

## **Concerned Students.**

### **A Letter to the Bishop of Oxford.**

Dear Bishop Steven,

We write to express our sincere condolences to you.

Some of the conservative churches of Oxford have branded you a heretic or false teacher for proposing same-sex marriage. Turned away from Holy Communion by Reverend Vaughan Roberts and others who similarly fight against the progress you seek for the Church of England. Such behaviour is lamentable, or perhaps laughable, and no doubt creates a deeply personal and painful situation for you. Our hearts go out to you.

Perhaps we should all be grateful for five hundred year's civilising progress in our human rights. Unlike previous 'heretic' bishops, who were dragged outside these city walls and burnt at the stake in the ditch that is now Broad Street, today you escape more lightly.

You are being judged and rejected for your beliefs. We, however, are being judged for who we are: forced to choose between those we love, and churches that have become our spiritual homes. Now, finding yourself cast out and subject to such judgement, perhaps you can relate to us with greater empathy as an ally. Personal experience, as you now realise, is a far more authoritative and painful teacher than intellect and abstract theories. That has certainly been the case for us.

### **Oxford Safe Churches Project.**

During the summer of 2023, we conducted an in-depth analysis of the "*Attitudes towards Queer Christians in Oxford Churches*". This research was motivated by shared personal experiences of exclusion and feeling unsafe in local churches, as a direct result of our queer identity and relationships.

We watch in dismay as freshers are drawn into churches where they are initially welcomed, only later to encounter theology, policy, and practice which oppose their queer identities and relationships. The effect upon them and their faith can be devastating.

Some of these churches spend vast amounts on marketing towards students, and employ several student workers: simultaneously keeping their attitudes towards queer identity and relationships carefully, and intentionally hidden.

To be 'lovingly welcomed' and integrated into a church community, only to find out much later that leadership are opposed to your queer identity, or your relationships, can be both traumatic, and deeply wounding. This results in being forced to choose between the person you love, or your church family and spiritual home – knowing that you cannot have both. Or to find life-long celibacy imposed upon you, failure to do so, resulting in exclusion from full participation in the life of your church.

In the light of intense pressures of studying at university, students are in desperate need of an environment that nourishes, and nurtures their spiritual health. To find this being ripped away from them at a moment's notice, without any warning, is distressing and leaves life-long scars.

The aim of our project is to collaborate with churches and church leaders to minimise the risk of spiritual harm to LGBTQ+ people through honesty, transparency, and accountability of theology, beliefs, pastoral policy, and practises. To this end, we encouraged each church to complete a survey and maintain a channel of open communication for dialogue. Following months of research, and hundreds of hours of work, our findings were published in a 32-page report in October 2023.

Our findings were deeply distressing. Conservative churches keep their theology and pastoral practice hidden, to attract and win as many students as possible into church membership, this has led to lasting and irreversible damage in some vulnerable LGBTQ+ people's lives.

Had we known what these churches believe and practise, we would never have stepped through their doors.

We hope you will take the time necessary to read, study, and reflect upon the information and testimonies gathered by the project. We think you will agree with us, that the report and testimonies are deeply distressing. The secrecy certain churches employ, to hide their

theology, beliefs, and pastoral practices, is far from Christian behaviour. *Should the gospel, in its fullness, be hidden?*

### **The Damage Being Done.**

It is clear that the ‘*gospel*’ we are suffering under is about dominion, authority, and power. Power to judge, condemn, exclude, reject, and demonise. This gospel, rooted in fear and the threat of hell, seems perilously devoid of love, except perhaps the pity that claims to save us from hell.

Our most serious concern is how they will pastor and disciple children, students or vulnerable people who are LGBTQ+, *with the same threat of hell?*

It needs to be clearly understood that some students have come to Oxford, in part to escape the judgement and rejection of Christian fundamentalist homes and families who do not accept their LGBTQ+ identity. This means that, for many of these students, church becomes their chosen family. To suffer a second judgement and rejection from their new chosen church family can destroy people’s faith, and ability to trust in church, authority, or God.

The effects of this are clear to us, and anyone who knows LGBTQ+ Christians that have attempted to find a spiritual home in supposedly ‘*welcoming*’ conservative churches. Sometimes the shock that leadership opposes our identity and/or our relationships feels like a deep betrayal, causing loss of faith, doubt, despair, confusion, and far worse. Far too many of us have suffered and battled with suicidal ideation, self-hatred, and self-harm, as a direct result of the judgement, exclusion, and rejection, suffered in some of your churches.

*Three of the largest student-oriented churches in the city, are part of the Oxford Diocese, and under your care. They carefully hide their theology, pastoral policies, and practise, from public scrutiny.*

Foundational to these CoE city churches and clergy is the belief that we, as LGBTQ+, should repent of our identity being lesbian, gay, bisexual, or trans. This identity is declared a heresy, a lie, a

deception, even a torment of the devil, to be renounced and repented of.

At the heart of this deeply damaging and spiritually abusive practice, is a theology that was laid out and revealed by some of the same clergy, in their letter to you, *'Concerned Anglicans'* (2018).

In this, they are clearly asking that we, as LGBTQ+, should repent of our queer identities *"and find our identity in Christ"*.

This is not only a theological and ontological impossibility, but also profound hypocrisy on their part. No one's identity is solely in Christ. We are, by virtue of being human, earth bound, with feet of clay. Even clergy, and bishops, will forever have their identity rooted in their earthly existence, roles, and positions within society.

They cling to their identities and power as priests, whilst demanding we renounce our identity as queer?

The theological, and pastoral implications of this for LGBTQ+ students, and especially for children growing up in these churches, is nowhere more tragically demonstrated than in the theological, ideological, and pastoral position of Reverend Vaughan Roberts, St Ebbe's Church, and Living Out ministries.

Roberts believes he is not gay, but that he *'suffers from same sex attraction'*.

This is but one of several possible perspectives, it is not an ultimate or absolute truth. It is his personal opinion, and nothing more. His personal views fly in the face of the overwhelming weight of science, and even of many of his conservative colleagues of faith, who hold that 'same sex attraction' is both natural, and irreversible.

Whilst it is reasonable for Roberts to hold these views on a personal level, about how he chooses to identify, very serious concerns must be raised when they become the foundation for church theology, ideology, and pastoral practice. When his beliefs guide the churches pastoral principles by which to disciple students and young people, the potential for serious spiritual abuse is evident, even if unintentional, and practised with sincere conviction.

Some of your clergy and churches not only keep their theology and beliefs hidden, but they also deny wider dialogue about these issues

within their churches. As such they enforce a toxic culture of secrecy, silence, and fear over our queer identity, and queer issues. Many have refused to even look at the *'Living in Love and Faith'* materials, whilst at the same time boasting and celebrating being churches of *'diversity'*. In another demonstration of hypocrisy, recent years have seen the drive for church leadership to repent of their previously racist cultures and attitudes, yet, the same leadership that seeks to become racially diverse, simultaneously denies diversity in matters of sexuality and gender.

### **Concerns of LGBTQ+ students.**

We recognise the personal cost of being the lone, and first, bishop to propose equal marriage. Your proposal, "Together in Love and Faith" is a vital step forward. However, we are deeply concerned about your reluctance to hold individual churches or clergy accountable for the harm caused to LGBTQ+ people.

*'While we need to acknowledge the pain and difficulty of LGBTQ+ people, given the present position of the Church, I am very hesitant indeed about ascribing this pain to particular individuals, or groups within the Church, or as the consequence of particular theologies. I am equally hesitant about reaching for the emotive language of abuse, or about any language that attributes individual blame in general terms, to pastors or to churches, or that suggests that the affliction of pain and difficulty is intentional.'*

This approach lacks desperately needed compassion and empathy for those LGBTQ+ people who have suffered spiritual abuse. It seems more focused on shielding clergy and churches from accountability, rather than addressing the harm they may have caused through their words, actions, and teachings.

Such a stance hinders the effective safeguarding of LGBTQ+ people in our churches. The godly process of repentance is essential for healing and forgiveness to occur in the institutions which have held and preached damaging theology and practice, and for the individuals who have suffered from them. It seems you wish to move past the era of 'conversion therapy' without engaging in the necessary processes of repentance, restitution, or healing for its victims and survivors.

There are countless testimonies from LGBT+ individuals who have been deeply hurt by specific clergy and churches. Some of these cases have occurred under your governance. The pain and suffering from this abuse, is sometimes life-long. The words you used in the above statement quoted, are seen by many as dismissive of their experience and suffering.

Wounds that we carry, stem from the actions and behaviours of individual clergy and churches. Avoiding the emotional language of abuse and the responsibility of individuals does not change this reality. In line with this, our revision of the Oxford Safe Churches report will continue to provide concrete evidence of the harm caused by specific clergy and churches.

We have no desire to replicate the kind of witch-hunt Christianity indulged in, but we do expect priests, above all people, to demonstrate humility, and leadership, in reflection, dialogue, confession, repentance, and restitution, to those they have wounded by their words and actions, whether intentional or otherwise.

Our goal is not to seek revenge but to ensure that such abuses never happen again. This is not about retribution, but about restoration. We believe in the importance of repentance and restoration for both victims and perpetrators, in line with God's desire for reconciliation and healing.

For the safety of LGBTQ+ students and individuals in your diocese, it is crucial for churches and clergy to be transparent about their past and present beliefs and practices regarding LGBTQ+ people, especially concerning conversion therapy. An apology without the fruit of repentance is worthless.

We urge you to reconsider your statement, and to affirm that individual clergy and churches will be held accountable for any spiritual abuse of LGBTQ+ people, past, present, or future. It is essential for the health and integrity of our Church to address and repent for the harm caused, embracing God's gift of repentance for true reconciliation and healing of all concerned.

As Bishop, overseer of the flock, it is your responsibility to guide and encourage your priests and churches to acknowledge and take ownership of the harm they have caused to LGBTQ+ individuals. This includes fostering an environment of repentance and accountability, ensuring that the Church is a place of healing and reconciliation for all.

## **Hearing From You.**

Bishop Steven,

We are disheartened that you have hidden from giving a formal response to the Oxford Safe Churches Project, when we know you have seen the report.

Your silence is deafening.

We believe that there should be official response to the Oxford Safe Churches Project, and to the very painful testimonies it contains; addressed to the victims, survivors, and individuals represented in it, from yourself, and the Oxford Diocese.

**We are asking for a formal and public response from you** regarding the distressing testimonies of LGBTQ+ people who have suffered spiritual abuse within your churches and from your clergy.

For many of us, the lasting damage of *'conversion therapy'* and associated practices of coercive *'prayer'* and *'pastoral guidance'* is all too clear. Regrettably, some of this has happened under your tenure and authority.

**We are seeking assurance from you, that your Safeguarding Officers have authority and power to help protect us** in any further reported instances of wounding or abuse by your clergy and churches, particularly those churches who have now rejected your governance. That you will not hesitate to hold individual clergy and churches accountable and responsible, in the event of the spiritual abuse of LGBTQ+ people, whether past, present, or future.

Following the decision of certain conservative churches to withdraw their parish share from Oxford Diocese and place it within the *'Alliance's'*, *Ephesians Fund*, and/or the *Oxford Good Stewards Trust*, **we would like to know how you intend to protect and safeguard LGBTQ+ students and people in these same churches, who are rejecting Oxford Diocese Governance.**

It is obvious, within the authoritarian cultures of these conservative churches, that Parish Safeguarding Officers will only be elected if they hold to the same theology and pastoral beliefs as their leadership. As such, we can expect unconscious cognitive bias in their treatment of us as LGBTQ+ people. For us, as LGBTQ+ students, we are facing a *safeguarding crisis*. In these churches, *our identities and*

*relationships are the subject of their judgements, authority, power, and discipline.*

Consequently, we believe that your current safeguarding structures, policies, and procedures fail to protect us. Such churches cannot be seen as spiritually safe for LGBTQ+ people unwilling to commit to the demand for lifelong celibacy. As such, we warn that the Diocese's safeguarding structures, policies, and practices are unlikely to be of any help to those experiencing the same spiritual abuse that we and many others have suffered, as documented in the Oxford Safe Churches report.

It is a safeguarding tragedy waiting to happen, if it is not already happening.

### **Steps Forward.**

On our part, we will endeavour to maintain and review the Oxford Safe Churches project each year, exposing those churches who hide their damaging theology regarding LGBTQ+ people. Adding to the testimonies of abuse, and reviewing churches and clergy's theological, and pastoral positions.

Your official response is requested in time for us to publish a revised version of the report in September 2024.

Within this revised version, we hope to include the **Oxford Diocese's official response to this crisis in pastoral care and safeguarding**. We believe this is the best way to help incoming students make a more fully informed decision about which of your churches to attend, and which to avoid.

In the case where churches have rejected your governance and that of the Diocese, we urge you to make this publicly known through publishing a full list of these churches. Failure to do so would implicate you in covering up for churches and clergy who keep their theology, pastoral policies, and practices hidden from the public.

We appreciate your time and concern over these deeply distressing matters and look forward to hearing your official response as soon as possible.



Yours Sincerely,

The Oxford Safe Churches Team