

THE SIBYLS

A Christian Spirituality Group for Transgender People



A REVIEW OF THE SIBYLS AND IT'S CURRENT ROLE

www.sibyls.co.uk

Susan Gilchrist 28 January 2012.

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FOUNDATION

The Sibyls was founded in 1996 following a conversation between Jay Wamsley and Malcolm Johnson, Master of St Katherine's foundation.

Its aim was to provide a confidential Christian spirituality support group for all transgendered people, their families and supporters.

Since then members of the Sibyls have engaged in a variety of activities but the primary role of the Sibyls as a confidential support group has always remained the same.

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CONFIDENTIAL SUPPORT

By providing an environment where transgendered people, their families and supporters can separately or together prayerfully express their Christian faith without fear, rejection, intimidation or persecution

By providing a resource where people can meet and share their hopes fears and aspirations without their confidence being broken

Traditionally this has been done through

- Two retreat weekends each year

- Day meetings and other events

- Contact Systems

- Regular Newsletters

- Helplines

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CONFIDENTIAL SUPPORT

By providing pastoral guidance relating to personal concerns and help on seeking expert opinion for counselling and advice

By providing a caring and supporting environment where people can learn to accept themselves, and where guilt can be absolved in the Love of Christ

By giving help and support to transsexuals and their families who are going through the process of gender reassignment and ways to help their integration into society.

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MEMBERS

Members come from a wide variety of backgrounds:

Transvestites: who need to express their female identity, but whose gender identity conforms to their biological sex.

Transsexuals who have undergone gender reassignment, or who are seeking it.

Transsexuals who for personal reasons are trying to continue to live in their birth assigned role.

Spouses with their families and other supporters.

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OUTREACH: PUBLICATIONS AND INFORMATION

Members of the Sibyls provide information and other resources to churches and the public on transgender matters:

Publications by Members:

The Transsexual is my Neighbour: Pastoral Guidelines for Christian Clergy, Pastors and Congregations by Christina Beardsley.

Faith, Gender and Me: by Elaine Sommers.

To access these and more information go to

<http://www.gndr.org.uk/transgender/index.htm>

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OUTREACH: SPEAKING ENGAGEMENTS AND WORKSHOPS

Speaking Engagements: For example the presentation on “LGB and T People: Labels and Faith” given at the Spectrum Home Office LGB&T Network Annual Conference in the Fairfield Halls Croydon on the 8th February 2011.

Workshops: For example the Sibyls workshop on “Gender, Sexuality and Spirituality” has been run at a variety of venues from 2007 including the International LGBT Human Rights Summit and LGBT Health Summit and elsewhere

Other Meetings: These involve interested and key groups. For example a panel meeting on “Listening to Trans People” was held for bishops and delegates attending the Anglican Lambeth conference in 2008.

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OUTREACH: INVOLVEMENT WITH OTHER ORGANISATIONS

Through involvement with external organisations; these include:

The Police

Government Working parties and Advisory Panels

Churches and Religious groups

In line with its role as a support group the Sibyls has been a lobbying rather than a campaigning organisation

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OUTREACH: CREATING UNDERSTANDING

Members of Sibyls work together with other organisations, such as GIRES (Gender Identity Research and Education Society).

Members are active and represent Sibyls in other transgender organisations.

Members are also involved in the more general LGB&T groups such as the *LGB&T Anglican Coalition*. Two of the trustees of *Changing Attitude* are Sibyls.

Much of the campaigning work of the Sibyls is carried out through the involvement of its members in the *LGB&T Anglican Coalition* and in partnership with other groups.

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ACTIVITIES AND ISSUES TO NOTE

These focus on the areas of: Desire, Transition, Invisibility, Gender and Sexuality, Identity and Relationships.

They are discussed here because they are the issues where the greatest lack of understanding is found.

They also directly affect how the Sibyls give support.

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ISSUES: DESIRE, TRANSITION AND INVISIBILITY

Most transsexuals do not want to be men or women, they want to be themselves.

However transsexuals may see this as a desire to change sex.

After successful reassignment many merge invisibly into society and contact with the Sibyls is no longer required

For some, membership of the Sibyls is a transitory phase; others find it a source of continuing support.

This support will continue to be needed for as long as the rejection of transsexuals and transvestites by the Churches remains.

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ISSUES: GENDER AND SEXUALITY

Gender and Sexuality act independently of each other

Before reassignment transsexuals are often heterosexual with reference to their birth assigned role

Equally before reassignment some transsexuals are homosexual with respect to their birth assigned role

After reassignment the direction of sexual orientation may not alter

Thus, some who would have been regarded as heterosexual in the birth assigned role will be identified as homosexual after transition.

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ISSUES: GENDER AND SEXUALITY

Others may change direction and embrace a sexual orientation which seeks heterosexual relationships in the newly defined role.

When there is a conflict between gender and sexuality, it is usually sexuality that is suppressed.

Most transvestites are heterosexual and have a male gender identity.

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ISSUES: MARRIAGE AND RELATIONSHIPS

The independence of gender and sexuality causes major problems for transsexuals and their spouses.

When marriage has taken place before reassignment nothing of the love and commitment to each other which was first embraced in the marriage may be lost after reassignment has taken place.

Many marriages break up instead because of the difficulties of adjustment and the trauma incurred.

Others are tested greatly because of the change.

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ISSUES: CIVIL PARTNERSHIPS AND MARRIAGE

Once a transsexual has obtained a Gender Recognition Certificate, he or she can marry in the new role.

Provided the partner is a member of the opposite sex this is a full marriage

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ISSUES: CIVIL PARTNERSHIPS AND MARRIAGE

There are greater difficulties for a married couple who want to stay together after reassignment has taken place.

Transgendered individuals who are legally married, and do not wish to dissolve that marriage, are not permitted to have a Gender Recognition Certificate. Divorce is required before the full certificate is granted.

Such a couple may divorce and then immediately engage in a civil partnership. However the thought of having a divorce can cause great trauma to the partners.

The alternative is to stay together without a gender recognition certificate being sought.

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MANAGEMENT: DYNAMICS

Although the conflict manifests it through gender the driving force behind it is the need for transsexuals to be themselves

Transsexuals face a conflict that cannot be fought.

It comes from the foundation of self identity. It is not about sex.

Any attempt to deny or suppress the underlying gender identity leads to a runaway drive

Even well meaning advice which asks transsexuals to use willpower to overcome the conflict is counterproductive. The guilt it brings can be devastating.

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MANAGEMENT: IDENTITY

Many transsexuals report a sense of unease with the gender identity assigned to them from as early as the age of four years.

Some compensate for this by engaging energetically in the imposed role. Before transition a male to female transsexual may appear very masculine in the male role.

Gender, in the elementary sense of deciding who one is, is one of the first global self concepts to form. Problems that transsexuals face may arise from building their sense of selfhood on a contradicted base.

The conflicts which transsexuals encounter are identity driven. The demand for transition and reassignment grows stronger with age.

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MANAGEMENT: CONSEQUENCES

From the outset some transsexuals reject any association with the gender assigned at birth. Others build up strong commitments and relationships in this role. These they cherish and want to preserve.

The discord with gender may not be consciously felt. Some may only become aware of the situation at a later date.

Attempts to suppress the conflict do not succeed since the conditions for finding a secure sense of self identity demand a firm base.

The repeated failure to find this firm base leads to a deeper sense of alienation and rejection. The more the conflict is fought the stronger the gender demands become until collapse occurs.

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MANAGEMENT: PRINCIPLES

It is the rejection of the enforced gender role that drives the conflict.

The contrasts between the extremity of the conflict, the modesty of the outcome, and the independence of gender and sexuality suggest that the source of the conflict arises from the foundation of self identity instead of the demands that gender makes.

Accepting the reality of the gender identity may help people to calm the drive for reassignment. However a total commitment to this approach is needed for it to succeed - and it cannot be enforced.

The coherence of self identity that is found after reassignment resolves the conflict with gender at source.

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MANAGEMENT: MISCONCEPTIONS

The true nature of the conflict is often not understood.

Other people see this goal in terms a lifestyle choice, where the desire is for a role or a preference for sex.

Transsexuals can reinforce some of the misconceptions by expressing their source of their distress as the desire to be identified as a member of the opposite gender.

Medical advice which is based on these presumptions is the opposite of what is required and it can have a very harmful effect.

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ENGAGEMENT: RELIGIOUS DEMANDS

The same misconceptions are used by Churches and religious organisations to condemn those transsexuals who seek gender reassignment for their acts.

The euphoria of religious belief may sometimes hide the drive for rejection and some may claim that a “Cure” has been found.

That only lasts for as long as the euphoria can be sustained.

The Churches which employ the Bible as a Judge to expel from their membership and condemn to damnation transsexuals who cannot conform to the rules which the churches themselves create, remove their ability to recover, magnify guilt and cause enormous distress.

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ENGAGEMENT: EDUCATION

There is the requirement to correct these misconceptions by creating a better public understanding of the condition.

There is the need to use scriptural analysis and reasoned argument to expose the inaccuracies of the more negative and literalistic interpretations of religious texts.

There is the demand to show that transsexuals do not seek gender reassignment for ulterior motives.

There is the obligation to communicate the awareness that transsexuals who have sought gender reassignment are, like everyone else, capable of living spiritually pure, moral and uplifting lives.

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SOCIAL CHANGES

In one generation there has been a massive change in public outlook towards accepting transsexual people as ordinary members of society

The Gender Recognition Act 2004, The Gender Equality Act 2007 and the Equality Act 2010 regularised the status of transsexual people and outlawed harassment and discrimination on the grounds of sex.

The Church of England and other churches obtained exemptions from this legislation on the grounds of Christian belief.

Major issues which still remain are those of rejection of transsexuals by their own families and the rejection and condemnation by many people in the Christian Church.

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SIBYLS ACTIVITIES

The Sibyls continues to be a confidential Christian spiritual support group for transgender people, their families and supporters.

It continues to offer prayerful and pastoral support for those who are in difficulty or are going through the changes associated with gender reassignment or transition.

There is a growing emphasis within the Sibyls on providing support for spouses and families where one of the members is transgendered.

The greater social acceptability of transgender people in society means that the educational and outreach work of the Sibyls and the creation of better religious understanding will play an increasingly important role.

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BELIEF

It is our belief that the labels which Christians use to condemn each other drop away in the true Love of Christ.

“You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.”

Galatians Chapter 3 Verses 26-29

May we all learn to live together in the Gospel of Christian Love.

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Are there any questions?

Thank You

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