

The Gay Divide

No issue is as divisive among Christians as homosexuality. The stories told here aren't about people who make headlines.

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They aren't the leaders of the conservative or liberal factions. They aren't the ones turning church conventions into war zones.

These are the people who get lost behind the debates over policy. They're the ones wounded in the battle over Bible verses.

Homosexuality isn't just an issue to them. They live it.

The endless fighting over the issue hurts them. But they're also bruised by the silence.

Some believe that God says homosexuals are people of sacred worth but same-sex relations are wrong. They have the weight of Christian tradition on their side.

Others say it's time for tradition to change. Some of them suffer openly, some secretly because they differ with church teaching.

Faith has led these Christians down different paths. But each has a common plea to churches.

Be compassionate. Be loving. Reach out.

These are people whose stories are seldom heard. They share them with great fear of backlash.

But their hope is to bridge understanding. Here are their stories:

The church closet

He's a gay Protestant pastor in North Texas. If he came out publicly, he'd lose his job. He's fearful that will happen anyway.

His denomination teaches that God loves homosexuals but frowns upon their sexual activity. Abstinence is the only acceptable lifestyle, it says.

This pastor has never been in love with another man.

"I was 36 before I'd even get together with other gay people," he said. "It was scary just to let some other gay person know that I was gay."

It took him a long time to realize his sexual orientation. In grade school, then high school, then college, he waited for attractions to women to kick in.

They never did. He was devastated when he realized he was gay.

"I was pretty much into biblical literalism," he said. "My whole understanding of homosexuality was that the Bible said it was sin."

When he felt called to seminary, he figured God would "fix" him.

"If it's so wrong, so horrible and so against God to be gay, then God will certainly change me before calling me to be a pastor," he said.

Not until his fourth and final year did he realize his sexual orientation wasn't going to change. Maybe it wasn't supposed to, he thought.

He found books that caused him to rethink Bible passages used to condemn homosexuals. He also discovered that many homosexuals weren't promiscuous - a prevalent stereotype in churches.

"It came to me in prayer that I was called to ministry, not in spite of my homosexuality but, in part, because I am a gay man," he said.

But getting to that point was a lonely, isolating process. It only grew more intense after ordination.

He lives chastely by choice, not because of church law. He hopes to fall in love someday and live in a monogamous relationship with complete sexual expression.

Being gay has made him a more compassionate minister, he said. Still, he seldom has breathed a word to anyone about his inner turmoil.

He doesn't feel safe doing so, especially in his denomination.

"If people knew who I really was, they would despise me, let alone fire me," he said. "I've lived in constant fear that it may all end because of church policy."

A Teen's Tale

Her father is straight. Her mother is gay.

He says homosexuality is sin. She says it's blessed by God.

Each side uses Scripture to sway Wynndee Thiessen.

"My dad's family says the Scriptures were written by God, and homosexuals are going to hell," said Wynndee, 16, of Fort Worth.

"My mom says the Scriptures were written by men who put their own beliefs and opinions into it."

Wynndee is pulled both ways.

She lives with her mother, Deedra Wynn, 36, the three children whom Ms. Wynn had by artificial insemination, and her mother's partner, Tammy Alford, 35.

They attend the Cathedral of Hope, a mostly gay and lesbian church in Dallas. Wynndee said she likes it because no one is shocked her "parents" are lesbians.

"I can talk about it and not worry that kids are going to beat me up at the dumpster afterward," she said. "People will be friends with you, and it's not scary."

Her father's family lives in Oklahoma and attends a Pentecostal church that teaches against homosexuality.

"You can't talk about homosexuality because everybody thinks it's a sin," Wynndee said.

Three years ago, Wynndee declared that she was a lesbian. Both sides of the family were skeptical.

"I felt she was trying to please us," said Ms. Alford, whom Wynndee calls her stepmother. "I discouraged it because it's such a tough life."

Wynndee's persistence changed her mind. But Wynndee's grandmother is convinced it's just a phase.

"I think she was taught that lifestyle," said Pat Thiessen, 61, of Eakly, Okla. "I pray God will send her a Christian friend to insulate her against the evil she's surrounded with."

Wynndee's mother and stepmother have been together nearly 12 years. As former Baptists, they said they're sensitive to the mixed messages that Wynndee hears.

"We assure her that God loves her as we are," Ms. Wynn said.

"I tell her God blesses sexuality," Ms. Alford said. "It's a gift to be celebrated."

For Wynndee, God is like the lava lamp in her bedroom.

"Everyone who looks at it sees something different," she said.

A Parent's Story

His is a parent's anguish. His only son is dead.

A decade has passed, but the pain is as sharp as ever.

When word came that his son lay dying in a California hospice, Len Layne hustled to catch a plane. But he was told not to come.

His son didn't want to see him. For years, his son had been angry with him because he couldn't endorse homosexuality.

"I couldn't tell him what he wanted most to hear," said Mr. Layne, 88, of Fort Worth, "that a gay lifestyle was acceptable."

Dudley Layne died of complications from AIDS in 1990 at age 43. He didn't allow a family funeral. His friends scattered his ashes.

"The last time I talked with him, he told me he had made peace with God," said Len Layne, a retired United Methodist pastor.

But the son never made peace with his father.

Dudley was 18 years old when he burst into his parents' bedroom and told them he was gay. He sobbed. They sobbed. They held each other tightly.

"It ripped us open," said Len Layne, now a widower. "From that night onward, we constantly sought God's help."

He bought a shelf of books on homosexuality.

"They told me that homosexuals can't help it," he said. "There's no need to try to talk them out of it. What you have to do is love them."

He tried to love his son unconditionally, without condemnation. It wasn't enough. The tension grew.

"I never knew what my son expected of me," he said. "I couldn't, in good conscience, tell him I approved of his lifestyle. But I never rejected him, either."

He hopes others find a lesson in his story. He pleads with the gay community not to hate the church.

"You are part of the church," he said. "Please don't push away Christians who cannot bless your lifestyle."

He also says churches must do more to welcome the gays and lesbians who fill their pews.

"They're people. They're not going to contaminate us," he said. "We must love them every bit as much as God loves them."

His words were muffled by tears. A long silence passed.

"Our lives were drenched in pain," he said. "There are other parents sitting in the pews right now hurting just as bad."

After so many years, his grief is still a gaping wound.

"He's still my son," he whispered. "I've never stopped loving him."

Finding a home

It's said that Sunday morning worship is the most segregated hour in America.

Gays and lesbians go to their churches. Straight people go to theirs.

David Allen tired of the divide.

Two years ago, he quit a mostly gay church that he had gone to for years.

"I just got tired of everything being about being gay," said Mr. Allen, 41, of Dallas.

So, how does an openly gay man choose a church?

Most mainstream churches don't ordain gays and lesbians, or bless their relationships. Mr. Allen didn't put much weight on official policy.

"I looked for a church that accepted me," he said. "I wanted a family."

He tried other gay churches at first.

"More gay rhetoric," he said.

Then he tried black churches.

"The services were so long."

He found a home in a small, multi-ethnic United Methodist congregation less than two miles from his home.

"Most people are white," he said. "But there are blacks and refugees, straight people and gay people. You have all ages."

He likes the mix.

"Everybody is very accepting," he said. "If I felt the members were against me, I would leave."

Not that he knocks gay churches. They're important, he said, particularly to people struggling with their spirituality and sexuality.

And without those churches, he might never have found faith.

A decade ago, Mr. Allen didn't attend church. Then he joined a tennis league at a gay church and became curious about the worship.

He initially went to worship because of the friendships that he formed. Then he discovered a spiritual hunger and stayed for eight years.

But as he grew in faith, he longed for a broader message.

"Week after week, it seemed like the sermons were always about homosexuality," he said. "What got to me was that sometimes they tried to make characters in the Bible out to be gay."

He has found a home in mainstream Christianity by ignoring his denomination's policy battles over homosexuality.

"I had to weigh what's important," he said. "My local family is sufficient."

A New Outlook

Randy Thomas used to be a party-happy gay man.

He frequented gay bars. He dated men. He balked at religion.

It's not just his thinking that's changed today.

He says his sexual orientation has shifted, too.

"I could be married and have children someday," said Mr. Thomas, 33, of Arlington. "For now, I'm choosing abstinence."

He said that before his orientation changed, he first had a spiritual conversion.

"I invited Jesus into my heart and immediately felt peace," he said.

But the homosexual attractions didn't stop.

That has been a 10-year journey aided by Living Hope Ministries in Arlington, an outreach of Exodus International, the largest of the ex-gay organizations.

The ministry teaches that homosexuality is a sin that can be overcome.

"In Jesus, we find the freedom to change," Mr. Thomas said.

He said he became aware of his homosexual attractions at age 10. By the time he graduated from high school, he was immersed in the gay culture.

"I heard pro-gay theology, and I heard Jerry Falwell," he said. "I thought that's all there was to Christianity."

He ran from Christianity because he thought it meant condemnation. At Living Hope, he said he found healing.

Today, he's a Southern Baptist and director of Living Hope.

The ministry's approach is criticized by those who don't feel sexual orientation can be changed. They point to Exodus chapters that closed after leaders returned to a gay lifestyle.

Mr. Thomas is aware of the criticism but says he knows firsthand there can be freedom from homosexuality with Jesus.

"A lot of times people want to portray us as simpletons or right-wing fanatics," he said. "We are people with particular convictions, trying to live out our lives as peacefully as possible."

As his faith grows stronger, the temptations grow weaker, he said.

"The temptation still comes from time to time," he said, "but it doesn't have any power over me. I don't miss it. I don't want it. I don't long for it."

Nowhere to go

Lynn McCreary came out to her church.

Then she found herself without a church.

Everything changed four years ago, when she began to think of herself as a lesbian. She was 41 years old and had never dated.

She said she finally knew why.

"It's a whole lot better being honest with yourself," she said.

She said she had good reason to feel safe telling her church. She was a founding member, a lifelong United Methodist and a dedicated Sunday school teacher.

United Methodists affirm homosexuals as children of God but teach that same-sex relations are sinful. Ms. McCreary, who doesn't have a partner, views the teaching as a double standard.

"To me, that's like God playing a trick on you," she said. "To say you can have these feelings but not act on them is not consistent with the way I understand God's love."

Her troubles started three years later, after the leadership changed at her church, Trinity United Methodist in Denton. Sunday school teachers were asked to sign an affirmation to live by the denomination's beliefs and "highest ideals" of the Christian life.

The word "homosexuality" wasn't used. But Ms. McCreary said she was told by a church staff member that she had to remain celibate to continue teaching.

It felt like a slap.

She said she was made to feel suspect, all because she had shared an intimate discovery about herself.

"It's not right that we have to fear coming to terms with who we are," she said.

The Rev. Steven Davis said the affirmation had nothing to do with homosexuality.

"Everyone is welcome at our church," he said. "The question is how do we help people who disagree with teachings on homosexuality understand that there is still a place for them."

The church backed down after Ms. McCreary's protests. But the hurt never went away, and she left the church.

She tried a nearby Presbyterian church that welcomes gays and lesbians, but it didn't feel like home.

"I'm a born-and-bred Methodist," she said. "It's my identity. That's very important to me in connecting to the church."

But in her city, she has nowhere to go.

Caught in the middle

Like many pastors, the Rev. Harold Rucker is caught in the middle.

He's tugged in one direction by those in his denomination who affirm gay couples and in another by those who condemn them.

"Years ago, pastors weren't put in this position," said the caring ministries pastor at First United Methodist Church in Richardson.

He tries to follow his denomination's strict teaching on homosexuality and still minister to gays and lesbians who turn to him.

At times, it feels impossible to do both.

"Personally, I do not feel comfortable in a homosexual situation," he said, "but I never turn anybody away. Nor do I use those situations to condemn. I don't see Christ doing that."

His church draws 2,500 people to weekly worship. It's a mostly white, middle-class, heterosexual congregation.

Some parents who seek his counsel don't see their gay or lesbian children's sexuality as an issue. Church policy bothers them.

Others struggle to accept their children. Pastor Rucker says he counsels them to love their sons and daughters as children of God.

"Some Protestants would have kittens if their kids married a Catholic, or certainly a Muslim," he said. "I counsel parents upset about their kids' sexuality just as I would any other parents who had children not living the life they wanted for them."

He supports his denomination's stance against ordaining noncelibate homosexuals and blessing same-sex unions. But if the policies changed, he said, he would try to support them.

"Many people would leave the church, but I wouldn't," he said.

He said he welcomes gays and lesbians to church, though he doesn't condone their sexual activity. His goal is to model Jesus' love without being strident.

"When they come to the Lord's Supper, I serve them Holy Communion just like everybody else," he said. "That's between them and God."

Years of debate over homosexuality have fractured United Methodists and other denominations. Pastor Rucker is sick of it but sees no end anytime soon.

"Every year, the battle just gets uglier," he said. "It's definitely the hardest thing. You have people pulling you on either end."

The greatest taboo

Some Protestant churches make a point of publicly declaring that homosexuals are welcome.

Bethany Presbyterian Church in Dallas was nearly half gay and lesbian when a straight Hispanic group asked to join them three years ago.

Rosa Alfaro, one of the Hispanics, said she had never been around openly gay people before.

"Homosexuality is taboo in our community," she said. "Families feel ashamed. They don't talk about it."

Bethany's gay and lesbian members also were hesitant.

"We were a congregation where people felt safe holding the hands of a partner during worship," the Rev. Todd Freeman said. "People needed assurances that wasn't going to change."

A quarter of the Hispanics left.

"They said they didn't want their children around gay people," said Pastor Daniel Alatorre, the associate pastor, "or they were afraid people would think they were gay."

And some didn't approve.

But Mrs. Alfaro and her family stayed. Two years ago, when her brother died of AIDS, she thinks she received more compassion than she might have at other churches.

"People who reject gays and lesbians don't know them personally," he said. "When you see them as people, you see what good hearts they have."

Pastor Alatorre said gay Hispanics and their families - even those at other churches - seek his counsel because he's at Bethany.

His attitude toward homosexuals changed in seminary. A Hispanic man was dying of AIDS, but his family or church wouldn't visit.

"It wasn't right," he said. "The Bible says to love your neighbor."

Bound for life

"Dearly beloved, we are gathered here in the sight of God ..."

The ceremony was under way. It looked just like a wedding.

Fresh flowers. String quartet. Ave Maria.

The grooms, dressed in gray tuxedos, swapped nervous smiles.

Scriptures were read. A sermon delivered. Rings exchanged.

And in the end, a kiss.

It was a February afternoon at the Cathedral of Hope in Dallas, one of the few spiritual places where gay and lesbian couples can exchange vows of commitment.

The church calls it a holy union because couples can't legally wed. But to Larry Robertson, 35, and Patrick Petillo, 42, of Grapevine, this was their wedding day.

"The only difference was that no one was fitted for gowns," Mr. Robertson said.

Many Protestant denominations are embroiled over whether to allow the ceremonies. Most teach that the Bible only sanctions heterosexual marriages.

"Other churches will say gay and lesbian people are people of sacred worth, but they won't bless their relationships," said the Rev. Michael Piazza, cathedral senior pastor.

During the ceremony, he spoke about the story of David and Jonathan as biblical evidence for same-sex commitments.

"We're not talking about sex," he said, "but they were people of the same gender who entered a sacred covenant."

The 40-minute ceremony was witnessed by 125 guests - friends, co-workers and three Catholic priests from out of state.

Mr. Robertson said he didn't invite his parents "out of sensitivity for their struggle" with his sexuality. Mr. Petillo's parents flew in from New Jersey.

"It was beautiful!" Patrick's mother, Joan, said afterward. "I hope that people become more open-minded and accept the lives that God gives people."

The Grapevine couple, both Catholic, fell in love more than a year ago. They aren't allowed to wed in their faith tradition, but a Catholic priest said he co-led the ceremony "as an act of pastoral care" despite church prohibitions against officiating.

"It's not every day you stand up and commit every bit of your life to someone," Mr. Petillo said.

"We could have done it on a mountaintop," Mr. Robertson said, "but we wanted it in a church because we have such deep feelings about our spirituality."

Celibacy brings peace

Faith was as important to Tracy Hummel as breathing.

But finding himself attracted to men was crushing.

How could he love God and have homosexual feelings? How could God possibly love him?

In college, as a Baptist, he tried to suppress the feelings. But he eventually tired of the struggle.

He went to gay bars, then felt empty and ashamed after sexual encounters. He prayed harder.

His searching led him to a mostly gay church that told him God blesses monogamous gay couples. That didn't fit his view of Scripture.

"It sounded nice, but deep down I felt I had to choose between God or the gay lifestyle," said Mr. Hummel, 41, of Hurst.

He became a Catholic and in the church discovered Courage, a support group that teaches people with homosexual attractions to live chastely, whether single or married.

He says he's finding peace as a celibate man.

"I have sexuality, but that doesn't mean I have to perform sexual acts," he said. "Jesus didn't, and he was truly a man."

Courage doesn't pressure participants to change or deny homosexual attractions. But it encourages them not to identify as "gay," "lesbian" or "homosexual."

"We teach people to be chaste out of a love for Christ," said Father John Harvey of New York, founder of Courage.

He said homosexuality is a "condition" that can be controlled through spiritual discipline. His approach is sanctioned by the church but criticized by Catholics who approve of gay relationships.

Mr. Hummel attends weekly Courage meetings - a time of prayer and sharing led by Father Mark Seitz of Waxahachie.

"I see a radical honesty in their desire to live a holy life," Father Seitz said.

"He keeps reminding us that saints are not made overnight," Mr. Hummel said. "It's a journey, and we have to keep pressing on in faith."

Mr. Hummel said his prayer life has deepened. His sexual attractions have waned and no longer have the power they once held.

"I used to hope that God would perform a miracle and I wouldn't have these feelings anymore," he said. "Now I feel God's mercy and his presence more than ever."