

'Jesus holding my hand has been the most powerful force in my life'

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Two gay priests of different generations talk about the challenges that they have faced in their ministry

LAST year, two gay priests released books. The Revd Marcus Green, Rector of Steeple Aston with North Aston and Tackley, in the diocese of Oxford, wrote *The Possibility of Difference*, offering "a biblical affirmation of inclusivity".

The Revd Stanley Underhill, now retired after serving in parishes in Canterbury and Lichfield dioceses, and Menorca, wrote *Coming out of the Black Country*, a memoir that included a stark account of lifelong depression and subjection to conversion therapies (News, 12 October 2018).

Born almost 40 years apart (Marcus in 1966, Stanley in 1927), they met recently at The Charterhouse in central London.

Marcus: I'm 52. I was ordained 25 years ago this year in the Church in

Wales. I recently wrote a book on the possibility of difference — and that's as an Evangelical and as a gay man . . . seeing in the Bible a very affirming view of God: how God loves everybody and why the Bible very strongly says that.

Stanley: I'm 91. I was born and brought up as a Methodist until I was 30, but I also associated with Free Churchmen who were also Evangelical — I suppose they were fundamentalists. I didn't know the difference in those days — as far as I was concerned they preached Christ. [At the same time, I was made aware that there was something wrong with me, as I did not feel attracted to the opposite sex and that these feelings for my own sex were an abomination to God.]

Ultimately, I had a breakdown, precipitated by another Christian who sought to exorcise the demon from me — as he called it. Then precipitated a visit to the hospital for about six weeks, where I had Electric Current Therapy. From that point onwards, I suffered periodical depression — I suppose you call it reactive depression. So I packed up my bags and came to London.

Marcus: Had you ever suffered from depression before that point?

Stanley: The depression started for real after the exorcism. I mean, I was anxious and had a lack of confidence throughout the years up to that. Then I came and had two years with a Freudian analyst who didn't do a thing — just left me like Humpty

Dumpty, falling off the wall: left me in pieces. I had then testosterone treatment, recommended by the health service. They said that homosexuality was a mental illness; so they stuffed the male hormone into me. That didn't do anything but make me feel more sexual, more and more so!

I tried anti-depressants. I had lithium treatment for a while, which made me shake. From then onwards, I had nothing to do with drugs, because they just made me feel like a zombie.

Marcus: What age were you when you stopped?

Stanley: I suppose I was 40 when I stopped all treatment. I then made a decision that I would try to live as a straight man, because life was so dangerous.

When I came here [Charterhouse], my depressions had been off and on throughout all those years. They continued even when I retired, when stress is taken away from you. I always remember the therapist said: "Stanley, the only way you will come to terms with yourself is to tell your story." He hoped it would be a catharsis, and he was right. I haven't been depressed, and I have certainly felt happier about myself since I wrote the book.

Marcus: I was listening to Radio 5, and it was a chap who won *Big Brother* last year. He's a teenager, but he found it really difficult coming out to his best friend that he was gay. And we presume that kids today

have it really easy. Just listening to that it brought me up sharp. It's easier. The world has changed. But it is not easy.

Stanley: It has changed, but as you say there are still people who are struggling.

Marcus: I was born in a world where being gay was illegal. Although that changed not long after I was born, society didn't. The attitudes that I grew up in were the attitudes that you grew up in. . .

I didn't need the fingers on both hands to count the number of people who knew that I was gay for most of my adult life. I came out when I was 43. My family didn't know prior to that.

Stanley: I only told my brother a year ago. . . He's two years younger than me. He's 89. He was perfectly unfussed and I was quite surprised. But I never told my parents.

Marcus: Do you think they knew?

Stanley: My mother may have done. But my father was so macho-orientated. Throughout my childhood, he hardly ever spoke to me, and he thought I was a sissy. . . They had no vocabulary. They didn't understand the emotional dilemma I was in at all.

Marcus: The depression's an interesting thing. I have suffered from depression all my adult life. Has it been better since I came out? I think the answer is, yes, [although] I still suffer from time to time. I think when you've had this long-term dissociation between what's inside

and what's outside . . . there are scars that are left there.

Stanley: Having had sex as a battleground throughout your life . . . you've missed out on any experience of intimacy, and the sacramental element of the union of two souls.

Marcus: Love.

Stanley: Love. I'm alone and I long for, I suppose, an experience of feeling one with another.

Marcus: That's one of the things behind the book: I want people who are younger than me to have an understanding of God which allows them to live with that possibility of love, so that they can have that life which you haven't had, which I haven't had.

Stanley: I would love to have been married, loved a woman, and had kids. When you see everybody with their huge families, you feel the odd man out.

Marcus: I always wanted to be a young father, so that I would have children who would know me before I was old. And when I realised that was never going to happen, that was a loss, that was a grief. . .

Stanley: It's a strange thing: for years I never loved myself. I didn't think I was lovable, and now I think I'm lovable — and now I'm too old to experience it!

Marcus: I became a Christian through the school Christian Union. My family were not churchgoers, and a friend at school invited me to a



Left to right:
the Revd
Marcus
Green, the
Revd Stanley
Underhill

lunchtime meeting. My Dad had brought me up to hear the word "Christian" and spit... I came away from it genuinely changed inside.

After university, I worked at a church, St Aldate's in Oxford, and then in that time looked at ordination and went straight to Wycliffe Hall, and was ordained at 27...

This was the mid '80s; so at that point we believed that [being gay] was a choice, and you could change. I knew it wasn't a choice, because, although I could be pretty awkward, I wouldn't have chosen that for myself. I just thought to myself, well, if this is it, I will either have to change or be single for ever; I can do it.

Stanley: My path started when I was quite a boy. I remember being bullied at school. At the time, the Home Service was broadcasting *The Man Born to be King*. I think on Sundays. It's an extraordinary rendition of the Gospels in dramatic form. It so impressed me that I said: "Well, I'm going to take Jesus as my friend, because he stuck up for the underdog."

My next great realisation was that this Jesus whom I had befriended, or he had befriended me, was the Son of God. I started to read my scriptures in my early twenties.

Marcus: Has the Church damaged me as a person because of my sexuality? The answer is undoubtedly yes, because... when you grow up as an Evangelical, you very subtly are a second-class person.

And yet, the sustaining power of Jesus — holding my hand, blessing me and carrying me, being with me, lifting me up, being with the underdog, as you say — has been the most powerful force in my life.

Stanley: That's been my experience, too. One might ask me: "Why on earth stay with an organisation that treats you so badly?" You have to sort it out. The Church is one thing, and Jesus is another. Often, the two don't meet.

"It's always been an anomaly to me... Evangelicals would quote: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only son," and that Christianity was a universal phenomenon; and yet, on the other hand, they are going to exclude me because I'm gay. It is a strange phenomenon.

Marcus: The turning-point for me

was a breakdown, and a really serious breakdown that took me three years to recover from...

"Yes, the Church damaged me, but people in the Church were instrumental in lifting me up, as well. My Bishop at that time, the Archbishop of Wales, Barry Morgan, was extraordinarily kind and sent me away to quite a conservative seminary in Kentucky. They put me up, connected me to a psychotherapist who was simply brilliant, and gave me the space to understand who I was.

It was a Tuesday afternoon in February, nine years ago, I suddenly understood for the first time that I saw myself as a second-class human being. I realised just what shockingly awful theology it was, and that God doesn't see anybody that way.

The moment I understood that that's how I saw myself, I understood that it was terrible and couldn't possibly be true. That was the unlocking moment for me.

People in the Church were the gifts that freed me. So had the Church damaged me? Yes. Did the Church restore me? Yes.

Stanley: The thing that puzzled me about the Church: we had the battle with Darwin... yet when you look at anthropology, from the word go the human race has been anything but the binary model. If the Church recognises that God didn't make the world in seven days, why couldn't they recognise that sex is as variable as anything else?

There's another thing that distresses me: the Church of England has got superb theologians, and yet we are still misled by these fundamentalists who do not even obey the rules of the Church of England: that the Bible is to be interpreted with reason and tradition. It may be the word of God, but it's handed to people who are frail and sinful; so they need help in interpreting it. And yet they go along the line that the words cannot be altered...

Marcus: You were single as you were trained, single when you were selected. This was never an issue, and people never hinted or talked?

Stanley: It was never discussed. I was never asked about my sexuality. Bishop Runcie talked about his love life when he was a tank commander

in Holland! It was quite strange... Lovely man, but it was hilarious.

Marcus: For me, in the selection process, I don't recall anything. I was much younger, in my early twenties. I spent most of my time at theological college wrestling with it as an Evangelical. I remember going on a study week in my second year at Wycliffe Hall and somebody making some kind of off-colour joke. Because I was struggling at the time, I just couldn't handle the situation and I left without telling anyone. I couldn't have told anyone.

And then, right at the end of my time there, the college principal, Dick France, called me in and said he wasn't commending me for ordination because I had missed

"It was smoke and mirrors, and he had nothing to offer. I was completely devastated"

stuff. And he cited that week, and I sat there thinking, "Do I tell him?" And I decided I would.

So I said: "This is why I wasn't there, because this person made this comment and actually it's about me. I've been coming to terms with the fact that I am gay." And Dick sat there, and said: "I had no idea. Oh, oh, oh, then it's my turn to apologise. I should have known, and I should have been helping you, and I am really sorry. Right, scrap everything I have just said."

And he stopped being my college principal that day and he became a friend.

Though I have to say that my time at Wycliffe was hard, there were a couple of people there who privately were extraordinarily, in the end, helpful.

Stanley: Can I make one correction about the Church of England? When I joined the Society of St Francis, part of my motivation was to escape a world that was cruel to me. The Society attracted quite a considerable number of homosexuals, and in all

the teaching there was no homophobia whatsoever... There is a part of the Church that was enlightened.

Marcus: I am going to tell you a story from 1992, in my time at Wycliffe Hall... We had a pastoral-studies week, which included input from an organisation that was all to do with helping people change from being gay to being straight. And I was delighted, because I didn't want to be gay: I wanted to be straight.

The guy who came was the head of this organisation. And we could, without anyone knowing, go and see this person... So I went to see this chap, and I wanted to know what the secret was, and how I could become straight.

And this guy sat there, having told us about the ministry of his organisation, and basically apologised to me because it didn't work. I was devastated... It was smoke and mirrors, and he had nothing to offer. I was completely devastated.

Stanley: Until the '90s, of course, it was still a silent war. Everyone was in the closet, and you didn't speak about it. I was aware there were three gay people in my congregation. You wanted to help them, and yet, in helping them, you would disclose your own identity, and then the cat would be out of the bag, the balloon would go up, and all hell would break loose.

One guy was in my little village church. [Later] when I came to London and I met him casually, he was working at the AIDS ward in Barts [hospital] as a nurse... Then he told me he'd got AIDS, and the next moment he'd died. I was absolutely shattered. It was about 2005.

His boyfriend couldn't live without him, and booked a hotel in Bloomsbury and hanged himself. I went to both funerals. It was absolutely devastating. That was all because we were all so buttoned up, and hadn't got the courage to reveal ourselves.

In moving her motion against conversion therapy at the General Synod in 2017, Jayne Ozanne read from a letter from Stanley. The Synod voted to call for a ban (News, 8 July 2017).
Stanley: I was delighted for the

opportunity to express what I've suffered as the result of the Church's attitudes towards homosexuality over the years. I am delighted that the Synod approved her motion, and it's now gone to Parliament...

Marcus: I wanted conversion therapy. It took me years to accept that this is how God has made me.

Stanley: I hope that we will be raising people up, releasing them from their bonds that the Church has put then in.

Marcus: Yes, setting people free.

Marcus is on the biblical-studies working group of the Living in Love and Faith project, the House of Bishops' programme on sexuality.

Marcus: My experience has been extraordinarily positive. They are not attempting to write another report with more recommendations, which will inevitably upset some people and delight other people, and probably upset everyone. Frankly, it's an attempt to write a set of resources so that the whole Church can have a better conversation: "This is what the inherited position is, this is what the emerging position is. Let's have a better conversation, with better information. Let's appreciate we are all in Christ here."

I think this is the first time that that has been attempted, and from where I am inside it, in my group there are people with very different opinions with very different backgrounds, but actually genuinely appreciating each other. If something of that work can infect the wider Church, that's a better atmosphere.

I don't mind disagreeing with people, actually; I really don't, providing the disagreement appreciates that the person I am disagreeing with is also a human being loved by God.

I have Evangelicals writing to me, wanting to know more, wanting to engage, wanting to be part of a conversation. And I think that is a very different position from where we were.

The Possibility of Difference is published by Kevin Mayhew at £8.99 (CT Bookshop £8.10). Coming Out of the Black Country is published by Zuleika at £25 (CT Bookshop £22.50).