

**LGBTQ+ Pride Vestry Papers May 2023**

**A God Who Loves Us Just As We Are**

Kim Jackson

The Rev. Senator Kim Jackson speaks with the quiet power of someone doing the work she was put on earth to do: pastoring those who are often overlooked, while holding them in the light to those who would rather not see. It is a role to which she is uniquely suited. As a Black lesbian clergyperson elected to political office, she literally crosses the street from her unhoused congregants to her statehouse colleagues. And her experience as both person and priest gives her unprecedented credibility – as well as responsibility – in her mission to make real, positive change in the world. In this extended conversation, Kim shares the critical importance of seeing and of being seen.

“I believe that as Christians, we serve and love a God who loves us just as we are and says we are enough. And that’s what the world needs. The world needs people who are willing to stand up and show their authentic self and stand in the deepest conviction and knowledge that God loves us just as we are.”

For the interview with Kim Jackson, go to: <https://www.ecfvp.org/vestry-papers/article/1072/a-god-who-loves-us-just-as-we-are>

*Rev. Senator Kim Jackson has served as a college chaplain, a nationally renowned consultant and preacher, a parish priest, and a social justice advocate. In 2018, the Georgia House of Representatives commended her for her “tireless efforts on behalf of the disenfranchised, disenchanting, and dispossessed” (GA House Resolution 1188). Now serving as the vicar at the Episcopal Church of the Common Ground, Kim co-creates church with people who are unhoused in downtown Atlanta. She and her spouse, Trina, live on a small farm in Stone Mountain with two Great Pyrenees dogs, goats, bees, ducks, chickens and a cat.*

## **Becoming the Person God Created Me to Be**

Freya Gilbert

*“I will bless you, and you will be a blessing.” – Genesis 12:2*

I’m standing in front of the altar, parishioners holding their hands over me in blessing. A former Presbyterian pastor and current postulant to the priesthood is intoning a blessing in Hebrew to honor my fifth anniversary of physical transition, and I am loving my church and my journey.

My heart thinks back to the fifth anniversary of my social transition at the diocesan convention where I was elected to the Standing Committee. Five years and one month before, I had come to self-realization as a transgender woman. And, feeling that I must be my authentic self to do the spiritual work of convention, I had thrown myself at the work of transitioning in order to appear at convention as the woman that I knew myself to be.

### **Blessing or burden?**

At convention, everyone I spoke with held me and supported me, from my bishop and regional canon to the many people I had worked with in the diocese. A beloved friend and priest told me how wonderful it was that I was becoming the person God had created me to be. That summed up how I felt too. But a couple of weeks later when I came out to my parish, I began feeling more like a burden than a blessing. I would sit in the church parking lot screwing up the courage to walk through the red door. I felt that I was an embarrassment and that I should just go away and make things easier for everybody.

Ash Wednesday fell on Valentine's Day that year, and I was blessed to resume my ministry of lay preaching. I used the text from Amos where God asks us to rend our hearts and not our garments. I spoke of how coming out was like holding my broken and somehow still breaking heart in my hands, and how Lent should be a time where we come out to God in all our brokenness but also where we give God the space to come out to each of us.

### **Moments of grace**

I remember the joy and wonderment I felt that Easter. Wearing a beautiful new dress for the very first time, I knew that I was participating in a resurrection myself.

But resurrection is not a one-time event, rather an ongoing challenge to us to experience every day in ever new ways. My parish and I had to adjust to a new reality that was both a continuation and a break from our previous life together. It was a time to give and receive grace.

Patterns that had been etched into our way of being needed to change. I had a new name and new pronouns. Adjusting to the new reality was an ongoing process for all of us. Among other things, we had to work through and beyond moments of misgendering and the use of my birth name.

It still felt as if I were a burden when people struggled to acknowledge my “newness.” And it was challenging to deal with members of the parish who were perhaps careless, especially when that carelessness trended toward

callousness and occasionally even cruelty.

I had to learn and relearn the grace of forgiveness, and I had to give myself the grace to be strong and courageous in claiming safe space for myself.

Those moments of grace took place within the larger context of the diocese as well. There were – and are – moments of pain, but ever so many more of joy and love.

### **Much work remains**

I appreciate how wonderful and precious my diocese is in its growing affirmation of my gifts and the gifts of my trans siblings. Which makes it that much more painful to realize that I would not have had the same experience in every diocese and parish of the church.

It causes me great sorrow to be unable unreservedly to recommend the Episcopal Church to my trans siblings throughout America. So much work remains to be done before the entire church can be safe space for trans people that allows us to be nurtured and transformed. But the creation of safe harbor for trans people creates space for the entire church to be nurtured and transformed.

### **What I have learned**

If my lived experience in the Episcopal Church teaches me anything, it is that my trans siblings and I are not a burden but entirely a blessing: We give voice to God's deepest longing for the church to seek out the lost sheep and stand fearlessly alongside the least of these, to empty itself of prestige and power and to give voice to the voiceless.

And when the church empties itself, it opens itself to incarnation – an incarnation that embraces the messiness and confusion of our genderedness and our sexuality. And so it was that when I boldly and graciously asked for the blessing of my five-year milestone, I knew that I was blessing my parish as much as they were blessing me.

***Freya Gilbert** has called four different countries home. She recently retired from a career in hotel management. She's been active as a lay leader in the Diocese of Northern Indiana and the dioceses of East and Western Michigan. At any given point she's reading at least 20 books and she loves spending quiet evenings with her two cats, who are named after the main characters in Finnegans Wake.*

### **Resources:**

- [A Service of Renaming](#) from the Book of Occasional Services 2018, page 120
- [Discipleship from the Margins](#), an ECF Vital Practices webinar presented by Dr. Sandra Montes, David Patiño and Atticus Zavaletta, June 12, 2019

## Do You Really Belong Here?

Isaiah “Shaneequa” Brokenleg

The Rev. Isaiah “Shaneequa” Brokenleg, a Lakota two-spirit and member of the Presiding Bishop’s staff, explores essential questions of belonging in this wide-ranging conversation on the intersection of race, culture, gender, faith, and identity in the Episcopal Church. Committed to serving in liminal spaces – at moments of transition, reconciliation, death, and discernment – Shaneequa encourages us to learn from the disparate voices and traditions within the church, placing relationships at the heart of our work. Both in her life and in her ministry, she provides a powerful example of what it means to honor difference and create a space that truly welcomes all.

“Remember that we are made in the image of God. And that means that God is not white. God is black, and brown, and tan, and everything. God is fat, and skinny, and everything. God is . . . cisgendered, and transgendered, and non-binary, and all those things. And we will never look into the eyes of someone that God does not love, even if we look in the mirror.”

For the interview with the Rev. Isaiah “Shaneequa” Brokenleg, go to: <https://www.ecfvp.org/vestry-papers/article/1071/do-you-really-belong-here>

***The Rev. Isaiah “Shaneequa” Brokenleg** is an enrolled member of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe and a priest in the Diocese of South Dakota. She is the Staff Officer for Racial Reconciliation for the Episcopal Church and works to bring an end to the structural violence and oppression that hurts us all. As a winkté (Lakota two-spirit) she believes that we are all related (Mitakuye Oyasin) and that she is called to move communities toward healing and positive change.*

## Differentiating Between the What and the How

Alan Yarborough

*“Fight for the things that you care about, but do it in a way that will lead others to join you.” – Ruth Bader Ginsburg*

I won three different strength-of-character awards in grade school, which has always fascinated me because during that time I was always lying. I lied to my dentist, my orthodontist, the mechanic and anyone grasping for human connection through small talk when they asked if I had a girlfriend. Despite living in a liberal town, with supportive parents, I lied in deeper ways to close friends, teachers, my parents and myself, all to hide and protect myself from a world that told me I did not belong.

Yet I remember how God reached me through the Episcopal Church, imperfections and inconsistencies aside, with a message of belonging. I do not remember what Father Bill said 20 years ago, but I most certainly remember how he made me feel when he supported the ordination of Bishop Gene Robinson. Father Bill ran toward dissent and confronted it, lovingly, on behalf of others. Since that time, the Episcopal Church has repeatedly reminded me that I belong.

### **Building a church – and a world – for all God’s people**

While there is much to admire in our church’s message of belonging, renewed homophobic and transphobic rhetoric and actions in our country are a chilling reminder that we cannot be complacent. We still have much work to do in building a world where all LGBTQ+ people can thrive.

And in a culture of hasty critiques, with myriad public audiences at our fingertips, we must take care not to tear each other down as we use different strategies to build more welcoming communities. To do this, we must differentiate between *what* and *how*.

The *what* is easiest. I can imagine most Episcopalians proclaiming, “Of course, we support LGBTQ+ people!” And yet we cannot stop at proclamations—we have to act. We also have to acknowledge the connection between politics and the individual—every political action impacts someone somewhere.

This makes the *how* less clear. Building a welcoming world can be tough, murky work, but it is work I have seen the church do well. In fact, I draw from experiences within the church as I write this very piece. With a better understanding of the plurality of approaches needed to succeed, we can become more adept at overcoming the challenges before us.

### **The question is: How?**

#### ***How do we add tools to our toolbox so that our actions fit the context where we live?***

May we explore our local town culture, learn about current *and proposed* state laws, and research our congressional representatives to examine any unique leverage they may have in Congress. May we not overlook the fact that the success of many who wish to silence LGBTQ+ voices comes from informed, detail-oriented, effective advocacy. May we [be savvier in leveraging systems](#) for justice.

### ***How can we help others learn just as we ourselves learn?***

I certainly was not born with the vocabulary to talk about being gay, much less lesbian, bisexual or transgender. I am still learning. May we take care to remain humble and distinguish between willful malignant ignorance and the ignorance that comes from lack of exposure and understanding. May our own vulnerability be the steel frame on which we can build lasting relationship, trust and reciprocity. May we understand the grace required from someone who takes time to educate us. May we seek to learn by reading, listening and watching queer-produced media and entertainment, so as to alleviate the burden on others to teach us directly.

### ***How can we take risks, leveraging our privileges for change?***

While I do not know if Father Bill used the word *privilege* at the time, I imagine he saw himself as someone in a position and of an identity likely to be listened to. I have tried to channel that approach as I've built an uncanny (if occasionally harmful) level of patience for talking to people with whom I disagree. May we be so bold as to avoid existing purely in echo chambers and instead be a presence in places where the gap between where we are and where we want to be is greatest. May those of us of identities less at risk understand our responsibility accordingly. In doing so, may we indeed leverage our privileges as the Episcopal Church to build stronger, more diverse communities.

### ***How do we measure success?***

Incremental progress is a reality of our world, yet when it comes to recognizing humanity, increments are particularly fraught to push for and celebrate. May we not allow perfect be the enemy of the good; may we maintain our focus on larger goals even as we take smaller steps to realize them.

### ***How do we consider differences in threats to and needs of each part of the LGBTQ+ family?***

We have greater knowledge today of the intersectionality of injustices, something that works in our favor, but only if we put that to use by being more proactive particularly for transgender people and others who face disproportionate discrimination. May we take care to listen to people within each identity and use this understanding for precise action.

### ***How do we consider international contexts, while respecting and heeding other cultures?***

May we hold progress on LGBTQ+ rights in the context of a global push for justice while remembering there may be other ways of understanding humanity unfamiliar to ourselves, but learned through genuine engagement with others.

## **Hearing and being heard**

As difficult as it may be sometimes, making a statement is easy. What we say is important, but it is not a strategy for fostering genuine belonging. We [must also communicate in a way that is heard](#) by those who need to hear it, and we must act in a way that is effective. That's risky work, and it looks different depending on who we are and where we are, but the reward is quite literally life-giving. May we first seek to ask someone why they take the approach they do, so that we may learn from one another.

**Alan Yarborough** is the church relations officer for the Episcopal Church's Office of Government Relations. He also conducts dialogue trainings through [Habits of Discourse](#). The views expressed are his own.

## **Resources:**

- [Advocacy Resources from the Office of Government Relations](#)
- [Make Me an Instrument of Peace: A Guide to Civil Discourse](#)