

Rejecting Rejection: My Journey to Becoming an LGBTI Ally

Introduction

Tonight we're exploring the idea of 'Rejecting Rejection' — specifically the rejection of LGBTI people by some Christians and Christian churches. This is perhaps one of the most difficult topics before the church today. There is heat and hate on all sides, and I am very much aware that what I share tonight may further divide. That's not my intention, but I do recognise the risk.

There are variations in the acronyms used to describe the Rainbow Community, but tonight I'm mainly using the initials LGBTI, for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex — distinct and sometimes overlapping groupings. I am deliberately including 'I' for Intersex as this group says they often feel overlooked and misunderstood even within the Rainbow Community. One-in-2000 babies are born with ambiguous genitalia so that doctors cannot easily decide at birth if they are male or female genitalia, with one-in-300 sent for further investigation. Life for them can be extremely difficult, particularly as their gender is often assigned before they can communicate their own sense of gender identity. So I want to include intersex people this evening. I have chosen not to use the letter 'Q' for Queer as some people, particularly those who had this word used against them in the past, find it offensive. I am therefore more comfortable with allowing people who self-identify as queer to use this label themselves, rather than presuming I have the right to use it on their behalf.

If you identify as a member of the LGBTI community, thank you for coming. I apologise that I am going to talk 'about you' tonight — that's presumptive on my part and I recognise that some of what I say will be in the nature of generalisations that might not describe your experiences; just as some of the things I might say about heterosexuals and Christians (whether gay or straight) will also be generalisations.

In summary of where we are heading this evening, I want to share my personal and considered conviction, developed over many years and after considerable reading, reflection and prayer, that I am no longer comfortable contributing to the marginalisation of LGBTI people by the church; I instead feel it is my responsibility to advocate for their total inclusion. My conviction comes in part out of a sense of justice, because I see the harm discrimination and social exclusion causes to people's mental health and wellbeing — especially among young people. Yes, many are resilient, but it's surely not just or ethical for us to rely on that resilience when we could be preventing such harm in the first place. My drive to work for a more inclusive Salvation Army also comes because I no longer see the Christian story as excluding people from God's loving acceptance on the basis of their sexual orientation or, perhaps more controversially for some, on the basis of their being in a faithful relationship with someone of the same gender, a relationship that may be sexually expressed.

I'd like us to start by watching a 10-minute video that captures New Zealand's bitter public debate ahead of the 1986 law change decriminalising sex between consenting males 16 years and over. We're going back to 1985, when The Salvation Army agreed to coordinate a nationwide petition against MP Fran Wilde's Homosexual Law Reform Bill. My apologies to those who might find this video upsetting, but this aspect of our history is where my own story of engagement as an LGBTI ally begins. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M85ayjhanzE>

Looking back

There is no doubt in my mind that many within the New Zealand gay and lesbian community still associate The Salvation Army with our opposition to the Bill and for the toxic vitriol expressed by Christians at the time, even if it did not come from our mouths. Actually, the most vile and hateful phrases came from MP Norm Jones, who you heard saying such things as:

Go back into the sewers where you come from ... as far as I'm concerned you can stay in the gutter ... Turn around and look at them ... gaze upon them ... you're looking into Hades ... don't look too long — you might catch AIDS.

I can't even imagine how it would have felt to hear hatred like that if you were a gay man, or if someone from your family was gay. *What was it like for Christians with gay family members or friends to hear this said about people they loved? How did it feel to sit in church, including church services at The Salvation Army, when many Christians were showing so little grace and love — and when this was personal, because it was about you or those you loved?*

'Homosexuals', as they were being referred to at the time, were being encouraged to come out for the first time when the Bill was being debated, a strategy law reform supporters hoped would bring people out of the shadows so the public could see they were not monsters or perverts, but everyday people they lived and worked with; the same people they were friends with and even loved.

But just how easy was it to come out if you were gay and Christian? When media reports communicated time and time again that you were not accepted by the church as you were, and therefore — by extension — that God didn't accept you either? Could you come out and still have a home within the church, or would you need to walk away? Was celibacy the only path available for you, when you wanted to fall in love and build a life with someone, just as many straight people did? Would you have to find such relationships outside the church, among people who did not understand or share your Christian beliefs and values? Did you fear needing to settle for the promiscuity of casual encounters when you longed for the commitment and intimacy of a long-term relationship? And how easy was it for the Christian parents of gay children to 'come out' when the church was complicit in this nationwide campaign of homophobia? Was their stigma your stigma too?

I was 18 when the Homosexual Law Reform Bill began to be debated, working as a computer operator in the Finance Department of The Salvation Army's Territorial Headquarters in Cuba Street. Because The Salvation Army was organising the petition against the law change, Salvation Army halls were targeted and some Salvationists had to run the gauntlet of protesters to get in and out of church on a Sunday morning (as we saw in that video).

Despite assurances to the contrary, people feared their donations to the Red Shield Appeal were being used to bankroll opposition to the Bill. The Salvation Army said anyone who felt strongly about this could come to THQ with their receipt and their donation would be reimbursed. I remember that for a while it was routine for people, some of them very angry, to come in the large front doors of the old THQ building, turn to the left to enter the Finance Department, and present their receipts to our cashier, who would politely refund them their donation.

It needs to be said — and said strongly, I think — that not all Salvationists agreed with the position the Army took. As Lieut-Colonel Ian Hutson says in his study into what happened at the time (which you can find on the Army's website¹), there wasn't wide consultation with Salvationists as to whether the Army should join this campaign. In fact, it seems our leadership's decision to coordinate the petition was more about 'informing', than 'consulting'.

In 2001, Ian interviewed the officer who was the Army's Social Secretary in 1985, Colonel Melvin Taylor, who described the campaign as 'homophobia in action', with the Army 'the righteous crusaders waging war against the filthy infidels'. This despite his personal view that those with a homosexual bias had 'no more control over this disposition than, say, children with asthma'.

Ian also interviewed the Chief Secretary of the day, Colonel Ken Bridge, who prior to the Army's decision to sponsor the petition had outlined his opposing position that 'The Salvation Army and maybe other sections of the church could do with a lot less arrogance and a lot more humanity'. The Chief Secretary felt so strongly that he took the extreme action of bypassing the Territorial Commander, Australian Donald Campbell, to write to International Headquarters in London, hoping the General would tell Commissioner Campbell to change his attitude.

Last year, updating his study of the Army's actions during this time, Ian interviewed retired General Shaw Clifton, who served as Legal and Parliamentary Secretary at IHQ in the 1980s and later also served as New Zealand's Territorial Commander. General Clifton responded by saying:

At that time ... we [at IHQ] had faced the same issue elsewhere and had handled it calmly by neither opposing change nor supporting it, but instead analysing the draft legislation to see if it protected minors, plus those of unsound mind, prisoners, etc. We also looked carefully at the age of consent in the legislation as some were advocating in those days for same-sex relations to be legal at 16 when the age for heterosexual acts was often 18 or even 21 ... The New Zealand Salvation Army leadership, through the then Territorial Commander, went public and made known its opposition to the new law without consulting or informing IHQ ... Had IHQ been consulted before the Army in New Zealand went public, and had New Zealand acted upon the advice that would have been given, the outcomes would have been very different because less offence would have been caused to the supporters of the draft bill, without any loss of principle occasioned to the Army.

To add further context to events of the time, the Homosexual Law Reform debate came at the height of the AIDS crisis. The church — along with the New Zealand population in general — had a largely uneducated fear around the spectre of the AIDS virus. AIDS was seen as a 'gay disease' and even 'divine judgement on homosexuals'. It was only in September 1983 that the world learnt AIDS could not be transmitted via casual contact, food, water, air or surfaces. It was only in 1984 that we learnt IV drug use could also spread AIDS, not just unprotected sex. It wasn't until 1991, when basketballer 'Magic' Johnson announced he had AIDS, that the stereotype of AIDS as a 'gay disease' began to fade. And discrimination against homosexuals in New Zealand did not become illegal until the passing of the Human Rights Act in 1993. None of this justifies the ugliness of the church's treatment of gay and lesbian people, but we do need to remember some of the forces at play.

¹ www.salvationarmy.org.nz/masic - see content in the 'Sexuality' section

How educated was I?

I cannot recall if I signed the petition against Homosexual Law Reform, although I suspect I did. *But I do wonder how educated my decision would have been.* My personal view would have been shaped by the established Christian view that homosexuality was a sin and that to be a 'practicing homosexual' was to live in open rebellion against God's will. I now realise at least two of my friends at The Salvation Army at this time were gay, although I genuinely didn't think I knew any gay people. I don't know if these young men had come out to themselves or anyone else at that stage, something that would not have been easy to do in the 1980s church environment.

I would have received a small amount of teaching on the Bible's views on homosexuality as a corps cadet, the discipleship course available to teenage Salvationists. This would have been reinforced in soldiership classes, which were based on the book *Chosen to be a Soldier: Orders and Regulations for Soldiers*. The 'Sexual Morality' chapter, in a sub-section labelled 'Unworthy Conduct', describes homosexuality as 'misconduct of a sexually deviant kind' (along with marital infidelity, deliberate promiscuity and criminal sexual offending). The more detailed explanation is as follows:

The term 'misconduct of a sexually deviant kind' includes homosexual acts (if between women, termed lesbian practices) ... It is necessary here to distinguish between homosexual tendencies and homosexual practices ... The homosexual person is attracted to persons of the same sex. So long as this does not express itself in homosexual acts, it is not blameworthy and should not be allowed to create guilt. Such persons need understanding and help, not condemnation. Some can never achieve a heterosexual relationship, but it must be remembered that some men and women who have actually committed homosexual acts are still capable of heterosexual relationships. Given a close walk with the Saviour, and the strict discipline of thought and obedience which all Christian life requires, there is no reason why the homosexually disposed believer should not be a victorious Salvationist, rendering service in appropriate areas of Army activity as appointed by [their] officer. Homosexual practices unrenounced render a person unacceptable as a Salvation Army soldier, just as acts of immorality between heterosexual persons do.

Chosen to Be a Soldier was first published in 1977 (the version I have says it was last revised and reprinted in 1994). Its view on homosexuality was representative of Christian views at the time, which influenced society's perspective but was itself shaped by outside influences.

If you'd like to look more into the historical, cultural, psychological, social, political and religious influences on how we view LGBTI people today, I'd recommend US writer Kathy Baldock's book *Walking the Bridgeless Canyon*² as an excellent resource. If you're more a video watcher than a reader then Google 'Untangling the Mess' and watch a video of Kathy giving a presentation of her research, which she also gave last year to a group of Salvationists in Wellington.³ If you don't feel comfortable with some of what I'm sharing tonight, I'd ask you to read Kathy's book or watch her video. You don't have to accept Kathy's conclusions or mine, but I'd hope you would at least be open to considering them. I'd like to highlight some of Kathy's research here, because as a young Christian and a Salvationist, I was never helped to understand the topic of homosexuality other than by way of

² <https://www.amazon.com/Walking-Bridgeless-Canyon-Repairing-Community/dp/1619200287>

³ <http://canyonwalkerconnections.com/untangling-mess-video-presentation>

4 | Christina Tyson (Major) / The Salvation Army New Zealand, Fiji & Tonga Territory

'Rejecting Rejection', presented at the Booth College of Mission Thought Matters Seminar, 26 October 2017

being told what The Salvation Army believed, with justification for that being those few verses from the Bible that, on the face of it, condemn homosexual behaviour.

For instance, I would not have been aware that before the 1946 *Revised Standard Version* used the word 'homosexual' in an English translation, that 'homosexual' or the like in any language had never previously been used in *any* Bible translation or paraphrase. And that in the original text, two words were used in different ways, not just one.

Of the two Greek words used in the three New Testament passages, one is easily translated in context of time and culture, and the other is more difficult. One of these words, *malakos*, translates to the word 'effeminate' in the *King James Version*. That was a good translation of an ancient word at the time the *King James Version* was written. *Malakos* did not just refer to sexual practices, positions or roles; it had a breadth of meaning associated with traits thought to be feminine or associated with women.

As Kathy explains, these were negative traits the ancient world attributed to a woman, including: laziness, decadence, lack of courage, moral and physical weakness, fear and vulnerability, being unchaste or lustful, or being in the submissive role in sex. It was used to describe men who neglected their businesses or took life easy, those who drank too much wine, had too much sex, ate too much gourmet food or were weak in battle. In other words, *malakos* referred to the entire complex of femininity as understood at the time. If we were to extend this to the mechanics of sexual intercourse: all penetrated men were *malakos*, but not all *malakos* men were penetrated.

The more challenging Greek word is *arsenokoitai*. It is thought Paul coined this word. (Note that we cannot assume this word is directly related to the Hebrew words *arsen* and *koten* in Leviticus as it may have changed in meaning in the 1400 years since those Hebrew words were used.) *Arsenokoitai* appears less than 100 times in surviving ancient texts over a span of about 600 years. It only appears in lists and always without definition, so the best way to figure out its meaning is to see where the word consistently appears in vice lists in comparison to surrounding words. When that process is worked through, it is clear that *arsenokoitai* is associated with exploitation and/or sexual abuse, most often where there is an exchange of money or economics. Therefore, the best translation may be 'those who are abused in sex or sold in sex'.

The most important thing to be aware of in terms of our reading of the Bible today is that the *Revised Standard Version* combined *both* these words and replaced them with *one word*, 'homosexual', which is wholly inaccurate. *Malakos* is tough to translate today because we would, of course, no longer suggest that being a woman is the worst thing to be, or that women are inferior and should therefore always hold the position of social or sexual submission. Yet one thing is very clear: *malakos* would never have been used to describe an actual woman, only a man with the ancient complexity of so-called feminine traits. We can therefore see that while the term 'homosexual' is used in the Bible to describe both male and female, *malakos* would never have been used to describe a woman. This was not a gender-neutral term!

When reading *arsenokoitai* in ancient texts *and* in ancient context, this is closer in meaning to a man who sexually uses and exploits a male — typically a boy. The best understanding in the 1940s, when this translation was done, may have been a young male who was sexually abused or sold.

From all this, what is clear is that ‘homosexual’ was a poor translation of those two Greek words. Even in the medical community, people did not understand what homosexuality was in the 1930s and 1940s when the *Revised Standard Version* was being developed. An abused male for money and a male abuser did not translate to ‘homosexual’, and the culture of the time saw homosexuals as sexual perverts. By translating these two words as ‘homosexual’, the sexual perversion meaning was what the *Revised Standard Version* delivered to its readers — in a definition that covered not only males, but females too.

As a teenager I didn’t know this. In fact, I probably presumed that this word ‘homosexual’ was the same *one* word God inspired the original Bible writers to use, and that it meant *precisely* the same thing to them *then*, as it did to me in 1985. Neither did I appreciate that my views on homosexuality were shaped by relatively recent history that at one point regarded homosexuality as criminality, then a mental disorder, and more recently some sort of optional ‘lifestyle’. I would have accepted without question that someone who was gay was likely to try to ‘corrupt’ others, especially young men, into the same behaviour — and so they were to be feared. And I probably subscribed to the view that if the rights of gay people were strengthened, ‘normalising’ homosexuality, it would spread like some contagion.

I certainly wasn’t asked to consider what the church’s harsh judgement was doing to actual gay or lesbian people. This was the era of superficial and dispassionate clichés like ‘love the sinner, hate the sin’ (which sadly people still use today, as if people might be reassured by such cold comfort). Perhaps we were able to overlook the harm we were causing because we thought homosexuals were on the margins anyway, a long way from where most churches lived. Of course, gay people were in our churches, but most were (and many still are) in the closet, having been led to believe (contrary to what the *O&Rs for Soldiers* said) that their same-sex attraction was indeed ‘blameworthy’, and that they should therefore accept considerable feelings of guilt because of this.

‘Praying the gay away’ doesn’t work

When gay people did out themselves, we were likely to engage in what has been shown to be ineffective and highly damaging to people’s wellbeing by attempting to ‘pray the gay away’ with what is called ‘reparative’ or ‘conversion’ therapy. Although well intentioned, this really is a form of spiritual abuse, and it concerns me some Christians and church leaders still see this as effective and appropriate — when mental health and medical professionals and many church leaders and pastoral workers within churches agree it is not. It particularly concerns me when I hear of young people, at highest risk in terms of mental health and suicide, coming out to youth leaders or pastors only to be prayed for that they would no longer be gay. Several years ago, a deeply distressed father at our corps approached my husband concerned that this had happened to his 16-year-old son. He wanted to understand why The Salvation Army had not felt it appropriate to discuss this with him first and to seek parental permission to counsel his son in this way.

In June 2013, Exodus International, which had attempted to change people’s sexual orientation through prayer and counselling since 1976, shut down. The previous year, then-president Alan Chambers admitted to the Gay Christian Network conference that: ‘The majority of people that I have met, and I would say the majority meaning 99.9% of them, have not experienced a change in their orientation.’ In announcing the organisation’s closure he offered this apology:

Please know that I am deeply sorry. I am sorry for the pain and hurt many of you have experienced. I am sorry that some of you spent years working through the shame and guilt you felt when your attractions didn't change. I am sorry we promoted sexual orientation change efforts and reparative theories about sexual orientation that stigmatised parents. I am sorry that there were times I didn't stand up to people publicly 'on my side' who called you names like sodomite — or worse. I am sorry that I, knowing some of you so well, failed to share publicly that the gay and lesbian people I know were every bit as capable of being amazing parents as the straight people that I know. I am sorry that when I celebrated a person coming to Christ and surrendering their sexuality to him that I callously celebrated the end of relationships that broke your heart. I am sorry that I have communicated that you and your families are less than me and mine.

My brother-in-law, who lives in Australia, is gay, and perhaps this would be a good time to share something of his story, which I do with his permission. Ross grew up in The Salvation Army and shared his experiences with me a few years ago. He said:

I remember quite vividly, as a Junior Candidate, standing in front of 500ish Salvos and testifying that Jesus made me straight. Apparently, I remember my dad bowing his head as I made the statement. It wasn't because he was embarrassed by me, but because he's not one for drawing attention to himself. I was giddy with excitement as fellow Salvos approached me and said how wonderful it was that I was saved AND straight.

I wanted to die. I would loath myself for looking at another guy and thinking how handsome he was. I would get up at 5 am and pray that God would fix me and take away this horrendous burden.

I remember as though it was yesterday when I woke up the day of my wedding. I was a silly 21-year-old and had no clue, and said that I shouldn't be doing this.

[As an aside, this marriage was encouraged by Ross's corps officers — who had offered deliverance ministry to Ross, and who perhaps thought encouraging his relationship with a young woman at the corps might help 'seal the deal'. Ross and his wife had two children and went on to serve as Salvation Army envoys in charge of a corps before Ross came out and their marriage ended. Ross continues ...]

I tried harder to save more people. I would be the first to go the mercy seat with my NIV Bible and counsel young men about being saved because they were sinners and separated from God. I thought of myself as some sort of super Christian Salvo who wanted all to join me in my lofty saved stature.

I genuinely believed that I was the most humble but most right Christian ever.

I knew it all. Everything. Jesus could fix anything.

But Jesus didn't fix me. I had the foulest temper that would dissolve into pity parties I could drag out for days. I would be repulsed by my body's natural sexual response to a cute guy. And the sage wisdom that was bestowed on me was 'seek God's forgiveness'.

I'm now 45 and have the wisdom of time. I like that. I still get things wrong and I'm cool with that. The reality for me is that I will most likely not attend a church of any kind in the foreseeable future. I cannot accept any kind of condemnation that I am a lesser person because of what goes on in my bedroom. ... But what I know is that I'm an okay person, extraordinary actually. I'm worth something!

Sadly, I suspect that many Christians today still operate from the same, narrow 'this is what I was told although I've never really looked into it for myself' base of knowledge I once did. Many still do not think they know any gay people. As a result, they feel they must stand as sentries over some perceived line of righteous morality, influenced by thinking of past eras that said homosexuality was a crime or a sickness or a deviance ... or a sin.

Just five or six Bible passages are commonly used when discussing homosexuality. Two verses (and sometimes Genesis 19) are from the Old Testament, and of the three New Testament passages, only two are thought to be relevant. For many, the existence of these six passages is the end of the whole 'discussion'; while others point to ways of interpreting the Bible that don't exclude homosexuality as we know it today. Significantly, Jesus didn't speak against homosexuality, although he had a lot to say about religious hypocrisy.

Captured or corrected by culture?

Personally, I no longer believe faithful same-sex relationships are incompatible with the Bible's teaching, particularly when I look at its teaching on such matters as women in leadership and the remarriage of divorced people. Scripture's opposition to these issues is far clearer, yet we no longer have such trouble contextualising human experience into our understanding of Scripture. Most Christians today would struggle to accept that the Bible could ever have been used to endorse slavery as God's will, but for 18 centuries Christians accepted slavery, arguing that God instituted and approved of it. The Bible was used to support those who established apartheid in South Africa, until this teaching was declared heresy in 1982. We'd probably be familiar with those Bible verses that advocate a male-dominated leadership, with women spoken about as the 'weaker' sex and instruction that they should remain quiet in church. (In fact, I wonder whether my empathy for LGBTI people comes because, as a female and a female leader in the church, I come from a historically excluded and oppressed demographic myself!) There was a time when those who were divorced had a tough road in Christian circles, but today we're more gracious. Bible verses about divorce haven't changed, but our understanding and application of them has.

I wonder if, when changes in thinking were happening around these matters, some conservative Christians complained the church was being 'captured by culture' — just as people are making that accusation today now that more Christians and churches are affirming and inclusive of LGBTI people. With the benefit of hindsight, I think we could agree these were instances of the church being '*corrected* by culture'. And I do think that as difficult as this current time of change is for the church, the same is happening with regards to LGBTI rights and inclusion within the life of the church.

My own view is that by broadening our outlook to accept and nurture same-sex relationships, we would be able to speak more convincingly of God's love for all — the 'whosoever' we reference in our Salvation Army's sixth doctrine. More than that, we would be better able to support LGBTI

people to live in relationship with God and with each other. Not because we are ‘giving them permission or authorising their access to God’, but simply because we are respecting their identity as people made in the image of God, sexual beings with that very human longing to love and be loved.

Actively promoting and supporting gay Christians to follow Jesus would, of course, mean promoting adherence to Christian values and standards of godliness — not the ‘perceived morality’ of a person’s sexual and gendered identity, but the morality of the *choices* made as people, gay or straight, seek to live well for Jesus in this world. A lifestyle of holiness that is open to all of us.

I’ve already alluded to the barriers erected between the church and the LGBTI community through the era of the Homosexual Law Reform Bill in New Zealand. When we think about that time, we must sense the deep pain the church — including The Salvation Army — caused. We must also recognise that some people, then and now, have chosen to end their lives, rather than live with the burden of shame, hopelessness and despair that we in the church contributed to. I hope we feel a deep sense of sorrow about that and a determination never to repeat the sins of our corporate past.

Compassionate public engagement

One positive outcome of that time is we now demonstrate a more circumspect and compassionate approach to our public engagement. That doesn’t mean it’s easy for The Salvation Army to speak into this space, but when we have done so, it has been in more positive ways. Significantly, in July 2006, Territorial Commander Commissioner Garth McKenzie, issued a statement to coincide with the 20th anniversary of the passing of the Homosexual Law Reform Bill. He said:

The Salvation Army remembers the time leading up to the passing of the Homosexual Law Reform Bill as one in which judgemental and prejudiced words were spoken on both sides of the debate. We would wish to clarify that while The Salvation Army did not initiate the petition opposing the Bill, we did take a prominent public role when a few senior Salvation Army leaders offered our assistance in coordinating the petition. However, this was not a policy unanimously endorsed by all in Salvation Army leadership at the time and it did give rise to considerable debate within our movement nationally.

While some Salvation Army members supported the petition, others were uncomfortable to varying degrees and took no part. A further body of opinion supported the Reform Bill and even initiated a counter-petition. Then, as now, The Salvation Army encompassed a diverse community with a wide range of opinions on this and other subjects. We therefore continue to seek God’s wisdom on what it means to live as biblically-informed Christians in today’s world.

We do understand though that The Salvation Army’s official opposition to the Reform Bill was deeply hurtful to many, and are distressed that ill-feeling still troubles our relationship with segments of the gay community. We regret any hurt that may remain from that turbulent time and our present hope is to rebuild bridges of understanding and dialogue between our movement and the gay community. We may not agree on all issues, but we can respect and care for one another despite this.

This was followed, in May 2012, with Rainbow Wellington and The Salvation Army issuing joint statements in a rapprochement — ‘a resumption of harmonious relations’. The Salvation Army reiterated its 2006 statement but added an apology, while Rainbow Wellington said:

Many of those in the GLBTI community have come to adulthood in a world in which their human and civil rights are much more widely respected than was the situation in 1986, and to whom the events of that time are history rather than personal experience. That is not to say that they should be forgotten; on the contrary it is important that we should all be aware of or recall a time when we were a persecuted minority. Nor is this a matter of forgiveness. Some of our members and friends, we are sure, will continue, as is their right, to feel strongly about the events of those years. But we have further battles before us before we are acknowledged as equals in our society with full equality of rights, and in those battles we need friends and allies as we have needed them in the past. The time has come, therefore, to look forward rather than backwards, and to move on.

When same-sex marriage was debated in New Zealand after MP Louisa Wall’s Private Members Bill was drawn from the ballot in July 2012, Salvation Army representatives met with Louisa to discuss the Bill’s implications. Yes, we eventually made a submission opposing the Bill, but our opposition was intended to clarify that if religious communities chose not to solemnise such marriages on the grounds of religious belief, this wouldn’t be seen as unlawful discrimination.

Someone whose view impressed me at this time was Anglican Bishop Richard Randerson, who said:

... nowhere in Scripture is the concept of loving, committed same-sex relationships envisaged. One cannot find a biblical text on this subject any more than one can find something about nuclear bombs or genetic modification. Reference must be made to more underlying biblical principles ... Part of our current knowledge about sexual orientation is that homosexuality is not a sin or aberration, but is as natural for many in our society as heterosexuality is for others. If we look to scripture for deeper principles that might underlie all relationships, they are ones of love for God and love for neighbour, and the belief that in love for God and others we might come to maturity in Christ and have a care for the wellbeing of others.

At this time, The Salvation Army was invited to join some other churches to lobby against the Bill. One statement we were asked to put our name to framed marriage primarily around the purpose of raising children. The Salvation Army saw this argument as simplistic and even insensitive, as it potentially marginalised couples that wanted to have children and were unable to, as well as those who chose not to have children for whatever reason. Pragmatically, it was also clear there was a will for change and that this Bill was likely to pass. There was little to be gained and a lot to be lost by reinforcing the perception that the church was unsympathetic to the needs of same-sex couples.

Leadership therefore prepared the following guidance for Salvationists: ‘The Salvation Army hopes this law change leads to a safer and more inclusive society for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex people in New Zealand. Regardless of their personal views on the merit of this law change, Salvationists are asked to honour the principles of the Christian marriage covenant in their own lives and to treat all people with respect.’ This was a long way from the approach taken in the 1980s.

Last April (2016), The Salvation Army took part in a small inter-faith church service to mark the 30th anniversary of the decriminalisation of homosexuality in New Zealand. The event was held during Wellington Pride Week and sponsored by the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA). A composite Salvation Army brass band provided musical support, with our Territorial Commander playing and other Salvationists present in the congregation. I was part of the small organising group with two other Salvationists and I remember how surprised and thankful people were for the Army's involvement. A number of people spoke of the healing nature of a gathering that allowed them to feel welcome inside a church — some for the first time since they had revealed their sexual orientation in the churches of their youth.

In August this year, The Salvation Army made a submission to Government supporting the expungement of convictions for historical homosexual offenses, saying the Bill was 'an important reflection of the need for care, justice and mercy in society' and that for the 'men and families of men who have historical homosexual convictions, such convictions have been both discriminatory and distressing'. The Salvation Army hoped enacting this Bill would 'ensure that this discrimination is not continued and that people can fully experience the freedoms given to them under current law'.

In Fiji, The Salvation Army has hosted AIDS Candlelight Memorial services for a number of years. LGBT and also HIV-positive Fijians say they find in The Salvation Army a more accepting and non-judgemental environment than other churches.

A small group of Salvation Army officers have been in positions that have allowed us to advocate as allies with Salvation Army leadership over the past 15 years or so. However, with the exception of a 2014 survey into Salvationists' attitudes towards same-sex relationships, there has been a consistent caution and nervousness amongst many of our senior leaders to extend these conversations to our pews. I think this is regrettable, but symptomatic of what I see from The Salvation Army internationally. The risk is that should the Army's leadership decide to move towards more inclusive practices, it may not have done enough to bring grassroots Salvationists with them. Similarly, if a more traditional stance is retained, there will be many who will see this as unjust and out of sync with what is happening in the world and in parts of the church. Our senior international leaders have been discussing the matter of sexuality for a number of years, and territories seem to be in a holding pattern waiting for their deliberations to bear fruit. I am not sure of the best way to widen this dialogue, but it's important our leaders don't keep this conversation entirely behind closed doors.

The Salvation Army no longer has an International Positional Statement on Homosexuality — our old statement was withdrawn some years back at IHQ's request. Currently, therefore, our IHQ public statement seems to be limited to one on the topic of non-discrimination, issued in October 2013 in the wake of an unfortunate Australian radio interview. Here's an excerpt, which includes content contributed from New Zealand:

A diverse range of views on homosexuality exist within The Salvation Army — as among the wider Christian (and non-Christian) community. But no matter where individual Salvationists stand on this matter, The Salvation Army does not permit discrimination on the basis of sexual identity in the delivery of its services or in its employment practices. Our international mission statement is very clear on this point when it says we will 'meet human needs in [Jesus'] name without discrimination'. Anyone who comes through our doors will be welcomed with love and service, based on their need and our capacity to provide.

The Salvation Army stands against homophobia, which victimises people and can reinforce feelings of alienation, loneliness and despair. We want to be an inclusive church community where members of the LGBTQ community find welcome and the encouragement to develop their relationship with God.

Of those who have worked to help The Salvation Army engage around this topic in New Zealand, I want to mention the work of officers Harold Hill, Campbell Roberts, Ian Hutson, Garth Stevenson and Ross Wardle in particular, as well as gay Salvationist Colin Daley from Wellington City Corps and, more recently, Ian's son Craig, who has been an effective bridge builder into the Rainbow Community. I also want to acknowledge those territorial commanders who have endorsed statements and activities that have put legs under our 2006 promise 'to build bridges of understanding between ourselves and the gay community'. It has been a privilege for me to support the communications aspects of this engagement over many years. There have been plenty of moments where I have felt that my appointment in the Communications Department at THQ has been 'for such a time as this'.

This year I was one of a small number of Christians, including a handful of Salvationists, who took part in the Wellington Gay Pride march behind a banner that said 'Christians United in Love' and carrying a sign that said, 'Build Bridges, Not Walls'. Afterwards, we ran a stall in the 'Out in the Park' event. Significantly, Rainbow Wellington funded this stall. It was reassuring that younger people did not think it odd to see a Christian group at a Gay Pride event, while some older people took the opportunity to share some of the hurts they'd experienced from the church over the years. And we listened. This was a huge privilege and we were so graciously received by the LGBTI community!

No longer gatekeeping

In drawing my thoughts to a conclusion this evening, the passage of Scripture God that has used most strongly to galvanise my own activism in this area is from John chapter 10 (CEV), where Jesus talks about himself as being the gate for the sheep:

'I am the gate,' Jesus says, 'All who come in through me will be saved I came so that everyone would have life, and have it in its fullness ... I am the good shepherd. I know my sheep, and they know me.'

All of us are the most complete, the most alive, when we can connect with God. Jesus came to make a way for that to happen — he is the gate. And yet we in the church seem to have adopted the role of gatekeepers; bouncers outside God's door, deciding who is in and who is out. But we don't have that mandate. Jesus told us to *go* into all the world; he didn't commission us to tell others to *go away*!

As well, and I am sorry for not touching more on this because it is absolutely crucial to the topic under discussion: *let's not presume that LGBTI people are not already in God's family as devoted followers of Christ. Because they are!* And they shouldn't be content with being shoved to the margins. They must be able to bring their faith, passion and skills to all areas of the church's mission.

As I've said, I no longer see the Christian story as something we 'own' as heterosexuals. We are not meant to be salvation's gatekeepers; we are to be the people who throw open the door and call people to Jesus. Actually, that's wrong, God is the one throwing open the door and running down the driveway, racing to embrace anyone and everyone who wants to come home.

But just like the story of the Prodigal Son to which I allude, there lurks — at home — a judgemental elder brother, complaining at his father's extravagant love 'unfairly' bestowed on the returning lost child. In this, the elder brother shows what we in the church demonstrate but do not easily confess: *we know who we want in, and who we want out*. And so the Father responds by standing with the beloved 'outsider' and saying words I wish the church would hear today:

'My son, you're always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we should be glad and celebrate! Your brother was dead, but he's now alive. He was lost and has now been found.'

In conclusion, my deepest hope is that we would refuse to abandon the people God loves, and that we would also refuse to allow our own fears and prejudices to communicate that some people 'don't fit' into God's Kingdom. I pray that we would stop implying by word or deed that God's love is not sufficiently wide and deep for everyone. *Because it is*.