

One Family's Story

Reverend Paul W. Egertson, Ph.D.

Lutheran Pastor currently serving as Bishop of the Southern California West Synod, Evangelical Lutheran Church of America

What do you say after someone you love says, "I'm gay?" That's the question our family faced a decade ago when the oldest of our six sons told his mother and me that he is homosexual. That's the question many congregational families will face in the future as more and more of their lesbian and gay members muster the courage to publicly share what they have privately known to be true for years.

I share our family story here, not because it is unique, but because it is a typical account of one way parents respond to the discovery that a child they both love and admire is gay. It is offered with the prayer that it can be helpful not only to other families, but also to our church family as we seek together a place to stand in relation to a reality that will not go away.

Step 1: Deny It

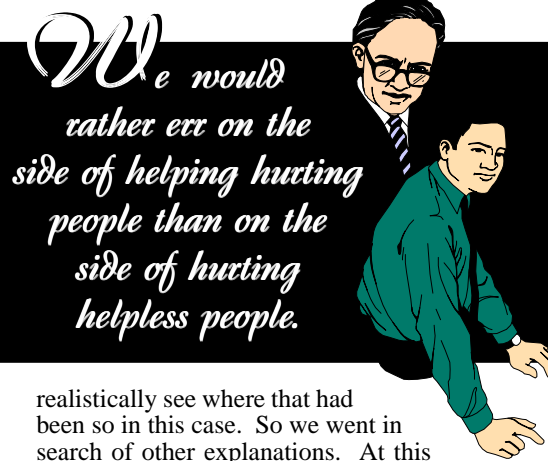
Looking back, we can see six steps on the road we have traveled. Upon hearing the news our son brought us, our first step was to *deny it*. Admittedly, we knew very little about homosexuality at the time. After all, what was there to know? God created people male and female for the purpose of reproducing the human race and provided marriage as the proper setting for it. Sexual activity between people of the same sex was obviously a distortion of nature prohibited by both Scripture and common sense. What more does one need to know than that?

While we knew very little about homosexuality, we knew a great deal about our son. He didn't fit the image we had of a homosexual at all. He had been a delightful child to raise: bright as a whip; multi-talented; self-directed and self-disciplined; honest and ethical to a fault; helpful and caring toward others. He graduated from high school with honors and from California Lutheran University with highest honors. Beyond that, he was a devoutly Christian young man, planning to enter the ordained ministry like his grandfather and father before him, not out of some pressure to maintain a family tradition, but out of a deep inner sense of call. In other words, he was about as perfect a child as any Christian parents could hope for in a world where nobody is perfect. If

he thought he was gay, he must just be going through a phase of some kind and "when the right girl comes along" he will resolve it. In the meantime, let's all keep our heads and not panic.

Step 2: Explain It

When we could no longer deny it, we sought to *explain it*. How had this fine young man become gay? What caused it? Our state of ignorance was such that only two options seemed possible. Either he had chosen a style of life in contradiction to nature and the will of God, or his mother and I in our parenting had unknowingly contributed to a perverted development of his sexuality. Either his mother had emasculated him by smother love or I had been a weak, ineffective and/or too much absent father. Since we could not convince ourselves that this highly ethical boy had suddenly chosen a deviant style of life, the fault must have been our inadequacy as parents. We explored that explanation for a while but, self-serving as the conclusion was, we could not



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realistically see where that had been so in this case. So we went in search of other explanations. At this point our education began.

We learned that there are several theories on the causes of homosexuality; that they stand in conflict with each other; that none of them can be sufficiently established to produce a consensus; and the only certain truth at this point in time is *that nobody really knows*. The fact is that across time, nations, races, cultures and classes, a consistent percentage of persons in all populations just are homosexual and the fault cannot be laid at anyone's feet.

Step 3: Fix It

When we could neither deny it nor explain it, we then sought to *fix it*. There were two options open: divine intervention and psychological therapy. As a devout Christian who knew from early childhood that something


was very different about him and who suspected from adolescence that this difference was something unacceptable to God, our son had devoted himself to prayer and trust in the grace and power of God. Preachers said God loved all people unconditionally and could change persons who came to him with a broken and contrite heart. So for years, night after night in the privacy of his closet, he took his broken and contrite heart to the throne of grace. But God did not change him. Did that mean he was so defective that even a gracious God did not love him? What else is a teen-age mind to conclude? (Preachers, beware! Some people believe what you say.)

Since divine intervention failed, perhaps psychological therapy could succeed. So we pursued that, only to discover that most psychiatrists and psychologists had long since come to the conclusion that homosexuality is not an illness and that no known system of treatment can change it. Homosexual behavior can be changed by conditioning toward celibacy, but the inner affectional orientation of constitutional homosexuals is not changed. And that was the issue for us, because sexual activity was not the problem. In short, there was no known way to fix it. The best that therapy can do is help gay and lesbian persons accept the reality of their being before the socially imposed shame of it and the personal pain of it drives them to despair, drink, drugs, or death by suicide, all of which it does daily to numerous persons in our world.

Step 4: Mourn It

When you can't deny it, explain it, or change it, the only thing left is to *mourn it*. Parents have two choices at this point, and both of them involve some form of death. On the one hand, you can choose the death of rejection and separation from your child. You can say, "If that's the way you are, you're no son of mine." You can cut off relations as though the child never lived or as though the child has died. That's an option many parents have taken and an option many congregations have taken in response to their lesbian and gay members. But quite frankly, that was never an option for us because we could not believe this son we knew so well was in any sense a perverted person.

The other option is to suffer the death of your own ignorance, prejudice, opinions, attitudes and misunderstandings. Then you mourn the loss of a nice and tidy worldview in which everything fits neatly into boxes of black or white, right or wrong, true or false. And you mourn the loss of security provided by a few biblical passages that can tell you which is which so you don't have to take the

 *Continued on the next page*

Family Fellowship

Family Fellowship is a volunteer service organization, a diverse collection of Mormon families engaged in the cause of strengthening families with homosexual members. We share our witness that gay and lesbian Mormons can be great blessings in the lives of their families, and that families can be great blessings in the lives of their gay and lesbian members. We strive to become more understanding and appreciative of each other while staying out of society's debate over homosexuality. We seek to put behind us all attitudes which are anti-family, which threaten loving relationships, and which drive family members apart. All who can support these goals are welcome to contribute to this newsletter. However, the views expressed here belong only to the individuals who express them.



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responsibility for making a judgment.

Along with those losses goes the death of your hopes and dreams of ordinary happiness for your child, particularly as that comes through the joys of marriage, children and a life approved by family, friends, church and society. And in our son's case, there is also the probable death of any hope for ordination into the ministry to which he has always felt called by God, unless he is willing to sacrifice for it all experiences of human love expressed through physical intimacy.

During the process of mourning, his mother and I came to realize how close we were to shifting the focus from our son's struggle to our own. That final form of death for parents is to recognize that their pain is secondary to their child's suffering and to take up their role as supporters of the life they brought into the world, the life their child has to live out in the world. When that happened for us, the question became, "How is he handling this in terms of his own life, health and happiness?" It is his problem, not ours. He doesn't need us to increase his struggle by making the problem our own and then looking to him for a solution.

Step 5: Accept It

When he came to the place where he could accept the reality of his sexual orientation as given, we were able to take the next step and *accept it*. It was at this point that we remembered one version of the Serenity Prayer: "Lord, give us the serenity to accept what cannot be changed, the courage to change what can be changed, and the wisdom to know the difference."

For us that has come to mean the acceptance of something in the being of our son that neither we nor he would have chosen, something neither he nor we can change. More than that, it has come to mean seeking change in those things which can be changed, namely the attitudes toward and understandings of homosexuality that remain dominant in both church and society. For we have come to realize that the biggest problem in being gay is not the gayness, but the reaction of heterosexuals to it. And we want to join with those who seek the ways of healing and wholeness at this point of pain in our world.

As parents, we are grateful to the pastors and members of St. Francis Lutheran Church in San Francisco, where our son experienced that gospel of reconciliation in both word and action through which the Holy Spirit has kept him "united with Jesus Christ in the one true Faith." It is our prayer that every Lutheran parent or gay or lesbian children can some day have the assurance that their children will encounter that same gospel acceptance in any Lutheran congregation they may attend.

Step 6: Celebrate It

At this juncture on our journey we have taken a sixth and final step: *celebrate it!* Where you end up on this journey depends on what you think homosexuality is. To what may it be rightly compared? Your answer to that will finally determine the place you will stand.

At least four options are open for consideration:

First, you might say that homosexuality is a conscious and defiant rebellion against the laws of God and nature. In that case, it is simply sin and our only proper response is the

announcement of God's judgment, the offer of grace, and a call for repentance. But is that what homosexuality is?

A second option is to say that homosexuality is an illness like alcoholism, where behavioral activity brings the bondage of addiction that only total abstinence can break. If that's the case, then clearly celibacy is a sufficient solution to the problem. But is that what homosexuality is?

A third option is to say that homosexuality is a tragedy of nature, something never intended by God and contrary to his will, but something that happens regularly in our world nonetheless. It is one more demonstration of the effect of the Fall in the world. In that case, it is like mental retardation, a condition for which the victim is not responsible, which cannot be changed, but something we can never call good. If that's what it is, then shouldn't we treat homosexuals with the same compassion and understanding as we grant to others who innocently suffer as victims of a broken world? Then shouldn't we make special rules for them so that life can be as full as possible within the limits of their deformity? When people have no legs, we provide wheelchairs as substitutes and set aside special parking spaces which are illegal for others to use but permitted for them. Could we provide homosexuals with a substitute structure for marriage that would allow them the personal fulfillment that comes through sanctioned committed relationships. But is that what homosexuality is?

Finally, we might say that homosexuality is one of the varieties of nature, one of those delightful differences that regularly appear in counterpoint to the ordinary norm. In that case, it is like left-handedness, a minority condition in a world where most people are right-handed and a few are ambidextrous, but a natural variation that has its own contribution to make to the wholeness of the world. There was a time when people considered left-handedness so deviant that it had to be punished or changed. But in trying to force that change, we discovered the same thing we're finding with homosexuality now: attempts to change them don't change them but only cause more serious problems. Once that was clear in regard to left-handedness, we were freed to discover some positive benefits southpaws offer the world. Professional baseball teams, for example, value them highly. In fact, you can't win a championship without some lefties. Is that what homosexuality is? If so, we can celebrate it as a gift of God.

Unfortunately, there are no experts right now who can answer our questions or tell us which of the above options will turn out to be true. All we can do is digest the best information available from scientific research and search the Scriptures for what they do and don't say, praying that the Spirit will lead us into all truth. In the meantime, we all walk by faith and run with risk. Each of us will place our own bet and be responsible for it. As for me and my house, we're putting our money on the *celebration* line. We would rather err on the side of helping hurting people than on the side of hurting helpless people. May God have mercy on us. 🙏

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A Father's Perspective

David Richardson, Ph.D.

We were thrilled beyond words with the birth of our sixth child, a boy. We loved and adored him and nicknamed him "The," which stood for The Perfect Boy, The Wonderful Boy, The Brilliant Boy, The Righteous Boy. Then as he approached his 19th birthday, having never shown any hint of being gay, he "came out" to us. He had been depressed for several weeks while attending the University, and his mother kept pressing him for the reason until he finally broke down and told her: "I think I might be gay."

Rather than following my wife's example of accepting our beloved son's shocking announcement with calmness, patience, and resignation, I launched an all out campaign to "save" my son. Never in my life had I felt the slightest sexual attraction to anyone of the same sex, so I could not believe it could happen to my son whom I called "The" — The Very Elect. Also I could not believe he would consider himself gay because (unless one twists the meaning) the Bible clearly condemns homosexuality, modern prophets condemn it, laws of the land condemn it (sodomy), and ideal nature condemns it — the greatest possible diversity, the greatest possible range of thoughts and feelings and insights for a human being comes through union with a person of the opposite sex, not with a person of the same sex no matter how wonderful that same-sex person might be. Believing otherwise was to me a fulfillment of the scriptures: "Even the very elect shall be deceived." Armed with these powerful arguments, I launched an all out battle to save my son.

For one "bright" interlude during the "Dark Ages" which followed, I accepted the view that homosexuals were "born that way and cannot change." How I wanted to believe that! How good it felt to believe that! Neither I nor my son could be blamed in the slightest for his feelings! Such relief! Now I would not have to feel guilty that I had not been a better father, and he would not have to feel guilty that he had not resisted more diligently and conquered homosexual temptations.

Then one day my comfortable belief system came crashing down: I read in the newspaper (and later verified it in scientific journals) that twin studies had shown that in 50 percent of the cases, one twin was *not* homosexual even though his identical twin was homosexual. My peaceful world suddenly shattered because, if homosexuality were strictly genetic, why wasn't each twin homosexual if his identical twin were homosexual? Obviously environment and choice do play a role after all as to whether a person becomes a practicing homosexual. Obviously homosexuality can be learned (consciously or subconsciously) after all, and if it can be learned, it can be unlearned, difficult though it may be.

For about four years I brought to bear my full resources and capacity as a Ph.D. in a

technical scientific field: I read, listened, discussed, and weighed the evidence on both sides of each homosexual issue. My research included dozens of books at universities in Utah, Virginia, and Wisconsin, attending symposiums for and against change, and discussions, conversations, and debates with gay people, therapists, psychologists, etc. This intense research unearthed a mountain of evidence that homosexuals can and do change to heterosexuality — both in their sexual practices and their orientation. Some of this evidence is presented in a book I compiled titled *Coming Out of the Fires of Homosexuality and Homophobia* by Dr. Howard Rawlins (pseudonym), available in Deseret Books stores, Sam Wellers, and Evergreen International. For example, therapists report success rates of 33 percent, 50 percent and 60 percent of homosexuals who underwent therapy. Follow-up after six years showed a success rate of 71.6 percent for 67 homosexuals and 14 lesbians (Masters and Johnson, *Homosexuality in Perspective*, Little and Brown, Boston, 1979, p. 402). I learned that therapy is not 100 percent successful in treating homosexuality any more than therapy is 100 percent successful in treating alcoholism, drug addiction, obesity, depression, pedophilia, criminal behavior, etc. I learned that some gay people would be much happier if, through proper therapy, they moved from a 5 or a 6 on the Kinsey scale down to a 1 or 2, meaning that they still might occasionally feel a homosexual attraction but they would not let it interfere with their heterosexual or celibate sexual preference.

I also found that experts which are frequently quoted by pro-gay writers have made statements which support the fact that sex behavior and orientation can change: "This is not to say that

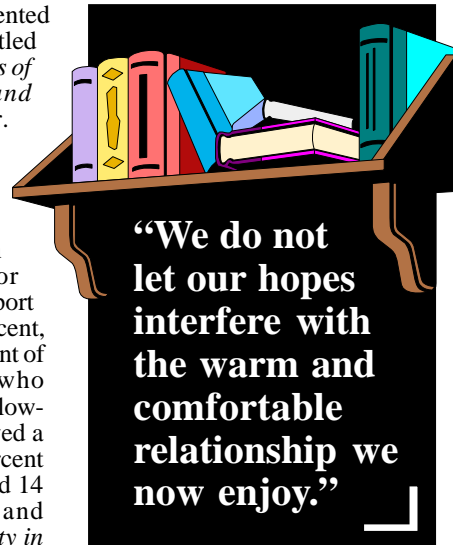
all men maintain the same sexual orientation during their entire lives, nor that all changes in sexual direction occur early in life." (Dean Hamer, Ph.D., *The Science of Desire*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1994, pp. 53, 54, 63)

Whenever I think about it, I feel sick at heart over the way I treated my son during those terrible "Dark Ages," and wish I could undo the harm it caused. At last, at long last, I abandoned my misguided battle to save my son. The terrible burning anguish which drove me so relentlessly to save him was finally relieved by a priesthood blessing by my bishop followed by Boyd K. Packer's talk in General Conference quoting Joseph Smith and Brigham Young that wayward children will return some day, in this

life or in the next — if the family has been sealed together and if the parents perform valiant service in the Cause of Truth. The wayward children will have to pay the debt to justice and suffer for their sins, but they will return. (See *Ensign*, May 1992, pp. 66-8.)

Now because of the blessing I received and these inspired and comforting words of early modern prophets, reiterated and emphasized by a present day apostle of God, I am at last truly at peace, and my son and I have fun together again. We laugh

and joke and talk about good times and can even talk pleasantly about homosexuality without either of us becoming hurt or cold or condemning. We are able to do this now because we both have changed. We have both accepted the likelihood that neither of us will change our fundamental beliefs about homosexuality, but have resolved not to let our disagreements about the subject stand in our way any longer. We are once again able to relate to each other in love, friendship, affection, and admiration despite our differences of opinion. Each hopes the other will change, but we do not let our hopes interfere with the warm and comfortable relationship we now enjoy. That is the way it should have been all along. 🙏



All should understand that persons (and their family members) struggling with the burden of same-sex attraction are in special need of the love and encouragement that is a clear responsibility of Church members, who have signified by covenant their willingness "to bear one another's burdens" (Mosiab 18:8) "and so fulfil the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2).

Elder Dallin H. Oaks — *The Ensign* / October 1995

Family Service

The entries below list some ways that families and family members are reaching out to each other, sharing their experiences, and holding their families together. This space is provided for anyone to report on and advertise activities that share the goal of strengthening Mormon families dealing with this issue, regardless of what organization the activity may be sponsored by.

Utah County Forum Firesides January 14 and April 21, 1996

— Mildred and Gary Watts, Provo

The last Utah County Forum was held on Sunday, January 14th at the Utah Valley Regional Medical Center.

We had a very interesting and informative program. Six different books and one recent study of gay youth at risk were reviewed. The books presented were: *A Place at the Table, Born That Way?, Stranger at the Gate, Same-Sex Unions, Virtually Normal, and The Family Heart*. The reviews were all excellently presented by parents of gay children and the study was reviewed by LaDonna Moore, L.C.S.W. After the meeting a light buffet was enjoyed. It was a great time to meet new people and visit with good friends.

Two members of the Salt Lake City School Board will be speaking at the next Forum scheduled for 5:00 on Sunday, April 21st at the Utah Valley Regional Medical Center.

Diversity Is Great February 10, 1996

— Claire Malmstrom, Lehi

Gary and Mildred Watts were the deserving recipients of the "Diversity Is Great" award recently. Lynnette Malmstrom, L.C.S.W., presented the award to Gary and Millie on February 10th at the U S WEST Communications Building during the Diversity Is Great 1996 Recognition Banquet. This prestigious dinner is an annual event to honor organizations and volunteers for their outstanding efforts in community service. Diversity Is Great is sponsored by several groups including PFLAG.

Parents Conference May 3-4, 1996

— Marv Peterson, Farmington

Family Fellowship is sponsoring a parent conference on May 3rd and 4th to be held at the Doubletree Hotel in Salt Lake City. The seminar theme is: Reconciliation Through Understanding. The co-chairs for the event are Dick and Renee Van Wagoner and Marv and Geneva Petersen. They, along with their committee, are working hard to ensure a comfortable, rewarding and enriching experience for all who attend.

The keynote speaker will be Dr. Roger A. Gorski, Professor and Director, Laboratory of Neuroendocrinology of the Brain Research Institute at UCLA. His address will present a broad appraisal of where science stands in 1996 on the etiology of homosexuality.

Other events of the seminar will be a talk given by Gary M. Watts, M.D. titled, "Mugged by Reality," a question and answer session with Dr. Gorski, a panel discussion titled,

"Reconciliation: Dealing with the feelings"; eight optional workshops on (1) Homophobia and anti-gay rhetoric, (2) Sharing personal stories, (3) How my perspective has changed, (4) The morality of homosexuality, (5) Participation in public policy discussions, (6) When parents come out, (7) When our lesbian daughter came out to us, (8) Out in every aspect. Following the workshops — back by popular demand — we will have the personal stories session from last year. The speakers this year will be Tom Mathews, Wayne Schow and Kathryn Steffensen. The seminar will conclude with an open mike session.

A block of rooms has been reserved for participants of the Family Fellowship Seminar. In order to receive the special rate of \$74 for a room with one or two occupants (\$10 for each additional person), your hotel reservations must be made by April 3rd. Call the Doubletree Hotel at (801) 531-7500 or (800) 222-8733.

The seminar fee will be: Single/Full Seminar — \$45, Couple/Full Seminar — \$80. This will provide each participant with the Friday evening dinner and the Saturday morning brunch and access to all meetings. Snacks and beverages will also be included. The fee for attending just the keynote address is \$10. The keynote address will be Friday evening at 8 p.m. Please send your check or money order to Gerry Johnston, Seminar Registrar, 965 E. South Union Ave. #60, Midvale, UT 84047. Questions? Call Gerry at (801) 568-1141.

Gamofite Retreats

April 26-28 and May 31, June 1-2, 1996

— Robert Olsen, Baltimore, MD

A retreat for Gamofites, Gay Mormon Fathers, will be held April 26-28 in Washington D.C. The theme of the weekend is Living Courageously — Loving Creatively. A workshop on communicating about life's most difficult issues will be facilitated by Mormon psychologist Dr. Roy Musick, specialist in marriage and family counseling. Frank and Carol Mensel of Family Fellowship will facilitate another workshop on loving creatively to strengthen family ties.

Other activities will include a formal dinner at historic Union Station, talent show, games, singing, walking tour of nearby national monuments, and jogging on the Washington Mall.

The emphasis will be on strengthening friendships made at the last eastern retreat and creating new friendships to provide support in living courageously and loving creatively. For more information or to register contact:

Robert Olsen
2809 Boston Street #131
Baltimore, MD 21224
Phone: (410) 732-3497

For more information about
Family Fellowship write to:
P.O. Box 9451
Salt Lake City, UT 84109
Phone: (801) 374-1447

The Utah Gamofite Retreat will be held May 31st through June 2nd. For more information, contact Sean at 226-5232.

Reconciliation

— Duff Dazley, Salt Lake City

The purpose of Reconciliation as a whole is to provide a safe haven for gays, their families and friends to meet together in a spirit of understanding and love, to study and discuss the gospel of Jesus Christ. There are six chapters; Idaho Falls, Pocatello, Logan, Ogden, Salt Lake City and Provo. We meet in each other's homes to discuss the gospel. Provo meetings are a little different and deal with personal reconciliation issues and challenges.

Reconciliation was organized in 1990 by a gay man, a friend of his and his parents in Idaho Falls and Pocatello. Later, in 1991, a Salt Lake City chapter was created by a gay man. In 1993, Ogden was organized by parents and Logan was organized by a gay man. In 1994, Reconciliation merged with The Legacy Foundation of Provo. We are experiencing a great deal of success and realize there is a great need and room to grow.

We have found that parents and other family members are key to the magic that occurs at our meetings. Whether the biological members of your family are there in person or not we all come away a little bit healed from having associated, shall we say, by proxy, with them. We are learning from each other on a higher level than mere intellect. We share in each other's spirit and experience in a real way, each other as whole people. Although our topics are not about homosexuality, (with Provo being the exception) it generally comes up since we are all affected by it. We do not moralize people's behaviors or lives nor do we solicit changes in people's sexual orientation.

Our purpose is to focus on loving each other and building each other spiritually. We leave judgement of each other at the door and to the Lord. All who are interested in participation in gospel discussions in a spirit of peace and harmony are not only invited, but encouraged to attend any of our meetings. We generally meet Sunday evenings. A list of contact numbers for more information about meeting times and locations are found below.

Idaho Falls: 208-523-0399

Pocatello: 208-233-4906

Logan: 801-755-0493

Ogden: 801-786-1322

Salt Lake City: 801-254-2559

Provo: 801-373-0515

If you wish to be on our mailing list please write to:

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P.O. Box 1501

Salt Lake City, UT 84110-1501

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