

Welcoming and affirming transgender people: reflections and resources for the Blackburn Motion

A radical, new, Christian inclusion

In February 2017, following the General Synod debate on GS 2055 (on Marriage and Same Sex Relationships after the Shared Conversations), the Archbishops of Canterbury and York promised ‘a radical, new, Christian inclusion’. Its scope will be tested on July 9th when the General Synod, meeting in York, discusses the Blackburn Diocesan Synod Motion:

“That this Synod, recognizing the need for transgender people to be welcomed and affirmed in their parish church, call on the House of Bishops to consider whether some nationally commended liturgical materials might be prepared to mark a person’s gender transition.”

The Motion, which was to have been discussed in February, was displaced by consideration of GS2055, but what an excellent debate this was. On that occasion voices from the parishes expressed their desire to offer a truly Christ-like welcome to everyone. It seems fitting then that the July Synod should be considering the welcome and prayerful affirmation of trans people in a grassroots motion that has come, via its diocesan and deanery synods, from a parish in Lancaster.

Ritual markings

Like several English parish churches, Lancaster Priory received a request from a transgender parishioner for a rite to mark their transition. When Christian trans people begin to express their gender identity by coming out, or making a legal name change, acquiring legal gender recognition, or any other stage of transition, they naturally look to their church community for support and prayer.

When I transitioned in 2001 I found it harder to change some documents than others. The ancient university where I did my doctoral studies sent me a copy of my degree certificate with my name amended by return. By contrast, the new university where I was an undergraduate made a quite unnecessary fuss, and it needed a phone call to achieve the same result. And the Church? Well, baptism registers are a historical record, so I knew that my name as recorded there could not be changed. That hurt a little, as if my gender identity was still being qualified by my naming as a baby, over which I had had no control. So I found it very helpful and healing to take part in a liturgy at a weekend organised by the Sibyls, a group which provides Christian spirituality for Trans People, [which you can access here](#).

This was not a re-baptism. The Church of England believes in ‘one baptism’ and we cannot be baptised into Christ a second time. It was a celebration of baptism, with renewal of our baptismal vows. Most importantly, at its conclusion I received a baptismal certificate in my legal female name. It made such a difference, more than I could have imagined.

From exclusion towards acceptance

It’s heartening that parish clergy and congregations are sufficiently well-informed about trans people’s journeys nowadays to respond sensitively and prayerful to this kind of request. It has not always been so. When the Sibyls was first formed in 1996 many

members had been rejected by their churches, and debarred from leadership positions or denied Holy Communion for coming out, or acting on their gender identity. This is why every gathering to the Sibyls' at that time included Holy Communion, celebrated by a sympathetic priest, as these were the only occasions at which some people could receive the Sacrament.

The picture today has changed vastly for the better. Many trans people are assimilated into their church's community life without any problem, though not all churches are welcoming to gender variant people. [Chris Dowd's study of twelve trans people's spirituality](#) confirms that clergy and pastors have tremendous power to heal, but also to hurt trans people who come to them for help (see pages 193ff, 268ff):

Often the failure to welcome and include the trans person is due either to a lack of knowledge, or limited insight into the vulnerability of transition, and the stresses and losses that can accompany it. However, there are plenty of resources available to rectify this and I will include some in the following paragraphs and others at the end.

Ignoring the professional and scientific consensus on trans people

Sometimes, though, trans people encounter problems because their pastor questions the basis of their transition on theological grounds. This theology, however, is rarely based on an impartial consideration of the science or the empirical evidence of trans people's experience. Mark Yarhouse, a US psychologist and author of *Understanding Gender Dysphoria: Navigating Transgender Issues in a Changing Culture* is an exception, in that he has studied a cohort of Christian trans women. Even so, and for all its apparent balance and fairness, his book relies on authors like Paul R. McHugh (for whom being transgender is a mental illness), Kenneth Zucker and Ray Blanchard, whose work has either been discredited by their peers, or is regarded with deep suspicion by the majority of clinicians and practitioners engaged in the care and treatment of trans people. [You can read a critique of McHugh's work here.](#)

Citing clinical literature or research that supports one's own argument, even though it lacks the respect of specialists in the field, or even worse, that they consider to be dangerous, seems the norm among those who question trans people's reality. [Martin Davie's Latimer House document](#), for example, tries to be scrupulously fair by including extensive quotations from myself, Chris Dowd, and Justin Tanis in relation to theology and pastoral care. Yet the clinical sources it relies on are almost entirely anti-trans, and it does not engage with the mainstream clinical literature and protocols about trans people, except to reject them.

This is also true of Vaughan Roberts' *Transgender* (The Good Book Company 2016). Both are potentially harmful in that they advocate (against the prevailing professional consensus) persuading people not to transition. Davie's notion of pastoral care also includes persuading people to de-transition, which is even more disturbing: I am preparing a detailed critique of Davie's paper.

Some Key Resources

What then are the mainstream sources one should be consulting for an informed view of trans people's lives? In the UK, [GIRE, the Gender Identity Research and Education Society](#), is a good place to learn more about the biologically and multi-factored causes of gender variance, the numbers of people affected and much more.

The international standards of care for trans and gender non-conforming people are administered by WPATH, the [World Professional Association for Transgender Health](#). You can [download the WPATH Standards of Care here](#):

The Scientific Consensus

All this extensive professional engagement with trans people is based on a scientific consensus. Much work has been undertaken on the development of gender and sexual identities and a consensus exists among the major professional institutions. This is the position taken for example by the British Royal College of Psychiatrists, the British Psychological Society and parallel United Kingdom organisations. Equivalent positions are taken by the American Psychiatric Association and the American Psychological Association. Other international organizations, including the World Health Organization have followed.

This consensus currently regards both gender and sexually variant identities and behaviour as being naturally expected variations of the human condition which are intrinsic to the person, arise very early in development, and cannot be changed by the individual concerned, or by the actions of others in subsequent life.

From dogma to pastoral care

Although Yarhouse, Davie and Roberts attempt to address the scientific aspects, their sources are of dubious value. An older text, like the Evangelical Alliances' *Transsexuality* (2000), hardly does even that. It is primarily dogmatically driven, focussing almost entirely on what the authors believe the Bible says about gender, which, in their judgement, prohibits gender transition on *a priori* grounds. There is no room for debate with this viewpoint which maintains that trans people are deluded.

The author of Chapter 7, 'Transsexualism', in *Some issues in human sexuality: a guide to the debate*, hoped that the Church of England would engage in a debate about trans people, and set out the arguments pro and con from a theological perspective. But what is there to debate when the professional caregivers are united in their assessment that trans people's gender variance is not a mistaken mind-set that can be changed? Indeed, attempts to persuade people to delay, or worse, reverse transition, are considered unethical as well as ineffective. Yarhouse talks about hormone treatment and surgery as 'a last resort' but it is unwise of him to generalise. In any case, the international protocols, when followed properly, are extremely cautious and do not rush people towards transition, quite the reverse, and he should know that.

As far as I'm concerned the last fifteen years have been a struggle to shift the conversation about trans people from dogmatic presuppositions that supposedly oppose it, to a theologically grounded pastoral practice, based on engagement with trans people's experience of gender and spirituality, and the professional consensus about their care. I wrote pastoral guidelines for clergy, ministers and congregations at the invitation of the Gender Trust in this spirit, and the second edition (2007) included some theology and ethics. [These guidelines are available here](#).

Helen Savage undertook doctoral research, based on interviews with transgender Christians, at about this time. [Her dissertation, Changing Sex? transsexualism and Christian](#)

[Theology \(2006\), is available online.](#) The question in her title is rhetorical, as she demonstrates that Church documents about trans people have usually failed to listen to trans people, or how they relate to the Bible and the Christian tradition.

Church documents often fail to appreciate that transition and gender reassignment is a process that confirms the sense of gender identity that the trans person has experienced, in many cases for most of their lives. If the Church of England decides to approve a service or liturgy it will need to acknowledge this understanding of gender identity, otherwise it will fall short of providing the affirmation that is required.

Both Yarhouse and Roberts seem more at home when they are articulating their evangelical theology, which is ostensibly welcoming of trans people. At the same time, though, they appear to stigmatise trans people as particularly fallen (though they cite no biblical evidence for this judgement), and for Roberts our reality is driven by sinful desire rather than identity.

Susan Gilchrist has undertaken a thorough [programme of research](#) which shows that the development of everyone's gender identity and allegiance, whether atypical or not, proceeds in the same way. Consequently, although transgender people develop a gender allegiance which is at variance with their biological sex, it is at least as firmly held as those for whom their gender identity and allegiance follow the expected path. Indeed, it could be argued that the gender allegiance and identity that trans people experience might be even stronger, because it has had to be fought for all the way. The major structural changes in the brain which take place from around the age of two years, physically and permanently lock these in place, so that from this time constant core elements of personality and gender identity are created. However, a great variety of individual experiences are encountered. Susan also has a chapter in the Sibyls' book, *This is My Body: hearing the theology of transgender Christians* (DLT 2016), a volume I co-edited with Michelle O'Brien to counter Christian texts written *about* trans people but without actually talking *with* trans people. Part one, which is mainly theoretical, includes the chapter 'Gender Incongruence in the changing social and medical environment' by Terry Reed of GRES, which is an up-to-date review of the current science. Part two, which contains people's stories, demonstrates that many people have struggled to conform to others' gendered expectations, only to discover God's love more fully by accepting themselves as they are.

Lex orandi, lex credendi

One objection to the Blackburn Motion is based on the Christian adage *lex orandi, lex credendi*: the law of prayer is the law of believing or, liturgy leads to belief. According to this argument, welcoming trans people is fine, but if the House of Bishops were to devise and issue prayers to mark gender transition that would affirm trans people's reality and the Church is divided on that.

But the Church of England, in its typically pragmatic way, has already affirmed trans people's reality through its response to the Gender Recognition Act 2004. This legislation facilitated the marriage in Church of England churches of those who have obtained full gender recognition, while negotiating an exemption for clergy who could not conscientiously officiate at such a wedding. This means that someone with a trans history can be prayed for in church, in their legally recognised gender identity, using the rites and ceremonies of the Church of England, in the form of the marriage service. In 2006 my

husband and I were able to marry in my local parish church, thanks to this compromise, as one of my friends did in his parish church a few weeks later.

Similarly, the Diocesan Directors of Ordinands' Handbook contains a section on transgender candidates which enables their access to the discernment process for ordination, but if an advisory panel member had conscientious objections to the idea of a candidate with a transgender history, either they or the candidate would be transferred to another panel. This provision also facilitates prayer in church for a person with a transgender history in their legally recognised gender: when the bishop lays hands on the candidate at their ordination. The Revd Rachel Mann and the Revd Sarah Jones, two currently serving parish priests, are publicly known to have been ordained under this protocol, which demonstrates how unremarkable a transgender history is as far as eligibility for ordained ministry in the Church of England is concerned.

The *lex orandi, lex credendi* objection seems extremely questionable therefore in the light of these precedents, both of which include conscientious opt outs. Likewise, no one would have to use the prayers for trans people if they were unable to endorse them on theological grounds.

Gender & humanity

Theological objections to trans people's reality often include the conviction that male and female are dimorphic, even polarised, but theorists tell us that these are very modern conceptions, and that the ancient world, in which the Christian faith took root, saw things rather differently. [Adrian Thatcher's work](#) is helpful in this respect.

Although modern theologians, like Karl Barth and Hans Urs von Balthasar, have been fascinated by gender dimorphism it isn't exactly prominent in the Church of England's historic formularies and is entirely absent from the Creeds. Early Christianity doesn't seem to have been particularly interested in the manhood of Jesus. It was Jesus' humanity - inclusive of male, female, and everything in between - and his divinity, that were significant for salvation in the early Church, as they remain for us today.

Some additional resources:

The care of transgender young people and children often arouses intense reactions and feelings, but this is a highly specialist area. Here are links that parents and young people in this situation may find helpful.

Gender Identity Clinic - [Tavistock & Portman NHS Foundation Trust](#)

[Mermaids](#) - support for children, teenagers and parents

[Gendered Intelligence](#) - for gender diverse young people