



Stefan Wycliffe

Is my church homophobic?

Did that title catch your eye?

I'm being deliberately provocative. To be honest, I'm not a fan of the word 'homophobic.' It has too many violent and broad connotations that make me feel uncomfortable about using it when discussing my experience of church. And yet I have struggled to find another word that is useful when discussing the fear, anger, prejudice and mistrust I have experienced in church because of my same-sex attraction (SSA). After all, why did I seek out True Freedom Trust (TFT) all those years ago, and why do many of my brothers and sisters continue to do so? Is it not to, at times, find a place of safety from what might be intolerant and unthoughtful Christians in our local church contexts?

When others have commented on the theological stance of my church in relation to same-sex attraction, I have rushed to defend it. I have tried to explain that the leadership hold to a biblical position, as I do, whilst knowing in my heart and mind that some of their thinking and behaviours towards me have, at times, been far from the biblical ideal. TFT groups, friendships, and the annual conference have over the years provided a much-needed refuge.

Why am I writing about this now?

About eighteen months ago, I moved my home (and work) to a new city, after having been a member of a local church for the best part of thirty-five years. My new church has made me feel truly at home and welcomed. This has, if anything, accentuated some feelings of regret and sadness about some of my past experiences. This article is not intended as a moan about my previous church, for which I remain thankful; instead it's an opportunity to look at the lessons I have learned. I am hopeful that it will encourage you to both bless your fellow church members and, in turn, be encouraged in your most precious faith. So what lessons has God taught me through my years of experiencing church?

Lesson 1 - Stick With It!

God oversees our lives and knows what is best for us when it comes to experiencing him in a local church. A key assumption here is that a healthy church is a community of born-again believers who glorify Christ in their lives and recognise the Bible as the authority for ordering church life. My former church community met these criteria as well as it could, given the nature of their sinful

hearts. And mine, of course. I had prayed about which church to join as a student, and God made it clear this was the right community for me. The teaching, as well as many of my friends, encouraged me in my young faith, and did so to my last Sunday service. I am grateful to God for his provision, a response which I believe is essential when we're walking through hard times. I have experienced fear, anger, prejudice and mistrust in my church"

Lesson 2 – Speak Up(Wards)

God desires us to have a living relationship with him. Prayer is a means by which we can know him and learn; it's especially important to depend on him through prayer when we're facing trials. At times, church life has been a trial, a challenge. No way of dressing that up! It has been tough and has required perseverance and patience that I think can only come from knowing God. When attitudes feel hostile and even homophobic, then seeking to forgive and going to God in prayer is vital. This is particularly the case when it comes to praying for our leaders whom Scripture tells us carry a heavy responsibility for our souls and spiritual well-being (Col 1:28, Eph 4:12, James 3:1, Acts 20:28). It's not easy, but it is part of the Christian's walk.

Lesson 3 – Submit!

We can't get around some key Bible verses, however much they may trouble us at times. First, 'Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.' (Hebrews 13:17). Second, 'Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."' (1 Peter 5:5). My heart is full of pride, and I often believe I know the best way I should be led. These verses acknowledge my heart's tendency to know better than my leaders. God has given them to us for a purpose, and I need to acknowledge this in my relationships with them.

Lesson 4 – Speak Out

At the same time, I don't think this should mean that we remain silent when we experience homophobic attitudes. When I was younger, I found speaking out to those in leadership about my SSA very intimidating. There were broader social reasons for this as well as the pervading church culture. Neither of these, I have come to learn, reflected God's perspective. Materials provided by TFT and early workshops/conferences acted as a proxy for my voice, and to which I pointed my elders. The Lord was using me as a signpost to help challenge and develop the leaders he had chosen.

At times, though, I felt I needed to speak directly. I remember writing an email to an elder, which resulted in a relational mess between us. I learned that it's better to have a conversation after careful reflection and prayer, than writing long letters. Nowadays, I seek to help leaders learn, rather than approaching them in order to vent my own frustrations. Easier said than done. When things are particularly tough, it can be useful to speak about your feelings and experiences with a trusted friend; it's also helpful to pray together. I know that when I bottle things up, they become distorted in my mind. A good conversation helps me put things into context.

Lesson 5 – Step Up To Service

My childhood history and subsequent same-sex attraction brought with them pain and trauma that replayed not only in the church, but in work and life more generally. I was at the mercy of feelings of abandonment, and a seemingly unquenchable desire for male affection (that went unrequited). What made it worse was that no one seemed to be bothered. However hard I worked externally to fit in, my internal struggles invariably leaked out. I then felt shame and feelings of frustration towards all male authority figures, and those in church leadership particularly. It wasn't their fault, it was the consequence of unaddressed pain and my tendency to project my issues onto others. To break the chain required God's active grace, demonstrated by him in a multitude of ways. It took time. These included counselling, prayer, and healing ministry, as well as mentoring,

godly friendships, accountability and supported spiritual disciplines.

Ideally, the local church should seek to help in these ways. Leaders should equip church members to play their part. If you think your church isn't equipped to help, then maybe God is asking you to step up and use your gifts and spiritual journey in your church, and perhaps also in TFT. Why not consider offering to become an accountability partner for someone recovering from pornography addiction, or simply befriending those who may also feel like outsiders? Another option may be to apply to volunteer to support the work of TFT in some way. Start by speaking to your leadership about the possibilities for service, and see how the Lord leads you and them. Serving your church community with commitment is a wonderful way to bring glory to God. In my experience, however, it can do even more; it can lead to a measure of personal healing.

Lesson 6 - Saved Forever!

Whatever your experience of church is like today, it is but temporary. Heaven awaits us; in Christ, we have hope of a far better future. No matter what you've been through, hold onto hope.



This article originally appeared on the True Freedom Trust website in 2020.

Stefan Wycliffe works as an academic in a university business school. His focus is organisation and people development. His connection to the work of *True Freedom Trust* stretches back to when he was a young Christian searching for some understanding of same-sex attraction in the 1980s.

Stefan now serves in his local church, offering support to people who struggle with addiction and its consequences.

True Freedom Trust is a charity that holds to the historic Christian understanding of the Bible's teaching on sexuality. The charity provides confidential, non-judgemental support and community to people across the U.K. & Ireland. This includes pastoral support, biblical teaching, resources and conferences. More details are available on the website at truefreedomtrust.co.uk



About Living Leadership

Living Leadership exists to help Christian leaders live in Christ joyfully and serve him faithfully.

Find out more about our ministry, and access more useful articles, on our website: www.livingleadership.org

If you need support to help you in your faith or ministry, contact our team on support@livingleadership, and we'd be happy to connect you to a service of ours that would benefit you.