

Queer Faith Voices: The Importance of the Reconciliation between LGBTQ+ and Faith



Photo Credit: Mark Loudon

From Left to Right: Dr Chris Greenough, Ellen Loudon, Liz Edman, Kieran Bohan and Char Binns

Since the 1960s, LGBTQ+ people have been writing stories in which they share with us their journey towards equality.

According to Stonewall, the UK's LGBTQ+ rights charity, almost three in 10 LGBTQ+ people who visited a faith service or place of worship in the past 12 months has experienced discrimination, because of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

So why has it taken until 2019 for the reconciliation of LGBTQ+ and faith to be acknowledged?

On Saturday 23rd November 2019, a diverse range of speakers met for the first time at Leaf on Bold Street for a one-off panel discussion called Queer Faith Voices.

Queer Faith Voices brought together the great work of numerous Merseyside-based groups including the Open Table Network, Edge Hill University and Liverpool Queer Collective, supported by the Church of England Diocese of Liverpool.

After a brief introduction from Anglican Bishop of Liverpool, Paul Bayes and the Diocese of Liverpool's Director of Social Justice, Ellen Loudon, the event's four main speakers explored

topics relevant to queer and faith identities and what it means to be an LGBTQ+ person of faith today.

First to speak was Char Binns, director of the Homotopia Festival and Liverpool Queer Collective.

As a member of the Quakers, a historically Christian group whose belief is that there is 'that of God in every one', Char expressed her anger towards religious communities who view queerness and faith as incompatible with one another.

"We as a society are made to see religion as up here and queerness as down there.

"For example, Churches Together England recently blocked a Quaker from becoming one of their presidents because she is in a same-sex marriage.

"At the Liverpool Queer Collective, we as a grassroots company try to locate more accessible, welcoming spaces of worship for LGBTQ+ people in Liverpool.

"For example, the Anglican Cathedral hosts a place of worship for LGBTQ+ people at Liverpool Pride each year."

This challenges conservative Christian doctrines, which still consider homosexual relationships and transgender identity to be 'unnatural', partly because of the belief that binary gender (male and female) is fixed and sexual relationships are primarily intended as a way to procreate.

This led Dr Chris Greenough, Senior Lecturer in Theology and Religion at Edge Hill University, to explore the idea of queer theology and how its shock tactics break the rules of traditional Christianity.

Chris said: "In the Bible it says 'Love thy neighbour'.

"But in practice, the positional statements of the mainstream churches towards the LGBTQ+ community is quite hostile.

"This is why some LGBTQ+ people struggle to reconcile their faith with their sexuality, as mentioned in my book *Queer Theologies: The Basics*.

"For me, then, queer theologies that give a bit more weight to queerness and a little less attention to theology, really add colour and diversity to theology, which is essentially 'talk about God'.

"This is where queer theologies have real impact - when they engage with real lives, real communities, real beliefs and real practices.

"At Edge Hill, we embrace diversity and inclusion on campus and in outreach work by ensuring trainee teachers are educated and equipped with LGBTQ+ issues to then make and impact in schools."

Therefore, diversity is certainly prevalent throughout Edge Hill University.

The same goes for Open Table, a network of ecumenical Christian worship communities which receives an average attendance of 300 people per month across England and Wales (60 in Liverpool) and with whom 80 churches have been in touch to explore how to be more inclusive for LGBTQ+ people.

Kieran Bohan, network coordinator of Open Table, said: "At Open Table, everyone is welcome to 'come as they are', without judgement of worthiness or membership.

"12 years ago we LGBTQ+ people of faith were excluded from celebrating Mass on Catholic premises in Liverpool, but now there has been a movement towards greater inclusion through Open Table and similar initiatives, including Catholic Mass for the LGBTQ+ community in six dioceses.

"LGBTQ+ people of faith and all who seek an inclusive church are finally being accepted."

The final speaker of the night was Liz Edman, an American priest and author of *Queer Virtue*.

If the Diocese of Liverpool's Ellen Loudon hadn't met Liz in New York, then the Queer Faith Voices event wouldn't have taken place.

Liz explained why her faith began before she even had a language for it and why she views queerness and Christianity as interchangeable.

"I knew there was this life force that was bigger than me and we were connected.

"It was part of what made life possible and I never questioned that."

She referenced the famous handwritten quote by controversial British artist Tracey Emin, which appears as pink neon art inside Liverpool's Anglican Cathedral: 'I felt you and then I knew you loved me.'

"There is this path of experience that many queer people walk that is similar to the path that Christians walk.

"This is because Christianity disrupts these so-called central binaries and siloes.

"In Christianity I see an inherent queerness, this idea of disruption."

With other events of its kind emerging throughout the UK, Queer Faith Voices exemplifies that there is something in queerness that not only Merseyside needs right now, but also that the rest of the world needs right now.