

No Ordinary Child

In her recently published book "No Ordinary Child", Scottish mother Jacqueline Ley tells the story, from a Christian perspective, of coming to terms with the homosexuality of her son James and of her admiration for Metropolitan Community Church, where her son found his spiritual home. James first came to MCC Manchester and when he moved to London attended **MCC North London**. He has since relocated to Scotland and has attended Holy Trinity MCC in Edinburgh. "No Ordinary Child" is published through [Wild Goose Publications](#), the publishing arm of the Iona Community, and a review from the [Herald](#) (a Scottish Daily Newspaper) is set out below.

Going Through Hell

Jacqueline Ley was a fundamentalist Christian when her son told her he was homosexual. REBECCA McQUILLAN meets a mother who was moved to reconcile faith and family.

WHEN James Ley told his devoutly Christian mother Jacqueline that he was gay, her first reaction was one of "shock and deep pain". "To me, at that time, it felt like bereavement - the death, as I saw it, of so many hopes and dreams for my son, of every mother's hope of a 'normal' life for their child," she says. "The fundamentalist Christian tradition had ingrained in me the conviction that homosexuality was somehow a sin; that, whatever his relationship with God, my son had placed himself beyond the pale."

Yet at the same time, she felt overwhelming love for him. "I was completely 100% behind him and I have never felt anything but complete love and acceptance of him." Somehow she had to reconcile her religious views with her love for James. Over the following months, Jacqueline, a commercial editor and former teacher who moved with her husband, Colin, to south-west France last year after 30 years in Scotland, examined her views and assumptions. She came to reject the hardline brand of Christianity that had influenced her former attitudes, and embraced diversity. Her experiences have led her to write a book, *No Ordinary Child*, describing her acceptance of her gay son and confronting hardline fundamentalist attitudes about gay men and lesbians.

Tall, elegant, quietly spoken, and younger-looking than her 54 years, she frowns as she remembers the way her views on homosexuality developed. "I became a Christian when I was a student and my involvement then was with a really fundamentalist Christian group who were hardline on all kinds of issues," she says. "I hadn't really come across homosexuality before that. I can remember being quite judgmental about one incident in the church we were going to when we lived in Glasgow. I can remember not being particularly compassionate about the people involved. "But it was one of those things I didn't really think about. So when James plucked up the courage to tell me about his sexuality it was the first time I had really had to confront it."

James, now 24, is the second of three sons of Jacqueline and Colin Ley, a freelance journalist and PR consultant. He had always had many female friends and his parents had never suspected he might be gay. After leaving school to study drama at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama in Glasgow, he started attending a very fundamentalist church. "He behaved like a lot of homosexuals do - for a little while he tried to convince himself that he was heterosexual and had a girlfriend," says Jacqueline. "But he felt he was being dishonest with everybody. So he talked to one of the elders at the church and they said 'just go away and pray about it'. He felt that he had just been brushed off."

James then moved to Manchester seeking acting work and started attending a gay and lesbian church, the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC). There, he came to accept his sexuality. He finally told his mother in October 1998. His father was away on a business trip. "We are quite tuned into one another so I knew that he was building up to tell me something fairly major," says Jacqueline. "When he told me, basically all I could say was 'I don't know what to think but don't shut God out of it'."

For James, the relief of telling his mother was instantaneous, but Jacqueline had been plunged into confusion. She went on a religious retreat to try to work out what to believe. "It never made me question the reality of my faith. But it made me aware that there were a lot of things I thought I had pat answers to that I didn't have pat answers to. It was a question of challenging my own attitudes." She spent weeks thinking and praying about James, and, in time, started to see homosexuality in a different light.

"I think people can run away with the idea that the Christian god is a very narrow god. But my experience is that God is a very gentle and a very compassionate being," she says. "When I was down visiting James in London, we went to this Sunday morning service at MCC and it was delightful. I was so warmly welcomed and accepted there. It was a real privilege to meet a group of gay and lesbian Christians who were very committed to God and very committed to one another. I just felt, you can't demonise people. There is a sector of the church that views homosexuality as a sin and something you can be healed of, change, not do, in the same way as you don't go out and commit a crime. Many sectors of the church are far more enlightened than that, but a substantial sectors considers it something to be healed of."

I think the idea of healing homosexuals is a very, very dangerous road to go down. What you are saying to homosexual people is that they are impaired, that unless some miracle takes place they are unworthy individuals in some way. I think it can create enormous psychological problems. It's a bit like telling someone that they can be healed of being black or healed of being Chinese."

She became deeply concerned about the way Christian views of homosexuality were portrayed during the Keep the Clause campaign. It sought to block the abolition of Clause 2a which limited teachers' freedom to discuss homosexuality in schools. "The Keep the Clause thing I found very distressing because I thought it was a witch hunt. That's putting it very strongly, but there were elements of that. It seemed to me that the whole campaign was being waged in the name of Christian parents and there was no acknowledgement of the fact that there was this whole other group of Christian parents who had homosexual children who they loved to bits. "The furore was based on the idea that youngsters would be influenced into being homosexual in school. Well, this is impossible. You can't be influenced into being homosexual."

She feels that gay youngsters need more support. "If I have a regret it's that I didn't know more earlier. Secondary schools can be very brutal places. Anyone who vaguely does not conform to what is considered the norm can be treated mercilessly. I wish I had known - I still don't know - the full extent of what James might have had to go through. That's why I feel it's not good enough to say we are not allowed to address this issue. There are lots of kids out there who are going through hell, to be honest."

Nowadays, she is no longer connected with fundamentalism. "Before ever James came out I was aware that although my faith in God was absolute, there was a lot about the fundamentalist church that didn't sit right with me. We are now involved with the Episcopal church which is a lovely, accepting place. My attitude to fundamentalist Christianity has changed a lot and it's not something I want to be involved with any more. I'm in no way criticising any individuals, but, for me personally, I'm not comfortable about being so dogmatic about so many things."

Jacqueline recognises many non-religious parents have difficulty accepting their gay children. "I have heard of a couple of instances of parents who have, basically, rejected their kids. I think that's tragic," she says. But *No Ordinary Child*, which contains Christian reflections, will resonate particularly with Christian parents as one woman's attempt to shed "the pernicious fundamentalist tendency to sit in judgment of others". "I never set out to have some great personal crusade," she says. "I'm not making pronouncements about what people should think. I just feel everybody should be allowed the space to come to their own conclusions."

No Ordinary Child by Jacqueline Ley ([Wild Goose Publications, Iona Community](#)); ?7.99.
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