

# A CHURCH DIVIDED

*Sarah Sedgwick*

## FORMER LESBIAN SARAH SEDGWICK SPEAKS CANDIDLY ABOUT HER DECISION TO LEAVE THE METHODIST CHURCH.

I still have vivid memories of that August day in 2014 when I first stepped foot into Trinity Methodist Church in Long Eaton. I had responded to the call of God to find a church - despite battling with him over the common sense of his suggestion - and here I was, reluctantly, but obediently entering a place of worship for the first time in over 30 years. My story is well documented: I was openly gay; I had been in a relationship with my civil partner for over 16 years, but God had been wooing me for a few months and Trinity was the destination he had chosen to draw me into a full relationship with him.

Six months and a lot of wrestling and wrangling with God later, I finally gave my life to the Lord. This was not without complications as I was fully aware that following Jesus meant full surrender. This required me to consider God's perfect plan and purpose for sexuality and then to decide whether surrendering my own sexuality to him was something I trusted him enough to do. As I worked this through with loving, supportive sisters in Christ, I began to recognise the beauty of God's creativity in designing sex for marriage (the lifelong marriage of a man

and a woman) and the joy of finding my identity in Christ as opposed to the labels the world had assigned me. It was a joyous thing to realise that experiencing same-sex attraction no longer defined me and that Jesus walked through my temptations with me - I really could trust him with this. Of course, same-sex attraction is the thorn in my flesh; I'm sure that you have a thorn in yours which you may have to deal with every so often. After six years of commitment to Jesus I can honestly say that I won't swap my thorn with yours. Why? Because Jesus has used it to draw me close; to press into him daily; but not only that, it has guided my path in ministry and I have been privileged to use my experiences to support churches and individuals who also wrestle with issues of sexuality.

It wasn't long after I became a Christian that I became fully aware of the extent of the division within the church over same-sex relationships. My initial research had revealed to me that there were some very liberal church denominations and gay affirming churches, but I hadn't seen Methodism in that light. Yet slowly I started to piece the puzzle together to see the clear division that was right in front of my nose. Take for instance the day of my baptism, a day on which I woke up filled with joy and hope, yet a day that ended with me crying myself to sleep. Put simply, this was the first day that I had shared my testimony, and whilst many were supportive and loving,

members of my own church community openly questioned my choice to remain celibate and blatantly suggested that God had not required that of my life. I walked home dejected, my commitment undermined by those who held to a theology somewhat distant from the truth I had read about in God's Word. Other instances followed: a sermon preached by our local Superintendent opened my eyes to his stance and his wearing of a rainbow badge on our next encounter underlined the void in our theology.

I lose track of the times I was told that the Holy Spirit had seemingly convicted me in a different way to others. Whilst God had told me to surrender my sexuality, I was told that he didn't expect that from everyone. I could not understand a theology that sees God as double minded. When we hear from the Lord we are taught to test it with his Word and as I read his Word more and more it became increasingly clear to me how we are called to steward our sexuality for his glory. Again and again I was told that, 'love is love', and 'if God made us that way, who are we to reject it?'

The issue on which people seemed to have lost perspective is that we are all made with feelings; we are all made to love, but is it right to act on those feelings simply because the world says it is? Is our Lord, 'Lord' in name only or is he truly Lord of our lives?

When I became aware of the *God In Love Unites Us* report (GILUU), I was deeply saddened about the proposals, yet challenged and eager to speak my thoughts, thinking there would be active debate and compassionate listening from each side. What I found was in fact the opposite, plus I found a reticence from the Methodist leaders to listen to my voice, or indeed the voices of anyone who had chosen celibacy over active homosexual relationships. I wanted to share my concerns about this oversight. A letter to the President of Conference went unanswered; my question posed to a leading member of Dignity and Worth at a local consultation event in Stoke also went unanswered. I attended consultation events where I was appalled to hear suggestions that Jesus and John; Naomi and Ruth as well as David and Jonathan were in same-sex relationships. It was at one of these events that a Methodist member of another church suggested that I 'go to Greenbelt to receive healing', roughly interpreted as you need to be healed of wanting to remain faithful to Scripture.

Other insults followed and much of me was ready to quit, but something told me that God wasn't quite ready for me to throw in the towel yet. Then COVID-19 struck, Church went online, things calmed down for me and I was hoping to take a step back from the consultations and surrounding hype.

Unbeknown to me, the hype and confrontations were not going to go away simply because of a global pandemic. My church had been running the 'Freedom in Christ' course and were running a sermon series based on its teaching. We had been given special dispensation for non-accredited preachers to lead online and I was allocated week 4, which is the week the course looks at 'The world's view of truth'. I spent much time in prayer preparing for this topic, I knew my testimony would be valuable but I didn't want to major on that. The structure of the sermon gradually came into place and I recorded it to be included in an online service aired via YouTube.

After the service went live, I received a number of messages all complimenting or thanking me for the message I had



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preached; seemingly it had gone down well. A few days later, I received a phone call from the hierarchy of the Methodist Church informing me that the church had been told that the video was to be taken off YouTube immediately. I was shocked and I wrongly assumed that this was because I had shared a small part of my testimony. After some further investigation by the church leadership, it came to light that my error had been to state that 'God created them male and female.' This language had been complained about and was deemed to be potentially transphobic. Yet the response went further than that, it was intimated in their response that there were indeed more than two genders. I was both angry and sad that things had come to this. It was at this point that my Church Leadership Team were told that I could no longer preach or lead worship; in essence I was not welcome in the pulpit. Despite having heard so often over the past couple of years the phrase 'living with contradictory convictions', I was now part of a scenario which clearly shows that this cannot be achieved if holding the belief that God created us male and female results in a preacher being banned. Far from the GILUU report uniting us, it has caused great rift and division.

The response to my preaching was the straw that broke the camel's back; I was hurt by the accusation. I was shocked at the level of biblical illiteracy that I was witnessing and the extent to which the Church had been deceived by the



world's view of truth. I could no longer stay in Methodism; I was weary, hurt and angry and that's not a good place for any Christian to be. I wrote my notice of resignation and started to pray about the future; where was God leading me?

In the few months prior to my resignation, many members of Trinity had shown concern over the direction of the Methodist Church and some conversations had taken place about how we could respond if the Conference accepted the recommendations of the GILUU report.

As part of those conversations my sermon had been sent to the National Leader of the Free Methodist Church, John Townley, to gauge how the Free Methodist Church would respond to it. His response was a delight to me: 'We would welcome Sarah to preach in our churches with open arms!' Conversations continued, and as more members of Trinity resigned, we started to explore the option of starting a church plant. John Townley was gracious and generous with his time and advice. He welcomed us with open arms to explore the Free Methodist movement and, after much prayer, a small group of us established New Harvest Community Church, a church plant of the Free Methodist Church.



Starting a new church in a pandemic is probably easier than you'd think! We began on Zoom and established a great pattern of worship, word, reflection and prayer. As the end of lockdown loomed, it got harder as we searched for premises but we eventually found an old school hall that has quickly become home. My heart swells when I think of New Harvest. We may be a small community (approx. 35 to 40 each week) but we are biblically rooted and have a unique opportunity to shape ourselves to become a church that is truly inclusive, showing compassion without compromise. My desire for New Harvest is the same as it is for all churches, that we rise up and uphold God's standards of holiness and righteousness as we openly and confidently address issues of sex and sexuality in line with the holy teachings of the Bible.

I think it's fair to say that I am deeply saddened at the position in which the Methodist Church put me and also many other members. My church family was everything to me. It was through them that I came to faith, was nurtured,

disciplined, prayed for, counselled, encouraged and supported through many ups and downs of my early Christian journey. Yet despite all the sadness of leaving, God is good, New Harvest is thriving and growing and I have found a new community in which to further develop my faith. Through all this I am reminded of the verse in 1 Samuel 2:30 that tells us 'those who honour me I will honour, but those who despise me will be disdained'.

*Sarah Sedgwick is a former member of the Methodist Church, the author of 'Transformed by God's Love - Exploring Issues of Sexuality in the Christian Faith' and founder of Transformed Ministries, a ministry supporting individuals and churches as they explore sexuality: [www.transformedbygodslove.com](http://www.transformedbygodslove.com)*

