

Vista 30 Mission on the Margins

'Lets talk about LGBT inclusion'

When Lucy came to my door that morning I could see that she was nervous. "Dan," she said, shaking. "I've got something to tell you. And because you are a Christian I'm afraid that you might drop me as a friend ... I'm in love with a woman."

I'd had some very close gay friends over the years, but it was Lucy's revelation that morning that God used to begin a journey of study, growth, reflection and compassion. Rather than pulling away from Lucy, as she feared, our friendship became closer. It happened organically. We'd been singing together as backing vocalists for years already. When we started a new band with Lucy's partner and several other gay women, before I knew it I was the sole, straight, married evangelical Christian performing at multiple gay music festivals, events and social gatherings. At one particular Pride festival as I looked out over the largely LGBT crowd, I had what I can only describe as a supernatural experience. For just a moment I caught a glimpse of the overwhelming agapic love that God had for those in front of me. My life has not been the same since.

I had theological questions. Of course I did (and do). But in that moment all of my questions were all completely overshadowed by the deep, underlying truth that my friends and this community are deeply, passionately loved by Jesus. That the truth of the gospel is as much for the LGBT community as it is for me. Our God stands with those who the world keeps at its margins, yet it is clear that many feel that there are additional hoops and obstacles placed in their path to Jesus because they are LGBT.

Pete started out as my neighbour but became one of my closest friends. A gardener in his mid-fifties, I admired his faith in Jesus, his biblical knowledge and his complete assurance of God's grace for him. But there was also deep sadness in him. As a gay Christian, he believed that in order for him to be faithful to Jesus he needed to live a life of celibacy. Loneliness and grief over never having had a family and children led him to long periods of despair. He struggled to feel at home in church because, while they pointed to celibacy as the only option for a gay Christian, he rarely felt any support in walking this difficult, lonely road. In fact, he felt like an outsider.

Michael began attending an evangelical church because he saw something truly different in a Christian friend that he wanted to understand. Yet as a gay man, he felt there was an elephant in the room. No one said anything directly about his sexuality or explained what it had to do with faith, but Michael felt like he was on the outside of the community. He had a sense that he wouldn't fit in unless he changed something that seemed unchangeable. As he felt more out of place, he gradually stopped attending the church.

Kevin and Tom came to know Jesus as young people. For many years Kevin lived celibately out of obedience, but after years of biblical study and seeking God's will, he came to the conclusion that God could and would honour a committed marriage relationship with another man. Now Kevin and Tom are married and together lead a thriving spiritual community that points other LGBT people to Jesus.

I recognise the complexity and challenge in each of these stories for many of us. One or two of them might even make you angry (or stop reading). As I have journeyed with these and other friends, some fundamental questions have emerged for me: Do I trust the Holy Spirit enough to allow him to work in people's lives in his own way and in his own timing? What kind of environments or faith communities clear the way of obstacles, allowing people often kept at the margins to feel like they are welcomed and even invited to journey with and toward Jesus?

In recent years I have been part of hosting several invitation-only conversations around how the church can grow in our love and engagement with LGBT people within our churches and in mission. We invited about 30 church and mission leaders and practitioners from across a theological spectrum from traditional to affirming, including those who identified as LGBT themselves. For everyone to speak freely and safely, the rules were confidentiality (personal stories and opinions shared had to stay within the room) and respect (disagreement was welcome, disrespect was not).

This was a fascinating experiment that taught me several things. Firstly, there is such division in the church across issues of sexuality and gender that it is rare to gather to hear directly from those who take a different point of view. Because we don't know one another's stories, we make all sorts of assumptions. "Those with an affirming perspective must not take scripture seriously ..." "Your traditional perspective means you don't care about LGBT people..." But by creating an environment of safety, even over those few hours we were able to have deep dialogue and address tough questions. Relationship developed, and relationships are everything. When people from different backgrounds take time to listen to one another it's amazing how quickly they can connect. Secondly, church leaders

(and individual Christians) often don't feel safe to discuss their questions on this subject in their church environments for fear of being labelled and even rejected. We feel like we need to work out what we think in our own heads, rather than discussing and addressing challenges to our theology and practice together. This is difficult to overcome, especially when it is the church leader that has questions to resolve. Thirdly, the majority church must stop referring to the LGBT community as if they are NOT us. There are many vibrant LGBT believers of multiple perspectives throughout the church. Some are quietly part of your congregation, perhaps wrestling alone. Other are passionately taking the lead in reaching out to the broader LGBT community with the love of Jesus. The church would be poorer without them.

A church leader recently asked me to help him talk through his conservative church's theology on LGBT issues. I asked: "What would your church do if a lesbian couple began to attend with their two children? What would it look like for that family to become part of your congregation and grow as disciples of Jesus?" This is by no means a fringe scenario in 2018, but this loving church leader groaned and expressed a hope that he wouldn't be put in this position. Was he actually hoping that gay couples and their children would not attempt to encounter Jesus' love in his church? I don't think so.

But I think we can be so paralysed by a fear of the unknown and of getting our theology wrong (and being judged for doing so by other Christians) that this can stop us from actively loving the people in front of us. This fear can limit our effectiveness in mission.

Let's take the initiative in building relationships across these artificial divides. Let's love, listen and strive to understand the stories of those on the margins and those with whom we think we disagree.

Even when it's complicated. Even when it is painful.

Let's treat LGBT people in our midst like people who are deeply loved by Jesus, not like an issue or a problem to be solved. Let's show compassion first and invite the Holy Spirit to help us know how to love and grow and challenge one another.

Let's actively create safe spaces where we can talk with one another with respect and without judgement as we aim to navigate situations that challenge our theology and worldview.

Let's deepen our knowledge of Scripture, never using it as a sledge-hammer, asking God to help us grow in love, wisdom and depth of insight.

Let's create open-hearted communities where all are welcomed to begin a journey with Jesus, even if it messes with our neat theology and programmes. Let's recognise that often the journey to Jesus begins by being welcomed freely and without agenda into relationship with the people of God.

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(Names have been changed.)