

I am a person that scares people

Marian Edmonds-Allen

Rev. Marian Edmonds-Allen is the executive director of Parity, a NYC-based national nonprofit that works at the intersection of faith and LGBTQ+ concerns and the director of Blessed by Difference, a project that seeks to promote curious and collaborative bridging across the LGBTQ+ and faith divide.

In my bridging work I do a lot of speaking to groups, small and large, and from a variety of perspectives. I generally start by saying that I am the executive director of a national nonprofit based in NYC that bridges the LGBTQ+ and faith divide. And then I “come out” as a person of faith, an ordained Protestant minister who is also gender non binary and a woman married to a woman. I am Christian clergy and LGBTQ+ activist.

It took me years to have a job where I could bring these important parts of who I am together. I have had a variety of workplaces where I could be a comfortable Christian - such as my work as a Sunday school director, pastoral associate or minister. And in other workplaces my credentials as an LGBTQ+ person were sought after, generally as a director or executive in a nonprofit or advocacy organization.

Like many executives, I have a seat on several community boards. Sometimes I am there because they wanted a faith person on their board. Other times I “represent the LGBTQ+ voice” - but rarely I’m asked to speak to both. Regardless of how I am perceived, both major parts of who I am guide my life and work in the world, work that I believe God has called me to do.

And so - standing on the stage in my clerical collar, I watch faith audiences recoil when I tell them I am LGBTQ+, and when I am in an advocacy setting in front of a primarily LGBTQ+ audience and “come out” as a person of faith, I see the same ripples of discomfort and even fear. That’s my job, to be a human bridge and a face - hopefully a friendly one - for people who have perhaps never met someone like me.

Landing my first LGBTQ+ advocacy job was thrilling. I was fresh out of theological school, newly ordained, and a full-time church pastor, but needed more income, and so I happily accepted a position as executive director of a LGBTQ+ youth center. I finally felt as though all of my years of education, experience (and student loans!) were being put to good use, as I split my time between the church and the youth center, living the dream! But a few days after I started my youth center position, a board member called. She told me she noticed that my email signature line said “Reverend” before my name and said that I needed to remove it immediately. She said, “The board doesn’t want you to talk about being a minister, or to talk about religion.” When I asked why, she replied that “our LGBTQ+ youth have been hurt enough by religion. They don’t want anything to do with faith, ever.” I tried to explain that I hadn’t ever planned to proselytize or even hold any programming having anything to do with faith, but she would have none of it. After the call I felt gutted, that a hugely important part of who I was wasn’t welcome at my new job, that only part of me was acceptable, and the rest needed to be hidden.

Of course, I obeyed these directives, deleted “reverend” from my email signature line and kept my faith self carefully hidden at the youth center. The church I pastored was in a town an hour away, so if an adult volunteer happened to have heard about my church ministry, I quickly changed the subject. I learned to act a part and did well enough at it that it was a year before faith was mentioned again at the youth center - and not by me.

What I started noticing was that some of the youth at our growing center were mentioning faith themselves! We had a variety of job prep and educational programs that attracted youth from three states, youth who were learning that our center was a place where they could be themselves, LGBTQ+, of course - and they were testing the waters to see if faith would be okay at the center, too. At first, I deflected their faith comments and questions, until I realized that these youth knew our “safe space” meant that they could ask about religion and spirituality. I still stayed in my closet as a clergy person, but I started a faith and spirituality discussion group, a group which ended up being the most popular program we had, with rooms overflowing with teens who wanted to listen and be part of the discussion. I invited LGBTQ+ and allied people from every type of religion or spirituality I could find to talk about their faith for 10 minutes and to be part of a discussion for the rest of the hour.

We continued to grow the center, with attendance blossoming from 17 youth to 700 each month, and one day, after months of discussion with the board, I “came out” as a person of faith at the center myself. Homeless LGBTQ+ youth began attending our center, too, and what I learned was that LGBTQ+ youth, especially youth experiencing homelessness, are the most authentically spiritual of anyone I have ever met. Almost every homeless youth has a journal where they write or draw about God. When I asked one youth why, when all he had was a backpack for his belongings, he bothered to lug around a journal he replied - “Well, faith is all I have left.” Just yesterday I had a long email from one of the youths from the center who just “wanted to talk about God.” Out of the blue, years later, these LGBTQ+ youth still want to talk about faith with someone who will listen.

I wonder when the stereotypes will change, when it will be okay to be a person of faith at some organizations, and when it will be okay to be an LGBTQ+ person at others.

One of my favorite occupations has been working as a chaplain - work that I have done in hospitals, nursing homes and hospice settings, but work that is difficult to find when you are LGBTQ+ and living in a conservative state like Utah. I have had a dozen hospice interviews where I was hired verbally on the spot and then ghosted a day later, likely after I had been “outed” by someone - or by a Google search. But I persisted with my interviews and finally landed a hospice chaplaincy position where I was careful to “pass” and to be as closeted as I could. I realize now that the person in charge of the agency was LGBTQ+ himself, and also closeted, but he was kind to me, and best of all I began to realize that my caseload was almost entirely LGBTQ+ hospice patients!

The tragedy was that I learned as I worked with these hospice patients that most of them never actually saw a chaplain, that the staff chaplains would forge the files to look like these patients had been visited, but never were. One middle-aged man especially caught my heart. He was a hospice patient in a nursing home, in a wheelchair and unable to speak because his suicide attempt failed. His gunshot to his head wasn't fatal, and his mind was fine, but he was disfigured and obviously shunned by everyone, even the chaplains before I met him. But I became his chaplain and eventually I did “out” myself to him, secure that he wouldn't tell. And I went to visit when I was off duty, too, until he died. I will always remember his eyes, and when I realized he wanted me to pray for him- the prayers that we shared.

My heart grieves for not only the people who can't be fully themselves at work, but also for the clients, customers, staff and the bottom line - profits and other indicators of success for any organization or business. When people aren't able to be their full selves, with all of their gifts, the parts of themselves that add to achieving the mission and goals of their work in the world - we all suffer, from the paralyzed gay veteran nearing death to the homeless youth who wants to ask about God.

For me, I am grateful that my job, and my call from God, is to be a human bridge, fully all that I am, a woman of faith, Christian clergy and LGBTQ+. And I am grateful to the Religious Freedom & Business Foundation for sharing stories and scholarship, statistics and life lessons that we all can learn from as we navigate these sometimes fraught, yet always human, situations of dignity, freedom and respect in the workplace and the world.