to heal her demon-possessed daughter. She comes in a vulnerable and desperate state. But, Jesus seems to refuse her request, calling her a dog in the process:

*“First let the children eat all they want,” He told her, “for it is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.”* (Mark 7:27)

Nevertheless, the narrative ends with Jesus giving her what she wants. She returns home to find her daughter lying in bed with the demon gone. Jesus heals her daughter.

Mark includes this strikingly odd encounter not, as some claim, to show Jesus being “healed” of His racism and prejudice, but to present amazingly good news.

### Jesus crosses the divide

The key to interpreting this episode is in its location. We are told Jesus is on the east side of the Sea of Galilee, which was predominantly Gentile territory. What was Jesus, God's promised rescuer of Israel, doing in Gentile territory?

Incredibly, Jesus is there to provide rescue, not just for ethnic Israel, but also for the “unclean” Gentiles.

In the verses preceding this encounter, Jesus rejects the religious elite of Israel, the Pharisees, and redirects His mission to the unclean Gentiles. It is a controversial, ground-breaking move.

Yet, far from being exclusionary, the very fact that Jesus is east of the Sea of Galilee shows He is pioneering inclusivity. Jesus crosses the divide and offers God’s promised rescue to outsiders.

However, Jesus’ controversial redirection is not completely novel. Though unexpected, it is not without precedent. As we read the Old Testament, we discover it has always been God’s plan to include people from all nations, to make those not ethnically Jewish His people too (Isaiah 19:23-25; 60:1-3).

So, we find that this Gentile woman, whose gender, ethnicity and religion meant there was every reason for Jesus to refuse her request, still receives God’s promised rescue. Though she is undeserving, and though seemingly insurmountable barriers stand between her and Jesus, she still receives the mercy of God.

Her request is granted because Jesus is willing to cross the chasm.

### Jesus tests her faith

Recall that Jesus initially refused her request forcefully. So, what changed? Why did Jesus give her what she wanted?

*“First let the children eat all they want,” He told her, “for it is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.”*

*“Lord,” she replied, “even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.”*

*Then He told her, “For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter.” (Mark 7:27-29)*

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### “Jesus’ heart is for the marginalised in our society”

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We see incredible humility in the woman’s response. She comes to Him on her knees, pleading with him. Furthermore, she is willing to accept that she has no rightful claim to Jesus’ healing power.

Nevertheless, we also see her confidence in Jesus’ compassion. Her reply shows she believes that Jesus’ heart is tender and kind, that He cares more about rescuing people than the inconvenience of societal barriers. Today, in the same way, Jesus is pleased with those who come to Him, confident in His compassion. He is pleased with those who still come to Him despite being told they do not fit in, or are

made to feel they are not welcome. He is pleased when the marginalised in our society today - people with disabilities, mental illness and people from the LGBT+ community come to Him. He is pleased when all people come to Him in faith because His heart is for all people.

### Jesus loves the marginalised

What if Jesus is more radically inclusive than we realise?

In this encounter, He crosses the divide to give unclean Gentiles God's promised rescue. While His initial response to the woman appears offensive, His heart is ultimately full of love and compassion.

Likewise, people in the LGBT+ community may find Jesus' teaching offensive at first glance and be tempted to dismiss Christianity entirely. But, closer examination reveals the tender and merciful heart of God towards those who need rescue.

Yes, following Jesus will mean denying ourselves and our desires, whether for fame, success, wealth or sex. But Jesus will prevent no one from coming humbly to Him for rescue. He invites everyone to come and join God's family.

The Syro-Phoenician woman asks Jesus only for crumbs. Yet, she receives bread. She does not get half a miracle, but whole healing for her daughter. This Gentile woman gets a miracle that even Jesus' own Jewish hometown did not receive.

Those who come humbly to the pioneer of radical inclusivity will never be short changed. So, come to Jesus, whoever you are. His arms are wide open.

*Ryan moved from Australia to undertake ministry training at a church in central London. He enjoys reading and figuring out how to keep his indoor plants alive.*

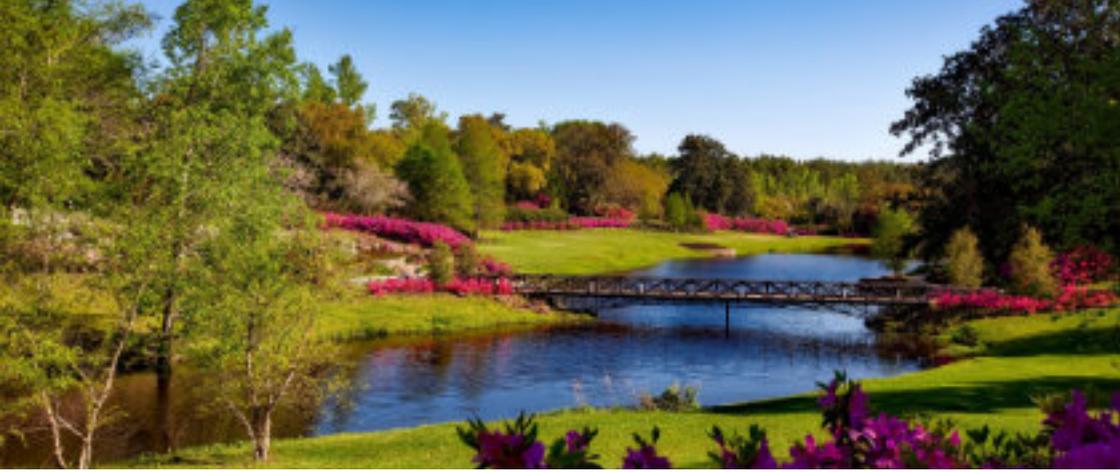
## Request a speaker

Did you know TFT has a team of speakers who can speak at a variety of events both in person and online? 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 and its pastoral implications.

Whether you are looking for someone to drop into a midweek seminar, or a Sunday service, we'd love to help. Please get in touch with us:

[truefreedomtrust.co.uk/speaking](http://truefreedomtrust.co.uk/speaking)  
0151 653 0773.





## How can TFT become more diverse?

**G**lancing out over the balcony, I see a myriad of trees and shrubs next to the creek, in full display of uncountable shades of green. Yet, upon closer examination, it is not just all green. There are dazzling yellows and dark browns, purples and pinks, scarlets and fuchsias. The wind then blows, and the leaves rustle, whispering in harmony to the melodies of the birds and the insects. All the while, the bubbling creek keeps to the rhythm of the whole symphony. Together, it reflects perfection in creation, even if only for a while.

In this article, I reflect on how the TFT community, and perhaps the whole church, might become more inclusive and diverse. In the experience above, it is the diversity that brings out the beauty of each part of creation. Each aspect highlights or complements another. The reds would not look as bright without the greens, and the birdsong would sound lonely without the background bubbling creek. In the

same way, diversity is not only found in nature; we should also find it in all areas of life. This includes the “body of Christ”, the whole church, which TFT is part of.

### **How TFT is already changing**

There can be a perception externally that TFT is exclusive and narrow-minded, catering only to a small sub-section of the population of white, middle-class males. Our conferences often reflect this, where there are certainly far more males than females. Even the staff, at first glance, appear to be from a particular demographic. However, this impression quickly dispelled as they warmly welcomed me. Once you get to know them, you swiftly realise that the staff and the wider volunteer team do come from diverse backgrounds and cultures. Even the small staff team includes men & women, gay & straight, North & South! There is also an active women’s group, parents of same-sex attracted children, and those in related support ministries.

However, there is still work to be done to draw more diversity into TFT and to be more welcoming to those who do not fit in with the TFT stereotype. In the last couple of years, as the diversity in TFT has grown, the articles, policies and choice of images on websites and social media could be updated to contain more welcoming references to diversity and inclusion, which should be evident as a part of the greater body of Christ. The increase in diversity is one benefit of the pandemic, where TFT has taken steps to be more accessible via virtual events, which has welcomed involvement from people outside of the UK. Many more people can now connect online, which has broken down the location barriers. This is a great example of how TFT is opening up and addressing the need for support, especially in places where organisations like this do not exist.

### **Diverse friendship groups**

We can all take practical steps to open up and reach out to those who would benefit from TFT. Diversity has to start with each of us individually, reflecting on the diversity in our friendship groups. We can ask the question, “How diverse is my friendship group based on age, gender, race, class and upbringing?” We can review this continually, and ask God to open our eyes to seek opportunities to reach out and understand others who differ from us. It is so easy to slip into the comfort zone and surround ourselves with like-

minded people. If our everyday life reflects diversity, we will naturally be more open to reaching out to new members by welcoming and interacting with them.

I have lived in five countries, and spent more time living outside of my birth country than in it. These cultures have shaped me through my interactions with a diverse range of people, many with different backgrounds and upbringings to mine. I have friends from those in their eighties, to those under eight. It does not matter where they are born, what their job is, whatever their educational level, where they live, or whether they are single, married, divorced or widowed. I always come away from our interactions learning something from each person. I am fortunate to have an incredible array of friends in my community and circles, and feel all the richer because of them. A simple challenge for each of us is to connect intentionally with someone at the next TFT event with whom we may not have interacted before.

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**“As Christians, God calls us to reach out to people all over the world and to make Jesus known”**

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### **Reaching Out**

As Christians, God calls us to reach out to people all over the world and to make Jesus known. A great place to start is in TFT, where we can challenge ourselves to seek interactions with people with whom

we may not always feel comfortable. Same-sex attractions do not discriminate. Anyone might experience it. The unity that we have with others in TFT who are different to us, but who also want to honour Christ despite their SSA, is something that can deepen our friendships. These interactions can build us up to reach out in the local community, and open the doors to meaningful friendships and opportunities to share our personal testimony and Christ in the wider world.

Those of us who may be a little more shy might start with just being around in a group conversation, or being present virtually after an online TFT event and attending small groups. For example, our Barnabas group has been looking at material from Preston Sprinkle, who himself took steps to reach out to the secular LGBT+ community and listen to their stories. Hearing his online content has exposed me to people with different views and stories. While we are different, we all still long to be understood and loved. Through understanding others, we come to understand the world, ourselves and God in a deeper, fuller way.

### Remembering the “why”

As we think deeply about our friendship groups, how we fit in, and how we reach out, it is important to reflect on why we want to do this. Why should TFT, and each of us, be inclusive and seek diversity? Here are three reasons from the Bible:

1. Jesus came for ALL (Ephesians 2:13-14).
2. It is God’s will for everyone to believe and trust in Him (2 Peter 3:9), so who are we to discriminate?
3. We need each other. As the church, we bring a range of talents and gifts, just as each part of a human body has its own function (1 Corinthians 12). Diversity is a taste of Heaven on Earth (Revelation 7:9).

I glance out over the balcony again. The beautiful panorama I saw hours ago is no longer visible now that it is dark. As the magnificent scene disappears from view, it is easy to despair and to lose sight of the bigger picture. Similarly, seeking diversity, reaching out and including others can be hard, it can take us out of our comfort zone. Nevertheless, I am reminded that it is worth it because my Lord Jesus Christ never gave up on me. He is the best example of why we need to be open and inclusive to everyone. Jesus broke down the barriers of culture, nationality and caste. He loved his enemies, the outcast, the sick, the poor, the old, the frail, the women, the children – those different to him. Together, in Christ Jesus, we make a beautiful symphony.

*By P*

*P comes from an Asian background and enjoys reading, gardening and asking questions. She has directed some of these questions heavenward and the answers often come through lessons learnt in the garden and by reading the word of God.*



# Book Review

“Still time to care” by Greg Johnson

£16.99 hardback. £9.99 ebook. 291 pages. (Zondervan, 2021)

This is a superb book. It includes Johnson’s journey from being an atheist 6-year-old to a “gay virgin” pastor who is now fifteen years clean of porn. It also describes the church’s response since the “gay question” emerged in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. He includes a history of conversion therapy in the church, seeing it as a combination of secular reparative theory as well as “over-realised eschatology” (the belief that we should receive all of God’s blessings in this life). Included is also a description of how the alliance of the ex-gay movement with right-wing politicians in the culture wars went wrong. We are then invited to engage with the New Testament texts, usefully being shown the prevalence of consensual adult gay relationships in Graeco-Roman society, demolishing the “*committed adult gay relationships are not what Paul was talking about*” interpretation. A challenge follows to stop endless debates over whether to describe ourselves as ‘same-sex attracted’ or ‘gay’. He then appeals for churches to be places of grace, as the reality of teenagers being willing to be ‘out’ at school, but not in the church, says it all. Finally, we have Greg’s own testimony of the friendships he has built, along with a call to build churches that do not marginalise single people.

## The demise of ex-gay ministries

In describing the rise and fall of the ex-gay movement, he explains that there

were few total reversals of orientation, as the flow of ex-gay leaders being exposed as involved in gay relationships brought the whole movement into disrepute. However, he identifies several ministries still endorsing the practice, including Bethel Church in Redding, California.

Nevertheless, his primary concern is the damage that Christians’ expectation of change has caused. This mirage of false hope can encourage others to assume gay Christians just don’t have enough faith to be healed (or even that they are unsaved). When most gay Christians eventually realise their sexual orientation remains unchanged, many sadly give up on Christianity entirely.

## Valuing singleness and celibacy

Johnson warns against the perception that the church is entirely negative in its message for gay members: no sex, no dating, no significant other. Instead, he wants celibacy to be elevated as a sign of the kingdom; we will all be as angels in the resurrection (Matt 22:30). As CS Lewis writes, “*...in homosexuality, as in every other tribulation, [the works of God] can be made manifest... Every disability conceals a vocation if only we find it, which would turn the necessity to glorious gain.*”

This is taking Paul’s description of celibacy seriously as being the better choice, and not just one forced on gay people. He wants to see celibate gay

people more visible in our churches to show that we do not hate gay people.

### The response of the local church

Johnson includes comments like this one from John Stott: “...if gay people cannot find [mutual love, identity and a longing for completeness] in the local ‘church family’, we have no business to go on using that expression.” I suspect few churches meet this standard. Johnson makes much of the desire of gay people to make themselves lovable, excelling in every field, spending excessive time in the gym or demanding equal marriage. The church’s role is to show that we *are* loved just as we are. The danger is that gay people hear, ‘you are loved, but...’, where the ‘but’ is not there for anyone else.

Specifically, Johnson argues that no extra level of ‘policing’ should apply to gay members. He tells of a same-sex attracted man presenting himself for ministry. A panel questioned him about any past sexual sins, whereas they did not interrogate straight candidates in the same way.

Jesus radically challenged the norms of His culture by identifying His disciples as His ‘mother and brothers’. So, the local church *should* be our family, “with all its mutual duties and obligations to each other.” He offers the refrigerator test; can you raid a friend’s fridge when visiting without embarrassment? Johnson’s primary paradigm is ‘brotherhood’, seeing shared life together without emotional dependency as healthy. For him, this means a regular pattern of intentional time together with several others with whom he can share in depth.

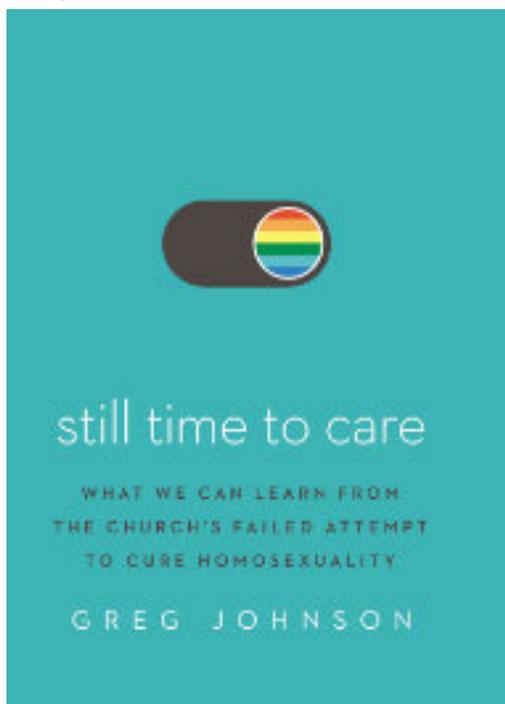
### Conclusion

The book is not perfect for a UK audience. He focuses, no doubt because of his experience, on responding to claims that those who remain same-sex attracted are unsaved. Such a mindset is rare in the UK, where our problem is much more with those who have endorsed gay sexual relationships.

Church leaders need to hear the pain this book reveals. If churches cannot show genuine acceptance of celibate gay people in their congregations, then many in the next generation will reject the church for its homophobia.

*By Bruce*

*Bruce is a retired computer programmer with a strong interest in church history and board war games.*





## Being asexual

**TFT:** Joel, thanks for agreeing to tell us about your life. What was it like growing up in Spain, perhaps feeling different from those of your age?

**Joel:** At the age of five, I remember being told I had to go back to the UK. There I was surrounded by kids who were from a very different culture, with different interests. For instance, I grew up not liking football, which is quite a big thing as a guy. So, from a really young age, I felt different in so many ways. It was quite a challenging time. But I learned from that point on to embrace what makes me different and appreciate those things.

My parents always taught me that home is ultimately heaven. Where I am at any single point of time may feel a bit out of place, and I will never feel entirely at home until I'm in heaven. There are moments when I feel like I really fit in, but there are also times when that's not the case. I don't have a problem with that. It's the reality of living in our broken world.

**TFT:** That's really interesting. Now, when you became a teenager, you realised you didn't have the same

level of sexual or romantic attraction that others do to either sex. When did you first realise this, and what was that like?

**Joel:** Yes, it was another reason I found I differed from everyone else. Growing up, because so many things were different, I didn't realise that I was different in this area. I thought, "Well, maybe it's because I'm from a different culture", "Maybe it's because I'm a Christian", "Maybe I'm just a late bloomer." There were many different reasons. I don't think I fully worked out what it was until I started university. There I sat down and gave myself the time to rethink and wrestle it through, and realise that I didn't have those same desires as everyone else. It was definitely a process.

**TFT:** Was it helpful to realise that you were asexual, or was that upsetting for you?

**Joel:** It was indeed a challenge that I had to pray a lot about and try to work out. Initially, I thought, "What's wrong with me?", "Why am I different from everyone else, again, on this issue?", "Why God? Why am I like this?" And it took me a while to

get my head around the biblical truth behind what it means to be single. I also wrestled with whether I'd describe myself as asexual. I think labels like that can be helpful in a certain context, and it's a term I would use with people who already know and understand and use it, but with other people who don't know what it really means, I probably wouldn't. So it depends on who I'm speaking to. If it's going to be helpful as a shortcut to explaining things, I might use it. Otherwise, I probably wouldn't.

*TFT:* That makes sense, thank you. Do you have a thoughts on why God made you this way?

*Joel:* Ultimately, there is nothing wrong with being single, which Paul makes clear in 1 Corinthians 7. He wishes that there were more single people like him. I think that is something that has got lost in secular culture, where the entirety of life is built around relationships. But it has also got lost within Christian culture, which often idolises marriage and relationships. It has helped me to realise that God's singleness is a gift rather than a burden. I can serve Him with different priorities and opportunities than other people, so I see it as much as a gift from God as marriage.

*TFT:* It sounds like God's given you a sense of peace about your calling. I'm curious how other people have reacted when you've told them you are asexual?

*Joel:* There's definitely been a range of responses. Some people are probably a little confused because it's quite an alien concept for them. Other people's reaction is, "Well, never say never! God might change things. You just might not have met the right person yet." But, I also get some people who have been understanding, which is really refreshing. These people have frequently had experience either personally, or with friends or family, of singleness. They have supported me in significant ways, which has been great.

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**“When I gave myself the time to think, I realised I didn't have the same desires as everyone else”**

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*TFT:* Joel, I know you enjoy being with other people. What is friendship like for you?

*Joel:* Yeah, friendship is crucial, for someone who is single. When God says to Adam in Genesis that it's not good for him to be alone, He creates Eve, and creates marriage. But we are all made as social beings to be in a relationship with God and other people. And that's one reason God has placed us in churches. And one thing that is important for me is finding people to whom I can be honest with and bare my soul. Friends I can speak to, who I can rely on, who will listen to me and understand me and have got time for me. At the same time, other

people around me who are in relationships or marriages have different priorities in life, such as their spouse or their kids. So I think it's important to develop close intimate friendships with people who have got that time in their life to invest in me, as I invest in them.

*TFT:* And because you're not pursuing a sexual or romantic partnership with anyone, are you investing longer-term than most people might be in their friendships?

*Joel:* Yes, that's my hope. What is hard is thinking, "What is going to happen in the long run?" I'm in my early 20s, and everything is relatively transient. People are moving here, there and everywhere. I aim to establish longer-term friendships than most people are doing, but it's definitely a challenge. Our culture sees relationships as quite transactional.

*TFT:* As you say, you're in your early 20s. Do you have a sense of what singleness will look like moving into your 30s and into later life?

*Joel:* I think that will be a challenge. Most people around my age end up getting married or into long-term relationships. I think it will be a challenge being a single person surrounded by couples and families. New opportunities will emerge to be friends and support those people. That might mean looking after their kids, babysitting so that their parents can have a night together or helping

on a day-to-day basis. It also means that I can be flexible to go somewhere to support someone who needs it and not worry about leaving my family behind. So definitely a lot of opportunities and challenges.

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**“God does not make mistakes – don't think that there's something wrong with you”**

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*TFT:* What might you say to other Christians who might consider themselves asexual?

*Joel:* Firstly, I'd say that God does not make mistakes. You are God's creation and made in His image. Don't feel you are a mistake. Don't think that there's something wrong with you. Secondly, you're not the only person like this. I've found it's helpful to know that I'm not the only person who is asexual. And thirdly, I'd want to encourage people to make the most of the opportunities that singleness brings, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 7. Being single and being asexual is a gift. See it as an opportunity to serve God's church and glorify God.

*TFT:* I was wondering what Bible verses might be helpful to Christians who are asexual. There are, of course, references to eunuchs, such as Jesus' words in Matthew 19. However, when you mentioned 1 Corinthians 7, I thought of verse 9,

which says that those who burn with passion should get married. But in verse 8, he calls those who are unmarried, and don't burn with passion, to the great calling of singleness.

*Joel:* Exactly. Yes, that's a great verse. If you don't need to get married, Paul is saying you don't have to. In the eternal scheme of things, the norm is not to be married. We're all born single, and many people will die single as well. Even when we're in heaven, it won't be all the couples with strange single people! That's not what being a Christian is. You can see from the Old Testament through to the New Testament how Jesus redeems singleness. Whereas the Old Testament saw singleness as a curse, we then see that Jesus was single. Paul was single. Some of the most remarkable people in the New Testament were single. They served God in brilliant ways. This is a great reminder that the aim of being a Christian is not to get married and live a happy married life with kids. Our aim as Christians is to glorify God and tell other people about the gospel.

*TFT:* Joel, thank you so much for your honesty and openness.

*By Joel*

*Joel is a recent university graduate who loves meeting new people, countryside walks, songwriting and spreadsheets.*

## Tips for welcoming celibate gay Christians into our churches

Begin by listening to people's stories

Have leaders say, "We need these people in our churches"

Make these people and their stories heard within churches

Create a healthy culture for all single Christians

Affirm spiritual families alongside the nuclear family model

Equally challenge all forms of sin, so no-one feels unfairly scrutinised

Allow a breadth of language around sexuality

Focus on ministering to individual people rather than fighting the wider culture

Minister into the common battles that we all have with sexual sin

Adopt an intentional, missional focus towards LGBTQ+ people

These ten insights are included here from chapter 5 of the book "Costly Obedience", with the permission of the author, Mark Yarhouse.



## Honestly, how are you really doing?

**W**hy is it that so often we have difficulty being honest with one another, particularly with our Christian friends? I'm not talking about lying, although that can be a part of the problem. Mostly, I'm talking about how we use the "F" word. "How are you doing? I'm fine." We say this automatically, without much thought. But how often is it really an honest answer?

The word "fine" is fine when things *are* fine. But when they are not, we often gloss over our reality by slapping a happy face on it. And "fine" is usually the easy answer to give. "I had a bad day at work yesterday, and then I went home and had a fight with my wife. After she went to bed, I looked at porn on my computer until two o'clock in the morning, which made getting up at six o'clock rather hard. I was late to work again today and my boss yelled at me. I feel like I'm failing everyone."

See how much easier it is to be "fine?" Being honest isn't fun, and I don't want to burden other people with my problems. No one wants to

be the complaining friend all the time. "Besides, people will think I'm not living the victorious Christian life if I am always talking about my problems." These are just a few of the ways we convince ourselves not to be honest with others.

So, why be honest? What are the benefits? There are several, some of which are good for us and some that are good for others too.

### Honesty encourages honesty

When I am honest about a struggle I am facing, or how I really feel about a situation, it often allows others the freedom to be honest as well. Before coming to the Where Grace Abounds ministry (WGA), I often felt more at ease with my non-Christian friends. They didn't necessarily understand my faith in Christ, but there were not so many rules about how to behave either. It was okay to let my hair down every once in a while and laugh at an off-colour joke (or maybe even tell one). My non-Christian friends weren't living double lives. Some were drinking, having sex with whomever they wanted whenever they wanted,

and doing drugs. True, they were often miserable, but they didn't seem to feel the need to be "fine" about it all the time. Whilst I didn't always agree with the choices, I was drawn to the openness with which they lived their lives.

Over the years, I have facilitated many small group discussions at WGA's weekly support group. Some of those have been failures, because no one was willing to start things off with a little vulnerability. But, when someone comes to the group prepared to talk about the pain they are experiencing in a specific relationship or confess that they've been viewing pornography, others respond to this honesty by sharing at a more in-depth level themselves.

When I share vulnerably in a safe place, confessing my sins to another person, something happens. I feel lighter because the shame of my secret is out and no longer weighing me down. I no longer feel alone, because someone else heard me and still loves me. He or she may be dealing with the same problems as me, and now I feel stronger knowing that we are working on this problem together.

### **Honesty encourages transparency**

Even though it is difficult, if we are committed to being honest and transparent, others around us will catch on too. When I first came to Where Grace Abounds in 1995, I was terrified. I was in desperate need of help, but I could not imagine anything more terrifying than

sitting in a group of people and sharing my most shameful secrets. But I knew that *not* talking about these things wasn't working either. I had no better options, so I came anyway.

*It was terrifying too*, but not as much as I feared. In fact, those who had come before made it much easier for me. The culture was such that it was okay to be honest. After a little while, I found myself more and more at ease, talking openly about my struggles. No one was shocked or rejected me. I felt more comfort and peace than I had in many years.

### **Honesty draws others to us**

As we are committed to being honest with ourselves and others, those outside our immediate circle of influence take notice. Men and women are starving for real, intimate relationships. Honesty creates intimacy, and healthy intimacy is a magnet for those who are in need of friendship and love. This can be an awesome evangelism tool! Have you ever heard of someone leaving a church because everyone was fake? Or maybe they left because everyone seemed so "perfect". No one seemed to be able to relate to them or their problems, because everyone was pretending to be "fine" all the time.

I suppose the reverse of this is true as well. Honesty can drive away those who are committed to keeping secrets and being "fine." We may lose a few friends, or a few fellow church members, along the way, and this

can be sad. But, in order to be able to receive love and acceptance, we must be fully known. If all anyone knows of me is the “put together” image that I present to the world, I cannot receive their affection. They love my “image”, but not me. A commitment to being known and accepted can bring about the loss of relationships. But the benefits of being known are far greater.

### A word of caution

Honesty does not always come without negative consequences. There are some relationships where it may be best to say less than we would with others. We must use wisdom in what we share and with

whom. Our words can be used against us at times, or we may unintentionally harm someone by sharing too much or at the wrong time.

Being honest gets easier, the more we practise it. As we share more and more of our lives with others, the power of shame is destroyed. Living an open, transparent life is a better way to live, and it simply feels better than the alternative as well.

*Roger is the Executive Director of Where Grace Abounds (WGA) ministry, based in Denver, Colorado. This article first appeared on the WGA blog in September 2019.*



## Women’s Ministry at TFT

**W**omen make up a third of the TFT membership, but we pack a punch! In recent years, we have seen a greater number of women seeking help in their struggles with same-sex

attraction. A brave, sole woman attended the National Conference over twenty years ago but, In 2021, she was not only our Conference speaker but was joined by another 25 women. Times have changed.

## Events

We organise events for women during the year. There are similarities between men's and women's struggles with sexuality, but a female-only environment can be helpful in order for open discussion of our unique differences. We have an annual women's conference, with themes including friendship and loneliness. This year, we will be considering Jesus as our Beloved. These are times of intimacy and community, which are invaluable as we seek to walk this path together. Our women's weekend away combines worship and biblical sharing with eating, walking and fun activities. We hold this annual event in springtime at one of our houses. Women take turns to lead this and organise the airbeds and board games required! Two or three times a year, we also hold Zoominars, which are interactive webinars where two members share their stories, followed by time set aside to ask questions. During this, when following a celibate path is so counter-cultural, these testimonies to the faithfulness and love of God have thrilled and challenged us all.

## Groups

We run two women's online Barnabas Groups and two book clubs, including both single and married women. We also offer mixed groups for men and women, which are geographically near to where members live. During the pandemic, we are delighted that women living abroad have

participated and found fellowship via Zoom. Sharing experiences with women from diverse cultures has been so beneficial. We have thriving WhatsApp groups linked to this support system, where we share prayer requests and chat between our meetings. Our private Facebook group, *Women of Light*, has 50 members who share podcasts, book recommendations, Bible verses, questions and testimonies with one another.

## Volunteering

We value our women speakers as established members of our TFT speaking team. They speak at churches, colleges and conferences. In addition, our speakers are part of a broader Voluntary Worker team, some of whom also take pastoral referrals. We also value women as leaders, whether in a group setting or on a platform.

I am privileged to lead this work, and I pray that God will continue to enable our women to flourish.

*By Ruth*

*As well as being the TFT Women's Worker, Ruth likes to invite friends for meals, practise some recently learned textile techniques and enjoy walking canal paths.*

# How biblically inclusive is your church?

## 10 statements to help you audit your church family:

This audit was designed by the Living Out team and is reproduced here courtesy of them. You can download the audit for yourself by searching online for “Living Out Audit”.

- |    |                                                                                                                                                                                   |             |              |                 |
|----|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|--------------|-----------------|
| 1  | Your church family meetings include people who could be labelled LGBTQI+/<br>are same-sex attracted.                                                                              | <i>True</i> | <i>False</i> | <i>Not Sure</i> |
| 2  | Derogatory language or stereo-typing attitudes towards anyone would not be tolerated either up-front or in conversation between church family members.                            | <i>True</i> | <i>False</i> | <i>Not Sure</i> |
| 3  | All in your church know that we all experience sexual brokenness and all are being encouraged to confess their own sexual sins.                                                   | <i>True</i> | <i>False</i> | <i>Not Sure</i> |
| 4  | Same-sex sexual relationships are never mentioned in isolation from other sinful patterns of behaviour, or from the forgiveness offered to all through faith in Christ crucified. | <i>True</i> | <i>False</i> | <i>Not Sure</i> |
| 5  | All in your church are hearing the same call to radical self-sacrifice of themselves in response to God's giving of himself in Jesus.                                             | <i>True</i> | <i>False</i> | <i>Not Sure</i> |
| 6  | All in your church are encouraged to develop an identity founded first and foremost on their union with Christ.                                                                   | <i>True</i> | <i>False</i> | <i>Not Sure</i> |
| 7  | A godly Christian's sexual orientation would never prevent them from exercising their spiritual gifts or serving in leadership in your church                                     | <i>True</i> | <i>False</i> | <i>Not Sure</i> |
| 8  | God's gifts of either singleness or marriage are equally promoted, valued and practically supported in your church family's life together.                                        | <i>True</i> | <i>False</i> | <i>Not Sure</i> |
| 9  | Church family members instinctively share meals, homes, holidays, festivals, money, family life with others from different backgrounds and life situations to them.               | <i>True</i> | <i>False</i> | <i>Not Sure</i> |
| 10 | No-one would be pressurised into expecting or seeking any “healing” or change that God has not promised any of us until the renewal of all things.                                | <i>True</i> | <i>False</i> | <i>Not Sure</i> |