

LOUD,
LOUD,
LOUD,

LOUD,
LOUD,
LOUD,

OVERCOMERS

Diverse stories, united in one truth

PROUD
PROUD
PROUD

Overcomers:

Out, Loud, and Proud

Diverse stories, united in one truth

Overcomers: Out, Loud, and Proud

First edition: June 2022

Published by:

PLUC

All rights reserved. Except for extracts for review purposes, no parts of this book may be reproduced or retransmitted in any form or by any means without the written permission of the publisher.

Scripture quotations are from The ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Cover & Illustrations:

Chew Yuin-Y

Editing & Typesetting:

Anna Tan

CONTENTS

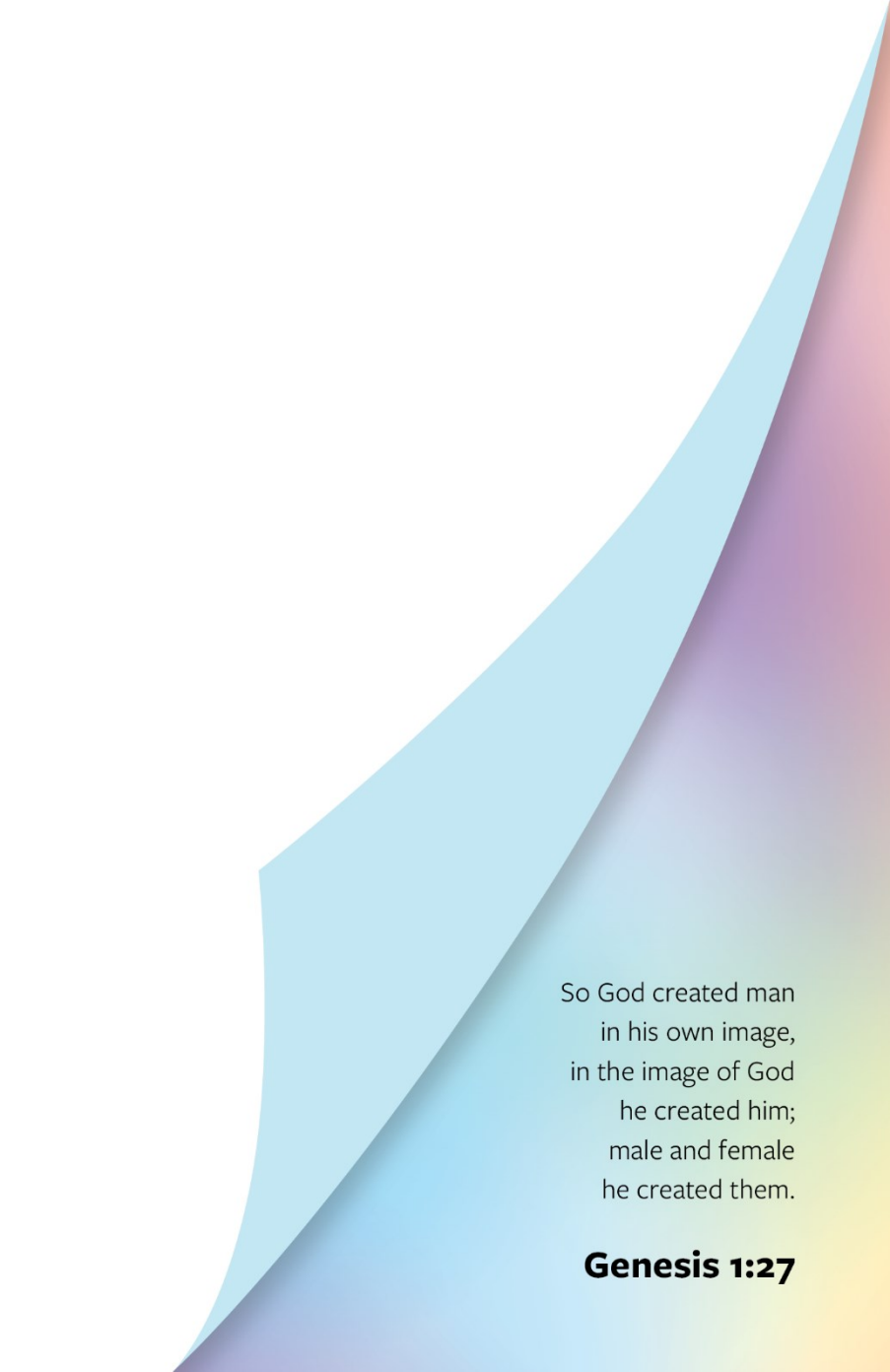
<u>Introduction</u>	5
<u>Made in the image of God</u>	8
<u>A child of God</u>	16
<u>The old has gone, the new is here</u>	23
<u>The truth will set you free</u>	31
<u>Never left alone nor forsaken</u>	40
<u>Not broken, but chosen</u>	47
<u>A renewal of the mind</u>	58
<u>Restoration of lost years</u>	68

Introduction

This collection of stories organised by PLUC (Pursuing Liberty Under Christ) is dedicated to God's leading of this ministry across 20 years. PLUC journeys with individuals with gender identity questions, those who pursued alternative sexuality and longed to return to God, and families in pain over their loved one's choices. Every story has its own struggles, and our counsel is based on biblical truths, with a posture of grace and acceptance.

These experiences told to us, and encapsulated in story form, is a declaration that "Transformation is possible" because of Christ. We may or may not have walked alongside all our storytellers, but nevertheless, these stories are united in one truth

and a reminder that though *"we are afflicted in every way, but (we are) not crushed; perplexed, but (are) not driven to despair, persecuted, but (are) not forsaken; struck down, but (are) not destroyed"* (2 Corinthians 4: 8-9).



So God created man
in his own image,
in the image of God
he created him;
male and female
he created them.

Genesis 1:27

Made in the image of God

Way before cross-dressing and trans-sexuality became more accepted, Emmanuel was not afraid to challenge conventions. He did fear ONE thing—spirits from another world. After an encounter, he asked a friend to help him get rid of ‘ghosts’ which ended up with him visiting a church. The Holy Spirit met him instead and began the work in restoring Emmanuel’s rightful identity.

Speaking of the supernatural, I do believe that there is a generational curse in my family. My grandmother was a medium, with black magic being practised by extended family members. My other set of grandparents were involved in illegal loans and provided females as services for nightclub guests. Aside from me, a former transsexual, one of my brothers was a former homosexual, redeemed by God before his death, and another is still a homosexual. I think the past affected my family's circumstances to a certain extent.

Since I was young, I took a liking to wearing my mom's clothes and putting on makeup. I loved the sounds high heels made. Like many parents in my time, they would not let me buy paper dolls and cooking toys because it was not for boys. The lack of awareness and education also left them helpless to help me change.

However, I was born with a fiery attitude, and I had no hesitancy to try and to do what I wanted. I did not care. I wore heels and women's clothes to college and despite being told off, I worked around it as there were no written rules. The more I wore women's clothes, the more I believed I should be a woman. I was born in the wrong body!

Being a woman

Feeling like a woman didn't translate to being attracted to them though. I recalled being aroused seeing my uncle come out of the shower topless, or pictures of other topless males. While crossdressing, I only dated men. It was confusing and eventually, by the wonders of modern advancement, I found the solution!

Since I had been acting like a woman for most of my life, why not be one? I started taking hormones to alter my voice and body shape, have a flawless complexion, and took all sorts of supplements to keep my physique up. Over ten years, I did implants and certain procedures to make me look even more like a woman. It was hard work to maintain a 24" waist, size 33 breasts, and 36" hips.

I was very much wanted by men who considered themselves bisexual. They liked sexual escapades with a transsexual woman because I knew how to please them. I was so high on drugs and felt physically in need, so five to ten men a day was not uncommon. At the height of it, I could go with up to ten men a day but there was never penetration, which in hindsight, kept me safe from diseases. I stopped being in serious relationships after many experiences of ex-boyfriends dumping me because they decided to be 'straight' and start a family.

However, this lifestyle began to lose its charm. I felt tired and found myself often thinking “how nice it would be if there’s a God who can help me out...” Yet, all through life I never believed in one power and was always focusing on me, myself, and I—because I was ‘different’, and I felt that I had to get the things I wanted on my own. I depended on me, plus I did not care what others thought of the way I was.

Meeting the right spirit

By this, I mean the Holy Spirit. I had encountered supernatural events at home on separate occasions, such as feeling ‘hairy’ things chasing me out. I kept on hearing people talking and quarrelling (the reason was me) but I lived in the apartment alone. I even did very heavy moving tasks which would require two people, but I just felt something helped me do it. Bear in mind, I was skinny then. I rushed to my mom’s place and she said I was hallucinating due to the drugs. I was really scared.

Suddenly, an old friend called me out for lunch. After dropping out numerous times, I finally agreed to meet her, thinking she could help me make the ‘ghosts’ disappear. She casually invited me to church right after lunch and since I had nothing to do, I followed her.

The speaker was sharing about his previous life dealing with witchcraft. Wow, I was surprised at this coincidence and thought maybe this guy could help me. What I found to be more unbelievable was how the church members did not bat an eyelid when I walked in dressed very skimpily. They were just friendly and welcoming.

My curiosity awakened and the next day, I attended church again. My friend then gave me a brief overview of the Bible. Sometime down the road, I went to a rally and accepted God as my Saviour. I began to learn about the Word, attended service and cell groups regularly and felt that something new was taking place within me. I did not have any more supernatural encounters as well.

Doing a 180°

Even though I met the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, I did not immediately change. I continued dressing up as a woman because I thought that the church ought to accept me for who I am. While the congregation did not raise concerns, God revealed to me that I did need to change my physical appearance if I wanted to leave the transsexual life. I should remove my implants, but I did not have enough money for that. I chose to trust God and prayed.

After mentioning my intent to the cell leader who brought it up to a pastor, the church came alongside to raise funds for me. I also stopped hormone therapy because I knew I could not afford the long-term cost. It was tough looking at myself in the mirror and seeing the structure of my bones becoming wider and more masculine. Going to the men's toilet was awkward, buying men's clothes was truly a strange experience.

The moment my implants were removed, I received a call from the pastor asking if I wanted to work in church. This was something I never saw coming. The only thing I knew about working was fashion consulting, creative arts. The church leaders had gone to a prayer mountain and the pastor received a nudge from God about having me work in church. Naturally, there were a lot of red flags. I went through many rounds of interviews to talk through my temperament and lifestyle. In faith, the leadership accepted me.


God is indeed a way maker

I do not have all the answers about my past but perhaps being a she-male was better for people around me. I think if I became a married man, I would have lived a double life—sleeping around, making unwanted babies, and running off because I was a selfish man. And likely getting a divorce eventually.

Our God is Lord over all, including ghosts. He probably allowed those scary incidents to happen to draw me towards Him. He knew I would not voluntarily search for a god because I had zero concept of it, and I was very stubborn. But I was superstitious and would immediately seek to get rid of the ghosts!

As John 10:10 says: "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly."

Yes, for the past thirty to forty years, I have been lost, starting from childhood. With nobody to guide me, I was destroying my external and internal being. Now that I know I am His child, my identity is being restored. I continue to cling onto Him daily with the support and encouragement of the church community.



But to all
who did receive him,
who believed in his name,
he gave the right
to become children of God

John 1:12

A child of God

Does **not** having interest in typical boy activities make him gay? Does **not** resisting (*and to an extent enjoying*) a boy's inappropriate touches mean he's born gay? Does **not** looking at females but admiring the male body mean he might as well be gay? God meets Kenny between his head knowledge of biblical truth on homosexuality and leads his heart to acknowledge that looks, personality, and interest do not define sexual orientation.

The names of certain individuals have been changed to protect their privacy.

I suppose the only ‘boyish’ thing I liked was trains. Otherwise, I was into singing, drawing, and music. I had my share of stereotypical labels like ‘sissy’ as I was also rather flamboyant in my expressions and gestures.

My parents had no issues with their son liking different things than other boys. Mom is also very expressive and passionate for the arts; hence we spent a lot of time exploring this area. I do think that Dad found it challenging to relate to me because he played sports but I didn’t, so we did not really get to bond through them. Dad is a naturally quiet man and was often busy with work, so I would say that our relationship was not strongly cultivated.

In school, I used to stand by the side during physical exercise class because I did not want to be laughed at for not knowing how to play football. After a while, I noticed a few other boys standing with me too and we got talking. They weren’t into sports either! I was happy and didn’t feel too alone so we became friends.

One day, they brought gay porn magazines to school, and I was intrigued by the male body. There was also an incident when I was twelve—an older boy in school had touched me in places that he ought not to. It was so awkward, and I ran away but his actions had awakened my curiosity for men. The Internet era came, and I found out where I could indulge my admiration for good-looking bodies (I was a skinny kid with low self-esteem). While

looking is not wrong, the more I saw, the more I started to fantasise and, of course, release my needs by masturbating.

Now, both my parents were serving in ministry, and I'd been in church ever since I could remember. I knew that homosexuality is not natural. At the same time, I was sure of my path in life – to be in ministry. I was in seminary as well. Having said that, being surrounded by biblical truth and Godly people did not make my same-sex attraction (SSA) struggles disappear. I still felt attracted to men and would pleasure myself. However, the knowledge of this sin increasingly gnawed on me especially when I was also trying to be right on the path of serving.

The path of discovery and embracing the man I am

At seminary, I was introduced to Rev. Tryphena. She was teaching on the topic of homosexuality, and I was enlightened by the biblical angle it came from. I was so happy to learn I'm not a homosexual, but I only have SSA. And I was very clear not to engage, nor associate myself and certain behaviours to be 'gay' because I knew it was a lie.

Aside from trying to find answers to my SSA, I also struggled to reconcile that I, a leader in church, might require counselling. In the Asian community, counselling is already a taboo for regular folks,

imagine the perception for a pastor-to-be? I blurted out my struggles to my parents as well. It shocked them and they felt guilty for not educating me enough on this subject. They did not judge me but encouraged me to seek the help I needed.

During counselling, I learnt to accept myself in terms of my physique. I've always felt like a scrawny, not handsome kid. As I was stepping into a new light and reconciling myself to the fact that God made me in His own image, I saw myself as not too bad looking! The major inner healing was about believing that the talents I had, despite them not being perceived as normal for boys, were a gift from God and that He's calling me to do His work with them. I wasn't confused with my identity, I just did not fit into the norms of society back then.

Having said that, there are certain actions I do that my mom or even pastors would remind me to tone down. For example, I tend to talk with exaggerated hand gestures or bodily postures when I'm exhilarated, like how some gay men behave. Those who care for me would gently let me know that certain actions, when habitual, might become a part of me that I don't want.

I also learnt about pursuing holiness as our main goal in working through same-sex attractions. Instead of focusing on getting rid of this feeling, we look at keeping our lives holy. While some people find freedom through marriage, some may be called to singleness. I was 30 then and I just told myself that

I'd be celibate and focus on doing God's work, since I saw no girl in sight. Relationships are complex, there is often pain anyway. Perhaps it is better that I don't have to go through that.

An unexpected event

Surprise, surprise! I met a girl and was taken by her character, personality, and attitude. I really wanted to get to know her more. It was a vast difference from how I felt for men, which was pure sexual arousal. It felt strange. Even my straight guy friends thought I was weird for not having any physical feelings for her. Rev. Tryphena assured me that this is the right way to know a girl. Just listen, have a conversation, and get to know her. So, we spent the first year doing exactly that.


After that, we knew we would reach the 'what's next?' question. I was sure I needed to open up to her about my past even before the dating phase. I wanted to be fair to her, and if God willed a marriage, I had to be honest and see if she could journey with me. I was glad and relieved to hear that she appreciated my honesty and she liked me for who I am and was willing to walk with me through this. Having received that assurance, we started dating.

Still, I had my moments of doubt. Was I fully healed and restored in my identity? Or else I cannot

marry as I might hurt her feelings whenever I am tempted. Long story short, God is good. We are now a family of three and I can see how my personal experiences have also shaped our family dynamics. For example, we don't subscribe to 'gender roles' and I am very happy to be the chef-at-home!

I do get tempted by gay porn especially when my emotional tank is low or when my wife is too tired for intimacy. I would respect her decision and divert my attention to something else or talk to my senior pastors. I find device monitoring apps to be helpful to steer me away, but the seed of pornography was planted during my youth and still exists somewhere in my mind. It is a subtle enemy, but I have learnt to take one day at a time, instead of trying so hard to keep a clean record; to live as much and as well as I can for the day; and if I falter, to immediately seek God's forgiveness and grace to start all over again.

Though I still hope for the day when I can wake up and know I have no more sexual sin, I have accepted that it is what it is, and God remains merciful and loving.



Therefore,
if anyone is in Christ,
he is a new creation.
The old has passed away;
behold, the new has come.

2 Corinthians 5:17

The old has gone, the new is here

“It’s just a five-year phase,” Evelyn told herself of having same-sex attraction (SSA) to girls and the happiness of feeling accepted by like-minded friends. She had homosexual relationships. However, those feelings didn’t switch off automatically after five years. She didn’t think much about it. When someone important learnt about this side of her life, Evelyn remembered the ‘five-year phase’ and became curious to seek God’s view – a course that led her to trace the possible reasons for her SSA.

The names of certain individuals have been changed to protect their privacy.

A feeling of abandonment

I am the third of five children. Due to financial difficulties, I was sent to live with my grandmother and only saw my family on weekends. It made me sad when I played with my siblings but was never allowed to go home with them. This was my life up till I was twelve.

In my subconscious, I must have felt unaccepted by my own family. I returned home permanently when I started secondary school, but our relationship was merely functional due to the lack of nurturing in my childhood. My two older siblings and two younger siblings had each other – I did not fit into their dynamics.

So, I went about doing whatever I wanted, and my parents didn't oversee me either. As I didn't like to be at home, I would leave for school as early as 6am and wait there until my classes in the afternoon. When I was in the morning session, I'd hang out after school and take the last bus home. I felt happy and free as my parents never asked what I was doing. Somewhere along the way, I'd replaced the feeling of being abandoned with the freedom I had, and it gave me happiness.

A lost sense of identity

When I lived with my grandmother, I had to keep my hair short as it was more convenient for her. It

made me feel so embarrassed and awkward—especially when I was called out as a boy while standing in the girls' queue for the toilet. An uncle and his family were also staying at my grandmother's at the time. It was then that I was molested by my cousin brother. I felt like I had lost my worth.

During this season, I would say that I didn't know who I really was. I followed whichever group of people accepted my looks and feelings. So, when I entered secondary school and we weren't allowed to have long hair either, I didn't feel alone at all. Instead, I felt that I had found my tribe. While I noticed other girls having boyfriends, it also occurred to me that boys seemed to like girls with long hair. Naturally, I wouldn't choose to mingle with them. The molestation incident had left me feeling that men are not good people.

In my early relationships, I projected myself as a male figure but as I progressed in them, I realised that I liked the feeling of being protected. If my girlfriends' words and actions conveyed the feeling of protection, I believed that they loved me. I had no sense of what I valued, wanted, or believed in—I was only feeding off the preferred emotions I received from my girlfriends.

Having said that, there was one thing I told myself to do: to end this same-sex lifestyle post-secondary school. Then, I had a bad breakup. It caused me a great deal of sadness, but I saw a light

at the end of the tunnel. By leaving my hometown for the city, I could leave all the pain of my childhood, teenhood, and lesbian relationships behind and start afresh.

A familiar comfort

For all my good intentions, I walked straight into the thing I wanted to forget. I went to study on my own and knew nobody. Automatically, my housemates became the people I hung out with. What were the odds that my college housemates in Kuala Lumpur (KL) were all lesbians? Including my roommate. It was extremely comforting, especially since we were no longer in a single-gender school and I was going to have more interaction with guys. I didn't want to make friends with guys. My roommate was very caring and inevitably, we had a relationship for more than a year.

Life was blissful until my sister invited me to church.

Experiencing God once again

I had accepted Christ when I was sixteen years old, but I wasn't serious about church or reading the Bible. Since both my sister and I were in KL, she invited me to church and, out of obligation, I agreed to go. In time, I soon heard from a church member

that my sister already knew I had SSA from the time I was in secondary school although she never brought up the subject. I wasn't fearful – it was more of a realisation that somebody knew even though I thought I kept the secret well. That knowledge evoked my intrigue on what God has to say about it. Around the time of my seeking, I took a course by PLUC on the topic of SSA and homosexuality.

I soon understood God's design for man and woman and felt that I didn't want this life anymore. During the college semester break, my girlfriend and I returned to our hometown – coincidentally, we were from the same state. I told her why I wanted to end our relationship, having also found out that she had a long-distance girlfriend while we were dating. Our group of friends painted me as the 'bad' person for not taking her back upon her breaking up with the other girl. At the same time, I also had objective friends who questioned her sincerity for only deciding on me after our relationship was upended.

As much as I decided to turn away from homosexuality, it wasn't that easy because my friends were my coursemates who lived this life. I had to draw my boundaries. While I'd listened to their love stories, and understood their feelings, I was able to clarify where I stood on their choice. They are good people; loyal friends and we respected our differences.

The past reconciled, a future to embark on

After attending the course and reliving my experiences through the assignments, I was able to make sense of all the events. It was perhaps a blessing in disguise that I was 'shipped' off to my grandmother because my dad was an alcoholic and would occasionally beat my mom and siblings. I think I would have been more traumatised by that. Mom was the only one working and she struggled to make ends meet and settle their debts.

It took me many years to forgive my dad and acknowledge that he is still my earthly father despite not having done his responsibility. Forgiveness is indeed a choice as I chose to follow Jesus. How will I experience God's love if I harbour bitterness? I made the decision to rebuild our relationship and although he wasn't accepting of my faith at first, eventually he walked me down the wedding aisle in church!

If you ask me if my feelings for men and women are any different, I do not think they are. I just needed to feel care, protection, acceptance, and support in a relationship, regardless if it is a man or woman. To me, acceptance is very important. It means I trust him enough to tell him about my past.

My husband and I met in church and took two years of being in the 'being friends' zone before we started dating. I needed to learn and pray about knowing how to love while he was uncertain about

starting as he had come out of a long-term relationship. It gave me time to tell him about my family background, which is pretty 'colourful' and not many might be able to handle it. Finally, I shared about my experience with homosexuality. He was open and saw it only as a time before he knew me. We have been married for over a year now and are hoping to build a family, God willing!

I am thankful that God was compassionate, reaching out to me and nudging me to the realisation that homosexuality is not His plan for me, or for anyone else. There are many people struggling with this area still, which is why my church members, and I took courses (with PLUC) to learn about how the mind, emotions, and experiences shape sexual orientations. We realised that our own church members may be struggling too and wanted to learn how we as a congregation can be better equipped to engage and encourage them to the truth.

³¹ So Jesus said to the Jews
who had believed him,
“If you abide in my word,
you are truly my disciples,
³² and you will know the truth,
and the truth will set you free.”

John 8:31-32

The truth will set you free

Sex with men was fun but Sanjay knew it was a messed-up world. So, he made rules to keep himself 'safe', including not having a real boyfriend. Soon, the heart longed for a deeper love beyond physical gratification. Before he got deeper into a world of wrong love, an awakening led Sanjay back to God's truth and a new life within His good rules.

The names of certain individuals have been changed to protect their privacy.

I was a Christian living a double life in the USA. It was a time of freedom as an undergraduate and being in a liberal city emboldened me further to explore homosexuality. I went to church but only to absolve myself from the sins I committed through the week. Being young to the faith, in a new land, I had nobody to guide me through God's way.

So, I attempted to find my own understanding. Every man I met I'd ask, "what do you think God says about people like us?" Most said God created us this way. I concluded that God must have made a mistake in creating me. Therefore, this is my truth, and my actions were justified.

To be safe, I made some rules for 'protection' in the messed-up world I was in:

- no sex on first dates
- meet at public places
- never date a man with AIDS or HIV+
- never date a partnered man

By the time I'd slept with all the men that met my rules, there weren't many left in the circle to date. I would get depressed when I could not find anyone to go out with for a weekend. I realised that my rules were complicating things, so I began bending them. BOOM! That decision opened a whole new world to me.

The hunger intensified and sometimes I dated two men at one go – in two years, I slept with at least 60 men. It was no longer enjoyable, and I thought perhaps it was time to find a real boyfriend. I was attracted to muscular, older men who I saw as able to look after me because of their maturity level, while the physique was figurative to the sentiment of care.

I did meet a man. Jake was exactly my type, and I was waiting for him to be ready to take me as his boyfriend. Instead, I received a text from him saying, “I am all alone tonight and I want to have sex with you.” My heart sank and I saw the real picture. All these years, I had also been using other men for sex and now when I wanted love, it eluded me. I was devastated.

I decided to stop dating and seek God.

Reconnecting with the Father

I accepted Christ when I was 18 but I suppose I did so to get rid of the dreams I’d been having since I was 15. The dreams were often about homosexual sex. I was aware that such activities were taking place in school toilets and although I did not take part, the confusion of the dreams led me to seek meaning on the Internet. Inevitably, I ended up on gay porn sites.

Most of the time, I tried to ignore it but deep down I liked the idea of being loved sexually by a man. I even planned to marry a girl to change myself, but I abandoned the plan for studies in the USA instead. Hence, the struggle remained within me for years. I knew that it was wrong as a Christian, but I did not have the strength to walk away from the gay life.

During this period of looking to, and for, God, my emotions were a roller-coaster ride. I was in a pit of darkness. I felt that no one could help me. That I was doomed for life and had reached my quota of asking for forgiveness from God.

One day, I was mourning while revisiting the painful message from Jake and lamenting over what I had done to myself. At that very moment, I heard a voice saying *“Son, I have sent my only Son for your sin, would you not let it go for Me?”*

Tears started pouring and I felt this immense sense of comfort. I rushed out of my room to check if there was anyone at home. Nobody was. I was sure the Lord met me. I repented wholeheartedly and accepted His forgiveness.

John 10:10 mentions that “the thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly”. For years I was deceived into a trap that distorted my life. Everything made sense after I surrendered to God. I started to see my struggle in a new perspective. I

saw that my future is to live life for Christ. While the desire did not switch off automatically, I was now willing to make the right choices even though it might be more difficult.

In new company

For me to walk in the light, I needed to be in the light. Since I yanked myself out of the homosexuality circle, I needed to root myself in good soil, but I had never told anyone about this area of my life. Although I attended a cell group in the house I stayed in, I hid that part from them.

One night, the cell leader mentioned that he felt strongly that a person had something to share. And nobody would speak until this person did. I was trembling inside, but eventually found the courage to share about my struggle. Nobody cast judgemental looks, nor said anything to demean me. Instead, they gave me encouraging words and said that they will journey with me. We studied the Word, and they would always remind and point me back to the Bible.

Church had a new meaning and I even started serving as an usher. One day, the pastor walked up to me and asked if I was interested in being an intern pastor as the church was looking for someone that year. Me?! Out of 2,500 people? And someone with a past that would be frowned upon?

However, knowing that God redeemed me with loving kindness and mercy, I was assured that I could try this opportunity and learn from it. I equipped myself and felt that God had a call for me to serve His ministry, but I did not know how yet. Post-graduation, I wanted to stay in the USA, but I couldn't find a job, so I returned to Malaysia and worked for a while.

After encountering God and turning my life around, I discovered that my relationship with my family had a different dynamic. I had an absent dad and my mom offloaded her stresses on my shoulders. I was also quite bad-tempered and often hit my siblings. I think we just existed in the same home but never established deeper connections. I believe an important part of my healing was to share this journey of mine with dad and mom. Of course, they never expected it, but it allowed restoration to flow and today we are close, and they are enjoying their season as grandparents.

Finding true love on earth

Even when I stopped sleeping with men, I didn't think that I needed to find a woman to belong to. However, when I met the sister of my pastor friend, I felt a strange feeling. Aside from her looks that I was attracted to, I really had an interest to know her. Yet, she spoke zero English so my mind immediately concluded that it would not be

possible. Also, my parents didn't have a strong marriage which gave me the impression that marriage isn't worth it. I left it at that.

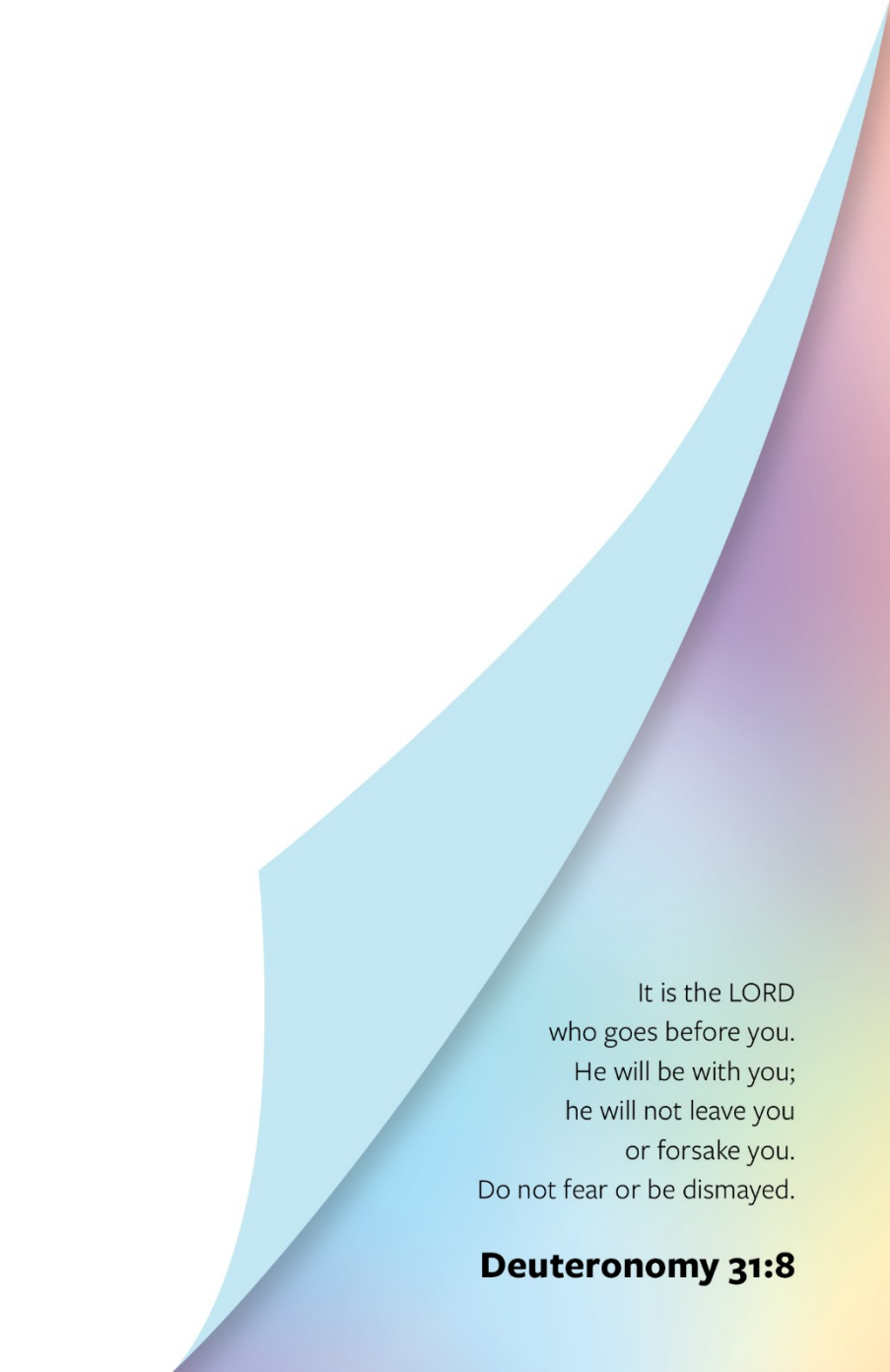
Still, I felt strongly about this girl and in 2015, I went to Vietnam to meet my friend. I whispered in my heart to God, "If You mean this girl for me, I want her to speak English." Upon meeting me, she asked, "How are you? How was your flight?" I was surprised and learnt that she had been learning English and had a basic level of communication. I asked her out and during dinner, I told her how I felt and my past. She simply responded that she believes in the person she sees right now.

The next thing she told me might seem too much of a fairy-tale, but it is true. In 2014, she was praying about marriage, and she saw me in a vision, but it didn't convince her. God showed her again that she will marry a foreigner, so she took English lessons. It was always her wish to be proposed to in Dalat, and we had this conversation in Dalat! Both of us wanted a beach wedding and small celebration with those close to us.

With all that in place, we felt assured and dated for one year before getting married.

Of course, I was nervous about marriage. I still had the occasional homosexual dream, but I know where my identity is, and I make a choice not to be affected. It comforts me that my wife is fully trusting that I will not fall back into my past life. Never did I

imagine being a dad and I can see how my children are God's promises to me, a redemption for my life. When I feel tempted, I look at my children and remind myself that nothing in the past is worth revisiting for all the blessings I have today.



It is the LORD
who goes before you.
He will be with you;
he will not leave you
or forsake you.
Do not fear or be dismayed.

Deuteronomy 31:8

Never left alone nor forsaken

Expressing thoughts and emotions were never M's strong suit. After being shut down for telling her parents about a non-consensual sexual touch from a young man, she grew quiet. Then came the same-sex attraction and again, she struggled quietly. Being a Christian made the conflict even harder to navigate. There came a time where M was simply existing, not living. Upon reaching a breaking point, she reached out for help. The restorative journey has taken ten years (and is ongoing) but God is patient, and generous in revealing His visions for her.

The names of certain individuals have been changed to protect their privacy.

When I was about five, I came home from my neighbour's house. I usually hung out there, but that day was different—I had been sexually violated. I told my parents what happened but got beaten instead. They didn't believe the bodily fluids on my underwear was of a man's and thought it was cover for my masturbation. I never said anything anymore.

Since then, I believed that women are only a man's sexual tool, and I despised my body and identity. I began to fear men and stuck with girls, reasoning that it was safer. Soon, I developed admiration for women. The lack of information about gender and identity back then didn't help me figure things out either.

My friendships with females became unhealthy. I needed constant company from certain girls. I had no boundaries. For example, a friend would drop me home after an entire day of outing and I'd call her immediately to talk until she got home. She never told me off thus I believed she enjoyed our closeness. She asked me to be her girlfriend. I was tentative about what society would think of me but out of my dependency, I said yes. It lasted only seven days, with her saying it's not possible and she'll be going abroad anyway. I didn't talk about the breakup. I wasn't sad but more of just accepting that nothing could be done.

At college, I was even elected President of the Christian Fellowship while struggling with same-sex attraction (SSA). Occasionally I would share with some friends about it, but they were not equipped to do anything except knowing that I needed help. They found PLUC for me and gave me the number, which I kept aside. After graduation, I threw myself into work and *boy, did I work hard.*

Eventually, my body could not handle the stress. I broke down physically. More strikingly, emotionally I felt 'broken'. That was strange, considering I have never really connected with my emotions. I knew I needed professional help and I found PLUC's number again. I made the call. There were no expectations, I didn't know what was going to unfold.

Embracing and talking about feelings

During the initial sessions, I unknowingly spoke in third person. Even while using the pronoun 'I', I was emotionally detached, telling the story of somebody else. I told a story as though I was reading from a book; I was never heartbroken to the point of shedding tears. These sessions were strange and awkward yet I pressed on.

Gradually, I began to learn to give names to how I felt and acknowledge that emotions are a part of me. One year of counselling and one year of support

group later, nothing much seemed to have changed. Still, I was encouraged by my counsellor that time and progress are relative for every person.

Over the years, I learnt to practice how to express my emotions—a simple ‘like’ or ‘dislike’ used to be so challenging but now it is easier. I was under the impression that my feelings were unacceptable, and I had a people-pleaser personality as well. Certain conversations were more complex for me, whereby I would project the person’s reaction to what I had to say. It caused me a lot of unnecessary stress in minimising the potential of being brushed aside, or offending the other party. I am getting better at it and the biggest achievement from this would be me moving out of the family home.

In Asian culture, one usually remains in the family home unless they work elsewhere or get married. The decision caused an emotional roller-coaster when my mom said I was not doing the right thing, while I couldn’t understand why they wouldn’t accept it. However, I stood my ground. I think it was the biggest decision I ever made thus far in my life.

Seeing my steps in the Lord

The Lord showed me very clear pictures throughout this season. During one retreat, I had the first vision

where I saw myself in a very dark room, refusing to go out even though I clearly saw Jesus outside. I was too comfortable in the dark room while Jesus was shining brightly. This would be the tumultuous period in my life before I stepped out to get help.

In a second vision sometime later, I had left the dark room. I saw a staircase, but I was afraid to go up as I couldn't see an end. Eventually I took one step and stopped. I stepped down. Perhaps this corresponds to the time when I decided to get counsel, but I wasn't fully invested.

A few years later, another vision came. This time, Jesus was sitting beside me. He said nothing and I felt that He was the best friend I had ever had. No instructions, no rushing. All I felt was peace. We just sat there for another few years. At that point of time, work was a heavy load because my leaders had left. Feeling directionless, I made a drastic decision to take a Voluntary Separation Scheme. I just needed some downtime to process the events since I began turning my life around.

The next vision came during a Bible conference where I was overcome by a feeling of filth. As my guy friends always hoped for a virgin wife, I thought I was already defiled and didn't deserve marriage. In the vision, I saw I was totally cleansed, and Jesus has made me holy and acceptable. While it is clearly written in the Bible that everyone can be made holy, it was then that this truth became so real.

It was my turning point to believe that I am cleansed, holy, and ready to be a bride of Jesus.

Since then, I have ceased my pornography and masturbation habits too. It was only at this point that I was ready to decide for my life. Before this, I could never really make up my mind when the counsellor asked if I wanted to pursue a homosexual life or a holy life. After the revelation of holiness, I am certain of my choice in the Lord.

In 2019, I heard three Chinese words which can be translated as 'a fellow journey-er'. It was an assurance and encouragement for me to share my story, the process and victories claimed with Christ. Eventually, I told my parents about my struggles as I would be sharing in conferences, and I didn't want them to hear it from someone else and not know anything.

It is my hope that others will know that they are not alone and if they decide to walk with God, they can be sure of a very personalised journey. There will be ups and downs but if we persevere and continue trusting, the freedom we can experience is, at times, indescribable!

¹ Behold my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my Spirit upon him;
he will bring forth justice to the nations.
² He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice,
or make it heard in the street;
³ a bruised reed he will not break,
and a faintly burning wick he will not quench;
he will faithfully bring forth justice.
⁴ He will not grow faint or be discouraged
till he has established justice in the earth;
and the coastlands wait for his law.

Isaiah 42: 1-4

Not broken, but chosen

A sexual violation in her childhood caused Sylvia to lose trust in men. This distrust was further heightened due to similar incidences in her adulthood. Fearful of intimacy, yet longing for closeness, she chose girls because it felt safe. Until her 'forever love' was shattered and she found God, wholeness, and a future so clear.

When you watch a love scene in a movie, you think that all physical intimacy is the same—a rush of passion, sensuous touches, and a totally enjoyable experience. It isn't so for me.

I was afraid of getting close to people I love because of the multiple sexual violations that happened to me. I was molested as a child by a neighbouring boy and my parents kept quiet about it. In my young adult years, a man on the bus touched me and the bus driver didn't do anything when I reported it, while another young man forced himself on me to show his affections. All these unwelcomed touches led me to build walls, especially around men, including my father and brothers. I saw my friends dating men but I didn't feel the same way. In fact, I was happier not dating!

I found comfort in the company of girls. I started to notice girls and felt a sense of attraction to them. If a girl approached me, I'd be very happy. Girls were always coming round for stayovers in my house which had my mom asking if I was a homosexual. I denied it because, truthfully, there were no sexual acts when the girls came over—I just enjoyed their company. I was also a keen reader and many of the novels I read depicted homosexual relationships with a happy ending. Slowly, I became convinced that I can have a girl-girl relationship and have a happily ever after.

The lesbian phase

I had been in the closet for several years as I was still living in the family home. It wasn't something you wanted people to know in a small town – until I was in a serious relationship and badly wanted to be with her. That meant moving to Kuala Lumpur. I then opened up to my family because I didn't want to lie, and I wanted them to bless this relationship. Having said that, I also made up my mind to leave, regardless of their opinion. I was being very selfish.

Nobody knew me in the city, so I was free to live my homosexual life. In job interviews, I intentionally made it known, which resulted in many lost opportunities. Finally, one company hired me. They didn't question or react to my disclosure, so I felt comfortable working there. Life was good. I had the love of my life. I enjoyed going out and meeting like-minded people at gay pubs.

Then my girlfriend said she wanted to leave the relationship. My world came crashing down. I'd had a few relationships before that, but this was the one I gave up everything for and in the end, I gained nothing. My friends were her friends, so essentially all I had in the city was this group of LGBT folks, which was awkward after the breakup. I also had not spoken to any of my family after I left home. I was wandering in a sense of loss.

Love from unexpected places

Since I was comfortable with the people in my office, I shared about the breakup. They didn't judge or give me words of advice but listened and prayed for me. Before the breakup, my boss had always encouraged me to call home, but I was never able to. I knew it was not right to have run away and I didn't forgive myself for that. She gave me another nudge to call, and in my brokenness, I found the courage.

I paced for more than one hour before picking up the phone. My mom answered but there was silence on my end. I found no words, but Mom called my name and asked, "How are you?" I broke down instantly and all she said was, "Don't cry anymore, just come home." I did and nobody spoke about my homosexuality. At this point, the care and love I received from my co-workers and family was a balm to my soul.

Around this season, an acquaintance from the neighbouring office invited me to an evangelical meeting in her church. She was persistent despite my excuses, so I agreed to go to get rid of her. I watched a group from Hong Kong share the gospel and sing songs in my Cantonese dialect. Aside from the relatable language, I found the songs to be very soothing, unlike songs in the clubs I used to frequent. At the end, the pastor made an altar call. My heart was beating so rapidly. I was struggling because I knew that choosing Christianity meant

forgoing homosexuality, which I felt I wasn't ready for.

Then the pastor said that he was waiting for ONE person.

I knew it was me. I could almost hear my pounding heart. A voice in Mandarin said, "*Just trust me, take one step in faith.*" I took one step...and walked all the way out. The pastor said, "This person has come out, we can start to pray."

I was amazed to know this God is so gentle, kind, and patient. I thought my life would be smooth and happy after receiving Him.

Healing from shame

There was a sense of lightness in my heart upon receiving Him but the walk with God unearthed a lot of pain. As a young Christian, perhaps I was naive when I asked Him one day to show me what I needed to deal with inside.

Sometime after that prayer, the memory of my childhood sexual abuse surfaced. I had drifted from my family after the incident and kept to myself. Since I received no justice, I told myself that I was a healthy child in a happy family. This was how I framed my mind to cope with the shame and pain over the years.

Upon remembering the lies I told myself, my heart felt very heavy. I wanted to jump down from my apartment unit on the 21st floor to avoid dealing with this mountain of trauma. While I was standing in front of the window, I heard a voice saying, "***Look to your left.***" I looked and it was my bookshelf housing Christian reading material and a worship songbook. I then heard, "***Pick up the book and sing.***"

I took the book and opened it and immediately the tears flowed. I couldn't see the words at all, but I thought I was singing so I kept flipping the pages. The tears eventually stopped, I sang my heart out, and found a sense of calmness within. It was indeed the Holy Spirit comforting me and telling me that I can heal from what happened during my childhood.

The family reconciliation

I knew I had to seek forgiveness from my parents for leaving home that way, and for the reason I did. Although they are not Christians, they knew the homosexual path was not going to be easy. I was surprised to learn they never spoke ill of me to relatives who would always question my absence in family gatherings. In their own way, they honoured me.

One year, we celebrated Parents Day with my siblings, and I decided to have an appreciation session by telling our parents how we love them.

Much as I was convinced to apologise, there was still hesitancy. I planned to only say a generic “Thank you for raising me” but the Holy Spirit urged me to say “Sorry” instead. As much as I resisted, the prompting of God was just too strong, and I knew obedience would change the entire situation. I apologised and my mom responded with a simple, “It’s okay, that was the past.” While Dad was quiet, I could see the tears in his eyes and body language that the hurt was so deep.

That day, my heart was renewed. I can say that this was the moment I truly felt free. I decided not to hold on to the painful past. My parents didn’t purposely not stand up for me—back then, they were unaware and unequipped to handle the situation. Since then, the walls have disappeared and now I truly enjoy the relationship with my family.

Relearning men are made in God’s image

Indeed, God made men and women, and it was good. But I never saw men as people I can be acquainted with, and I still held a negative perception of them. How did God help me? By putting me amongst them!

I was ready for a new season in my life and was seeking God’s direction when He opened a full-time job in my church. I had to report to the pastor—a

male figure – and he put me on a task where I had to work with a group of men. Oh dear. I was so afraid because I didn't know how to talk, relate to, or understand men but I didn't really have a choice. My colleagues were married men, so I did feel safe(r) and as I worked with them daily, my mind started to change. I gave myself the opportunity to relearn who a man is, designed by our Heavenly Father. It wasn't right to lump all men in the same category because of a few who made mistakes. I'm glad to have fostered healthy friendships with men, and I would even be open to marriage, should the right man come along!

Called to service at PLUC

I first got to know about PLUC when I was still working in the commercial marketplace. One day during Sunday service, I received a leaflet about a workshop on handling LGBT issues, organised by PLUC. I had no interest but there was a bugging voice urging me to just walk in despite not having registered. I hadn't taken leave either and I told God that if my boss was in the office when I arrived, I would ask her permission for the day off and I will go if she grants it. I was pretty sure this wouldn't happen because my boss was never early. Guess what? I opened the office door, and she was there! Being a principled person, I kept my promise to God

and asked for permission. And I went to the workshop but just sat quietly in the corner.

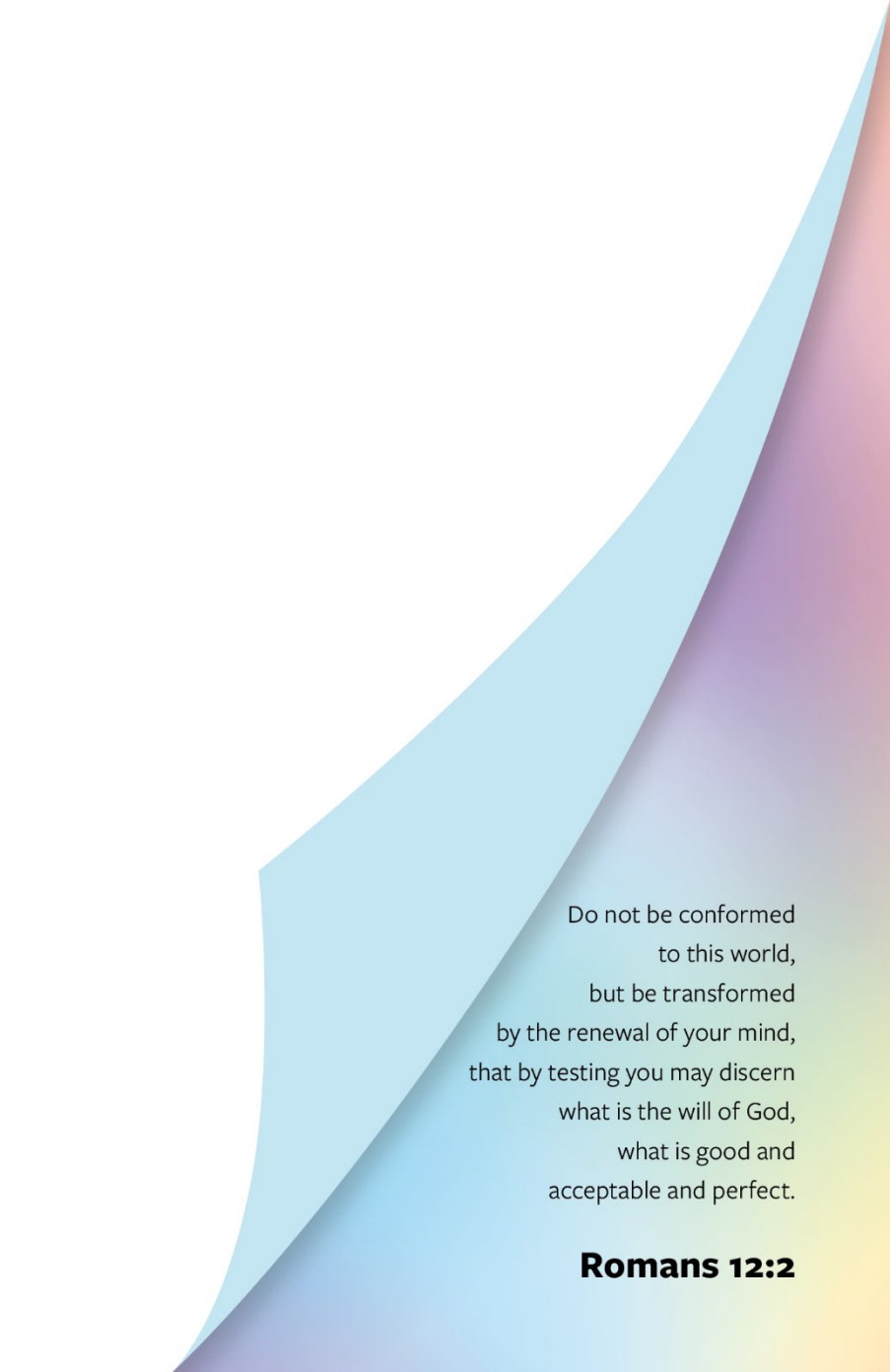
After that, I had recurrent impressions of serving in this niche ministry. It was the last place I'd wanted to go to! I thought hearing people talk about their LGBT experiences would trigger my own memories and I didn't want to open myself to that possibility. However, the voice was too hard to ignore and since I didn't know how to proceed, I spoke to my pastor. He suggested we sit down with PLUC to see how I can be part of the ministry.

We met Rev. Tryphena, but PLUC had no funds to hire someone—even she did not receive a proper salary. Then my pastor asked me to work full-time in the church and I could also volunteer with PLUC. The church would have better flexibility for me to do two things instead of being tied down to a commercial company which limits my time to learn at PLUC.

I wasn't even a regular churchgoer then. I felt that the church had too many 'rules' and I didn't like how things were done. I asked my pastor why he considered me for a full-time role when I wasn't the most committed member? He said he didn't really know, but he'd asked God to lead him on the words to say to me when we went to talk to Rev. Tryphena and offering me the role came to mind.

Well, I'm sure it isn't co-incidental and after much prayer, I became full-time at PLUC. I have not

heard from God yet on the next season so I will continue sowing into this field. God is indeed gracious to renew my heart and mind and giving me the privilege to share His truth and love about gender identity and sexuality through PLUC.



Do not be conformed
to this world,
but be transformed
by the renewal of your mind,
that by testing you may discern
what is the will of God,
what is good and
acceptable and perfect.

Romans 12:2

A renewal of the mind

Childhood was blissful for E but all that changed during teenhood. Family circumstances made her strong and independent, so she never wanted to burden them with her emotional struggles and gender confusion. Unchecked and unexplained, these struggles almost led to homosexuality in adulthood, but it always felt like there was a thread holding her back, which reeled her back to God's truth and clarity.

The names of certain individuals have been changed to protect their privacy.

In an all-girls' school, admiring girls was common. I looked up to tomboys. I tried to act like a boy, kept short hair and bent the rules as girls seemed to like that. I was also attracted to girls who carried themselves with poise and, perhaps, an air of arrogance—the ones who were unattainable as friends as they were on 'another level'. I was average in studies, a little chubby, and socially awkward.

Whenever a girl I considered to be better than me extended her friendship, I scrambled all over her. Every year, I had a new best friend and I felt intensely for them. I joined whichever clubs they were in, whether I liked it or not. I loved it when they asked me for help because that validated my self-worth. *Even the popular ones need me.*

I didn't know the real me and that made secondary school a lonely period. I also experienced a range of emotions through the years that I didn't know how to manage and had no one to talk to. The heartache and confusion when M walked off one day and just stopped talking to me. Embarrassment when I was caught climbing a wall to skip co-curricular activities as I wanted to impress S who was a rebel. The pain when K dropped me like a hot potato in front of her cool friends yet she was so sweet with notes and little gifts to me in secret. In hindsight, she was nice probably because I was her butler. Then I overheard someone mentioning that I followed K like a dog—it broke me. The shock when J pecked me on the cheek during a random game in

class. The eye-opening moment when I watched a girl-on-girl intimate scene on a DVD a friend passed to me.

I became aware of physical arousal and soon found out about self-pleasure. I started fantasising at night to distract me from all the hurtful events, and masturbation helped me sleep. When high school ended, I was so relieved and couldn't wait to leave my hometown and put the sad years behind me.

Problem solved, or so I thought

Everything was new in university, and I made lots of friends. In fact, they thought I was outgoing and popular because I seemed to know many people – from those in different courses to those staying in other hostels. I finally felt more comfortable in my own skin.

While there were one or two girls whom I felt more attached to, it wasn't as deep as before as there were always some other things I wanted to do. Neither did I have time for sexual fantasies (four people sharing a room is a good detractor). I considered the emotional intensity for girls in school as 'just a phase' and completed my university degree without any attachment issues.

Straight out of graduation, I started working. There was a lot to learn, and I needed much

assistance trying to figure out an entire new way of life. One year in, we had a new colleague, a fresh grad who seemed to be uncertain about a lot of things. I empathised and immediately offered my help. She was very appreciative and had this air of innocence around her, which was rather endearing. Above all, I would be the first person she went to for anything. And so, it began again, crushing on her and getting emotionally attached.

Having a gay boss and lesbian mentor who seemed happy with their choices awakened thoughts about my sexuality. To seek confirmation, I began searching for stories of people coming out. One night I couldn't sleep and I chatted with my work mentor. I shared how certain girls make me feel mushy and maybe I was gay? She did not try to convert me, instead she simply said, "Whatever feels right for you, and since you are searching, it wouldn't be right to impose any of (my) ideals and influence your decision." If she had affirmed my curiosity and encouraged me to try, I would have jumped into that world, as I already had the idea planted in my subconscious for years.

One day, my colleague said she was afraid of me. Of my overly affectionate touches, and uncalled for nice gestures. I knew I had gone too far and perhaps I was one of the reasons she left the company shortly after that. Her confrontation caused me to think of seeking answers so I wrote to PLUC.

Actually, I only wanted to know whether I was gay or not and be done in one session (or two), then decide what to do next. Well, the 'diagnosis' wasn't homosexuality but 'emotional attachment/dependency' and it didn't happen overnight. There are usually incidents through childhood that reinforce the behaviour.

Catalyst of emotional dependency

Through the sessions, I realised my mom depended a lot on me emotionally because of two factors: my medical history and my family's financial situation.

My sudden illness followed by a period of hospitalisation traumatised my mom greatly. After that, she became very anxious if I exhibited discomfort of any kind. Even saying "I'm tired" made her worry. I would avoid telling her if I was not feeling too good unless there was no choice. It made me feel that if anything were to happen to me again, she could collapse.

Due to a business gone bust, Dad was left with loans. He tried to solve it with credit card loans, borrowing from friends, loan sharks, and gambling. When he finally told Mom, the mountain of debt was high, and she gave up a lot of her money. We had been comfortable middle-class citizens until then, but we had to sell our Japanese-branded cars and downsize our lifestyle. My parents worked

extra jobs every night and scrimped every penny – this wasn't the life Mom envisioned for her mid-forties.

The atmosphere at home was tense. Being the eldest, I became responsible to ensure dinner was on the table, the house was cleaned, and sort out school stuff and schedules for myself and my younger sister. We barely spoke to our parents as they worked late but when we did, Mom vented to me, blaming Dad and saying he was the reason we were in this circumstance. I didn't think I could talk to them about what was going on in my life as I didn't want to burden them any more than necessary.

Self-worth in the wrong places

So, I turned to these girls. While I learnt independence by helping at home, for some reason, it became something I pinned my worth on. If I was dependable and useful, people would want to be my friend. That is why I bent over backwards, even when not asked, and spent way too much time thinking of how I could make these girls happy and remember me.

I also discovered that I found it hard to say NO to requests. If I was the first person people thought of to ask for help, I said yes even if I wasn't keen. I didn't want to make things more difficult for them to find someone else. In truth, the need of being

needed overtook my honesty and I'd do things without sincerity. To comfort myself, I would silently judge people who could say NO, telling myself these people were selfish and I'm not like them.

I feared being unlikeable. It came to mind that my mom has this characteristic too—she always projected to us that we should comply to keep peace and not cause others to be angry. Her mentality was largely influenced by her family who tended to fling their authority about and could turn a troop against one person. So, Mom chose the non-confrontational route to keep herself safe. My distorted belief system revolved around trying to be the best person and to gain approval at all costs. I had no ownership of myself and PLUC was the first place where I learnt about boundaries and how important it is to my emotional wellbeing.

Pathway to healing

I thought I had this emotional attachment issue wrapped up after learning the reasons for it, and I was pretty sure I could spot the signs a mile away. I overestimated myself and a subsequent relationship would be the hardest, and longest to heal from. I was open about my struggles quite immediately upon realising I was falling. She accorded me grace and I tried to be more mindful about crossing my boundaries. Friends argue, yes, but I always blamed

myself for it and took the step to apologise, even when I didn't need to. I was so afraid of losing her.

A few years ago, she let me know that she has decided to keep a low profile. I did check in occasionally, but the distance was palpable, to the extent that I couldn't help but feel patronised. I decided that I had done my best for the friendship and let go. The only thing I could do was surrender to God, not berate myself nor cast the blame on her. I learnt to accept that the friendship was a season, and I want to believe that there was good in it, despite the roller-coaster rides.

After this happened, I thought about all my past friendships and the first ever person who walked away from me came to mind. I never knew what I did wrong. Was she traumatised? Did I affect her trust in other people? I don't know but I just felt that making an apology would help me heal, and hopefully help her as well. We were friends on social media though we never communicated. It was an awkward situation to bring up, but I felt a need to do it. I wrote her an apology on Facebook messenger and after doing so, the burden I carried for twenty plus years was lifted from my heart.

I learnt to reason with my mom as well when she expected me to do things that affirmed her self-worth amongst her siblings. I shared with her about boundaries and that we cannot please everyone at the expense of ourselves, for doing so will likely end

up in burnout or sadness because most people wouldn't appreciate us anyway. From using the irrefutable 'mom' card, which has caused many arguments, she now asks if I can do it.

At this point of writing, I can say I am emotionally stable enough. Otherwise, I wouldn't be able to put the story together. I cannot be sure if I've won the battle of emotional dependency as there hasn't been anyone recently. Yet, self-awareness is key—and being vigilant, especially in new friendships, whether female or male. What I am confident of is that God is kind, and He will remind me if I ever was stepping into murky waters, and I hope I haven't gone too far.

²⁵ I will restore to you the years
that the swarming locust has eaten,
the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter,
my great army, which I sent among you.
²⁶ “You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied,
and praise the name of the LORD your God,
who has dealt wondrously with you.
And my people shall never again be put to shame.

²⁷ You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel,
and that I am the LORD your God and there is none else.
And my people shall never again be put to shame.

The LORD Will Pour Out His Spirit

²⁸ “And it shall come to pass afterward,
that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh;
your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
your old men shall dream dreams,
and your young men shall see visions.

²⁹ Even on the male and female servants
in those days I will pour out my Spirit.

³⁰ “And I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth,
blood and fire and columns of smoke. ³¹ The sun shall be
turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great
and awesome day of the LORD comes. ³² And it shall come
to pass that everyone who calls on the name of the LORD
shall be saved. For in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall
be those who escape, as the LORD has said, and among the
survivors shall be those whom the LORD calls.

Joel 2:25-32

Restoration of lost years

For as long as she could remember, Tryphena tried to be the good girl in her family, the best-friend-forever, the one who does not fail, and ultimately, the one who God approves of for her tireless service. She seemed happy enough, but one devastating breakup shattered her world. As past wounds resurfaced, God revealed how she was only getting by in life with lies she told herself and redirected her to experience the way He really loves.

The names of certain individuals in this story have been changed to protect their privacy.

If hypocrisy had a degree of measurement, I'm sure I was pretty much up there—serving in church while being in homosexual relationships. Perhaps I was trying to exchange the sin for grace through my service. Nobody really must know what goes on behind the doors as long as my service benefits the church and community, right?

I was in teachers' training college when I began to tread on homosexuality. It started with emotional dependency. I wasn't in a very good place emotionally at that time and Anna would always provide a listening ear. Her touches, which were to comfort me, became something I craved for, and eventually I got attracted to her. We ended up taking things further physically, and she mentioned it to a mutual friend, Jean.

One day, Jean and I were traveling, and she asked if I was struggling with same-sex attraction, to which I replied, "I think so." To my surprise, Jean touched me as well, presumably to help me see if I really wanted to be a lesbian. However, it only made me more aware of my needs for sexual touch.

You see, when I was six years old, a female neighbour lay on top of me and kissed me on the lips. That was my early awakening. Later, I discovered masturbation by rubbing the bolster between my thighs—Mom discovered my act and told me to stop without explaining why. I also stumbled upon Dad's pornography stash at home.

Thus, I had the awareness of sexual pleasure at an early age.

When Jean touched me, I got turned on and attracted to her. Strangely, she also fell for me. We became a couple but eventually, she realised it wasn't what she wanted, and we ended it. I decided to stop indulging in homosexual acts and relationships as well because I knew it wasn't pleasing to the Lord and even against my moral convictions.

Falling short again, and again

However, my decision to stop dating girls wasn't backed with a plan against relapses. I had not told anyone about my struggles and had no proper support for my resolve. The only thing I knew to do was throw myself into work. I had received my teaching post and was involved not only in regular teaching but also training students for sports. I was actively serving in the local church as well. All the same-sex attraction (SSA) temptations seemed to disappear.

Then a fellow colleague, Kate, rented a room in the house where I stayed. We didn't speak much at school as I was busy and projected an air of not wanting to make friends.

One night, Kate told me that something was 'disturbing' her and she was afraid to sleep alone in

her room. I invited her to bunk in my room. The bunking stretched across a few nights. I held her, hugged her, as a means of soothing her fears. Amidst that, I started telling her about my dysfunctional family and found out she had a similar background. Soon, temptation kicked in and I went beyond the limits. She was shocked at first but eventually we got together for about one year.

Then I left teaching for Bible college without considering that she would be alone or what she thought. I was adamant and there was nothing she could do although I did go and see her during the weekends. She even supported me financially – that was how invested she was in me and our relationship.

Lo and behold, in Bible college, I crossed paths with a senior girl, Xuan. She was my cup of tea, with an air of mystery and elegance. I was drawn to her. We got talking and found ourselves on the same wavelength. We enjoyed teasing each other and having deep discussions. One semester, she ended up being in the same room with me in the dormitory and we got to know each other even more. There was surely chemistry between us, but it was platonic as she had a boyfriend and I was still calling and meeting up with Kate.

Things got real when my mom was in the hospital, and I was very worried. Xuan ensured I was taken care of physically and emotionally,

especially when Kate couldn't be with me on weekdays. When Mom passed away, I had nights overwhelmed with grief where I would wake up screaming or crying, and Xuan would pacify me.

Our attachment grew stronger, and it became very apparent when I felt jealous upon seeing her boyfriend. When she returned to the room, I pretended to be asleep because of my irrational anger towards her boyfriend. She came to check on me, but in a physical way. I responded...and that was how we started a relationship. Only later did I break up with Kate and Xuan called it off with her boyfriend.

Then, she went overseas to serve, as encouraged by her pastor. I stayed back to finish up my studies and I became a pastor. We held on to a long-distance relationship and I started noticing calls and emails were getting lesser. Eventually, she told me she was getting married to a man. I was so heartbroken. We had so many memories in the three years. After so many previous girls, I truly believed we had something special because of our common faith, and it almost drove me to commit suicide. I revisited pornography to cope with my loneliness and went on online dating sites, sleeping around (even with men!) just to fill the gap of lost love, bitterness, and anger.

A turning point

The breakup with Xuan massively impacted me. I could not bring myself to continue serving with this double life. I called someone who I considered a mentor and blurted out, "I'm a lesbian, even though I'm a pastor." Tears just rolled down my face and all he said was "Jesus loves you." I couldn't believe how God can love someone so filthy as me. I didn't even know what it meant to love myself because I'd been searching for affirmation and love in all the wrong places. I just knew that if I didn't reach out, I would spiral deeper and deeper because this wasn't the life I wanted.

I quit the church within 24 hours and left for Sabah for a retreat and a time of healing. During the retreat, I asked God if I could ever be unbroken and made beautiful again. I soon understood that to be unbroken, I had to piece together the dark holes of my life. To forgive the girl who laid on top of me and her elder sister who just allowed it to happen. To forgive my father for his irresponsible ways of bringing in porn material and leaving it around to be accessed. I had to forgive Mom for making me her 'surrogate husband' since I was six or seven years old. Whenever she had an outburst, I told her not to worry and that I would take care of her.

Perhaps I should give some context about the strained relationship with my parents. I didn't see my dad as a strong father figure. He had a gambling

habit that wrecked our family's finances. He didn't know how to save, plus he was with poor company who spent their free time drinking and playing their money away. My parents were constantly fighting about money.

On top of that, he believed a rumour that Mom was involved with another man and that we were not his children. He kicked all of us out of the house and Mom had to take care of four kids on her own. We moved from house to house, wherever work took her. I was the eldest so naturally Mom made me her helper and her 'punching bag' in times of frustration. It was not a very pleasant childhood.

Eventually, my parents reconciled and started a food business. In an unfortunate investment scheme, they lost some money and Dad borrowed from illegal money lenders (Ah Longs). We lived in fear because these Ah Longs were known to extort and threaten you if you could not pay up. I even had to help pay the debts when I began getting a very small allowance from teachers' training college.

To sum it up, there was a sense of bitterness within me because I just felt that I had to bear a lot of my parents' burdens from a young age even when I had nothing to do with it.

Finding self-worth

I believe my self-worth was built from the way Mom interacted with me. If I wanted love, I had to earn it from her by providing the help she needed and being a sensible eldest sibling to the young ones.

I didn't know the real me. I saw that I was only worthy if I was tough and could protect people. It probably didn't help much that I was also bigger in stature than other girls and wore short hair. Girls in school would always come to me for 'protection', even if it was just going to the toilet. In role-play games, I was never the princess but always the bodyguard or police. A girl, but never seen as one.

Though I fell for a guy before, he treated me only as one of his 'brothers', casually telling me he liked another girl. So, I concluded that men only like skinny girls with long hair. Also, since Dad did not live up to his role, I told myself that if a man cannot be good, then I will make myself better than a man so that I will not need them. And I can also be the man that my girlfriends need(ed).

For many years, I conducted my behaviour according to what people expected of me. Or at least I assumed their expectations. Whatever I found my hands doing, I would also work doubly hard to make sure I was worthy of the position – whether as a teacher or in ministry. I operated on a distorted belief system that doing good and excelling equaled being loved. I needed to hear constant appraisals

from my leaders otherwise I'd feel like I haven't done enough.

One day, during another silent retreat, God met me and assured me that my identity is in Him and not anchored on what people say. In that moment, I found my security and following that, I changed the way I did things. I was less afraid of failing and began to express myself more as in the past I didn't allow myself to share my true feelings for fear of how people would look at me. I learnt that God's acceptance precedes any other worldly ones, and I am beautiful the way I am because He made me.

A certainty in every sense

Indeed, I have come a long way and I don't doubt that my past experiences with SSA and homosexuality shaped me to work with God in this area through PLUC. In the beginning, it wasn't even a place I saw myself in.

At that time, the founding individuals of PLUC wanted to move on and it was somehow passed on to me to carry on as I was working with them. For the first ten years, I felt I had no choice. Even though the field was niche and the workers few, I kept looking for opportunities to pass on the ministry to someone else. I think it was mainly because I was a one-man show and most churches and partner organisations saw me as the face of PLUC. It was

always perceived as 'Tryphena's ministry that she founded' although that wasn't true at all. It became somewhat of a burden to me, instead of being a joyful service to the Lord.

After ten years, the overseeing leadership of PLUC felt that the organisation should be referred to as PLUC and not Tryphena being the face of PLUC. That 'weight' was lifted, and I was very clear that this is the place where God wants me to be for now. He also sent wonderful co-workers who have the same heart for these groups of people.

Truly, I thank God for His grace that carried me through and stayed with me, being patient because He knew what He wanted my life to be. Despite all the ups-and-downs and sinful ways I committed, the truth remains—Jesus sat with sinners and tax collectors and showed them love. In all our wrongs, He will take us back if only we repent.

Our special thanks to Yune Yee who interviewed all the contributors, crafting their stories, as well as managing creative design and publishing. We appreciate all the storytellers who took their time and found the courage to share as “Overcomers: Out, Loud, and Proud”.

To talk to us or to understand more of what we do, visit www.pluc.org.my.