



## **Faith and LGBTIQ+ identity**

Interview with RMIT Senior Chaplain and RMIT Ally Alae Taule'alo





## **Tell us a little about yourself.**

My name is Alae Taule'alo. I'm part Kiwi, part Samoan and I was born in New Zealand and lived most of my childhood in Samoa. I was raised Roman Catholic. I've lived in Melbourne for the last 20 years and roughly four years ago I was received into the Anglican Church. I am Senior Chaplain at RMIT.

In my spare time I like watching Spanish-language soaps on Netflix. I married my partner Andrew in 2017 before it was legal here, in Gibraltar of all places. I loved Gibraltar but I'm afraid of monkeys so we stayed away from the famous rock.

## **Would you like to share your coming out story?**

I would like to say I had a dramatic coming out story, but I didn't. My mother jokingly said I came out when I was eighteen months old, so I don't really have an agonising coming out story to share.

I suppose when I was young my parents had that discussion about whether I was gay or not. They were waiting for me to say something. I was lucky in a way. My dad came from a very traditional Samoan background. He was the son of a village pastor and I suppose, when I was in my teenage years, I worried about whether that would be an issue for him.

Samoa is also a very conservative country and so it was interesting to have that as part of my soul searching, something I suppose many DGSS\* people from diverse backgrounds go through.

But my dad was very accepting and it was a relatively easy conversation to have. I suppose I was conscious of being a gay when I was about thirteen or fourteen.

Interestingly, neither of my parents is particularly religious now. Although my dad was raised by a pastor he no longer attends Church, although he still considers himself a Christian and knows his Bible backwards. In Samoa boys of his generation were taught to read using the Bible.


Mum was raised Roman Catholic and she took us to Mass when we were children. Ironically perhaps, I'm the only one in my family—I have two older brothers—who still goes to church.

## **Do you see any parallels in your identity as a gay man and a person of faith?**

When I was a young teenager it was about negotiating my Catholic identity with being gay. You must remember my brothers and I were raised in a very religious country even if our household was pretty liberal in many ways. In Samoa, the expectation was that everyone went to church on Sundays, sometimes more than once. Looking back, I sometimes wonder if we went to church simply because that's what everyone else did.

I think certainly St. Peters, my church in Melbourne, has helped me develop a stronger relationship to God and a stronger prayer life. I think I was never really a part of a community before and I never felt like I could be myself until I came to St. Peters.

That's not to say I didn't encounter inclusive voices in the Catholic Church, or that I still don't feel a strong bond with Catholicism. But I lacked a community, and the Christian faith is a community faith. You can't be a Christian on your own.



In terms of my becoming an Anglican, the reality is I married into it because my husband is a choir director at the church. So, I would like to say there was some profound conversion but there really wasn't.

Having said that, I belong to a particular part of the Anglican Church, which is the Anglo-Catholic movement. It's all about stressing the Catholic heritage of the Church of England but also shaking up the sometimes staid culture of conformity within Anglicanism.

Strangely, I forged a deeper relationship with my Catholic faith—by becoming Anglican.

### **Have you experienced any unique challenges in the context of navigating your faith?**

At an institutional level, the Anglican Church in Australia, including the Diocese of Melbourne, is not inclusive.

Melbourne is a diverse and vibrant city but religiously it's quite conservative, at least as far as Anglicanism is concerned. Having said that, there are a number of clergy in Melbourne who identify as DGSS although they experience certain challenges in terms of how their colleagues and the Bishops treat them.

Being gay certainly precludes career pathways; it would be difficult if not impossible for me to get ordained as a priest in this Diocese if that's something I wanted to do.

There are other Dioceses where it would be easier, for example if I lived in Perth or Newcastle. Anglicanism isn't as centralised as Catholicism in terms of laws and governance. Different bishops make different rules in their patch about who can and can't get priested.

### **What helps you feel at home in the religious space in the context of being a DGSS person?**

I feel at home in my particular community because it is LGBTQ+ friendly and I've always felt it hasn't been a hindrance to my flourishing within it.


I think St. Peters does a pretty good job and although I think there is still a way to go, I have always felt welcomed and I think that's due to the culture of the place. There has always been LGBTQ+ involvement in that community for decades and St. Peters is unique in that respect.

The relationship between gay men and Anglo-Catholicism is probably a bit of cliché, but it's founded in fact. In part it's because we've kept the frocks and drama of Catholicism. But on a deeper level it's because we haven't edited the body out of our faith in a cerebral or overly spiritualised way. Jesus was born a man with a human body—we worship him with our bodies as well as our hearts.

### **Are there times where you feel tension between your religion and your identity?**

I don't feel tension so much between my faith and my sexuality, more so between the institution and my sexuality.

I have gone through discernment for ordination but unfortunately because of the way the church is currently situated it's not really a conversation that I can have and I received advice that rather than



hazard a lengthy (and expensive) process of instruction to ordination it'd be more prudent to pip the inevitable rejection at the post.

From a cultural perspective it can be trickier. Being Samoan is an interesting one because of the very visible third gender we have in our culture.

The fa'afafine presence within our culture is very ancient, but now it sits alongside a very conservative fundamentalist Christian perspective that supports some rather patriarchal views. It's a complex environment and it's really more cultural baggage than religious baggage that affected me when I was younger.

As a child in Samoa there were elements of that visible fa'afafine culture I identified with and elements I didn't identify with. I've been asked to join a fa'afafine associations by expats here but I don't identify as fa'afafine. Having said that, I'm also not going to be offended if you call me fa'afafine, as I consider us to be part of the same community. And decriminalisation in Samoa, which is still an ongoing thing, requires the community to work together.

For those who don't understand what fa'afafine means, basically it translates to 'like a girl' but really it's a spectrum. There are what we'd call in this culture cis gay men and transgender women who present in many ways and they may all identify as fa'afafine—or rather the community claims them. In Samoa it's less about how I identify myself and more about how the community identifies me.

For lack of a better term there is the 'female' version which translates to 'like a boy' and again there may be those who dress in a more masculine way or may have transitioned or identify as men and they may be part of this community.

I guess having that identity as an option in Samoa has made it easier for some people to find their own tribe. But I think the community in Samoa needs to find its voice. Interestingly, the Prime Minister of Samoa is one of the patrons of the national fa'afafine association there.

But in my view the fa'afafine association needs to start thinking broader and, dare I say, more politically. Decriminalisation needs to be a priority. That and undoing some of that damaging colonial legacy. At its best, our culture is all about leaving no one behind. There needs to be room for all of us at the table.

### **Do you have any advice you would give your younger self?**

Worry less!

I was always so worried about being perfect and therefore anxious about my body, sexuality and faith and now looking back I created a lot of unnecessary grief for myself.

Allow yourself the freedom to make mistakes. We all have this fantasy that we emerge into the world fully formed and that we're meant to know everything. It's ludicrous.

On a more practical note, you don't need to accept every social invitation you receive. Not every invitation is honour, although some are. Find good people and keep them close. Constantly keeping up with the Joneses will exhaust you emotionally and financially.



\*A term RMIT uses interchangeably with LGBTQ+ and stands for Diverse Genders, Sexes and Sexualities.