

SAGE: Youth inclusion

Hello, my name is Sage and I am one of the youth Reps for Edinburgh Diocese. I am a proudly young, queer Christian and am here to talk to you today about what it can be like to be a young person like me in the church. I use the word queer in this speech to be inclusive of all members of the LGBTQIA+ community. I have discussed this with others who share similar experiences to myself to make sure that other voices are heard.

I have always felt welcome in Episcopalian spaces to be open about my queer identity but in other Christian spaces this is not always the case. There have been situations where me mentioning queerness has been met with weird looks and quick changes of conversation. Other young people I spoke to shared similar experiences, feeling welcome and safe in episcopalian spaces but wary of being themselves in other religious spaces due to the worry of how other people might react.

Something people might not guess about me when they first meet me is that I am not a cisgender person, meaning I do not identify as the gender I was assigned at birth. I chose the name Sage for myself as a teenager. My pronouns are They/Them, which for me personally is because I do not feel like a male or a female. More like something in between the two. This does sometimes affect how I see things as a christian and how I experience going to church events. I love when people ask me for my pronouns and share theirs, even if their pronouns are what you would assume by looking at them. I am not always as open as I would like to be about my gender identity at church because at times, I do worry about how people will react, especially people who have known me my whole life. I do believe that when God created me, I was created to be non-binary. God does not make a mistake with people who are transgender or just not cisgender, he creates trans people so that we can also be a part of creation like he is.

Galatians chapter 3 verse 28 reads 'There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.'. This verse was the first one I found when researching to find something from scripture to talk to you about today and it really spoke to me. It tells us that in the eyes of Jesus, we are all the same no matter who we are. I think that people within the church should remember this when interacting with people who are different to them, whether due to age, gender, sexuality or anything else about who they are. After all, why should we judge people if Jesus himself did not judge people for who they were?

Another thing many young people, myself included, have experience of is being used as a token young person. This can be voluntary or just being mentioned as 'the young person' or a similar phrase. When the new Priest for my church and our sister church was in the process of being hired, I asked to be involved so that the new priest at least knew about the young people involved in both churches. Another member referred to me as the 'token young person', which yes I was and I also called myself that during the process but it did kind of make it clearer that if I wasn't there then there would be no

young people even involved in the decision making process. It was a massive honour for me at the time and still is something I am proud to have been a part of but this experience of mine does highlight that young people are not always thought of first when it comes to the decisions made within a church even though our voices are just as important and it does affect us.

Another young person that I spoke to had experienced the same thing, being the only young person in the room and being asked for their take specifically as a young person. I am not saying there is anything wrong with asking for the opinion of any young people in your church, in fact I am saying the exact opposite. Ask young people what they think about things but actually listen to what we say, young people deserve a voice at the table not just to sit there and look pretty.

For me, being a young christian can feel like quite an isolating experience, there are very few of us around. It is always such an amazing feeling to be at YEEK or other youth events and not feel like an alien for once. The majority of young people today are non-religious so meeting other young people like me is a rare occurrence. The only other young people in my church are my brothers so as you can imagine, there isn't a youth group at my church. I sometimes wish there was a youth group I could be part of but I still enjoy going to church and having the community of people with the same beliefs. There are Christian youth groups around but they are not always a safe or welcoming space for me or other queer young people due to prejudice that still exists in many churches.

I would hope by me standing up here today and speaking to you all that you think about how you can make young people feel welcome in your church. Especially young people like me who might not always feel welcome in church because of whatever the reason may be. I would also hope that you keep what I have said in mind during your debate on transgender, non-binary and gender non-conforming people on Saturday. Thank you for listening.