



Four interviews with trans Christians: exploring identity in faith and gender

In this issue of *REtoday*, themed around identities, we are very glad to have some thoughtful reflections from transgender Christians, considering what it means to identify differently from your birth gender and to do this in the context of religious commitment. Learning activities for students, relating to examination work and thinking about identities and ethics, are at the end of the article. Thanks to our generous contributors **Mary Thewlis**, **Alex Clare-Young**, **Rosie Martin** and **Nikki Burr**.



Mary Thewlis is a trans Christian. She shares how her own sense of identity in Christ and as a trans woman has changed:

I was a 'so-so Christian' for many years. When I knew I was female but denied it, I lost my contact with God. When I started to live honestly I gained a deeper relationship with God and a deeper faith. I had been a 'good church person' since I was 20. After transition I felt that when I prayed I was really talking to someone, and when I read the Bible it had something fresh to say to me. A church community is important, but it's there to support and encourage our own life with God.

I very strongly support the view that God loves all sorts of people. This includes people with different colour skins, people with disabilities and members of other minorities, including trans people.

For 30 years I was a member of a church that is sometimes regarded as a cult. The leader of that church threw me out before I had made the decision to transition. His reasoning was 'You have cross-dressed

– you are obviously homosexual – get out and don't come back.' I joined my current church and transitioned a few months later. I got reactions like 'Do you want to be one of the women who do food for special occasions?' and 'Can I add you to the coffee rota?' Just another woman to join the team. God is love. They love me and I love them. Many church people are quite different from God, so there are many churches I would not join. Faith is different from human organisations. Young people are learning who they are and where they fit in the world. Churches should support this process and not impose 'You should be like me' rules.

When I was young I didn't have the concept of transgender. Late in life I was seeing a therapist for depression and anxiety problems when I started to become aware of my real identity. I spoke to the therapist and her receptionist about it, then started to present as female at her office. It was when I realised that I would have to cross-dress as male to return to my family that I knew my future.

As long as there have been religions people have claimed that God, or their gods, only

likes people like them. Jesus was very strong about including all sorts of people. Here is a Bible passage that should make people think – it is in Matthew's Gospel, where Jesus talks about identity:

"For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can."

Matthew 19:12 (NRSV)

I transitioned because being female is true for me. The kingdom of heaven is truth.

God knows the truth. You must be honest. If you don't know quite what you are, be honest about it.



Alex Clare-Young is a minister of the United Reformed Church. Here he writes about being a trans Christian minister:

I believe that God loves trans people because I believe that God loves everyone. In fact, I would say that God *is* love and grace; that God is constantly calling every person to grow; and that trans people are a clear example of God's grace and creativity.

I feel very disappointed that Christianity is often portrayed as transphobic. People assume that it is impossible to be trans and Christian. Some trans people think that I am compromising part of my trans identity to be Christian. Some Christians think that I am compromising biblical beliefs to be trans. Neither is true. I am very openly trans and very openly Christian! I engage deeply with the Bible, prayerfully asking questions about the stories and rules in the Bible like: why is this there? What does this mean for us now? Would I read this any differently if I was reading it in Hebrew or Greek? Asking those questions enables me to be trans whilst also paying attention to the Bible. By reading carefully and questioningly, I haven't found anything that makes me think it's impossible to be trans and Christian!

I have mostly experienced acceptance in churches. I think that people are hostile to an idea of what they think I might be like, but once they actually meet me they realise that there is nothing to be scared of! When I came out, one amazing elderly church member gave me his son's old clothes and invited me to dinner! I was, however, asked to leave one church when I was 15 because of how I was presenting my gender and sexuality, which was very painful. A few Christian organisations write horrible, untrue stuff about trans people, which is quite hurtful and damaging. I wish they wouldn't; if they can't say anything kind or helpful shouldn't they just be silent?

I would like churches to do a 'gender audit'. Some of it is about the physical space: gender-neutral toilets, images of trans or non-binary people on church walls. Some of it is about how we speak: 'Christian family' instead of 'Christian men and women' or 'kin' instead of 'brothers and sisters'. Some of it is about groups: having a gender-neutral alternative to every 'men's' or 'women's' group. And some of it is about visible inclusion, not just welcome. If you have trans people in your group, invite them into leadership roles, make sure they are enabled and affirmed to talk about who they are, not told to stay quiet; make sure they know that they will not be judged.

When I was a child, I felt like an alien. I went to an all-girls school and simply could not relate. I moved to a boys' school when I was 13, and immediately knew I was a boy. But I didn't know that was possible because there was no trans visibility back then. I thought there was something wrong with me. When I was at university, I finally met other trans people and found an inclusive church. That saved my life, and eventually led me to both transition and become a church minister!

I love who I am now. I wish I had someone to show me I was loved and it was OK to be trans back then.

People ask me how I could be a minister when the (Christian) Church is transphobic. (A) Not every church is transphobic. (B) How could I not? I'm a minister so that I can challenge people's assumptions about what it means to be trans, care for trans people and offer glimpses of God's love and grace to as many people as I possibly can.

Galatians 3:28 says: 'There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus' (NRSV). It shows that with God things are always changing, that the categories that people want to cling to don't really matter in God's present and future. That God loves all people and that we are all part of that love, whoever we are and whatever we believe.

There are some resources available for young people at: <https://transgenderchristianhuman.com/about/for-parents-and-young-people/>



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Rosie Martin is a trans Christian. She says:

I am now 75 and it took me 57 years to tell anyone of my feelings. I believed I was the only person in the world who felt the way I did, and I was very careful to hide my feelings. Thankfully we live in a more enlightened age and there are many resources to help and support trans people. I purposely took my time on my journey of transition as I wanted to be absolutely sure it was the right route to follow. I also wanted to be sure that there were no other underlying issues that might cause me to have these gender-identity feelings. I would caution against rushing into transition without seeking proper professional guidance, preferably from the NHS. Your GP is probably the best starting point.

I came to faith in a very conservative evangelical Church, which enabled me to suppress and deny my gender-identity issues. My subsequent training for lay ministry opened my eyes and mind to the richness of other Christian traditions. I now serve in a variety of roles in the United Reformed Church.

One of my most difficult struggles was with the so-called two great commandments to 'love God' and 'love your neighbour as yourself'. Loving God was not too difficult as I accepted that, despite all my flaws, I am made in the image of a God who 'created my inmost being' (Psalm 139:13). My difficulty was

with the implied third commandment to 'love ... yourself'. How could I love this person whom neither I nor those around me understood? Once I transitioned, I was able to begin to love the person I am and hence love others.

During the long process of coming out, I sought churches and Christian communities that were accepting and supportive of LGBT+ people, and I will be forever grateful to Metropolitan Community Church and especially the Sibyls (<http://sibyls.gndr.org.uk/>) for their loving support to me and my late wife.

I have had many discussions with some conservative Christian organisations in an attempt to inform and educate them, but sadly to no avail. Despite their support for 'freedom of speech', some of these organisations have banned me from contributing to their discussion groups. But the biggest disappointment is with my sister, who said, 'I can never accept you as my sister.'

The most important thing the Churches could do is to stop denying that a trans person can even be a Christian! They need to simply acknowledge and accept the wonder and glory of our God-given diversity.

Should trans Christians leave the faith? Firstly, the best way you can be an agent for change is to be part of the organisation

that needs changing. Secondly, my faith is in Jesus Christ my Saviour, *not* the Church. Thirdly, I firmly believe that the best way of understanding the hostility is to listen to it, reflect upon it and then respond to it. This can be very painful, but there is a sense in which it is the cross that trans Christians bear.

I find that Psalm 139 (NRSV) speaks very clearly about God's relationship with me both before and after transition:

1 God has 'searched me and known me';

13 God 'formed my inward parts' and 'knit me together in my mother's womb';

14 'I am fearfully and wonderfully made' and 15 'made in secret, intricately woven';

16 God saw 'my unformed substance' and knew about 'all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed.'

But then comes the challenge to transition and beyond:

23-24 'Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.'

Nikki Burr is a trans Christian. She says:

I am a Christian and I happen to be trans, and I'm OK with it, but that wasn't always the case. In fact, when I first acknowledged I was trans it took some time for me to realise that God doesn't have a problem with my being trans – He loves me because He made me. The problem with tradition is that it often gets added to over time, so I like to go back to the things that Jesus said and are recorded in the Gospels. I figure that if it's important to Him then He would have said something about it. Strangely enough, He had a lot to say about religious people judging others, and nothing that suggests a trans person cannot follow Him. Jesus summed up the law in two commandments: 'Love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and love your neighbour as yourself.' I've got as much opportunity to keep these as anyone else.

Many Christians have an image of God that is of a tyrant that is just waiting to punish them when they get things wrong. But Jesus said, 'For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life' John 3:16 (NIV). To me, that speaks of a very different God.

If we are made in God's image, then to me it must follow that God encompasses both male and female characteristics. I'm not suggesting this in the physical sense, but

in the qualities that we would often use to describe men and women, boys and girls. Even as we do this we may think of people who may be a little different from society's norms; for example, a woman who is proficient in combat or a man who is able to nurture and show great compassion. This is all part of the wonderful diversity that God has made in humanity and the rest of creation.

We don't honestly know what causes trans people to feel different. But it's really important to understand that being trans is not a 'lifestyle choice' as some would suggest, and there is a lot of medical research that backs this up.

Many trans people will undergo surgery and other medical procedures to change their bodies to match the gender they feel they are inside. Doing this can help to relieve the conflict they feel between their outward appearance and the rest of their being. Some people see this as 'mutilation' and cannot understand how God could still love them. However, for trans people this treatment enables them to have a quality of life and, perhaps, to begin to love themselves. I cannot see how God would love them any less for this.

I have been extremely fortunate to find a Church where I am accepted, loved and where I am able to preach and lead services. I have also attended

meetings with other Christians where I do not feel so welcome. I would like British churches to change: simply to ask us about our journey and how we want to be treated. Because many Christians see their authority as the Bible, they think that they have the answers and that they know more about a person's situation than they do themselves. What often follows is an attempt to try and 'fix' someone who doesn't need to be fixed, but needs to be loved, listened to and understood.

The same applies to children and teenagers, who are mostly still working out who they are and where they fit in the world. That should not invalidate what they feel about who they are. Showing unconditional love without judgement is vitally important. It is so important that we show respect out of our love for them as individuals.

My faith is just as much a part of me as my identity as a trans woman, and I have no doubts that God loves me for who I am. Like many other LGBT+ Christians, I am hugely frustrated with the unwillingness of the Anglican Church in particular to create an environment where we can feel safe; however, I am encouraged that there are a growing number of local churches that are choosing to be 'out' as inclusive. Sometimes it's easier to influence change from within than outside, even though it can be more painful.



For the classroom

- Ask learners in groups of four to each read one of these accounts of trans Christian identity, and summarise in chat to their group what they have found out.
- Can the group identify three similarities in the experiences of the interviewees? Something unique about each of their experiences?
- In what senses do these interviewees feel accepted by God?
- What experiences of rejection and acceptance by other Christians do the interviewees report?
- What is *agape* (unconditional love)? What evidence can be found to reveal its presence among humanity (reference to God is optional)?
- Church councils and national bodies often have to decide what position they will take on an issue like trans Christian identities. What should churches do about our society's increasing awareness of trans people? For example, should churches publicly stand in solidarity with trans Christians? Should churches have a policy on who uses which bathroom? How could a church community practice loving inclusion for trans people?

There are longer versions of these four interviews available at the NATRE website for use with students aspiring to higher grades.



Online resources to support this article can be found at www.natre.org.uk/retoday-e-resources/