

On Being Christian

by Michelle Hogan

Preamble

After living half my life with a deep secret, I had to find out what was really wrong with me. It took years to find someone who could not only tell me, but guide me to the truth of myself.

Herein, I have been asked to describe my journey from man to woman, correcting a misdiagnosis at birth, how my church family helped me along that path, and where that path is leading me today.

The Story

I was born into Wesley United Church when our part of Cambridge was known as Galt. United, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Anglican churches were built by Scottish stone masons using indigenous limestone in our town and the architecture is traditional, as are the outlooks on life of most of our population.

Growing up, I was a bit of a lone wolf, moulded by Cubs, Scouts, and Venturers, all hosted by the church. Yes, I enjoyed Sunday school and was in regular attendance. I wish more of our children could say the same when they grow up.

I knew there was something wrong with me when I was a child. What science tells us now is that I missed a hormonal process while still in the womb that wired my brain female while creating a male outer shell.

Life continued and I learned to bury my thoughts and desires and became “the good son.” This continued till I found a woman willing to share my life. That lasted a total of seven years. During this time, I had fallen away from my church family. I suppose I was trying to catch up on all the married life I had missed, as we were both in our thirties. But all good things end.

Our marriage and relationship took on a great deal of economic stress during the late 1980s and early '90s. We separated in the mid '90s and divorced a year later.

Before our separation, I had gone to my family doctor. My desires, feelings, and confusion began to manifest a feminine side that needed to express itself. Honestly, it was strange and at times uncontrollable, and disconcerting. My doctor became a sounding board for me. We met; I talked about my feelings and experiences. He sent me to a sex consultant who, in turn, sent me to an endocrinologist. The sex consultant's efforts were sufficient for my wife to decide that she did not have the fortitude to continue with me as her partner.

It took two more years of searching before I would discover what it was about me that did not fit and be properly diagnosed. After that day, it took me six months of soul searching to decide, “Will I continue to live the lie, or begin to live my life in full and complete truth?” Truth won, as it should.

I began hormone treatment. Shortly after that the Harris government in Ontario removed sex reassignment surgery from the OHIP provincial health insurance plan as a supported procedure. This procedure would be the very last thing that would be done in support of the Standard of Care for what was then known as “Gender Identity Disorder.”

During this process, an announcement came out from the church to tell us that a new Church Directory was about to be created. This meant that we were about to have family pictures taken for a directory so the entire congregation would know about me. Not wanting to shock anyone, I decided that I should meet with a new minister at Wesley, get to know him, and see if he would accept me or kick me out on the street.

He accepted me with open arms.

It turned out that this new minister had experienced gender different folk in two Greater Toronto Area congregations. He thought that when he made the move to Cambridge that he would not see anyone like them, but I found him.

Now, serendipitous or not, Wesley had just started the two-year process of discernment as to whether they would become an “affirming congregation,” and I was soon asked to help with that process by offering my experiences and views. Many had no idea about the issues involved with gender or sex orientation. In fact, I had questions myself.

It was near the end of discernment when I was approached by our minister and asked to attend a meeting. When I got there, it was not long before I was humbled, greater than I ever have been. Twelve members of the congregation had learned of my challenge with healthcare costs and the limitations I was experiencing in completing my Standard of Care and wanted to help.

The main problem was the surgery, the sex reassignment procedure having been delisted by OHIP. These twelve pledged to support me spiritually, socially, and financially, to see me through the Standard of Care. This would see us all raising funds with garage and book sales, dinners, lunches, and teas to raise \$15,000 over the following two years.

I had done my research. OHIP, before delisting this surgery, sent patients at their own expense to London, England, for the procedure, which was then paid for. But listening to many who had surgery there as well as reports from many surgeons worldwide, it was evident that the best surgeon resided in Thailand. Costs of travel were saved and the time to book the surgery was looming. Now, it needs to be said that when you go through this process, it is recommended that you do not remain on hormone therapy (increased hormone intake to raise levels to that of a teenager) for more than two years before surgery. I had been stuck on hormone therapy for five years. This extended period leaves one susceptible to many potential health problems.

The day came to leave and one of the group members drove me to the airport in Toronto very early in the morning. She was caring enough to stay about to ensure that I found the right gate.

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I was away for four weeks. Three of those were post-surgery, healing, ordered to total bed rest. Even though I was in good shape, I was having trouble healing up. A week before my scheduled return home, I had a check-up with the surgeon. A couple of small corrections were made in his clinic and I was cleared for my 24-hour flight (ordeal).

However, the most incredible surprise awaited my return. Six of my supporters came to the airport to greet me, with flowers, to bring me home. And a beautiful bouquet was waiting when I arrived at home. A victory party ensued where I decided I had to form a support group for others, like me.

Over that summer, I solicited members of the official board to garner permission to form what is now known as Torchlight Gender Support. As I write this, we will celebrate our sixth anniversary.

We invite anyone with gender issues to join us in our discussions. They are always encouraged to bring family, friends, even employers to learn what transition means and what the issues will be and what they will be able to help with. We have from 6 to 24 members come out each month.

We have had five members start with us, go through transition and complete surgery. Many others, over a hundred, have attended meetings, hoping for information on who to see and how to make it through transition. And some of these are becoming accepted and valued members of our church family.

I have learned that “being Christian” means to see where others need help in their community and then get out there and help, and make a difference in the lives of others.

Our church has helped the homeless in our community, from offering a hot meal and a warm, dry bed to encouraging our city’s churches to create a facility designed to bring homeless folk off the street and into a program where they work toward self-sufficiency, with a job, income, and their own apartment.

So, it is my dream to see chapters of Torchlight offered across Canada, some day, hopefully soon.

Michelle Hogan has been a member of Wesley United Church in Cambridge since birth. She launched a human rights complaint against OHIP after the de-listing of Sex Reassignment surgical procedure, and finally won restitution and reinstatement in 2007 and 2008. She has also been involved with completing the Standard of Care for GID (2003), and in 2003 founded Torchlight Gender Support to help other with this medical condition (now know as Gender Variance). She has been the Gender Contact for Affirm United/S’Affirmer Ensemble since 2007.

Michelle is also a member of the Rainbow Health Network, and the Trans Health Lobby Group. Her interests include fashion, cooking, astronomy, physics, design of human powered vehicles, travel, motorcycling, sustainable living, music, singing, photography, cinematography, and historical religious and Bible studies. Michelle is a member of The United Church of Canada’s new Transgendered Task Group, which held its first meeting in May 2009.