

My name is [REDACTED]. I am a [REDACTED] [REDACTED], and a gay Christian woman. I am writing to outline my experiences as a teacher [REDACTED].

My involvement [REDACTED] began as a casual teacher [REDACTED]. Almost immediately the school began asking me to speak at Chapel services and at special events, due to my experience in youth work and my ability to preach in a way that was engaging for young people. [REDACTED] this led to the school giving me a contract to work part time, combining the teaching of English and History, and a more pastoral, chaplaincy role. This second role involved oversight of chapel services (including either preaching myself or engaging other speakers), responsibility for the pastoral care of students in the high school, establishing and running a peer support program, developing a student leadership program, including an annual student leadership camp, and occasional parent education seminars. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] I was also asked to take charge of the Prefect Body. In essence, I was responsible for all aspects of spiritual and pastoral care for the high school students, with an emphasis on those in years 9-12.

As part of my role, I was required to teach what is known as “purity culture”. Essentially, this means teaching students that God has designed people such that we can only flourish when sexual intimacy is confined to the relationship between a husband and wife in a monogamous, heterosexual marriage. Within this context, we explicitly taught that homosexual relationships are an “abomination” – an expression of sexuality that God loathes. Anyone who engaged in homosexual acts was a sinner, destined for hell. It was taught that God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah because the men of the city were homosexuals, and that eternal judgement (that is, conscious unending torment in Hell) was the penalty for anyone engaged in a “homosexual lifestyle”.

I further taught that same-sex attraction was a distortion of emotional connection between friends, and that acting on such an attraction would bring sexual dysfunction, relational pain and separation from God.

At times the school would bring in speakers to undergird this teaching. [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] These speakers taught that homosexual or transgender “identity” should be resisted through self-control and trust in God.

Throughout this time, I was deeply closeted to myself and those around me. I believed that to please God and experience his love, I must deny any same-sex attraction and date men with the goal of heterosexual marriage. Anything else would be a betrayal of God’s love and his calling on my life. This is what I was taught, and in turn taught the students at my school.

At times, in my pastoral care/chaplaincy role, students would seek me out to confide their struggles. When a student, with incredible fear, disclosed that they experienced same-sex attraction, I assured them that this was not God’s will for them and that they must resist it. I further explained that they were confusing emotional connection with sexual attraction. I would commit to praying for them, and/or refer them to the school counsellor. I personally never suggested that they were not loved by God, but I did say that acting on their attraction would lead to unhappiness, shame and brokenness.

At the time, I genuinely believed this to be true for them, and for me. But I never spoke a word about my own struggles; I couldn't because I wouldn't even admit it to myself.

Yet I noticed that students whom I suspected were LGBT were withdrawn and obviously unhappy. It was not possible to thrive in that environment as an openly gay student (or staff member). Students who had "sinned sexually" (for example, were gay, or who had fallen pregnant) were barred from talking about their experiences or discussing their sexuality. Some students would begin to act out under the incredible strain of forced silence, closeting, innuendo and bullying. At this point they were able to be punished for their inappropriate behaviour; some such students were suspended so that their behaviour wouldn't adversely affect others. It was extremely rare for a student to be expelled; instead, the parents would be encouraged to withdraw their child so that the student didn't have the black mark of expulsion against their name. This was viewed as a gracious act. Staff sometimes joked about troublesome students who were "encouraged to pursue excellence elsewhere".

Students who did thrive (at least in appearance) were those who conformed completely to the school's teaching. I now know that several students who were elected as Prefects and School-Captains were tightly closeted during their schooling. To be anything else would mean disqualification from leadership, and probable expulsion. It was only years after leaving [REDACTED] they were able to process the trauma of those years and finally come out.

Every now and then, a biblical, evangelical scholar would write a book or preach a sermon suggesting that it was possible to be same-sex attracted and still be loved and accepted by God. Such teaching was immediately denounced as unbiblical, and the author discredited. Similarly, when prominent Christian musicians such as Jennifer Knapp or Vicky Beeching came out as gay (and still Christian), they were denounced and their music was no longer allowed to be sung or played. (Christian bookstores also removed their CDs and products from the shelves, to ensure access to their music was cut off).

Please understand, it was becoming obvious that there were and are other interpretations of the Bible that did not hold homosexuality to be inherently sinful. It simply isn't true that all Christians, or even all Evangelicals, see homosexuality as incompatible with faith in God. Yet in the context of [REDACTED] schools, any other viewpoint was deliberately, relentlessly suppressed.

Throughout this time, I was preaching and teaching the conservative evangelical viewpoint on sexuality, while simultaneously refusing to acknowledge my own same-sex attraction. I clung to the "truths" I taught students, hoping it would save them, and me.

My complete denial of my own sexuality had a devastating cost. I was praised for the poignancy and effectiveness of my preaching, and continually elevated into leadership roles, while experiencing intense internal struggle. [REDACTED] I was finally diagnosed with depression and suicidal ideation. Many times, I would drive home from work fantasising about driving my car off a bridge. I gained weight and lost hope, but did not believe there was any other path open to me.

Some days, I was so mentally and emotionally distraught that I could not teach and had to go home. I clearly remember the Assistant Principal walking with me through the corridors, her arm around me, escorting me to her office so she could pray for and counsel me before sending me home. The whole time I was too distraught to speak. I was told, and believed, that the school was acting with "grace" towards me. I dared not tell anyone what I feared to be true about me – that I was one of the abominations, a lesbian. I knew that if I did, there would be no more grace. So, I continued to convince myself that I wasn't gay.

Through all of that I was praised for my trust in God and told that what I was experiencing was a result of “spiritual warfare” because I was standing up for righteousness. The devil was attacking me, but I should put my trust in God and all would be well.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] I had been exposed to differing theological viewpoints, and now understood that there are many committed Christians who believe that you can be gay and Christian, that you do not have to choose between your gender identity or sexual orientation and Christian faith. I also came to know committed Christians in same-sex relationships, and saw the beauty and holiness of those relationships.

Consequently, when I was asked to speak at [REDACTED] camps, or when students spoke to me about their struggles, I spoke with compassion and grace, rather than stridency and judgement. I did not, however, explicitly affirm same-sex relationships, as I knew this would cost me my job – both as a pastor and a casual teacher – and my entire network of community.

It was in this context, that I undertook blocks of casual teaching [REDACTED] during the marriage plebiscite debate. During that time, I heard school leaders, up to and including the Principal, declare that Christians must vote No in the referendum. To do anything else was to betray our shared biblical worldview and contradict the Bible.

I became aware of gay students, including one young man in year 12, who was being targeted because of his sexuality. He experienced bullying and shaming on the one hand, and encouragement to suppress and deny his sexuality on the other. He told me directly that his mental health was in disarray and he was suicidal. He said the school’s teaching was directly contributing to the bullying he experienced and to his internal conflict.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] I finally ended my professional relationship with the school, and gradually came out to family and friends. As I had feared, I became anathema to former friends and colleagues. The price was high, but that was the beginning of a vast improvement in my mental health and well-being.

[REDACTED]

I conclude by stating that since coming out, I have been contacted by hundreds of students, staff and parents at Christian educational institutions who fear the consequences for themselves or their families should they come out as LGBTQIA+ themselves, or as affirming of those who are. Each of them has seen the consequences play out for others, in loss of community, employment, enrolment, or a combination of such. They have suffered the burden of psychological harm and experience ongoing trauma.

Personally, I also continue to experience ongoing harm and PTSD symptoms from my experiences. Yet, even in the face of that, I would not go back to a closeted life, or support of a harmful, oppressive theology that denies room for others to grow and flourish. In every way, my life is better today – emotionally, psychologically, socially – proving that what I once taught and believed was a lie. There is abundant life for those who understand that they don't have to choose between their faith and sexuality. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]