

Moving out of fear and shame

James Blackhall is a Methodist Layworker in Leicester

Being a gay Christian, for me, often feels like a life of contradiction. Not because I feel conflicted that I am doing something wrong, quite the opposite, I feel the freedom of a life of being honest to myself and to God, but of feeling both "in church" and "out of church".

That one can be "in church" - indeed I work for the church, I preach in our pulpits and serve on our District Executive as well as Methodist Conference- yet can often feel outside. Not quite in.

In Methodism it tends to feel easier, but I often feel that it would be easier for the wider Church if I hid away or at least didn't acknowledge the loving, good and holy relationship I have with my partner.

Yet the experience is not all negative- in my church I find love, acceptance and a genuine inclusiveness that makes me proud to be a Methodist. To know that our church can be truly welcoming place to be. A church that I would have no qualms inviting an LGBT person who was exploring faith to come to.

Yet my experience has not always been positive and the first experience that I want to explore wasn't.

When I first became a Christian I heard many negative connotations to homosexuality. Some seemed to view it as a "sickness" which the person needed to be cured from, and there was often an implicit message that said if you were not cured then there was a problem with your faith and your commitment to Christ.

Others labelled it as a temptation that had to be lived with but to not even consider ever having a loving faithful relationship. That would be "sinful", or terms like "disgusting" were used to describe gay men. Hearing these views as a teenager was incredibly damaging. I perpetuated it - I remember writing to my MP opposing civil partnerships on the grounds that it was an unnatural way of life - while feeling it was incredibly damaging because I knew that my romantic inclinations were towards other men.

While I believe it is important that we allow people to have their varying convictions around same-sex marriage, I think we have to be very careful of the language we use. It's time to lose terms like "disgusting" from our vocabulary whatever our view on same sex relationships. They do not help and ultimately lead to a lot of young people feeling incredible guilt and shame.

Despite having never had a relationship I would regularly go up to the front at events to confess being gay, hoping God would cure me. I prayed regularly that God would cure me because it was a dirty secret that I had to hide. That level of shame around

something totally outside of your control is not only unhealthy but the opposite of “life in all its fullness” that being a follower of Jesus is supposed to provide.

On the other hand, there have been so many positive experiences. I will never forget how healing it was after I met my partner to bring him to church with me one Sunday, something that I will never feel able to do in some churches I have had links with. To find him welcomed with open arms and loved and made to feel welcome was so refreshing for me. To see that our relationship was seen as just as valuable by members of my church family was so important. This is how church should and must look, where diverse people are welcomed and loved. Where all can see the grace of Jesus Christ in action in our lives. This is the outpouring of grace that shows love to all.

The way we treat others shapes them and moulds them and their relationship to Christ. I am grateful that Christ broke through all of those views that I was “dirty” “untouchable” “unclean” knowing that Jesus promises us that ‘you have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you’ (John 15:3) and that truly ‘I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord’ (Romans 8:38-39).

I am convinced that is true for each and every one of us whatever our sexuality and gender. My prayer now is that all people will feel the liberating love of Jesus Christ that I have felt that truly released me from that fear and shame.

James Blackhall