



**I CAN HAVE  
A SPIRITUAL  
JOURNEY**

A photograph of a person with short, dark hair, seen from behind, sitting in a wooden church pew. The person is looking towards the front of the church, where a large, simple wooden cross is mounted on a light-colored wall. The lighting is warm and dim, creating a contemplative atmosphere. The church's interior features wooden beams and a high ceiling.

*Three stories of individuals navigating the intersection of their LGBTQIA+ identity and religious faith within the church*

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**A**licia Fisher sits comfortably in who she is. We're in a quirky Des Moines coffee shop, where she orders the Cinnamon Toast Crunch Latte because it sounds good. Her auburn hair descends from a knit hat in waves, framing her eyes, which have been painted a bright pink. Under a cardigan, she's wearing a t-shirt from which a rainbow casts out the words "Downtown Disciples." Fisher is proud to be asexual, bisexual — and Christian.

### ALICIA'S STORY

Our conversation gets off to an unexpected start. "I always joke that some people rebel in high school by drinking and doing drugs. I rebelled by becoming a conservative Christian," she says.

As a young girl, Fisher attended mass sporadically. Her grandmother was a practicing Catholic. Her mother wasn't uber religious. Fisher only went to service on holidays.

"Tumultuous" is the word she uses to describe her childhood. At seven years old, Fisher was the new kid at a small school. Relationships were already established between the students there, so she struggled to fit in. Then the bullying started. "It made me very lonely and angry. I would lash out a lot at people, which only made the bullying worse," Fisher says.

In school, she developed a reputation for being angry all the time. At home, things weren't any better. "I don't think my parents knew what to do with me," Fisher says.

Desperate to find love and support as a young teen, she looked to the church. On Sunday mornings, an older woman from her congregation would drive her to service. Fisher also attended Wednesday evening services. Church became the community Fisher needed.

"I think I found a place where I could just still be [a] hurting person and they would listen," she says. "I [had] a reputation of being angry all the time, and, with them, I didn't."



By high school, Fisher was spending nearly every night with her church's youth group — eating meals, playing board games at the pastor's house, and serving the homeless shelters of Milwaukee.

Meanwhile, she was beginning to sense she was different from her church-going peers. "I don't think I had words for it for a long time," she says. "The asexual part of me is probably the biggest part, and that goes back to high school — not ever really wanting a boyfriend, never really feeling called to marriage, never really feeling strong attractions to anyone."

So when her church acted inappropriately towards her, Fisher felt all the more uncomfortable. Her youth pastor would arrange for the boys in the youth group to drive her to events. During mission trips, guys would crowd around her. "I was like, 'Haha. I'm just going to throw this ball at you and go away please,'" she says.

Fisher was aware her church fostered a conservative culture. It wasn't an issue — until she was challenged for advocating tolerance.

She'd just attended a performance of *The Laramie Project*, a play that depicts the aftermath of a hate crime that killed a gay man in 1999. Fisher cried through the entire show. "I think that was the first time I started to see violence in anti-rights rhetoric," she says.

Fisher says she was never taught to treat homosexuality with violence, but the show revealed the consequences of permitting hate to fester. After the play, Fisher bought a t-shirt. It read "The Laramie Project" on the front and "Tolerance" on the back. She wore it the next time her youth group gathered.

Her tone shifts as she explains their critical response. "I remember getting a lot of questions about it and being really defensive and angry that they were being so harsh about

something I felt was a staple of what we were teaching,” Fisher says.

She didn’t know what to do. It was clear her church didn’t tolerate people like herself. But if she walked away, she’d lose her entire support system. She’d go back to being alone.

“I hate to say it,” Fisher says, “but it was a six-year long journey ... chipping away at what I was taught, and asking questions ... [like] ‘Why is love wrong?’”

Fisher was a junior in college when her youth pastor invited her to partake in a summer retreat in New Hampshire. During the getaway, the youth group listened to a guest speaker who was leading a thriving boarding school in Africa. Following the presentation, one of Fisher’s peers expressed it was a shame the speaker never had a husband. He insisted the speaker could accomplish more if she was married.

“I’m just sitting there [thinking], ‘Shit. That doesn’t really play into the way I feel. I don’t know that I want to get married,’” Fisher says.

This was the final straw for her. She knew there was nothing wrong with how she was created and didn’t want to associate any longer with a culture that constantly told her otherwise. The retreat was the last thing she did with her childhood church.

Fisher isn’t alone in her experience. Across the country, churches are losing their LGBTQIA+ community members. The Religious News Service surveyed 250 LGBT people in 2023 and found 80% of them reported being raised religious. But only 36% reported a current religious affiliation. Of the 64% who reported no religious affiliation, about one-third claimed they continued to feel a connection to their spirituality.

Mickey Powell would’ve identified with this group three years ago. They believed in God — but were burned out from church.

### **MICKEY’S STORY**

Growing up, their parents worked as Independent Baptist missionaries. Powell was constantly experiencing

new congregations — and constantly walking away hurt.

“I’ve been to a lot of churches,” Powell says, “and it seems like all that I could find was contradictions.”

The sermons Powell sat through left them questioning, “If this is wrong, shouldn’t this be wrong too?” and, “If God loves everybody, why is this person bad, and I’m better than them?”

Church hindered Powell’s ability to know who they were.

“They very much hold to the Bible and hold to homosexuality is a sin and all that stuff ... that’s why it took me so long to discover myself,” they say.

Powell spent their young adult years in a cycle of desiring spiritual connection, getting involved with a church, encountering homophobia and hypocrisy, then leaving discouraged. A round of this cycle played out when Powell was a college student. After enrolling in Faith Baptist Bible College and Theological Seminary in Ankeny, Iowa, they decided to give church another try. Powell joined a Bible study at a non-denominational congregation. It failed to practice what it preached. They left that church “worn out.”

In 2012, Powell earned their degree in theology. Shortly thereafter, their grandparents fell ill. This caused Powell to move back to their home state of New Mexico. While living there, Powell was expected to attend church. They complied for a short time — until they couldn’t stand the culture anymore.

“[It] was the antithesis of everything I stood [for],” Powell says.

So, in September 2020, when the opportunity to nanny for a friend presented itself, Powell enthusiastically moved from New Mexico to Des Moines. They didn’t step foot in a church for an entire year.

### **THE UNFORTUNATE STANDARD**

The amount of LGBTQIA+ Americans driven away from a house of worship versus that of all Americans is disproportionate. In a 2020 study by the University of California, Los Angeles, 53.3% of LGBT people reported being religiously unaffiliated. In the same year, the Public Religion Research Institute found that only 23% of all Americans reported not having a religious affiliation.

A Minnesota-based Catholic priest, who wishes to remain anonymous, deems it “unfortunate” that a high number of LGBTQIA+ people are withdrawing from churches — though he’s not surprised.

When he was a young boy, he remembers accompanying his mother to mass. There, he’d witness her travel to a place “beyond,” he says. “She just closed her eyes, and she was listening. You could tell she was in another world, but she was sitting there, totally physically at peace, almost glowing.” So he, too, was delighted to attend church. “I went with her because it was cool. It was quiet. It was a routine in the day. It was spiritual.”

In their small town in Wisconsin, homosexuality wasn’t condemned, nor embraced. He remembers one instance where he brought up the topic of homosexuality around his mother, and she shut it down. “In my world, [sexuality] just wasn’t part of conversation that I heard around me.”

Later in life, the priest was attending seminary school, where he lived among men, studying and interacting. “When I admitted to myself, I was gay, I was ... on my bed crying in my room alone,” he says.

But he wasn’t alone. He soon learned that many of his intelligent and admirable schoolmates were gay, as well. He was able to pick himself up. “All of a sudden, it was OK,” he says.

The priest never abandoned his faith. Still, he can understand why half the LGBTQIA+ community keeps their distance from the church. One of the



contributing factors, he speculates, is a lack of insight among members of the LGBTQIA+ community.

“Maybe the gay and lesbian community ... get caught up in their own ... in some ways, shallowness,” he says. But he deems formal religion the main factor, “especially the very conservative religions [that] preach, ‘It’s the sin, but we’re gonna love you; we’re gonna hate sin.’”

To which, he says, “That’s bullshit.”

He saw the destruction such thinking can cause when he was asked to anoint a high school classmate of his who was losing his battle against AIDS. This was a profoundly spiritual man. One who spent much of his boyhood in chapel. Even so, when the man was dying, his parents paid him only a brief visit, then drove away before his final breath, never returning for his funeral.

“Yet these people think they’re religious!” the priest says. “No, they’re afraid.”

It was the culture of the parents’ Catholic church, not religion or spirituality, that enabled them to turn their back on their child, he says.

### **FINDING AN AFFIRMING CHURCH**

LGBTQIA+ affirming congregations are revolutionizing church culture. For instance, New Beginnings Christian Church in Urbandale, Iowa believes all people deserve to be honored for who they are, according to Minister Heather Wachendorf. “Whoever you are, however God created you — you’re good. You’re beloved. You don’t have to pretend to be something that you’re not,” she says.

Powell says they believe if it weren’t for Downtown Disciples, another LGBTQIA+ affirming church in Iowa, they would have remained unsatisfied in how they identified. The supposedly spiritual environment they were raised in didn’t provide resources to help them discover themselves. At 16, they wondered if they were lesbian. Fifteen years later, when they moved to Des Moines, they identified as

transgender. Powell says they didn’t feel these titles suited them. Enter Downtown Disciples.

“It was actually the first week that I went to Downtown Disciples when I finally decided that I’m not a he/him. I’m a they/them,” Powell says.

They say being in an affirming church empowers them to be whoever they want to be.

But finding a tolerant congregation can be frustrating for LGBTQIA+ individuals, Fisher says. Many churches don’t clarify whether they embrace the community. “They’re going to say, ‘We don’t hate gay people, we love them. We just don’t love their lifestyle,’” Fisher says. “It’s that whole ‘love the sinner hate the sin’ thing. They want you to get plugged in ... they don’t say the horrible things out loud because they want your life to be so involved that breaking away is too painful.”

But Downtown Disciples is direct about what they stand for. In 2019, Fisher landed on the congregation’s webpage. In clear sight were the words “LGBTQIA+ affirming” and “Black Lives Matter.” In attending her first Downtown Disciples service, Fisher was amazed. “There’s this pastor standing up there teaching a Christian message from the Bible that isn’t saying gay marriage is wrong and isn’t saying that people shouldn’t love who they love, that people shouldn’t be who they are, and I’m like, ‘This can happen?’”

### **HEALING OPEN WOUNDS**

LGBTQIA+ believers are embarking on spiritual journeys. If churches want to walk alongside them, they’ll need to, in the priest’s words, “grow up.” He’s calling on religious communities to understand their need for queer people’s spiritual gifts. “The church is really denying itself a great source of grace by keeping people on the fringe,” he says.

The priest says that, due to their subjective experiences, members of the LGBTQIA+ community can help build churches. “The perception of a gay person can be increased by the struggle that they’ve had because they come to know another truth

that is beyond the narrow truth prescribed by society.”

The church’s next step in forming a positive relationship with the LGBTQIA+ community is to extend genuine invitations.

“It’s interesting that there’s so much that the gay community can bring to the church, and has, but the door is just ajar,” the priest says. “Why don’t we open that door? Let the fresh air in. Let the Spirit come in and work and build this community.”

Powell has experienced the power of a welcoming church. They want this feeling to reach the entire LGBTQIA+ community. Until it does, Powell extends a hand.

“There is someone out there [who] loves them no matter what,” Powell says. “They don’t necessarily have to believe in a higher power, but there is a community ... out there that loves them and accepts them and affirms them.”

“Why don’t we open that door? Let the fresh air in. Let the Spirit come in and work and build this community.”