

[0:00:00]

Interviewer: I'd like to start, Stephen, by asking you a bit about your childhood, where you grew up, brothers or sister, what your parents did, that kind of thing.

Respondent: I have a sister who is four years older than me and my parents, they married in 1949. I come from Lincolnshire. I was brought up on a farm. I come from an agricultural family on both sides of the family, on my mother's side and my father's side of the family. And my mother, she developed diabetes in pregnancy and then had complications and, sadly, died aged 52 in 1977. My father was a self-employed farmer in partnership with his brother and worked on the farm, together with their own father, the three of them together initially, and then just the two of them. And it was an arable farm growing root crops such as potatoes, sugar beet, cauliflowers, cabbage and then sort of wheat and barley. And they kept livestock, they kept milking cattle and we had pigs and we had bantam chickens and ducks and geese and sort of thing. And so it was very much a rural sort of upbringing. But because I wasn't sort of physically suited to becoming a farm labourer that was not something that I wished to pursue.

Interviewer: Were a church-attending family?

Respondent: I when I say 'church-attending' I would sort of say initially three or four times a year, sort of really a typical village sort of attendance really, Easter, Harvest, Christmas, so initially three or four times. That was about the maximum number of times my parents went to church. I was only really when neighbours, they sang in the... Or they had two boys of a similar age to myself and they sang, well, in the church choir and they went to the local parish church. I lived in a small village called Quadring which is near Spalding in South Lincolnshire. So very much a rural sort of upbringing. And so, you know, I suppose it was just something that initially appealed to me and I sang in the church choir, I was a server, and then latterly on the PCC. And then I left home, as I say... Well, I was born in '57 and I left home in '82 and then moved to a rural town - again, in Lincolnshire - about probably ten miles away, not too far from Spalding. But nearly all of Lincolnshire is mainly the industry or business of agricultural, you know, food processing industries really.

Interviewer: Yeah. So you went to school... That was okay? Enjoyed it?

Respondent: Yeah, I enjoyed school. The subjects that I really took an interest were English Language and History really, they were my two favourite subjects. So I suppose loosely in a way the historical age of the church, you know, architecturally and liturgically and the tradition, you know, that sort of aspect appealed to me really.

Interviewer: Would you say that you had at that time a kind of living faith or was it the culture of the church that you enjoyed?

Respondent: I suppose, as you call it, a living faith, that's something that evolved over a period of time as I progressed, as it were, as I grew, if you like, from an 8-year-old to then my teenage and then then my adult years. So that was something that evolved. And, sorry, the second point that you...?

Interviewer: I was just saying, you know, was it the culture and the tradition of the church (overspeaking)?

Respondent: Well, yes, and very much the... Certainly the culture in Lincolnshire is that farming's sort of... family's sort of... I suppose it was probably more expected that you went to church really. Probably more so then. There was always a reasonable attendance. I

suppose when I think back there were always two services and sometimes three, whereas now most rural parishes, you know, they're lucky if they get a regular Sunday Eucharist. So yeah.

Interviewer: At what point did you kind of sense what your sexual identity was? When did you become aware of feelings?

Respondent: Well really, if you like, sexual feelings when I was sort... I knew at the time I was different, if you like to use the word, 'homosexual', 'gay', you know, whatever. And I somehow knew that I wasn't attracted to girls and it was males that I, if you like, became sort of... I couldn't explain why but somehow it wasn't a sexual... Well, it wasn't a sexual fetish, it was just something just that was part of me really, yeah.

[00:08:02]

Interviewer: Yeah. And did you have any sense of that being problematic in terms of you going to church, or...?

Respondent: Not so much... Well, certainly... I mean, I didn't talk about it for years and, no, it... Yes, I suppose as I got older I realised it was almost frowned upon, it was something that was almost dirty, you know, and (inaudible 00:08:46) sort of God's judgment, you know, sort of hell and damnation, it was an abominable sin and the worst atrocious thing (overspeaking) -

Interviewer: Where did you pick those messages up from?

Respondent: Possibly because it was... I suppose, if you like, I'm afraid to say, the Church's teaching really and people's attitudes to gay people. Because when I was growing up in 1968, '69 it was only... you know, those late '60s, early '70s, and I suppose it was very much in the news then, so... Because it was illegal to have sex with a man, so... And, again, even in the... It was just public... It was the attitude within society, even within the late '70s, '80s and that sort of... I remember buying my first copy of... well, it was The Gay News, you know, it was just a simple paper then, and even just getting that either from your trip to London or the occasional copy in Smiths or, dare I say a... not a backstreet newsagent but those that stocked... And you felt that you were doing something horrific by buying something, you know, sort of... I mean, it wasn't illegal. And you were made to even then still meet in secret, you know, in a church hall, sort of a meeting for men, you know, on the first... Although it wasn't advertised as that, it was more as a social gathering, a social meeting, that's how it was phrased; it wasn't advertised as a gay meeting. But it was sort of this secret language really, secret code really.

Interviewer: Yeah. And that was in the church hall?

Respondent: Yes, but it wasn't locally and that's why I had to go to somewhere that met... It was in a church hall but, again, it was somewhere 30 miles away so you had to have a car really to... Because, and I know it's a cliché now, you know, to use the phrase "You're the only gay in the village" but that's how I felt, you know, sort of... And because I was so actively involved in the village... And later when I moved to other parishes, well Holbeach and another parish, Sutton Bridge, basically I (inaudible 00:12:08) on two occasions, and that was during Lent(?) courses and that sort of... and twice the comment was, you know, sort of "Well of course we have no gays in our parish" and even then it was... I mean, I wasn't out as a gay person then but it was still very difficult, yes.

Interviewer: Yeah. Did you come out to your family or did it just emerge naturally?

Respondent: It didn't emerge naturally. Initially when my mother died in 1977 and then my father married again in 1979... And just before I left home my stepmother found gay magazines, copies of The Gay Times under the bed -

Interviewer: You should have hidden them more imaginatively. (Laughs)

Respondent: Well yeah, but I didn't expect her to... you know. But (overspeaking) -

Interviewer: Most parents look under the bed. (Laughs)

Respondent: Yes, be that as it may... And of course the next thing she knows and that's sort of... And so that really sort of... And I was threatened that if ever I was seen to be with a man or bring even a male friend home I'd have to leave home. So I knew then that my time -

Interviewer: Your days were numbered.

[00:13:47]

Respondent: My days were numbered. So at the first opportunity when I was able to do leave home I did. I mean, I know I had to wait another three years but it wasn't as easy then to move away from home. So, you know, what your father... you know, your father still ruled the roost even though I was in my teens and early 20s. I mean, it's far more common for even those who go to college and university but even then when I was 18 up to early 20s, certainly in a rural community, you didn't leave home at that early age. But once I left home it was easier in a way but because of where I was living still in Lincolnshire life was still very difficult even though I lived on my own. Even though the world was my oyster I still felt trapped in a way because of my financial means because even though I was earning it was a very small wage by comparison. When you're living and working in a rural community your salary is very... Well, certainly in an agricultural area and that sort of thing, especially in the South compared to London, and it's a very small regular wage. So you were limited by how much money you actually earned and... So I didn't really, if you like... I suppose I didn't do much about being gay or who I was (overspeaking) -

Interviewer: Yeah, it was just financially too difficult.

Respondent: Financially too difficult. And to meet friends, you know, it was still very difficult. So to meet likeminded people, if I did I would have to travel, you know, 30 or 40 miles away to go to Peterborough, it really was difficult, rather than meeting people on your doorstep. But having said that, once you did realise that you weren't the 'only gay in the village', as I say, there were other people, it was then that you felt more ordinary, if that's the right word, and not strange and frowned upon for being different. I didn't feel different but just to be accepted really.

Interviewer: Yeah. And how did that happen, how did your circumstances change?

Respondent: Well my circumstances changed really... It wasn't until even as late as...until I met Simeon. It would be about I suppose getting on to, what, 15 years ago now. And because I felt, you know, sort of... Because I had a disability I thought, "Well no one wants to meet a gay disabled person" and I thought, "Well that's it, I've just got to accept life to be..." And it wasn't until we met across a crowded room and were discussing human sexuality... Bishop Michael Doe at Lincoln. And we initially met and exchanged numbers and because I lived 40 miles away from Lincoln he said, "Well whenever you're coming up to Lincoln do call in for coffee". But of course it never worked out quite like that because whenever I went to Lincoln I had... Because I was the church warden at the time of the parish, I had other people in the car and it just

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wasn't possible, so... And anyway, moving further on two years later, we met again and that has... you know, we've been together ever since. But prior to that that sort of... I suppose I realised within the Church of England that there are far more gay people closeted that are still afraid to actually come out, and I'm not necessarily talking about clergy. That's when I realised, you know, it was either just the odd look and that sort of... or the occasional male would either just look at you across, again, from one side of the church to the other. You didn't say anything but you just... you know, it's sort of that hidden knowledge, you know, sort of an awareness.

And I suppose my first... If you don't mind me just going back, just talking about myself and that sort of... Just talking just brings me back to the late '60s, my first parish priest, and that sort of... I realised that... I didn't know that he was initially gay but I... It was a bit sort of like Benjamin Britton in one sense, having an attraction to young boys and sort of the boys within the church choir and that sort of thing. He had a boat and we'd travel on the boat from Boston and which he had moored in Boston in Lincolnshire to another village, sort of Horncastle or (Inaudible 00:20:56), and it was always the boys on the boat. There was never anything impropriety or anything sexual, it was just an attraction. And basically this particular parish priest, he also taught old-time and sequence dancing and that sort of... And he retired to Douglas in the Isle of Man. And this would be in the early 1970s. And that was the first time I stayed... He ran a holiday club business and I stayed sort of overnight and that sort of... But I initially shared a room with him and I slept in the single bed and that was fine and, again, nothing untoward. But it was just in the conversations, it was just when he said, "I can't see anything wrong in two male people living together". And I realised... I was 17 at the time and I thought, "Ah..." You know? And that sort of then... And I said, "No, I don't have a problem, I don't see anything..." It did initially take me a little bit by surprise because I wasn't expecting it, and I thought, "What is going to say next?" but he didn't, he left it at that. And then he said would I go over to Douglas, which is the capital on the Isle of Man, and basically manage his holiday flat business, look after the business. That was the... My only... Well, one is always wise with hindsight. And I thought, "Now, should I or shouldn't I have gone and taken that opportunity?" but I didn't at the time because my mother's health was failing and she was... She died of diabetes complications but before she died in 1977 the last four years of her life she was deteriorating and it was very difficult for me to uproot and just leave home, because I was 20 when she died, so... And we're talking about between the ages of 16 and 17. So whether my life would have been... It certainly would've been interesting, yes, but...

[00:24:05] And then I met... Because I had about three or four holidays really in Douglas on the Isle of Man and I met... Through my retired parish priest... I realised... He gradually introduced me to one or two of his male colleagues in the lounge and that sort of... I can't remember the name of the hotel but it was near the Villa Marina. It might have been called the Villa Marina Hotel. Yes, I think it was actually, in Douglas. And it was always the lounge bar, you know, he had a liking for going for a whisky and that sort of... And I realise now looking back he was an alcoholic because before he died... I learnt he died of... He died a few years later of sclerosis of the liver, it was through drink really. But I had certainly interesting times, you know, holidaying... I used to fly from East Midlands Airport to Douglas and stay a fortnight at a time but, you know, I... I mean, he was very kind to me and... but very much, if you like, I suppose in a way (inaudible 00:25:49) compare Benjamin Britton, you know, to sort of how he treated young boys, young men; it was never anything sexual, it was just an attraction, you know, sort of... And it may have been the same with me, I have no idea, but... But that was certainly the one time when I really felt totally at ease, you know, sort of...

Interviewer: Yeah. And you were still involved in church?

Respondent: Oh yes, I was still -

Interviewer: Have you always been -

Respondent: Yes, I've always been involved with church really. And I suppose in a way that's been the difficulty in one sense because in one sense it's been part of my life... And initially I did explore becoming ordained and that sort of... In fact, I did go twice down the path of exploring my vocation and ordination and did go once to a selection conference and I was turned down because I... I realised that at the selection conference I was the only single male colleague - and this was in 1991 - and I realised even though I hadn't mentioned my sexuality on the application form it was the time of the... I don't know if you can recall Tony Hickton(?), he was quite outspoken about -

Interviewer: I don't know that name.

Respondent: But his book and his writings at that time were well known within clergy circles. He'd brought out a couple of books and... And the tone of questioning, it was sort of honed in on my sexuality and... And then it got... One of... It wasn't so much the direct questioning of sexuality, but even at one sort of interview it was had I had a relationship with a woman, and at that point I said, "Oh, with respect, it's none of your business" -

Interviewer: Oh good for you.

Respondent: - and I realised... I thought, "Well that's it, I'm not going to get any further with that because..." It was just a horrendous time. And I suppose in a way I could've... I am very easily... I don't know how I kept going to church but then, you know, sort of it was suggested that I might explore becoming a reader within the Church of England, which I have done. And I have enjoyed my ministry. But certainly latterly with how the Church is treating gay people, I mean, not allowing, you know, sort of a church service, you know, sort of celebrating civil partnerships and not even a blessing, you know, in God's house of prayer, and now, you know, the argument about gay marriage and not allowing that to materialise really, and even though the Act has been passed and it's now law but the Church still thinks it has its final say. So I'm literally... Even though I still go to church regularly and I'm still actively involved, I still sort of feel I'm only really clinging by the edge of my fingertips really, so...

[00:30:00]

Interviewer: Are you still a reader?

Respondent: I am still a reader, yes.

Interviewer: You're still exercising (overspeaking) -

Respondent: And I still exercise that ministry, but I am finding it difficult even so.

Interviewer: Okay. So there haven't... I mean, they must know that you're with Simeon.

Respondent: Oh yes, they... Yes, the parish and the local church is (overspeaking) -

Interviewer: You've had a civil partnership?

Respondent: Yes, we had a civil partnership and that was at Lincoln, and that was well received. The sadness on that particular day was my father and my stepmother... And I still don't know why because my father died last August and he just wouldn't tell me why he was... The sadness was that he was unable to have his photograph taken with me and Simeon on that particular day, he just wouldn't have his photograph taken, or any photograph taken (overspeaking).

Interviewer: He came?

Respondent: Well he came (overspeaking) -

Interviewer: He came but he just didn't... yeah.

Respondent: Yeah. Which I was sad about. And even though my stepmother who's, sadly, been diagnosed with Alzheimer's... But even though it was a civil partnership everyone... you know, those people, well, relatives, of my father's generation refer to it as "When you were married," you know, they look upon it as a marriage. And it is in a way, you know, it's sort of -

Interviewer: I'm just checking the recorder. Yeah, it's still going.

Respondent: Yeah, and so that sort of basically... You know, it was a lovely day. We didn't have a big celebration but a small gathering at the Lincoln Register Office and then a meal afterwards, a lunch, and then sort of back home at Lincoln for a celebratory cake really, so...

Interviewer: Sounds lovely. What year was that?

Respondent: That would be... I'm trying to think. Either seven or eight years. I can tell you precisely when I look on the plaque(?) in the... I can never remember the exact date. I know it was May 23rd but... Yeah, so about seven or eight years ago, yes.

Interviewer: So obviously if you're a reader in the Church of England, 'converting that', for want of a better word, into a marriage in another church where it was legal would not be an option for you? I'm a bit unclear when it's reader and when it's ordained, a ministry, is it the same...?

[00:33:27]

Respondent: Yes, and certainly... And with regard to... Simeon and I would like to transfer our civil partnership to a marriage and it will be interesting to see whether my licence has happened within the Church of England. Certainly the reader ministry licence has been like revoked and, you know, refused. And I'm thinking of one or two other readers within the diocese and that's... But I'm not a hundred per cent certain but I'm certain that's happened with the readers as it's happened within the clergy. So I would lose my permission to, if you like, practise my ministry. I mean, I can't officiate at the Lord 's Table because I'm not priesthood and that's... But my licence of reader ministry would be withdrawn. I haven't sort of put that to the test yet but it is something that we would like to sort of... Because then, as other people have said, you know, we are fully... You know, why should we stay just a civil partnership just to... you know. (Inaudible 00:34:58), you know, "You've got everything," you know, but it's not the same as... But, you know, people, if you say 'civil partnership, you know, sort of on a form, whereas if you say, "We're married," you're married. You know, it doesn't have that same sort of ring of truth to it. And people look at... And, people, if you say, 'civil partnership' there's those people that say, you know, "Why not married?" You know, the ordinary person in the street, you know, sort of can't see the problem, "What is all the fuss about?" And especially with the Anglican sort of Primates, you know, meeting this week at Lambeth, you know, whether that will resolve anything or how things will improve or whether things will stay the same... I can't see much happening there; we'll just have to see.

Interviewer: Yeah. Have you had any involvement with LGCM?

Respondent: Not what I call active involvement with LGCM. My only sort of involvement was really sort of in the '80s and '90s and that sort of... And I really... You know, through... No, I haven't what I call had an active involvement. It was really only through changing institute really that I've had involvement, which is not the same as LGCM. But -

Interviewer: Are you still involved with Changing Attitude?

Respondent: Not at the moment but possibly will be because there is a... But there's a possibility of a Changing Attitude group starting in Newcastle. There's a meeting in Newcastle next month, in February. Did used to be a member of LGCM but I have to confess I'm not a member at this precise moment but I will be... As Tracy's reminded me, I'm not a member. And neither is Simeon. Because Simeon used to be a member. But anyway we will be... Because we sort of feel so far away from events but if there's more... I've been reassured that there are more other members in the North East, sort of in Newcastle, and so it would be good to try and get involved. There's nothing happening in Durham certainly in that sort of... unfortunately, and that's... And everything seems to hit towards Newcastle, which although is okay, it's 20 miles away. You know, it's fine on the train but... But anyway, we'll just have to... Even though we've had the house here in Durham sort of eight or nine years in October, you know, we still haven't what I call met any other or very few... Well, we've met probably about one other gay couple, male couple, locally, you know, we haven't met any other gay couples. And, as Simeon keeps reminding me, we're never going to meet any gay friends within the Church, certainly that's our experience anyway. But that's something that we... we just want to meet, again, likeminded people, you know, just for friendship and companionship really, you know, and social events and sort of... So we'll just have to see what materialises in this forthcoming year really.

Interviewer: Yeah. What do you think the future of the Church of England is?

Respondent: Very bleak. I think it's going through a very bleak time and I can see even further divisions and even more and more people leaving. You know, (inaudible 00:39:53) people as members of the Church of England and I can quite see very easily myself and my partner leaving the Church of England, it won't take much at all.

Interviewer: And where would you go?

Respondent: Well it sounds awful, probably from frying pan into the fire, you know, but whether we'd become Catholics and even joining the Roman Catholic Church, that would even be worse, you know, so then... But it hasn't... The institution of the Church disappoints us greatly but I haven't lost my faith and belief in God and Jesus Christ, my faith is as strong as ever, and that's the difference, you know, there is a difference. My personal faith, you know, my conviction, you know, that's not changing, but it's just the sadness of the institution that... you know. And it can't seem to just... You know, it's like knocking heads together against a brick wall, you know, for goodness sake, you know... And it's just not going to get any better because the split with Africa and... I mean, that's going to happen and gay people are becoming even... Even those either out or closeted and those sort of within... You know, whether lay or clergy or even bishops, the division is going to get greater. It's a sad thing but I don't see things sort of getting any easier. But we have thought about, you know, do we go to some other institution, you know, that welcomes gay people, you know, or do we become a Quaker or... I'm really... I can't say a hundred per cent but I would certainly be going to a church that certainly welcomes gay people anyway and embraces us and accepts us. Even the Metropolitan, you know, but, again, there's only one Metropolitan Church and that's in Newcastle. So it's not going to be easy in I suppose these next few years.

[00:42:39]

Interviewer: What's your experience been as a reader, are you ever allowed to mention the subject of sexuality within the Church of England? You know, I'm thinking in a preaching capacity or...

Respondent: Not... (Hesitates) Well, I could refer to it but it's a bit like sort of how Billy Elliot... If you've watched the film Billy Elliot and that sort of... Because this is a mining community, you know, an ex-mining community and it's still very much a macho sort of feel. You know, in one sense you feel almost more isolated as gay people here in the North East but that doesn't stop our attraction for the North East and the people but just there is a harshness. So, no, it's even more difficult to actually sort of preach about oneself and about being gay and who we are, which is sad, because I know that if I did I probably wouldn't be asked to preach again or give a talk again. You know, that's the sadness. Because I sing in the church choir and even only last Friday there was one particularly choir lady who is 70,71 and a stalwart of the Church, and I just... The choir practice had finished and the evening had gone well and I just said, "Oh..." And I've never watched an episode of The Voice but the vicar of Rowlands Gill I believe was on an episode and Rowlands Gill is a parish in... It's still in the Durham diocese but it's called Rowlands Gill.

Interviewer: Yeah, there was a vicar on it.

Respondent: Yeah, that's right, yeah. And I said, "Oh we'll have to watch that," you know, "Surprised that he's singing," you know, sort of... And I can't remember the song now. And they said, "Oh Boy George is on the panel" and the choir lady said, "Oh that's the trouble, they have to give all the gays a job," you know, sort of... And I thought, "Now..." And I wasn't quite sure... I should have responded to it but it was the end of a... It was evening, about sort of quarter past eight in the evening, and I thought, "Now, is that a dig at the BBC or is that referring to me as a gay person being a reader and actively involved and active in the Church?" So that's sort of that constant attitude that you have to sort of put up against. And I was told when I came here, you know, that it is very much a harsh community and harsh attitudes because it was a... All the parishes were very, you know, sort of mining and colliery based. I mean, this housing estate where I'm living now, it's built on what was a slag heap, so... And this mine closed and that was 40 years ago, so... But yeah, so it's certainly challenging times at the moment, yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah. Are you in general hopeful for the future of the wider Church? I mean, you've indicated that you think the future's bleak for the Church of England but do you think the Church as a whole...?

Respondent: I'm a positive person and I would like to think that I'm hopeful for the Church in the wider scheme of things but possibly not in my lifetime, you know, sort of where, you know, sort of we'll be welcomed and embraced and sort of a union of marriage between two people of the same sex. I can't see that, sadly. I'd be very surprised if that... Well, it hasn't happened yet anyway and it would certainly take a number of years for that to evolve, as it did for, you know, just the pure recognition and acceptance of problems within marriage, you know, the acceptance of divorced people, you know, so when people's marriages break down and the reunion and for divorced people to marry in church, and now that is more and more accepted, but that's taken quite a number of years. And, again, it's the same for gay people, just for them to... you know, their marriage to... Because, again, it's constantly being frowned upon, you know, and being mentioned, you know, sort of that a union is between a man and a woman, not between a man and a man or a woman and a woman. So...

[00:48:35]

Interviewer: Yeah. Okay, that's great. Thank you so much.
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Respondent: Okay, pleasure. Well I hope that's helpful.

Interviewer: No, very. (Laughs) Thank you.

Respondent: As I say, I've -

[End of transcript]