

# Trans people are not issues, but fellow human beings

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My name is Karl. I am a Methodist Presbyterian currently serving in the London District, a mathematician by background, a former risk analyst, a published author, someone pondering further theological study, and a human being who also happens to be trans.

When I was asked to write a piece for LGBT+ History Month on transphobia, my initial reaction was enthusiasm for the task, as I strongly believe it is important that trans voices are heard, especially in the current highly charged climate. However, in reality, writing this has proven far more difficult than I imagined. The fact is that this past year in particular has been very difficult for me personally, as well as for the wider patchwork of trans communities.

The [best estimate](#) we have is that trans people may comprise around 1% of the UK population, but it is difficult to offer an accurate figure. This is partly because ‘trans’ is an umbrella term for people whose gender isn’t the same as, or doesn’t sit comfortably with, the sex assigned them at birth, and not everyone who might come under that umbrella would use the term ‘trans’ of themselves, for a range of reasons. It also reflects the fact that there has never been an official attempt to collect such data (the 2021 Census won’t be asking the question, for example).

Given we make up, by all accounts, a very small percentage of the diverse population of the UK, it might surprise you to know that between them, the *Times* and *Sunday Times* published over three-hundred articles relating to trans people in 2020, almost all of them from a negative and critical perspective. They are not alone; particularly since Theresa May’s administration launched a consultation about reform of the Gender Recognition Act 2004, and then sat on the results for three years, the media climate has been extremely hostile towards trans people across the political spectrum, from the *Guardian* to the *Telegraph*.

As many commentators have said, there are clear parallels between how gay men were talked of in the 1980s – as, to quote Owen Jones, “would-be sexual predators, violators of biological reality, threats to children, immoral, deviants, and generally undesirable” – and how trans people, especially trans women, are spoken about today. For trans men like me, the most common tropes are that we are vulnerable women who need protecting from ourselves, or else confused lesbians who have been subjected to a ‘trans the gay away’ model of ‘conversion therapy’, both of which are factually untrue and deeply offensive.

Against this backdrop, I have received numerous abusive e-mails and Facebook messages, been verbally harassed in the street (including on three occasions within a few yards of one of the churches I serve), and had excrement put through my manse door. Nationally, a [Stonewall survey](#) in 2019 found that around forty percent

of trans people had been victims of hate crime in the past year, and around the same percentage of trans young people had attempted (not just contemplated) taking their own lives. Data obtained by the BBC shows that transphobic hate crimes have [quadrupled](#) in the past five years.

Amidst this hostile environment, it isn't easy to articulate the emotional impact of constantly finding our lives, and something as intrinsic to our personhood as our gender, being seen as 'up for debate'. It feels very much like others view me less as a fellow human being made in the image of God, and more as an 'issue', whose dignity and wellbeing are secondary to their 'right' to say what they will. After a while, that grinds you down, and erodes your sense of safety and value, especially as these same 'debates' are repeated seemingly endlessly, and have been for [decades](#) now without the conversation moving on.

Issues such as trans women's access to public toilets, [refuges](#), prisons and sports are brought up, again and again, despite the fact that trans people have been able to access the correct facilities for our gender for decades now, and certainly long before the Equality Act 2010 (which brought together provisions from previous sex discrimination legislation). Reforms to the Gender Recognition Act – which would make it easier for trans people to obtain a new birth certificate, and remove the need for one's gender to 'assessed' by a panel we never even get to meet in person – of the kind [already in place](#) for many years in several countries, such as our neighbours in Ireland, have not led to the bonfire of women's rights that a vocal and well-funded minority claim.

What makes this situation worse is that, contrary to what the media portrayal might suggest, most feminists, as Judith Butler reminds us in a [recent interview](#), are trans-inclusive, but a [vocal minority](#) – along with right-wing groups, and faith groups such as Christian Concern – are not, and are very quick to tell us we're seeking to 'silence' the freedom of speech of others or perpetuate 'cancel culture' (often, ironically, from the pages of national newspapers, or by Twitter accounts with millions of followers) if we dare to object.

So, it has been genuinely heartening to see the Methodist Church producing material for LGBT+ History Month for the first time. I hope that this will be the beginning of a move to engage more fully and regularly with the stories and experiences of trans people, within and beyond its existing connections. Trans people are not issues, but fellow human beings with the same hopes and fears, joys and worries, as anybody else. We want to be free to live our lives with dignity and safety, and to have as much opportunity to flourish as any other person, as equally beloved children of the God who calls us and shapes us more each day into the likeness of Christ. I pray that the Church it is my privilege to serve will stand with me, and all trans people, as 2021 unfolds.

**Karl Rutlidge**