



Safe Places

Newsletter

<http://www.buildingsafeplaces.org/>

November 2014

We hope this finds you well and with more gifts than challenges in your life. In **Voices of God and the Church** Reinder Bruinsma begins a two-part article comparing earthly laws and Heaven’s spiritual/legal principles. Reinder has been a pastor, president of both the Dutch Union Conference and the Belgium conference, General Conference administrator, Sabbath School lesson writer, guest lecturer at universities, blog author, and voice in the Adventist church for decades. He hails from the Netherlands and earned a Ph.D. in church history from the University of London. He and his wife, Aafje, who translates books, have two grown children.

Our **News Note** reports on a new book by David Gushee, an evangelical ethicist.

Because this is an international newsletter, this month we chose to include a study from Nepal on sexual minorities in our **Research** section. It can be very easy to look at issues through the lenses of our own cultures. One of the gifts of Adventism is the call to view the world with “bigger” eyes and hearts. Because we Adventists focus so much on our children and their education, we’ve included an overview of studies about how transgender parents are doing as they work to bring up their children.

Our website, buildingsafeplaces.org, is where we collate resources as we find them. This month in **Resources** we’re introducing some work being done with hate crimes, building understanding, health and aging, and religion and faith. We are utilizing the work of two organizations with different histories but similar foci. To quote its home page, the Southern Poverty Law Center was founded in 1971 and “is dedicated to fighting hate and bigotry and to seeking justice for the most vulnerable members of our society. Using litigation, education, and other forms of advocacy, the Center works toward the day when the ideals of equal justice and equal opportunity will be a reality.” *The Human Rights Campaign* is a civil-rights-focused organization working to end discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people.

In **Voices of the Heart** we’re continuing our series of video interviews as well as written ones. Sakiyah lives in the southern United States and works in human services with children of multi-problem families.

As always, you are most welcome to share this with anyone who might find *Safe Places* helpful. If you are getting our newsletter as a gift and would like to receive it regularly, you can access it on the front page of buildingsafeplaces.org. If you have questions, compliments, suggestions or concerns or if you would like to discontinue receiving this newsletter, you can reach us at info@buildingsafeplaces.org.

We wish you gentle blessings,

Catherine Taylor and the Building Safe Places Team:

– Frieder Schmid, Ingrid Schmid, Dave Ferguson, Floyd Poenitz, and Ruud Kieboom.



Norms of the Kingdom

Every denomination—including the Seventh-day Adventist Church—must have a set of laws or rules. Together, we determine how we organize a local church, a local conference, or any umbrella organization. Most church members will agree that a denomination cannot do without some sort of “church manual.”

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Surveying Nepal's Sexual and Gender Minorities

In a recent survey of sexual and gender minorities in Nepal, over 60 percent of respondents reported experiencing at least one incident of abuse or discrimination, and over one-third reported discrimination or abuse in three or more public settings.

Transgender Parenting: A Review of Existing Research

The authors of this report reviewed 51 studies that analyze data about transgender parents.

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David Gushee, leading evangelical ethicist, affirms same-sex relationships

David Gushee, a Distinguished University Professor of Christian Ethics at Mercer University, a Baptist college and divinity school in Georgia” will announce “that he now affirms same-sex relationships

[Read more on page 8](#)

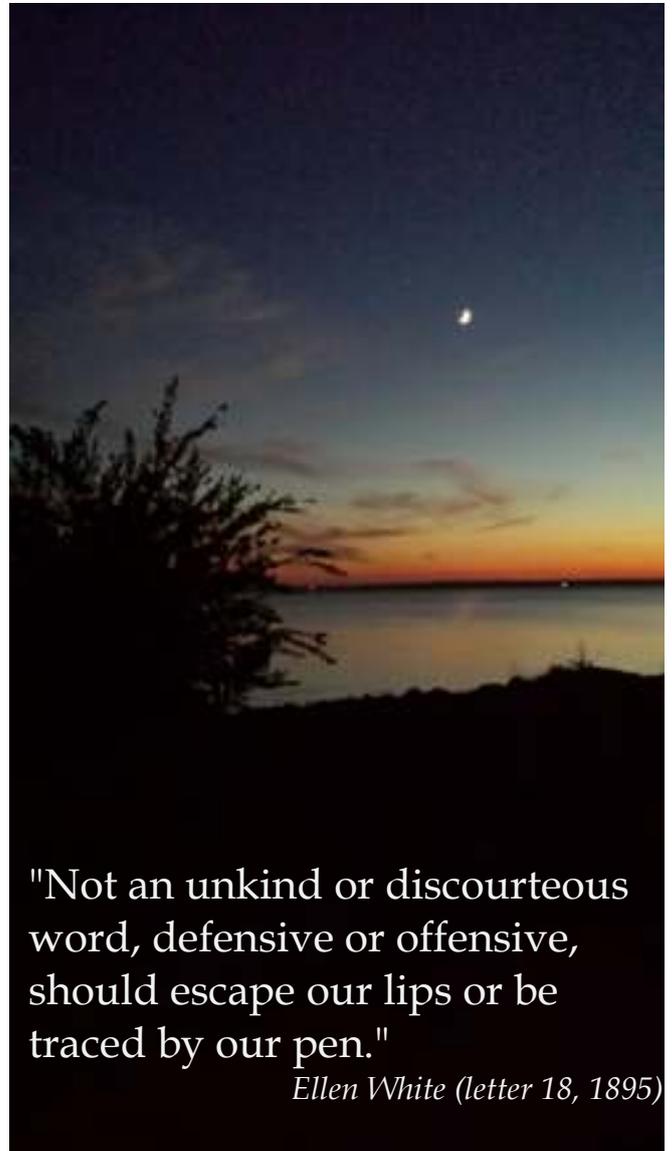
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Sakiyah

I was baptized into the Seventh-day Adventist Church when I was 18.

I immersed myself in church and all the activities connected to being Adventist. I tried not to dwell on, or even think about, my attractions to women; but they were with me every day.

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"Not an unkind or discourteous word, defensive or offensive, should escape our lips or be traced by our pen."

Ellen White (letter 18, 1895)

Norms of the Kingdom



By Reinder Bruinsma

I have no idea how many laws exist in the United States of America. I have done a little research for my country, the Netherlands, and found that there are 1,750 laws, 2,400 government directives, and 6,700 official guidelines. In addition there are, of course, numerous regional and local ordinances. In theory, every citizen is supposed to know all 140,000 articles of these laws and directives. In actual practice and many instances, we need experts to explain our legal necessities.

While most laws appear quite reasonable, some are antiquated and bizarre. In Scotland we are not allowed to shoot anyone with a bow and arrow on Sunday. In France it is forbidden to name your pig Napoleon. In England it is illegal for you to die in the parliament building. In the Netherlands there is a law, never enforced, that you may not play bingo in a senior citizens' home. Most of us feel there are far too many rules. The majority of citizens in EU countries are adamant that Brussels should not regulate people's lives in the way they do.

Organizations, as well as countries and cities, need rules. A school needs class schedules, dead-

The rules of the kingdom

Now, enough about human rules! I want to focus on a set of rules that is found in one of the most well-known passages in the Bible: the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7 and parallel chapters). In this famous speech Jesus established the norms for the kingdom of God. He explained that his followers have a dual identity. They may be citizens of a specific country here on Earth, but they are also citizens of the divine kingdom. This is not an ordinary political and/or ethnic unit. The realm of God's rule is *now*, in the present. But it is also *future*. It has to do with everything *around us*

and outside us, but it is also *within us*. It requires nothing less than total loyalty; yet, it requires nothing but a foundation of love.

The kingdom of God has laws. It might be better to say it has fundamental principles. Those who want to belong to the kingdom are defined as "they who keep the commandments and testify of Jesus" (Rev. 12:17). If you want to know *how* these saints keep the commandments and how they testify of Jesus, check the Sermon on the Mount!

lines for homework and term papers, and certain norms as to what constitutes acceptable behavior. A political party must have rules that cover how it will choose its chairperson and draw up a list of candidates for election.

I live in an apartment. I must abide by the stipulation that I cannot have a satellite dish on my balcony. Nor can I organize a barbecue on that same balcony. There are certain requirements about demanding a kind of flooring that will not transmit unwanted noise to the people who live below us. I am quite happy with most of these rules and also expect my neighbors to stick to them.

Every denomination—including the Seventh-day Adventist Church—must have a set of laws or rules. Together, we determine how we organize a local church, a local conference, or any umbrella organization. Most church members will agree that a denomination cannot do without some sort of "church manual."

In general, one might say: *Without rules chaos is sure to result*. I imagine the majority of us even agree that it is wise to decide how to enforce these rules and how to discipline offenders.

While we obey the laws of the land where we reside or hold citizenship, as Christians we also abide by another system of norms—the norms of the kingdom. These have the highest priority. I remember Jesus’ words, “*Seek ye first the king-*

The rules are different

Not all laws of my country benefit me. Earthly laws regulate a lot of things; they also fail to deal with a great many others. In my country, I am allowed to do many things that are detrimental to me. It is often said that our civil laws have their basis in the Ten Commandments. Those Commandments may be the basis of, but are not completely reflected in, earthly legislation.

I can freely trespass almost all of God’s commandments without any interference from the state. The laws of the land allow me to have other gods. I may freely fill my house with Buddhas and statuettes of the Virgin Mary and may spend all day praying to them. When I use swear words nothing will happen to me. I am free to break the Sabbath and spend all day in a shopping center or wallpapering and painting my house on the seventh day. No one forces me to honor my aging parents; I do not get a fine when I neglect to visit them in their old people’s home. I can steal the honor that is due to someone else. I am not

A spiritual set of rules

We must not repeat the Pharisaical practice of following the principles of God’s law by meticulous external conformity. **God’s law is not primarily a legal document, but a spiritual one.** This difference has to do with who and what God is and who and what He wants us to be and become. The law is not given with the primary purpose of avoiding punishment. Here in Matthew 5:17-46, Jesus provides some examples as to how ancient Hebrew laws form the backbone of the norms of his kingdom.

¹⁷ “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. ¹⁸ For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. ¹⁹ Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever

dom...” (Matt. 6:33). The special thing about the norms of the kingdom is that they are norms of a different kind of world. In fact, they are the norms of heaven—norms that are to benefit and to bless us.

allowed to kill, but what about character assassination? I can sleep around without being arrested. I (and most of the rest of humanity) can tell lies without any interference from the police. I can, with impunity, be jealous of the BMW or the Jaguar owned by my neighbor. I am free to break the laws that protect my spiritual and physical health. As long as I do not decide to drive a car, I can drink as much alcohol as I want. I am free to eat junk food every day of the week. Nobody stops me from going to a casino. If I become addicted to gambling, that is simply my problem.

Jesus explains, *All of this is different in God’s kingdom.* He tells us, *If you conform to the norms of my kingdom, it will always be for your own good. It will always benefit the people around you. It will be a blessing for society and it will be a joy for God.* Jesus explains further, *These laws are not new. God’s law has been in existence from the first day of creation. It is an old law, but not one letter has lost its validity.*

practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰ For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.

²¹ “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ ²² But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.

²³ “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.

²⁵ “Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still to-

gether on the way, or your adversary may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. ²⁶ Truly I tell you, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny.

²⁷ “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ ²⁸ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ²⁹ If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. ³⁰ And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.

³¹ “It has been said, ‘Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.’ ³² But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery, and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

³³ “Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not break your oath, but fulfill to the Lord the vows you have made.’ ³⁴ But I tell you, do not swear an oath at all: either by heaven, for it is God’s throne; ³⁵ or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. ³⁶ And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. ³⁷ All you need to say is simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.

³⁸ “You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ ³⁹ But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. ⁴⁰ And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. ⁴¹ If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. ⁴² Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.

⁴³ “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor, and hate your enemy.’ ⁴⁴ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. ⁴⁶ If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? ⁴⁸ Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Among the many examples listed above, you will note that Jesus says, you are not to physically murder another person **and**, with deeper significance, you are not to dislike another person, wish anything unpleasant to happen to them, or speak to them in a way that denigrates them. All of these behaviors constitute a path of spiritual murder.

When I was preparing this article, I found a striking anecdote: Two shop owners hated each other with a vengeance. They fought bitterly for the custom of people in their part of town. Each kept a close watch on the other, all the time trying to do all to lure customers away from their rival. As the story goes, one night, an angel appeared to one of the shop owners. He said: *I will give you whatever you ask. But be aware, I will give your competitor twice as much. So, if you want to be rich, your wish will be fulfilled. But your competitor will be twice as rich. Just tell me, what will it be?* The man had to think for a moment. Then he said: *Make me blind in one eye.* Why did he have this strange wish? It would admittedly be a handicap for him, but it would totally eliminate his competition!

This story illustrates the way we often deal with each other in our everyday world. The kingdom of God is much different. Citizens of that kingdom turn the other cheek instead of hitting back twice as hard. Citizens of that kingdom do not attempt to eliminate their enemies; they wish them well.

As you also read above, Jesus condemned adultery, and then went on to the secret focus of our hearts. In a paraphrased way, I hear Jesus say: *Being loyal to your partner means much more than not sleeping with someone else. It concerns the direction of your thoughts and secret fantasies. In My kingdom, if you cherish the thought of a little fling with someone other than your partner, you have committed adultery.*

It did not surprise the listeners on the Mount when Jesus said, “*You should not make it a habit to swear.*” Remember this when you hit your thumb with a hammer. As with the other principles, He didn’t stop at the surface. “*You should not connect the name of God with things that have nothing to do with Him.*” Digging deeper it means, “*You should not engage in pious talk in an effort to manipulate people and push your own opinions.*”

The principle is clear. God's kingdom demands a new mentality, a mentality of caring for one another with pure and unselfish motives. It demands a renouncing of all forms of violence. It

requires a mentality of love. It requires of focus of forgiveness.

Next month I will discuss our response to this law.



Recent Research

Surveying Nepal's Sexual and Gender Minorities

In a recent survey of sexual and gender minorities in Nepal, over 60 percent of respondents reported experiencing at least one incident of abuse or discrimination, and over one-third reported discrimination or abuse in three or more public settings. The research methodology and study was implemented through the Williams Institute and the Blue Diamond Society (BDS).

The survey utilized Nepal's inclusion of a third gender category in its national census, the first such attempt in the world. The survey reveals that LGBT people in Nepal continue to face a wide range of obstacles as individuals and as a commu-

nity. These challenges include widespread bullying in schools, lack of protection from discrimination by employers, paucity of programming to address the reproductive health needs of lesbians, and the lack of sensitive HIV healthcare for transgender women and gay men who are at exponentially higher risk of HIV infection than the general population.

Link to full report:

<http://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/Nepal-Survey-Oct-2014.pdf>

Transgender Parenting: A Review of Existing Research

By Rebecca L. Stotzer, Jody L. Herman, Amira Hasenbush
October 2014

The authors of this report reviewed 51 studies that analyze data about transgender parents. This report reviews the existing research on the prevalence and characteristics of transgender people who are parents, the quality of relationships between transgender parents and their children, outcomes for children with a transgender parent, and the reported needs of transgender parents. Overall, the authors found that substantial numbers of transgender people are parents, though at rates below the U.S. general population. The vast majority of transgender parents report that their relationships with their children are good or positive, including after "coming out" as trans-

gender or transitioning. Based on their review, the authors recommend further research on the many facets of transgender parents' lives, including research on the impact of discrimination on transgender parents and their families. Increased data collection and research will lead to a fuller understanding of the experiences and needs of transgender parents and their children.

Link to full report:

<http://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/transgender-parenting-oct-2014.pdf>

I'm an evangelical minister. I now support the LGBT community — and the church should, too



By David Gushee

For Christians, the LGBT debate has always been framed as a question of sexual ethics. Our argument has centered on six or seven biblical passages that appear to mention homosexuality negatively or appear to establish a heterosexual norm: the sin of Sodom, the laws of Leviticus and the list of “the unrighteous” in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10. For most of my career, these ideas formed the foundation of my views and teachings as an evangelical minister and professor of Christian ethics. I co-authored a popular textbook that stated this position flatly: “Homosexual conduct is one form of sexual expression that falls outside the will of God.” I wasn’t mean about it. But I said it.

In recent years, my moral position has shifted. It has dawned on me with shocking force that homosexuality is not primarily an issue of Christian sexual ethics. It’s primarily an issue of human suffering. With that realization, I have now made the radical decision to stand in solidarity with the LGBT community.

Working through this issue has taken me back to the very roots of my faith.

In 1978, when I was a hopelessly confused 16-year-old ex-Catholic kid, I stumbled into a Southern Baptist church near my Virginia home. I was looking for something — anything — to make sense of life. Four days later, I was a newly minted born-again convert. I was attracted by the vibrant faith, moral certainty and loving spirit of the people I met in that church. My life was transformed. By 1993, I had been ordained in a Southern Baptist church and received a doctorate in Christian ethics from Union Theological Seminary in New York.

Union Theological Seminary is a school in the liberal Protestant tradition, though at the time I remained firmly anchored as a Southern Baptist. But I was initiated into an ethical tradition that revered those very special human beings who stood against majority opinion in their era to follow God and conscience, as they understood was required of them — come what may. Teachers like Glen Stassen of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (later Fuller Seminary) and Larry Rasmussen of Union taught me about Nazi Germany and the Holocaust, the silence of most “good” Christians amid the slaughter of the innocents, and the few, great resisters such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a hero to these mentors and to me.

Studying race and black theology in a context blessed by the presence of James Cone and Cornel West, and hearing about the largely silent white church during the harrowing days of the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s, I came to believe that silence in the face of majority contempt for a minority is just as immoral as direct perpetration of evil. Too often, people are silent when minorities are being victimized, because majority opinion is powerful. It is hard to cut against the grain of your entire culture, and courage is costly.

Since the 1960s, when the gay rights movement began in America, Christians and their leaders have struggled to figure out how to respond to the growing tolerance of same-sex relationships. Most in Christianity have responded by offering endless debates over how to interpret that handful of biblical passages. Books erupted. Congregations fought. Denominations split.

For me, the answer to this debate has become simple: There is a sexual-minority population of

about 5 percent of the human family that has received contempt and discrimination for centuries. In Christendom, the sexual ethics based in those biblical passages metastasized into a hardened attitude against sexual- and gender-identity minorities, bristling with bullying and violence. This contempt is in the name of God, the most powerful kind there is in the world. I now believe that the traditional interpretation of the most cited passages is questionable and that all that parsing of Greek verbs has distracted attention from the primary moral obligation taught by Jesus — to love our neighbors as ourselves, especially our most vulnerable neighbors. I also now believe that while any progress toward more humane treatment of LGBT people is good progress, we need to reconsider the entire body of biblical interpretation and tradition related to this issue.

Put simply, it finally became clear to me that I must side with those who were being treated with contempt, just as I hope I would have sided with Jews in the Nazi era and with African-Americans during the civil rights years. With that realization, I began working on my new book, “Changing Our Mind.”

It is hard to describe exactly why my moral vision shifted in this way. But undoubtedly, it had much to do with my move to Atlanta in 2007 and my growing contact with LGBT people, especially fellow Christians. I hardly knew anyone who was gay before that move, but afterward, they seemed to be everywhere, and a few became very dear friends. It became clear to me — in a deeply spiritual place that I will allow no one to challenge — that God was sending LGBT people to me.

The fact that one of these LGBT Christians is my dear youngest sister, Katey, has made this issue even more deeply personal for me than it would have been. The fact that one place where she developed a deep struggle with her sexuality was in evangelical churches has contributed to my new moral commitment to make evangelical families and churches safe places for LGBT people.

Evangelical Christians, such as Denny Burk and Robert Gagnon, are criticizing me because I’m now “pro-LGBT.” They want to shift the discussion immediately to the debate on same-sex relationships and the proper interpretation of those six or seven most cited Bible passages. I want to move right back to what really matters the most to me — loving this particular 5 percent of the population in exactly the same way that Christians are called to love everyone. That means attending to what most harms them and doing something about it. And that means offering full acceptance of LGBT people, ending religion-based harm and contempt, helping families accept the sexual orientation of their own children, and helping churches be a safe and welcoming place for every one of God’s children. For this reason, I have accepted invitations to contribute to the work of the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention and the Family Acceptance Project.

I am pro-LGBT in just the same way I hope I would have been pro-Jew in 1943 and pro-African American in 1963. I stand in solidarity with those treated with contempt and discrimination. And I do so because I promised in 1978 to follow Jesus wherever he leads. Even here.



Building Safe Places Website

On our website we offer materials on Biblical issues, personal stories, brain research, parenting studies, self-harm and suicidality, building bridges, promoting health, sex, and gender, consultations and trainings, archived newsletters, recent relevant news, etc. We invite you to visit us at any time and to let us know what else would be helpful to you.

www.buildingsafeplaces.org

Hate Crimes

The passage of the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act in the United States sends an important message that some governments will not tolerate violent crimes that target individuals because of their sexual orientation, gender identity, or other characteristics. Passage of the HCPA does not, however, end the need for lawmakers to address hate-motivated crimes that terrorize communities across our world.

<http://www.hrc.org/topics/hate-crimes>

Teaching Tolerance

We know we won't achieve equality and justice through the courts and investigative reporting alone. The future of our great country lies in the hands of today's young people.

That's why we aim to put our legal work and Intelligence Project out of business: We're reaching into schools across the nation with lessons to counter the bigotry and extremism that children hear in the media and even from people who are supposed to be role models. The SPLC's (*Southern Poverty Law Center*) "Teaching Tolerance" program works through educators to nurture a new generation that is more accepting of difference and more engaged in social justice than those that preceded it. We want kids to get along with each other and, just as important, see themselves as global citizens in a diverse society with the capacity to work together for a fairer world.

<http://www.splcenter.org/what-we-do/teaching-tolerance>

Health and Aging

Fear of discrimination causes many LGBT people to avoid seeking care and, when they do get treatment, studies have shown that LGBT people are often not treated with the respect or cultural competence that all patients deserve.

<http://www.hrc.org/topics/health-and-aging>

Religion and Faith

People look to their faith as a source of guidance and inspiration—and LGBT people and our family and friends are no different. The HRC Religion and Faith Program is working to create a world where nobody is forced to choose between who they are, whom they love, and what they believe. Thanks in part to this work, more and more faith communities aren't simply engaging in dialogue around LGBT equality, they're leading the conversation. They do this work not in spite of their religious beliefs but because of them.

<http://www.hrc.org/topics/religion-faith>



Arlene's Story

<http://www.wearesdas.com/#/arlene/>



Sakiyah

Southern United States

I am a fourth-generation Adventist. My memories of church begin when I was eight years old. I lived with my Grandmother in California. She made sure my sister and I attended Adventist Sabbath School and services. I remember lots of children our age. I remember that the church was full of lawyers and doctors. I remember feeling uncomfortable in that setting. The congregation was predominantly black, but split on class issues. My family was not wealthy.

I enjoyed our AY (Adventist Youth) meetings on the beach and the times we played miniature golf. My aunt was an excellent cook. We liked helping her prepare Sabbath dinner and we really enjoyed eating her food.

As a teenager, I knew I was attracted to other girls. I struggled but I did not accept my sexuality. I took Bible studies after I graduated from high school. I believed God would heal me and keep me from thinking about how beautiful girls were and how much I wanted to touch them. I decided this was not an issue because I had no intentions of acting on or even talking about my attraction. I felt bad about my attractions to women and bad about myself because I had them.

I was baptized into the Seventh-day Adventist Church when I was 18.

I immersed myself in church and all the activities connected to being Adventist. I tried not to dwell on, or even think about, my attractions to women; but they were with me every day. I accepted a variety of congregational offices. I tried to be so busy I would not think about my attractions. I married the young man who had given me Bible studies when I was twenty.

Given my feelings about and toward women I knew I should not have married him. We had conversations about how I felt. I didn't feel in love with him. He told me love is not a feeling but a principle. He told me things would be okay. I listened to him and I hoped that I would grow to love him. I had lots of issues in my family and this was a way I could escape. For the most part we got along pretty well. I still love him but I never had the level of intimacy I want with a mate. I was never sexually attracted to him.

In my late thirties I realized I was overwhelmed, depressed, and needed to do something about this internal core of myself. My struggle with my

orientation was coming to a head. I began to talk to my sister. As I described my feelings she looked at me and said, “Well, this is because you are a lesbian.” I looked at her. “Like, really?” But she was right. Even though she is a Seventh-day Adventist she didn’t judge me. She just loved me because I am her sister.

At that time I was a church elder. I prayed hard that God would help me not to act on the desires that I had. I read more. I prayed more. I studied more. I became more spiritual. I was one of the first female elders in my church. Because of my struggles I had wondered if I should become an elder. I knew women in the church would come to me to ask my advice on a variety of topics. I didn’t know what I would do if I became attracted to a woman; but during that time I wasn’t, even though some women made passes at me.

About five years ago I got a tear-filled phone call and request for a visit from one of our church members. She came out to me, told me she had been married to a woman, announced their break-up, and confided that she was feeling hopeless and suicidal. I helped her find hope and resources. She helped me find a group with whom I could share my soul.

This church member hosted a women’s Narcotics Anonymous (NA) meeting in her home. As a help to her, I began attending each week. There were six of us: four lesbians, one bisexual. Because they were honest, supportive, and personally open about all aspects of their lives, the women in this NA meeting helped me to come to terms with who I am. These meetings were the beginning of me accepting my sexuality.

I talked more about my orientation: to the ladies in the group, to my sister, and then, to my husband. I let him know that I wanted to end our marriage. I had been unhappy with several aspects of our relationship, and I had been on antidepressants for years. Though I still have my moments, I have felt better since I left.

Accepting my orientation affected my spirituality. I prayed less, I studied less, I attended church less. I somehow needed to learn where my new place was with God. Through reading NA literature I came to a more thorough understanding of the grace of God. These days I live that grace. Before these changes, I believed that God only did good things for me because I was obedient to the rules laid out for me as a teenage Bible

student. When I turned away from church activities, God was still with me. He still loved me. He still took care of me. I believe in the Sabbath. I believe that Jesus will return. There are many things about the Adventist Church still I believe are true. Along with these foundations, I am still growing in my own faith and my own development. I am grateful that I have a better understanding of who my God is.

The first woman with whom I got involved did not attend church regularly. We had lots of spiritual talks about God. Through these talks, she learned to read and study the Bible. She encouraged me to pray more and to begin to believe that God loves me.

It took me till last year to come out to my children. I worried about how they would feel about me. My oldest son’s only question was, “Will you be saved?” My daughter said she already knew I am a lesbian. That was kind of funny. My youngest son said it was okay and that he loved me. Nothing changed in our relationships. We were always very close. We still are. They even liked and were nice to the women with whom I have been involved.

Going to Kinship’s *Book and the Beach* was a wonderful experience. I was nervous going for the first time. I didn’t expect it to be as spiritual as it was. That was a nice surprise. I felt comfortable. I believe God led me there because this was an experience I needed. I got to spend time with Seventh-day Adventists like me.

I am writing my story with a pseudonym because I am still in the process of coming out to the church. I don’t know if the Adventist congregation I used to attend and serve as an elder knows I am a lesbian. I go to services at another congregation. I am working on attending regularly. Right now I just want to sit and be quiet and not have anyone know who I used to be. I want to have room to listen to God’s voice.

I don’t know the next steps for me. This bothers me because I have always led a very structured life. I had a check list and knew what I wanted to do and when I would do it. I am waiting for God to show me my path and to give me the grace and strength to follow it.

I do believe it is time for us Adventists to be honest and transparent with ourselves and each other. Many families have gay or lesbian members they need to love. In the churches I attended I

knew prominent members who had children and grandchildren who are gay and lesbian. At home they were loving to those family members. In church meetings they acted differently. I believe we should always err on the side of compassion and we should do it wherever we are.

I wish the Seventh-day Adventist Church would embrace the life of Jesus and understand what Christ's priorities would be here on earth

today. I want Seventh-day Adventist leaders to think carefully about the people with whom Jesus would chose to spend His time. I read all of Ellen White's writings and I never saw her write anything about gay and lesbian people. We have been given a command to love. I believe that Christ will not return until we really learn how to love each other. This is the last lesson.

