

THE SIBYLS

A Christian Spirituality Group for Transgender People



**GENDER AND SEXUALITY:
A TRANSGENDER EXPERIENCE**

www.sibyls.co.uk

Susan Gilchrist 20 April 2013.

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THE SIBYLS: FOUNDATION

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

Its aim is 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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THE SIBYLS: 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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THE SIBYLS: 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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THE SIBYLS: 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, their families and other supporters.

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THE SIBYLS: 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 for more information go to

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

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THE SIBYLS: OUTREACH: TALKS 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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THE SIBYLS: OUTREACH: INVOLVEMENT WITH OTHER GROUPS

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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THE SIBYLS: 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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ISSUES: CONCERNS 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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ANALYSIS: CONUNDRUM

Most transsexuals simply want to change the frame of reference in which they live and in every other way wish to preserve their current life.

The contradiction between the extremity of the conflict and the modesty of the demand implies that gender is the focus but not the drive.

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Transsexuals deal with conflicts relating to gender role in many different ways

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Transsexuals deal with conflicts relating to gender role in many different ways

The conflict is driven by the search for identity and has its roots at the foundation of selfhood itself.

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ANALYSIS: A NEW APPROACH

This is described in the following documents:

LGB and T People: Labels and
Christian Doctrine. Susan Gilchrist

LGB and T People: Identity, Desire and the
Christian Church. Susan Gilchrist

Check the website: <http://www.gndr.org.uk/transgender/index.htm>
for information on access and the current status of these documents.

Please note that the views expressed in this analysis are the personal
views of the author alone.

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ANALYSIS: METHODOLOGY

In order to explain this conundrum and gain some understanding of these conditions a number of hypotheses will be presented.

This research takes account of recent advances in infant neurophysiology and neuropsychology and links these with models of personal and psychological development to provide an overall approach.

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ANALYSIS: NEUROPHYSIOLOGY

Development begins with the creation of individual strands, bubbles or pebbles of elementary thought a self-reinforcing process in which each step takes as its starting point the previous advance which had just been made, and each of these fragmentary elements later coalesce into the more complex concepts that are formed.

The process is tuned to ensure that the maximum degree of individuality is created, but this also means that more things can go wrong.

The differential delayed development of the pre-frontal cortex and brain plasticity lock these early concepts in place.

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HYPOTHESES: ORIGINS

This analysis identifies the conflict with gender identity as the symptom of the failure to build a coherent sense of self identity rather than the cause.

Instead of building a gender identity which is totally male or female, every person creates a sense of self identity which is a composite of all the early concepts that are formed.

It is this composite that underpins conscious thought. The need to make sense of this requires each person to create an exclusive gender allegiance which is polarised into either male or female, to which total loyalty is required.

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HYPOTHESES: REJECTION AND DESIRE

Both gender and sexually variant conditions, such as homosexuality and transsexuality are identity driven.

Desire does not drive these battles. Even though the conflicts manifest themselves in terms of gender and sexual orientation, their origins lie at the foundation of self-identity itself.

Parallel dynamics can be seen in the conditions such as addiction, alcoholism, depression, obsession, tribal allegiances, conflicts of sexual orientation, and in further areas as well.

Although the conditions are independent of each other the same form of analysis can be applied to sexually variant conditions as well.

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PROBLEMS: PSYCHOLOGY FAILURES

The failure of many of the conventional psychodynamic and psychiatric approaches to resolve or explain these conditions is of major consequence.

The drives of rejection and the searching for a coherent self identity are often confused with the desires for some goal.

It is important to make the distinction between identity driven conflicts and desire driven ones, for each of these needs different management programmes and often the wrong ones are used.

Attempts at repression have often been employed and many disasters have occurred.

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PROBLEMS: RELIGIOUS FAILURES: 1997 CATECHISM OF THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH.

“Homosexuality refers to relations between men or between women who experience an exclusive or predominant sexual attraction toward persons of the same sex. It has taken a great variety of forms through the centuries and in different cultures. Its psychological genesis remains largely unexplained. Basing itself on Sacred Scripture, which presents homosexual acts as acts of grave depravity, Tradition has always declared that "Homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered." They are contrary to the natural law. They choose the sexual act to the gift of life. They do not proceed from a genuine affective and sexual complementarity. Under no circumstances can they be approved.”

And transgender experience can be included in this as well.

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IDENTITY: 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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IDENTITY: 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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IDENTITY: GENDER AND SEXUALITY

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

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

Most transvestites are heterosexual and all have a male gender identity.

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MANAGEMENT: DYNAMICS

Transsexuals face a conflict that cannot be fought.

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

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

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

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

The conflicts which transsexuals encounter are identity driven.

Many transsexuals report a sense of unease with the gender identity assigned to them from as early as the age of four years. The demand for transition and reassignment grows stronger with age.

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.

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MANAGEMENT: CONSEQUENCES

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

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

However attempts to suppress the conflict do not succeed for the conditions for a secure sense of self identity demand a firm base.

Repeated failures to find this firm base leads to an ever deeper sense of alienation and rejection. The more the conflict is fought the stronger the demands of gender become until collapse occurs.

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MANAGEMENT: PRINCIPLES

The rejection of the enforced gender role 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 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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RELATIONSHIPS: MARRIAGE

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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RELATIONSHIPS: 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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RELATIONSHIPS: CIVIL PARTNERSHIPS AND MARRIAGE

Once a transsexual has obtained a Gender Recognition Certificate, he or she can heterosexually marry in that transitioned role under the provisions of the 2004 Gender Recognition Act.

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

The present requirement for couples who were previously in a heterosexual marriage to divorce before engaging in a civil partnership is resolved by the 2013 Equal Marriage Act.

However benefits accrued will not be backdated to the date of the original marriage

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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 of conduct they make, also remove their ability to recover, magnify their feelings of 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

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 as 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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QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

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Thank You

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