

The Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee

End Conversion Therapy/Practices Virtual Engagement Session in private with the Committee and Individuals with lived experiences

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Participant – J

Committee Member - Pam Gosal

Janet grew up in West Lothian in the 80s and 90s, when there was no internet and no answers available to explain how she was feeling. During her teens, her sexual orientation played on her mind 24/7.

She initially came out to someone she trusted at the age of 19. They asked if she'd read the Bible. This made her retreat. When she was 21/22 she felt a bit better about herself, but still felt a sense of shame about her sexuality.

At 24, her sister encountered the Pentecostal Church. Both she and her sister had issues with substance and alcohol abuse. The church helped her to stop the substance and alcohol abuse.

However, over the next ten years she was subjected to a range of conversion practices.

The first time she interacted with the church pastors, she was told that 'Jesus will make you better', and 'Jesus loves you too much to leave you the way you are'. She now sees that this is a horrible thing to say to someone.

Janet opened up to the pastors quite quickly. They gave various reasons why she might be gay. Her relationship with her mum or dad, or if she'd experienced sexual abuse. She was abused at the age of eight, and this became where they focused their mission.

Two to three months after becoming a Christian, or 'born again', she would receive counselling from pastors in their own home. This involved the laying on of hands to 'cast out demons', 'homosexual demons'.

Later, these practices took place in the church and became more public. Pastors would be joined at the front of the church by church elders. She found the spotlight of the situation very damaging. Every single week, every encounter, she would walk away unchanged, and felt she was doing something else wrong.

The pastors undertook research hoping to find external experts that would 'correct' her sexual orientation.

Her first experience was a conference in Oxford, led by a Christian author. The conference included counselling and healing prayer. There was also a purification ceremony, "where they cleanse the filth of sins in our hands". The conference provided small group counselling, and again she was told that her sexuality was down to her relationship with her parents and the fact that she had been abused as a child. When she left she felt a sense of failure.

Her next experience was a weekend event held at a manor house in the English countryside. She was nervous because she would be sleeping at the house and sharing a room with other participants. The weekend was to include fellowship, eating, worship, counselling and ministry. She felt that the first evening was quite nice, that it was pleasant to sing songs and meet those around her. However, she said "it wasn't just a manor full of gay people, it was a manor full of broken people".

She was matched to a team of counsellors, one man and two women, and felt an attraction to one of these women. One of this team said that god had given them a vision of a really hard nut to crack, "and that was me". She felt terrified by this and did not sleep all night. In the morning she left. On her train journey home, she felt a failure once again.

Her next experience was at a ministry in Inverness, affiliated with Exodus International (Exodus International has now closed its doors as the leaders have renounced conversion therapy). The counselling offered was different, it got a bit deeper, and she felt exposed.

Again, it focused on her relationship with her mum and her dad. It was suggested that she judged her mother and ended up rejecting femininity. Because her dad was not a hugger and couldn't convey his emotions well, it was suggested she ignored men and chose same sex attraction instead. But, she described her dad as an "absolute star". When she came out to him when she got engaged, he said "how come it's taken so long to get a girlfriend?". She had waited until her 30s to tell him.

The counselling also focused on whether the abuse made her gay. It was the first time she was asked to go into great detail about the abuse and was asked to forgive her abuser in the same way that she was seeking forgiveness for sinful behaviour. She was told to imagine Jesus in the scene while she was abused. All she could see was Jesus standing on the side-lines doing nothing to stop the abuse. This was her catalyst for change, but it didn't happen straight away.

Her field of work has helped her to process what happened, and over the past ten years she has been able to come out and feel able to talk about this experience.