

# Being intersex in the house of God



By Sara Gillingham, 5 August 2018

*On Sunday, 5 August 5, Sara Gillingham was invited to talk to the congregation of St Mark's Church in the parish of Badshot, Lea and Hale as part of their inclusion series of sermons. She spoke movingly on her experience of being intersex in the House of God.*

Thank you so much for inviting me here today just to share some of my experience of Church as someone who is born intersex. Firstly, I want to share a bit of my own story, before I reflect on Church and Faith.

Just to explain what 'intersex' is, as it is often confused with LGBT, particularly Transgender. "Intersex" refers to people who are born with any of a range of biological sex characteristics that may not fit typical notions about male or female bodies. Variations may be in their chromosomes, genitals, or internal organs like testes or ovaries. In some cases, intersex traits are visible at birth while in others, they are not apparent until puberty. Some chromosomal intersex variations may not be physically apparent at all.

About 1.7% of the population is born intersex, across a very wide spectrum. Much of the problem is that there is very little awareness about 'intersex', and the secrecy surrounding us is often shaming and stigmatising. Often children are subject to surgeries that are not medically necessary, simply to alter their bodies to fit others expectations. It may be that intersex children, like other children, also have medical conditions that do need treatment, so it is important we differentiate between the two. We now know from research how harmful these non-medically necessary surgeries are to children's physical and mental health.

I am a survivor of non-consensual surgeries. I was of an age that I remember some of the surgeries and the times when I was recorded or examined in front of medical students. The nature of these surgeries were kept secret from me by doctors and family, despite my asking about them on numerous occasions throughout adulthood. It was only seven years ago that I retrieved my medical records, which explained the secrecy. I have grown-up with the knowledge of knowing that I was somehow different, often with a sense of stigma as the secrecy surrounding me suggested I was somehow shameful.

It is my faith that has helped me endure those 'dark days', by showing there is a light out in the darkness. I often drew upon scripture such as :

2 Corinthians 4:8-9

<sup>8</sup>We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; <sup>9</sup>persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.

Many Christians born with Intersex traits find solace in the stories about Eunuchs, for instance the baptism of the Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts 8 : 26-40 where God acts to include those previously excluded.

Others may emphasis in Genesis 1:27 that “God created human beings in his own image...male AND female he created them.

I personally do not feel the need to identify myself so specifically in biblical scripture, as I feel like everyone else I was created in the image of God. I do frequently turn to Psalm 139 which I find very affirming :

“You it was who fashioned my inward parts....You know me through and through, my body was no mystery to you, when I was formed in secret, woven in the depths of the earth’.

However, I know there are others in the Church that have a very different biblical interpretation and who call upon scripture to enforce their binary understanding, and label such people as myself as having ‘a disorder’. This is label that leads to the stigmatisation and non-consensual surgeries I have spoken about. I have also been labelled as being the embodiment of sin, and have been told by Christians to my face & in social media just in this last month alone, as being possessed by Satan with calls to ‘repent’.

I was invited to share my story in the Regional Shared Conversations on Human Sexuality over two years ago, where many were challenged by my physical presence. I had one member of clergy, who lead a large team in his own Parish, avoid eye-contact and actively avoided just me when sharing the peace at communion. I had people after hearing my story start to pray uninvited, that I be cured. Some embarrassment followed when I asked what being ‘healed’ may look like. It is this hurtful response that brings me in to fellowship with many people who have physical and mental health challenges.

The belief that is core to my faith is that Christ healed by helping people escape discrimination by restoring them as equal members of the community, no longer being marked as ‘IMPURE’.

So Church can be an extremely painful place for me. But I feel called by “God” to try and make use of my pain, and for this reason I am now on Deanery & Diocesan Synods. It is something I find difficult to do, but also at times hugely rewarding and uplifting as people who have remained silent for some many years also find the courage to speak out.

I am currently working with Bishops as they prepare a new episcopal teaching document and pastoral guidance on human sexuality, which will also include ‘intersex’. This again is a bruising experience at present, but I hope greater understanding will reap fruit in the future.

Church can also be a very healing place, and it is important to me and my well being. My own Church community at Holy Trinity in Guildford has become my family, and has enabled me to flourish. It is my Faith and my Church that have given me the courage to find my voice, and put my experiences to good use.

Also being invited today, at one of an increasing number of safe & affirming churches is both moving & joyous. Most of all we must no loose sight of this, as for many this is what they understand as Church.

So thank you.

Amen