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8

Welcoming Some of *The Least of These*: LGBTI Youth Through Our Own Conversion

Glenn Miles

Abstract

The “discussion” about lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) youth is debatably one of the most inflammatory issues that currently faces most denominations of the church. The majority of denominations have taken a firm stance, rejecting membership or at least leadership of those who practise homosexuality. Other churches, prefer to take a “head in the sand” approach, ignoring the LGBTI community, in the hope that it will somehow go away. It won't.

The church must make it clear to all youth, regardless of how we in the church initially feel, that they are welcome into our churches regardless of who they are and will find a place to share their concerns and feel accepted. The often-used adage “Hate the sin, love the sinner” is unhelpful to LGBTI people. In spite of what may be meant by this, what they hear is “hate the sin, hate the sinner”. The value, worth and acceptance of the person is decided based on whether or not they are sinners, when we should know from Scripture that we all of us are sinners. Rather than alienating a minority of youth the church should be helping all youth to understand the challenges of sexuality, pornography and abuse whether hetero- or homosexual.

Key words: conversion, LGBTI youth, welcome, inclusive church

Introduction

The “discussion” about lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) youth is debatably one of the most inflammatory issues that currently faces most denominations of the church. The majority of denominations have taken a firm stance, rejecting membership or at least leadership of those who practise homosexuality. Other churches, prefer to take a “head in the sand” approach, ignoring the LGBTI community, in the hope that it will somehow go away. It won’t. Very few denominations, such as the Friends (Quakers) have embraced the gay community and created space for dialogue. Boswell (1980) suggests that this is not a new phenomenon at all and that the church has been intolerant of homosexuals since the early church and that it is a larger cultural stance, rather than a theological one.

The amount of dialogue on this one issue has been enormous. Biblical scholars have argued both sides of the issue, some citing that the Bible condemns it (Schmidt, 1995) and others citing that it condones it (Brownson 2013, Beardsley and O’Brien 2016, Ozane 2016). But even those who believe that the Bible does provide enough evidence to say that homosexuality is wrong, also encourage the church to engage with the LGBTI community, rather than turning them away (Stott 1999; Marin 2009, McLaren 2010). Others who believe in a more inclusive theology have encouraged the church to provide a “generous spaciousness” to include them. For some leaders in the church, their stance to support the LGBTI community has led to them being described, at best, as deviating from Scripture and, at worst, as heretics (e.g. Rob Bell, Tony & Peggy Campolo, Brian McLaren, Steve Chalke).

The challenge with rejecting membership or ignoring the issue is that LGBTI children whose parents are members of non-LGBTI affirming churches often feel rejected by their families and religious communities from the outset. When Jesus became indignant with his disciples for turning the children away, did he make any exceptions? Isn’t it God’s intention that all should come into his Kingdom?

Different churches will have different attitudes about how an LGBTI person should be helped. But shouldn’t it be our main priority for them to come into a personal relationship with Jesus? As John Stott (1984:443) says, “We are all human and we are all sexual. If we stereotype and stigmatize one another, then we do not treat each other with the respect that each person deserves.” The Corinthian church was full of characters that were from a range of lifestyles and Paul had much to say to them, but the fact was that they were *included* in the life of the church, not left on the outside. This is not to say that we condone sexual violence or promiscuity and one-night stands, but we still welcome people of every and all lifestyles.

When LGBTI youth are part of the church, just like youth of any sexuality, they need “instructing in the ways of the Lord” (Proverbs 22:6). All youth, like Samuel (1 Samuel 3), need to listen to God’s voice as he speaks to them about the things that need addressing: recognising sin, understanding God’s forgiveness and love and treating others with respect and dignity. Why is it that we focus so much of attention on homosexuals when children of all sexualities experience temptation and need help in making good choices. If children feel unwelcome in

the church, then they will seek support and love elsewhere, wherever they can find it.

Only when we welcome young people into the church, do we have the right to speak into their lives and challenge them. However, when we do, we had better be sure that what we speak into their lives is leading them into truth. We are reminded in three gospels that Jesus said those who lead children astray would be better to have a millstone tied around their neck and thrown into the sea (Mk 9:42, Mtt 18:6, Lk 17:2).

Discussing this with a well-known Christian child protection author and champion, she felt that it was a Western construct, and thus a Western problem, which did not really affect the developing world. I disagree. In India, according to the 2011 census,³² there are 490,000 hijira (transgender) who have been around for hundreds of years and are not an imported Western trend. Indeed, the homophobic law Section 377 is still based on colonial law from the British Raj dating back to 1860.³³ I was fortunate to visit a program run by Inter-Mission Care and Rehabilitation Society (IMCARES), a faith based organisation, who have been addressing the issue of HIV/AIDS. I was deeply touched by their work with a community of Hijira that they have helped for many years. And I was moved by the way that they reached out, in love, to an intensely marginalised community – one that was even further ostracised among their own community. They subsequently went on to campaign that the church recognise the Hijira who are often visible on the streets of Mumbai and treat them with dignity and respect.

There are many young people who believe they are aberrations in a heteronormative culture, because they are sexually attracted to the same gender or feel they are trapped in a body of the wrong gender. The church must make it clear to all youth, regardless of how we in the church initially feel, that they are welcome into our churches regardless of who they are and will find a place to share their concerns and feel accepted.

The often-used adage “Hate the sin, love the sinner” is unhelpful to people who are gay. In spite of what may be meant by this, what they hear is “hate the sin, hate the sinner”. Once again the value and worth of the person is decided based on whether or not they are sinners, when we should be aware that all of us are sinners. In the same way that Jesus said, in response to those who wanted to stone an adulterer, “Let he who has not sinned, throw the first stone” we should also be careful about what we say and whom we criticise. Jesus made it clear that none of us is worthy or deserving of God’s love, yet we are loved all the same. Many people, who self identify as gay, do not consider that they “practise” homosexuality but that they are born that way. If Christians condemn their “practise”, they feel condemned. Gay people consider that they are oriented to their sexuality in the same way that straight people are oriented to theirs. So they therefore feel that you cannot condemn the sin without also condemning the sinner.

32 Cf. <http://www.census2011.co.in/transgender.php>

33 Cf. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Section_377_of_the_Indian_Penal_Code

Another unhelpful question posed to a gay person is the question, “Are you a practising homosexual?” Once again, is this making their acceptance conditional on whether they act out their sexual feelings? Do we ask if heterosexual youth are “practising heterosexuals”, even though they may well be in a sexual relationship or relationships.

When working in Cambodia doing research on sexual exploitation, we as a team of researcher/practitioners realised that, while the focus of research was on girls, there were also boys that were being sexually exploited. Then when interviewing boys and young men, we realised how easy it was to put them into deserving and non-deserving categories. For boys and young men who identified themselves as gay, we had to be careful not to consider them less deserving of care compared to those identifying as heterosexual who sold their bodies to get money for their families. It was unhelpful to categorise because these boys and young men deserved help irrespective of their sexuality, but simply because they were being exploited.

If we are honest with ourselves, we can so easily categorise sins, especially sexual sins, and put homosexuality near or even at the top of the list – even though it may be something that we have never personally struggled with. However, Jesus said, “But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Mt 5:28). For the enormous number of us Christians who “struggle” with pornography and/or lust, we should be careful about judging.

The way in which the church treat LGBTI youth is a case study on how people are welcomed into the church. Do we say that people are welcome as long as they conform to a certain way of living, or do we welcome them and make them accepted and loved members of the church first, then pray for them and with them about the things that are making their lives less than complete? Which style of welcoming into his Kingdom did Jesus choose? In the story of Zaccheus, the tax collector, it was clear that Jesus invited himself to Zaccheus’s house (Lk 19:5). Zaccheus was shocked that the great teacher would do that, knowing that the crowds and religious leaders would disapprove. He was so touched that he repented and promised to return money that he has taken from others to be returned to them (Lk 19:8).

Eunuchs were men who had been castrated. The Ethiopian eunuch in the Acts of the Apostles, who was baptised, was one of the first people to become a Christian. Typical of Jesus’ upside-down Kingdom (the first will be last and the last will be first), the Ethiopian eunuch was both an African and a transgender. It says nothing about what happens to him after his baptism except that he became a disciple. We cannot assume that he decided to dress as a man or not. Regardless, it doesn’t seem to be important enough to the story to be recorded by Luke.

After giving advice on marriage and divorce, Jesus talks about eunuchs (Mtt 19:11). He says that some were born that way, others were made that way, and some chose to live that way for the sake of the Kingdom.

Coffman suggests, “Eunuchs in ancient times were considered unworthy of being received in the work of God, but Christ opened the kingdom to eunuchs also, and allowed in this place, but did not command, celibacy. This passage shows

that eunuchs were also to be admitted to the kingdom of heaven. The conversion and subsequent baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8 is significant in this context.”

As the majority of commentaries have little interest in LGBTI issues, it is hard to find biblical scholars who comment on what is important to this minority. “Gay Christian 101”³⁴ has some scholarly discussion on this. It is suggested that we could interpret these verses in Matthew to mean that they could be applied to “gay” men as well as eunuchs. “Some were born that way, some were made that way...” (which might allude to nature versus nurture) “... and some choose to live that way”. Could this mean that some men who have sexual attraction to the same sex *choose* to be celibate as a number of Christian hetero- and homosexual men have done, through priesthood, monkhood or simply choosing not to marry or have sexual relations? These choices would provide a celibate person with time and energy that is not always possible for those who are married and have the responsibilities of a husband and father. This passage also appears to imply that some men will not choose to be celibate. Jesus says at the end of this statement “those who can accept this should do so,” implying that some will not do so, as certainly appears to be the case. Not accepting what Jesus says clearly has implications.

Just as debates about women’s exclusion from leadership, slavery and war have been justified using Scripture, this is another topic which seems to have been polarised to such an extent that it is difficult for the laypeople to make sense of it all. Biblical scholars can justify both sides of the argument and many churches have been caught in the crossfire. While this debate doesn’t directly impact most people who self-identify as heterosexual until a close friend or family member comes out to them, it is the LGBTI person who suffers. I have spoken to many LGBTI people who are furious with the way they have been rejected and excluded from the church and only a miracle would enable their return to the church. At a recent LGBTI conference I attended (to speak on research I had done with ladyboys/transgender in Bangkok), one speaker was appealing to people to campaign against (Gideon) Bibles containing perceived anti-gay verses being left in rooms in hospitals and hotels. He went on to say how all monotheistic faiths have spilt blood over this issue and continue to do so, e.g. in Uganda where it is illegal to be gay.

Some well-known pastors have “come-out” in the sense that they have made their LGBTI affirming views known, for example Rob Bell, Steve Chalke, Brian McLaren and Peggy Campolo (the wife of Tony Campolo). As a result, they have received hate-mail and communications most unbecoming of the Christian community saying that they are wolves in sheep’s clothing and even the anti-Christ. There is no doubt that the media have selectively represented “faith” communities who are the most vociferous in expressing their hatred. While most Christians may not be so angry and spiteful, they still carry the label of “Christian”. It is important for us to ask what carrying hateful signs does to draw those increasing numbers of people – participating in Gay Pride Marches (homosexual and their supporters) into faith? What

34 Cf. <http://www.gaychristian101.com/Eunuchs-Are-Gay.html>

does it say to homosexual youth about the wider church except “you are *not* welcome here!”?

What are the consequences of the church continuing to be either hostile towards the LGBTI community or to simply ignore the issue? Sadly, the loud voices of those who oppose it are what the media, and general public, often hear and focus on. Even if the hateful sign-carriers are a minority, if the majority of the church remains silent, then the minority voice is heard and considered to represent the whole of the church. Churches who deliberately make it clear that gay people are not welcome may cause members who “struggle with same sex attraction”³⁵ to either leave, keep quiet, or feel that if they tell anyone they might be ostracised or even asked to leave or be excommunicated.

Some in this context become so confused about their feelings, which they are told are wrong, that they interpret this as rejection, which may or may not be true. For some, this may even lead to suicidal thoughts or even actions. One of my colleagues, who is gay, was brought up in a Christian household where homosexuality and paedophilia were two indistinguishable concepts, and treated with the same disdain. He grew up with a deep-seated fear of himself – terrified that he would grow up to be a paedophile and hurt children. He believed that he was sick, and that he would never be good enough for God or the church he was part of.

One of the challenges, practically speaking, is that churches often avoid talking about sex and sexuality at all. In churches that attract young adults who have had little previous biblical input, it may often be a long time before even heterosexual couples living together outside of marriage, realise that this is something that the Bible doesn’t condone. This is particularly true in a postmodern culture, because the church very rarely talks about it and people’s personal lives are often considered to be private.

Christian organisations continue to actively campaign against sex education for children in schools because they feel that children need to be protected. However, we are no longer living in a world where children are sheltered from the need to know about sex until a few days before their wedding night (if, indeed, that ever really existed).

Indonesia recently banned a sex education book for children as “too vulgar”, because it discussed the subject of masturbation. The education ministry said that the book *I Dare to Sleep Alone* and *I learn to Control Myself* by Fita Chakra contained pornographic content, although the graphics are cartoons rather than photographs. Indonesia has the world’s largest Muslim population so it seems Muslims are also sensitive to this type of sex education.

However, if children don’t learn about sex from their families, schools and churches then they will likely learn about it from pornography. Children need to learn primarily about loving relationships but also about sexuality, dangers of pornography, sexual abuse and sexual exploitation according to their age and understanding.

Children are learning about sex from pornography, often pre-pubescently, and this normalises sexual behaviour as well as body types that are far from “normal”. Girls are becoming anxious about their bodies leading to eating disorders and, in some cultures, even seeking plastic surgery. Boys, both hetero and homosexual, are feeling inadequate about their penis size and muscles – leading to dysmorphia when they compare what they have to the models who perform in pornography. These unrealistic images need to be challenged.

In Cambodia, I helped to facilitate an education program for school aged children helping to protect them from sexual abuse and exploitation using a flip-chart that we developed. The “good touch, bad touch” flip chart³⁶ has been used successfully in many countries in Asia and is now being used in Africa. It deliberately includes a boy as well as girls to normalise the idea that boys can and are sexually abused too. A follow-up flip chart was subsequently developed to educate school-age children about the dangers of accessing pornography³⁷ and how to seek help.

The church has been particularly antagonistic towards education involving transgenderism for children. This initiative has been aimed at helping children to understand that some of them do not have clear binary ways of experiencing their gender. The response from the church tends to be one of outrage, but it has not been thought through. If the church is to engage with this issue, we need to be better at saying exactly what our concerns are. There are a number of intersex and other children who are left feeling unclear about their gender and/or sexuality. How do we propose that they are protected from bullying and supported as they grow up? Whilst we say that “Man looks on the outside appearance, but God looks on the heart”, why do we continue to do the opposite putting an enormous emphasis on the outside gender appearance when all children need to be encouraged to seek God – their appearance surely is not a priority.

Research in Cambodia by the Child Welfare Group found that even in 2003 children had access to pirated pornography in the form of DVDs. In Cambodia, children are not limited by age to access porn. Even though the Royal Government of Cambodia’s Ministry of Culture has tried to ban pornography sold in DVD stores, this is sporadic and not sustainable. As a result, children had unlimited access to pirated pornography in the form of DVDs. Examining a cardboard box in the back room of a DVD store, researchers found hard core hetero- and homosexual porn and porn involving rape, minors and animals (Child Welfare Group, 2003). Just a few years later even in rural areas children were exchanging pirated copies of porn in the playground (Fordham 2006). Recent, as yet unpublished research by Miles and Phuong with youth and children connected to several different NGOs, found that porn is now even more readily available through mobile smart phones.

Although some might argue that having this kind of porn means that paedophiles and rapists have a way of sexual release not involving people, even children who we interviewed admitted that “if you see it then you want to try it”.

35 A term used by Christians who do not affirm a gay Christian lifestyle outside of abstinence but still recognise that some people can be sexually attracted to the same sex.

36 Cf. www.goodtouchbadtouchflipchart.org

37 Cf. www.asianyouthagainstporn.org

Recent neurobiological research (McIlhaney & McKissic Bush 2008) indicates that pornography can have the same effect on the brain that illegal drugs can, where tracks are formed that create patterns of addiction. As most of this research has been conducted with adults rather than children, due to the ethics, the impact on children is not yet understood but as children's brains are still growing, the effect may be even more marked.

Also, pornography involves actors and is in itself a record of abuse as they rarely "choose" to do it. Even if they did "choose" to take part, they are unlikely to understand the long-term consequences of having a video of them online. In addition, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and subsequent protocol on pornography says that any sexual behaviour involving anyone under eighteen years, whether they agree or not, is considered abuse.

A colleague has recently conducted research in the Philippines where boys and girls masturbate and touch themselves on camera at the behest of paedophiles online who pay and then request them to do certain sexual things in a modern day remote and anonymous twist of a peep-show. Even if this does not involve sex with another child or adult, the impact of this kind of behaviour is to be determined but likely to be not that different from other forms of sexual abuse. This type of online exploitation is not recent. As soon as webcams were invented then, according to Donna Hughes, (1990) "Rape Camp" was available through webcams in Cambodia.

Although church youth groups may have the "Sex Talk", this is maybe once a year – if that much – and likely this focuses exclusively on heterosexual relationships and maybe pornography for heterosexual young men (even though it is becoming an increasing problem for females). Erotic massage and prostitution is unlikely to be discussed. Sexual abuse and exploitation of females and males is increasingly understood to be a common problem in the wider community, but it is rarely talked about in churches, perhaps outside of what happens to young girls in faraway places like Cambodia and Thailand.

As a researcher who has conducted significant research on sexual exploitation of boys, young men and transgender people, (Miles & Jarrett 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017), I have found getting funding from Christian trusts to be particularly challenging. Some representatives have said that, although they themselves are convinced of the need for work in this area, they know that their board would not approve.

I am aware of a situation where there were a group of young men who had been trafficked who needed to be transported back home. However, although funds were left over for the year, potential donor refused to cover the costs because the money was earmarked for women and children. The most vulnerable here were not women and children but that was where the need was.

When I have spoken at seminaries in the UK and Asia about the work I have done with LGBT young men, several students ask me what I believe about gay marriage. I refuse to respond knowing that it is a thinly veiled way of deciding whether I am "liberal" in my theology or not. I'm afraid that life is not so simple. My faith in the Bible as the word of God is as strong as ever.

So, what would an "inclusive church" look like?

- A church (perhaps not dissimilar to yours) with a strong emphasis on biblical values. It would have a pastor and/or leadership team who was not afraid to talk about the joys and challenges of faithful and loving sexual relationships.
- It would be one in which everyone was welcome; male, female or transgender.
- Youth and adults would be discouraged from promiscuous sexual behaviour.
- Gays, lesbians and youth with bisexual feelings would be welcome.
- There would be discussion in youth groups about the dangers of men and women using heterosexual or homosexual pornography; the way in which it de-values, commodifies and uses the model actors and leads to an unattainable body image for the voyeur.
- Both heterosexual and homosexual people who have multiple partners and indulge in flirting, erotic massage and prostitution would be challenged.
- But this would be done in the context of being known and loved, so in relationship. They would not be rejected because they were struggling with their sexuality.
- Hetero- or homosexuals involved in any kind of sexual addiction – pornography, flirting, one-night stands, erotic massage, prostitution – would be encouraged to be part of an accountability program where restoration and healing would be sought.
- Counselling and support would be provided for all those suffering the consequences of unfaithfulness outside of loving relationships.
- Christian donors would be willing to support programs and research with sexually exploited boys and young men whether or not they were gay.

The Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8 was welcomed into the church through baptism by Philip who revealed to him through Scripture that he wasn't rejected but deeply loved by God. The eunuch was coming from Jerusalem where as a eunuch and person of colour, would not have been allowed to enter into the temple.. Surely he would relate to the Scripture spoken out by Philip of the humiliation and deprivation of justice for the lamb to be slaughtered, Acts 8:32-33 quoted from Isaiah 53:7-8? Philip goes on to tell him the good news of Jesus and without consulting with disciples or extensive committee meetings the sexually disqualified person is welcomed into the church.

The complicated issue of welcoming children who self-identify as LGBTI also needs to be carefully considered. A recent report by Dreilinden gGmbH on behalf of SOS Children's Villages International and Keeping Children Safe illustrates how even secular iNGOs are ill equipped to deal with children who "come out" in their organisations. It carefully examines LGBTI issues involving children in the light of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and interviews several children who describe some of the challenges including those in countries where it is illegal to be "gay". We need to welcome the LGBTI

community into the church whether we believe that the Bible says homosexuals should be celibate or if you believe that it is appropriate for gays and lesbians to have committed monogamous loving relationships. Exclusion is not an option. We ourselves need to be converted to this fact.

Let me conclude with a poem written by a friend about their experiences of a church who is deciding whether to be gay-friendly.

Grateful

I'm supposed to be grateful
That people are discussing my sexuality
That people are even having the conversation
About whether or not it's okay to be gay
and a Christian
I'm supposed to be grateful
That people are discussing my personal
life
In a way that no one else in the room has
ever had to endure
Whether my sexuality would be
approved of
Whether my actions would be acceptable
Whether my relationships would be
considered valid
Just because they would be with
someone of the same gender
I'm supposed to be grateful
That I go to a church that is
even having this conversation
I'm supposed to be grateful
To feel welcome and accepted
By some of the people at this church
I'm supposed to be grateful
To be accepted by my Christian brothers
and sisters
For who I am
When who I am
Is who God made me to be
And not whom I happen to love
I'm supposed to be grateful
How many other people are expected to
be grateful for these things
I'm supposed to be grateful
That some people have moved on
and changed their viewpoint or
understanding

From what they thought they believed
To maybe accepting that it might be
alright for me to be me
I'm supposed to be grateful
That someone 85% accepts that it's OK to
be a queer Christian
I'm supposed to be grateful
That our church is moving forward
It's a slow process
Step-by-step, eh?
Not yet acknowledging its acceptance of
me and my kin
Wouldn't want to upset anyone or cause
anyone to leave
Except maybe me
I'm supposed to be grateful
For something that everyone else in the
church
Accepts as being their entitlement
Without ever even having to consider or
question it
To be fully accepted as a Christian
To have their faith acknowledged and
validated
To be loved as a brother or sister in Christ
To be welcomed by all members of the
body
But I'm supposed to be grateful!

Gela Griffiths

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2015 Lausanne Statement on Children-at-Risk: An Integral Mission Response to the Cape Town Commitment Mandate to Take Children Seriously in Mission

Susan Greener

Abstract

The Lausanne Movement of Evangelical Christianity has historically viewed children as mission targets or evangelists to peers, and neglected the holistic needs of children-at-risk through emphasis on evangelism rather than integral mission. For the first time, the Cape Town Commitment (2010) explicitly mentions children-at-risk and dedicates a section to children. In November 2014, 60+ theologians, practitioners, and church leaders from five continents gathered in Quito, Ecuador, to explore what it means for children-at-risk to be viewed as strategic and indispensable to the *missio Dei*. Recommendations include: 1) embracing children as vulnerable agents of God who are ministered **to**, advocated **for**, and who partner **with** adults on God's mission; 2) creating theologies that lead to child-friendly churches where children can flourish; 3) viewing children as complex, whole persons who live in contexts of families, communities, cultures, and societies impacted by sinful brokenness; and 4) addressing diverse, difficult childhoods from conception to adolescence by pursuing partnerships with the global church, NGOs, governments, and civil society. Particular emphasis is necessitated on the neglected area of children's co-participation **with** mission. Communicating and gaining endorsement of the Lausanne Statement on Children-at-Risk intends to be an advocacy effort to educate, unify and mobilise the global church to take action on children-at-risk and mission. The movement desires broad support of the declaration as a rallying tool to mobilise the evangelical church to take children seriously in mission through theologically informed