

# TRANSFAITH: AN EXPLORATION OF GENDER IN THE CHURCH FROM THE MARGINS.

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# Synopsis

*This thesis uses Indigenous Knowledge and Feminist Participatory Research methodologies to investigate the faith lives of 13 transfolk. This thesis contains the following elements:*

- *A literature review contained in Chapter 2. This concludes there are two different conversations in the UK about transfolk. The first is a response to a perceived threat to marriage and binary gender while second is the search for meaning, identity and pastoral care.*
- *A methodological statement contained in Chapter 3 describing how the 13 interviews were conducted, transcribed and analysed using Nvivo 10 software.*
- *A discussion of the results contained in Chapter 4. This concludes the lives of transfolk show the search for identity, integrity and meaning can be painful but that it also has the potential to be spiritually transformative.*
- *A set of research-based insights that can help inform pastoral care for transfolk and those affected by their gender dysphoria in Chapter 5.*

*In Chapter 6, this thesis concludes that the Church has problematized transfolk as a threat to heteronormative marriage and a literal interpretation of Genesis 1:27. By doing this, the Church has created a distorted intellectual atmosphere where it rejects both the lived experience of transfolk and expert opinion in favour of a predetermined negative stance on transfolk. By doing this the Church misses out on a rich source for theological reflection and denies transfolk and those affected by their gender dysphoria their rightful place as part of the Body of Christ.*

## ***Dedication***

*To my beloved Will,  
whose loving support made this work possible.*

## **With thanks to**

Sal Bateman, Rev Dr Christina Beardsley, Jenny-Anne Christine Bishop, Rev Kieran Bourne, Rev Dr John Bradbury, Phyllis Grimm, Rev Dr Jenni Hurd, Dr Nick Jones, John Kivett, Frin Lewis-Smith, Rev Max Reay, Mona Shabaz, Dr James Shearer , Dr Nicola Slee, Alison Smith, Rev Dr Janet Tollington, Cambridge University Writing Group and The Sibyls.

**And to the unnamed prophets who trusted me with their stories. I hope I have done them justice.**

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## General definitions used in this thesis

**Berdache**- An American Indian who assumes the dress, social status, and role of the opposite sex (*sometimes offensive*) (Merriam-Webster Dictionary<sup>1</sup>).

**Cisgendered** - Denoting or relating to a person whose self-identity conforms to their assigned gender at birth.

**Coming out**- Refers to (1) the internal acceptance of being a sexual minority identity. (2) The articulation of that identity to other people.

**Gender Dysphoria**- Refers to the sense of dissonance transsexual [and Trans] people experience between their gender identity and their biological sex, which is usually in conflict with their perceived gender and their social gender as well. The hostility or resistance that transsexual [and Trans] people can encounter when they attempt to dress or behave in ways appropriate to their internal gender identity often intensifies their

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/berdache> accessed 14/3/15



distress at being treated as someone they are not. The conventions of perceived gender are such that, in most cases, people can only be themselves if they transition. (Beardsley 2007:3).

**Gender identity** –Refers to one’s internal sense of being a boy or a girl, or a man or a woman, irrespective of one’s genitalia or chromosomes. (Beardsley 2007:3).

**Gender journey** -The process of moving from a place of gender dysphoria to a place of congruence between inner gender identity and outward appearance.

**Gender Queer** - Refers to folk who do not consider themselves as either male or female but beyond the constraints of a binary gender system.

**GRS-** Gender reassignment surgery. A surgical procedure undertaken with the intention of physically changing sex.

**Natal Gender** -Refers to the gender assigned at birth. It is used in this thesis to differentiate between the gender identity prior to transition and the current gender identity of the interviewees.

**Orchiectomy**-The surgical removal of one or both testes. A self-orchectomy is the removal of one's own testes.

**Passing** -The term passing has its derivation in the US where it originally was used for light skinned African Americans pretending to be white in order to gain the privileges of white people in a racist society. Transfolk use this term to mean that they pass as natal born folk of their assumed gender. The other term used is "stealth".

**Sex** –Refers to the biological body as indicated by the genitals, i.e. the sex assigned at birth (which is not always the same as the chromosomal sex) (Beardsley 2007:3).

**Social gender-** Refers to the gender role allocated to an individual by society.

**Transition** – Refers to the process by which a transsexual person seeks to align their biological sex, perceived gender and social gender with their gender identity, usually, but not always, by means of medical intervention. Many transsexual [and Trans] people experience transition as a time of emotional and spiritual growth (Beardsley 2007:4).

**Transgendered/ Trans** - The umbrella term used for those who do not fit within the gender binary. A fuller discussion of how this term is used in this thesis occurs in the methodology section of this thesis. This appears on page 129.

**Transsexual** - A person who has undergone gender reassignment surgery (GRS).

**Transfolk**—This is the term that is used most often in this thesis. It is used as a collective noun for transgendered people.

**Transmen**—Refers to Female to Male transsexual [and Trans] people, i.e. those whose birth sex is perceived to be female but whose gender identity is male. (Beardsley 2007:4).

**Transwomen**—Refers to Male to Female transsexual [and Trans] people, i.e. those whose birth sex is perceived to be male but whose gender identity is female. (Beardsley 2007:4).

# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.

## **The problem explained.**

Although theologians speak of a God beyond gender, the Church in the Western World is stuck in a binary, heteronormative gender system reinforced by theology, tradition and practice (Daly 1985). At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century the Western Church finds itself embroiled in many arguments relating to gender. These arguments include the ordination of women, the appointment of women bishops, the place of the nuclear family in society and the ongoing and often tortured debate about Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) people (Tanner 1997:33).

Like the rest of the Western Church, the Church in the UK is stuck in an entrenched argument between conservative and liberal religious views on these matters. These arguments are largely incomprehensible to a society where gender equality has been enshrined in law for over 30 years. These arguments are also increasingly dissonant on the issue of LGBT folk. In the past 15 years, LGBT folk have been increasingly accepted within UK society and significant strides have been made in legal protections. The mainstream acceptance of LGBT folk is best illustrated by the change in the Conservative

Party's legislative agenda. It has changed from legislation prohibiting "promotion of homosexuality" in Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988, to the instigation and enactment of the Marriage (Same-Sex Couples) Act in 2013 which allows same sex marriage. The Church in the UK has not shown the same swift progress or change of heart.

These increasing legal protections and changing societal attitudes have put the Church in a position where its traditional teachings on gender and sexuality are seen by wider society as oppressive (Norris 2008:437). This has increasingly distanced society from the Church (Bosch 1995:3). If the Church is to move beyond the current stalemate it may find it helpful to adopt the more fluid interpretation of gender contained within Galatians 3:28.

*<sup>28</sup> There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>2</sup> New International Version

The problem is that the Church is so rooted in the paradigm of a heteronormative and binary gender system that it is difficult for it to even begin to imagine what being “one in Christ Jesus” would look like. What does it feel like to be beyond gender? Christianity needs fresh perspectives from people who are not normally heard. These experiences could bring new insights that may help to move the conversation onwards.

This thesis explores the thorny issue of gender in the UK Church through the eyes of folk with an atypical experience of gender. This chapter serves as a brief introduction to the main thesis. Its aim is to give an overview of the problem under investigation and outline the methodology used to explore it.

## **Evolution of the research.**

### ***Initial assumptions and aims of the research project.***

The initial aim of my research was to interview transfolk who are Christians or had been Christians. My initial idea was to compare and contrast their natal and Trans experiences (assuming they had occupied

both male and female gender spaces in the Church) to see how men and women have been treated differently in the Church. As part of these insights, the pastoral care needs of transfolk would emerge. This statement of specific pastoral needs for transfolk would honour the requirement of my Indigenous Knowledge methodology to give information back to the folk studied.

***The broadening agenda of the research.***

Very early in the project, I realised my initial assumptions were wrong. Transfolk do not inhabit a cisgendered natal gender space prior to transition but a place of gender dysphoria. Many folk after transition remain Trans, either through their conscious desire or because others will always see them as such. My interviewees could tell me little about a cisgendered gender space pre or post transition because it was outside their experience. They had never been cisgendered but had always experienced gender dysphoria.



This caused the research to move into a different direction. The initial question “tell me about yourself” was designed to be an icebreaker. Instead it became the primary question with most interviewees using about 70% of the interview time answering with a long biographical description. I began to realise that these biographical stories were powerful stories of faith, courage and integrity and began to see them as parables showing how God works in the world.

Given this broadening of the research agenda, the questions evolved into

- a) What are the experiences of transfolk in UK churches?
- b) What theological, biblical and pastoral insights can these experiences bring when they are used as resources for theological reflection?

I believe the data are broader and richer than my initial aim- which now feels hopelessly naive. The insights that have come from this change of direction are far more helpful than my own early aims for the project.

## **The researcher.**

### ***Brief biography of the researcher.***

I have lived and worked within the LGBTQ community as an out, gay, cisgendered man for 30 years in Sydney, London and Birmingham. I have transfolk I count as family and friends and therefore approach this research as an ally, friend and family member. For nine years I was ordained within the LGBTQ friendly Metropolitan Community Church before transferring to the United Reformed Church in 2013.

My own position in this research is explored more fully in Appendix 1. This appendix contains a self-reflexive analysis based on the self-analysis suggested by Singh, Richmond and Burnes (2013) for cisgendered researchers working with transfolk.

***Researcher motives for research.***

There are several reasons why I chose this topic. They are:

- a) I believe my own liberation as a gay man is inextricably bound with the liberation of other sexual minorities. As I explain in Appendix 1, I believe that once the Church begins to understand and reflect on the lived realities of sexual minorities, the burden of heteronormative expectations will be lifted from all.
- b) I also have several transfolk who I count as friends and family, and I want them to be free to worship and be part of church communities with integrity.
- c) This research was also a way for me to answer some nagging questions that had arisen out of my own pastoral experience. I needed an explanation why several pastoral relationships had been abruptly severed. There is almost no pastoral theology written about transfolk in the UK that could help me understand what had happened.
- d) The amount of interest my thesis has generated within the United Reformed Church points to an unmet need.

e) On an institutional level, I hope that the Church will begin to provide the moral leadership that the Western World sorely needs. I believe that until the Church stops obsessing about gender and sexuality it will remain too preoccupied to do this. I hoped that I would be able to bring different perspectives to help move the debate on. A powerful way to do this was to listen to a group of people with a different experience of gender within our society.

## **The beneficiaries of this research.**

There are two main beneficiaries of this thesis:

- a) *Christians with a desire to gain new perspectives on gender and transgender.*

This thesis is aimed at folk who are open to new theological expressions of gender. It would be foolish to think that all folk engaged in this argument about gender and sexual minorities are eager to find new perspectives to help them resolve their differences. Some folk hold fixed views that are not open to change. I am aware this thesis will be at best an irritant and at worst encourage false teaching and condoning sin for these folk. I am clear this is not the audience I am addressing. This thesis is addressed to those who want to gain new perspectives and insights on gender and transgender. This thesis may help them explore the complexities of these issues and how they are played out in the Church.

It is my hope that this thesis will speak to a broad cross-section of people active within mainstream Christianity. It is my hope this thesis provides material to look at the issues of gender and the Church with fresh eyes and open hearts. I acknowledge that my own experiences within Metropolitan Community Churches and more recently The United Reformed Church are the contexts into which I speak with personal knowledge.

b) *Transfolk and those interested in matters of advocacy, pastoral care and justice on their behalf.*

While the primary research questions are about the wider problem of gender and transgender within the UK Church, there is another implied question created by the methodologies of feminist participatory research and indigenous knowledge<sup>3</sup>. This question could be phrased as “*What are the perspectives and/or understandings from this thesis that can benefit Christian transfolk and hence honour the requirement of its chosen methodologies?*”

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<sup>3</sup> Both are explored fully in the methodology chapter.

This thesis responds to this question in several ways. In Chapter 4 the research combines the life stories of 12 transfolk. As this thesis observes, the very act of telling these stories of faith is liberating to both the folk who tell them and the folk who read them. The pastoral care implications from these stories are discussed in Chapter 5.

Finally the information contained in this thesis will be made available to the Sibyls<sup>4</sup> for their website. It was also presented at a study weekend for the Sibyls at Lake Windermere in May 2014.

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<sup>4</sup> From their website *"The Sibyls is a UK-based confidential Christian spirituality group for transgender people, and their supporters, offering companionship along the journey, and information/advocacy to churches."*

*Sibyls seek to fulfil the two great commandments of Jesus to love God and to one another. To achieve this we try to hold two retreats a year, in safe, friendly establishments, to provide an opportunity to meet, talk, learn, pray and seek God's will. We also produce a regular e-newsletter and offer a listening service for members."*

## **The originality of this thesis.**

There is very little research about Christian transfolk in the UK. As Chapter 2 shows, the UK Church has produced one report specifically about transfolk and several reports that include transfolk within their remit. There have also been several articles written by pastoral workers or ethicists. These articles tend to explore specific concerns relating to the impact of transfolk on the Church. There has been little theology written by UK transfolk themselves. The exceptions to this are *Trans/Formations* (2010) and several articles by Dr Christina Beardsley. There are also several biographies written by transfolk that explore their spiritual journeys such as *Dazzling Darkness* by Rachel Mann. All of these sources are discussed in Chapter 2.

This thesis is the first systematic attempt to listen to, analyse and reflect on the stories of transfolk in the UK. This project is original in the following specific ways:

- a) It is the first time that a study of the experiences of a group of Christian transfolk has taken place in the UK. While there have been



individual biographical accounts and some theology written by transfolk, this is the first time a synthesis of the experiences of 12 transfolk from different parts of the UK has been collected and analysed to ascertain life patterns and pastoral needs.

- b) It is the first study to use an Indigenous Knowledge methodology to engage with transfolk in the way that was suggested by Trans activist and academic Vivienne Namaste (1993). This means that the project was guided by individuals from the group studied and that transfolk will share in the results in ways that will benefit them.
- c) This project provides a set of pastoral guidelines that have been created through research. These guidelines contain the collected wisdom and experience revealed in the narratives.

## **Constraints and limitations.**

I am very aware that the experience of transfolk in the UK is an under-researched field. This thesis is an attempt to begin a long overdue discussion. While it may be tempting to make broader generalisations about atypical gender experience and UK Christianity from this study, it is not possible to do so because it is a piece of qualitative research limited to 12 interviewees. More research is needed to validate these results.

There is very little British literature to validate my findings. In order to remedy this, literature has been used from many disciplines and contexts to create a theoretical framework for the study. Much of this literature has come from outside the UK and is the “best approximate” that could be found.

This thesis also discusses public reports produced by the UK Church about transfolk. These reports are limited to the voices of the Evangelical Alliance and the Anglican Church. I am very aware these documents do not encompass the entire Christian response to transfolk. However, because there is a lack of other published materials, it is difficult to ascertain how other Christian traditions view or engage with transfolk beyond anecdote. Therefore, they cannot be included in this thesis.

## **Dissertation objectives.**

Broadly my dissertation objectives are:

- To document church experiences of 12 British people transfolk.
- To use this experience to gain new perspectives on the theological construction of gender in the UK.
- To honour the commitment of my methodology to provide information useful to Christian transfolk in the UK by providing:
  - A reflection on how the Church currently engages with them
  - A body of theological reflection on their gender journeys
  - Pastoral Guidelines that may be useful to them and their advocates.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW.

### **Introduction.**

This literature review explores and evaluates what has been written about transfolk and the Church in the UK. The literature is important for two reasons. Firstly, it gives an indication of the theological work the Church has done in considering transfolk. Secondly, it is important for understanding the church environment the interviewees describe in their narratives. An analysis of this literature helps to contextualise the situations described in Chapter 4 and the pastoral recommendations in Chapter 5. The literature reviewed consists of three types of texts:

*Source literature.* These are the articles, pamphlets and other materials produced by theologians and other writers that are quoted as source documents in the denominational responses to transfolk .The criteria for their inclusion is that they are explicitly theological in nature.

*Denominational Responses.* These discuss transfolk with the intention to provide denominational guidance to clergy and/or church membership. These texts are either the product of a single UK denomination such as the Anglican Church or a coalition of churches such as the Evangelical Alliance.

*Trans Literature.* This is written with the express purpose of communicating or analysing the experiences of UK transfolk or making recommendations on their pastoral care. The criteria used for inclusion is that literature is the published work of an openly Trans writer in the UK or included in a published work alongside the work of openly UK Trans writers. The only exception to this is the North American writer Victoria Kolakowski who is considered because she is quoted in UK denominational responses and as such arguably becomes part of the UK context.

This literature review is limited to UK material only. While it is tempting to include the small body of literature written in North America and Australia, this does not speak directly to the UK context. The lack of a healthcare system that offers free GRS, the lack of an established church or a different (or non-existent) legal framework for recognising gender

change mean that while there are some similarities, there are also differences in context. It is also logical, given the use of the Indigenous Knowledge methodology, to explore sources that speak specifically to a UK context.

There is no neutral vantage point from which to assess this literature, and I need to acknowledge my own stance as a biased/committed ally.

Nevertheless, it is helpful to be clear about the criteria I will use to assess the literature which follows; I will attempt to apply this criteria consistently.

This chapter does not review the secondary material used to validate the findings in Chapter 4 of the thesis. These materials are from many disciplines including psychology, law, medicine, gender studies, sociology, anthropology, feminist theory, queer theology, ethnography and indigenous studies. This material is used to widen the context and relate my research findings to relevant scholarship in other disciplines. This provides a vital interdisciplinary aspect to this thesis and ensures that the

theological discussion is engaged with other work being produced in a wide number of academic disciplines about transfolk.



## Source Literature

### *Introduction*

This literature consists of the published articles and pamphlets written by Christian ethicists, academics and pastoral writers specifically about transfolk. These writings provide the source materials for the denominational responses analysed in section two of this literature review. The following criteria was formulated to investigate the available source materials:

*What are their main arguments?* It is important to assess the arguments of the source materials for two reasons. Firstly they provide the intellectual framework for the denominational responses. Secondly, they are the materials cited by the denominational responses for further study. In both of these ways they help to create the environment explored in Chapter 4 and the recommendations in Chapter 5.

*How authoritative are the sources used in the source literature and how are they deployed to support the arguments?* This source literature is not exclusively theological in nature. Each text explores and attempts to explain the causation of transfolk/transsexuality. Indeed, much of their theological arguments rest on their understandings of causation. It is therefore important to assess how they arrived at their understanding. It will also be observed that sometimes these sources are used selectively in order to support arguments that are not validated by close reading of these documents.

*What are the scriptural sources examined in this source literature? How wide-ranging are they and how are they deployed to support the overall argument?* While all of these writings engage with Scripture, different authors consider different texts to be pertinent. Some use texts to affirm a scriptural basis for gender; others explore proposed biblical prohibitions against transsexuality; while still others attempt to map transfolk onto the biblical story. In each case use of Scripture is key in the construction of the author's argument. It is therefore important to consider what Scripture is cited and how it is used.

*What is their contribution to the Church's discussion about transfolk?* Not all of the sources have been used by the Church in a consistent manner. Some form the basis of denominational responses while others have been almost completely ignored. This question attempts to assess the contribution that each source document makes on its merits rather than its usage.

## ***O'Donovan-Transsexualism and Christian marriage.***

### ***Main arguments***

On the surface O'Donovan is primarily concerned with investigating whether postoperative transsexuals should be allowed to marry in their acquired gender. He is unsure if they pose a potential threat to heteronormative marriage (1982:6) because the marriage of a postoperative transsexual may be de facto gay marriage (1982:8).

In order to clarify his concern, O'Donovan investigates whether transsexual people can change their gender through medical intervention. This becomes his principle aim and the majority of the pamphlet investigates if this is possible. O'Donovan concludes that transsexuals cannot change their God-given chromosomal gender and so they remain in their natal gender and therefore cannot marry.

O'Donovan believes gender dysphoria is a psychological illness (1982:17) that can be cured by the acceptance of the God- given (natal) gendered body. He dismisses medical interventions such as hormones and GRS as "plastic", concluding that they produce only a facsimile rather than a genuine change of gender (1982:16). He is unsure if healthy bodies should be altered to conform to what he considers a mental illness. He does advocate surgery as a treatment of last resort to relieve the profound distress experienced by some transsexuals (1982:17).

O'Donovan writes that the "transsexual claim" is based on three assertions:

*my body is an accident that has befallen the real me, the real me has a true sex, male or female; and I know immediately what that sex is without needing anyone to tell me. (1982:10).*

His arguments to refute these claims are not satisfactory. While he may believe the “gender accident” is psychological rather than physical in nature, he is unable to provide proof of this. O’Donovan’s attempt to refute transfolk’s assertion of their real gender does not recognise the value of lived experience and he casually dismisses the importance of self-identity. His third point misses the reality that the heteronormative gender system teaches clear gender roles for men and women and transfolk have more than enough information to make an informed decision about which gender they are.

O’Donovan also introduces a puzzling charge of Gnosticism against transsexuality (1982:11). He argues that the body is not something that is divorced from the spirit, but that both body and spirit should inform each other, and that gender dysphoria is a sign of the rending apart of this psychosomatic unity. He asserts that transsexualism is a gnostic withdrawal of the spirit from matter. This is a peculiar argument because it ignores the Christian tradition of asceticism that seeks to allow the spirit to triumph over the body. Several of the authors discussed later in this

chapter have disputed this position and their objections will be explored in the discussion of their work.

### ***Use of Sources***

In considering transsexual marriage O'Donovan's main source of authority is neither medical nor theological but legal, quoting *Corbett vs Corbett*.

While it is recognised that this ruling set the precedent for the legal status of transfolk until the 2004 Gender Recognition Act, O' Donovan seems unaware that this ruling could be overturned by subsequent rulings more favourable to transfolk.

When considering gender change itself, O'Donovan mainly refers to the work of John Money and the Johns Hopkins medical centre<sup>5</sup>. He disagrees with Money's position on the causation of transsexuality (that it is a form of intersexuality and sex can be reassigned) but fails to cite dissenting

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<sup>5</sup> Referenced as Money, John 1969 "Sex reassignment as related to hermaphroditism and transsexualism." Pp. 91-113 in Richard Green & John Money (eds.), *Transsexualism and Sex-Reassignment*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press. and Pauly, Ira B. 1969 "Adult manifestations of male transsexualism." Pp. 37-58 in Richard Green & John Money (eds.), *Transsexualism and Sex-Reassignment*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press.

opinions or authors to prove his assertion (1982:17). In this he discards the only medical evidence he presents. The weakness of O'Donovan's thesis about the causes of transsexuality is that it is completely uncorroborated by medical evidence and is entirely the personal opinion of someone with no expertise in the area of transsexualism.

O'Donovan also quotes sources selectively. A case in point is the testimony of Nicholas Mason (Mason 1980) about the struggles he faced in transitioning gender. O'Donovan completely ignores this biographical account and merely uses it to show that some doctors refer to the natal rather than assumed gender of transfolk. Not engaging with this piece of published literature shows the paucity of his use of source materials to frame his argument.

### ***Scripture***

The key Scripture used is Genesis 1:27. O' Donovan sees this as the basis for a God ordained binary gender. His contention is that transsexuality disrupts this order and as a result should be resisted (1982: 6). Other



Scripture is not explored in depth but rather quoted as a set of self-evident assertions. In this way he uses Mark 10.6 on marriage (1982:6) and 1 Corinthians 6.18, claiming that there is an analogy between Paul's condemnation of fornication and transsexualism (1982:16). He uses the tale of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5: 1-11) as an analogy about transsexual marriage. He contends that marriage leaves transsexuals exposed in judgement for forsaking their natal gender (1982:19), as were those two early converts who did not give all they possessed to the Church. He argues that conducting these para (sic) marriages (1982:21) devalues (sic) both the vocations of singleness and heterosexual marriage. This is stated as a fact rather than explored in a way that would allow the reader to understand the thinking that lies behind this perplexing assertion.

### ***Contribution***

O'Donovan is the first church-based writer to explore transsexualism in any detail. His contribution to the debate is important because the arguments he formulates form the basis of the Anglican and Evangelical

Alliance's position on transsexuality. Nevertheless, his arguments are not compelling. He rejects expert opinion on the causation of transsexuality in favour of his own assumptions even though he is unable to cite alternate expert opinion to support them. He does not explore Scripture with any rigor but rather quotes Scripture selectively without discussing its applicability. But it is the lack of pastoral concern for transfolk that is particularly troubling; O'Donovan is intent on expounding his theories with no concern about the impact on the people he is so quick to dismiss.

## **Horton-Changing Channels: *A Christian Response to the Transvestite and Transsexual.***

### ***Main arguments***

Horton wrote the Grove booklet *Changing Channels: A Christian Response to the Transvestite and Transsexual* in 1994. His aim was to provide a pastoral response to people who cross-dress or who are transsexuals.

Horton believes there is a large, undiscovered community of transfolk within Britain. He writes with some knowledge about organisations such as the Beaumont Society<sup>6</sup> and the difference between transgenderists (those who do not seek GRS), and transsexuals (those who do). He also mentions analogous people in other cultures such as the lady-boys of Thailand, and the Berdache of the First Nation Peoples of the Americas. He

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<sup>6</sup> From their website <http://www.beaumontsociety.org.uk/history/> accessed 15.3.15

“Originally founded in 1966, the Beaumont Society originally started as a UK Chapter of the secret American organisation “Full Personality Expression” (FPE). The aim of the society then, is remarkably similar to those of the society now :-

1. To provide information and education to the general public, the medical and legal professions on transvestism and to encourage research aimed at fuller understanding.
2. To provide TV’s with an opportunity for a social life together.

From these roots, the UK Chapter eventually became the Beaumont Society, taking the name of the Chevalier d’Eon de Beaumont. Originally, all members had to be sponsored by an existing member and had to be vetted before being accepted – but this is no longer the case.”

considers that gender dysphoria may be something like left-handedness (1994: 50). He disagrees with O'Donovan about the givenness of binary gender and considers that people may be both physically and psychologically intersex (1994: 45).

Horton argues that there are many ways for women to express gender variant feelings in our society such as dress or occupation but there are no similar outlets for men. He believes the Church has a role to play in seeking justice for transfolk in society, and laments that support and help for them are found in the gay community rather than the Church (1994:48). He also speaks with insight, saying transfolk should be encouraged to integrate their whole selves and their histories in gender change. He makes the observation that people need to become whole people and not caricatures of their assumed gender (1994:49). Like O'Donovan, he is concerned about the decoupling of body and spirit but considers that surgery is better than the lasting distress and risk of suicide he has observed in his pastoral work with those who are unable to get treatment to resolve their gender dysphoria. Horton is also concerned with honesty. He is clear that potential partners need to be told early

about gender dysphoria, and that wives need time and help to adjust to any disclosure. He believes that faith can be an enormous support for both transgendered people, their families and friends.

Horton argues for the inclusion of transgendered people within the Church, but also considers that “odd” people may drive away children and families. He considers that it may be more acceptable for transfolk to appear as their natal gender at church or be given chaplaincy services in their home. Of particular interest is his challenge to the reader when he asks:

*Do we represent Christian values to those who are different, or do we merely seek their conformity to our patterns of behaviour to save ourselves embarrassment? (1994:56)*

## ***Sources***

Horton discusses the work of Prof Louis Gooren. Gooren has published many articles on the topic of brain structure, hormones and transsexualism in which he argues there is a biological basis of transfolk. The work is summarised in an article he published with other researchers the following year (Zhou et al 1995).

## ***Use of Scripture***

Horton explores Scripture in detail and concludes there is no biblical impediment to transsexualism. He considers Deuteronomy 22:5 and concludes that, if Christians ignore the prohibition against mixed fibres in Deuteronomy 22:11 and the injunction to make tassels for cloaks in 22:12, it is likely 22:5 is also not applicable. To counter this prohibition he selectively quotes Matthew 6:28<sup>7</sup> “And why do you worry about clothing”. This text is used incorrectly as it is in the context of an admonishment not to worry about obtaining clothing rather than worrying about what type of clothes to wear. This selective quotation does not seem a valid counter

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<sup>7</sup> Matthew 6:28 New International Version (NIV) “And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labour or spin.

argument and his comments about applicability to culture seem more valid.

He also discusses Deuteronomy 23:1, arguing that Isaiah 56:4 and Daniel 1 show that this prohibition no longer applies (1994:42). Horton also counters an exclusive interpretation of Genesis 1:27, arguing that this can be read inclusively and that any combination of gender is also created in the image of God. Horton also explores Matthew 19:12 and Acts 8:26-39. He concludes that these texts about eunuchs may be cautiously used to infer that there is no biblical bar to transsexualism.

### ***Contribution***

Horton writes with knowledge about pastoral issues transfolk and their families face and discusses organisations that exist to support them. While some of his pastoral conclusions such as excluding transfolk from public worship if they are “odd” are not be supported by this author, he attempts a balance between practicality and compassion in his advice. He also attempts to engage with a breadth of Scripture exploring both

possible prohibitions and possible opportunities to see scriptural characters such as eunuchs as forerunners to modern transfolk. Horton is quoted in both Holder and Watts (also discussed in this section) but only briefly in Anglican Church reports. He is also listed as “further reading” in the EA’s *Transsexuality*. It is sad that this early attempt at a pastoral conversation about the care of transfolk is not as widely quoted as its fellow Grove Booklet by O’Donovan.



## **Kolakowski- *Towards a Christian ethical response to transsexual persons.***

### ***Main arguments***

Kolakowski believes the prominence of transsexualism is increasing for two reasons. The first is that the transgendered civil rights movement has led to the formation of activist communities who have demanded Trans rights and increased visibility. The second is the increased treatment and research into transsexuality has led to greater visibility. Her contention is that the increasing visibility and confidence of transfolk will lead to challenges to the Church for civil rights in a similar way to lesbian and gay campaigns (1997b:14). She invites the reader to consider a response in readiness for when it is needed.

### ***Sources***

Kolakowski spends very little time evaluating medical data, noting the Gooren studies on brains mentioned previously. Instead of going into exhaustive details on the causes of transsexuality, she directs the reader

to a recently published book written by sex therapists Brown and Rounsley.<sup>8</sup>

Instead of focussing on Scripture she focuses on Church tradition and evaluates the traditional understandings of human sexuality and transsexuality. She concludes that, under the Jewish and Catholic understanding of natural law, procreation is paramount. Given that GRS voids procreative ability it could be seen as inappropriate for Christian and Jewish transfolk. She recognises that this stance is supported by traditional understandings of Deuteronomic law and the understanding that gender and sexuality are determined by God and should not be altered on human whim. The insistence that transsexualism has psychological origins, she suggests, transgresses these Deuteronomic laws by altering bodies and voiding the ability to procreate for psychological reasons.

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<sup>8</sup> Referenced as Brown, M. L., & Rounsley, C. A. (1996). *True Selves: Understanding Transsexualism: for Families, Friends, Coworkers, and Helping Professionals*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

The resolution to this dilemma hinges on the successful resolution of the following question: are transfolk their natal gender, their transgender or a mixture of both? In her response she believes that transfolk are a mixture of both. She argues that the real question posed by transfolk is: what is the appropriate ethical response to folk who are biologically neither male nor female?

### ***Use of Scripture***

Kolakowski addresses similar Scripture to previous writers. She argues that the prohibition contained in Deuteronomy 22:5 has little practical relevance to modern Christians. She also argues that these Scriptures were never intended to give guidance on issues such as transsexuality and that understandings of such modern phenomena were not known in the archaic social theory of the society which produced the Scriptures (1997b:22).

What is different in her use of Scripture is her positive use of the role model of the eunuch to link transfolk to the Scriptures. This is explored in greater length in the third section of this review when Kolakowski's work on eunuchs will be discussed alongside other Trans writers who explore the biblical eunuch.

### ***Contribution***

In this article Kolakowski completely recasts the debate on transsexuality. Instead of exploring if transfolk exist, she asserts the reality of transfolk as part of modern society. While she cites medical evidence, she is not overly preoccupied with this but rather explores the physical implications of GRS on church tradition and practice. She also provides an alternative analysis to O'Donovan's "transsexual claim"; it isn't that transfolk are one gender or the other another but rather they are physically and psychologically intersex. Her challenge to the Church to find an ethical response to the lived reality of transfolk is the first of its type and therefore of critical significance.

## **Holder- Crucible articles on transsexuality.**

### ***Main arguments***

Holder produced a two part article that appeared in the Anglican journal *Crucible* over two successive issues in 1998. His concerns were threefold: is GRS a mutilation of a healthy body or appropriate treatment; should post-operative transsexuals be allowed to marry; and what is the status of pre-existing marriages after GRS? (1998a:91).

In attempting to answer his first concern, Holder engages with both medical sources and Scripture. He concludes that gender reassignment surgery is an attempt towards wholeness and, provided there are appropriate safeguards in place to prevent inappropriate surgical decisions, there should be no objection to it. Holder then moves to his second concern. He believes the marriage of post-operative transsexuals is permissible provided it is within a heterosexual union.

On his third concern, he believes that those who have married when they were preoperative should remain celibate, and that the marriage contracted in their natal gender is still valid, arguing that it is akin to a progressive disability and hence the marriage is unable to be dissolved. The resolution of his third concern suggests a form of same sex marriage without the cisgendered partner's consent.

Holder then investigates the existing literature. He begins with a refutation of O'Donovan's concerns about surgery on healthy bodies. He argues that many types of surgical and medical interventions are used to promote wholeness, and makes the helpful distinction between the intention behind the surgical procedure and the surgical procedure itself.

He is also critical of O'Donovan's argument about Gnosticism saying that transsexuals are not objecting to bodies per se but that they are convinced their natal bodies are the wrong ones at birth (1998b:128). He also points out that by rejecting Money's theory that transsexualism is a complex interaction between nature and nurture (i.e. body and spirit) O'Donovan inadvertently creates the gnostic dichotomy he criticises.

He also dismisses O'Donovan's objection against marriage on grounds of inability to procreate, since this is not applied to older people or the infertile because the Church promotes the unitive aspect of marriage. He also observes that surgically constructed genitalia will provide the same effect for this purpose as natal genitalia.

Holder is critical of Kolakowski's argument that compassion alone should permit gender dysphoric folk to obtain GRS. For him, this is not a convincing argument. He is equally critical of her argument that there is a wider and wider acceptance of non-heteronormative relationships and on this basis transsexual marriage should be permissible, noting that "such arguments too prematurely abandon the objectivity of the Christian tradition" (1998b:130).

## Sources

Holder draws on many medical sources including Money and Gooren (previously discussed in this review), Rekers et al (1983)<sup>9</sup>, Dorner et al (1991)<sup>10</sup> and Lothstein and Levine (1981)<sup>11</sup>. He concludes that transsexuality is “to be determined very early in life and not a matter of individual choice” and that GRS is a suitable treatment for some people with gender dysphoria (Holder 1998a: 94).

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<sup>9</sup> This was a clinical study pursued on the status of fathers, father-substitutes, and older male siblings for 46 boys with deviations in male role development. Significantly fewer male role models were found in the family backgrounds of the severely gender-disturbed boys as compared to the mild-to-moderately gender-disturbed boys. Male childhood gender disturbance was also found to be correlated with a high incidence of psychiatric problems in both the mothers and fathers.

<sup>10</sup> A study of the effect of prenatal hormones. It showed a positive correlation between hormone levels and transsexualism and homosexuality.

<sup>11</sup> This article reports the work of The Gender Identity Clinic at Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland. They reported that treating individuals with psychotherapy as a first alternative to GRS produced the following results: of 50 gender dysphoric (GD) patients, 70% adjusted to nonsurgical solutions, 20% continued to receive treatment, and 10% received GRS and psychotherapy. The article argues even cases where GRS was pursued the patients benefited from psychotherapy. It concludes that GRS and psychotherapy are not mutually exclusive treatments. This is further discussed as a source in the discussion on the Anglican Report *Some Issues in Human Sexuality*.



## ***Scripture***

Holder explores both the Old and New Testaments. He comments on the prohibitions in Deuteronomy concluding that “verses whose primary concern is cultic purity are not the place to derive a moral prohibition” (1998a:96).

He does differentiate between cross dressing and transsexuals passing as their acquired gender when discussing Deuteronomy 22:5. He is disapproving of cross-dressing because he considers there is an erotic element to it, while approving of transfolk presenting as their acquired gender as “aiming for a sense of wholeness” (1998a:96). He also explores the verses in Matthew 19 and Acts 8 concluding that they “should be real encouragement to transsexuals.” (1998a:98).

***Contribution.***

Holder's is the first explicitly Anglican position on transsexuality. It is published in an Anglican journal (in contrast to O'Donovan and Horton who are published by Grove Books) and explores the issue using "the three legged stool" of Scripture, reason and tradition. It is neither universally positive nor negative but takes a nuanced view of transfolk. It provides a more complete overview of Scripture from an Anglican perspective. It also benefits from the inclusion of later research on transsexuality unavailable when O'Donovan published. Given this, I believe Holder should be accorded a more prominent voice in the debate.

## **Watts- Transsexualism and the Church.**

### ***Main arguments***

This article is an attempt to sum up the writings on transgendered people up to its publication date in 2002. Watts concludes that hard facts about the causes of transsexualism are in short supply (2002:64). He counters the assertion that gender dysphoria is a mental illness in itself by arguing that the psychological illness often associated with gender dysphoria is just as likely to be caused by the stress of living in an unsympathetic society (Watts 2002:68).

Watts is concerned with the inconsistencies contained within *Transsexuality* and is highly dubious about the authors' confidence in seeing transsexualism as a psychiatric disorder. While he devotes a section in his article to its exploration, his comments will be incorporated in the discussion of the report in the next section to avoid duplication of the material.

Watts considers the impact on transsexuals within the Church. He begins with an exploration of transsexual clergy. He suggests that they should take time out of ministry while they adjust to their new gender but then argues that the Church should attempt to find a place for a committed transsexual minister who wishes to continue ministry. He cites the Church of England's acceptance of Rev Carol Stone as a transgendered Anglican Priest serving in Swindon in 2000 as a precedent and also argues that many excellent clergy battle with physical impairments and psychological problems.<sup>12</sup>

He also touches on transsexual marriage but directs the reader to O'Donovan for an in-depth analysis of the issues. He does make a distinction between marriage and the blessing of less ideal (sic) relationships such as same sex and Trans relationships (2002:82).

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<sup>12</sup> While I would dispute the inference in this statement that all transfolk have physical impairments or psychological problems, I concede the point I believe Watts is trying to make in that physical or psychological disadvantage does not necessarily make clergy ineffective or unfit to exercise their spiritual and pastoral duties.

## **Sources**

Watts surveys the increasingly complex set of medical data exploring a possible biological basis of transsexuality including anatomy, endocrinology and genetics. While he is not entirely convinced by arguments that there is a biological basis of transsexuality he notes:

*It would perhaps be best to conclude that the biological aspects of transsexualism are not yet firmly established. On the other hand it would be rash to say that it had none. (2002:66).*

He is similarly unconvinced by his survey of psychological factors but notes that most experts agree that transsexualism is not amenable to psychological treatment (2002:68).

Interestingly he notes a journal article that reports a transsexual who had been cured (sic) by exorcism. This article investigates the apparent biological and psychological changes of a transwoman called Judith after

the exorcism of 22 demons (Barlow, Abel and Blanchard 1977: 392) by a Christian faith healer.

Watts also explores the arguments for a socially constructed cause for transsexuality. He concludes that there is a weak case for social constructivism where the increasing diagnosis and labelling of folk as transsexuals may lead to others identifying and calling themselves transsexuals (2002:72).

Watts discusses O' Donovan at length and considers it "the best piece of Christian writing on the subject" (2002:73). He is particularly convinced by O'Donovan's analysis of the "transsexual claim". Watts also seems to agree that we should accept the limits of our own bodies and, with some caveats, asserts that self-identity "is not a licence for people to do whatever they manage to convince themselves is right" (2002:75).

Watts mentions Horton and Kolakowski in his bibliography but they are not explored in any depth. He seems to be completely unaware of the two Holder articles. This lack of exploration of sources other than O' Donovan seems contrary to his expressed purpose of exploring the topic of transsexuality in the Church. It is puzzling that he focuses exclusively on a 20 year old text rather than constructing an overview of all theological literature in the same way that he surveys medical, psychological and constructivist literature to such good effect.

### ***Use of Scripture***

Watts explores Christian tradition instead of Scripture. He points to Christian traditions of religious celibacy, the Church Father Origen and the Russian Skoptic Christians (2002:73) as worthy of consideration on the issue of transsexuality. He notes that there are several societies with gender liminal roles such as the Berdache who have an element of the sacred associated with them.

### ***Contribution***

Watts is quoted in the Anglican Church documents on transsexuality, particularly in regards to transsexual clergy. While he provides a comprehensive overview of the possible causes of transsexuality at the time of writing, he is much less successful in his exploration of literature available to him at the point of publication. The lack of consideration of later writers such as Holder, Horton and Kolakowski is a serious flaw in this article which purports to be an exploration of how transsexuality is viewed in the Church.



## **Parakaleo Ministries.**

Parakaleo Ministries is a UK based organisation that runs a website and an ex-Trans ministry. It is heavily referenced in the denominational responses investigated in the next section and as such needs consideration in this section. The problem with Parakaleo's materials is that they only exist electronically and the specific web based publications cited by *Transsexuality* and *Some Issues in Human Sexuality* are no longer available via their website. In an attempt to provide an evaluation of Parakaleo's contribution, *Towards an understanding of transsexual behaviours*, currently available on their website, is evaluated in lieu of the quoted source material.

## ***Main Arguments***

Keith Tiller writes that the "transsexual agenda is an offshoot of the homosexual agenda" and has resulted in the Gender Recognition Act 2004. He claims that this piece of legislation creates a legal fiction (sic) where people are allowed to legally live in an assumed gender rather than their natural gender. He argues that there is no proof that transsexuality is a scientific fact and he believes that its acceptance is the result of research

being funded by pro-transsexual institutions and lobby groups. He also believes that gender dysphoria is a pattern of addiction and deception that destroys families and traumatises children. Tiller believes there is deep sense of shame that all transgendered people feel which can be cured by a relationship with God and the use of reparative therapies to help transfolk return to natal gender and heterosexuality.

### ***Use of Sources***

Tiller does not use any published source to substantiate his arguments. This renders his assertions about a homosexual and transgender alliance, the deep shame that all transfolk feel after transition, the conspiracy between all researchers and the transgender lobby and the effectiveness of reparative therapies groundless without evidence to support them.

### ***Use of Scripture***

Tiller quotes Genesis 1:26-27 as proof of a binary gender. He uses Mark 10:6 as an affirmation in the New Testament of this intention. He also quotes the prohibition contained in Deuteronomy 22:5 as biblical evidence against transfolk. Tiller simply reproduces these texts without any analysis.

### ***Contribution***

Parakaleo Ministries is used as a counter narrative to peer reviewed literature on the causes of gender dysphoria and the success of reparative therapies by those unwilling to accept scholarly opinion. Tiller openly testifies to his own healing (sic) from gender dysphoria and claims his expertise from his own experience. While it is difficult to justify extensive use of Parakaleo material from a position of academic rigour, it is undeniable that it has been influential in the UK Church as evidenced by its extensive use in *Transsexuality and Some Issues in Human Sexuality: A Guide to the Debate*.

**In summary.**

These early writings are concerned with transsexuality rather than with Trans or gender queer folk but they form the basis by which all transfolk are viewed in the denominational responses discussed in the next section. With the exceptions of O'Donovan and Tiller these initial writings offer a cautiously sympathetic reaction.

The writers who fully survey Scripture find little impediment to the acceptance of transfolk. All consider Deuteronomy not applicable to transfolk. Some see eunuchs in the Old and New Testaments as precedents. Watts sees that Christian tradition may have other precedents such as Origen and the Skoptic Christians. Those who explore the causes of transsexuality using peer reviewed clinical literature conclude that the causes of transsexuality are complex and that transsexuality is not chosen. All writers apart from Tiller concede that gender reassignment surgery may be the best option for transfolk, even if they see it as an action of last resort.

It is therefore surprising that these writings are the primary source materials for the reports from the Evangelical Alliance and the Anglican Church whose response to transfolk has been overwhelmingly negative.

## **Denominational Responses.**

The Christian Church in Britain has spent very little time considering transfolk. There are no statements from many of the smaller mainstream denominations such as Methodism, the Society of Friends or The United Reformed Church (URC). Much of their conversation and energy have focused on the issues that gay and lesbian people present, especially in recent times around same sex marriage. The Methodist Church is a good example. Their sole mention of transfolk is in their paper *Common Human Sexuality* (1990) where transfolk are mentioned once in passing.

The responses to transfolk from the UK Church are the Evangelical Alliance's *Transsexuality* (2000) and the Church of England Reports *Issues in Human Sexuality* (1991), *Some Issues in Human Sexuality: A Guide to the Debate*. (2003) and The Pilling Report (2013).

In assessing these responses it is also important to assess their merit as objectively as the previous section, particularly as they are perceived to be overwhelmingly negative towards transfolk and the stated intention of this thesis is advocacy. In order to do this a further set of questions are explored:

*What is their overall understanding of transsexuality after their investigations?* This understanding is important because these understandings are the official position of these denominations and hence directly influence the environment in which this research was carried out. Understanding these positions helps contextualise the narratives explored in Chapter 4 and the pastoral advice given in Chapter 5.

*How have they used the authors already discussed? What other sources are used?* As has already been observed in the discussion of the source literature, not all of the source documents have been given equal consideration in these reports. Evaluating how these sources have been used helps understand the intent behind the report's conclusions. Also by evaluating the other sources used, it is possible to gain an insight into how

the report writers arrived at their understanding of transsexuality and transfolk.

*How have they used Scripture in their arguments?* In a similar way it is important to assess how scriptural understandings have helped the denominations arrive at their conclusions.

*What is the impact on Church practice?* These reports provide guidance for dealing with some of the ecclesial and pastoral issues that may arise in the consideration of the churches' response to transfolk. These also directly impact the church environments explored in the interviews and also contrast with the pastoral guidelines given in chapter 5.



*What has been the reaction of transfolk to their reports?* From a position of advocacy it is important to see that transfolk have not been passive recipients of these reports but have critiqued them and responded to them. This section allows these voices to be heard and allows cisgendered readers to understand how these reports may have been viewed by the interviewees.

## **Evangelical Alliance – *Transsexuality*.**

The Evangelical Alliance published *Transsexuality* in 2000. Their aim was to explore transsexuality from a conservative Christian viewpoint and to provide a policy statement for their member churches to follow. A later version was produced that included observations on equality legislation in 2005 which has since been withdrawn from circulation.

### ***Understanding of transsexuality in the report.***

The report explains that there are transfolk as well as transsexuals and makes a distinction between transvestitism (which they deem has an erotic element) and being Trans. While it admits that most transsexuals are happy with gender reassignment surgery (2000:24), it argues that the duty of Christians is obedience to God and that natal gender should be seen as a clear intention of God's will. It contends that the onus of proof should be on transsexuals and the medical establishment to claim the reality of transsexualism rather than the onus of proof being on Christians to justify their position on the issue (2000:52). The report recognises that the Church is seen by society as "strong on condemnation and weak on compassion" (2000:53) and a denier of human rights (2000:52) on the

issue of transsexuality. It justifies this stance as being countercultural against the “me-first culture” and the “deification of sex” (2000:54).

Halfway through the report the central concern against transsexuality is explored. This concern is that if transsexuality is real, it renders the gendered distinctions between male and female “infinitely plastic” (2000:57). This plasticity would threaten the complementarian nature of gender espoused by the Evangelical Alliance (2000:48). This concern is further explored in the ethical implications section where it affirms that a given biological sex is fundamental. Any revision of this as a result of gender alienation and is a form of unacceptable gnosticism which makes gender subjective and contingent.

*Transsexuality* further argues that sex and gender are a biological reality (sic) and a matter of public fact and these facts are more important than self-perception. While it acknowledges that some people may see not this reality (sic) it argues they should be dissuaded from their false gender beliefs and be led to the truth of their biological sex (2000:65). It considers

GRS is only appropriate in matters of pastoral emergency (2000:67) as a way of managing symptoms rather than curing the problem.

### ***Use of Sources***

The report offers a review of scientific literature. This section begins by asserting that science does not have greater authority in this area than Scripture. It also dismisses much of the science it discusses as “one off” results and a deliberate skewing of results to appease unspecified “single issue lobby groups” (2000:15).

*Transsexuality* begins by referencing work by evangelical Christians Whitehead and Whitehead (1999) whose work is neither published in an academic publication nor peer reviewed. When the report engages with peer reviewed literature it only quotes selectively from it. An example of this is how it establishes the incidence of transsexuality (Gallarda et al 1996). While the report correctly quotes the statistics from the article, it ignores the article’s finding that medical intervention is the only way to improve the clinical condition of transsexuals. This omission is

presumably because it would undermine the EA's contention that surgery is a last resort after all other options have failed.

Another example of obfuscation occurs when discussing Bosinski et al (1997). This study showed that 83.3% of untreated female to male transsexuals had above normal values for at least one measured androgen (male hormone) as opposed to 33.3% of a female control group. While the authors consider this biologically significant, *Transsexuality* does not report this finding. Instead it attempts to explain that the masculine body shape of the FTM participants observed in the study meant that they were treated differently than other women (sic). The report contends that this treatment was the cause of their transsexuality rather than the greater presence of androgen. This can only be a misinterpretation of the article which clearly argues a biological link to transsexuality.

*Transsexuality* also criticises the work of Gooren (Zhou et al 1995). It attempts to throw doubt on his study arguing that brain structures change in response to behaviour. As evidence it cites an article in the popular science magazine *Scientific American* (Kandel and Hawkins 1992) rather than peer reviewed clinical studies in rebuttal.

The report then argues that since a biological cause has not been established, the obvious answer is that the cause must be psychological. In evidence the report misquotes Holder as endorsing psychological causation (2000:22). What he is actually discussing is his concern that a proved biological basis for transsexualism could be tested in utero and this may prompt parents to abort transgendered foetuses (1998a:92). He is later misquoted again as citing a high incidence of regret after GRS (2000:25). In this case he is discussing the recommendation in *The Lancet* that the Harry Benjamin Gender Dysphoria Guidelines are used because it increases the probability of a successful gender transition (Holder 1998:94). How he is quoted implies a great deal of dissatisfaction with GRS. However, peer reviewed studies such as Lawrence (2003) report the exact opposite.

*Transsexuality* also cites Cohen-Kettenis and Arrindell (1990). In their study they show transfolk remembered their parents were more emotionally distant than a cisgendered control group. What is not quoted is the discussion about the impact of subsequent events on the interpretation of memory (1990:619). The article examines the possibility that if the transperson had subsequently experienced difficulties with parents this could impact their interpretation of their personal histories.

The overwhelming impression is that this material has been included in order to give a veneer of scientific respectability to the report. A mixture of popular science, Christian pseudoscience, misquotation and the selective quoting of peer reviewed sources is not helpful in allowing the reader to come to an understanding of the origins of gender dysphoria or transsexuality. What the reader is left with is a vague impression that somehow transsexuality is psychological in basis and somehow both transfolk and their parents are to blame. This is neither a useful nor an accurate summary of the cited material.

### ***Use of Scripture***

Given the Evangelical Alliance's assertion of the primacy of Scripture, very little space is given to the exploration of it. Of the 87 pages of the report only three and a half pages are specifically devoted to the exploration of Scripture. In these pages it discusses the possibility of a progression from the prohibition of Deuteronomy 23:1 to the recognition of Matthew 19 to the acceptance of the Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts 8:26-39. It attempts to wrestle honestly with the complexities discussing whether Deuteronomy can apply to transsexuality and the applicability of Mathew 19 (2000:46). Instead of continuing this biblical work, it veers off into a doctrinal discussion of Creation and marriage (2000:48), The Fall, Redemption and Final Restoration (2000:51). In these sections it does deal with Genesis 1.27 asserting that this is a clear setting up of a gender binary.

### ***Impact on Church practice***

The authors believe that with prayer, guidance and support, revision to natal gender is possible for some transsexuals but also acknowledge this may not be possible for all. They accept their member churches have a



pastoral responsibility towards transfolk but consider it should take the form of “heavy shepherding”<sup>13</sup> towards gender conformity (2000:83).

The report concludes with advice to churches on issues such as dealing with marriage (where it concludes that divorce or separation may be the best option); whether the repentant transsexual should receive baptism and communion (left to individual churches but with a warning that privileging (sic) a transsexual may lead to resentment amongst congregants) and a discussion concerning whether transsexuals could be in church leadership (not recommended because they are poor role models).

On matters of pastoral care it recommends a healing (sic) of disunity between body and spirit (2000: 81). It discusses compassionately the need to allow openly Trans members to be part of a church in order to save them from self-harm and suicide but counsels a gentle heavy shepherding where possible (2000:82). The report clearly states that the only

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<sup>13</sup> This term seems to have come from the evangelical Shepherding Movement of the 1970's to mean a system of meetings with some form of coercion to correct (sic) problem behaviours. It is not defined in the report.

appropriate Christian response for a transsexual who refuses to return to their natal gender is celibacy (2000:78).

While it is less than enthusiastic about transfolk, the report recognises the pastoral reality that most transfolk are happy with their new identities.

While coming from the conservative social and theological position of its membership, it does accept member churches have a pastoral responsibility to transfolk and attempts a compassionate response within its own understandings.

### ***Trans Reactions to the report***

Tanis (2003:98) is particularly concerned about the recommendations of shepherding back to gender conformity and the “last resort” option of GRS. He asks how much misery a person should be put through at the cost of their inclusion in the Christian community. He is also very suspicious of the charge of Gnosticism, arguing that transfolk fully inhabit their bodies and that is what makes the pain of gender dysphoria so intense

(2003: 100). He is also deeply concerned that the onus of action to promote acceptance is entirely put on the transsexual person and that the Evangelical Alliance does not suggest any form of education or enabling of congregations to accept transsexual members (2003:101). Rev Dr Beardsley's critique of the Evangelical Alliance Report is that it is disingenuous because it supports medical intervention to "correct" intersex conditions but does not advocate surgery for transfolk because they are born with normal (sic) bodies. She also dismisses the claim that GRS is experimental, noting that there is nearly 80 years of experience (Beardsley 2007:14). She also considers the report "simplistic and rigid" (Beardsley, O'Brien and Woolley 2012:261) and overly dogmatic in its insistence of a psychological cause for transsexuality. She is also critical that it has not engaged with transfolk in order to gain their perspectives (Beardsley 2007:14).

### ***Other reactions***

Watts is also suspicious of the insistence on a psychological cause of transsexuality arguing that it is likely that there is at least some biological basis for transsexuality (2002:77). He is uneasy about how the report pits the “truth of someone’s sex” against their “false gender beliefs” (2002:78). He points out that dualism has a respectable place in the Christian tradition and that the use of the term Gnosticism is “a very loose use”. He is also concerned over the use of Genesis 1:27 as an exclusive statement when there are demonstrably intersex folk who do not fit in a gender binary. Given this biological reality he contends it may be logical to assume that transfolk are another category (2002:79).

**The Anglican Church: *Issues in Human Sexuality, Some Issues in Human Sexuality: A Guide to the Debate* and *Report of the House of Bishops Working Group on Human Sexuality (the Pilling Report)*.**

The Anglican Church has produced three reports that mention transfolk:

*Issues in Human Sexuality: a statement by the House of Bishops* (1991)<sup>14</sup>,

*Some Issues in Human Sexuality: A Guide to the Debate*. (2003)<sup>15</sup> and

*Report of the House of Bishops Working Group on Human Sexuality* (Pilling Report) (2013)<sup>16</sup>.

*Issues in Human Sexuality* and the *Pilling Report* only mention transfolk tangentially. They do not discuss any of the source material explored nor explore Scripture regarding transsexuality. They provide no guidance nor insights to Churches. *Issues in Human Sexuality* merely notes in section 3.19 that “human sexuality is a fragile system, easily distorted and broken” (1991:26). It lists those distorted sexualities as those unwilling to have intercourse with their spouse and transfolk.

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<sup>14</sup> Referred hereafter as *Issues in Human Sexuality*

<sup>15</sup> Referred hereafter as *Some Issues in Human Sexuality*.

<sup>16</sup> Referred hereafter as the *Pilling Report*.

While the methodology section of the *Pilling Report* tells us that transfolk were interviewed as part of the consultation process undertaken, transfolk are referred to only three times in the report. The first mention is in paragraph 30 where it concludes that the issues transfolk encounter are about feelings of shame and exclusion and not primarily about sexuality (2013:7). The second reference admits that “transgender and intersex conditions raise important theological issues” (2013:9) but this is explored no further. The third is Paragraph 198 which states that “Unlike people with intersex conditions, their [meaning transfolk] bodies are unambiguously either male or female” (2013:61). With this observation it directs readers to *Some Issues in Human Sexuality* to explore these matters further.

*The Pilling Report* does not give any guidance on transsexuality because its focus is same sex marriage and does not consider the complexities of marriage for intersex and transgender people. The list of interviewees in Appendix 2 lists two specifically transgendered groups, Sibyls and Trans Awareness Group, and also academics discussed in this thesis

(Rev Dr Christina Beardsley and Dr Susannah Cornwall). To have not considered marriage for Trans and Intersex folk feels like a missed opportunity.

***Some Issues in Human Sexuality: A Guide to the Debate.***

Bishop Richard Harries explains in the foreword of *Some Issues in Human Sexuality: A Guide to the Debate*: “The title of this study exactly defines its purpose”(House of Bishops 2003: ix). The aim of the report was to expand on the earlier *Issues in Human Sexuality* and add material to act as a guide rather than change Anglican teaching.

***Understanding of transsexuality***

The report gives two definitions of transsexuality. The first is from the *Home Office’s Report of the Interdepartmental Working Group on Transsexual People 2000*. This report is the product of senior civil servants who consulted with many organisations with experience of transfolk including the Beaumont Society, British Medical Association, Gender Identity Research & Education Society (GIRES), Liberty, Northern Concord,

Press for Change, FTM Network, The Gender Trust and experts such as Dr Zoe-Jane Playdon and Profs Louis Gooren and Stephen Whittle. What is quoted in *Some Issues in Human Sexuality* is a less than complete reproduction of the neutral definition given by the report. The definition reproduced leaves out the following underlined sections:

1.1 People with gender dysphoria or gender identity disorder live with a conviction that their physical anatomy is incompatible with their true gender role. They have an overwhelming desire to live and function in the opposite biological sex. Some people become aware of their transsexualism as children while others discover their feelings later in life. Once experienced these feelings are unlikely to disappear.

1.2 The cause of the condition remains obscure. Many transsexual people benefit from counselling and others live happier lives following hormone treatment and gender reassignment surgery.

(2000:3)



In stark contrast the second definition from *Transsexuality* is less neutral ascribing transsexuality as a psychological illness “in which the mind can no longer accept the body” (2003:223). *Transsexuality* cannot claim such a vast representation as the Home Office Report and yet it is treated as the primary definition of transsexuality with some fifteen lines of text reproduced as opposed to four.

In the Home Office Report Prof Zoe-Jane Playdon specifically addresses the issue of psychological illness inherent in the Evangelical Alliance definition:

*....in 1984 the American Psychiatric Association gave diagnostic criteria. At that point, the circumstance [transsexuality] might be described as a physiological condition which was subject to verification by psychiatric analysis - the analysis verified, or proved, that the individual was not mentally ill. (Home Office 2000:40).*

In *Some Issues in Human Sexuality* the possible causes of transsexuality are listed as physiological (either with a genetic or hormonal component), psychological (as a result of poor parenting) and social (as a reaction against a too rigid gender system) (2003:226). While it acknowledges that people do not choose transsexuality it goes on to make the confusing claim that people can choose not to be transsexual by accepting their natural (sic) gender.

This is an important point and is the crux of the logic followed in *Some Issues in Human Sexuality*. If transsexuality is a psychological illness it can be cured. If it is a choice and transfolk continue to choose transsexuality they can be blamed for doing so. While the report is willing to consider these possibilities it is not willing to explore a third option: that transsexuality is naturally occurring and is a complex interplay between many factors over which the individual has very little control. If this is the case, the interpretation of Genesis 1:27 as a divinely ordered rigid dichotomy of male and female begins to break down. Gender may be more fluid than the Church is willing to admit.

It is this refusal to consider this possibility and fear of its consequences which gives rise to the anxiety about transsexuality evidenced in O'Donovan and its intellectual successors, *Transsexuality* and *Some Issues in Human Sexuality*. It is for this reason that *Some Issues in Human Sexuality* champions the understanding of transsexuality as a psychological illness that can be healed- otherwise the rigid dichotomy of male and female which is the theological underpinning of gender espoused in this report simply does not work.

### ***Sources***

The use of sources in this report is poor. The report uses the (then) 30 year old work of O'Donovan and *Transsexuality* as the principal source documents. It does not fully consider the other source documents that it quotes. The voices of Kolakowski, Watts and Holder are used as a foil representing a more liberal view of transsexuality.

*Some Issues in Human Sexuality* does not include the voices of transfolk, those who work with them or any recent peer reviewed journal which may shed light on the causes of transsexuality nor recommendations of pastoral care for transfolk and their families. It does not even fully utilise the Home Office Report cited. While it could be argued that *Some Issues in Human Sexuality* is a theological work and not a review of the causes of transsexualism this would be disingenuous. The report itself sets out to explain transsexuality and is highly selective in its use of source materials to do so.

One such example is the inclusion of the only medical journal article (Lothstein and Levine 1981)<sup>17</sup> used. This article describes a therapeutic regimen of what can only be described as reparative therapy. It describes patients being broken down over several months by aggressive psychotherapy and “electric treatment” until they form a therapeutic alliance (sic). The article reports that these patients frequently feel unsafe and refuse to be left alone with therapists. Refusal of cooperation is labelled “lack of productivity because they are incapable of fantasy and

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<sup>17</sup> Originally appearing in Holder 1998a

lacking in mental imagery” (Lothstein and Levine 1981:927). The article claims an 80% success rate of curing (sic) transsexuals.

The five case studies of healed (sic) individuals show individuals with severe mental health problems including bipolar disorder, alcoholism, schizophrenia, and issues from the survival of childhood abuse. It should be noted under the Harry Benjamin guidelines it is doubtful if these folk would be eligible for GRS as they are presented in the study. While it would not be fair to entirely dismiss the discussion of reparative therapies at this time, it should be noted that critique already existed at this time as evidenced by Bennett (2000). This critique is not engaged with on any level. Citing only Lothstein and Levine (1981) is not an adequate discussion of the effectiveness of reparative therapies although they are embraced in *Some Issues in Human Sexuality* as a cure for transsexuality.

Another problem with the source material used is that there are several unpublished and inaccessible materials such as letters from Peter Forster and Catholic theologians Luke Gormally and George Woodall used extensively. These were neither published nor peer reviewed and so their substance cannot be interrogated.

Of particular concern is the inclusion of an article from Parakaleo Ministries by Keith Tiller and Mark Dainton. The report cites the testimony of Dainton as evidence. It should be noted that Dainton later publicly severed links with Parakaleo and is now living as a transwoman thus negating the authority of this source<sup>18</sup>. These articles are neither peer reviewed nor published in any credible academic journal.

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<sup>18</sup> "Mistaken Identity" The Guardian 31/7/04 found at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2004/jul/31/health.socialcare>

## ***Scripture***

Scripture is briefly discussed and it is found that there are no specific biblical injunctions against transsexuality. It rejects Deuteronomy 23:1 as a ban on transsexuality citing that any prohibition is lifted by Isaiah 56:4-5, Matthew 19:12 and Acts 8:26-9.

The report spends longer on Genesis 1:27 reiterating O'Donovan's view of the immutability of sex and gender (2003:230). Watts' more inclusive view of Genesis 1:27 is not neither offered nor discussed.

## ***Advice on Church Practice***

Chapter 7 discusses the possibility of Christian marriage for post-operative transfolk and raises two objections to it. The first objection is that transfolk have deliberately voided their ability to procreate. This is an inconsistent argument because the Anglican Church does not require fertility testing or declarations of intention to procreate from cisgendered heterosexual couples. Nor do they refuse to marry those beyond child bearing age. The second objection is that a person would be

psychologically unfit for marriage because of the psychological cause of transsexuality. This argument is not consistent with expert opinion in this area. A third, implied objection is that it is gay marriage through the “backdoor” as inferred by the inclusion of Kolakowski about the increasing recognition of same sex unions in civil society.

In Chapter 8, *“Homosexuals, bisexuals and transsexuals in the life of the Church”*, the report raises the subject of transsexual clergy. It recommends that they should be ineligible for ordination because they are unwholesome (2003:287) and that they are not psychologically stable (2003:288).

The report uses a quote from Watts (2002) as evidence for this assertion. Watts begins his discussion by saying he can see no reason for a prohibition on transsexual clergy (2002:81). He then goes on to explore the objections of others and discounts these. He cites the case that Rev Carol Stone and the acceptance of her congregation after transition. By omitting this detail what is reproduced in the report only points to problems rather than possibilities, thereby altering the original writing.



### ***Reactions by transfolk***

Rev Dr Christina Beardsley notes in her critique that none of the voices of professionals who work with transgendered people or the voices of transfolk of faith are included (2005:342). She also notes that more favourable reports within the Anglican tradition that may have balanced the debate such as the 1989 *Osborne Report on Homosexuality*, were completely ignored (2005:339). She also argues that the exclusion of other pertinent materials is not reasonable and the weight is disproportionately given to tradition and a specific reading of Scripture. She notes that the argument regarding Scripture is circular with the interpretation of Genesis 1:27 proving binary gender.

Beardsley also argues that *Some Issues in Human Sexuality* gives no real context for transsexuality because it does not give information about *DSM IV* nor *The Harry Benjamin International Guidelines for the Treatment of Transsexuals*. She is also critical of the prominence given to reparative therapies and she quotes experts in the field in rebuttal.

**Summary.**

Most denominations have produced very little public comment about transfolk. What has been produced by the Evangelical Alliance and the Church of England has ignored the consensus of professional bodies and the lived experiences of transfolk themselves.

## **Transfolk speaking for themselves.**

The aim of the literature produced by transfolk is primarily to tell their stories and explore the way these stories may inform the wider world.

Within this literature the term transgendered is understood differently from the literature discussed previously. While Church based writers have been preoccupied by biology and medical considerations, the writings of transfolk about themselves are primarily about identity. This identity is broader than the narrow categories of transsexuality or even those with gender dysphoria. It often includes all those who could be considered gender variant in some way.

While these writings are partly theological in nature, they are equally about the rights of transgendered people and arguments for their inclusion within the Church. Many suggest that there are specific gifts that gender variant people can bring.

This section is limited to only UK Trans voices<sup>19</sup>. The many US voices that provided background reading for this thesis including McCall Tigert and Tirabassi (2004), Mollenkott (2001), Mollenkott & Sheridan (2003), Sheridan (2001), Stryker (2008) and Tanis (2003) are not included in this section.

This section of the review will also focus on two questions. These are:

*What insights are gained through the writings of transfolk about theology and the Church?* This project has championed the importance of “doing theology from the ground up”- taking seriously the importance of the lived experience of transfolk as a source for theological reflection. This section surveys the work that has already been done in a UK by transfolk in this area.

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<sup>19</sup> A discussion the reasons for exclusion appear on page 35.

*What advice do transfolk have regarding the provision of pastoral care for themselves and those affected by their gender dysphoria?* While Chapter 5 provides a series of recommendations about the pastoral care of transfolk and their families, it would be contrary to the spirit of this project of taking transfolk and their experience seriously, not to include the work that has already been done by transfolk themselves in this area. This section assesses the work that has already been published on pastoral care.

## Writings of transfolk on Scripture /theology

### *Exploring the eunuchs in Scripture*

Both Reay (2009) and Kolakowski (1997a, 1997b and 2007) make the connection between biblical eunuchs and transfolk<sup>20</sup>. Reay makes parallels between Jesus' discussion of eunuchs in Matthew 19 and modern transfolk (2009:156). He concludes that Jesus's discussion about eunuchs and particularly verse 19:12 is a direct and clear analogy. Kolakowski further explores this analogy in her discussion of Acts 8 in which she argues that this radical act of inclusion counters any biblically based objection against the inclusion and welcome of transfolk (1997a:24). These identifications offer transfolk visible narratives of identity located within the Bible. They also provide a powerful counter narrative to O'Donovan, *Transsexuality and Some Issues in Human Sexuality*.

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<sup>20</sup> As do Tanis (2003) and Mollenkott (2001) but as US writers they are not included in this review.

Kolakowski (1997b) also uses the eunuch to make a plea for acceptance in the Church. Her argument is that if eunuchs are blessed in Scriptures such as Isaiah 56, then God approves of eunuchs. If transfolk are analogous to eunuchs, then God approves of them also. The logic of this position is simple and elegant; the inclusion of transfolk in the wider church community becomes a biblical principle to be followed.

However, this use of eunuchs plays into a medical model where identity becomes located entirely in the physical and transition becomes a mechanistic medical process. It entirely misses the complex issues of constructing identity, finding the courage to following one's inner truths despite the obstacles or challenging the gendered assumptions of society. It negates the ability to self-name and self-define and cedes the power of self-definition and self-expression to others. It also excludes. It ignores the pre-operative, the gender queer and those happy in their gender expression without surgery or medical intervention. As Stone (2006) argues, to limit the identification of the Trans identity to a category of postoperative transsexuals ignores the richness and the variety of the Trans experience.

Claiming eunuchs as analogous with modern transfolk without completely understanding their societal context is problematic. The analogy also ignores the different societal contexts in which biblical eunuchs and modern transsexuals live. Directly comparing transfolk of the 21st century with Near-Eastern court officials in biblical times is a difficult comparison to justify. As Guest notes:

*...while tracing a transsexual or a trans ancestry to ancient times might be understandably popular and have strategic advantages, the very different constructions of gender and sexuality in different places and times seriously undermine such ventures (2006:134).*

It is also apparent that transfolk do not occupy a similar place in our society. The only attempt at a demographic study of transfolk is Robbins et al (2007). The data shows a population at high risk from HIV, experiencing greater mental health issues than average, and suffering from the threat of violence (2007:52), more often without family or supporting social structures, and economically poorer than the general



population (2007:59). There is very little in this description that would seem analogous to the elevated social position of the biblical eunuch.

### ***Apophatic Theology***

In identifying the relationship between queer theory and apophatic theology Daniels (2013) notes:

*This epistemological emphasis on the inadequacy of human knowledge and language to describe God shapes also how we speak about ourselves, the human that is made in the imago dei. Thus, one can begin to see how a queer theoretical position is an apophatic one, through its deconstruction and eschewal of categorization and assertion of incoherent subjectivity... (2013:116).*

This queer, apophatic viewpoint is represented by two contributions in Trans/Formations. Cornwall (2009:34) argues that using apophatic ways of doing theology quashes boundaries of heteronormativity and homonormativity and creates a way through them by claiming that all human imagery is insufficient. This is also echoed in BK Hipsher's

contribution which explores how a Trans image of God can be liberating because it:

*transgresses all our ideas about who and what God is and can be...  
transports us to new possibilities of how God can incarnate....  
transfigures our mental image from limitations... transforms our  
ideas about our fellow humans... and transcends all we think we  
know about God. (2009:99).*

Transwoman and Anglican priest Rachel Mann also uses apophatic theology in her memoir/theological reflection *Dazzling Darkness* (2012). As she states in her introduction:

*so much of what I want to say here comes down to the idea that we  
cannot say who God is and as such we must ultimately be left in the  
silence of her presence.... it is only in the creative dynamic between  
Word and Waiting that we hope to be our true selves (2012:17).*

While apophatic theology has an ancient pedigree and is scarcely the invention of these writers, it can be argued that they bring different and new insight to it. They bring an element of disruptiveness to the idea of a gendered God either through their own gender journeys or their theological reflections about the known limits of gender.

### ***Contribution to Liberation theologies***

This emphasis on personal histories is the third contribution made to theology. God's identification with the poor and marginalised, the importance of embodied experience and liberation theology's challenge to oppressive structures is also part of this Trans liberation theology. Mann (2012) chronicles her struggles with both illness and gender identity and reflects on what she has learnt from her experience. She asserts that because she has experienced "otherness", failure, loss and brokenness, she has had to deeply ponder her faith. This has led to a richer and deeper faith life in the "dazzling darkness" rather than in the light of certainty.

Ford's (2013) self-published account of her own experiences and struggles as a transgendered Christian contains an identification with a suffering, abandoned Christ (Ford 2013:86). This is also echoed by Hannah Buchanan's identification with a ridiculed and marginalised Christ (2009:44).

These accounts provide a direct challenge to those who confidently expound the immutability of gender from their positions of institutional power. I believe it is no accident that the denominational responses on Transfolk exclude their experiences, otherwise their stories would offer a powerful counter narrative to their assertions.

***What can transfolk tell us about their pastoral care?***

Two different aspects of pastoral care are contained in the writings of UK transfolk. The first is a set of pastoral guidelines written by Rev Dr Christina Beardsley on behalf of the Gender Trust called *The Transsexual Person is my Neighbour* (2007). Apart from its critiques of *Transsexuality*

and *Some Issues in Human Sexuality* which were discussed earlier when considering these works; it contains educational and pastoral materials aimed at clergy and churches wishing to work with transgendered people in their congregations. It was written as a supplement to other information provided by the Gender Trust and was not intended to be considered in isolation from these other sources (2007:2)

The advice in the booklet has been gleaned by Beardsley's own personal experience and her work with transfolk. It is not an attempt to create a piece of theology but rather a condensed set of facts and advice. For example, in its brief discussion of Scripture, it identifies Genesis 1:27 and Deuteronomy 22:5 as the most likely problematic texts for transfolk and offers Isaiah 56:4-5, Matthew 19:12, Acts 8:26-40 and Galatians 3:28 as affirming texts in their place. Of particular interest is the added passage of Galatians 3:28 (which has not been explored in any of the literature surveyed) which could be seen as a counterargument to the over literal use of Genesis 1:27 in *Transsexuality* and *Some Issues in Human Sexuality*. Beardsley does not pursue this argument but suggests it works

synergistically with Genesis 1:27 to create an image of God who transcends gendered distinctions (2007: 12).

In her brief advice to churches and clergy, Beardsley suggests many of the issues ministers face are management issues about the reactions of congregations to a Trans member coming out. She is clear the effective pastoral worker/minister has two roles: firstly to support transfolk and their families and secondly refer them to agencies with greater expertise. In order to do this she adds a list of agencies under the “further information” section of the booklet. Her recommendations have echoes in the findings in Chapter 5 of this thesis which attempts to build upon this work.

The greatest frustration with this booklet is that it has not been developed further. The information is overly brief and only begins to address the complexities it discusses in the simplest of terms. It is also limited in its reference to other materials. For example it provides a very basic reading

list of only 11 publications. It is hoped a more complete set of pastoral guidelines will be forthcoming soon.

The second contribution to pastoral care is the crafting of liturgies designed to celebrate and legitimise transfolks' experience. As Kranemann and Moore (2013) note about the general purposes of liturgy:

*...rituals should accompany times of upheaval for individuals, groups, and society at large, such as life transitions, catastrophes, particular moments of time within the passage of the year, etc. But they must also make room for communal remembrance and grief.*  
(2013: 414)

Trans/Formations contains two such liturgies. In his contribution Himschoot discusses the healing aspects of constructing a liturgy for Transgendered Day of Remembrance. He observes:

*Liturgy that addresses the themes of pain and possibility, horror and hope, is not a work of theological reflection but a work of action bringing the community together (Himschoot 2007:144)*

John Clifford's contribution can also be interpreted as a type of liturgy where he has created a monologue articulating his rage, despair at the theologies and images of God that have imprisoned transfolk in places of pain and guilt.

These liturgies are not just important for transfolk in order to celebrate their identities but also work to allow families, friends and allies to participate in these actions. It can be argued that they also serve an educative purpose. After attending a Transgender Day of Remembrance service it would be impossible not to be aware of the multiple issues of



violence, race, class, transgender and economic disadvantage that affect many transfolk. Reading Clifford's performance piece articulates the pain and hypocrisy he has felt at the hands of the Church.

## **General concluding comments.**

The literature shows that there are two very different viewpoints about transfolk in the UK religious landscape. The first view focuses on the need to mitigate the threat posed by transfolk to the Church. This viewpoint is expressed in the literature based on O'Donovan (1982) and includes both Evangelical Alliance and Anglican responses. This has become the de facto viewpoint of the UK Church because there have been no other official denominational viewpoints proffered. This literature is rooted in the assumption that transfolk are at best sick and at worst sinful. This assumption and assertion is needed to justify the marginalisation of Trans voices, rights and spiritual insights. The pastoral responses of Watts, Holder and Horton are gentler, compassionate and more conciliatory but they still see transfolk as a pastoral problem to be solved rather than new sites of theological reflection and revelation. They also seek to externalise transfolk as being apart from the Church, seeing "them" rather than as part of "us"- part of the Body of Christ.

Neither type of literature includes the voices of the people that they are discussing. They are preoccupied by the physical. They are concerned with chromosomes, whether reconstructed genitalia are fictive or not, and whether physical gender can be changed. They are concerned about the impact on the institutional Church and beliefs about the God-giveness of binary gender. They are caught up in the mundane and are incurious about the spiritual and transcendent.

The second voice is found in the writings of transfolk about themselves. These writings are not primarily interested in the physicality of their condition but what it means to be Trans and/or live in the Church as a gender variant person. These writings have entirely different preoccupations of identity, justice and spiritual insight. The understandings and definition of themselves are broader and more expansive. They often include many folk under their banner that the Church has not even begun to think about.

These two conversations are happening in completely different intellectual, cultural and theological spaces with radically different conceptions of what it is to be a person and the nature of faith. The Church does not appear to hear, understand or want to move out of its comfort zone or its preoccupations, to join this second conversation and explore how the Trans experience could enrich the Church rather than threaten it.

## **CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY**

### **Statement of research questions.**

- a) What are the experiences of transfolk in UK churches?
- b) What theological, biblical and pastoral insights can these experiences bring when they are used as resources for theological reflection?

## **Limitations of this research project.**

I am well aware of, and have already commented on, the dearth of literature on the faith lives of transfolk in Chapter 2. I am also aware this is very much a pioneering project with little work with which to compare it. It is my hope that the insights and perspectives contained within this thesis are superseded by other research in this area quickly. Given this observation, some of the specific limitations of this project were:

- The sample used for the research was small (12 people). While this was a sufficient sample to generate themes and concepts, it certainly is not sufficient to provide an exhaustive view of the lives and experiences of all transfolk of faith in the UK.
- The sample is also somewhat homogeneous because it tapped into several existing networks of transfolk. These people were linked by mutual interest, common values and shared identity. Several knew each other socially. It is not possible to deduce whether the experience of the interviewees is representative of all transfolk. All that can be stated with certainty is that this thesis discusses the experiences of 12 transfolk of Christian faith in the UK in 2012.
- The sample only focuses on transfolk of Christian faith. It does not include folk of other faiths or engage (apart from one interviewee)

with those who would describe themselves as having no faith.

While I have been careful to describe this limitation, there is a danger that the findings in this report may be seen as representative of the spiritual journey of all transfolk.

- The recollections of the interviewees are subjective. There is little within the methodology to differentiate between the reality of the reported situation and the interviewee's interpretation of it. I was keenly aware that when the interviewees were telling their life stories they were giving subjective accounts of their lives. While this does not discount the value of the narratives presented, it does mean that they are part of a larger story not explored in this thesis.
- The sample does not include the narratives of cisfolk who were affected by a loved one's gender dysphoria and their subsequent gender journey. The perceptions of a partner or parent are likely to provide a very different perspective on the events recounted by the interviewees.
- The Indigenous Knowledge framework meant that some of the data was lost. Several of the interviewees substantially altered their transcripts and one withdrew their transcript entirely.

- Many of the incidents and lives that are recounted within the transcripts made the interviewees identifiable because of their uniqueness. This created an ethical problem because the interviewees had been promised that the interviews were anonymous. In order to solve this dilemma specifics of several situations have been generalised or omitted. This meant the some data were either obscured or lost.



## **The definition of Trans.**

As Trans activist Sandy Stone notes on her website<sup>21</sup> the term

‘transgendered’ is still in dispute and she considers that this is a very healthy sign. There are two different ways that this project could have defined transgendered.

### ***The medical-legal definition.***

The United Kingdom Equality Act 2010 section 7 defines the protected category of transgendered people in the following way:

#### ***Gender reassignment.***

*(1)A person has the protected characteristic of gender reassignment if the person is proposing to undergo, is undergoing or has undergone a process (or part of a process) for the purpose of reassigning the person's sex by changing physiological or other attributes of sex.*

*(2)A reference to a transsexual person is a reference to a person who has the protected characteristic of gender reassignment.*

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<sup>21</sup> <http://sandystone.com/trans.html> accessed 20/7/13.

*(3) In relation to the protected characteristic of gender reassignment—*

*(a) a reference to a person who has a particular protected characteristic is a reference to a transsexual person;*

*(b) a reference to persons who share a protected characteristic is a reference to transsexual persons.*

While this is a good legal definition to ensure that those who are visibly changing gender or have changed gender are not discriminated against, this definition is reliant on the person undergoing a medical treatment or legal process. There are many transfolk who identify as Trans but do not wish medical or legal interventions. These include those who are gender queer and who want to move away from a gender binary; those who express their gender variance in the privacy of their own homes; or those whose personal circumstances do not allow them to access medical treatment or to legally change their identity. All of these people are excluded from the medical-legal definition. It was important that a broader definition was used.

### ***The Trans (self) definition.***

The definitions in the writings of transfolk reviewed in the previous chapter do not focus on the medical or legal aspects of their lives but on their experiences of gender dysphoria and their search for identity. Their writings suggest a breadth of experience that could be labelled as Trans that would be excluded in the medical-legal definition discussed above. I consider the most representative definition was given by Tanis in *Trans-Gendered*. His definition of transgendered is:

*Transgendered people are those individuals who do not fit comfortably into society's traditional understandings of sex and gender. We occupy a space beyond and/or between the standard categories of female and male. Some do so knowingly, deliberately, and as a statement against the binary gendered system. Others feel that they have no choice in the matter and were born as they are. There is no way to estimate how many people feel themselves transgendered in some way or who live in a way that crosses or subverts gender either in their thoughts, actions, dress, mannerisms, choice of careers or in other ways (2003:18).*

Using the legal-medical definition ignores how transfolk self-define. To do so runs counter to the ethos of this project. It would also exclude the experiences of many of those who have atypical gender experiences within the Church. This project uses Tanis's definition but also adds the requirement that the person has taken steps to act on their transgender feelings by manifesting some outward and detectable change of some type. This may be undergoing medical treatment or legally changing identity but equally could be a natal woman growing facial hair. This requirement was put into place to ensure that those interviewed had atypical gender feelings that were insistent enough that they required some action to resolve them.

This project excludes two groups who come under Tanis's definition. The first is the politically gender queer. I define politically gender queer people as those who otherwise define as cisgender but wish for political reasons not to conform to the gender binary. While I do not discount the value of this position, the politically gender queer person does not have gender dysphoria and therefore is unlikely to have the atypical gender experience that this thesis explores. The second exclusion is those who

cross dress but do not identify as Trans. This is an extremely complex area with no easy demarcations. To attempt some clarity on the issue I have used the criteria of self-identity. Some people cross-dress and identify as Trans and are included within the scope of this project. Others who cross-dress as a private and/or as an erotic act and do not identify as Trans are excluded. While this second category may have the atypical gender experiences explored within this thesis, they do not claim a Trans identity and it is contrary to the ethos of this project to impose any identity on folk who do not claim it for themselves.

## **Definition of Christianity.**

The aim of this project was to explore the direct experiences transfolk have of Christianity. This meant that the interviewees needed to have some personal contact and had self-identified as a member or regular attender of a worshipping community at some stage in their lives. This did not mean that they needed to self-identify as a current member or regular attender of a Christian worshipping community; nor did they need to currently self-identify as a Christian.

## **The ethos of this project.**

This project uses a participatory framework called Indigenous Knowledge.

The aim of this methodology is to empower marginalised groups of people and to make sure that they are able to benefit from research that is conducted in their communities (Akena 2012, Brush 1993, Doxtater 2004, Iacovino 2010, Joranson 2008, Sen 2005, Sheehan 2011, Simpson 2004, Stevens 2008, Wilson 2004).

There are also similarities with other methodologies that seek to empower individuals. Two examples are social work research as explained by Martin and Ehrenkranz (2003) and feminist methodologies as explained by Singh, Richmond and Burnes (2013). Both of these methodologies attempt to reduce the privileged and powerful role of the professional researcher and to empower the people who are the focus of that research in a similar way to Indigenous Knowledge.

### ***Indigenous Knowledge methodologies and transfolk.***

Trans writer and activist Viviane Namaste (1993) argues that transfolk have been studied by researchers in exploitative ways. Her criticisms include:

- a) Researchers do not attempt to address the concerns of the transfolk but rather use them as a lens for the investigation of social phenomena such as gender. She is scathing about the amount of research done using transfolk as research subjects when little or no work has been done to explore pressing issues for North American transfolk such as the high incidence of HIV , the constant threat of violence or the prevalence of sex work as a primary way of earning money for medical treatment.
- b) Researchers have used their power to colonise and invade the lives of transfolk and exposed their lives to public scrutiny with little thought for their wellbeing or the consideration that there may be aspects of life that are not suitable for public discourse. These areas may be the sharing of personal details or experiences that the subject would prefer to keep private.



- c) That the narratives of transfolk have not been used to explore their own experiences but rather to explore researcher's preoccupations with gender or feminism.
- d) That transfolk have not benefited from the research done on their lives because the intention was to study them and not engage with them.

Namaste (1993) draws parallels between the exploitation of transfolk and that of indigenous peoples within colonial settings and concludes that:

*If marginalised people such as transsexuals and transvestites have been excluded from knowledge production (including within feminist theory), how might we proceed otherwise? Attention to the central arguments of indigenous knowledge is helpful here (1993:24).*

Indigenous Knowledge (IK) was developed by indigenous peoples in Australia and North America in response to their experience of anthropological studies about themselves (Simpson 2004). Indigenous knowledge can be summarised as:

- a) The researcher does not impose their knowledge and views on the community.
- b) The researcher is aware that they cannot hope to learn everything there is to know about a culture by their study.
- c) Knowledge is gathered by observation, experiential learning and apprenticeship.
- d) The researcher is cognisant about the power imbalances that exist between academics and native peoples and undertakes the work taking into account this dynamic.
- e) The researcher understands that some knowledge such as initiation ceremonies or tribal lore may be secret and not appropriate for academic discourse. This type of knowledge cannot be taken out of the culture and understood properly. The sacredness of this knowledge also means it is not something to be discussed with those who have not been initiated.

- f) The researcher looks for wisdom and learning in narratives. The narratives are not linear and do not seek a particular outcome. These narratives are not a set of facts to be learnt but a life lived.
- g) Western knowledge is only one way of seeing things and making meaning. The empiricism of the West does not take into account the broad swath of things that we cannot know or cannot be proved.
- h) Indigenous Knowledge does not seek to categorise knowledge into disciplines but attempts to see knowledge as holistic and interdependent.
- i) Spiritual experience is often the way that knowledge is conveyed.
- j) The relationship between person and environment cannot be separated. Indigenous Knowledge relies on subjective experience of the people being studied and is highly contextual. It is also highly localised and does not attempt to make assumptions beyond its own locality.
- k) Indigenous Knowledge challenges researchers creating knowledge from studies of indigenous communities about who

owns the knowledge. It also means holding researchers accountable for the uses that knowledge is put to.

- l) Indigenous knowledge asserts that the intellectual property created by any study belongs to the population being studied. Therefore there must be some recompense for cooperation. This recompense is normally the sharing of the fruits of research with the population studied. There is also the understanding that the community in some way helps co-create the research questions and methodology so that they receive knowledge that is useful to them.
- m) Indigenous knowledge recognises that Western intellectual tradition has fetishized and eroticised the indigenous as either a noble or wretched savage. This means what indigenous people know does not need to be taken seriously.
- n) Decolonising knowledge is about taking seriously the thoughts, culture and experience of indigenous people on their own terms rather than on western terms.

This project utilised Indigenous Knowledge methodologies and attempted to adapt it for the population studied. My project adapted and used Indigenous Knowledge methodologies in the following ways:

- a) I tried not to impose my knowledge or views on my interview subjects and I am aware I did not learn everything about transfolk and their lives in this study.
- b) Knowledge was gained by open-ended interviews with subjects where they were free to tell me what they felt was important pertaining to the questions asked. I only asked for clarification when I did not understand. The majority of the interview time consisted of the interviewees telling me about their lives in their own words and in their own time.
- c) I was aware of the power imbalance that existed between myself and the interviewees and I took this into account. To counter this I recruited a steering group of transfolk to scrutinise my methodology and my research results. I also allowed the interviewees to feedback via a satisfaction questionnaire about the conduct of the interview. While I am aware that this may not accurately reflect their feelings because they were observed

while filling them out, it was an important statement that they had the right to criticise the researcher and the conduct of the interview.

- d) I recognised that some knowledge gained about people's lives was private to the interviewees. The interviews were returned to the interviewees so they could amend or delete sections of the interview after it had been transcribed. Several made significant alterations and deletions and one interviewee withdrew permission to use her interview after reading her transcript<sup>22</sup>.

One of my areas of concern is how to make sure of confidentiality in a small community where many people may recognise individuals by their narratives. Steps have been taken to anonymise the narratives as much as possible.

- e) I looked for wisdom and learning in the life narratives of the interview subjects and used this as material for reflection. I have looked at what the interviewees told me and then looked at the

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<sup>22</sup> This withdrawal was about the unease of seeing her words on the paper. She felt that the naturalistic style of transcription used made her seem inarticulate and she decided not to give permission for the transcript to be used. I was aware that she was well supported pastorally and there was no indication of trauma created by the interview.

literature on the subject to see if their experiences and the academic literature agreed or disagreed.

- f) I am held to account for what I produce. Prior to submission I presented the fruits of this research to the Sibyls on a study weekend in May 2014. There was time for comment and criticism. The results of the project will also be put on their newly created website some time in 2015 when it is finished.
- g) I recognise the medical establishment has effectively colonised the Trans identity and has become the arbiter of who is Trans- rather than the experience of the person claiming that identity. I tried to ensure I did not do the same by allowing people to self-define as described in my methodology.

## **An overview of the research process.**

### ***Recruitment.***

Recruitment was done principally via word of mouth. I utilised my existing social and professional networks to disseminate an invitation to potential interviewees via email. The email explained the project and invited interested transfolk to contact me via the dedicated email address [transfaithproject@gmail.com](mailto:transfaithproject@gmail.com). The information sheet attached to the initial email is included in Appendix 4. Two types of interviewees were reached in this way. The first group were members of churches or spirituality networks that specifically welcomed transfolk. The second were individuals my own contacts knew personally and felt might be interested in participating.

An advertisement was also placed within the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement (LGCM) national magazine which invited contact via the email and/or telephone. There were no replies to this advertisement. There is no way of being completely sure why one strategy was successful and the other was not. LGCM does have transfolk as members who receive the magazine. It may be that many transfolk did not read the LGCM magazine



or that the advertisement did not catch their eye. I believe the most likely explanation is that an approach coming from other transfolk who could vouch for the probity of the project and the researcher gave the interviewees confidence to contact me and take part in my study.

### ***Discussion of the sample.***

The basic information about the interviewees is contained in the table below with accompanying explanation of the categories contained in the table:

Designation Letter	Gender Identity at time of Interview	Description of Church Involvement	Estimated age at time of interview	Geographic location of the interview
A	Female	Member of a church	31-40	Scotland
B	Female	Member of a church	21-30	Scotland
C	Male	Non attender of a church	31-40	Midlands, England
D	Female	Member of a church	>51	Scotland
E	Male	Clergy	41-50	Scotland
F	Male and Female	Member of a church	>51	SW England
G	Male	Clergy	>51	SW England
H	Female	Exploring Vocation as a nun	>51	Midlands, England
J	Gender Queer	Member of a church	21-30	Midlands, England
K	Female	Accepted as novice in a convent.	>51	SE England
L	Female	Exploring Vocation to clergy	41-50	SW England
M	Male and Female	Non attendee of a church.	>51	SE England
N	Female	Clergy.	41-50	Northern England

### Designation letter.

One of the central ethical concerns of this project was to protect the privacy of individuals. In order to do this a letter of the alphabet was randomly assigned to each interviewee. The letter bears no relationship to either their given or family names.

### Gender identity at interview.

In line with the ethos of this project individuals were invited to self-define their own gender within the interview. As an interviewer I did not make an assumption based on the personal presentation of interviewee at the time of interview.

### Age.

The age is estimated by the interviewer or was disclosed within the interview.

### *Geographic location of the interview.*

Interviews were held at the convenience of the interviewee. An attempt was made to try to include a geographical cross section of people in England and Scotland. There were no responses from Wales.

### ***Limitations of the sample.***

Many of the characteristics of the sample are homogenous. The ethnicity of the entire sample is White British. All but one of the interviewees were university graduates. It is impossible to know how representative the sample is of transfolk of Christian faith. While it was not expected many people with an Asian ethnicity would identify as Trans and Christian, there was a reasonable assumption that some of the sample could have been either Afro Caribbean or African transfolk. I believe it is likely that the ethnic segregation, a feature of so many churches within the UK, is mirrored in the networks of Christian transfolk. It may also be that transfolk of African or Afro Caribbean descent do not wish to belong to networks that identify them as Trans and Christian. There has been no research done with black Christian transfolk in the UK that could prove or disprove this hypothesis.

The closest work was done by Doyal, Anderson and Paparini (2008) in their study of black gay men of the African diaspora in London. Their work shows a conflicted identity where African masculinity and homosexuality are not compatible, and that to be gay means somehow to cede part of the African identity and become “white”. They also suggest that the high level of homophobia in the black community and the fear of being forcibly returned to Africa by family members mean that most gay men are not out to their families or their ethnic communities. They are also reluctant to be out to others in general. While it is impossible to draw exact parallels between black transfolk and gay black men, it may hint at reasons why black transfolk did not appear in the networks that were accessed by this study.

This study does not consider other journeys that may have moved to a different spiritual and religious identity. Kidd and Witten (2008), Reinsmith-Jones (2013), Smith and Horne (2007), Schuck and Liddle (2001) and Sullivan- Blum (2008) suggest that this movement from Christianity may be the most common or at-least-as-common experience of transfolk regarding their spiritual and religious identity. This thesis cannot confirm nor refute this. All but one of the interview subjects of the study is

currently actively involved in regular Christian worship and describes themselves as part of a faith community. The focus and concerns of this thesis are entirely Christian in nature.

### ***The conduct of the interview.***

The interviews were carried out at times and places that were convenient for the interviewee which often meant that interviews were done in the interviewee's home or church. Interviewees were sent the information sheets contained in Appendix 4 directly by the researcher and there was a discussion by telephone or email prior to the interview to ensure that the interviewee was comfortable with the interview questions and the proposed use of the data.

Prior to the interview commencing the interviewee was given a hard copy of the information sheet and was asked to read it. After the sheet had been read the interviewee was asked to fill out a consent form which also included consent for the interview to be recorded which is included in Appendix 4.

At the end of the interview respondents were invited to fill out an evaluation form which is also included in Appendix 4.

***The interview questions.***

In line with the ethos of this project, I kept the questions very broad and open. Most of the questions were formed after an initial and broad reading of literature written by transfolk about themselves and their experiences.

The questions were supplied to the interviewees prior to the interview so that they would have time to think about the information that they wished to share. The questions were used as an aid to the conversation and a way to ensure that the interviewees had the opportunity to volunteer similar information. The questions chosen were:

***Tell me about yourself... (Life story as much as is comfortable)***

The aim of this question was initially to put the interviewee at ease. It soon became apparent that most of the interviewees used this question to relate all the information they felt was relevant. With very little prompting

I was repeatedly offered a narrative of the interviewee's life. This question took up the majority of the interview as evidenced by the transcripts.

*Tell me about your image of God. How do you think your image of God has changed because of your gender variance?*

The initial reading of literature suggested that most people of Christian faith who undertake a gender journey also undertake a faith journey. In this faith journey much of what they previously believed is re-examined and tested in light of their new experiences. The aim of this question was to test if the experience of gender variance had impacted on their image of God.

*Where are the places in Christianity and particularly in the Bible where you see transpeople being included?*

Much of the initial reading of literature indicated that transfolk were likely to identify with particular biblical characters such as eunuchs. This question tested whether there was a general identification with eunuchs, or if there were other characters from either the Bible or the Christian tradition that transfolk identified with.



*Where do you see yourself excluded?*

The initial review of the literature indicated that many transfolk had had difficult relationships both with communities of faith and the wider Church. Some of this was to do with traditional understandings of Genesis that teach a God-ordained and created gender binary of male and female. I was also interested to test if interviewees had been troubled by the biblical prohibitions such as those contained in Deuteronomy 22:5 or any other biblical text.

*Have you stayed in the Christian Church? If you are still a regular attendee, why?*

Most of the networks that I accessed were ones based on faith so many of the interviewees were part of a worshipping community. I wanted to find out the reasons why interviewees had stayed within Christianity rather than leaving it.

*Or if you have left why have you left?*

This was a reverse of the previous question if an interviewee was currently not part of a worshipping community or had left the Church completely.

The aim of this question was to find out why interviewees had left the Church.

*What have been your experiences of Christianity as a transperson?*

This open-ended question was designed to allow the interviewees to freely volunteer any experiences that they attributed to being Trans within their own congregations or from the wider Church.

*How have you experienced the teachings of gender within the Church?*

The initial aim of this question failed. It was hoped that this question would allow the interviewees a chance to reflect how they had received the teachings on gender as someone who has been both male and female.

As mentioned in the introduction, I failed to take into account the interviewees had always experienced atypical gender and therefore were

unable to answer the question in the way it had been framed. I believe this is why there was a poor response to the question.

*What do you think transpeople can teach the Church?*

This open-ended question was designed to allow the interviewees to volunteer their own insights and opinions about what they felt that they could offer the Church as a result of their own gender journey.

*How do you reconcile your past identity with who you are now? And how do you explain it in spiritual terms?*

From personal and pastoral experience I had noticed that many of the transfolk I knew had abruptly severed contact with people they knew in their natal gender after transition. Many transfolk I had known had disowned their previous lives in a way I had found puzzling. When I had previously asked folk they had said that it was all “too difficult” but had not elaborated. I wanted to explore this in greater depth. The second part of the question was an attempt to see how the interviewees had reconciled their lives if they saw their lives as one continuous narrative.

### ***Recording and transcription.***

All interviewees were recorded digitally and were transcribed by the researcher. No other person heard the recordings and they will be kept for ten years (until 2022) and then erased.

The aim of the transcription was to attempt to capture the conversation as accurately as possible. In order to achieve this, each time the interviewee paused or took an intake of breath, a new line was initiated to signify breaks in speech. The transcripts were transcribed verbatim in an attempt to capture the individual words and phrasing of each interview.

### ***Approval by the interviewees***

Once the interviews were transcribed they were sent via email to the interviewees for approval. The interviewees were given complete freedom to edit, omit or change information. Three made changes to the interview transcript either to omit personal details or make clear a point that they had made. One interviewee withdrew their transcript entirely. Once the interviews were amended, they were then deemed ready for analysis.

### ***Use of Grounded Theory***

Glasser and Strauss (1967) introduced Grounded Theory as a qualitative research method where the theory emerges from the data rather than attempting to prove a hypothesis by generating data. While I acknowledge that any theory that emerges from data is a co-creation between the data and the researcher and cannot be completely unbiased, this project uses Grounded Theory in an attempt to generate new theories and concepts. Hutchison, Johnston and Breckon (2010) identify several attributes of grounded theory. These attributes have been consciously used in this project.

*An iterative process.* Knowledge gained from the early interviews was discussed with my supervisor and steering group. Early assumptions were discarded as information from the interviews began to inform the interview process.

*Sampling made on the basis of the research question.* Sampling decisions were made about who fitted the ethos of the project (those who self-defined as Trans) and those who were most likely to have had atypical

gender experiences. This excluded the politically gender queer and those who cross dress but do not identify as Trans.

*Creating analytical concepts and codes from the data itself.* The codes and concepts discussed in the results chapter emerged entirely from the data. A close reading of literature happened after the results of the interviews were known.

*Systematic comparisons.* Individual transcripts were compared with each other in an attempt to find patterns. These patterns are reported in the results chapter. This also determined what literature was included in the discussion of the results.

*Theoretical density.* This thesis attempts to go beyond merely describing the content of the interviews and provides concepts that are grounded in the data.

### ***Analysis using Nvivo 10***

Once the interviews were transcribed they were loaded into Nvivo 10 for analysis. Within Nvivo the following process occurred:

- a) Using the interview questions as a guideline, data from the questions were grouped by subject. While some of these data were a direct answer to one of the interview questions, other pieces of relevant data from other parts of the transcript were also added.
- b) This grouped data were then reanalysed and concepts and themes were identified from each data set.
- c) The grouped data were then re-coded under the concepts and themes.
- d) The concepts and themes were then cross-referenced by age, gender identity and geography to see what patterns emerged when the data was re-examined in light of the demographics.

### ***Reporting of results***

Chapter 4 contains the results from the interviews and then compares those results to relevant literature. The results that are reported are the most common themes that emerged out of the data generated by the interviews.



## CHAPTER 4: INVESTIGATING THE NARRATIVES.

### Introduction.

The 13 interviews resulted in over 500 pages of transcript that detailed over 20 hours of recorded conversations. During the long hours of transcription and analysis, 13 different life narratives emerged which I began to interpret as parables in the sense described by Graham, Walton and Ward (2005). They describe a parable as having the potential to construct meaningful stories out of an individual's life and "emphasise the mysterious and indefinable aspects of the human experience" (2005:47). Theologian Stephen Crites also calls such stories sacred:

*not so much because gods are commonly celebrated in them, but because men's (sic) sense of self and world is created through them. (Crites 1971: 295).*

Anderson and Foley (2001) also note:

*When we are willing to admit the possibility of God's presence in ordinary human events, we will be more likely to fashion our human*

*narratives— composed of so many such events— in the light of that presence. Ordinary life is transformed when we recognize that our stories bear the presence of God. When we can acknowledge the possibility of God’s presence in our daily living, it is possible for us to weave the divine narrative into the stories we fashion. Such weaving is ultimately transformative and life-giving (2001:40).*

The aim of this chapter is to begin to interpret these 12 sacred stories (one being withdrawn by the interviewee and hence not included) given within the interviews.

This chapter uses a Grounded Theory approach exploring the most common themes present within the transcripts as described in Hutchinson, Johnston and Breckton (2010). I acknowledge the limitations of this methodology. I recognise that no narrative can be truly objective and that I am favourably disposed to the narratives produced from the interviews. I acknowledge my belief that these stories have profound things to say about God, the Church and humanity and this influences how I interpret these narratives.

I am also aware that there may be other significant findings that are not discussed within this chapter. It is not because they are not valid or important, but because they are not the most common experiences of the interviewees, and this is what this chapter explores. I have arranged the narratives under the following headings:

*Life narratives.*

These recount the common events and experiences in the interviewees' lives. This includes childhood experiences and early memories of gender dysphoria; the strategies used to compensate and attempts to be normal (sic); exploring identity and coming out; reactions of spouses, friends, family and work colleagues to disclosure; and stories about transitioning from one identity to another.

*Church experience narratives.*

This recounts the common experiences of interviewees within their religious traditions. This section includes experiences such as their treatment by clergy and church hierarchies; their reasons for staying with or leaving congregations; their experiences of teachings on gender and

human sexuality; and the positive and negative reaction of congregations to their coming out as Trans.

*Theological insights and gifts that transfolk bring.*

This recounts the common theological insights offered by the interviewees on their images of God; their relationship to biblical passages that could be considered either negative or affirming to transfolk; and the insights and gifts that they can offer the Church as people who have experienced gender in an atypical way.

This grouping of experience into three themes is not an attempt to pretend that the experiences of the interviewees fall into three unrelated categories. Frequently the narratives intersect. The themes are an attempt to find the most relevant parts of the narratives which will help answer the preoccupation of this project- what fresh perspectives do transfolk bring to the Church because of their atypical gender experience?

## **Putting the life narrative into context.**

Canadian sociologist and sexologist Aaron Devor (2004) created a 14 stage model of transgender identity formation using both personal and professional experience as a transman and therapist. This is based on a similar model created by Cass (1979) to explain the creation of a gay and lesbian identity.

The stages are a general pattern based on the experience of Devor as a therapist working with transfolk. He is clear that individual transfolk may not experience all the stages outlined. He is also clear that they may experience them in a different order than they are presented (2004:42). In this model some people with gender dysphoria may stop at any stage; many may still be working through the stages or even find that the model does not apply to them at all (2004:42).

I observed a correlation in the stages described by Devor and the information contained within the life narratives. Because I will refer to his work throughout my discussion of the life narratives, I have created a table in order to show these correlations. It appends Devor's (2004:43) by adding an additional column. This appears as Appendix 3.

## Locating Transfaith in Liberation Theology.

In her work Marcella Althaus-Reid makes clear the link between liberation theologies and what she terms sexual stories:

*The methodology of liberation should always be worked around elements of a passion arousing style. At a community level this has meant that people's starting point has always been their own experiences..... (Althaus-Reid 2000:126)*

Following this statement, she explicitly links the oppressive religious and economic structures in Latin America to the binary and heterosexual gender structures that also exist to oppress:

*For centuries they have embarked on the organisation of religious processions, and paying for masses and promises to God and the Virgin Mary. This has been for the forgiveness of the gods, and not the hanging conditions of international trade. Jubilee was requested*

*from the deities, to stop the economic crises that were destroying the lives of the whole communities, but no one thought about organising a Jubilee for the lesser Gods of the International Monetary Fund to cancel external debt..... the same can be applied to the pervasive gender making structures ..... it is difficult for people to see the sacred in their lives outside heterosexual parodies, repeated endlessly” (2000:126).*

This ethos is also echoed in other writers:

*Once transgressive sexual stories are spoken, they become disruptive by challenging the status quo. They will be heard, interpreted, redefined and will present sexual possibilities. The telling of sexual stories is a continual process of “coming out” a-revealing-a (divine) revelation of sexual experience. (Simpson 2005:104)*

*The ecclesial considerations of homosexuality and other forms of non-normative relations of gender, sex and sexuality, provide an occasion, a moment of rupture, exposing philosophical and meta-physical assumptions that might other be obscured. (Hutchins 2001:11).*

*If I'd known then what I know now would I have persisted in rekindling my love affair with the Church? But of course I would, it's my Church, my Virgin Mary, my Salve Regina as much as it is theirs. (Taylder 2009:77)*

This project is firmly located in this understanding of liberation theology's ability to challenge oppressive systems with the stories of the disenfranchised and oppressed. The intention of this project was not to simply catalogue suffering of transfolk, although there is an element of this in all 12 life stories analysed in this chapter. These stories speak of years of invisibility, fear and oppression which is self-inflicted as well church inflicted.



But more importantly, these sexual stories disrupt these “dominant ways and forms of knowing” and challenge assertions of a God ordained binary gender system and understanding of transfolk typified by the church-based writings analysed in the Chapter 2. They also attempt to give dignity and voice to folk who have found ways to survive and even thrive despite the difficulties they have faced in trying to remain as part of the Body of Christ.

These narratives also form the source material for the pastoral recommendations in Chapter 5. These recommendations are an attempt to take seriously the sexual stories of the interviewees, and using these stories, create a liberative and just environment in which they could thrive.

## **The narratives explored.**

### ***Early years to adolescence.***

Many of the interviewees remember very early experiences of gender confusion. Several (C, G and K) believed that they were their preferred gender rather than their natal gender. Others (A, E, H and N) remember feelings of discomfort around their gender identity from a very early age.

This identification and discomfort played out in several ways. Many of the interviewees report playing with toys designed for their preferred gender. A remembers playing with dolls while G remembers playing with guns and being the male leader in war games. E remembers playing almost entirely with boys, while L loitered around the girl's toilets hoping to be invited in. G also pretended to shave his face as a child.

Clothes also play a major memory in almost all the interviewees. All of the transmen (C, E and G) remember protesting against wearing dresses and wishing to wear either boys' or gender neutral clothes. As G recounts:

*I was staying with one set of grandparents my granny would dress me up in a frock to take me out and then as soon as I got back to their place I would say dress me now granny meaning can you put my proper clothes meaning my trousers normally my tartan trousers (laugh)*

Many of the natal males experienced cross-dressing from an early age (A, B, F, K and L). They recount secretly dressing up in female clothes while their families were out of the home. As K recounts:

*Really as far back as I remember I have had issues over gender um  
And even at the age of 6 and I know I was 6 because it was in a  
house that we moved from  
I was dressing in a cousin's female clothes and on one occasion I fell  
asleep in them and got found in the morning when my mother  
pulled away the bedclothes  
And  
The Identified female and dressing in female clothes continued  
throughout my childhood and my teens err*

*When my parents went off in the car and my brothers were out I  
would go to my mother's clothes cupboard and dress in her clothes  
and just potter around the house or watch television  
And just feel happy*

From an early age most of the children knew that their feelings of gender discomfort were a secret that they needed to keep about themselves. Almost all the interviewees (A, B, C, E, F, G, H, K, L and N) remember the need to keep their unexplained feelings and actions away from adults and other children. This secrecy led to feelings of abnormality and guilt. Several (A, F, H, L and N) consider these feelings of abnormality led to feelings of inadequacy that have resulted in their underachievement throughout life.

All research into the experiences of transgendered children has occurred long after the interviewees were children. Nevertheless, the research carried out agrees with the interviewee's reported experience. The early awareness of gender variance recounted by interviewees also agrees with the research on the subject. Many authors (Grossman and D'Augelli 2006,

Conroy 2010, Forcier and Johnson 2013, Kennedy and Hellen 2010, Dietert and Dentice 2013 and Fatty 2010) all state that consciousness of a gender variant identity and gender variant behaviours occurs before adolescence. Kennedy and Hellen put the average age of realization at 8 years (2010: 28) while Grossman and D'Augelli put awareness of gender variance at 10.6 years (2006:120). The very early manifestation of these behaviours argues against any form of conscious, transgressive choice by an individual. Indeed the children in the narratives were aware that their behaviour was different and learned very early in their lives to hide it.

The narratives also show many of the parents were aware their children were different in their feelings of gender to other children. Many of the MTF interviewees (A, B, F, K and L) report being discovered cross-dressing. As K recounts:

*My parents knew there were incidents but didn't know it was a sustained thing going on as far as I know err*

*Um*

*I got sent to a boy's boarding school to toughen up at the age of 7  
no 8 err*

In all these cases except B (where this prompted disclosure of being transgendered) this discovered cross-dressing was not addressed positively. Parents either ignored the behaviour or dealt out punishment to try to change it. This agrees with the literature on the subject. Forcier and Johnson as well as Dietert and Dentice note parents often attempt to redirect the behaviour of the child to more acceptable social expressions of gender (Forcier and Johnson 2013:100, Dietert and Dentice 2013: 35). Grossman and D'Augelli also note that parents often act abusively in an attempt to "correct" their child's behaviour (2006: 125). In contrast to both literature and the other interviewees' experience, C recounts his family deliberately creating a gender neutral childhood that allowed him to feel comfortable at home.

The findings and the literature both argue that gender variant children are vulnerable and aware that they are different from other children at an early age. It also argues that their gender variant behaviour is not a transgressive choice to be punished. This vulnerability is exacerbated by family members reacting negatively and, at times, abusively to their gender variant behaviours. This raises pastoral issues for Churches around the way they treat children who manifest gender variant behaviours and also how they engage and counsel families who may come to them for guidance.

### ***Adolescence to Coming Out as Trans.***

This is the time in the lives of the interviewees between puberty and the recognition of their identity as Trans. For some of the younger interviewees, such as B and J, this is a relatively short period in their lives. For other interviewees such as E, F, H, L and M this was a period of over 40 years.

The interviews show that adolescence brings the reality of natal gender. It forces the children (who became C, G and N) to abandon their illusions of being their preferred gender. Interviewees (C, E, G, H and N) report extreme trauma around puberty. This is particularly the case for the transmen who recount their horror of the changes to their bodies around menstruation. As E recounts:

*it was a complete and utter nightmare for me because I was totally*

*totally alien to what I really wanted*

*but it was so confused and I didn't know why*

*I clearly remember*

*Being on holiday and having the most horrendous awful awful*

*period pain and being hardly able to walk about*

*And it's like that physical pain is so so intense*

*But it was more the kind of emotional pain that went with it*

*But I couldn't make that understood*

*I couldn't really say that the physical pain was*

*I remember being all doubled up but it was the*



*It was like it penetrated all of me and just wanting that to stop and having no idea how this could be possible so it...*

Many of the interviewees mention self-destructive coping behaviours in this period of their lives. Three of the interviewees (A, E and N) report using drugs and alcohol as ways of coping. Other destructive behaviours include self-harm by cutting (K), suicidal behaviour (K and N) and extreme weight gain(C). Others interviewees (D, F, G, K and L) report depression and mental health issues. Many of the natal males (A, D, F, H, K and L) report continuing to cross-dress in secret.

Compensating behaviours were reported by the interviewees that were hyper-masculine or hyper- feminine. This behaviour is noted by Brown (Brown 2006:537). A joins the air force, B plays football, F indulges in extreme sports, H rides an enormous motorbike, N becomes a “young male rock god”, E becomes a home economics teacher in the conservative south west where he is encouraged to wear feminine clothes and K takes up mountaineering and a “male job”. As K recounts:

*But I tried to be male so I tried mountaineering*

*Cross country running but*

*I know they are activities that females do perfectly well but I think I*

*was trying to establish myself*

*Get a foothold in a male world and I think when I became a prison*

*governor that was the same I bought myself a very expensive pin*

*stripe suit and waist coat and*

*And so I was entering a male world (laugh)*

*On whatever terms I could negotiate*

Another pattern that emerged from the narratives was how the interviewees constructed their relationships and sexuality. The older interviewees (D, F, H, K and L) all married and had children (with the exception of H whose wife was unable to have children due to disability). They marry believing that marriage will cure them of their gender dysphoria. The reality is that this does not happen and ready access to women's clothes actually encourages their cross-dressing. All of these interviewees come to a realisation that they are Trans after they have raised families. Many state they believed they were the only person with gender dysphoria in the world because of lack of information available in

their younger lives. They never identify as gay or lesbian as part of their gender journey.

Those aged between 30 and 55 (A, C, E and G) initially come out as gay or lesbian before coming out as Trans. They are aware that they are not heterosexual and conclude they must be gay or lesbian because there is little information about transfolk for them to access. As A relates:

*One of the reasons I've finally come around to accepting my  
transgenderism is the fact that for ten years I have thought that  
you're gay B except that  
10- 15 years I think  
So I had given myself permission to be gay  
But it hasn't happened*

In the case of two of the transmen (C and E) they were aware that in the United States there was a possibility to transition but discounted the possibility of doing so in the UK. These interviewees (A, C, E and G) attempt relationships with a same sex partner with varying degrees of success. After several years within LGBT community they recognise their

gender dysphoria and begin to transition. The only variation on this theme amongst those between 30 and 55 is N who marries, comes out as Trans and then comes out as a lesbian.

Both patterns are consistent with the 14 stage model which Devor has created. It predicts that transfolk will attempt some form of adaptation to their natal gender in order to cope with their feelings of gender variance. This may be as cross-dressing heterosexuals or coming out as gay or lesbian (Devor 2004:51). Devor does not mention age as a factor but it appears to be important in the interviews conducted in this project. Also the model does not take into account the experiences of B and J who come out as Trans without either marrying or identifying as gay or lesbian first. This might be explained by the greater awareness of transfolk since that article was published in 2004.

It is hard to see this time in the lives of the interviewees as positive. Almost all the interviewees fight feelings of guilt and shame (A, C, D, E, H, K, L and N). Some (A and K) report that they felt dirty and disgusting. Others (A, E and K) describe feelings of fear and confusion. L describes a

cycle of buying clothes, then being consumed with guilt and discarding them:

*As um*

*this you can understand the living of a double life*

*Desperate to live out your female persona*

*Which completely takes over.*

*We might trash half a dozen wardrobes of clothes and shoes and*

*bags and things*

*maybe more*

*by getting rid of it all and thinking we can pretend it is not an issue*

*Well it doesn't go away*

*And it doesn't go away because it is genuine*

K poignantly describes a feeling of homesickness for her real identity:

*And at the same time I was recognising that it was more painful to*

*me*

*Because I was homesick for a person that*

*I wasn't allowing myself to be*

During this time all of the interviewees attempted to show a responsible face to the world, often holding down responsible jobs, raising families and being key congregants in their churches.

At the end of this period of their lives, interviewees begin to explore their identity and move towards an understanding of who they are. Two of these (J and N) began by researching gender theory and transgenderism within university libraries whilst students. Internet and the media were recognised as powerful tools to help create community and explore identity (E, F, H and K). K for example uses internet chat rooms to try out having a feminine identity in cyberspace and makes a friend who hosts her debut as a woman at a house party. After watching the same documentary about transmen on television E and G both recognised themselves for the first time. This led to their decisions to transition.

### ***Coming out.***

By coming out the individual accepts that they are Trans and also begins to disclose this identity to others. This period in the life of the interviewees is not necessarily a linear or straightforward process that immediately leads to a transitioning of identity. Again, this agrees with Devor's model. Several of the interviewees (D, K and N) made initial decisions to stay in their natal gender despite coming out to themselves as Trans.

The main reason for coming out is the recognition that this was the only way for the interviewees to find peace. All talked about this time in positive ways and three commented (D, G and K) that it was the best decision that they ever made. Several of the interviewees (A, F and N) felt this was the only way that they would be able to resolve the guilt and secrecy that had blighted their lives. As F relates:

*I used to go to hotels to dress before I went out in public and it was really was a major thing to keep it all under wraps I decided this is not honest I can't go on like this*

*the fear of discovery*

*It was just getting too much especially the more I went out locally for that very reason*

*So I said to S I can't go on like this*

*And we had both reconciled ourselves that this wasn't going to go away*

*I was much happier when I didn't*

*I was coming around to the idea that I didn't hate myself*

Most of the MTF interviewees (D, F, H, K, L and N) were in heterosexual relationships prior to transition. There seem to be two different patterns that emerge in the reactions of the partners of MTF interviewees at disclosure. Similar patterns of disclosure are reported by Bischof et al (2011:24).



The first pattern is early disclosure. Two of the interviewees (D and F) told their partners very early in their relationships. Both remained with their partners after disclosure but neither completely transitioned to a female identity (D remained with her partner until the partner's death and then transitioned). In both there was a series of negotiations that allowed the relationship to continue. Both Chase (2011:437) and Bischoff et al (2011:26) identify this pattern in enduring relationships. There is a clear dividing line between the acceptable acting out of gender dysphoria and the unacceptable changing of gender identity. In order to maintain their marital relationship, F negotiates with her wife about the amount of time she spends in her male identity and how much time she spends in her female identity. D's wife was tolerant of her behaviour but threatened to leave D if she transitioned fully.

The second pattern is those who told their partners much later in the relationship at the point of beginning transition of identity (H, K, L and N). All of the interviews who disclosed their identity after the relationship was established had their relationships break down. In these cases there is rejection (L and N) or it evolved into a friendship (H and K). Two of the interviewees (K and L) mention that the rejection of a continuing

relationship was in part because their wives did not wish to be identified as lesbians. As K relates:

*But she didn't accept that transsexualism was right and she has a right to her beliefs*

*She wanted to remain my friend but she felt quite understandably I didn't sign up for this I'm not a lesbian*

*She was a Christian woman who wanted to be married to a husband  
It was really really so sad and so painful.*

There are tremendous issues for the partners of transfolk. They need to negotiate a new relationship with their partner or live with the guilt of leaving them at a time of need. They also need to re-evaluate their own identity and sexual orientation (Chase 2011: 444, Bischoff et al 2011:26 and Pfeffer 2008:341). The needs of female partners of FTM transfolk are often subordinated to the Trans partner and they feel guilt about focussing on their needs. Their vulnerability at this time is a pastoral issue that supportive churches need to be aware of.

Stage 8 of Devor's model "delay before acceptance of transsexual or transgendered identity" (Devor 2004: 56) appears in two of the narratives. Both D and K decide to postpone any action towards gender reassignment because of their family responsibilities. As D relates:

*But as time went on*

*I just I couldn't do it*

*It just became more and more impossible to keep on living as a man*

*And eventually I got to the stage that I got to S my wife I can't go on*

*living as a man I've got to*

*I've got to transition and she said*

*She was deeply upset she said I can't*

*(silence)*

*If you do that it will mean the end of our relationship because I can't*

*deal with that*

*Which was heavy and I thought well we have been together such a*

*long time and we had been so happy together I am not going to*

*destroy our relationship*

*And soon after that she fell ill with a brain tumour*

D transitions after her wife dies. K waits until her children have left home. It is only after these responsibilities have been fulfilled that either feels free to assume their preferred identity.

The pattern was observed to be different with FTM interviewees. All three interviewees were in lesbian relationships before transition. All disclosed to their partner soon after they recognised their gender dysphoria. All relationships have survived. In the cases of C and G the relationship has become notionally heterosexual while E discovered that his partner was also Trans and they transitioned together into a gay male couple. There has been little research done into the relationships of transmen and their lesbian partners. An exception is Pfeffer (2010) whose work suggests a complex picture of adjustments and identity changes by the lesbian partners.

In all situations the responses of family members have been mixed, and each interviewee has received many different responses to their disclosure. Bockting, Knudson and Goldberg (2006) notes that family members are not a heterogeneous group and that their reactions are

varied (2006: 56). This finding is also echoed by Norwood (2012) who finds that the reaction of family members is a complex process involving grief for something that is akin to death (2012:84). This is further complicated by dealing with personality changes (2012:85) and balancing the family's needs against the desire to support the transperson. Norwood notes:

*“Support-giving was constructed as somewhat problematic in light of religious beliefs, family values, and even lack of cognitive and empathic understanding of TG identity. ” (2012:89)*

Several of the interviewees (B, C, D, F, K, L and N) experienced family acceptance from some members of their family. This is despite two of them (K and L) recounting very difficult family dynamics caused by their struggles with their gender dysphoria and resulting mental health issues in the past. At the same time acceptance was not uniform with several (D, F, K and L) reporting that they were also rejected by family members citing religious scruples and three (D, F and L) experienced outright condemnation based on religious belief. Super and Jacobson (2011:189) identifies that families who reject LGBT members also experience a sense

of dislocation and pain as they try to navigate multiple loyalties which is damaging to their spirituality. As L relates:

*Of course it hurt*

*I had but my family who profess those Christian values and beliefs*

*of unconditional love couldn't show it to me*

*because of this*

*it became a barrier and became something that was too much for*

*them*

*I understand that*

*but it did hurt*

Interviewees reported that the reactions of other people were also mixed. In the case of several interviewees (B, F, K, L and N) employers and fellow employees were very supportive. Only K relates discrimination in the job market. As an experienced teacher she applied to over 100 schools without getting an interview. E found that many of the gay men he had associated with in the past were confused and threatened by his new identity as a gay man. They were concerned that they may inadvertently pick up a gay man who had a vagina. This made them insecure in their gay

identity and worried about how they would deal with this situation. E also experienced confusion from many of his friends as both he and his partner transitioned from a lesbian couple to a gay male couple. Many found the situation inexplicable. This situation is mirrored in wider LGBT society where, for example, the largest campaigning organisation Stonewall does not include transfolk because they deem it a gender and not a sexual orientation issue. This is also reflected in literature (Raymond 1979, Frazer 2005, Nataf 2006, Morrison 2010) which notes an uneasy relationship between the lesbian and gay community and transfolk.

Several (A, E, F, H and K) joined Trans support groups where they begin to meet others and become part of an organised Trans community. Others (F, H, K and L) begin to venture out dressed in their newly claimed gender.

Medical intervention and physical transition were identified as an important tool in identity shift (D, E, G, K and L). Those who wished to shift identity completely (G, H, K and L) experienced few problems with the medical establishment. Others who did not necessarily conform to a “standard outcome” found opposition from medical professionals. D fought with her surgeon about the extent of surgery she required. E was

advised not to disclose that he was a gay man because he may not be considered a candidate for surgery. N consciously played a female stereotype to the delight of her doctors and psychiatrists being clear to play down the androgyny that is part of her identity.

### ***Life after coming out.***

Not all of the interviewees have completely settled into their identities. A, for example, is at the very beginning of her gender journey and has yet to give herself a new name. C gave the impression of still having some issues around coming out by describing himself as “not quite right” and L had literally completed her GRS only a few weeks before being interviewed and was waiting to explore her new world.

The transcripts suggest that several of the interviewees experience their lives as a split narrative where there is a disconnection between their previous life and their new lives. Several (H, K and L) refuse to acknowledge their previous names or identities. N described her early years after transition as “attempting to obliterate the male within her”.



Beardsley, O'Brien and Wooley (2012) note that for some transfolk there is as much of a closet after transition as there was before (2012:268).

Integration seems to come with length of time after a settled identity is achieved. Those who have been in their identities the greatest length of time (B, D, E, G and N) seem to come to a place where they are able to reintegrate the narrative of their life into a more coherent whole. In the debrief conversation after interview, N disclosed that she had participated as a way to explore how she could better integrate the two halves of her life story.

## **Church experience narratives.**

### ***Experience of clergy.***

Experiences prior to transition were reported as positive. After transition the picture is more mixed with regard to the behaviour of male clergy.

Some of the experiences were supportive while others were not. N was supported by both her university chaplain and her evangelical Anglican minister while coming out as Trans. K found similar support from a novice monk via the internet who helped her explore meditation and mysticism. K was also welcomed into a conservative evangelical church with the minister thanking her for making him think about the issues she had raised. L was supported and visited by her minister throughout the transition process. She described him as a “wonderful and loving man”.

Other experiences with male clergy were not so positive. After disclosure B was asked to leave by a male minister. H battled with her minister for several years which only ended when the minister transferred to another congregation. This minister objected to H wearing female clothes to church and hid her away from any visible ministry. The most devastating narrative is the story of F who was stripped of all ministry and excluded

from participation within the congregation after 40 years of involvement.  
F's wife was encouraged by her minister to leave the marriage. They were  
both shunned for a year before finally they decided to leave. As F relates:

*we negotiated a year with the leadership*

*um to see if they could see things my way and they couldn't*

*And in the end*

*During that time I wasn't allowed to minister in any way*

*Ah I had been leading worship for 30 years our group split up*

*we had a few loyal supporters*

*at the end of the year we said there is no future for us here*

*Which was probably what they were hoping for anyway*

Literature records similar experiences. Beardsley, O'Brien and Woolley (2012) tells a story where a Trans person was harassed for "living unbiblically" (2012:267). In his memoir Ford (2013:23) recounts his rejection from the church in which he had grown up. Super and Jacobson (2011) report that religious abuse is a real concern for counsellors working with LGBT folk. They note that these experiences set up a dissonance between the religious and sexual identities which leave the person feeling hopeless, condemned and confused (2011:181).

In contrast, all of the interviewees' experiences of female clergy were positive. When F and her wife were referred to her new church, the female minister intentionally did groundwork with the congregation and leadership to ensure that F and her wife were welcomed into their new church home. H found that her female curate removed transphobic Christian literature from when she discovered it. H also recounted the story of two female clergy making sure that she was comfortable, welcomed and supported at a wedding. The female curate in the village where N had grown up supported her mother when she disclosed her

gender dysphoria. This helped N's mother to accept her as a daughter instead of a son.

K also recounts a story of welcome and inclusion by female clergy. K was welcomed by several communities of nuns as a female guest. Over the course of several years she visited several convents as she openly explored her call to become a nun. She recounts how one of the convents tested her call and finally offered her a place amongst them. The test that K relates is not a test to see if she was female but rather if she was a contemplative and therefore suitable to join the community. Since her interview H has reported a similar experience as she explores her own vocation as a nun.

While it would be tempting, it is not possible to make the generalisation that female clergy are more tolerant of transfolk. It may be there is greater sympathy for minorities from a group of clergy who are minorities themselves. It may be simply chance that all experiences were positive. Literature on clergy psychological profiles (Francis 1992 and Francis and Robbins 1995) indicate that the personality profiles of male and female

clergy are much closer together than the general population. Therefore there seems little evidence to support this generalisation.

***People and structures beyond the local church.***

Kolakowski (2000:36) states that she does not believe that there is a vast conspiracy to disenfranchise or exclude transfolk from the Church but instead the barriers from social institutions, customs and hierarchical structures are organised in such a way that they are oppressive.

The treatment of the interviewees was mixed. N was accepted into Anglican ordination training as an out transperson. She was shown a confidential discussion document from a committee of Anglican bishops about transfolk seeking holy orders that recommended they be treated seriously as candidates provided they had the necessary aptitudes for a life in ministry. Her bishop recognised her disadvantage gaining employment after training and offered her a guaranteed post. In a different Anglican diocese, L was refused training without explanation.

F also received favourable treatment from her bishop when she and her wife went to find an Anglican Church after their traumatic experiences in their previous home church. It was the bishop who directed them to their current church and presumably briefed the new vicar on what he had done. F has also had positive experiences in her search for a spiritual director, being assured that most spiritual directors would have little problem with her as a transwoman.

In complete contrast D and others were engaged in a piece of performance art about faith and being Trans and became the focus of a demonstration coordinated by the Church leadership of the town. It was picketed by protestors screaming abuse at both cast and the theatre patrons. In her interview she recounted the wild rumours circulated about the play:

*And we got relayed some of the fantasies some of the stories they  
were telling about what happened on stage like you know*

*Oh God really obscene stuff*

*That was going to be naked people*

*the cross was pissed on*

*Nuns dressed in bondage gear and just kind of horrible horrible  
horrible sexual fantasies these people were circulating as if they  
were true*

Where did they hear them from (interviewer)

*You do wonder where they hear them from*

*you mean you just go my God*

*(silence)*

*Gosh and I mean I could spend the rest of my life trying to  
investigate all this but*

*(laugh)*

*There are far better things to do*



### ***Congregational reactions.***

As an Anglican priest N recognises that the treatment of transfolk within congregations is very varied. It is entirely dependent on the leadership of the clergy person and the reactions of the congregation.

All of the interviewees have found a place within congregations (A, B.D, E, F, G, H, J, K, L and N) if they wished to remain within a worshipping community. This may not have been their initial congregation. F was hounded out of her original church but found another church in the same denomination. In her account F related that even with the general condemnation from the congregation, several people supported them. As an act of defiance her old worship co-leader continues to use the worship songs that F wrote as a reminder that she was there. Another (B) was asked to leave when she disclosed she was Trans. She moved to another denomination. Ford (2013:89) notes in his biography the hypocrisy of the congregation who excluded him as a sinner while acknowledging that they were sinners themselves.

Several of the interviewees have joined a monthly mission project of an existing denomination set up to serve transfolk (A, B, D and E) and attend regular church services weekly. G leads a church originally set up by E to welcome LGBT people. J's primary church community is a group of young radical Christians who explore faith and spirituality together. Others have found churches in mainstream denominations. Whilst the interviewees have found worshipping communities, it has not been without difficulties.

One of the major issues that came out of the interviews was the difference between toleration and celebration. The interviewees that attend the mission project (A, B, D and E) feel that their monthly worship celebrates transfolk in ways that more traditional churches do not. They criticise the silence on LGBT issues generally and note that inclusion often means silence on difference rather than celebration and exploration of it.

As A relates:

*So few ministers are standing up and saying including*

*They are talking about the poor and disadvantaged and stuff but*

*really I never hear the word transgenderism or homosexuality*

*mentioned so I think because I think you are being excluded because*

*you are not deliberately being included*

*And so we are not having it mentioned knowing that some of the*

*congregation was struggling with it*

*It is the elephant in the room you know*

*The minister was saying we should all be you know open to*

*everybody but it seemed to be looking around the congregation*

*tended to be white*

*And I hate to say this white and middleclass*

*And rarely did I ever hear a minister turn around and acknowledge*

*that transgenders homosexuals or lesbians in any way shape or form*

*so you know I think*

*I felt a sense of being excluded because I wasn't actively included*

Accounts of those worshipping in mainstream denominations confirm this. Shottwell and Sangrey (2009) note that the burden falls disproportionately on the transperson who must micromanage their behaviour to fit in and not offend (2009:57). This seems particularly true in the case of F who has been welcomed into her new church but she feels that she is there on toleration. While she attends social occasions as a female she is careful to dress in male clothing for regular worship. She is also concerned that an impending interregnum may make her less welcome without a supportive cleric. L also wonders if there are some people within her congregation who are less supportive of her than they appear. H attributes any reserve to a prickly personality rather than any lingering transphobia. H also feels that her problems with the previous minister have led her to isolate herself rather than others avoiding her.

Others recount mixed messages by church communities. This is often around the utilisation of their gifts and skills. H was allowed to continue at the mixing desk during worship because there were few with that expertise and the role was not visible, however, she was excluded from other ministry. L was church secretary but felt that the acceptance was

conditional on her being quiet about her identity as a transwoman. N is aware that she is often praised for her intellectual gifts but often feels that lingering unease about her as a transwoman exists:

*I get told all the time by those in authority*

*You're a gift and have so much to offer*

*And you catch a glance or*

*You hear a story.....*

### ***Experiences of homophobia and assumptions of transphobia***

Many of the interviewees mentioned homophobia within the Church (A, C, E, F, G, H, J, L and N). This has formed their assumptions about how they would be treated. For example, C felt he was rejected by the Catholic Church as a lesbian. Because of this previous rejection, he felt that the Catholic Church would also reject him as a transperson. He specifically mentions that Catholic pastoral letter against gay marriage read out in every pulpit in the UK in 2012:

Where do you see yourself excluded in the Church (*interviewer*)

*My views*

*As I said my mum still goes to church every Sunday*

*And she recently became quite kind of*

*Nonplussed by this whole letter they got from the bishop about gay marriage*

*She couldn't understand why people have such a problem and so really for me the viewpoints I have .....*

*There are so many things I disagree with*

*That*

*The church seems so kind of irrelevant really*

Cornwall notes (2010:141) that Church concerns about being Trans are often reduced to an anxiety about whether it is really allowing homosexuality by another name. A reading of the Evangelical Alliance and the Church of England reports would seem to confirm this. One of their primary motivations in establishing if gender can be changed is the perceived threat to heterosexual marriage that may occur if gender does change. This would mean they are performing “gay marriage by stealth” by marrying two people of the same gender.

J has not brought up her gender queer identity in her worshipping congregation because she feels that she would be humoured and dismissed rather than engaged with. B hid her identity because she felt that she would have been disowned. L left her Anglican congregation after witnessing their poor behaviour towards an openly gay curate assuming this would also happen to her as a transwoman.

This assumption is not always true. N found that her evangelical church was very supportive of her as a transwoman. She believes this is because being Trans gave her church a medical narrative in which she had a condition that was being treated. Jasper (2005) notes that most of the population sees gender reassignment as a medical process that brings the body in alignment with gender identity without questioning assumptions about the God given nature of binary gender (2005:46). Cornwall agrees that gender reassignment surgery may affirm the existing binaries and make it more difficult for those who are either intersex or gender queer (2010:151).

For N the difficulty came when her congregation perceived that she had made a choice to “become a lesbian”. H also considers that being gay or lesbian would “push the envelope” in her church while she believes her own situation has been accepted. In her interview, F admitted that while she had accepted her own identity she struggled to do the same in regards to gay or lesbian people. It was only with much thought and prayer that she was able to change her previous convictions that being gay or lesbian was sinful.

***Reasons for staying or leaving a congregation.***

At the time of interview C is the only person who was not actively involved in a faith community. His disaffection started prior to his coming out as Trans when he identified as a lesbian. This exclusion started him questioning the validity of the Church’s stand on homosexuality and, later, transgenderism. This later expanded to questioning the validity of it at all. Later he began to wonder if God was real. He reasoned that an all-powerful and knowing God could not make mistakes such gender



dysphoria or permit a Church that perpetrated homophobia. Therefore God could not exist and C decided that he was an atheist.

Other interviewees recount times in their lives when they left the Church and have later come back. N left the Church because her prayers about being made a girl were not answered. B left the Church after being rejected for being trans. D also left the Church after serving on the PCC and observing the unloving behaviour of the committee towards each other and the vicar she liked and respected. This was further exacerbated by the conflicted relationship with her mother in law who declares her love for her “son in law” and calls her an abomination simultaneously.

For many of the interviewees there was “no option” but to stay (E, F, G, H and L) within the Church. The interviewees gave several reasons. One of the main reasons was community. Schuck and Liddle (2001:73) confirm that this is a reason why many LGB folk stay in churches and it is likely this is the case with transfolk as well. J values the small close-knit group of Christians that she meets with to explore their faith and their doubts. Others (A, B, D, G and N) also mentioned community. N believes that the

Church is full of extraordinary saints and that it mirrors both the best and worst of humanity within it. As she recounts:

*So I discovered that you know*

*The Church is full of extraordinary saints ....*

*But you know the Church*

*Has the best and the worst because it's a human institution because that's how it should be but some of my friends*

*Colleagues*

*Friends like X are inspirational who make*

*Not only the Church but the world a better place*

Another reason to remain in church was service (A, B, D, E, F, G, H, L and N). This service may be a specific outreach to the transfolk or LGBT folk (A, B, D, E, G) or the ability to make a difference in some other way (E, F, G, L and N). It may be the alleviation of suffering of others (E) or the ability to speak out as a person of faith (G and N). G believes that it is his mission to expand others' theology, while N believes she is called to be a holy maverick. For several (B, G, E, H and N) it was the need to contribute to

the community that they were part of. This is also found in literature (Bockting and Cesaretti 2001:297).

Many of the interviewees (D, E, F, G, K, L and N) have pivotal roles within their churches. They all feel a call to work with the excluded and the vulnerable. Both G and N consider that their clergy status allows them to speak with authority on behalf of others and to be able to influence society in positive ways. K is about to enter a convent. H and L are exploring their call to ordained ministry. D works as a playwright and a poet on religious themes. F intends to spend her time after retirement campaigning for evangelical churches to accept LGBT people.

The main issue for the interviewees was finding a place where they could worship as transfolk with integrity. For H this meant remaining within her existing congregation and fighting for acceptance from both congregation and clergy. For many others (A, B, D, F, J, K and L) this meant finding a congregation that would accept them as openly transgendered members. This has been either within a mainstream denomination or in a church that was created to welcome LGBT folk. Several of the interviewees (F, J,

K, L and N) also found local congregations within mainstream denominations that welcomed or tolerated them. Others (A, B, D and E) joined a mainstream church with a specific mission to transfolk. Only G remained within the LGBT friendly church that he previously pastored as a lesbian.

There was disagreement between the interviewees' views about congregations that focussed specifically on LGBT issues. All of those worshipping regularly in these types of congregations (A, B, D, E and G) saw it as providing a safe place to celebrate their identity. Some of the others (H and L) saw such churches as ghettos and considered they were not places that were attractive to them.

### ***Teachings on gender.***

There was very little response to the question about church teachings on gender. Conroy (2010:301) notes that binary gender is presented in churches as a fact rather than a belief despite evidence to the contrary. She also notes that this belief comes from a literal reading of Genesis 1

and 2 and that other religious cultures are much more accommodating (2010:308).

Many of the interviewees had received these traditional teachings on gender (A, C, F, G, L and N) where the differentiation of male and female and separate gender roles was preached as being biblically ordained.

There was no mention of gender variance from the pulpit and gender was always presented as a binary. Even J, who had a liberal feminist upbringing did not hear any mention of the idea of gender variance.

Several of the interviewees (A, D, G, J, L and N) were highly critical of the patriarchal nature of the Church and considered that it privileged men while oppressing women. They identified that patriarchy does this by excluding women from roles of responsibility. Several cited the arguments within the Anglican Church around women bishops. As A relates:

*Overall general view of Christianity is that it gives such a crappy deal to women*

*Churches argue about women bishops and stuff you know*

*I think of the centuries the male power and control and authority*

*My personal view is that it has side-lined women's authority and*

*And led them away from the Church*

Three of the interviewees (A, D and N) believed that the Church was inherently patriarchal and did spiritual and emotional violence to those who did not agree and/or did not conform to its teachings on gender and gender roles.

Sheridan (2001) echoes this in this observation about what is truly taught to transfolk about the challenges they pose regarding gender:

*We wish you were invisible, we don't accept you. We wish you would simply go away and we will pretend that you don't exist. We will ostracise and marginalize you. We will deny you any rights because you are different and we hate you (2001:52).*

## **Theological insights and gifts that transfolk bring.**

### ***Spiritual journeys of interviewees.***

There was a strong sense among many of the interviewees (A, E, H, K, L and K) that God affirmed their gender journeys. Several (H, K, L and N) felt that their gender variance and the struggle to become themselves had been an important part of their spiritual journey. It had led them to spiritual places they would not have found without the struggles they had experienced and the questions they had to answer.

The literature surveyed echoes this. Tanis writes that there was an important sense of following God's will into a new and unexpected direction (2003:43) in his gender journey. Wilcox (2002) notes that God was real and present in the coming out journeys of LGBT folk (2002:507). Reinsmith-Jones (2013:83) notes that 3 out of 4 of their interviewees felt loved and closer to God for embarking on their gender journey.



All the interviewees had experienced shifts within their beliefs. This often involved moving from legalistic types of Christianity to more open interpretations on matters of faith (F, H, K and L). As K recounts

*but this switch of view theologically was like coming out of the woods in to a wide meadowland*

*a sunlit meadowland where there was wide open space because suddenly*

*I didn't worry if someone was a Baptist or a Catholic or whatever*

*I didn't worry if someone was a Muslim or you know whatever even an atheist or agnostic*

*I just saw the sunlight of the love of God and God was always this person I could run down the field towards and know that I would get embraced*

*and this coming together of my theology occurred at the same time as coming together of my body and mind with the hormones*

*it didn't build up before that*

*what I found is a psychological happening*

*Spiritually and religiously as well as my gender*

This is also reflected in the general literature about LGBT folk reconciling faith and their lived experience. Sullivan-Blum (2008:199), in her study of drag queens reconciling their sexuality/ identity with their faith, notes that in order to navigate the conflict between conservative faith and life experience there is a reconfiguration of beliefs to accommodate the lived reality. Schuck and Liddle (2001) and Levy and Lo (2013) found similar shifts in their studies.

These changes in faith were marked by more generosity towards themselves and others. As a conservative Christian, K believed her father was in hell because he was not a believer; she now does not believe this. F originally believed that being gay or lesbian was sinful but her own journey led her to a place where she could accept her lesbian daughter when she came out to her.

Hattie and Began (2013) believe that the reconfiguration of personal theology incorporates concepts like goodness (2013:259). Beardsley, O'Brien and Woolley note that the network of Trans Christians who are known as the Sibyls meet to pursue "value, meaning and transcendence"

(2012:262). Wilcox (2002) adds that these reconfigurations of belief are often marked by a deeper trust in God because when God was turned to in crisis, God did not abandon even when others did (2002:510).

These changes also led to a spiritual practice of forgiveness amongst many of the interviewees (B, D, E, F, H, K, L and N). F is remarkably forgiving of her former congregation and defends them despite the treatment she received at their hands:

*And I quite carefully tried not to trash that church  
and when people outside the Church ask how do those people call  
themselves Christians I say well I say you have to see it from their  
point of view and I am spending the rest of my life defending what  
they did  
not agreeing with it but understanding the reasoning was and why  
they were doing it*

K is gracious about how she was effectively shut out of teaching when she transitioned and how people rejected her.

I think you are remarkably forgiving anyway (interviewer)

*It's more survival you have to take what things are*

D is very forgiving of the crowds that protested despite the fact that the situation was hurtful.

*I mean I think about it now and I think God these are Christian people*

*Mmm (sad)*

Why do you think that they were like this (interviewer)

*(silence)*

*(silence)*

*Well now that's a good question*

*I mean I think they were*

*They are not bad people really and they are very genuine*

D is also forgiving and loving when she talks about her mother in law's refusal to accept her transition and continues to regularly visit her. L is gracious about the comments, stares and mutterings she receives on the high street, believing that by meeting these behaviours with cheerfulness and love, hearts and minds will change eventually. B forgives a friend for rejecting him and hopes to be reunited one day. E forgives the treatment of those in a supposedly Trans affirming denomination who found it hard to accept the transition of himself and his partner. He forgives the "heteropanic" that his transition engendered amongst his gay male friends.

Forgiveness also is also evident in the writings of transfolk about themselves. Mollenkott and Sheridan (2003:73) write that forgiving yourself and others is the key to personal emancipation. For Tanis forgiveness causes the healing of both body and spirit (2003:107). Sheridan calls for transfolk to forgive those in the Church who have wronged them because broken relationships cannot be healed with hatred (2001:117). Reinsmith- Jones (2013:82) writes about a process where the body changes to self-love and by extension self-forgiveness. A study by

Greene and Brittan (2013) shows that forgiveness is positively linked to an increase in self-esteem and a decrease in shame amongst LGBTQ folk (2013:201).

Many of the interviewees disclosed a mystical experience (G, H, L and N) involving feelings of knowledge, intense love and praying aloud. These experiences often came at times of deep despair and confusion. They frequently included some elements of the natural world such as wind (K), fog (G), fire (K) and water (L). G relates his experience

*Woke up and there was smoke or fog in my bedroom*

*Now you know a scientist would say that you are halfway between  
being awake and asleep in that funny stage*

*But*

*Because I thought it was smoke I woke myself up thinking shit what  
the hell is going on so I know what I'd seen*

*And I know it didn't smell so*

*Like just a really warm feeling*

*So I had seen something supernatural if you like*

*That had no explanation there was nothing in the house where it  
could have come from*

*Umm so that had to be God*

*So even though I find it hard to define what God is that has to have  
been for me*

*I think it was part of the healing but also part of God saying to me*

*However you perceive me*

*Or don't or can't perceive me*

*Somehow I'm here*

The work of Hay and Nye report that this is not a surprising statistic. They quote from the Gallup Omnibus surveys which state that 76% of people said they had some form of mystical experience when they were asked in 2000 (Hay and Nye 2006:28).

### ***Images of God.***

Justin Tanis argues that the images of God presented by the Church are constricting and unbiblical (2003:137). Reinsmith-Jones reports transfolk interviewees with images of a God who is neither male nor female (2013:84). Wilcox argues this shift to a more personalised vision of God is a coping strategy to deal with the negative religious images and messages that bombard LGBT folk (2002:501). Like the literature on the subject, many of the interviewees (A, D, E, F, G, H, J, K, L and N) have rejected the traditional patriarchal image of God. As K recounts:

*in my understanding of God I know I no longer have to think of God  
as an old man with a beard who ordered ethnic cleansing of the  
Canaanites because they were outside of the plan for Israel  
I still regard God as one of my understandings as being an amazing  
caring and loving father because I had an amazing caring and loving  
father  
But  
I now totally believe that God fully understands  
Fully understands and knows what it feels*



*And means to fully express as a male*

*And knows what it means and knows what it is to fully express what  
it is to be female*

*That God's own nature and being male and female he created them  
in his image*

*And it's part of God's image and template to take the mythical*

*I mean archetypical genesis is actually the God in person fully  
embraces and acknowledges male and female.*

This rejection of a patriarchal God did not mean that the interviewees had dismissed the idea that God could be represented in a human image. They had expanded their imagery to include many different images of God such as a reproductive female or mother (A, F, K and N), a "normal person" (B), a being that transcends gender (K), daddy (K) and a child (K, L and N). As N states:

*God is disabled for me*

*God is a lesbian*

*Gods is Trans (Silence)*

BK Hipsher (2009:99) argues that the image of a Trans God is very attractive and deeply unsettling at the same time because it shows God in all the possible manifestations of humanity while being deeply transgressive to traditional images of God.

Many of the interviewees now see God as an attribute or value. E and J see God as human connectedness, while H and L see God as a comforter and rescuer. Both L and H see God as shattering love, while K sees God as gentle and playful.

Several of the interviewees also offered natural imagery when they described God as water (J and N), wind (G and K), fire and blossom (K).

Many of the interviewees had an apophatic view of God (B, D, E, G, H, K and N). They did not necessarily use the term (or were aware of it) but many of them described a God that did not conform to human imagery or existed within human boundaries. Others talked about what God was not- such as someone not interested in ethnic cleansing. This is also reflected

in literature. Mollenkott and Sheridan describe what God is not anything that creates a “theology of rage and hate” (2003:85). The participants in the study carried out by Wilcox (2002:506) also describe God as “not judgemental”. Many found their image of God was too large to be constricted into a single image. They attributed their growing understanding of God in this way to their growing understanding of their own identities.

Jesus is an important figure in the theology of many of the interviewees. Their Jesus is seen as radically inclusive (E, G, H and N), incarnational (H) bearing the wounds of his suffering in heaven in a very similar way to the marks and scars of humanity (N). As E and K state:

*I think I can identify with that sense of God's spirit and Jesus you know as God's presence being displayed through the actions of Jesus and*

*How radical his actions were and how very much Jesus' life and ministry were about including those who had been excluded and*

*making a stand for those who had been treated badly and when  
that was just so against the norm of that society  
That is my sense of seeing God today in the world and God in my life  
(E)*

*What I relate far more to is Jesus  
who was basically God come down to have a look  
did it got the t shirt  
I do not look on Jesus Christ the son of God  
not so much as come down to live among us here  
but come down here because the only way he could do it was to  
experience it  
Even the creator of the universe  
has got to be here and feel it and  
Live the life and that  
That is the heart of my gospel (H)*

The literature written by transfolk also echoes this. Sheridan (2001:22) sees Jesus as a liberative figure. Tanis notes that Jesus “challenged in ways that shocked challenged and transformed “(2003:141). Queer theologian Bob Goss sees Jesus as a gender liminal figure that transgresses gender boundaries (1993:81-82).

### ***Engaging with the Bible.***

Mollenkott believes that the Bible is an extremely Trans friendly document (Mollenkott 2001:146). She lists many transsexual images such as women being called brothers, men called Brides of Christ, Jesus and Paul depicted as mothers and the Church depicted as having a female body with a male head (John 16:21, 17:1, Galatians 4:19 and Ephesians 4:15). In contrast, none of the interviewees in Reinsmith-Jones (2013:82) saw themselves reflected in the Bible.

This mixed picture was replicated in the interviews. The Bible was seen by some of the interviewees as having value (A,G,K and N) but they were clear that it needed to be read with a critical eye and caution should be exercised about reading it literally as a template for modern life. Some identified with biblical characters. Others (A, C, G and K) saw the Bible as a distant document that was compiled for and by people in a different age. As G comments:

*It's not*

*It's not my history*

*It's the history of other people*

*And their relationship with God so whether there is*

*A lot I have no idea because I have never really read it for a long time.*

The only scriptural passage that the interviewees identified as being anti-trans was Deuteronomy 22:5 which is a prohibition against cross-dressing. Two of the interviewees (F and H) had struggled with the passage but both had resolved the issue for themselves and now considered it irrelevant to

their lives. Some of the interviewees (A, C, F, G H, L and N) saw the passage as a weapon of spiritual violence used against transfolk by conservative Christians. As A recounts:

*“And is it Deuteronomy when it talks about males no wearing female’s clothes*

Yes (interviewer)

*Again that is a really pathetic use*

*That some people use it as a stick*

*Fundamentalists use to*

*Beat people who they choose to*

*Because you know culturally it wasn’t that long ago that woman were not allowed to wear trousers because it was considered*

*That was considered cross-dressing so truly we are*

*Um talks in the bible about not wearing you know*

*Clothing of mixed fibres and that slavery is acceptable*

*And stoning adulterous women is OK then I think*

*I think this is all rather pathetic and extreme*

*Fundamentalists will say anything.”*

Mollenkott and Sheridan (2003:119) discuss this passage and conclude that it was a decree for certain times and places and was specifically around cultic cross-dressing. They also argue that the only way for transfolk to deal with negative interpretations of Scripture is to become biblically literate and learn to discern the difference between the words of the Law and spirit of the Law. They also call for a hermeneutic arising from the Trans experience that is informed by the struggles of transfolk in their fight for liberation. Wilcox notes a common strategy of modified literalism is used by LGBT folk to deal with unhelpful Scripture. This is a process where unhelpful Scripture is placed within its historical context and then evaluated for relevance to contemporary life (2002:509).

The places in the Bible where interviewees saw themselves varied. The most common biblical character mentioned was the eunuch (discussed at length in Chapter 5). Galatians 3:28 was also identified as explicitly endorsing transfolk. Others included Psalm 139 (G) and Joseph from Genesis (H). Most touchingly N speaks of the woman in Luke 8:42-48 saying:



*when I encountered that woman who touches the hem of Christ and  
is healed it spoke profoundly to me on*

*Who felt*

*Maybe still in some respects feels unlovely and unlovable*

*And maybe*

*Still wonders or wishes that I were other than I am*

*Wishes I had just been born a woman*

*Had been born female*

*But felt within that story me who was skirting around in the*

*shadows and had been laughed at and abused*

*(silence)*

*Could still be (very emotional)*

*Loved and (very emotional)*

*Healed in some sense (very emotional)*

*But I didn't even need (very emotional)*

*To speak to God to touch the hem of his garment is enough (very  
emotional)*

*And as you can see it still gets me and to discover that I didn't*

*Didn't have to produce this magic trick and turn this boy*

*Somehow genetically into a girl and you know somehow had to  
change reality in some sense is that me  
Who felt on the edges of society could reach out and be good  
enough to meet this person face to face (very emotional)  
That somehow my faith in him was enough (very emotional)  
To save me  
It's that  
It still gets me*

***Gifts and theological insights.***

When asked what unique gifts and insights they feel they had gained, the most common response was the insights gained by moving from a faith position that created pain and confusion to a faith position that allowed self-acceptance and peace (A, D, E, H, J and N).

While other groups such as LGB, disabled and women question assumptions the Church makes about sexuality, gender, embodiment and identity, transfolk pose these multiple questions simultaneously. The interviewees have had to question almost everything they believed about

themselves and God through the lens of their experience. Beardsley, O'Brien and Woolley (2012:277) see this as a process of self-discovery and self-awareness in which unhealthy coping strategies are overcome. Gender and sexuality come to be seen as a gift rather than a curse. Tanis (2003:145) writes that God delights in diversity. What we learn from transfolk is that when we suppress this diversity, spiritual and psychological suffering are created. He also writes that the gender journey is an invitation to set out on a journey of body, mind and spirit (2003:147)

Interviewees attributed their gender journey to radical changes in their beliefs about gender, sexual orientation, embodiment and biblical interpretation. As K relates:

*I think it can probably deepen our understanding of God*

*Um*

*Not necessarily put us on a pedestal*

*I'd never dream of doing that*

*but I think we can relate to so much of what it is to be human*

*So much of human experience*

*if you are a genetic female*

*you may not necessarily understand*

*and if you are a genetic male you might not necessarily  
understand*

*We somehow have this fusion of both*

*which has caused the situation sometimes referred to as gender  
confusion*

*Um*

*And*

*I think that has*

*(silence)*

*It has been a problem in my life in the early stages because I had to  
work out for myself what was going on*

*But through all the loss*

*All the personal heartache*

*The difficulties of working my way through*

*to the point where I am now absolutely 100% female ...*

*I am totally at peace with peace with that and I know that God is at  
peace with me over it too*

*and as a result of it I am*

*a much stronger person not just physically but emotionally*

Hutchins (2001:21) sees one of the gifts that transfolk bring is encouraging the Church to stop channelling its energies into illusions of theological simplicity and instead release and use those same energies to liberate. Several other writers made this same point. Ford (2013:81) notes that “pink and blue can make a pleasing purple”. Tanis (2003:181) writes that churches assume that societal norms are part of the Gospel when they are not. Transfolk remind us that God’s standards are not ours. Sheridan echoes this saying that being Trans confronts the issue of being other in a culture that demands uniformity (2001:10). Mollenkott and Sheridan (2003:151) argue that learning to live with ambiguity means living with the Spirit rather than living with forms of religious certainty.

The interviewees echo these sentiments. Several (E, G, J and N) mention one of the major gifts transfolk bring is the ability to live with ambiguity. To live with uncertainty and without rigid categories means living with multiple layers of meaning, identity and complexity without attempting to classify, regulate or simplify but rather allowing life and faith to be experienced and reflected upon. Several of the interviewees also identified that many churches have issues with dealing with ambiguity and often seek simple answers to complex questions. They also suggest that

the energies spent on theological definition, patrolling and enforcing could be better spent allowing the Church to adapt itself to the current age. As J relates:

*I think like that err*

*(pause)*

*That the boundaries of things don't need to be*

*so rigidly defended*

*mmmm*

*like um*

*you know um*

*like I think the Church is defensive about a lot of things*

*and um*

*(pause)*

*Um*

*(pause)*

*it's not going to*

*it's not going to*

*undermine the Church to be more open to um*

*to actually*

*listen to other people's experiences and um*  
*accept that's who they understand themselves and the world*  
*and think that would make it stronger not weaker.*

Both N and L consider that a deeper relationship with God can be found in the place of bewilderment they experienced. Ford echoes these sentiments by calling his gender transition his Gethsemane (2013:87). As a congregation grapples with the fact that gender is not as rigid as they previously believed, it may also begin to question other assumptions it has held. McCall Tigert and Tirabassi (2004: 14) identify this process as finding and losing as part of the journey. Tanis also describes this as learning to live with revelations that we don't want (2003:45). This questioning may lead to re-evaluating previous beliefs and seeking new ways of being a Christian. Spiritual honesty may not be found in places of comfort and power (Tanis 2003:181). Trans folk have already experienced this and can offer their experience and wisdom gained from their journey.

This also leads to the concept of evaluating what is theologically important (E, F and N). Many of the interviewees start in a place of rigidity and literalism but through their experiences change their attitudes. F's

experience of exclusion from being a white middle class pillar of his church community to one shunned and on the edges, has profoundly changed how she views the message of the Gospel. As she relates:

*and I have learnt so much it has softened my heart it has given me a sort of understanding of what people go through that are different and in some ways marginalized people and that is so true to the Scriptures*

*I mean what my church was thinking about really you know marginalized people in society are being marginalized by the Church*

*and the Church should be an example not to marginalize people.(F)*

One of the other insights expressed by the interviewees is the costliness of honesty and following your intuition (D, E, J, L and N). Mollenkott and Sheridan describe these gifts as honesty and integrity (2003:87) and coming out as an act of faith (2003:133). Reinsmith-Jones describes this as needing to live in authenticity (2013:80). The interviewees were aware of the potential cost to their careers, families, relationships and life chances.



They were aware that the road that they had embarked upon was difficult and heartbreaking. But this did not deter them from embarking on it because to do otherwise would not allow them to honestly express who they were. As K relates:

*The psalmist says um*

*When I take away your breath you die and go back to the earth um*

*When I send my spirit you are created I renew the face of the earth*

*and there is a sense that the amazing creator God*

*In all eternity know who we are*

*A bit like my gender journey*

*It has become a journey of trying to*

*Really acknowledge and be and become who I am*

*And*

*So In terms of vocation it is a journey of starting to recognise myself*

*and let God call me into deeper being with that.*

## **Concluding comments.**

Given the richness of the narratives it is hard to summarise in a few sentences what they contain. These sacred stories powerfully speak of an atypical gender experience that is full of discovery, faith and redemption. They speak of a costly co-creative relationship between God and humanity and the power of faith to heal.

But these stories also speak of the harm that is done to individuals in the name of gender conformity and religion. They speak of pain, fear and alienation. They speak of damage wittingly and unwittingly done. This damage is to transfolk themselves, the people they love and the communities that they are part of.

But mostly these narratives speak of silence. They speak of years of silence where people have held secrets believing that silence was more acceptable than truth, where years of struggle and heartache were carefully masked by an exterior of Christian conformity. Where good cisfolk and transfolk people have suffered needlessly and grievously because the Church and society did not want to listen to their truth.

The next chapter is in response to these narratives. It is a series of pastoral reflections that arose from my interaction with the narratives.

## **CHAPTER 5: PASTORAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE NARRATIVES.**

### **Locating this chapter in other pastoral, therapeutic, practical and liberation theologies.**

This chapter is an attempt to take seriously the experiences of a marginalised group of folk, reflecting pastorally on their sexual stories and give guidance to how to deal with a marginalised group of people within the Church. As discussed on pages 165 to 168, it is written as a piece of liberation theology.

But more specifically, this chapter sits within the pastoral, therapeutic and practical guidance informed by liberation theology. In this sense it is like other published works written by practitioners of pastoral care to sexual minorities such as Truluck (2000), de la Huerte (1999), Kundtz and Schlager (2007), Super and Jacobsen (2011), Mann (2013). Truluck (2000), for example, seeks to overcome the damaging effects of biblical interpretation against the LGBT community, whereas de la Huerta (1999), Kundntz and Schlager (2007) , Mann (2013) and Super and Jacobsen (2011) all attempt to provide recommendations for therapeutic and/or pastoral care for a sexual minorities. It also has commonality with trans-

specific pastoral, practical and therapeutic recommendations contained in the writings of Sheridan (2001), Tanis (2003), McCall Tigert and Tirabassi (2004), Beardsley (2007) and Millspaugh (2009).

However there are differences. Firstly this chapter is the product of the clearly outlined research methodology explained in Chapter 3. As such it is rooted in the collective experience of the 12 transfolk interviewed for the project. It differs from these other writings in that it is the product of a specific piece of research rather than the professional or personal experience of an individual who is writing on the subject.

Secondly, this chapter is different because it is specific to transfolk rather than generally about sexual minorities. Truluck (2000), De La Huerte (1999), Kundtz and Schlager (2007) Super and Jacobsen (2011) and Mann (2013) write about the pastoral needs of LGBT community as a whole rather than attempting to speak specifically about transfolk. While this can be helpful to contextualise the pastoral needs of transfolk as a sexual minority; it does not give the specificity of this chapter.

Thirdly, this chapter does not intend to replace what has been authored or co-authored by transfolk on matters of their own pastoral care such as Tanis (2003), McCall Tigert and Tirabassi (2004), Sheridan (2001) and Beardsley (2007). These writings arise from the personal and professional experience of transfolk working with other transfolk.

Fourthly, the research methodology employed makes it different from Millspaugh (2009) who has also written from the perspective of a cisgendered ally and pastoral worker. As well as being based in research, this chapter has been vetted by steering group of transfolk engaged in pastoral care to other transfolk and presented to the Sibyls for their critique and comment at a weekend in Lake Windermere in May 2014. While it is the perspective of an ally; it has also been shaped by the input of transfolk.

Fifthly it is UK specific. Beardsley (2007) is the only writer who has produced similar practical, therapeutic and pastoral guidance with a specifically UK context. As has been previously argued, the experiences of

transfolk outside the legal and medical systems of the United Kingdom will necessarily be different; simply because of the free medical care provided by the National Health Service and the protections of Gender Recognitions and Equalities Legislation which has been enacted in the United Kingdom. As I identified in the discussion of Beardsley's work on pages 115-118, this sole UK based work needs to be expanded and built upon. This chapter attempts to do this by adding the perspectives gained by the Transfaith project.

It is therefore hoped this chapter fills a specific gap in the available literature. It seeks to combine the pastoral perspectives of the working with sexual minorities with the specificity of the writings contained in the writings authored or co-authored by transfolk and cisgendered allies. It is also firmly set in a UK context and seeks to build on the work of Beardsley (2007) using the fruits of the research methodology outlined in Chapter 3.

## **Introduction to the Insights.**

This chapter is a pastoral response to the narratives and explores how my findings could inform pastoral practice. This chapter does not claim to be an authoritative or exhaustive guide to every situation a pastoral worker may encounter but offers a series of pastoral insights that are grounded in the narratives. There are three assumptions that undergird this chapter. The first is that pastoral workers should help transfolk embrace their gender journey in a positive manner. The second is that it is important to support family and friends whose lives are also affected. The third is that strategies such as denial, deliverance or conversion therapy are always inappropriate pastoral responses to people with gender dysphoria. I concur with literature (Super and Jacobson 2011) and British psychiatric and counselling bodies in Appendix 4 that enormous damage is done to transfolk who attempt these damaging and ineffective strategies.



This chapter uses specific insights gained from the narratives as its organising principle. Each insight is discussed and the pastoral implications from each insight are explored in each section. These insights are not ranked in any form of importance.

## **Pastoral insights explored**

### ***Insight 1: Gender dysphoria happens very early in the life of a child.***

The narratives show that the children who grew up to be the interviewees knew very early in their lives they had atypical gender feelings. The interviewees recognised their feelings long before they understood what those feelings meant. This insight agrees with the literature (Grossman and D’Augelli 2006, Conroy 2010, Forcier and Johnson 2013, Kennedy and Hellen 2010, Dietert and Dentice 2013 and Fitty 2010).

There are several pastoral implications to this insight. The first is that being Trans is an inherent part of personhood and not transgressively chosen later in life. If there is no choice, such “pastoral” strategies using blame, guilt, heavy shepherding back to gender conformity or punishment for “sinful behaviour” to make transfolk change their choice, are an inaccurate, inappropriate and inhumane pastoral response to transfolk.

A second pastoral implication is that children with gender dysphoria face an immense burden from a very young age. The interviewees (A, B, C, E, F, G, H, K, L and N) were aware of their difference very early in their lives and were also aware that they needed to hide this difference even when they did not understand why. This burden and the strategies they have used to hide and survive may result in difficulties in later life such as mental health issues and insecurity. This has been reported in literature (Bockting, Knudson and Goldberg 2006:59) and is also found in the narratives (D, F, G, K and L). Those working with transfolk may find themselves working with people who bear emotional scars long after any medical interventions have been completed. It is important to recognise it may take much longer for the soul to heal than for the body to find its most comfortable gender expression.

A third implication is that children with gender dysphoria are very vulnerable and are likely to be hidden. The narratives and literature show that parents are often aware that their children were displaying atypical gender behaviours (A, B, F, K and L) and exerted pressure on them to hide their behaviours (Forcier and Johnson 2013:100, Dietert and Dentice 2013:

35). Because the child had obeyed these self-imposed and parental pressures to remain hidden, it may have seemed they were the least likely to be struggling with such feelings. Pastoral workers and those working with children need to be aware that they may be working with children who are hiding atypical gender feelings. They need to be approachable and non-judgemental in their dealings with children, be aware how they model and represent gender, and also be cautious about enforcing gendered rules and behaviours on children.

They may also be the person who parents confide in and come to for help. If this happens it is important that parents are reassured and referred to support services who can help them and their child to deal positively with the gender struggles that they face.

***Insight 2: Trans adolescents are particularly vulnerable.***

The narratives show adolescence was a particularly difficult time for the interviewees. Many of them were confronted with the physical reality of their natal gender by either menstruation or the acquisition of secondary

sexual characteristics (C,E,G,H and N).This stripped away coping strategies such as believing that they would be able to grow into their preferred gender or their denial of their natal gender. It was also the time when society begins to more rigidly enforce gender roles and rules.

Many of the interviewees reported destructive coping behaviours such as self-harm, alcohol abuse and extreme weight gain (A,C,E,K and N). Interviewees also reported indulging in secretive and shame-filled behaviours such as cross dressing or engaging in extreme gendered behaviours in attempt to prove to themselves and the world that they were comfortable in their natal gender (A,B,E,F,H,K and N). The literature cited shows that depression, low self-esteem, social anxiety and suicidal tendencies are common experiences for young transfolk (Bockting, Knudson and Goldberg 2006, Ryan and Rivers 2003, Gendered Intelligence 2012, Riley et al 2013).

While pastoral workers need to be aware they may be working with young transfolk, they also need to be careful not to ascribe an identity not claimed by the young person. There could be many reasons why young people may wish to exhibit hyper masculine or hyper feminine behaviours. There are many reasons why they may be withdrawn, secretive, silent, self-harming or indulging in behaviours such as drinking or drugs. Pastoral workers should be alert to situations such as bullying and destructive behaviours in the case of any vulnerable young person. It is important not to jump to conclusions and label (or mislabel). Workers need to be open, approachable and alert in order that young people may approach them seeking help, reassurance and support.

***Insight 3: Transfolk who are not out and their loved ones are most likely suffering in silence.***

The most sad and difficult parts of the narratives are the periods in the interviewee's lives between childhood and coming out as Trans. These were catalogues of confusion, pain and suffering for the interviewees and often the people who loved them.

As the concluding comments in the previous chapter observe, this suffering often occurred in silence. The interviewees struggled secretly with shame-filled behaviours and longings. The transcripts hint of difficult relationships with partners and families where the interviewee either withdrew emotionally or struggled with mental health issues such as depression (D, F, G, K and L). Many of the interviewees presented the picture of a successful Christian in church leadership. On that shiny surface there was little to indicate their private struggles.

This brings three observations. Firstly, there may be people in any church congregation who are struggling in silence with their own atypical gender feelings or they may be affected by the gender struggles of someone they know. They may feel these struggles are an occasion for sin; a reason to blame and/or a reason for immense guilt. Making congregations aware of gender dysphoria in a positive way may help ease these negative feelings and encourage affected people in congregations to seek support and help.

The second observation is that facilitating an open discussion may name a situation previously unnameable. The narratives show that the older interviewees did not have the concepts or the identity to understand themselves in the earlier parts of their lives. They often believed that they were alone in the world and that their situation was unique. Their lives may have been very different if they had access to the terms and concepts to help them account for their experience. Educating congregations about transfolk may give someone the tools they need to be able to begin their gender journey.

Thirdly, congregations may react in shock and feel betrayed if someone comes out as Trans in a local congregation. They may blame the person for keeping their secret and feel that they have been wilfully deceived. Bettcher (2007) observes that transfolk are often accused of deception and are punished for it. By educating congregations about the difficulties transfolk may have in claiming their own identity, they can be reassured there has been no deception. They can recognise their fellow congregant has had an ongoing difficult struggle with gender identity. They can join in the



celebration that this difficult situation is being resolved and rejoice that clarity has been finally found.

***Insight 4: Life journeys are individual but there may be patterns.***

The transcripts hinted at patterns in the life experience of the interviewees. One example of a pattern was the similarity in experience of interviewees of similar ages.<sup>23</sup> Older interviewees had married, often had children and then came out later in life as Trans. Middle-aged interviewees tended to come out as gay or lesbian and then subsequently came out as Trans, while the youngest interviewees came out as Trans or gender queer at an early age<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>23</sup> While this was true for this sample it is not possible to assume that this pattern is common. It may even be generational. There is little research to either confirm or deny any patterns in the lives of UK transfolk at the time of writing. The discussion in this section is based on the patterns observed in the 12 transcripts.

Even if this pattern is not exactly replicated by further research, there seem to be several different possible life trajectories transfolk seeking pastoral support may have experienced. Working with older and/or previously married transfolk will contain the possibility of also pastorally working with former or current partners who may vary in their degree of acceptance. This is discussed in more detail in insight 5 below.

Issues may also be complex for the children of transfolk. There may be many years of difficult behaviours to forgive while the parent struggled with gender dysphoria and perhaps mental health issues. There may also be difficulty in establishing a relationship with the “new” parent and grief at the seeming loss of the “old” parent. While some of the interviewees had experienced acceptance and relationships with their children (D and K) others found that their children rejected them (L).

Transfolk who are parents may feel guilt for the taking away of a beloved parent by the decision to transition identity (K). They may need help in establishing a new relationship with children or a place to deal with complex emotions if their child rejects them.

The second group who came out in middle age and/or transition identity from being gay or lesbian also have unique challenges. One of the interviewees (E) found his LGB friends reacted negatively to his transition and he needed to find new places to find friendship, support and affirmation. Several of the FTM interviewees continued relationships with their female partners after transition (C, E and G). These relationships notionally became heterosexual or gay male relationships rather than lesbian relationships. The negotiation and claiming of these new identities and labels for the same relationship created difficulties and confusion within the communities the interviewees lived in.

Those who came out as Trans initially have different challenges<sup>25</sup>. Young transfolk may find their parents have difficulty accepting their transition. Parents may feel the plans and dreams they had for their children are no longer applicable. They may find their parents grieving for the child they have “lost” and struggling to accept the child they now have.

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<sup>25</sup> This section assumes that the option of coming out as Trans is most likely to be someone who is younger. This is consistent with my data but it may be that further research or a larger sample may disprove this assumption.

Given the huge advances in medical interventions and greater knowledge of gender dysphoria, it may be expected that younger transfolk and their families would have an easier set of issues to face. But increasing medical options and knowledge mean more decisions have to be made. Parents may need support while they decide whether they should consent to artificially delay puberty. They may need reassurance when the child wishes to present and be called in their preferred gender with a name the parents did not choose. They may need help to explain to the church youth group leader why their child has changed name and genders. They may have to deal with the anxieties of other parents who may have a very limited understanding of the circumstances and wish to withdraw their child from Church youth provision. They may have to lay groundwork to help the congregation understand and normalise an adolescent or child's gender journey so that the child is given the most nurturing church home possible.

***Insight 5: The partners of transfolk have specific pastoral needs.***

The narratives show cisgendered partners are deeply affected by the coming out of their Trans partners. In many respects, partners are presented with an ultimatum in which they must decide either to stay with their partner through their gender journey or leave. They face questioning about their own sexual orientation if they decide to remain in a relationship with their partner post transition, or they face divorce if they decide to leave. Whatever the decision, they experience the loss of a partner that feels like a bereavement (Chase 2011:439). Partners need to adapt their relationship of many years to fit in with new and unchosen realities. This new situation may not be one that meets their own emotional needs.

While there is no research on the male partners of transfolk, there are two articles written about the reactions of female partners. These show (Bischoff et al 2011 and Chase 2011) that partners are likely to struggle with feelings of anger, shame and inadequacy. They also show self-esteem, identity and body image are adversely affected. The literature also finds that women often put their own needs on hold while they prioritise their family and partner. They may be stigmatised by their partner's decision to

transition, and often face the loss of financial security if the relationship ends in divorce or the transitioning partner loses their job.

Some of these issues are likely to be true of partners of either gender. Spouses may need support to negotiate a new relationship with their partner or decide to dissolve it. They may need to be reassured it was not any behaviour on their part or their lack of sexual attractiveness that caused their partner's gender dysphoria. They may need support as they reflect on their own sexual orientation. They may need help to model loving and forgiving behaviour for their children, family and community if they decide to leave the relationship. There may also be a need for encouragement to arrive at a theological understanding that permits them to see their partner is not mired in sin, but has chosen a difficult and costly response to a complex problem.

***Insight 6: Families and friends of transfolk have complex reactions.***

Literature (Bischoff et al 2011, Chase 2011, Faith 2001 and Iantaffi and Bockting 2011) and all the narratives show that a gender journey is difficult for family and friends. There is likely to be a grieving process (Norwood 2012:84) as they adjust to the changes that their family member or friends makes. The person they knew and loved has gone; yet someone with the same memories and shared experiences has taken their place. Families may also struggle to accept this new person because of religious beliefs or because they have little understanding about what has happened. They may have difficulty in understanding why the person felt the need to transition, and blame them consciously or unconsciously for disrupting existing relationships. There may be blame, recrimination, confusion, divided loyalties and unease.

Many of these dynamics may also be played out in Church families. Congregants may have problems accepting the “new” congregant and feel they want to mourn the old. They may feel they have divided loyalties if a marital relationship ends. They may believe that being transgendered is

sinful and may struggle to accept someone such as N's congregation who were unhappy when she chose (sic) to become a lesbian after transition.

In these examples, pastoral input may be required in order to help folk come to terms with their own reactions to a loved one's gender journey. Pastoral input may help to clarify concerns, reflect on reactions or refer to appropriate support services. Like F's new minister, pastoral workers may have to lay groundwork with a congregation in order to be able to welcome folk who are Trans.

***Insight 7: GRS is a tool for constructing identity and not an end in itself.***

It is easy to assume the gender journey ends when someone has transitioned to their new physical identity. Devor (2004) and the narratives both indicate this is not the case. Both show that the psychological and spiritual aspects of the gender journey continue long after transition<sup>26</sup>. If used, GRS is a tool to establish an identity that has already been claimed. While GRS or other medical procedures are an important step, they should be not seen as the only rite of passage.

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<sup>26</sup> If, indeed, GRS happens at all. Not all transfolk in the sample undertook medical treatment or surgery but constructed their identity in other ways.



The transcripts made clear that many of the interviewees had lived from an early age with feelings of abnormality, shame and guilt. They had learned to hide from themselves and others. Several spoke of mental health issues they blamed on the pressure of trying to live heteronormatively. These matters are unlikely to be cured by medical interventions or resolved overnight. The pastoral worker may find themselves supporting someone who has transitioned physically years before they heal spiritually and psychologically.

I believe this accounts for the split narrative observed in several of the transcripts (L, K and N). These transcripts showed in the early years after transition the newly emerged Trans person began to move away from the friendships, support networks and pastoral relationships that were important to them in their gender journey. They may abruptly sever relationships. Their previous lives became a closed file. Several of the interviewees (L, K and N) refused to acknowledge their former names. N describes her first few years after surgery as an “attempt to obliterate the male in her”.

This can be deeply upsetting for those working pastorally with transfolk. It may leave them wondering what they did wrong or feeling that they have been discarded because they are no longer needed. The pastoral worker needs to see this as a positive step in the gender journey. The energy that was directed into transitioning can now be directed into creating a new life. With this new life comes new relationships and new opportunities. If this new life is to be embraced, it may be necessary to leave part of the old and often painful life behind. This may include people who have shared deeply in their lives prior to transition.

Pastoral workers may encounter transfolk who are living this split narrative. They may be the only person who is aware the person who has just joined their church had a different natal gender in the past. The transperson is unlikely to wish their history to be known to the wider community. Care must be taken to ensure that the person's confidentiality is respected.

The narratives also show after several years there can be a re-integration of both pre and post identity (E, G and N). The transperson begins to merge the pre and post transition narratives of their lives into a coherent whole. This seems to come as part of a healing process and may take several years to achieve.

***Insight 8: There is a difference between celebration and toleration.***

The interviewees who were in mainstream churches reported they were expected to moderate their behaviour and appearance to avoid causing offence to others. Often their acceptance was conditional on not drawing attention to themselves. There was a silence and lack of interest in any specific insight or the gifts that they might be able to bring.

While this is clearly much better than condemnation; it is not the most nurturing environment for people who have spent most of their lives hiding. While the polite ignoring of difference may initially lead to less friction, it also invalidates. It also leaves difference as a permanent unresolved issue on the margins of the congregation's awareness.

Celebration includes talking about what is unique about people and their lives. It includes referring to and addressing their specific concerns and life experience as part of worship and church life. It involves discussion of difference, perhaps being uncomfortable with it and dealing with it honestly. In the specific case of transfolk, it involves validating the life experiences through providing rites of passage for people with a radically different life experience.

Another aspect of celebration is the open acknowledgement of the gifts, insights and experiences that are brought into Christian service. Interviewees felt able to stay in their existing church homes when they were allowed to use their gifts and skills. Churches seeking to reintegrate an existing member who has changed identity need to allow them to retain their ministry. Churches looking to attract transfolk need to allow equal access to all areas of ministry available to other congregation members. This equal access to ministry is a powerful symbol of equality and acceptance.

***Insight 9: Clergy have tremendous power to hurt or heal.***

The narratives show the behaviour of clergy was key to whether transfolk felt that they were welcome in congregations. Some narratives show clergy at their worst. In some cases clergy took the initiative and directly asked the person to leave (B), or created an environment that was unwelcoming and hostile so that the person would eventually become disheartened and leave (F and H).

The transcripts also show clergy at their best. Many clergy were shown to have enormous power to heal. The transcripts show several healing roles clergy played:

- i) *Advocate*. In her transcript, N tells how a young curate was able to support and encourage her mother to embrace N as a daughter. N also experienced another type of advocacy when her bishop made her an unconditional offer of employment after ordination because he recognised that she would have struggled to find a parish. He also encouraged her application to commence ordination training by showing her a

confidential document that reassured her that she would be taken seriously.

- ii) *Facilitator and educator.* Prior to the arrival of F and her wife, their new minister did intentional work with the congregation to make sure they would feel welcome after their previous traumatic church experience.
- iii) *As a pastoral worker.* L describes her minister as a wonderful man. He had actively supported her in her journey. An example of this was that he was present in her home at the time of the interview to ensure that L was able to debrief to him if she was upset by the interview.

All of these roles show a deliberate and planned response. I believe the first step in formulating a response needs to be honest self-assessment. The pastoral worker needs to be honest about the doubts and fears they have about transfolk and work to resolve them. Even those who believe that they have no issue with transfolk may find lingering unease as the account from (N) shows. This unease may be theological in nature, or it may be about practical concerns such as the use of pronouns or the use of toilet facilities.

There may be fears other congregants will leave if this person is encouraged and welcomed.

I believe if this unease cannot be resolved satisfactorily, pastoral workers should have the courage and the kindness to own these feelings. If this unease is likely to create an unwelcoming or unsafe environment, it may be more positive to signpost to another church. While this is not desirable or encouraged as a first response, it does limit the spiritual violence done to someone who is otherwise left without support in a potentially hostile and degrading spiritual environment.

A second step may be doing the same intentional work with church leadership and/or other pastoral staff. They may also have reservations that hinder them being able to offer an honest welcome. They may need additional learning so they have a clear understanding of the types of words and actions that are required to allow transfolk to find a safe spiritual home in their community.

***Insight 10: Our language and understandings are often inadequate.***

The literature review shows that the Church has often mistakenly framed its response to transfolk by conflating sexual orientation and gender identity. There is a concern that a seemingly heterosexual relationship between a transwomen or transmen with a person of the (now) opposite gender could be a Trojan Horse for gay marriage. This train of thought starts with O'Donovan (1982), and is carried into the recent present by the Evangelical Alliance's *Transsexuality* and the Anglican *Some Issues in Human Sexuality*.

It is important to separate these issues. Gender identity (how we describe our own gender) and sexual orientation (who we are attracted to sexually and emotionally) are independent of each other. While both issues do create sexual minorities, they are not the same issue or the same minorities.



We do not have the concepts and terms to describe the complexities that arise when considering transfolk and their sexual/emotional relationships. Language around sexual orientation and transfolk is inadequate and incomplete. While it is possible to remain bisexual (orientated to both genders), all other sexual orientations necessitate a fixed gender point as a reference. When this reference point changes, our current understandings of sexual orientation tell us that there has been a change in sexual orientation even if the same relationship continues. An example of this is that G moved from being a lesbian to a heterosexual transman while remaining in the same relationship<sup>27</sup>. This arbitrary reclassification of an existing relationship feels inauthentic and inadequate. It also makes the false assumption that the transperson fully inhabited their natal gender without any atypical experience of it.

If we accept that transfolk do not experience their natal gender as cisfolk experience their gender, then we must accept that knowingly or unknowingly transfolk occupy a different gender space before coming out. We do not have the language or concepts to describe this space. Without

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<sup>27</sup> G did not use any terms such as heterosexual or lesbian but accepted them when they were offered by me.

being able to name this space we have no way to classify the sexual orientation of previous relationships.

This does not even take into account the experiences of gender queer or transfolk who inhabit both male and female gender spaces in different parts of their lives. Does F become a lesbian when she is consciously female and does she become heterosexual when she is consciously male? At the moment we have no words to adequately convey or describe these situations except the all-purpose label of gender queer.

This can lead the pastoral worker to feeling completely confused and reduced to using clumsy words that misrepresent the situation. Pastorally it is important to allow folk to self-identify and not to attempt to enforce simplistic and limited understandings onto complex situations because we do not have the language or concepts to adequately describe them.

***Insight 11: It is not possible to predict sexual orientation.***

The narratives show that it is not possible to predict how transfolk may identify their sexual orientation once they have completed their gender journey. In the interview sample, only four folk (B, C, G and N) retained their original sexual orientation to a specific gender while four others (D, E, H and K) changed their orientation. This means a pastoral worker cannot make assumptions about the future sexual orientation of a transperson based on their previous life story. This issue is raised because a pastoral worker may make assumptions when speaking about future life plans.

As a pastoral worker this may also be confusing and challenging. Our need to name may drive us to attempt to categorise people in ways that simply do not work when working with people with an emerging gender identity.

***Insight 12: Testimony is a powerful and healing tool***

There was a sense of joy and liberation as I interviewed the interviewees. All of them were very eager to tell their life stories. As an interviewer I was sometimes so profoundly affected by these interviews I needed to sit and

reflect on the truths that I had been told before I could travel home. I acknowledge I have been profoundly changed by the stories I have been privileged to hear.

As I observed in the beginning of Chapter 3, these stories should be interpreted as parables. They contain deep truth about the way God has worked in the lives of the interviewees. After hearing these stories it would be hard to dismiss the raw holiness they contain.

I believe it is no accident that the negative church responses by O'Donovan, the Anglican Church and the Evangelical Alliance reports do not contain positive voices of the people that they wish to condemn.<sup>28</sup> By silencing the voices of transfolk, the truth that is inherent in their stories can be obscured and denied. The writers of these reports can then retain their own preoccupations which have nothing to do with the lives of transfolk. By allowing transfolk to tell their stories of joy and struggle we hear their stories of faith and resilience. We do not hear arguments about gay

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<sup>28</sup> *Some Issues in Human Sexuality* contains a lone positive quote in its "framing section amongst quotations from Parakaleo ministries. *The Pilling Report* did consult transfolk and this is discussed in Chapter 2. Transsexuality shows no evidence of any form of consultation.

marriage or gnosticism, but how faith in God saved them when all else was falling apart.

These stories can serve several pastoral functions. Firstly, they help to construct a personal narrative. This may help transfolk to make sense of all that has happened. Many of the interviewees had never sat and told their stories in one sitting before. They were often stunned when they put all the pieces of their life together.

Secondly, such testimony serves to educate others. The narratives are educative without analysis and interpretation. Transfolk telling their stories to cisfolk allows them to gain insight into the lives of those who struggle with something that they take for granted. It throws into sharp relief cisgender assumptions and unthoughtful prejudices about gender and transgender.

Thirdly, it allows the transperson to validate their own experience after years of silence. The very act of telling their stories and being heard was immensely empowering and validating for the interviewees. This is particularly so if these are stories told after years of silence.

***Insight 13: An active forgiveness must be sought.***

Forgiveness was one of the surprising themes of the interviews. Most of the interviewees were not bitter about the difficult situations they had survived. They remained remarkably forgiving of those who had hurt them. They also frequently tried to reconcile with people they believe they had hurt.

Pastoral writers have several perspectives on forgiveness that may be helpful to consider. Komesaroff, Kath and James (2011) note that binaries of perpetrator and victim, and good and evil are not conducive to healing (2011:236). They allow room for recrimination and bitterness to remain. Healing begins when wounded parties move to a place that encompasses

the perspectives of all involved. They note that this process often involves pain, learning and a shared sense of vulnerability and loss.

The transcripts provide several examples of this. K spoke about the guilt she experienced when she realised that she would be taking her children's father away by transitioning. She also deeply regretted her emotional withdrawal from her family while she struggled with her gender dysphoria. She also spoke of her guilt about the dissolution of her relationship because her wife "didn't want to be a lesbian". In a similar way H also recounted the strained relationship created by her increasing androgyny that finally resulted in the breakdown of her marriage.

In both cases the interviewees were able to forgive themselves by understanding that they were people who had struggled with gender dysphoria and this had created an impossible situation for everyone concerned. They did not assign blame to themselves or to the reactions of their families but spoke of a difficult situation, recognising its sadness, brokenness and pain. Both have managed to negotiate a relationship based

in friendship with their former spouses and K has come to a rapprochement with her children.

In contrast Schweitzer (2010) offers a cautionary note on the wholesale embrace of forgiveness. He argues while there is ample evidence forgiveness is a healthy psychological tool to release anger, rejection and bitterness, it sets up a forced expectation of forgiveness for someone not ready to extend it. Also a forgiver could experience further hurt if forgiveness is not acknowledged or rejected. This is evident in the narratives. While it may be psychologically healthy for F to forgive the year-long abusive treatment she and her wife endured in their former church, it is unlikely to change the opinions or behaviour of the congregation or her former minister. Her act of forgiveness is one sided and incomplete because there is no recognition of the injustice that had been done by the perpetrators.



Schweitzer (2010:832) also maintains forgiveness is something we participate in rather than do. In her narrative, L speaks about being completely estranged from the majority of her family and their refusal to acknowledge her. The family's refusal precludes her participation in a forgiveness process. Any attempt on her part to seek forgiveness for the past is likely to result in experiencing further pain by either being rejected or ignored.

John Roth (2007) offers another helpful pastoral perspective. He explores the Mennonite perspective of right remembering – a commitment to remembering accurately what has happened, rethinking perspectives on events and looking to how this can enhance Christian discipleship through forgiveness. It may be pastorally more helpful to encourage L to look at her family situation objectively and rethink her own part in it. By taking into account her struggles and attempts to remain in relationship with her family, she can conclude that she is not inherently evil. She has attempted to remain in the relationship and has tried to make amends for her own contribution to the situation. Given that there is no likelihood of

reconciliation or restitution, it may be helpful to urge her to apply these lessons to other relationships that have been strained.

It is important to realise that there may be no neat solution. Reconciliation needs both parties to be actively involved. That may not be a viable option in all pastoral situations with transfolk.

## **Concluding comments on this chapter**

The narratives throw light on some difficult and unique pastoral situations.

The observations contained in this chapter are not an exhaustive list of “pastoral issues” but the most obvious fruit of the narratives. I have deliberately not given a series of “dos and don’ts”. Instead, I have tried to highlight pastoral implications derived from the narratives.

There are common themes that run through this chapter. The first is the need to suspend judgment. Secondly, there are no easy answers. Thirdly, some of what may be heard is uncomfortably challenging. Fourthly, pastoral workers may have to regretfully realise their role is to wish the now strong traveller Godspeed. While pastoral work with transfolk may sometimes feel difficult and challenging, it is a privileged opportunity to witness God’s co-creative redemption at work in the most profound way.

## **CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION.**

### **Restatement of research intention.**

The initial intention of the research was to Interview transfolk about their experiences of gender within the Church. My initial idea was to compare their natal and Trans experiences to see how women and men are treated differently in churches. This assumed that they had occupied both gender spaces within Christianity.

Very early in the project, I realised that the initial assumption on which the research was based was incorrect. Transfolk occupy a place of gender dysphoria prior to beginning their gender journey and gender congruence at the end of a successful gender journey. These places do not necessarily correspond to male and female in British church culture. Therefore it was impossible to answer my initial research intention.

This caused the research to move into a different direction. The initial question “tell me about yourself” was designed to be an icebreaker. As the research shifted it became the primary question with most interviewees using about 70% of the interview time answering this question with a long biographical description. The biographical stories were powerful stories of faith, courage and integrity. I began to see them as parables showing how God works in the world. The research questions evolved into

a) What are the experiences of transfolk in UK churches?

a) What theological, biblical and pastoral insights can these experiences bring when they are used as resources for theological reflection?

## What answers did I find?

After analysing the 12 interviews I found the following answers to the research questions:

- The UK Church is having a different conversation about transfolk than transfolk have about themselves. The Church has been defensive about perceived threats to its theological comfort zone. Transfolk have particularly threatened the Church's prerogative to define marriage as heteronormative. In response to this threat, the Church has looked for agreement selectively and internally. By the Anglican Church's own admission in its 2013 Pilling Report (2013:6) this has led to a place where mission is seriously impeded by the Church's myopia on gender and sexual minorities.
- The lives of transfolk show that the attempts to regulate, define, and present gender as a simple matter are misguided. Exploring the richness of atypical experience will help the UK Church come to terms with the need to live with ambiguity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Trans lives demonstrate that the process of living this ambiguity can be difficult and painful but potentially spiritually transformative.
- There is a vast difference between celebration and toleration of difference within the UK Church. When toleration downplays

difference, the Church renders disadvantaged groups and minorities invisible. If minorities are invisible, their unique perspectives are lost to the wider Church. The research showed that even when transfolk in mainstream congregations play an active part in their communities of faith, their unique experiences and insights are currently invisible. They are careful to micromanage their behaviour so that they do not draw attention to themselves. This also means the least privileged disproportionately bear the cost of maintaining a theological gender system that does not benefit them.

- The active and vocal persecution of the LGB community by parts of the Church has led transfolk to assume that they would be equally persecuted. If they have made this assumption, it is logical to assume other sexual minorities will have made the same assumption. They are likely to be equally disengaged, disenchanted and hesitant to reveal themselves even if they are in the midst of our faith communities.
- There is a gulf between the pronouncements of hierarchies within the Church and the lived experiences of faith communities. Despite a series of condemning Anglican reports, many transfolk have found welcome in Anglican congregations and several have had their

clerical vocations honoured. This disconnection between ecclesiastical rhetoric and lived experience creates a sense of dislocation and dishonesty.

- The Church has created a problem for itself because it does not attempt to look outside its own concerns or listen to those who have experience on this issue. The Church did not listen and reflect theologically on information that transfolk and the professionals working with them could have given it. Instead the Church has written self-serving reports that have fitted its own theological and political agendas and ignored facts when they got in the way.
- Congregations are uncertain about how to deal with the complexities of transfolk and are looking for clergy to model behaviour. Unless there are mitigating factors such as clerical unpopularity, congregations follow the lead of clergy.
- Inspiration for new ways of looking at gender and difference already exist within the Bible.

The research found the answers to the implied secondary research question:



*What are the perspectives and/or understandings from this thesis that can benefit Christian transfolk and hence honour the methodologies of Feminist Participatory Research and Indigenous Knowledge?*

- Transfolk often begin to experience gender dysphoria at an extremely early age. They learn to hide their feelings and behaviours even when they do not understand why. This creates immense psychological stress and patterns of behaviour that may need both pastoral support and professional input to overcome.
- Adolescence is a particularly difficult time for young transfolk. Young transfolk may be invisible because they may be indulging in coping and compensating behaviours to hide their gender dysphoria from themselves and others.
- Pastoral care needs created by an individual's gender journey are wider than the needs of that individual. Family and friends experience a complex set of feelings that may involve grief, anger, fear, confusion, betrayal and loss. There may be many unresolved issues related to the loved one's gender struggles prior to coming out. Of particular concern are partners who elect to remain in relationships. They have the difficulty of not only renegotiating their

primary relationship but they also have to reassess their own gender identity and sexual orientation in light of their partner's gender journey.

- Medical intervention and GRS are tools to establish an identity that has already been claimed. The real work of healing and wholeness often takes several years after medical intervention has ended.
- The principal motive for undertaking a gender journey is to find peace and a sense of integrity. Those who undertake it are transformed spiritually. They often move from a place of theological rigidity to a place of theological expansiveness. Transfolk can therefore model the creative possibilities of faith development that can be a resource for the whole Church.

## **What concepts can I draw from the answers I found?**

***An identity needs to be socially constructed before it can be widely inhabited.***

The data showed a pattern where age seemed to dictate the life choices of the interviewees prior to coming out as Trans. Those over 55 lived heteronormative lives before embarking on their gender journey; folk between 55 and 30 normally came out as gay or lesbian first; while folk under 30 simply came out as Trans. While they are all different ages, all the interviewees begin to come out from the mid 1990's onwards. I believe the reason for this is that the Trans identity came into popular consciousness sometime in the mid-90's. Without an identity to claim, the older transfolk had feelings but did not have any identity that matched their feelings. Without an identity to claim they took the path of least resistance and stayed living heteronormative lives while they struggled with their feelings.

Middle aged transfolk knew that they were a sexual minority and claimed the closest approximate to what they felt – even when it was not an exact fit. They therefore came out as gay or lesbian until a more meaningful identity came to their awareness and they then claimed it. Younger transfolk did not have to wait for an identity so they claimed it from the first and have only inhabited that identity.

Several of the interviewees mentioned the internet and media as places where they gained the knowledge to claim a Trans identity. They used the internet to experiment with their new identities and gain admission to networks of similar individuals who had gathered around this newly formed Trans identity.

This raises a question: how many other feelings are there waiting to coalesce into an identity? The Church may have to engage with many new and diverse ways that humans see themselves in an increasingly media rich and complex world.

***The mechanisms of power are invisible and self-perpetuating.***

The interviewees were not gender rebels. They did not want to smash heteronormative privilege and dismantle binary gender. They simply wanted a place where they could worship and be accepted as folk of faith. They wanted to live out their callings within the Church. As a result they were extraordinarily careful to micromanage their behaviour to ensure that they were welcomed. Those who wanted to celebrate their unique identity attended a church most Sundays and had a separate space where they came together to celebrate their own identities. In this way they did not disrupt or challenge the rest of their congregations. Only one interviewee had joined a specifically LGBT Church.

This self-regulation to gain acceptance was self-imposed and unexamined by the interviewees. It was a response to an invisible and unconscious imperative that says to gain acceptance you must conform as much as possible in order not to alienate others. Toleration could be extended to difference provided it was not disruptive difference.

This leads me to conclude that the Church's mechanisms of power will not be openly challenged by individuals who have found even a conditional place within it. It can only be challenged by Trans prophets who are willing to stand outside the mechanisms of power and lose the associated privileges, or by the collective voice of groups of Trans individuals who are empowered by solidarity to find their collective voice. A third avenue is that of cisgendered advocates who can stand alongside transfolk and speak from their place of cisgender privilege.

***Denial of society's new realities creates a distorted intellectual space.***

Reading the reports by the Evangelical Alliance and the Church of England is a frustrating experience. The impression they leave is that the authors were prepared to go to any lengths to prove their predetermined viewpoints. The reports come to conclusions and then abruptly abandon them, rely on documents over 30 years old, proof text other sources to distort their meaning, use unpublished materials that cannot be verified and find obscure, alternate views to cast doubt on the consensus of the counselling and psychiatric professions.

The collective denial apparent in the abovementioned documents creates a distorted intellectual atmosphere. Instead of the use of current published peer reviewed literature and advice from professional bodies, academic rigour has been subordinated to theological opinion. This creates a disconnected Church that does not have the intellectual resources nor cultural understandings to move beyond a self-created intellectual subculture to address the needs of the society it claims to serve.

***Forgiveness is both self-preservation and an indication of wholeness.***

The narratives describe several types of forgiveness. The first type of forgiveness is forgiveness of self. The interviewees found that they had to forgive themselves before they were able to move beyond the regrets and anguishes of their former lives, and embrace the opportunities their gender journeys had opened up for them. The second type of forgiveness required the interviewees to forgive others for the difficult things that had happened to them. In many cases this forgiveness became an everyday practice. Some of the interviewees were confronted almost every day by

people who wittingly or unwittingly treated them differently because they were identifiably Trans. The third type of forgiveness the interviewees practiced was their active efforts to apologise, atone for and renew relationships that had been damaged by their gender journey.

This practice of forgiveness was a method of self-preservation.

Interviewees recognised that if they were weighed down with the bitterness of the past or reacted to difficult situations that were regular parts of their lives, they would be perpetually angry. They recognised that this was self-damaging and self-harming and they had decided not to indulge in anger.

This practice of forgiveness was also an indicator that shows the interviewees had reached a place of spiritual and mental health and empowerment that meant that they were in the position to forgive and let go of the past. This contrasted strongly with the difficult and unhappy lives that had characterised their time before they began their gender journey.



## **Agenda for further research.**

As stated repeatedly throughout this thesis, this is almost an entirely unexplored area and it is my hope that the information contained in this thesis is quickly built upon. There is almost no area in this field that does not need a great deal more research. I believe that some of the priority areas are:

- A similar project done with transfolk of other faiths and ethnicities.
- An exploration of transfolk with no faith looking at the spiritual/emotional coping mechanisms they use instead of a professed faith.
- The emotional and spiritual impact of the gender journey on partners who remain in a relationship after transition.
- The emotional and spiritual impact of the gender journey on partners who leave a relationship after their partners have transitioned.
- The contributing factors that influence whether or not the children of transfolk accept or reject their parents after transition.
- Why many conservative churches can accept a medical model where they do not attach blame to transfolk and why there are no analogous models for LGB folk.

- The impact of the negative statements on sexual minorities within the Church and also how these edicts are translated, enacted or ignored in local churches.
- An exploration of resourcing that congregations would find helpful to enable them to integrate sexual minorities in the Church in a celebratory way.
- An exploration of the split narrative of identity in the early years after transition and what pastoral or spiritual resources are needed to help transfolk integrate their identities.

## **Final thoughts.**

In countless instances, biblical prophets came from the barren, dangerous and wild places with startling truths that disrupted the comfortable assumptions of a complacent majority. They called for people to change their hearts and minds in the light of revelation and to be kinder, more just and more compassionate.

The Church still needs its prophets. In our comfortable UK church culture, prophets are unlikely to burst forth from the moors or the wild places that remain. The wilderness that transformed ordinary people into prophets in biblical times has been replaced in our own times by the wilderness of the soul. The 21st century struggles and tribulations that bring certain folk to a special revelatory relationship with God are often not physical but spiritual. They are no less transformative for that.

In this project, I have had the opportunity to meet unnamed, hidden and often voiceless prophets. They are people who have returned from the wilderness spiritually transformed by their unique and often difficult experiences. If we would only listen to them, they could be voices challenging the Church to abandon its old assumptions and easy illusions about gender. And like all prophets that God sends us, we ignore them at our peril.

## **APPENDIX 1: SELF-REFLEXIVE PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH (PAR) FRAMEWORK.**

*This appendix is an assessment of my intersecting identities (e.g. race/ethnicity, gender identity and expression, etc.) as they relate to the privilege and oppression and power as a researcher on this project.*

I am a white, middle-aged, middle class male. I am also a gay man in a long standing relationship. This relationship has become as socially acceptable as being a married heterosexual man in the spheres of society I inhabit.

I am also a Christian in the United Reformed Church (URC) which is a mainstream Protestant denomination. This is the only place I suffer disadvantage. I am aware that the URC has diverse opinions of gay and lesbian folk and some of them are negative. This is experienced at a distance without direct discrimination. It mainly manifests itself as an awareness that this limits my employment opportunities for ministry within congregations on the conservative end of the URC.

I am aware that I occupy a privileged place in society that is only in a small way mitigated by my sexual orientation.

I am also a minister which means that I could be perceived as an authority figure and a reminder of negative experiences of Christianity for some transfolk. While I tend to see my role as a pastoral presence and an ally to transfolk, I am aware that many may not perceive me in this light.

I also see myself as a pastoral theologian who has a stake in dismantling the prevailing ethos and practice of heteronormativity within the Church.

**Clearly articulate a theory on gender and determine how this theory informs methodological choices.**

Gender is how we construct a social meaning from the roles needed for reproductive sex. For many people in our society these reproductive sexual roles are irrelevant because they do not engage in sex for reproduction.

While there is a differentiation between most male and female bodies, there is nothing essentialist about the gender expressions we have created. Our society has put these essentialist notions in place to regulate and contain women's reproductive capacity and inferior social position. They are also in place to force gender conformity in men who otherwise may wish to dissent from patriarchal identities and hence threaten heteropatriarchy.

This theory has affected my methodology in the following ways:

- I did not make assumptions that people transitioned from one "side" of gender to the "other" or that there was any desirability for them to do so. Therefore my questions didn't focus on the transition from one gender to the other but the journey people made from one identity to another.
- It also meant that I was highly suspicious of literature that embraced essentialist ideas of gender such as the writings of Mary Daly and Janet Raymond. This also meant that I viewed the reports of the Church of England, O Donovan and the Evangelical Alliance

with their championing of God-given, essentialist roles for men and women with scepticism.

### **Reflect on researcher positionality related to transgender concerns**

I have approached the work from my position as a pastor. It is not my intention to create a new theory of gender or transgender. I am not particularly interested in creating abstract theological concepts for academics to read. While this is intended to be an academic piece of work, this is a pastor writing academically and not an academic writing pastorally.

Because I am primarily a pastor I am interested in researching the issue from a pastoral perspective. I have the following research concerns:

- What has allowed my interviewees to make the perilous journeys they have undertaken?
- What have been the pastoral issues that I and others who work with transfolk need to be aware of as we are working with them?



- What insights do they have to share that can help other transfolk in their own journeys?
- How can we help cisfolk to appreciate both the integrity and courage of these people and humbly learn from them?
- How can the insights from this thesis help people in entrenched positions regarding gender gain fresh insights that will allow them to move from the becalmed place they find themselves in if they do they wish to move onwards?

**Determine the community needs by working collaboratively with transgender people and communities.**

From the beginning this project has had a steering group of transfolk who have informed both methodology and the concerns of the project.

**Identify the opportunities for advocacy associated with a PAR study**

This project carries an enormous capacity for advocacy. This work will be offered to the URC to help them in their deliberations about Human Sexuality. It is also intended that papers will be offered in networks such

as Greenbelt and other suitable Christian events where it may help people gain insights into how to create more safe spaces ( I recognise that there are already safe spaces) within the Church. I hope this project will also help people to celebrate transfolk and the gifts they bring in their churches.

This project also attempts to be an opportunity for advocacy by allowing cisgender Christians to HEAR the stories of the lives of transfolk of faith and to contextualize them as sacred stories about how God works in the lives of transfolk.

Knowledge of this project amongst church networks already brings questions from clergy who wish to be allies but are not sure how. At other times clergy have contacted me for advice about how to work pastorally with transfolk within their congregations or who have come to them for help. The learning I have gained from this project is already being used to advocate on behalf of transfolk in the Church.

The project also attempts to provide encouragement to those who are wrestling with their atypical gender feelings by providing them with true stories of faith and resilience from other transfolk.

**Work with a research team to establish expectations and accountability related to researcher privileges, assumptions and biases.**

I have worked with a small steering group of transfolk who have critiqued my work and also helped me with methodology. For example they broadened my initial definition of Trans and they also suggested changes to the methodology to ensure that privacy was respected.

**Identify how your personal liberation is connected with the liberation of informants and participants with whom you work.**

As a gay man I am interested in the liberation of other sexual minorities and it is my belief that the more alternate discourses on gender and sexuality that are produced, the more heteronormativity is disproved as the normal experience of all people.

By hearing and documenting other discourses, I believe I help to break down the rigid assumptions about gender and sexuality that oppress me and so many other people. This is particularly true within the Church: dissenting voices are still rarely heard in the conversation about gender and sexuality.

I also wanted to be liberated as a Christian. I do not want the Church to be continually mired in debates about gender and sexuality. I believe that this is impairing the ability of the Church to become missiological in my own society and is eroding its credibility. By extension this is also my credibility.

Finally as a friend and ally, I want to be in an environment where I can welcome transfolk into safe and celebratory places. I also firmly believe that unless I am part of the solution to bring this about I am part of the problem that allows this situation to continue.

## **APPENDIX 2: STATEMENTS FROM PROFESSIONAL BODIES ON REPARATIVE THERAPIES**

### ***<sup>1</sup> The British Psychological Society – Dec 2012***

The British Psychological Society (BPS) opposes any psychological, psychotherapeutic or counselling treatments or interventions (often referred to as 'reparative' or 'conversion' therapies) that view same sex sexual orientations (including lesbian, gay, bisexual and all other non-heterosexual sexual orientations) as pathological. The BPS believes that people of all genders and identities should be regarded as equal members of society and protected from potentially damaging therapies and pathologising.

### ***British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy – Oct 2012***

BACP opposes any psychological treatment such as 'reparative' or 'conversion' therapy which is based upon the assumption that homosexuality is a mental disorder, or based on the premise that the client/patient should change his/her sexuality. BACP believes that socially inclusive, non-judgmental attitudes to people who identify across the

diverse range of human sexualities will have positive consequences for those individuals, as well as for the wider society in which they live. There is no scientific, rational or ethical reason to treat people who identify within a range of human sexualities any differently from those who identify solely as heterosexual.

***British Psychoanalytic Council – 2011***

The British Psychoanalytic Council opposes discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. It does not accept that a homosexual orientation is evidence of disturbance of the mind or in development. In psychoanalytic psychotherapy, it is the quality of people's relationships which are explored, whether they are heterosexual or homosexual.

***UK Council for Psychotherapy - Feb 2010***

UKCP does not consider homosexuality or bisexuality, or transsexual and transgendered states to be pathologies, mental disorders or indicative of developmental arrest. These are not symptoms to be treated by psychotherapists, in the sense of attempting to change or remove them. No responsible psychotherapist will attempt to 'convert' a client from homosexuality to heterosexuality ('reparative' therapy).

## APPENDIX 3: CORRELATIONS BETWEEN DEVOR (2004) AND THE LIFE STAGES OBSERVED IN THE TRANSCFAITH PROJECT.

<b>Categories used in Life Narratives of Transfaith project</b>	<b>Corresponding Stages in the Devor 14 Stage Model</b>	<b>Some characteristics from Devor 14 Stage Model</b>	<b>Some actions from the Devor 14 Stage Model</b>
<i>Childhood to Adolescence</i>	<i>Abiding Anxiety</i>	<i>Unfocussed gender and sex discomfort.</i>	<i>Preference for other gender activities and companionship.</i>
<i>Adolescence to Coming Out</i>	<i>Identity Confusion About Originally Assigned Gender and Sex</i>	<i>First doubts about suitability of originally assigned gender and sex.</i>	<i>Reactive gender and sex conforming activities.</i>
	<i>Identity Comparisons About Originally Assigned Gender and Sex</i>	<i>Seeking and weighing alternative gender identities.</i>	<i>Experimenting with alternative gender consistent identities.</i>
	<i>Discovery of Transsexualism or Transgenderism</i>	<i>Learning that transsexualism or transgenderism exists.</i>	<i>Accidental contact with information about transsexualism or transgenderism</i>
	<i>Identity Confusion About Transsexualism or Transgenderism</i>	<i>First doubts about the authenticity of own transsexualism or transgenderism.</i>	<i>Seeking more information about transsexualism or transgenderism.</i>
<i>Coming Out to Transition</i>	<i>Identity Comparison About Transsexualism or Transgenderism</i>	<i>Testing transsexual or transgender identity using transsexual or transgender reference group</i>	<i>Start to disidentify with originally assigned sex and gender. Start to identify as transsexed or transgender.</i>
<i>Coming Out to Transition</i>	<i>Tolerance of Transsexual</i>	<i>Identify as probably</i>	<i>Increasingly dis- identify as</i>



	<i>or Transgender Identity</i>	<i>Transsexual or transgender.</i>	<i>originally assigned gender and sex.</i>
<i>Coming Out to Transition</i>	<i>Delay Before Acceptance of Transsexual or Transgender Identity</i>	<i>Waiting for changed Circumstances. Looking for confirmation of transsexual or transgender identity.</i>	<i>Seeking more information about transsexualism or transgenderism. Reality testing in intimate relationships and against further information about transsexualism or transgenderism.</i>
	<i>Acceptance of Transsexual or Transgender Identity Delay Before Transition</i>	<i>Transsexual or transgender identity established Transsexual identity deepens. Final disidentity as original gender and sex.</i>	<i>Tell others about transsexual or transgender identity. Anticipatory socialization. Learning how to do transition. Saving money. Organizing support systems</i>
	<i>Transition</i>	<i>Changing genders and sexes.</i>	<i>Gender and sex reassignments.</i>
<i>Life After Coming Out</i>	<i>Acceptance of Post-Transition</i>	<i>Gender and Sex Identities Post-transition identity established.</i>	<i>Successful post-transition living.</i>
	<i>Integration</i>	<i>Stigma management Transsexuality mostly invisible.</i>	<i>Identity integration.</i>
	<i>Pride Transsexual</i>	<i>Openly transsexed.</i>	<i>Advocacy.</i>

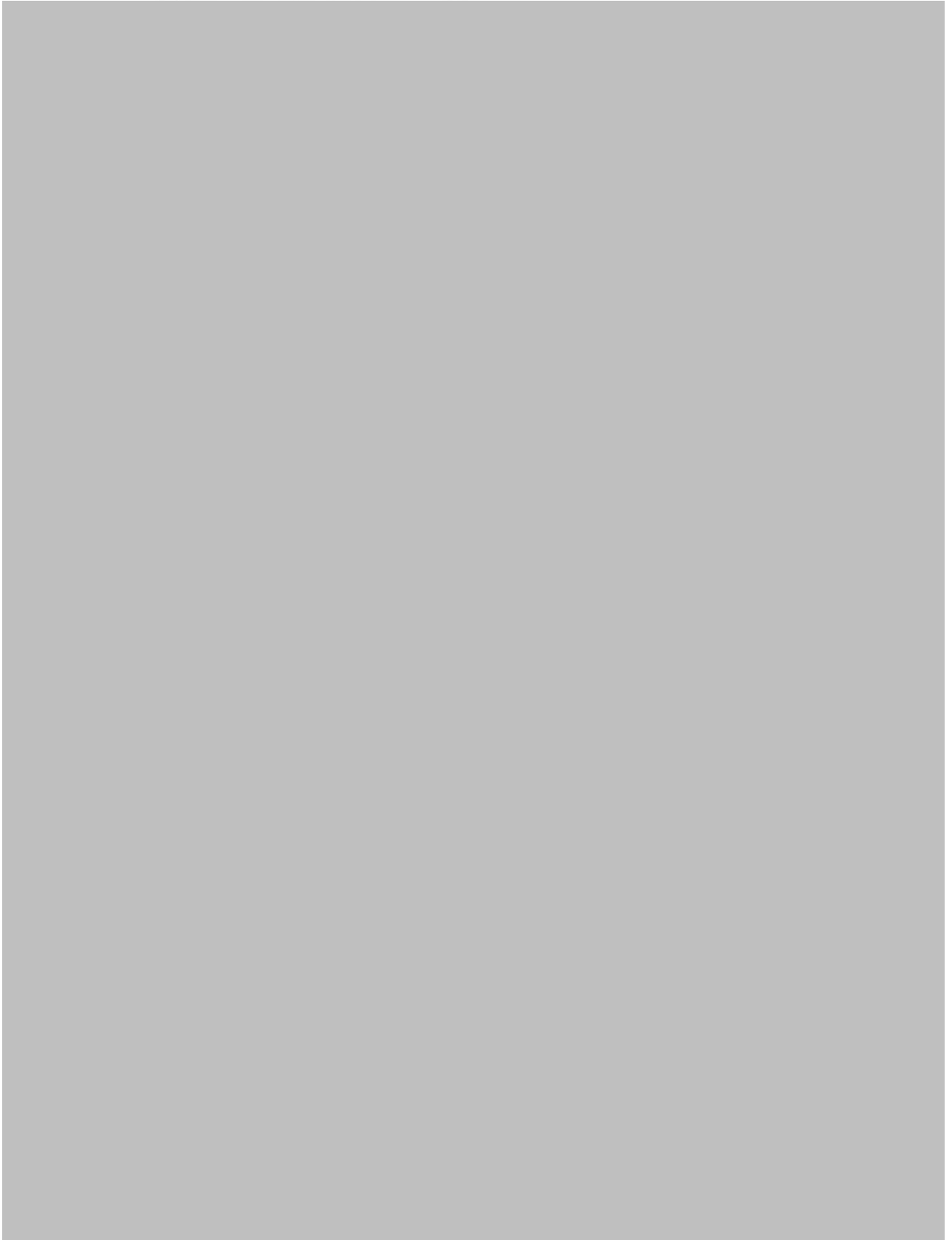
*Figure 1: Correlation between the stages in Life Narratives and the 14 stages of transgendered identity formation (Devor 2004:43).*

## **Comments on the model.**

The model is not a “perfect fit” to the narratives and there are differences between my findings and Devor’s model. Some may be based on national context. An example of this is that free GRS is available on the National Health Service in the UK. Free GRS is not available in all Canadian provinces. This may mean that stage 12 which describes a delay while saving money may not be relevant because UK transfolk do not have to save to finance their own surgery (although they may need to save to have enough money to finance time to recover from surgery).

There are also value judgments inherent in the model that I do not wish to replicate. Not all transfolk who have successfully integrated their identities in stage 14 may wish to participate in transsexual pride or become an advocate for any number of reasons. The model presented by Devor shows that they have not successfully completed their identity transition until they are willing to do so.

## APPENDIX 4: ASSOCIATED FORMS



**UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM APPLICATION FOR ETHICAL  
REVIEW**

OFFICE USE ONLY:  
Application No:  
Date Received:

The first part of the paper discusses the importance of the research and the objectives of the study. It then presents a literature review of the existing research on the topic. The second part of the paper describes the methodology used in the study, including the data collection and analysis techniques. The third part of the paper presents the results of the study, and the fourth part discusses the conclusions and implications of the findings.

The study was conducted using a quantitative research design. Data was collected from a sample of 100 participants using a survey questionnaire. The data was then analyzed using statistical software to determine the relationships between the variables of interest.

The results of the study indicate that there is a significant positive relationship between the variables of interest. This finding is consistent with the previous research in the field. The implications of these findings suggest that the research has practical applications in the field of study.

In conclusion, the study has provided valuable insights into the relationships between the variables of interest. Further research is needed to explore these relationships in more detail and to test the findings in different contexts.















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# Information for potential interviewees of Transfaith project

## **Name of project**

Transfaith: theological reflections from stories of transgendered people.

## **Contact details for researchers**

Rev Chris Dowd

Rev Chris Dowd is the founding Pastor of Journey Metropolitan Community Church which is an LGBT affirming Church. He is also chaplain at Aston University. He has worked extensively in the LGBT community serving five years as a trustee on Birmingham's LGBT Community Trust and is also as chair of Birmingham's LGBT interfaith forum. He is currently working on his doctorate at Birmingham University.

## **Funding source**

This is a self-funded doctoral project.

## **Sponsoring institution**

The Queen's Foundation  
Somerset Rd  
Edgbaston, Birmingham, West Midlands B15 2QH  
0121 454 1527

## **Purpose of the research**

The aim of the research is to explore the experiences of transpeople within the Christian Church.

## **What is involved in participating?**

Participating will involve being interviewed between one or two hours about your experiences as a transgendered person within Christianity. You will also be asked about your thinking of faith and gender. The interview questions are:

Tell me about yourself... *(Life story as much as is comfortable)*

Tell me about your image of God. How do you think your image of God has changed because of your gender variance?

Where are the places in Christianity and particularly in the bible where you see transpeople being included?

Where do you see yourself excluded?

Have you stayed in the Christian Church?

If you are still a regular attendee, why? Or If you have left why have you left?

What have been your experiences of Christianity as a transperson?

How have you experienced the teachings of gender within the Church?



What do you think that transpeople can teach the Church?

How do you reconcile your past identity with who you are now? And how do you explain it in spiritual terms?

### **Benefits and risks**

The benefit is that you as an individual will have your experiences heard and you will be invited to an event where the key findings of the project will be presented. You will also have the option of having your anonymised story put on a website that will be created as part of this project.

The risk is that you may be upset by recounting some of your experiences. A sheet of places where you are able to get help and advice by anything raised in the interview will be made available to you.

### **Terms for withdrawal:**

Participants have a right to withdraw at any time during the interview without prejudice and without providing a reason.

Once the interview is completed you will be provided with a transcript of your interview. You have the right to refuse some or all of the information in the transcript being included in the project. If participants withdraw all or part of their transcript, that part of the transcript will be destroyed and not used in any way in the project.

### **Usage of the data**

The data will be used to create a doctoral thesis on the experiences of transgendered people of faith.

The data will also be used to create freely available resources for transgendered Christians that will be available on the internet.

The data may be used for associated writings such as journal articles, conference presentations or workshops associated with this project.

On the consent form you have the right to choose if your interview is used in all of these ways.

### **Storage, archiving, sharing and re-use of data**

Data will be stored electronically on a computer. The data will not be shared with anyone beyond the researcher, the academic supervisor, the steering group and one or two research students without your express permission.

All interviews will be destroyed ten years after the completion of the project.

### **Strategies for assuring ethical use of the data**

The project has a steering group. All members of the steering group are transgendered people. Their role is to ensure that the project is conducted with the interests of the trans community at its heart.

**Procedures for maintaining confidentiality**

All responses will be anonymised. No personal details will be kept with interview transcripts. Interview transcripts will be numbered 1-20. All transcription work will be undertaken by the researcher. No one else will hear the interviews.

All identifying information such as names, geographical places and dates will be changed to ensure that no one is identifiable from the information.

**How to file a complaint**

**If you are unhappy with the interview for any reason, please tell the interviewer at the time of the interview.**

If you feel that something serious happened within the interview and there is cause for formal complaint please contact Dr Nicola Slee, The Queen's Foundation Somerset Rd, Edgbaston, Birmingham, West Midlands B15 2QH. Phone 0121 454 1527 to receive a complaint form.

## Consent Form for Transfaith Project

*Please tick the appropriate statements*

I have read and understood the information project sheet	
I have been given opportunity to ask questions about the project	
I have agreed to take part in the project	
I understand that I will be audio taped	
I understand that the researcher will comply with the 1998 Data Protection Act in respect to confidentiality and data storage	
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the interview at any time without having to give reasons why I may wish to	
I understand that I will not be identified publically as a interviewee of the project	
I understand that I may be quoted directly but my words will be anonymised so that I cannot be identified	
I am giving permission for this data to be used in the Doctoral research of Rev Chris Dowd	
I am giving permission for this data to be used in the online resource created from this project	
I am giving permission for this data to be used in any writings associated with the project	
I understand that I will be given a copy of my interview transcript and will be able to amend it so it accurately reflects my views and opinions	

Signed \_\_\_\_\_ (interviewee) date \_\_\_\_\_

Signed researcher \_\_\_\_\_ date \_\_\_\_\_

# Interview Evaluation

*Please tick the boxes of the statements you agree with.*



I feel that I was given adequate information about the purposes of the interview at the time of initial contact by the researcher.



I received an information pack and the interviewer was able to answer my questions prior to the interview.



I feel that I was interviewed at a time that was convenient for me



I feel I was interviewed in a place that felt safe and confidential for me.



Prior to the interview the researcher explained why the research was happening.



Prior to the interview the researcher explained the uses that the information may be used for and asked my permission to use the information gathered in those ways.



The interviewer went through the information sheet and the permission form prior to starting the interview



At all times the interviewer was polite and respectful

**If you felt unable to tick one of the above boxes, please tell us why in the box below**

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