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## **Identifying as Young, Disabled and Bisexual within Evangelical Christianity:**

### **Abigail's Story.**

**Alex Toft and Anita Franklin**

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3734-2242> (Toft)

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1310-3765> (Franklin)

#### **Abstract**

Historically, society has desexualised disabled people and has actively restricted their access to sex and relationship information, particularly in terms of LGBT+ identities. Research has further suggested that when such information is presented, it is often heteronormative and exclusionary. There has been little research exploring young disabled LGBT+ experiences, and the voices of this population are not being heard. Research exploring the lives and identities of young disabled bisexual individuals with religious belief is even more limited. This chapter focuses upon the experiences of Abigail, a disabled 18-year-old bisexual transgender woman who was brought up in an Evangelical Christian Church in the UK. We suggest that although the Church accepted her disability, her gender transition and bisexuality were seen as being out of line with the Church's teachings, resulting in the priest and congregation working to physically expel or exorcise her sexuality through prayer. The chapter explores how Abigail negotiated her identity against such a backdrop and how she continued to live as what she called her 'authentic self'. Her story shows an individualisation of faith, rooted in traditional Christian practices and traditions. Abigail received little support and faced discrimination and misunderstanding in relation to both her disability and sexuality.

## **Introduction**

Sexuality in the lives of young disabled people is an under-researched topic. This is due, in the main, to the failure of researchers to engage with disabled young people themselves; often focusing solely upon adults. The voices of disabled young people are largely missing from the research and they are not being asked about issues which affect their lives, although there are of course some exceptions (Henry *et al.*, 2010; Kimbal *et al.*, 2018; Sineka, 2008, Toft *et al.*, 2019). Research has consistently used expert opinion to form a consensus about what is important, and makes decisions on the behalf of young disabled people (Abbott and Burns, 2007).

Adding LGBT+ sexuality to the mix further reduces the research field as disabled people are not seen as sexual beings. Disabled people are consistently de-sexualised and infantilised (Dinwoodie *et al.*, 2016; Martino, 2017) and this is reflected in the sex and relationship education that young disabled people receive which is often not accessible or inclusive and is also heteronormative (Blyth and Carson, 2007). Little is known with regards to bisexuality and disability, as bisexuality has been subsumed within labels of gay or LGBT+. Although such a collective LGBT+ voice is important for the visibility of non-heterosexual sexualities, Abigail's story, the focus of this chapter, suggests that there are aspects of her experiences that are uniquely related to her bisexual identity, particularly in relation to how others perceived her sexuality.

Being both bisexual and Christian is assumed to be paradoxical within religious and popular discourses, and indeed the messages from organised religion have not always been positive towards people who identify as bisexual (Toft, 2012, 2014; Shepherd, 2018). However, through negotiation and re-evaluation of both

sexuality and spirituality, bisexuality and Christianity are able to be reconciled. Previous research has suggested that this has been achieved either through re-imagining bisexuality (Toft, 2014) where bisexual Christians work to downplay the sexual side of bisexuality in favour of other personal characteristics; usually in a response to the Christian Churches focus upon sex. Alternatively, and a much more common strategy enacted by respondents in Toft's previous research (2009, 2012, 2014) has been a reframing or reconceptualization of Christianity in relation to sexuality. This is done through adopting a more flexible approach to Christianity where Christianity works for the individual's life and problematic teaching and scripture is understood within the context of the age in which it was written. Research has suggested that not resolving such identities could lead to mental health problems, including depression (Levy and Reeves, 2011). However, negotiation (or resolution) is difficult due to the tensions between the multifaceted identities which could potentially be in conflict.

This chapter explores the experiences of Abigail, an 18-year-old transgender woman who identified as bisexual and disabled. The objective of the chapter is to examine the challenges that she faced and the strategies she used to address these in order to understand what bisexuality and spirituality (specifically Evangelical Christianity) mean in her life and how these identities were negotiated. Of course, as the focus is upon one individual the purpose is not to generalise and conclude that all disabled bisexual young people face the same challenges; but as this an area of new research it is important to highlight what may be some of the key issues and what they could mean for disabled bisexual young people. We are aware that this chapter does not focus upon Abigail as a transgender woman in great detail or provide an overview of the literature in this area. This is beyond the scope of this paper, and we will work

to explore this further in future dissemination. However, we are also aware of the importance of intersectionality and specifically the impact that being transgender may have upon other identities; as a result, this will be discussed in the findings section. It is clear that the resistance she faced and her responses were focused upon her identities rather than specific aspects (such as solely her sexuality).

It is important to stress that the chapter explores a number of identities that are contested. Abigail identifies as being: young, bisexual, trans, disabled and religious. In this instance we explored with Abigail what it meant to be disabled and bisexual, and also being religious and bisexual, as a disabled young person. In order to speak to these aspects, we will present a brief overview on the literature which touches upon these issues.

The chapter will then provide a short methodological account. It then presents findings which speak to the overall aim of the chapter. The first section explores (bi)sexuality in Abigail's life, looking at her understanding of how society views her as someone who is bisexual and disabled; and then moving to explore how she understands sexuality in her life. The aim is to construct a picture of what it means to be both bisexual and disabled and to explore both private and societal pressures and the negotiations which take place. Having presented a picture of being bisexual and disabled, the second section then applies this to look at religion in Abigail's life and the challenges she faced as a religious, young disabled bisexual person. As an Evangelical Christian, Abigail had the desire to attend church and be part of a religious community, yet the congregation and their attitude towards her sexuality made this difficult. The chapter explores her religious life and the negotiations she made in order to lead a religious life as a young disabled bisexual person.

## **Bisexuality and disability**

Historically, research on bisexuality has focused on understanding bisexuality and its relation to sex, gender, and other sexual identities (Storr, 1997). More recent research has tended to explain bisexuality as relating to sexual attraction, behaviour and identity (Robinson, 2015), building upon important work by pioneers such as Klein (1993) and Rust (1995, 2001). However, it is clear that there are motivations for adopting a bisexual identity that do not relate solely to intimacy and relationships. As Hartman-Linck (2014) has shown, bisexual visibility is important not only for attracting sexual partners but also in terms of being visible as bisexual women (in this case), which might not be obvious in some situations (e.g. in monogamous opposite sex relationships). In this regard it is an identity shaped by political beliefs and ideology. Previous research has also shown that bisexual women and men also focus upon non-physical markers for attraction, and are therefore attracted to the person rather than their sex (McCormack, Wignall and Anderson, 2015; Ripley, Anderson, McCormack, Adams, and Pitts, 2001; Rust, 2001; Toft, 2014, Forthcoming; Toft and Yip, 2018). Such a history is potentially questioned by the rise of intersectionality (Windsong, 2018) which stresses the importance of understanding that identities intersect and influence each other. Earlier research on bisexuality tended to view bisexuality in isolation with little exploration of intersectionality beyond gender (see Pennington, 2009) and religion (Levy and Harr, 2018; Toft, 2014, 2019).

This history of bisexual research is missing any consideration of individuals who identify as disabled, although there is research with LGBT+ and disabled people. Our view is that bisexuality needs separate consideration. Although there are some overlapping and potential relevant issues that arise from this literature which is relatable for bisexual disabled people, in essence grouping individuals into the

umbrella of LGBT+ potentially obscures and dilutes bisexual identity. Research on LGBT+ sexual identities and disability has focussed upon how society has viewed sexuality in the lives of disabled people and has shown that they are consistently desexualised by wider society (Richards, 2017) and perceived as being non-sexual (Dinwoodie *et al.*, 2016; Shakespeare, 2000). The wider research, from which this chapter originates, has shown that young disabled people are excluded from debates concerning sexuality. As a result, they often receive little or no information/support, due to the belief that it is not needed (they will never be sexual), it would not be understood (they lack capacity), or that sexuality is a passing phase; at times linked with their disability (they don't understand what LGBT+ sexuality is) (Toft *et al.*, 2019a, 2019b). This lack of information/support results in young disabled people being left to explore without knowledge or information and the risk of abuse is potentially heightened (Franklin *et al.*, 2015).

### **Christianity and (bi)sexuality in the lives of young disabled people.**

There is no literature that we know of exploring Christianity in the lives of young people who are bisexual and disabled. However, historically Christianity has been viewed as exclusionary towards disabled people in terms of its imagery. According to Hull (2003), such prejudice against disabled people is ingrained in Christianity and perpetuated through the Bible and Church worship. Research from Iceland (Björnsdóttir and Traustadóttir, 2010) has suggested that disabled people are devalued and not seen as having the capacity to engage with God. Participants in the research reported being denied access to religious spaces. One young man was denied confirmation by a minister who stated that people who are developmentally delayed cannot have 'a meaningful relationship with God' (55). However, the young man in

the story resisted such views and requested confirmation from his minister. The initial reaction from the minister confirmed for the authors that ‘people with learning difficulties were, as a group, viewed as incompetent, dependent and eternal children (57). This is a common theme throughout the literature and can be traced at far back as the work of Craft who coined the term ‘forever child’ (1987: 14) to describe how disabled people were perceived.

Individuals who identify as both Christian and bisexual have to work to negotiate their identities and attempt to reconcile with a religion that is generally unaccepting of their sexuality. Toft’s previous research (2014) shows that this is achieved either through adaption of spiritual beliefs or clarification about what bisexuality means. Strategies that individualise or adapt Christianity reflect a definite shift in contemporary religious life. A number of individuals in Toft’s research moved away from organised religion and/or practiced a faith which is more personalised and reflective. This reflects what Woodhead (2001) has noted in relation to the contemporary religious landscape, a shift towards asking what religion can do for you rather than what you can do for religion (Woodhead, 2001). Much of the Christian Church’s understanding of bisexuality appears to be deeply flawed, with previous research (Toft, 2014) suggesting that bisexuality has been largely conflated with promiscuity and that bisexual lives are always polyamorous (House of Bishops, 2003).

### **Methodological account**

The data used to construct this chapter was gathered during a 12-month project funded by the British Academy (SG163117). The project aimed to explore the experiences of young people (16-25 years) who were disabled and LGBT+.

particularly in relation to how they negotiate their identities, their experiences of support and education and other aspects of their lives that played an important role (such as religion). We spoke to 13 young people during the project. However, the lead author has since continued work in this area conducting a number of focus groups and workshops to continue the research.

The data was collected using semi-structured interviews, which generally lasted around one hour. Interviews were guided by the responses of the young people in line with the exploratory nature of the research, but broad topic guides were constructed focusing upon the intersection of their age, sexuality and disability. Topic guides were framed to then explore the young people's life experiences, societal perceptions, challenges/barriers, and education. The broad aim of the interviews was to allow the young people space to explore how they understood and negotiated their identities.

In order to make the interviews more accessible we constructed a series of innovative methods that would be used during the interview. This enabled us to move away from a reliance upon potentially anxiety-inducing question and answering sessions. These included word cards, role-play activities, and vignettes. Word cards worked well in helping to build rapport with the young people. During the activity both the researchers and participants looked through cards with key research words such as 'gay', 'bisexual', 'disabled', and selected those which applied to their lives. This was also useful in starting to unpick how such identities were used and the pressures young people felt. Role-play activities and vignettes were often used simultaneously and revolved around using real-life (or imagined) stories involving disabled and/or LGBT+ issues. The researcher and participant then worked through the issues raised to discuss aspects that related to the participants lived experiences.

Although we tried to work in a more sensitive and inclusive manner, with regards to collection data, we acknowledge that our methods excluded those with complex communication needs. Our sample was also convenience based and not representative; as we used gatekeepers with access to young people via their established support groups.

### **Bisexuality in Abigail's life**

The literature clearly shows that being LGBT+ and disabled is challenging. Abigail's story suggests that these challenges are as a result of societal misconceptions and ignorance. This section will now explore Abigail's perception of how society understood her sexuality and the challenges this posed. The section then moves to explore how she responded to such challenges by using creative agency.

#### *Everyday challenges*

Abigail suggested that the biggest difficulty she faced is not being able to validate her own sexuality. Throughout her story she gave examples of when she was being denied a sexual identity, due in main to her disability and being seen as incapable of making such a decision. She described herself as having a statement of special needs<sup>1</sup> due to being learning disabled and having mental health issues but was clear that she understood her own sexuality:

I always knew it was how I wanted to live [as bisexual]. So being LGBT and that young they always thought it was a phase.

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<sup>1</sup> From 2014 with the Children and Families Act Statement of Special Educational Needs have been replaced by Education, Health and Care (EHC) plans which are legal documents describing support needs. Abigail still preferred to refer to it as her statement.

She noted that both family and friends did not believe her when she discussed her sexuality, questioning her ability to understand what being bisexual meant. In the following quotation Abigail suggests that people simply do not accept that she is bisexual because she is disabled:

Because of my learning difficulties people [say] that because I am disabled that I don't understand it [bisexuality], and it is just a phrase<sup>2</sup>. I got told that a lot, that it is just a phrase, because I don't understand it because of my learning difficulties. You know, I may struggle with things but I am not completely stupid.

Abigail is clearly upset that people assume she does not have the capacity to understand her own sexuality and that as a result she has no sexual identity. As research has suggested (Toft *et al.*, 2019), young people often experience others making a link between their disability and understanding their own sexuality, and this is exacerbated with regards to LGBT+ which Abigail suggested was more difficult for others to accept. This is most clearly shown with regards to her sexuality being seen as a phase. Although this is an issue faced by young disabled LGBT+ persons as a whole (Toft *et al.*, 2019) this is clearly exacerbated in those who are bisexual, due to misconceptions about bisexuality as being either a path towards being gay or a period of uncertainty and experimentation.

Abigail explained how people in general see her bisexuality as a phase through which she will eventually pass. This also reflects discrimination against Abigail in terms of her age and makes a judgement regarding her maturity, seeing her too immature to grasp concepts such as bisexuality. This was also reflected in family

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<sup>2</sup> Analysis of the surrounding data indicates that Abigail accidentally used 'phrase' when meaning 'phase'. This nuance in language is important to note as our research has also highlighted that disabled young people can be frequently accused of not understanding a word/phrase and lack capacity to understand, for example, bisexuality when they use this word to describe themselves.

reactions as they were unable to acknowledge that Abigail was indeed bisexual. This was resulted in her family stating that her sexuality was a phase which she would grow out of:

When I was a younger person and I came out. Mum always used to tell me it was a phase and I would grow out of it... Seeing comments [on Facebook] saying that parents are forcing it on their children. I think that does play a key role in people being themselves at a young age, that it is being forced on them and it is not. It is just who we are.

Abigail's mother in this instance was referring to both her trans and bisexual identities, about which her mother was in denial. For her mother, it was hoped that Abigail would no longer pursue her transition and that she was in a bisexual phase but would be straight at some point.

It was a common occurrence for people not to understand her sexuality, and she was used to explaining her sexuality and gender to people. During the interview Abigail stated that this was a daily occurrence, but she was receptive to such requests:

There have been a few times when I have had to explain my sexuality and that [referring to her gender identity] to people. It can be frustrating but it is something I am really open about. So in that sense I don't mind talking to people about my whole transition and coming out and what not. That for me is something I am used to on a daily basis.

Although noted as being 'frustrating', there was a clear sense that she was willing to talk to people about her sexuality and gender. Abigail made a conscious effort to distinguish between people's interest in her sexuality and those who were being abusive. Interest and the desire to better understand was a welcomed interaction, as opposed to those who remained ignorant and did not attempt to understand her

experiences. Abigail noted how her friends and associates tried to be supportive but they could not quite grasp the situation:

Yeah, I think a lot of people didn't get it. When I came out [as bisexual and trans], I first came out on *Facebook* so I had quite a lot of comments on it.

They were supportive but they were confused as well, so I had to explain the difference between my sexuality and my gender. That is something I have to explain a lot as well.

Reaction from the general public was not always so positive, and as previously suggested there were people who did not want to learn more about sexuality and what it meant to Abigail. She explored how people's reaction to her sexuality has often resulted in violence and open discrimination: 'I have been told to kill myself, to overdose, to slit my throat, to slit my wrists, yeah. I get that on a daily basis.'

These experiences reveal the severity of the responses and the everyday challenges that Abigail faced. However, such a response did not come from a specific community or group of people. In her experience abuse occurred either online or in public place ('on the streets') and perpetrators were members of the public. The following exchange highlights this:

*Abigail* - When I've been walking down to the shops and that. I've had my nose broken and everything.

*Interviewer* - And is that people you knew?

*Abigail* - Yeah. Well I've seen them round the area, but not personally.

There were no instances of discrimination and abuse from LGBT+ or disabled spaces, and Abigail was clear that she garnered great support from her LGBT+ friends.

During the interview, Abigail noted that she does have a few other disabled friends

who have been accepting of her journey. She suggested that disabled people are used to being discriminated against and are therefore understanding and supportive:

I'm going on personal experience I think they have been more supportive because disabled people get discriminated quite a lot so they would understand what it is like to be discriminated against. So they would be more supportive in a way.

This is an interesting perspective which sheds light on the power of shared experiences. Abigail is suggesting that because other disabled people are likely to have experienced and suffered abuse from non-disabled people they are less likely to abuse others. This is pushed further by Abigail as she explains how she has in fact been a figure of encouragement for other people:

I've been told that I am an inspiration because... I'm a person for helping everybody else. I've been called an inspiration, people look up to me. I've been told that people do look up to me and how much I'm an amazing person, and I've been told that by people. And for me that has made me feel a lot better about myself and that kind of wants to make me carry on with things.

These experiences represent a consistent denial of the validity of bisexuality in Abigail's life. She was told that her sexuality is a phase and that she cannot be bisexual because she does not understand LGBT+ sexuality because she is disabled. The abuse that she suffers is very real, although she continued to work to educate and inform others about what her sexuality means.

### *Responding to challenges*

Against the misunderstandings and discrimination outlined above, Abigail worked to form her sexual identity and to be her 'true authentic self' - a phrase that she repeated

a number of times throughout the interview. Abigail responded to the misunderstanding and misconceptions by working to understand her sexuality on her own terms. Although she attends an excellent support group for young LGBT+ people in central England, which provides her with support, education, community and a place to explore herself in relation to her sexuality and gender identity; her family have not been supportive. As a result, she leads a double life where she cannot be herself at home; juxtaposed with her social life amongst friends where she feels free to be herself. Without guidance and the support of her family, she worked with a sense of creative agency. It is clear that she is aware that others perceive problems with her being bisexual as a disabled person, but this is not reflected in how she constructs her sexual identity. For Abigail, the central tenant of her bisexuality revolved around being open to other people and wanting to form a special connection that is not dependent upon their sex.

For Abigail, bisexuality was conceptualised as being falling in love with someone, and she did not put any filters or qualifiers upon this:

I just tell them that I fall in love with whoever I fall in love with. For me that is the easiest way to put it really without getting complicated.

Abigail preferred to understand her sexuality in terms of an openness to falling for a person rather than focussing upon their sex or gender. This often resulted in her preferring not to label herself, but she felt that overall bisexuality was probably the best way to frame her sexuality.

Sometimes, most of the time, I don't tend to label myself, because for me I tend to fall in love with whoever I fall in love with regardless of their gender or whatever. But if someone doesn't understand I use these terms (referring to

bisexuality and pansexuality) to make it a little bit easier for them to understand.

There was a consistent downplaying of the importance of sex and gender in terms of her attraction. Abigail preferred to think about her sexuality in terms of a romantic spark where personality and individual traits were more important than sex or gender:

I think it is just about that instant spark with them and being able to get along with them, and just to be able to have a laugh, and just be myself around them. To me their sex and gender doesn't define who they are as a person. It is more personality and how they treat me, and how they see me as a person rather than basing it on gender and sex.

Abigail described her sexuality as being either bisexual or pansexual and was not insistent on either being a preference. However, she was clear that she tended to use bisexuality for ease as most people had a better grasp of what bisexuality means. She defined her sexuality as being able to fall in love with someone no matter what their gender. In this regard Abigail perhaps conflated pansexuality and bisexuality. However, it is clear that she saw pansexuality as a type of bisexuality where the focus was upon both the gender identity of the person and their sex. She was attracted to people not based upon their sex or gender identity, making the distinction with bisexuality historical focus and conceptualisation as attraction to 'either' (as opposed to any) sex.

In this regard she understood her pansexuality as bisexuality-plus, an updated and improved version of bisexuality that is less constrained by homonormative tendencies (Klesse, 2018). It is important to note, however, that understandings of pansexuality are not well established due to a lack of research on pansexual lived experiences. As Klesse points out, little research has been done with the pansexual

community. Although the emergence of such intimate and erotic cultures could be signalling a generational shift, as the focus shifts more clearly upon ‘non-binary gender and sexual experiences’ (2018: 1363). The subsuming of pansexuality into the wider umbrella of bisexuality is problematic for some who suggest that identifying as pansexual is a conscious move away from mainstream identity politics. As Gonel notes:

Faced with the new-homonormativist identity politics of the mainstream LGBTQ movements, pansexual identification through respondents’ answers align with queer activism. Indeed, as queer activism criticises gay-only identity politics for their assumptions on fixed cores of identities, pansexuality embodies this criticism in that respondents suggest that their sexual identity is multiple, ongoing and transgressive. (2013: 56)

In line with such an assertion, Abigail continued by discussing the use of terms such as non-binary or queer. She noted that it is often preferable not to label herself, which appears to fit with Gonel’s (2013) discussion. Sex and gender is often not the central force in forming relationships or intimacies and the idea of loving the person – regardless of their gender and sexual identities at a particular point of life - is accentuated in the life of bisexuals (Toft, 2019).

Abigail’s sexual and gender identities were important to her, and she argued that not living her life truthfully and openly, was inauthentic and damaging. This is perhaps best demonstrated through her coming out story which she described as a life-changing journey which had to be made:

I came out to save my life really. Personally for me it was to save my life and just kind of it was like a weight lifting off my shoulders. I felt I had to come

out just to be able to be myself. I felt like I owed an explanation to people. I had to come out to save my life.

It is important here to recognise that Abigail is not talking in metaphor or hyperbole, and that coming out to save her life means that she felt that in order to continue living she had to come out. The only alternative she saw to coming out was suicide:

I think because I couldn't hide away who I was. It was pushing me away more from society. I felt if I didn't come out I probably, as horrible as it sounds, I probably would have committed suicide... So for me it is either I come out and be myself or I live my life as a lie, be unhappy and commit suicide.

This is difficult to read but further highlights the challenges she faced and the internal struggles that she had to contend with. For Abigail, not coming out represents a deception and an engagement in an act which does not represent her correctly or authentically. The process of enacting false or closeted identities was too much pressure for Abigail and had a constant negative effect on her mental health.

Although, coming out is often strategic (Orne, 2011) or something that is an ongoing process akin to a career (Guittar and Rayburn, 2015), for Abigail the pressure of not telling people about her sexuality and gender identity was too difficult. As a result, she revealed her sexuality and desire to transition in order to spare herself from such turmoil. This shows how, although she knew that coming out would be a difficult journey, it was preferable to living as someone else.

### **Religion in Abigail's life**

Abigail was a Christian and started attending an Evangelical church with her mother in her childhood. The church, according to Abigail, was very rigid in terms of its reliance on the absolute truth of the Bible and its teachings. However, after leaving

the Church, due to them not accepting her sexuality (as will be explored in greater detail) Abigail took to practising a more individualised form of Christianity involving personal reflection and private prayer. She missed the community aspect of worship and wanted to be a ‘real’ Christian again, as she felt less Christian due to her non-attendance.

Alongside the challenges of being bisexual and disabled, Abigail was working to negotiate her religious identity and exploring ways to continue to be a Christian. She had been raised in an Evangelical Christian Church near to her hometown and had attended regularly until she began the coming out process. This section explores how Abigail framed her religious beliefs as a young disabled bisexual person, the reactions from the Church which ultimately led to her leaving the Church, and finally, how she saw her religious life presently and in the future. Exploring these aspects will highlight how religion, sexuality and disability intersect in Abigail’s life and the negotiations that occur.

### *Religious belief*

Abigail described her religious beliefs as initially rooted in her attendance at her local Church. She aligned her beliefs with those of the congregation from an early age.

Abigail requested in the interview that the church be anonymised. However, it is clear from the official messages promoted by the church that a literal interpretation of the Bible, specifically in regard to New Testament, is taught. The Bible is God’s word as inspired by the Holy Spirit. Believer’s baptisms are crucial and that it is through understanding that Jesus is the only Saviour, the truth, the life and the way, that believers can enter the kingdom of God.

Although Abigail had been a regular attendee, she had recently begun to disengage and her attendance had reduced:

I was just little and mum would take me every Sunday and every big church event I would go to as well. But it got to the point where I don't go anymore.

Mum goes less often now too. But, I just don't go there, I don't feel that I can. Although, as this quotation alludes to, Abigail has moved away from the church and organised worship in general, Christianity is still a central part of her life and Christianity morality and belief in God contribute to how she understands the world. During the interview she explored whether she thought God was real and whether concepts such as heaven were useful. It is clear that for Abigail there is indeed an entity who oversees the world which she understands as God. The following quotation explains her core religious beliefs:

I do actually believe that there is a God. I do believe that everyone is their own [person], everyone should be treated as God's children. Personally, I believe it. I do believe that there is a heaven. But I don't believe there is a hell. No matter how bad people have been, no matter how people have sinned they are still going to heaven because they are still God's children in my eyes.

Here Abigail is exploring some of the central tenets of her belief system, which appear to align with the teaching of the church she attended. It is clear for her that there is a God and a heaven and that we are all God's children. As God's children we should be treated fairly and all of us are special and unique. The distinction between heaven and hell is also made as she states that there is no hell and/or no-one goes to hell because we are protected by God as his children. There is also a suggestion here that people are equal and ultimately the same because of the fact that we are God's children. Due in part to the length of time attending the church, it was clear that her

beliefs and those of the church are intertwined. Much of her religious belief was a result of the teaching of the church. The impact upon her life as she began to distance herself from the Church must have been substantial, however she eventually left as their teaching on sexuality (in particular) no longer fit with what she understood Christianity to be about. As will be explored in the next section, she saw the churches' reaction to her sexuality as a complete contradiction for her as they no longer loved her; something she viewed as entirely un-Christian. Her Christianity focused strongly around love and equality with an emphasis upon treating each other with respect. This exchange clearly highlights this:

*Abigail* - Just to love everyone as they would like to be loved, and not treat them any different to how they would like to be treated.

*Interviewer* - So do you think that Church is misunderstanding what being Christian is?

*Abigail* - Yeah, because I personally think being Christian is about loving everyone, loving God and not treating anyone different.

Abigail clearly expressed a disillusionment with her Church who have in her eyes, moved away from a key aspect of Christianity. If we are not open and loving to all people then this does not represent Christianity for Abigail. This is also reflected in Abigail's understanding of the communal aspects of religion. It was argued that belief in God places individuals within a collective family in which believers become like brothers and sisters working together for the good of the wider community:

From what I've seen before, before I came out, people come together. They treat each other as family. To an extent there is no judgement, but then when it comes to LGBT stuff, that is when the negative side comes out. But other than

that I do see a lot of positives like family, they class each other as family like brothers and sisters.

This quotation does however begin to touch upon the fallout with her religious community who placed great emphasis on sexuality after she came out. As will be explored in the next section, the congregation came together to work against her sexuality which they saw as being incompatible with their beliefs.

### *Responding to and negotiating challenges*

Abigail stated that she came out to save her life, as the pressures of being what she described as inauthentic and closeted began to take their toll on her mental health. However, upon vocalising her sexuality Abigail was met with open abuse from her religious community:

I am a sinner for it, that is a word that I get quite a lot, that I am a sinner for it. God doesn't accept it.

The religious congregation which she had been part of for the majority of her life turned against her and labelled her as a sinner once she revealed her sexuality. Of course, this was a point of great confusion for Abigail who had always understood Christianity to be about love and equality; and yet the congregation continued to abuse and berate her about her sexuality:

They tried praying it out for me in the hope that God would heal me. So... Yeah, they laid their hands on me and tried praying for me. I was like, you know, God says to love everyone as their own but I wasn't getting any of that. So I just stopped going because I felt I wasn't good enough to go.

The quotation above is very telling as it clearly shows the contradiction between the Christian message as understood by Abigail, and what was being practiced in her

Church. It is difficult to learn that Abigail internalised this abuse and stopped attending as she felt she was not good enough to continue going to the Church. The discrimination and abuse she received shamed her into no longer attending. The quotation also reveals the extent to which the Church go in order to 'fix' Abigail. The scenario that she outlines almost resembles an exorcism where the possessed essence of bisexuality is attempted to be removed through Christianity. There is similarity here with reparative (or conversion) therapy (Mikulak, 2018; Reay, 2018) which treats non-heterosexual sexualities as psychological disorders which can be changed through workshops and prayer. Although the structure of this therapy is clearly different in Abigail's case, as there were no workshops and the process does not appear to be consensual, the underlying feature is that Abigail's sexuality was seen as something that could be changed and it would be beneficial for her to do so.

Abigail said that before she told members of her congregation about her sexuality, sexuality was never mentioned at the church and she did not think it was part of their teachings. However, after learning of her sexuality it became the main focus of church services. She reflected on how the congregation took to having sessions where they prayed for her in order to get rid of her sexuality. This was surprising to Abigail as before she vocalised her sexuality there had been no teaching in this regard. She found the situation 'weird':

Yeah, they would talk about it and try and pray it out of me. It was really weird. Like you just said, that is something that is never talked about that often in Church, yeah.

On reflection, Abigail felt that their constant focus on her sexuality after coming out was in line with a literal interpretation of the Bible. The Bible was projected as being

the word of God which was incompatible with bisexual life and used as a weapon against her. The following quotation highlights Abigail's thoughts on this:

I think because they followed the Bible quite a lot. Everyone has a Bible in the Church and the worship leader takes out the Bible, reads it out and then puts it into practice as well. But when I did talk about me being trans and bisexual it was like he focussed just on that, and tried to pray it out of me.

The view that bisexuality is not accepted in a Christian life has been further confirmed by Abigail through conversations with preachers and representative of churches with a similar denominational outlook to her old church. She regularly engaged with street preachers to gauge their opinions on LGBT+ sexualities. For her this confirmed that it is not accepted:

Yeah because it is not... in the Bible it is not accepted. I go to [UK city] and I don't know if you've seen preachers standing on the side and I have actually stopped to talk to someone about being part of the LGBT, and it is not accepted. I think it is hard to be religious and LGBT, it is just not accepted as much.

Further contradictions and uncertainties for Abigail are reflected in the Church's attitudes to her as a disabled person. Being disabled, unlike being bisexual, has not been an issue for her Church and she received support and compassion with regards to this aspect of her life. For her, being disabled had less of an impact on her everyday life as it was framed as being easier to accept and compatible with her faith:

They are actually really supportive in terms of my disability, they love me for that still. So in that sense being disabled, that doesn't affect me on a day-to-day basis.

The acceptance of her disability but rejection of her sexuality further highlights her religious community's view that her sexuality was a choice and something that could be changed. The reparative work that the church attempted with Abigail is a demonstration of this belief. Her disability was not seen as a choice however, and was accepted as part of who she was.

The reaction from Abigail's religious community was extreme. She was driven away with feelings of inadequacy and made to feel like a sinner as the Church tried to pray her sexuality away. The Church focussed intently upon this aspect of her life, whereas previously it had not been part of their teaching. This brings into question where she sees her religious life presently and in the future.

### *Religious life*

I want to be myself, to be my authentic self and to be able to go to Church as myself, and live my life as a normal person. I am a normal person but for society to see me as a normal person.

This powerful quotation highlights Abigail's desires. She desperately wanted to be able to worship and to be Christian but this had to be done on her own terms.

Although this situation initially appeared to be hopeless, Abigail constructed a number of strategies or practices which allowed her to keep in touch with her Christianity. As Cusack (2011) has noted, young people exercise agency in the creation of their identities where religion is deregulated and recast in a market of choice. Abigail's story does reflect religion as adaptable and malleable in line with Rupke's (2015) assertion that 'religion is a cultural resource articulated through the agency of individuals (344). In this regard Abigail took guidance from Christian teachings and resources, but did this away from a communal church setting:

But I do listen to a lot of gospel music still. I have a Bible at home that I read through. But in terms of going to Church, for now that is something that I have stopped.

This represents a desire to continue with traditional modes of worship but with an emphasis on distancing from her Church, a common strategy which is employed (Schuck and Liddle, 2001; Yip, 2000) Abigail explained that she still prayed and often combined this with her love of Christian gospel music. She explored how the music allowed her to be at peace and focus upon what she felt was important:

I pray in my room. Like I mentioned earlier I listen to a lot of Church music. I put my earphones on, put it on and zone out really. Because that is what I am doing when I pray really, I zone out from everything. Kind of forget about everything.

Reading the Bible and her attitude toward the Bible were recurrent talking points throughout the interview. Although she clearly acknowledged that the Bible was the root of the problem with regards to her church's rejection of her sexuality; she felt that the Bible was central to Christian belief and it should not be used as a tool to put restrictions upon people's lives. Abigail explored why the Bible was important, specifically referring to Christian duty and the way that the Bible can reinforce essential Christian values:

I think it is just part of my religion really. It is like respect to God that I will read it, and try and put it into practice. Treat Christian values really. I see it as a religious thing. Each Christian reads the Bible.

However, Abigail did not engage with aspects of the Bible that might be interpreted as being in contradiction with her understanding of Christianity. She worked to push such aspects or passages aside, selecting aspects that worked for her:

I kind of push that to one side personally. But in the Bible it says to love each other as their own. So for me I love everyone as my own, as I would like to be loved. So in that sense I don't really tend to read that side of it. I kind of push it to one side.

It has been suggested that this level of individualisation is particularly prominent in the lives of young people. Religion in young people's lives is equated to individualisation due to the young adult period of life being the point at which people begin forming beliefs (Arnett and Jensen, 2002). Using the theory of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 1998), the key message is that late teen and twenties (Abigail was 18) in industrialised Western societies are characterised by an exploration of possibilities in life. In this regard, if the theory is accepted, young people are perhaps more likely to individualise faith (Collins-Mayo and Dandelion, 2010; Yip and Page, 2013).

In terms of her hopes for a religious life in the future, Abigail wanted to engage with religion as a force for good and not one which promotes exclusion. Although she has worked to construct a form of Christianity that fits with her life, it is clear that there remains a longing to engage with Christian communities. Abigail explained that she felt 'less religious' because she no longer attended Church. For her the ideal scenario would be to attend less regularly as she would have to travel to a different Church, but to be able spend time with other Christians and 'be a normal Christian in a way, to practice my faith'. Abigail is currently investigating more liberal Churches and hoped to start attending again soon.

### **Concluding remarks**

Before vocalising her sexuality and her transition journey Abigail painted a picture of pressure, anxiety and poor mental health; where she lived, in her own words, ‘an inauthentic life’ which was unfulfilling and unsatisfying. For Abigail, telling others about her sexuality and gender identity allowed her to express herself and to resolve some of the internal struggles she faced. However, there was a number of new challenges that she had to negotiate. Her family viewed her as incapable of understanding bisexuality (due to her disability), and as a result, are unsupportive; seeing her sexuality as nothing more than a phase (Toft *et al.*, 2019). Their lack of support resulted in her living separate private and public lives. The pressures of misunderstanding and constant affirmation of disabled sexuality as childlike, therefore under-developed and negligible, has done much to weaken the possibility of LGBT+ identities in the lives of disabled young people.

Adding a strong Evangelical Christian identity into this picture adds a further layer of complexity as she faced rejection from her congregation. Her experience with her Church is a harrowing story which resulted in her having to move away from organised religion. In its place, she worked to construct an individualised form of Christianity rooted in aspects of the faith which she could accommodate and integrate into her life. However, this has not been a satisfactory experience as she continued to explore alternative denominations to be, as she described it, Christian again.

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