

Story 4 Transcript

“My first memory is of sitting on a driveway building a house for a snail, out of leaves and twigs, talking with God. My first memory is of praying. I read the Bible a lot. My parents were very fearful and mistrustful of churches and of people with faith. God found me when I was very small. As I look back I recognise how my relationship with God was simply essential, my primary attachment lay there.”

I became seriously ill at the age of 15 and found myself in Hospital, unable to speak, eat, or take fluids, feeling my body slowly starting to fail. It wasn't a time for sadness, it was in my mind a time to 'go home'. This was the first time I heard God audibly, my mind, body and spirit resonated with His voice, He simply said 'There is something for you to do'. It took three years to physically recover, it was tough and painful.

I didn't go to church until I was in my late twenties because of my family's objections. I wrote to my family to tell them that I would always love them, but that if I had to choose, I chose my faith. I had spent years thinking about which church I would go to and I knew that it would be a Baptist Church. I gave up my birth family, but I gained a church family who loved and supported me to pursue my life ambition to go to University and read Theology. The more I flourished in the church, the more I realised I needed to be honest about who and what I was in the context of my faith.

I had got married at 21 to a man who was good and kind, who I loved a great deal and who loved me too. I owe much to the place of safety, encouragement and care that he gave me. When I came out six years after we got married, he was simply remarkable; but I lost my church. As I look back, I do not condone or approve of the conduct of the church at the time, but I remain deeply appreciative of the space the church gave me to find a space to flourish in relationship with God and others.

The loss of church was huge. God showed me a picture of a church one day as I was praying for a new place to worship and call my spiritual home. I searched the internet to see if a church that looked like the picture really existed. It did. My heart sank when I saw it was a Baptist Church, I was sure they'd never accept me. I was so afraid that first Sunday morning, walking up to the doors of the church, it was a real act of trust in Him. I loved the church He led me to – it was full and vibrant, it resonated Him. I arrived late to church and left early to avoid being seen. One day the Minister stood on the front door a little early. Some words had been laid on my heart in a service that morning and when she asked me who I was, instead of introducing myself, the words came tumbling out. I knew it was over, I knew I'd have to leave. To her great credit the Minister made time to sit and talk with me. I will never forget what she said to me, 'I don't understand all this. I don't know what I think. But for as long as I am Minister here, you are welcome here.' Over a decade later I still thank God frequently for this Minister, her words have quite literally sustained me many times in later years – she gave me hope. I have no doubt that cost her greatly.

It wasn't easy, the church was very divided. Some people would turn to the wall rather than look at me, many would not sit near me. In time, after the Minister left and the safety she created dissipated, some started to vocalise that my being in the church had caused the ill health of a few members and more frighteningly the death of a child. Others simply told me that it was not possible for me to have a faith because of my sexuality. These views were theologically flawed and were directly challenged by the leadership, but they got under my skin. I journeyed with this church for twelve years in love, prayer and patience – the bearing with each other by virtue of God's grace and sustaining, little by little, views changed. This journey is only possible in His grace and provision – it is simply not achievable in our own strength. In this time, I moved slowly and gradually from writing sermons for other people, to occasionally being invited to speak myself. But as my call grew so did the anxiety of some. I did not want to cause anyone discomfort or pain, and there was fear that my call would compromise others in my church. With great sadness I preached my last sermon and left. I still miss so many in that church and continue to love them deeply. It was, very simply, devastating.

Through the great depths of God's provision I found a Baptist Church that welcomed me, in my fullness, recognising and fully affirming my faith and my sense of call. I was also led to a College that would teach me, more than that, they cared for me in the period of loss and desolation as I left the church community I loved. There are no words to thank them for this gift.

I share this because there was a moment when very simply, I almost gave up – I just didn't have it in me to keep going with this journey anymore. It was God's provision and the love of good people of faith that carried me through.

I have shared a few moments with you. With hindsight I feel that I have very simply given all that I have to give. My faith journey has been one of complete surrender, which has required deep trust. It has brought the blessing of divine love and care, and the blessing of meeting many good people along the way. I will follow where God leads me. I try very hard to not compromise the essential integrity we all must have, fully accepting that some others within the Body of Christ will never accept me. I am determined to celebrate what I can love and value in those who will not accept me – I think that's what God's called us to do. I am called first and foremost to listen to, and follow, with integrity, wherever God might lead me.