

## **The Shades Of Change: Same-Sex Relationships—A Personal Journey**

I used to be a gay-basher.

Faggots, dikes, and insults far worse—this was how I identified people who were 'different' than me, who disturbed what I considered the natural order of things. How could these people see themselves as normal? How could they expect to be considered equal to the rest of society?

My questions quickly turned to angry and ignorant statements. I spouted the Bible. They were deviants, I would say. They were sinners. They needed to be cured. And when my friends joked that all the "homos" should be crammed onto a faraway island, I laughed right along with them.

In university, I remember reacting violently to courses that tolerated gay and lesbian activists in class, or challenged the heterosexist ideas of social theorists. I used to cringe when they would speak out in class. They had no right to try and fit into a social order that had taken so long to create. My hostility toward these people grew. When a young man was pitched over the Chateau Laurier Bridge in my third year at Carleton, I felt almost vindicated. That startled me—imagine feeling good about something like this. How did that happen? How did I become so filled with hatred and malice?

Did I lack awareness about who I was sexually? Was it because I was socialized in a heterosexist environment? Was I influenced by our culture's perception of "norms", and by a religious tradition that advocated the idea of love as a union between a man and a woman for the purpose of procreation?

I realized, eventually, that all those things had played a part.

My ignorance fed on itself, perpetuated itself, and my limited community endorsed it. But I had stopped listening. My reality wasn't real. I had built a safe, comfortable wall and cut myself off from the truth and the love of God. I was reciting the Bible, but I had forgotten what the gospel was saying.

I am not sure how I came to be where I am today. Everything did not change with one, solitary experience. It took many, over years, and some I probably don't even remember.

However it happened, today I believe that we, the people of the church, systematically exclude people because of their loving relationships. We act contrary to the grace of God. In a society torn with broken relationships (we) the church force(s) people to lie about their relationships, to conceal them, even to be ashamed of them. In order to include those people, to step outside this false reality, I believe (we) the church now need(s) to endorse loving relationships that fall beyond the traditionally sanctioned "marriage".

In 1992, at the worship service for the opening of seminary, I ran into someone I had not seen for years. He was an individual who played a part in my decision to come to Seminary. While I attended youth gatherings in my high-school years, I had considered him to be "a good pastor." I admired his leadership style and the way he paid attention to the youth. He always had time to talk, and he was never condescending. I felt I was being treated like an equal.

But after the service, he stood alone on the sidewalk, looking uncomfortable. He had left the ministry, I knew, because of his sexual orientation. No one talked about it. No one was talking to him. Clergy circulated in the crowd, gossiping, catching up. But he stood about twenty feet away smoking a cigarette in silence, uncertain whether he was welcome. Out of about 100 people, only

three approached him—a retired member of the clergy who did not know he was gay, a professor and myself. Other people noticed him, but only waved or wove around him. This image of the so-called Christian community will never leave me; it was my first month of seminary and already I had begun to question how—and who—defined it.

In the spring of 1995, after being engaged to be married for two years, I went to live with my fiancé and start my first unit of CPE. Things were pretty tense. My relationship had been suffering from too much geographic distance. I was starting a difficult period of study at one of the oldest psychiatric facilities in North America—Centracare. Within the first two weeks of the program, my parents sent me a letter encouraging us to get married because of a recommendation distributed by the Bishop's office in the Synod Notes that May. The recommendation read as follows:

Any candidate seeking ordination within the ELCIC or ordained pastor open for a call living in a relationship outside of marriage, will not be eligible for ordination or the call process respectively.

My parents' concern seemed justified. This recommendation did apply to me. It consumed me. IPR sessions in my CPE course were laden with my anxiety about this statement. My fiancé and I spent countless hours discussing the implications, exhausting our emotional energy on something that really didn't help two people who were trying to stay together given spending seventeen hundred kilometers apart for eight months of the year.

My anger returned. This time it involved me personally—my fiancé and I were the ones being excluded. The only thing that the church had to say—in three, bureaucratic lines—was that my five-year relationship was wrong.

During my internship in October 1995, while greeting people on their way out of church one Sunday morning, I remember welcoming some new faces and asking the couple to sign the guest book. The book was never signed. When I saw them the next Sunday, I jokingly told them that if they didn't sign the guest book I'd be fired. They signed it but left out their address, phone number and last names. I still couldn't contact them. Two Sundays later, after having gone to Fredericton to spend my week off with Erin, I saw Mikala and Sandy<sup>1</sup> again. Before I could speak, they apologized to me for not attending church the previous week. Assuring them that they hadn't committed a great sin, I told them that I had missed the service too because I was visiting my fiancé. They looked at one another and then back at me with the unified reply—"And Pastor doesn't look down on that sort of thing?" I just smiled and asked them to hang around for a while. After everybody had gone through the receiving line, I asked them when they might be home that week for a visit. They gave each other another look. I assured them that their living together wouldn't be in the bulletin next week. Mikala picked up on my cue. Sandy was from the Roman Catholic tradition, she said. He was worried how his priest—let alone his family—would react if he knew about their living arrangement.

After a number of visits, Sandy and Mikala attended a small group on getting to know about Lutheranism. Today, they attend church regularly and Mikala is now an active member of the internship committee. They were wed together one year later. I cannot but wonder whether they would have left the church otherwise?

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<sup>1</sup>Sandy and Mikala are pseudonyms.

Most people have an easy time relating to heterosexuals living together before marriage. It brings the definition of "marriage" or accepted relationship into question. While we say we can relate to the exclusive nature of "marriage" rites for heterosexuals, we don't do anything about it. With silent voices we continue to reinforce the heterosexist attitude that unless two people are legally joined they have not arrived at a place where society accepts them. For some this is an option, for a growing number of people it is not. Relational patterns in society are changing. People in relationships other than the traditionally sanctioned "marriage" now constitute 63 percent of the people in Canada. These are people involved in same-sex relationships, engagement, common-law relationships, and friendship. (Brehm: 1992, 411) It is obvious that we have moved beyond one so-called normative type of relationship as defined by marriage in the ELCIC. We can no longer assume that the "correct" form of "marriage" or relationship is eternal and unchanging in the experience of Christians.

There will never be a final form of "marriage." It will go on changing. There is no ideal "marriage" nor is it the purpose of this current debate to find one. No matter how inclusive the definition of "marriage" becomes it will always end up being exclusive. Creation has a way of making life dynamic not static. I think the Bible talks a little about this. Defining "marriage" is not the answer. How we respond to loving relationships as Christians is. Searching through tradition, history and experience, in thought and action will help us to embody a response that is gospel centered.

If I understand the freedom that Christ gave us in creation properly, and that in redemption God made us a part of Christ's body, then it surely means that Christ is present in this world through the people who respond to Christ in faith which leads to a full and spontaneous life of love. If God loves us as we are, then we are called to love others as they are. If we don't have to become something else to be loved by God, then we should not expect others to change in order for us to love them. If God's love does not exclude, then our love ought not to exclude.

WE are called to live God's inclusive love. This means action. How we do action is important. Action - listening, learning, living and doing—is a way of searching through to a deeper understanding of who we are individually which informs our response to others.

I believe people living in loving relationships outside heterosexual marriage have been excluded, silenced and made invisible in the church because of the church's narrow view of what it means to be in a loving relationship. By adopting a more open view of relationships and sexuality, and remembering the incarnational nature and reality of Christian love the church will become more inclusive and stand as a truer image and embodiment of the gospel.

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