

## Sexual and gender minorities are among those most excluded in our Church



Sister Patty Fawkner SGS. Image: Sisters of the Good Samaritan.

**One thing for certain we can say about Jesus, and therefore about God, is that Jesus is very comfortable with diversity and hanging out with those on the margins. Where society and individuals exclude, Jesus goes out of his way to include, writes Congregational Leader Sister Patty Fawkner.**

Jesus takes his disciples on a journey of ever-increasing inclusion. I believe that this is the journey that we in the Church must take regarding those who identify as LGBTIQ+ or 'queer', the somewhat vague umbrella term for sexual and gender minorities who are not heterosexual.

I became more mindful of this after attending an interactive webinar entitled *Working Towards a LGBTQ+ Affirming Church* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4zNFqa9OwJI>), organised by WATAC (<https://watac.net.au/>), Women and the Australian Church.

Teash Taylor, co-pastor of a Baptist Church, who identifies as a lesbian, and Anika 'AJ' Jensen, a member of the Uniting Church who identifies as non-binary, were the key presenters. Their warmth, insight from their lived experience, and their theological literacy made for an engaging experience.

I was particularly interested in Teash and AJ's Affirming Church Scale. This five-part scale presents the journey that many people make from rejection to affirmation of LGBTIQ+ people. The Affirming Church Scale helped me understand aspects of my own journey in relation to sexual and gender minorities.

The first stage of the scale is called Repulsion/Hatred. Most if not all members of the LGBTIQ+ community have been excluded, condemned, mocked and insulted.

Insult can be hurled from court benches in jurisdictions where homosexuality is illegal and even punishable by death. Throughout the world there have been incidents where gay men have been jailed or executed, and lesbian women raped so to 'cure' them. Insult can be hurled from mosque and pulpit alike and, most painfully, insult can be hurled within the family.

Repulsion and hatred of queers is 'alive and well' within some sectors of the Catholic community, with some people justifying their stance on the Church's teaching is that homosexual acts are "intrinsically disordered" and "contrary to the natural law." (CCC, #2357 ([https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/\\_\\_\\_P85.HTM](https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/___P85.HTM))) It is a short route from these statements to homophobia and the belief that any non-heterosexual person is a sexual deviant.

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There are some who believe that homosexuality is 'chosen' as an orientation or that environmental circumstances have been the cause. If so, the orientation can be changed, and the individual 'cured'. This leads to stage 2 of the Affirming Church Scale, Conversion is Possible.

Stage 2 is explored in the film, *Boy Erased* ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boy\\_Erased](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boy_Erased)), the 2018 American movie based on the memoir of Garrard Conley and his experience in a gay conversion program. The protagonist, Jared, is the deeply loved only son of faith-filled parents, Marshall a Baptist pastor and his wife Nancy. The film probes the complex interaction between faith and homosexuality.

The tortuous path for many in the LGBTIQA+ community as they come out and grow in self-acceptance of who they are, and the equally fraught path that family members make as they reconcile previously unexamined beliefs with the experience of their gay loved-one, is handled sensitively.

Conversion therapy is put on trial and found, not only wanting, but potentially damaging. Licensed medical and mental healthcare professionals, educators and child welfare advocates throughout the world have roundly discredited such programs.

Stage 3 on the Affirming Church Scale has the clever and prescient title, Welcome – Terms and Conditions Apply.

Teash and AJ believe that some church communities, somewhat proudly and self-regardingly, lay out the welcome mat for LGBTIQA+ people, but engage in subtle, or not-so-subtle, conditional support. Tokenism is the hallmark of stage 3. You are welcome if ...

You are welcome if you are gay or lesbian, but being transgender may be a step too far for the receiving community. You are welcome, but only if you are not in a relationship. You are welcome to take on a role within a community, but only if you are celibate.

There is an overlap between stage 3 and stage 4 which is called Accepting.

Here the individual is accepted as a person, rather than for their sexual orientation. Again, gay and lesbians may be accepted, but the community might struggle with what might be regarded as the more 'radical' identities of non-binary, transgender and intersex. Acceptance of the person does not extend to the person being in a leadership role within the community.

The fifth and final Affirming stage is characterised by deep respect for, and affirmation of LGBTIQA+ people, and the acceptance, even promotion, of diversity within the community. The community acknowledges the strength and courage it takes to claim one's sexual

identity within church and society.

The characteristics of the Affirming stage are mutuality rather than tokenism, and a deep desire to understand and learn from queer people.

Paid and unpaid ministerial roles within the community are open to LGBTIQ+ people.

It occurs to me that many of us within the Church community are the ones in need of 'conversion therapy', a conversion from discrimination to inclusion, a conversion from judging non-heterosexual orientation as deviant to the acceptance of sexual diversity.

And the implications for me as I reflect on these stages and my own response to the LGBTIQ+ community, are two-fold. The first is simply to wonder at the mystery of the human person "made in God's image and likeness" with such diversity. Over past decades, the human sciences have revealed much about the complexity of sexual orientation, both biologically and psychologically, as well as gender identity.

Franciscan priest, Richard Rohr (<https://cac.org/diversity-and-communion-2019-10-21/>) claims that "Jesus, like the cosmos itself, constantly affirms two parallel drives *toward diversity and toward communion*. The whole of creation cannot be lying." God, claims Rohr, seems to be more comfortable with diversity than we are.

I believe that sexuality and gender, in all their diversity, are God-given. "God made and celebrates me," Teash proclaimed during the WATAC webinar.

How can I deny that any gay, trans or intersex person is any less loved by God?

My second response to the journey towards an LGBTIQ+ affirming Church is to resist naïve binary thinking. Simplistic binaries and divisive dualistic thinking such as good and bad, worthy and unworthy, clean and unclean, normative and deviant, limit my thinking and are the antithesis of a stance of wonder at the mystery of life within God's creation.

It is encouraging to note that the draft Edition 2 of the National Safeguarding Standards of the Australian Catholic Church acknowledges the reality of "all the diversities of sex characteristics, sexual orientations and gender identities" and that each Catholic organisation must pay "particular attention to the needs of ... those of diverse sexuality."

On the Affirming Church Scale, such statements are at either stage 3 or 4, and this is to be celebrated. However, we in the Church community still have work to do before we truly become an LGBTIQ+ Affirming Church. As followers of Jesus, we still have a journey to take in the service of diversity and communion.

Patty Fawkner

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