

**Faith, Science and Sexuality –
session on Trans People: one trans person’s experience
by the Revd Dr Tina Beardsley**

In her Inclusive Church Lecture, delivered in July 2018 in Leicester, Stonewall C.E.O. Ruth Hunt observed:

‘This year we have stood up to a small but increasingly vocal group of lesbian feminists who totally object to trans inclusion. As a dyke running Stonewall that’s been pretty tough. ... For the record I think the abuse that trans people are experiencing is the like of which we saw around HIV in the 1980s, and it should be a wake-up call to all of us.’

This is the backdrop for those of us who are trans in the UK today, and for some trans people it’s the foreground of their experience.

However much one might be victimised during transition (my own problems being with the Church, though I won’t be talking about that today) one tries not to be a victim – in order to survive. I don’t want to play the victim here, but the statistics speak for themselves. For example, the *Stonewall School Report* (2017, p.7) revealed that more than two in five (45%) of trans pupils have attempted suicide, compared to one in five (22%) of cisgender pupils.

Ruth’s words are important because they name the extraordinary hostility that trans people currently have to face in the UK and other parts of the globe. This summer I was interviewed by BBC London News about objections to trans women swimming in [the women-only pond](#) at Hampstead Heath. My interview followed the crew’s encounter with one of the extremely angry objectors. They were still in shock. But it was a non-issue: the Corporation of London was following the Equality Act, and a spokesperson quoted minister Penny Mordaunt, launching the consultation on reform of the Gender Recognition Act: ‘a trans man is a man, and a trans woman is a woman.’

My main point on the television news – the rest having been cut – was that the objectors seemed not to understand our experience as trans

people. And it's my experience of being trans that I guess you're interested in this afternoon. I'm going to share some of it with you, but I want to make it clear that my understanding is that what we're engaged in today is informing people – about science, faith, gender identity and sexuality. We're not debating my experience in particular, or trans people's experience in general. Our experience just is. It's a fact. A reality. And it's not up for debate. Material from today will be used in the conversations taking place in the Church of England and other faith communities. We're being filmed and are keen to disseminate knowledge, but I'm simply expressing what I understand myself to be doing this afternoon. So, to my experience. 'Getting to know you.'

'When did you know that you were trans?' A friend, who has known me for over thirty years (in fact, she ran our Sunday School and youth work when I was a parish priest), asked me that question just the other day. Much more is heard and known about trans children now, and I suppose she was curious to know whether my childhood experiences were similar to those of the children she had seen on television or read about.

My reply was that, as far as I can recall, as a child I was conscious simply of being me – to begin with. In retrospect it's obvious that my play, behaviours and possibly speech patterns, did not conform to gender norms. And I was verbally abused by my father for that from a relatively young age – five or six. I had really no idea what he was talking about.

Over the years he tried several interventions in an attempt to make me more masculine (by the northern working class standards of the 1950s and early 1960s). For example, **he taught me to box**, which I hated (Sandra Bullock's role in *Miss Congeniality* still being decades away; how cool that recent photo looks of a young woman boxing). On one occasion, and one occasion only, in my early twenties, I had to use those pugilistic skills. Stepping out of a telephone booth I found myself surrounded by a gang of youths. When one of them started to punch me

and was clearly not going to stop, I jabbed with my left and swung with my right; and they all scattered, allowing me to make my escape.

Aged about 11, I think, I overheard my dad say to my maternal grandmother that I was ‘so effeminate’. Again, that came as a surprise. Whatever it was that seemed gender nonconforming to my dad seemed entirely natural to me, and I couldn’t understand the problem. My grandma replied that I would, quote, ‘grow out of it’ but, in fact, what I did, eventually, (after learning to hide who I was), was to grow into it. Years later, in therapy, I learned to accept that what appeared to my dad to be effeminate was simply feminine – and that there’s nothing wrong with that.

In my teenage years, in the mid 1960s, I began to hear about people who had – in the crude and inaccurate language (one is confirming one’s gender) of those days – ‘changed’ sex and wondered whether they were my tribe. [The Sunday tabloids told mainly sensational stories](#) about them, and it seemed something of a twilight world. Aged 15 a friend’s sister lent me (because I asked her to) the 1966 novel, *I Want What I Want*, about someone in transition. Wendy, the protagonist, passes well as a female, but her encounter with the sexologist, at the end of the book, is a disaster. He tells Wendy that she can’t really change sex, that it would all be very expensive anyway, and suggests instead that she adopts the coping strategy of becoming a drag performer.

If that was the situation for trans people (or women anyway) then – and naively I assumed that it was (I went on thinking I’d have to perform in cabaret long enough to save the money to go to Casablanca for ‘the operation’) it was just about to improve with the opening of the Gender Identity Clinic at Charing Cross, which enabled more people to access hormonal and surgical treatments. [The film version of the novel](#), made in the early 1970s, [reflects that more positive narrative](#) – it ends with a post-op Wendy sitting happily in her north London flat with a passport in her female name – but I didn’t catch up with it until much later. And I seemed to keep missing people.

Trans man and academic lawyer [Stephen Whittle](#) studied at Sussex University as I did, but after I'd left. Dr Rachel Padman and I were both research students at St John's College, Cambridge, but she arrived as my 3 years ended and our paths never crossed. While Rachel was seeing Dr John Randell, at Charing Cross, who administered oestrogen, I was at theological college, where my contemporary was the late Revd Carol Stone, the first (and so far the only) Church of England parish priest to transition in post (was there something in the water at our college?). Carol and I transitioned one year apart, she in 2000, and me in 2001. But as students in the late 70s neither of us realised that the other was trans (there was another student who I suspected might be trans, but who turned out not to be) and it would have been impossible to be open then.

It was only in 1979 and 1980 that I heard of – and heard [the voice of – Dr Randall](#) in the landmark BBC television programmes that followed the transition of Julia Grant. Now I knew what the route was, and that I ought to take it, straight to my GP, but I feared the consequences. Julia lost her job as an NHS catering manager, and I was newly ordained as a Church of England priest – then and for another fourteen years, a male only priesthood.

The way to transition seemed barred, until on Sunday 5th November 1989 I came out as gay in a sermon – the actual words, which I experienced as given in the night, were '[God loves me including the fact that I'm gay.](#)' (Not a great career move!) But a few days later, when someone said to me, 'it was great you came out – such a good role model to see a gay man in a caring profession', I had a light bulb moment, and said to myself 'But I never said I was a man'. So it was through experience that I learnt that sexual orientation and gender identity are different! And interviews undertaken by my colleague [Chris Dowd](#), suggest that my trajectory is not especially unusual for someone of my age. Older trans people tended to marry heterosexually; some trans people of my generation came out as [gay first, and only later as trans](#), partly because trans identity wasn't quite as apparent then, or the vocabulary as extensive as it is now. Today, people seem to come out as trans straight away. This observation (it's not a research finding)

can be found in our book *Transfaith: a transgender pastoral resource* (DLT 2018).

In a 2011 update on the number of UK trans people, the Gender Identity Research and Education Society (GIRES) reported the median age of transition as 42. I was in my mid-forties when I seriously began to contemplate transition, making me fairly average, ordinary and boring. And having spoken to Dr James Barrett, who is speaking next, that's pretty much the theme of this session on trans people.

And if I've left you wanting to learn more about my journey, you can find it in 'A Vicar's Story', Chapter 6 of *Trans Britain: our journey from the Shadows*, Christine Burns MBE (Ed.) (Unbound: 2018).