

“Take Me to Church”

This week, former President Mary McAleese publicly stated her discontent with how gay and lesbian people are received in our Church. Also this week the Irish artist Hozier climbed international charts with his song *Take Me to Church*. And during past week I felt drawn to watching a film I had seen advertised on Netflix* a few times.

For the Bible Tells Me So, an American production released in 2007, explores how fundamental Christians understand and deal with the reality of homosexuality in their faith community and families. The film centres the shared stories of various conservative Christian parents and the journey of growth and faith they embarked upon when learning that their beloved son or daughter was gay.

The stories ranged from the tragic loss of a daughter to suicide, following her mother's rejection of her sexuality, to the proud family of Bishop Gene Robinson, who was consecrated the first openly gay bishop in the Anglican Church. A touching moment in the film is when Victor and Imogene, Bishop Gene's elderly parents, tell us, in their Kentucky accents, of how they got some books and tried to 'learn about gay folks' explaining that:

"After he told us, it didn't change our love for him, because he is our son and we love him no matter what. God made him that way and he is still our blood. We learned to accept it... We knew how good he was in what he was doing [clergyman] and if anybody would go to heaven, he would."

The stories are very real and very human. They are about learning, family, unconditional love and finding God in new, unexpected places. The film also presents challenges: challenges to those who read the bible literally; challenges to those who believe homosexuality is a choice or an illness; challenges to those who have a limited understanding of the Christian message.

Reform and renewal is also part of the journey for some families. They organised and peacefully challenged churches and other Christian groups responsible for generating misinformation and negative messaging on the topic of homosexuality. They were supported by Soulforce, a not-for-profit organisation working to end the religious oppression of LGBTQ people in the US.

For The Bible Tells Me So is a balanced and touching documentary, presenting authentic Christians living by their conscience, valuing their family and loving God.

The video of the Hozier song mentioned above is also something to watch if you, like me, have been thinking on this topic over the past week. For its dramatic grittiness alone, it is worth the 4:03 minutes on YouTube. It artfully depicts the abduction and assault of a gay man to the poignant lyrics sung by the striking voice of this artist:
*"Take me to church so I can worship like a dog at the shrine of your lies,
I'll tell you my sins so you can sharpen your knife"*

Hozier has said that inspiration for the song and video mainly came from the controversial anti-gay laws in Russia at present, which are briefly referred to in the video. With this song being one of the most played on Irish radio stations since the New Year, it certainly seems to have caught the ear and perhaps the imagination of listeners. Although the musical quality of the hit is of a high standard, the main thrust

of the song's message leaves pause for thought. The listener is invited to consider how 'being taken to Church' is an undesirable and even threatening experience for some.

What then, are the challenges for us who are regulars 'at Church'? How do we welcome those who are anxious about joining us? How do we discourage this 'knife-sharpening'? How do we make our church a true refuge for sinners and the 'field hospital in a battlefield' as the wise man once said?
Your comments below please...

[Mary Anne Stokes is an ACI member with a special interest in social justice and popular culture.]

*Netflix.com is an online library of movies, documentaries and television series.