

Coming Out, Coming Home

True stories from my Ministry

The following accounts of coming out, coming home are based on true stories that I have experienced during my ministry. Some modifications, names and gender have been changed to protect the privacy of such persons.

Sarah

Sarah, nervously walked in the door of a regular Sunday congregational worship service. She had heard that the church had just appointed an openly lesbian minister of the word. She had not been to church in over 20 years, and was both curious and intrigued that, the church had moved to become more inclusive, and wanted to see this for herself.

Sarah's partner Mandy had decided to stay at home with their two kids, and was reportedly a little sceptical. Sarah was pleasantly surprised, by the warmth and welcome she received. The church was also not that different to how she remembered it some 20 years ago. When she left in her early 20's, it was because she felt that church was no longer a loving and safe space. She stayed for the cup of tea, and chattered to a few of the church people, she dropped that she had a female partner and 2 kids in conversation, to find not even a micro-second of awkwardness, but an instant 'you should meet our new minister'. Being ushered over to the new minister, Sarah introduced herself, and the minister warmly welcomed her. Sarah said, 'you know, I haven't been to church in 20 odd years, and I feel like I would like to come back, with my kids, and maybe my partner. Thank you for the welcome.' From then on, Sarah and her 2 kids became regulars in worship. Her partner Mandy respected how much this meant to Sarah and for the kids to have exposure to Christian values but still struggled with church for herself. Their 2 kids received baptism and became more involved with the church as they grew.

John

John, grew up in an evangelical Christian family, and when he came out, his family and church leadership made it clear that his homosexual life was not compatible with Christianity. They would pray for his soul. John rejected the Church and in what he thought was more about subordination and personal moral control.

Years later, John ran into an old friend he knew from school, who told him about the local Uniting Church he was attending. John said, 'I suppose they all hate gays...' 'No, that is not the case' his friend replied with a tone of protest, 'in fact many in our church marched in the Mardi Gras. For us, inclusion of LGBTIQ people is a matter of justice and of love'. His friend laboured the point that 'it is because of our faith, not despite, that the church is inclusive of all people.'

John had heard about these liberal churches and thought that they were just wishy washy, and put his old school friend in that category. But, something did disturb him about that conversation. So he dared himself to go, and meet his friend at this church. Which he did. John didn't find some wishy-washy church but a church of strong convictions that loved and included all of God's people.

John not only attended more regularly in worship, but became more involved in active leadership, taking a real interest in justice issues for the wider community.

Jimmy

Jimmy turned up one evening for a church service out of the blue, he had an out loud hair style. He introduced himself to the minister saying, 'I am church shopping, I have been going to a large Pentecostal church, but it isn't really where I am at personally.' The minister asked, 'what are you looking for?' 'I am looking for something less cliquey, more inclusive and loving' Jimmy replied. 'You know that we are an inclusive church, as in LGBTIQ inclusive,' said the minister. Jimmy piped up and said, 'ahh yeah... so I am straight, that stuff doesn't bother me. I am here because, I am just looking...' 'No worries, if you have any further questions about this community I am more than happy to catch up for coffee some time, let me give you my card.' The minister replied.

Jimmy didn't turn up again for about 3 months, but when he did, after the service, he came straight up to the minister and said, 'well yeah... following our conversation last time, maybe I am a bit bi, and it has been hard for me to admit that.' The minister affirmed that it is ok to take the time to work this out with integrity with God, others and self, and that this Uniting Church is a safe church community for you to do this in. The congregation didn't see Jimmy for another few months, until he again turned up to worship, again after the service Jimmy said to the minister, 'I love Jesus, I don't want to lose Jesus.' The minister put his hand on Jimmy's shoulder and said, 'maybe Jesus is finding you in a deeper way.' Jimmy then admitted to himself and the minister that maybe he was actually gay, and he was coming to the realisation that fighting this seemed more and more pointless and a waist of life.

Over time Jimmy became more and more involved with the congregation and began to flourish in new and meaningful ways. A few years later, he moved to another Uniting Church closer to where he was living. He said recently that he feels a great home in this Uniting Church that seeks to live the inclusive love of Jesus in real and tangible ways, and appreciated that being gay is no issue at all. Mind you he laboured the point that he is still looking for a husband.

Shree

Sharee had never grown up in the church, had no religious background. One day she dated another woman, Mira, who attended a local Uniting Church. It became clear that the date was not going to work, so Sharee and Mira decided to be friends.

Sharee, though was fascinated with Mira's faith, and asked if she could come to church to check it out. Mira said 'sure'. As Sharee walked into the doors of the local Uniting Church, she was amazed, she had not seen or experienced anything like it before. She had hoped for a Harlem gospel choir, because that is what she had seen on tv, but what she encountered was a community of people exploring deep human meaning and purpose in the teachings of Jesus. Sharee said, I just knew I wanted to be here, to learn, to grow, to know and to be known by this God of love, grace and justice. Sharee devoted herself to almost every activity the church offered, including; study groups, worship and social gatherings. One day she came to the minister and said, 'I want to be baptised. I want to follow Jesus and to be a part of this Church. I want to turn away from all that distracts us from the love of God we see in Jesus'. So Sharee was baptised into the faith and community of Christ. Sharee had found her spiritual home.

Karl

Karl had always lived with a secret, and it was that secret that kept him feeling so unknown for so long. He cared deeply for his wife and family and would do anything for them, but knew in himself that he never married for affectionate love, he married because of what he was taught was the right thing to do. Karl, broke down and told his wife on their 14th wedding anniversary. His wife Mary, kind of suspected, but also found this really hard to hear. Mary knew that Karl will do everything to support her and the kids, but that he was gay, this carried shame and a deep heart ache that she didn't know what to do with. Karl and Mary kept these things private. They agreed to stay together for the sake of the kids and to work this out once the kids



had left home. Karl and his wife were involved with the local "Kids in Uniting Church (KUCA) club at church. They had a significant role in the community as well. They tried to open the conversation with their local minister but, in raising the question about homosexuality, the minister at the time started talking, slightly obsessively and at length, about sexuality and leadership. It was unfortunate that the minister was not able to discern that Karl was actually looking for some pastoral help. As the kids grew up, Mary developed MS, and Karl became Mary's full-time carer. Karl began to research online and discovered the Uniting Network, and, from there began to find some support. He began to share his story with the local Uniting Church community. As he came out, his kids struggled a little to come to terms with this, and why he was not honest with them. Some friends and church members took some time to process, some sadly could not continue in the level of friendship they had enjoyed. But there were some loving and deeply caring people in the church, who offered unconditional love and support. Karl continues to worship, support his wife as the primary caregiver and has come to terms with his sexuality. He feels at home with God and with his local Uniting Church.

Ben

I have been in ministry for almost 20 years, and have been with my male partner for 12 years. This December I will marry the man I love in the Church that I am a part of, with the recognition of the state. This has only become possible in the past 12 months. I count it both a privilege and a humble joy to be at home, in this Uniting Church at this time. For me it feels like the most normal thing in the world, to marry the person for whom there is an intimate bond that reflects a deeper mystery. Scott and I are so much better together, our relationship reflects so much grace and love, such love and grace that we both see as a gift of God. The God we see in the trinity is a God of co-creative, interdependent relationships, the God of Love. Coming home to the God of Love, reflected in our small branch of the Christian Church, the Uniting Church is a real gift of grace. A grace I hope and pray many more can know and experience as deeply meaningful and purposeful in God and one another regardless of gender or sexuality.

Rev Ben Gilmour

Minister of the Word – Paddington Uniting Church

