

**October 2012, Issue 3**

# **NEWSLETTER: Making Space for Queer-Identifying Religious Youth**

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LGYM (Lesbian and Gay Youth Manchester) has a new Chaplain, Reverend Dawn Harrison. Ria Snowdon recently met up with her to hear about her exciting new role working with LGBT young people in Manchester.

**What does your role as Chaplain at LGYM involve?**

It's important being visible with a collar on, showing people that actually God does love them, sparking different conversations, and doing one-to-ones discussing where people are with God.

**Were there any reservations regarding your new role?**

There are always reservations when it's a new role but only because it's never been done before. When I was thinking and praying about this I spoke to friends I went to college with, colleagues, and LGBT priests who I know and I asked 'what do I need to do?' They told me to follow my instincts,

follow God and see where it takes me.

**How did your new role come about?**

I got to know Sally Carr [Operational Director of LGBT Youth NW] when I was doing some youth work in Halton, Liverpool. She asked me if I would come over to Manchester and do a session at LGYM and I agreed. But when I got here I realised that actually this is a really big deal. I was speaking about safe places, how Jesus had safe places and how LGYM needs to be a safe place to the young people. I looked out and suddenly in my heart I saw there was a lot of broken people and a lot of people who felt that God didn't love them because of their sexuality. That's not true, God does love you. On that first evening I fell in love with the place and mostly the young people. I felt it's what I'm called to do, accompany people on their journey of faith, sit with them, talk and listen to them. So we started the process with me just com-



**Rev. Dawn Harrison**

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ing in now and again to see if the young people would take to me, because there was no point if they didn't like it or feel the need for a Chaplain. Then we began talking with the Church officials to see if they would go for it, which they have!

### **How much need is there for a Chaplain at LGYM?**

The few months I have been doing this I've found there to be a huge need for a chaplain in the world as well as LGBT communities. Where else do you get someone to sit down and actively listen to you, without any ulterior motive except from to sit and listen to you. You go for coffee with friends and you all take turns and talk, the same in families. But when you sit and talk with me, I'm not interested in me. I'm there to hear what's going on in your life and what your concerns are. This can be things like relationships, God stuff or not. I think that there are so few places in the world that that can happen, and I suspect that there's even less opportunities within LGBT communities. That makes this role really valuable.

### **So the people who speak with you, do they always consider themselves religious?**

Not always. And that doesn't bother me because part of my role is just being around and being seen. There was a discussion about if I should come to LGYM in my clerical collar? – vicar's outfit? or not and it was decided that I would. Just by being there with a collar on starts to break down some barriers. The staff and volunteers at LGYM all deeply care about young people and they've known them for quite some time. But I think to have somebody else go in who has no ulterior motive, who is not LGBT, I think for them makes a difference and again starts to break down barriers.

### **Do you think these young people experience LGBT and religious community as separate or as an integrated community?**

I think from some of the conversations I've had there's a mixture. There are some who see them as polar opposites, how can they be LGBT and in a church. And I think a lot of that is to do with the Church's publicity at the moment, it's not got great publicity regarding homosexuality which I don't think is helping. But then there are other people that I have spoken to who have been to Christian conferences, who do go to church. Then there are others who just don't believe at all. So I think there's a whole mixture. I think it's great that there are Christians who are happy with their sexuality but I worry about those that perhaps feel angry with the Church because of their sexuality.

### **Do you think the Church promotes a positive**

### **message to young people regarding homosexuality?**

Manchester Diocese is very good. They have an LGBT Communion once a month which we're going to start taking young people to from LGYM who want to go. They also celebrate big days so the Cathedral is putting something on for National Coming Out Day and the Bishop has an advisory group on sexuality.

### **Do you think young people in general are quite disconnected from the Church?**

I'm not sure about Manchester but Liverpool Diocese for the first time in 12 years is actually growing even within the 20s to 40s range. I think the age range that LGYM hits is an interesting one because they're too old for Sunday School but they don't really want to sit in a main service. A Sunday morning to be honest is not the best time for young people realistically! So I think there is a gap for these young people and it's why I think it's great that Manchester does 5.30 on a Saturday night for LGBT Communion because people are just out of work and before the nightlife starts. So you can actually get there and then go out for a night or finish work early and go. I think it's interesting though when crisis hits young people turn to the church. I don't think church and God is something every young person thinks about and wants to be actively involved in but when crisis happens they turn to the church and they turn to God.

### **How do you see your role developing in the future? How would you like to see it grow?**

At the moment it's a case of coming in and breaking down barriers. Just being around, sitting having tea, helping whoever is cooking in the kitchen, and joining in the sessions. I think long term the role is going to be once a month visit LGYM, perhaps run some sessions on 'What is the Bible?', 'Who is God?', 'What does Christianity say about Homosexuality?' and prioritise in my diary those four week-ends away. Realistically, from my experience of doing youth work, it's when young people are away, when it's more than just a four hour session, when they've been away with friends, when it's a safe environment, that's when you're going to get more questions. So that's a long term thing. I imagine more one-to-ones will happen as people see that actually I haven't got three heads, I do care, and I'm not going to bash them over the head with a bible. But in order to have the conversations you have to develop, I argue, a relationship built on trust. The only way I can do that is to be around and be involved.



# What the team members have been upto

## Forthcoming publication

### **Queering Religion, Religious Queers** (eds. Yvette Taylor and Ria Snowdon)

We are delighted to announce that this edited collection will be published with Routledge US in 2014.

This collection will consider how religious identity interplays with other forms and contexts of identity, specifically those related to sexual identity (Stein, 2001; Yip, 2005; Taylor, 2009, Taylor et al., 2010). It asks how these intersections are formed, negotiated and resisted across time and places: ‘contradictions’ are both privately and publically inhabited in the context of legislative change and increasing, but often competing, socio-legal recognition. Considerations of ‘sexual citizenship’ are still positioned as separate from and indeed negated by, religious rights. Questions around ‘queer’ engagements in civil partnerships and other practices (e.g. adoption) have created a number of provoking stances and policy provisions – but what remains unanswered is how people experience and situate themselves within sometimes competing, or ‘contradictory’, moments (Weeks, 2001, 2007) as ‘religious queers’ who may be tasked with ‘queering religion’.

Additionally, the presumed paradoxes of ‘marriage’, queer sexuality, religion and youth combine to generate a noteworthy generational absence. In looking at interconnectedness, this collection seeks international contributions which bridge the ‘contradictions’ in queering religion and in making visible ‘religious queers’. It hopes

to offer insight into older and younger people’s understandings of religiosity (where Anglican-based LGBTQ organisations are also demonstrably those of ‘older’ adults), queer cultures, and religious groups. A small but active religious minority in the US has received much attention for its anti-gay political activity; much less attention has been paid to the more positive, supportive role that religious-based groups play in e.g. providing housing, education and political advocacy for queer youth (see Browne, Munt, Yip, 2010).

Queer methodologies (Browne and Nash, 2010) and intersectional approaches (Taylor et al., 2010), potentially offer a lens both theoretically and methodologically, to uncover the salience of related social divisions and identities: the collection hopes to be innovative and sensitive to ‘blended’ identities and their various enactments.

Chapters variously consider the intersections (and contradictions) between religious and sexual identities, and their interplay with other forms of identity, groups, and contexts.

After an overwhelming response to the call for chapters we are also looking to publish a Special Issue on ‘Religion and Sexuality’, there will be more on this in the next newsletter once we have secured a journal!





## Problematic Publics? Making Space at the Academic Table

Yvette Taylor

The Weeks Centre for Social and Policy Research, LSBU and Newcastle University recently held a cross-institutional LGBT Dialogue Day event, designed to create an inclusive and open space to foster greater communication between those working *with and in* LGBT communities and *in and beyond* academic communities. Cross-institutional efforts attempt to cross spaces and subjects, to ‘reach out’ beyond the confines of institutional walls and boundaries, as a responsiveness to working collaboratively rather than competitively (see [Crisis, Competition and Claiming Space](#).) Attending the day were the ‘usual suspects’ of academics, appearing as Principle Investigators, Co-Investigators, Researchers: capitalised titles generally conveying a presence, appearance and authority. But efforts were made to extend conversations across the career stage and include PhD students as part of a broader publics, making new knowledges, methods and engagements. How to ‘appear’ in these dialogues? What is disappeared? How is space ‘claimed’ and maybe even re-arranged? Are there ‘*problematic publics*’ brought into effect as space is made at the academic table?

By invoking and disputing the boundaries of ‘dialogue’ and ‘community’, this event necessarily engaged in thinking through epistemological, theoretical and ethical issues in mobilising ‘city publics’ and engaging as a [‘public sociologist’](#). But even those terms, and *that language*, sounds academic, disengaging... and maybe even ‘problematic’. The entrepreneurial university – and indeed the ‘entrepreneurial’ funded researcher – has been tasked with making an impact in (non)academic communities, responsabilising citizens to come forward and make a difference as part of a ‘Big Society’ (as conveyed in shifting funding priorities).



What if efforts, sounds and *different* dialogues collide rather than cohere in these efforts and urges? Attending the event were policy makers and practitioners working in a number of NGOs and local government posts from across the UK. Between papers the audience was encouraged to break into small informal groups to reflect upon presentations but, arguably more importantly, to also draw from their own research, work and personal experiences. In discussing current LGBT lives, different issues and urgencies (including LGBT youth suicide, hate crime, religiosity, scene spaces...) were brought to the table and the diverse lived realities and needs of LGBT communities debated and deliberated. In debating, one attendee stated that it is ‘hard to find academic research that is actually helpful’ and that ‘Academic language is hard to grasp – pretentious, designed for academic papers’. Offending academics beware!

Desperately hoping to moving away from ‘pretention’, questions were posed such as: ‘what is dialogue and when do we need it?’, ‘how can we foster and improve dialogue to ensure it is inclusive?’, ‘what is the role of academic research in informing NGOs and wider LGBT communities?’ These may seem basic questions, instinctive opening points, but even with good intentions it is easy to stumble at these starting blocks, where it can be assumed that ‘we’ (LGBT researching, presenting, appearing individuals) are on the ‘same page’. Such basic questions and understandings need to be clarified over again rather than solved in entering the (university) room and sitting round the table -even if a shared one.

We were coming from - and going to - different places; the pain in underfunding for voluntary agencies in particular meant that this seat at the table was threatened. The ‘table’ might have to balance rather sparse offerings in times of funding crisis and ‘cutting back’ (impacting more on specific vulnerable communities). So, as resources are cut back should the ‘innovating’ ‘enterprising’ researcher perform a more rigorous ‘outreach’, to extend *her-self* as the resource, to offer up a meal of knowledge

transfer on the hot-topic of the day, selected from a changed menu of funding priorities and ‘rational’ scientific objectives? How to capture the *absence* at the table, when its shape and structure sets exchange up in particular ways? And often in particularly ‘greedy’ ways that anticipate a metric return rather than a more vulnerable ‘measure’ of community (dis)engagement. The drive forward to ‘reach out’ to other/every non-academic community also likely misses out the cyclical, returning and reciprocal dialogue of these exchanges (beyond a ‘valued’ economic exchange).

Consider these comments voiced at the Dialogue Day in response to the question of ‘What is dialogue and when do we need it?’: ‘It is a circular process, giving, receiving, processing, refining – otherwise there is no benefit to participants...’ and ‘Communication – developing relationships – exchanging ideas – development of thinking – it is a ‘vehicle’ for bringing the past forward and into the future – moving forward but recognising the sensitivity of the past’. Addressing these responses takes time, consideration and re-visitation as opposed to a snap-shot of ‘transfer’.

Urgencies demand responses and resources - rather than a completed ‘transfer’ - which was highlighted around the following issues in particular:

- ‘Translating legal frameworks into cultural shifts and positive lived experiences’.
- ‘Better education and educational practices for and about LGBT lives, individuals and families’.
- ‘Identifying geographic gaps in service provision and addressing these gaps’.
- ‘Lack of funding for LGBT services’.
- ‘LGB poverty’.
- Trans poverty.

Many of these issues cannot be solved simply by an invite to participate, rather efforts and communications have to be sustained. And there needs to be acknowledgement that sometimes efforts ‘fail’, compelling a honesty about the difficulty with dialogue as well as its collaborative potential (‘Openness in research and dialogue is needed’). Having hoped for and experienced an engaging event, I still want to problematise the ‘publics’ that are brought into effect and to consider what happens tomorrow the Dialogue Day is over.

One attendee was quick to follow-up, pulling me up for using the word ‘problematic’ too many times

(how academia re-fuels these ‘problematics’ as repetitions). She noted that the day was an ‘interesting experience’ as her first encounter with academic presentation: presenting-academics were ‘...much easier to listen to and understand when talking about, rather than reading your paper...’. Academic protocols (‘...I understand that there are probably protocols in academic circles on how folk are expected to do this...’) can and should be adapted. And academics do need to listen and respond to the communities they ‘invite in’. There are vulnerabilities in this, where the academic can also be on unfamiliar ground as she takes up space. One attendee best reflects this as an *ongoing effort* ‘...I was really glad to be invited to the event, and was very impressed with the diversity of attendees that you had invited. I don't want this to be an opportunity lost....’ What is ‘lost’ in (dis)engaging academia in a heightened moment of cut-backs and educational crisis? What could be lost - and what should be gained - as the academic travels around the table?

***‘...I was really glad to be invited to the event, and was very impressed with the diversity of attendees that you had invited. I don't want this to be an opportunity lost....’***

**Anon. LGBT Dialogue Day delegate**

Yvette Taylor, editor of *The Entrepreneurial University: Engaging Publics, Intersecting impacts* (forthcoming, Palgrave)

# Conferences

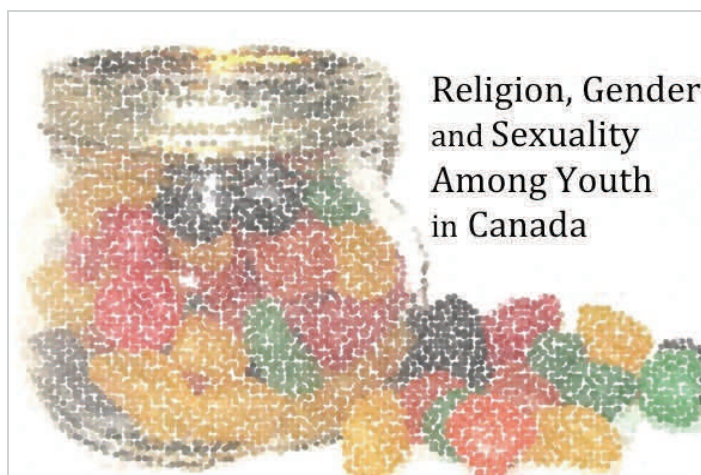
## Religion, Youth & Sexuality: Stories from the United Kingdom and Canada



I was recently invited to this seminar at the University of Nottingham by Prof. Andrew Kam-Tuck Yip (writes Ria Snowdon). It was organised for young people, academics and non-academic professionals and presented findings from two related research projects: the completed 'Religion, Youth, and Sexuality: A Multi-Faith Exploration in the UK' and the ongoing 'Religion, Gender, and Sexuality Among Youth in Canada'.

Sarah-Jane Page representing the research team for 'Religion, Youth, and Sexuality', which included Andrew Yip and Michael Keenan, gave an overview of methodology, participants, and key findings. The project set out to explore the lives and identities of religious young adults, aged between 18 and 25 from a variety of faith backgrounds in order to understand attitudes and practices around sexuality and how this was negotiated in relation to religious traditions. Tension and conflict, compartmentalisation, and accommodation were the three primary manifestations of participants' experiences in connecting faith and sexuality. A breakdown of their data can be found in their published report *Religion, Youth and Sexuality: Selected Key Findings from a Multi-Faith Exploration* (2011) and detailed analysis in their forthcoming book with Ashgate *Religious and Sexual Journeys: A Multi-faith Exploration of Young Believers*.

Growing out of this research, Pamela Dickey Young and Heather Shipley explained to delegates that their project 'Religion, Gender, and Sexuality Among Youth in Canada' was in the very early stages with their online survey about to go live. Whilst interested in international synergies, they outlined the different political landscape in Canada including same-sex marriage. Building on the work of Andrew Yip and his team they also added categories such as 'queer' and 'asexual' to questions on sexuality, identities they claim are increasingly familiar to young people. Watch out for Heather Shipley's forthcoming edited collection *Globalized Religion and Sexuality* and our co-authored chapter 'Mapping Queer, Mapping Me: Visualising Queer Religious Identity'.





# Conferences

## The Riots One Year On: On Being Present

Nicola Horsley and Yvette Taylor, Weeks Centre for Social and Policy Research, LSBU

The Weeks Centre proudly hosted a stimulating conference (28<sup>th</sup> Sept. 2012) on the theme of ‘Collisions, Coalitions and Riotous Subjects: the riots one year on’. The conference team was drawn from the Weeks Centre for Social and Policy Research (at LSBU) and members of the Institute for Policy Studies in Education (at London Met.): Yvette Taylor, Sumi Hollingworth, Ayo Mansaray and Kim Allen. What was evident before, during and after the conference was the real worth in cross-institutional responses, efforts and care (see Affecting Academia & Collective Presences). The conference was planned over the last year and was in part inspired by a piece for the *BSA Sociology & the Cuts* blog as a call to focus on the gendered aspects of protest, (in)visibility and the (dis)location of trouble on (certain) women’s bodies (those who don’t care). But our conversations and planning have continued at a time of heightened cut-backs, in and beyond higher education, when *certain* individuals (*certain* institutions) are more vulnerable than others. We wanted to respond proactively to the British Sociological Association’s call to work collaboratively, rather than competitively, across institutions, for all our educational (and employment) futures: we see that as also part of a public sociology which is accountable to a diverse body of students, where education isn’t owned by and done exclusively for white, middle-class institutions and audiences (and claimed by them as an enterprising diversity) (see Degrees of Diversity in Gay by Degree Index).

As an effort in still trying – to reflect on the ‘Riots’, to collaborate cross-institutionally, to practice a ‘public sociology’ – Yvette expressed hesitation about the ‘pace’ of academia as well as the space for reflection. Even as we go faster (rooms booked, registration received, food ordered). As co-organiser, Yvette hesitated somewhat over introducing the day as spotlight or showcase and in conveying some of the intellectual issues discussed. Precisely because they are *weighty* and should cause some pause. Co-organisers (Yvette, Kim, Ayo and Sumi) wanted to

be intellectually (rather than just administratively) present. There are real labours here that also need care. But who ‘owns’ the day was not determined in advance; we wanted it to be *everyone’s* and to be mindful of our different entry points into this space. Yvette welcomed the delegates with the story of the distillation of an hour’s conversation into a soundbite that appeared on the Times Higher Education website and considered what might be lost or gained by the reduction of ideas to measured forms. A sense of scale and balance came to characterise the day’s discussions, with Ken Roberts’ question of “why *don’t* (some) people riot?” answered from a number of perspectives. Les Back cited a You Tube clip of young people making “a calculation about what they had to lose” as evidence of a tangible metric that governed those who opted out of riotous behaviour. This point was later taken up by Owen Jones in his comment that rioters’ diffuse individual motivations were brought together by having “no secure future to risk”.

Jones invoked the shape of an hourglass to demonstrate a lack of opportunities in the middle of the job market, although an image of slowly mounting grains of sand could also serve for the gradual accumulation of injustices in a community’s collective memory – such as Jones’ example of the “constant, low-level harassment” of stop-and-search, or Teddy Nygh’s connection of frayed police relations after the deaths of local youths in custody – which, Nygh claimed “build up to a boiling point”. Ojeaku Nwabuzo suggested high and low profile injustices were inextricably linked in this collective consciousness. She argued that Mark Duggan’s death had “triggered” memories of injustice, just as individual incidences of stop-and-search cannot be separated from the wider discourse of which they are part.

This dual concern for macro and micro level practices was voiced by Geoff Bright in his analysis of acts of defiance in both dissent movements and the episodic ‘refusals’ of young people in education. Questions of scale were also raised by Tracey Jensen’s analysis of ‘cruel optimisms’ such as the virtue of thrift, as she quoted George Osborne, who equated his spending review with the behaviour of “every solvent household in the country”. Nicola Horsley’s paper questioned how macro level changes to young people’s empowerment could be achieved if they were denied agency in their everyday interactions

with teachers.

A similar consideration of depth had driven Teddy Nygh to take to the streets to participate in a “deeper conversation” in the wake of the riots. He found young people were frustrated by their representation in the media and that terms like ‘chavs’, ‘hoodies’ and ‘NEETs’ “de-humanise” individuals as much as racist comments like David Starkey’s assertion that “whites are becoming black”, which Katie Blood discussed earlier in the day.

The intersections of race and class in such ‘de-humanisation’ also came to the fore when panel member Lisa McKenzie described the criminalisation of residents of St. Anne’s in Nottingham. The

first panel’s theme of ‘reflections’ prompted discussion of the ‘chav’ as a racialised ‘white Other’ and the implications of guilt inherent in reporting that referred to Mark Duggan only by his surname, which was contrasted with representations of ‘Mr Tomlinson’ after a similarly controversial

death during G-20 summit protests. Clifford Stott urged that ‘the riots’ should also be properly identified, rather than rendered ‘mindless’ and Gillian Slovo agreed the riots were diffuse in nature. Tottenham’s events were said to stem from a “traditional race riot” that “turned into an anti-police riot that turned into a consumer riot”. But the broadcasting of Tottenham police’s failure to react galvanised rioters elsewhere, with various targets chosen by those “with not enough to lose”. Later in the day, Emma Casey explored the role of consumption in the riots and the flawed proposition that consumerism offers freedom. Casey’s conclusion that opportunities to acquire value or mobility are being eroded spoke to the theme of young people’s ‘manufactured choices’ in Nicola Horsley’s paper, as well as Gill Hughes’ assertion (following Lawler)

that young people are presented as the ‘wrong kind of selves’.

The second panel session considered ‘futures’ and Valerie Hey began with the statement that “the present is not what we expected of the future then”. She considered a cycle of excess followed by punishment to be “a very English phenomenon” but suggested that our current culture of possessive individualism without accountability threatens “fairness” and “decency” in public life. Neo-liberal visions of the future were troubled by the Weeks Centre’s Val Gillies as she considered Roseman’s question of “why does neo-liberalism hate kids?” and suggested that young people’s symbolism as the vessels through which the future is imagined conveys a cer-

tain power to disrupt order that is deemed threatening and has led to increasingly punitive practices in schools. Daniel Silver went on to problematise the positioning of police officers as working to improve futures by consulting with communities.



Overall, delegates were united in a call for a sense of scale that remembered the real people that have been reduced to subjects of discourse. Geoff Bright’s critique of ‘monstrous’ representations that allow property to be prioritised over people, and Tracey Gore’s analysis of policies being introduced in Liverpool – which will see poor people and ‘split’ families hit hard by universal credit and ‘bedroom tax’, leaving them with “no hope” – supported Lisa McKenzie’s call for “real people’s stories” to be heard. ‘The Riots’ and their effects still reverberate and the conference allowed for a pausing on, with and through people and places, rather than a moving on to ‘new data’. How to dwell in the locations that we inhabit – especially in a time of constrained (and constraining) spaces?



# Feature: Queer Identifying Religious Youth Advisory Group Member, Prof. Jodi O'Brien: *How Big is Your God?*

Professor Jodi O'Brien, Seattle University

I first began interviewing people who identify as openly queer and Christian in 1994. In the summer of that year I attended Pride parades in three different U.S. cities where I witnessed the otherwise merrily gay crowds throwing taunts and boos at marching representatives of Dignity (LGBTQ Catholics) and Affirmation (LGBTQ Mormons). The scene captured my curiosity: who are these people who want to be recognized for their religiosity among fellow queers, and accepted for their queerness among fellow Christians? The queer folks I knew who came from religious backgrounds, myself included, had either escaped the damning grip of Christianity in our youth, or accepted the cloak of shame conveyed in the Christian doctrine of “love the sinner but hate the sin.” These boldly out and proud queer Christians were news to me – and I wanted to understand them.

Countless hours of research later, I learned that wrestling the contradiction of being queer and Christian was a defining aspect of the lives of the people I interviewed. As a result of grappling with this contradiction, the individuals I came to know and respect had a keenly articulated sense of what it meant to be queer and what it meant to be Christian. The formation of a queer Christian identity involves transforming the discourse of shame and silence (and the peril of exile) into a narrative of pride and expression. For the people I talked with, this transformation came about as they began to realize that if a loving God loves and accepts all Her/His creations, then any church founded on Christian principles must also make room for all that God has created. A truly Christian church is one that is big enough to make room for its LGBTQ members. A truly Christian church has a very big god.

This realization spurred these self-identified queer Christians into action and they began to see themselves not as perverts and outcasts, but as children of God – sacrificial lambs even - who had a role to play in challenging the intolerance of their fellow congregants. As they saw it, God and Christianity are not the problem per se, rather the problem is the institutional church through which God's intent is interpreted. Openly queer Christians believe they have a place in God's plan; an opportunity to foment Christian reform and renewal. From this perspective, homosexuality poses a necessary and useful challenge to Christianity. By grappling with this theological challenge, Christianity might find its way to a bigger god.

As I moved deeper into this research project I came to understand that a social movement was taking place not in the polls, but in the pews of the churches rising to the challenge of acceptance and inclusion of *all* members. After completing the initial round of interviews with queer identified Christians, I embarked on a full ethnographic study of some of the first Christian (all Protestant in this case) congregations to adopt ‘open and affirming’ charters. This process is also one of wrestling contradictions: congregations struggle to find a balance between the authority of the institution and the belief that god's love is dynamic and fluid. Those churches that eventually articulate an ‘open and affirming’ identity emphasize a theology of ‘unconditional love.’ Rather than being a keeper of rules, ‘god’ becomes an expression of agreement and affirmation among a collective body united in spirit and intent. The more extensive the reach of the group's love, the bigger their god.

This deeply reflective engagement with the contradictions of sexuality and Christianity has resulted in a broad-scale social movement across Canada, the US, and the UK that has stretched both the possibilities for individual queer Christians, and for congregations.

Fast forward to 2010. Fifteen years later and I am watching another kind of parade: a protest. Hundreds of students, faculty, staff, and local citizens have gathered in the streets of Milwaukee, Wisconsin to protest the dismissal of a recently hired dean at Marquette University. MU is a Jesuit Catholic University and I am that would-be dean. I have been teaching and conducting research in another Jesuit university for sixteen years; I am also openly queer. The search committee that courted me to consider the position of Dean of Arts and Sciences emphasized the need for someone like me to “form bridges with the marginalized communities” that make up the neighborhoods surrounding Marquette. Apparently, I was the answer to their prayers: A dean who would represent the spirit and intent of the community; a community with the courage to take on the tensions and contradictions of Catholicism in contemporary times.

I accepted the position because this was a mandate I could embrace. A week or so after all the paperwork had been signed and I was considering what colors to paint the dean’s office suite, I received a phone call from the university President who told me that they intended to revoke my hire as dean. Although he didn’t specify the source, he intimated the intercession from ‘on high’ (i.e., an archbishop). When the news broke, the community outrage was enormous. *The New York Times* and the *Chronicle of Higher Education* carried the story and overnight I became a household name in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. I also became a parody of decades of my own research.

Historian Lisa Duggan uses the term, ‘homonormativity’ to describe the current socio-political climate in which the zeitgeist seems to be, ‘we’re here, we’re queer, let’s all go to IKEA.’ But underneath this sheen of acceptance, a more subtle but pervasive form of prejudice prevails. In the ‘homonormative’ moment, acceptance is also a form of branding. LGBTQ interests and issues become signifiers of a ‘generally liberal’ orientation, especially in churches looking to attract new members.

Many religious communities (as well as universities with a social justice mission) intentionally and strategically cultivate inclusivity with marginal groups, especially queer youth. Inclusivity becomes a kind of *raison d’être* that serves these institutions in their search for a unique and compelling identity in a competitive market (and both churches and universities must vie for participants). In this environment, queer Christians are welcome and celebrated as markers of diversity and recipients of earnestly intended social justice. They are made to feel as if they have a place at the table. And they often do - until their presence becomes inconvenient or they fail to conform to the ‘new normal’ of inclusion in which we’re all welcome, as long as we don’t act ‘too queer.’

Theological Theresa Tobin suggests that ‘spiritual violence’ occurs when a religious institution purposely fosters connections with the representatives of marginalized groups, only to degrade and dismiss them as “not religious enough” when they become inconvenient.

The cultural politics of recent decades suggest that LGBTQ identities and issues are the source of both the promise of gender and sexual justice and also the threat of a civilization in decline. We are simultaneously crucibles of progress and scapegoats of perversion. We may come out over and over again, but do we really ever come ‘home’? And what would that ‘home’ look like? Religious communities that struggle with the question of making space for queer members are practiced in these questions. As activists and researchers in this arena, we should be especially attuned to churches that are not just open and affirming in name (with the unintended but likely possibility of spiritual violence toward queer members who stick out too much), but are embracing the tensions and contradictions of a queer theology with all its possibilities for generating a bigger god.

# Project Reports

## Making Space for Queer Identifying Religious Youth (2011-2013)



By Yvette Taylor

When you think of religion, do you then think of sexuality? Does the connection then become a drastic disconnection, a sentiment of incompatibility and impossibility, as the mind wanders over abortion debates, family planning, and the ‘sins’ of homosexuality? These collisions are apparent in recent UK debates on the [Civil Partnership Act \(2004\)](#), The Equality Act (2006) and the proposed [Con-Lib plans to legalize gay marriage by 2015](#). All have generated significant controversies, frequently positing Christian ‘backlash’ against more integrative calls for inclusion. Representations of ‘sexual citizenship’ are still positioned as separate from and indeed negated by religious rights and some religions are (mis)positioned as more hostile, tolerating and welcoming than others. Sweeping claims are made about the representation of broader secular publics where some suggest that [‘Religious Leaders are out of Touch with Sexuality Issues’](#). Over time policy-makers and the media have variously positioned religious leaders and communities as (un)wise and (in)competent citizens; with – or without – the capabilities and connectedness to contemporary British publics. The voices of those most vocal are heard here, where gaps exist between prescription and practice and between official institutional stances – in being in or out of touch – and what is experienced on the ground at congregational level. Against this often highly intense social context young LGBT Christians try to find a sense of belonging and identification, which [Making Space for Queer Identifying Religions Youth](#) (ESRC, 2011-2013) focuses upon. Starting with a focus on the [Metropolitan Community Church \(MCC\)](#), the project offers insight into the management and development of excluded and in some ways ‘contradictory’ identity positions. How might religion *and* sexuality serve as a vehicle for various forms of belonging, identification and political expression where these have been pitted against one another?

Young people are often invisibilised in Equalities provisions which speak to/produce the adult consumer as tax-payer, employee, consumer, resident with individual/familial responsibilities and capacities, economically, socially and politically. These capacities are loaded with value, both morally and materially, and youth are positioned as becoming ([future citizens](#)) and ‘at risk’. Questions around the propriety of gays and lesbians engaging in civil partnerships and other practices (e.g. adoption) have created a number of thought provoking stances in a heightened moment of sexual citizenship– but what remains unanswered is how *young* people experience and situate themselves within such moments. They are seen as not-yet inhabiting these (adult) spaces and subjectivities, where even attention to the rise of alternative spiritualities and to processes of (re)sacralisation have again been skewed in representing older adults. At the same time, sexual/religious debates continue about the ‘best interests’ of young people, now incited to act to protect certain futures as *The Guardian* headline reveals [‘Catholic church urges pupils to sign anti-gay marriage petition’](#).

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In sharp contrast from the above headlines, many participants have so far spoke about ‘coming-out’ before God as a religious act, an act of conscience and care, of being true to oneself, one’s family and a larger community. There were expressed worries about acceptance and forgiveness, with some respondents quoting from Scripture as well as querying these statements about the non-acceptance of homosexuality



(sometimes reinforced in schooling settings as in the above headline example). For instance, Andrew (24) expressed concerns about Church debates and anxieties about sexuality, reconciling this in his belief that he, too, was ‘created by God’. These sentiments of being ‘born this way’ whether as an act of God, or a biological fixity, have been long debated within and outside LGBT community: clearly these debates still resonate for a younger population. Interviewees so far have been mostly from middle-class backgrounds and these class positions were reflected in anticipated – and actualised – trajectories, via higher education, which for some acted as a buffering zone to ‘come out’ in terms of religion and sexuality (see Liz McDermott in [Classed Intersections: Spaces, Selves, Knowledges](#)):

*‘...if you’d asked me kind of within the first three months before I went to University ‘How long have you got until you go to University?’ I could tell you the exact number of days; I started counting down from 100. When I was in year 9 I could tell you, it was like ‘6 years until I go to University, 5 years before I go to University’...’ (Nicola, 21).*

That said, in anticipating certain futures, even more middle-class young people felt doubt about educational and employment success, where being young was experienced as being ‘in-between’, as a ‘queer’ state in an adult world. What has emerged is the importance of education in facilitating and blocking belonging, mobility and identification, with all interviewees expressing a policing of gender and sexual identities in the classroom: in the context of Equalities legislation these educational endurances and inequalities stick with young people as they map their own pathways, intersecting religion and sexuality in their lives in a context which frequently positions these as impossible, incompatible and contradictory. As the young people’s maps and diary exercises show, they do this with creativity, ‘making space’ for themselves and challenge ongoing inequalities through alternative and ‘queer’ evaluations of community, while still negotiating the material forces that restrict young people’s uptake of public space. Their accounts present challenges for compulsory and post-compulsory educational provisions, where the language of ‘tolerance’, ‘inclusion’ and ‘acceptance’ and the reality of exclusion, marginalisation and discrimination, often bring into effect the *social* ‘contradictions’ shaping young people’s movements.

## Making Space for the Straight Talking/Acting Interviewer?

By Ria Snowdon

Towards the end of 2011 I made several research trips to the beautiful Cathedral city of Durham in the north-east of England. As Research Associate on the project [Making space for queer-identifying religious youth](#) (ESRC 2011-2013, PI [Yvette Taylor](#)) I was there interviewing young LGBT Christians who had responded to the [call for participants](#) in Newcastle and surrounding areas.

On my final trip I was feeling particularly harassed as I negotiated the steep icy bank from Durham train station down into the bustling city centre with its sprawling Christmas market and abundance of shoppers. It was bitterly cold but my coat wouldn’t fasten. My swollen feet and ankles precluded sensible footwear, sheepskin boots offering comfort but no grip on the precarious frost and ice patches. As I approached the Market Place I was running a little late and would need to call the first participant. My blood ran cold(er) when I realised I’d left my phone on the train – a little (a lot) later and I was back at the top of the hill having an animated discussion with a train station inspector about the absurdity of giving me a telephone number to report my lost mobile phone. A pay phone, no change, and the kindness of a passing commuter who loaned me her phone allowed me to arrange retrieval of my lost property for the following day. Now running exceedingly late, I jumped into a taxi and was dropped at Durham University Library, the location for my first interview of the day.

Several interviews ensued at various locations across the city with me arriving flushed, out of breath, and late. This was partly due to the time it had taken to trace the whereabouts of the lost phone but also my utter failure to appreciate the impact my slowing gait would have on a tight interview schedule. Apologising profusely and gushing about steep hills, lost property, and the dangers of inadequate gritting on pave-

-ments, individual participants invariably recommended a warm drink, sought out comfortable chairs, and even reprimanded me for not suggesting we meet closer to the station, after all ‘You’re what...?’ I fill in the blanks ‘Seven months pregnant’.

Arranging the interviews, I would advise participants that they could identify me by my green woollen coat. For the most part, I consciously held back that I was heavily pregnant in the pre-interview correspondence, despite the fact my burgeoning bump was more of a distinguishing trait than an increasingly ill-fitting coat.

This was unusual for me as I loved being pregnant, chatting happily with strangers about the prospective gender and lists of names for my unborn baby, and acquiescing comfortably to every request to stroke or ‘feel’ the bump. But arranging interviews via email, Facebook, and text message I was busy creating an alter ego that I hoped would appeal to, rather than alienate, respondents. When wrapping up with the project’s first interviewee, she said that she would see if her girlfriend wanted to take part and let her know that I wasn’t the stuffy academic they had both expected. Apparently I seemed a lot older in my emails. Although my vanity applauded (she thinks I’m young!) I became concerned about how respondents perceived me with this anecdotal evidence that one potential participant was already off put. Thereafter, I experimented with emoticons and reduced the frequency that my email signature appeared in ongoing conversations, something which denoted my status as academic (and ‘stuffy’).

And in truth, I feared that my pregnancy further marked me out as the respondents’ ‘other’, particularly as it hinted towards my ‘straight’ identity. Would young LGBT Christians be able to establish any kind of trust and rapport with me as a thirty year old straight agnostic, an ‘outsider? The reality, however, was much more complex.

More often it seemed to be the respondents’ identity rather than my own that made them pause on whether they should get involved with the project. Rebecca raised concerns in an email before our initial meeting that she didn’t identify as LGBT, instead she formed relationships with people based on personality rather than sex/gender but found the bisexuality label to be ‘too logocentric’. She therefore queried ‘if I am what you are looking for’. On the other hand, Susan identified as a lesbian but questioned if she was Christian ‘enough’, highlighting the ruptures she experienced between these intersecting identities:

‘...[I] am a Christian in a sense that I believe in the doctrines of Christianity, but due to my sexual orientation I guess choose not to worship God, or he chooses not to bother with me (hmm...). Would that still be applicable given that I’m not a worshipping practicing Christian, just a believing Christian...?’

Whilst Rebecca and Susan went on to participate in the study, a young man chose not to take part because as an Evangelical he identified as *Christian* and was unable to reconcile the project’s use of ‘religious’ (particularly in the title) which he could not identify with. Another respondent didn’t proceed because whilst she identified as a gay Christian she felt her experiences were too normative (not ‘queer’) being brought up by a loving and supportive family and worshipping in an inclusive church.

But it wasn’t just sexual and religious identity that gave participants reason to pause over their involvement with the study, class was also a concern. Andrea heard the project’s Principal Investigator, Yvette Taylor, speak at the Sexuality, Gender Identity, and Faith conference hosted by Gender and Law at Durham University (GLAD). Yvette touched on the fact that initial respondents were predominantly middle class and Andrea, fitting this category, wondered if there would be a place for her participation (there was). This, however, speaks to the difficulty we have encountered in reaching respondents beyond the educated middle class in the first phase of our fieldwork (see Liz McDermott in Classed Intersections: Spaces, Selves, Knowledges).

University LGBT societies have enthusiastically supported the project sending bulletins to their extensive mailing lists and promoting our search for participants through their active Facebook groups. Similarly, the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) has provided a natural starting point for our research due to its

mantra of inclusivity and celebration of LGBT sexuality and spirituality. ‘You don’t have to have a PhD to worship here but it helps’ joked a member of their Newcastle congregation. This suggests to us anecdotally at this stage that there are significant numbers of university educated members, something borne out in those we interviewed from the church. Whilst LGBT youth groups, support services and publications have also put out our call for participants, respondents through these groups and media remain relatively privileged, raising interesting methodological questions about confidence to respond to research of this type (see ‘Hidden in the Small Ads’, [Taylor, 2004](#)).

But let’s get back to the bump – rather than alienating participants, I think it helped to empower. At any other moment, personal questions are only asked by the interviewer but my pregnancy gave respondents a hook into my personal life, allowing them to unravel my identity on their terms, facilitating a mini-interview of sorts (‘...and the father...?’).

The bump is now a seven month old baby. I have returned from Maternity Leave and am about to embark on the Manchester interviews. Importantly, this first phase of interviews showed me that whilst I might have considered myself an outsider because I’m not an LGBT Christian, these young people are much more than their sexual and religious identities. How these intersect with other factors such as class, gender, and ethnicity sees my status shift imperceptibly to insider and back again (see ‘[Theorizing Intersectionality and Sexuality](#)’, Taylor et al., 2010). The rapport I’ve built with some of these young people has often made exiting the field difficult, but that’s another article 😊





# Have your say...

Leave your comments on our website  
<http://queerreligiousyouth.wordpress.com/>  
or Facebook group 'Queer Religious Youth'.

*Here is a selection of recent posts and discussions...*



*Timothy Kurek, a graduate of the evangelical Liberty University, decided to 'walk in the shoes' of a gay man and emerged with*

*his faith strengthened.*

*For the article in The Guardian, see:*

**Why a Bible belt conservative spent a year pretending to be gay**

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/oct/13/bible-belt-conservative-year-gay>  
(13 October, 2012)

*Your responses:*

**Person A:** Good on him for having the courage to do it, and great that his views changed and that he was able to experience homophobic violence firsthand. Slightly dodgy though. First-off, he will never truly know what it means to actually be lgbt\*. Secondly, shouldn't empathy be possible, and important, even without personal experience? And thirdly, the 'gay culture' is majorly stereotyped in this article.

**Person B:** "Early on Kurek decided to try to acclimatise to Nashville's gay scene by visiting a gay nightclub. Entering alone, he soon found himself dragged on to the dance floor by a shirtless muscular man covered in baby oil and glitter. As the pair danced to Beyoncé, the man pretended to ride Kurek like a horse to the disco music and called him a "bucking bronco". It was all a bit too much, too soon. "I want to vomit. I need a cigarette. I feel like beating the hell out of him," Kurek writes."

Gay tourism of the worst kind and an almost subtle homophobia at work. It's a little like me dressing up in blackface, attending a "black nightclub", and then

complaining how "I want to vomit" when Black women approach me with sexual advances. There is, as Alex notes, the implicit suggestion that the entire gamut of the ontology of LGBT discrimination, struggle, and history can be intelligibly known by a "one year pass to Gayville". If anything this article undermines the belief of most LGBT that their sexuality is innate and thus their experience and shared history is innate. Typical for the Guardian.



*Statistics Canada said it may have overestimated by as many as 4,500 the number of same-sex married couples in parts of the country.*

*For the article, see:*

**Census may have accidentally counted roommates as married same-sex couples**

[www.theglobeandmail.com](http://www.theglobeandmail.com)  
(19 September, 2012)

**Person A:** what a surprise... Did this census do anything right?

**Person A:** \*did any of the recent censuses do anything right

**Person B:** You completed the last census? Problems?

**Person A:** They only had a sex category, not gender, and when I asked them about it they were at first confused and then basically told me to write my gender, which means they had confused sex with gender

**Person B:** We need a 'dislike' button. Were they not prepared at all for trans-respondents?

**Person A:** nope. Not at all

***Compelling Diversities, Educational Intersections: Policy, Practice, Parity***

**Gender and Education Association Biennial Conference 2013**

**Weeks Centre for Social and Policy Research, London South Bank University**

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**Prof. Lisa Adkins, University of Newcastle, Australia:**  
What Do Wages Do? Feminist Theory After the Financial Crisis

**Prof. Val Gillies, Weeks Centre, LSBU:**  
From Baby Brain to Conduct Disorder: the New Determinism in the Classroom

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Dr Kalwant Bhopal, University of Southampton

Dr Kay Inckle, Trinity College Dublin

Dr Jayne Osgood, London Metropolitan University

Dr Vanita Sundaram, University of York

Dr Jin Haritaworn, York University

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The (re)making and (un)doing of privileged identities

The politics of diversity and 'different' differences

Widening participation: Access and existences

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Please save your abstracts (250 words) with author name followed by GEA\_2013 (e.g. Taylor Y\_GEA\_2013) with a brief bio. and contact details to **GEA2013Abstracts@lsbu.ac.uk**. The deadline for submissions is **12<sup>th</sup> November 2012**. Limited Bursaries and/or discount fees will be available for a number of postgraduate and early career researchers, some UK-based school teachers and a small number of academics based in resource-poor countries whose work directly relates to gender in education. Bursary details available at [http://www.genderandeducation.com/issues/conference2013\\_cfp/](http://www.genderandeducation.com/issues/conference2013_cfp/)