



Building Safe Places

www.buildingsafeplaces.org

Newsletter

January 2016

Ellen G. White,
Desire of Ages
page 353

Christ himself did not suppress one word of truth but He spoke it always in love.

He exercised the greatest tact and thoughtful kind attention in His intercourse with the people.

He was never rude, never needlessly spoke a severe words, never gave needless pain to a sensitive soul.

He did not censure human weakness. He fearlessly denounced hypocrisy, unbelief, and iniquity; but tears were in his voice.



Dear Colleagues

Here in the Netherlands, as well as other western Europe we have celebrated several December holidays and are now heading for 2016. We know that December can bring both many blessings and stressors, grief and sadness. We hope that you have had time to be with friends and family. We also hope that you have had times of gentleness and peace.

This month, in **Visions of God and the Church**, we are publishing three interactions with Adventism around LGBTI issues. Reinder Bruinsma shares a short response to the Statement of Homosexuality by the Faculty of the Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrew's University. Joachim Deuerling was one of the speakers at a conference of pastors on Homosexuality and the Bible in Hamburg, Germany. Tanja Koppers was a speaker at a Bible Conference on Homosexuality in Hannover, Germany.

We are beginning a new series in our **Research Section** that will cover, at this printing, 55 different topics under the categories of The Brain, Gender, and Orientation.

Many of you already know about PFLAG, the organization previously known as Parents and Families of Lesbians and Gays (under **Resources**), but for those of you who haven't heard of PFLAG, we are sharing their basic programs and contact information. We are also sharing two YouTube videos produced by a millennial about transgender issues and about peoples' reactions to her being gay. We are giving a slight caution before you see them. Since we think there are many ways to learn, we've included an article from a Walla Walla newspaper about *A Gay SDA Play*.

Finally, in **Voices of the Heart**, we are sharing the next portion of Jerry McKay's story...

We at *Building Safe Places* are quite excited about the response to our annual meetings in the Odenwald part of Germany for March 2016. This year there will be three foci:

1. Homosexuality, the Bible, and the character of God

2. Building Bridges: Adventist Communities and their LGBTI members
3. Hearing our stories: Conversations between participants and LGBTI Adventists.

We are just about full; but, if you are interested in attending, you can contact us at info@buildingsafeplaces.org.

As always, you are more than welcome to share this issue of *Safe Places* with anyone you know who might be interested in, or would benefit from, the information included in it. If you have questions, comments, or concerns, you can also contact us at the above address. If you would like to be removed from this mailing list, also feel welcome to let us know.

We wish you many blessings,

Catherine Taylor

and the Building Safe Places Team:

Frieder Schmid, Ingrid Schmid, Dave Ferguson,
Floyd Pönitz, and Ruud Kieboom.



Building Safe Places—For Everyone
Creating conversations to help us better understand and care for the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people in our congregations, our communities, and our lives.

Educational newsletter, small-group meetings, multidisciplinary trainings, multimedia resources.

For questions, requests, concerns, and contacts:
Info@buildingsafeplaces.org

"The last message to this world is a message of God's love, a revelation of His love." —*Christ's Object Lessons*, page 415

In this month's issue

A short comment on the Statement on Homosexuality Page 6

The Seminary faculty Faculty of the Adventist Theological Seminary (Andrews University) is to be commended for their recent statement on homosexuality. They have recognized that same-sex attraction and related issues are not only a reality in the world at large but also in the Adventist Church—a reality that cannot be ignored. We should appreciate the willingness of this group of scholars to address this topic, in spite of a lot of criticism that will undoubtedly come their way (and is already visible in many internet comments.)

Dialogue in Hamburg Page 8

It was not easy to write this response, not because of any difficulty but because it has taken time to realize all this meeting meant to me.

Lots of people have asked me if I thought the meeting was a success, if I think we have reason for hope. I answer yes to both questions. What stands out to me about this meeting is that the pastors asked gay and lesbian people to join them. They wanted to talk with us and ask us questions. All I have ever heard before this meeting was that church leaders wanted to talk *about* us but not *to* us.

Homosexuality “Bible Study” Day in Hannover Page 13

I had been asked to speak for Kinship. Because I knew *Coming Out Ministries* (COM) had also been invited, I was very concerned and nervous as I prepared my talk. I asked Kinship members for prayers and good thoughts. I talked with our ally Karsten who would introduce all the speakers. He was not happy about the decision to invite COM but knew the conference did so to make sure both sides of the story were presented.

Recent Research Page 16

For the last three years we have been republishing a variety of research on sex, gender, and orientation. You have been given or now have access to (in the archives of our website,

buildingsafeplaces.org) much of the most recent research. For the next year we are going to share with you essentially a very tiny alphabetical overview of research in this field, particularly in relationship to the brain

Pflag
Page 18

Your first reaction to learning that your loved one is lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or questioning can range anywhere from anger to sadness, fear to hurt, confusion to grief, and anywhere and everything in between. These emotions and the thousands of others that parents, families, and friends experience as they navigate their loved ones coming out process are normal.

**Play reveals gay
struggle in SDA Church**

Page 22

Bradley Nelson’s “A Gay SDA Play” is coming out at a precipitous time in the Seventh-day Adventist Church as it wrestles with its traditional stance on homosexuality.

Since beginning work on the staged reading piece in 2008, the Walla Walla Valley resident used interviews he conducted over a year to portray the problems “of being gay and SDA” in a world that doesn’t always understand either, he said.

The result is a documentary-style presentation based on more than two dozen interviews that explore the real-life struggle between the Seventh-day Adventist religion —highly represented in the Walla Walla area—and people who come out as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender within its membership.

Journey
Part V
Missionary to Japan
Page 26

I finished high school in 1974 with better grades than expected and more confidence in my academic abilities than when I started. I attribute that to an environment in which I felt safe and content. There was no comparing my years at Kingsway to my first year of high school back home. Graduation, however, did not mean I had to relocate to continue my studies. Because Kingsway offered the first two years of a bachelor in theology, I started my degree in Oshawa that fall.

Visions of God and the Church [1]

**A short
comment on the
Statement on
Homosexuality
by the Faculty of the
Adventist Theological
Seminary (Andrews
University)”
– October 19, 2015.**



By Reinder Bruinsma

The Seminary faculty is to be commended for their recent statement on homosexuality. They have recognized that same-sex attraction and related issues are not only a reality in the world at large but also in the Adventist Church—a reality that cannot be ignored. We should appreciate the willingness of this group of scholars to address this topic, in spite of a lot of criticism that will undoubtedly come their way (and is already visible in many internet comments.)

It is good to note that the paper acknowledges the existence of same-sex orientation as a condition many people have to live with, rather than describing it as a terrible sin they should overcome. It is also positive that the paper creates openings for (some) gays and lesbians to be admitted to church membership, and to church offices and leadership roles.

However, the statement (maybe, not surprisingly) does not fundamentally differ from earlier statements the Seventh-day Adventist Church has published about homosexuality. I will attempt to list a few of the main points with which I have difficulty.

1. Although the paper mentions, in passing, people with “alternative sexualities” and “transgender identities” (page 1), it does not explain any further what is meant by these terms and how the content of the paper is to be applied to other non-heterosexual individuals, apart from gays and lesbians.
2. The well-known biblical passages that condemn (or supposedly condemn) all homosexual activity are reviewed. However, even though there is an awareness of alternative interpretations for a few (or, according to some, for all) of these passages, these alternative interpretations are not discussed in any meaningful way.

3. Those Christians who defend alternative explanations for the “anti-homo” texts in the Bible point out that these texts do not deal with same-sex relationships, as we know them, based on an exclusive and enduring relationship between two men or two women, but with other phenomena (e.g. in the sphere of religious rituals or resembling the Greek-Roman institution of pederasty).
4. Many theologians point out that the Bible does not offer a clear-cut answer to all contemporary ethical issues. Could the question as to how Christians must deal with same-sex attractions and enduring relationships – based on exclusivity and love – be one of these? It is an important question the paper fails to address.
5. The paper points to the Edenic ideal of a lasting relationship between one man and one woman. Even when this is accepted as true, it is clear from the Bible that, in particular circumstances, God has been willing to accommodate the less than ideal (e.g. polygamy, divorce, levirate). It could be argued that the homosexual orientation falls short of the Edenic ideal but is today a condition of a substantial part of humankind, and that God (considering the kind of God he is) might be willing also in this case to accommodate the “less than ideal.”
6. The paper suggests that gays and lesbians who want to fully function in the Seventh-day Adventist Church must decide to be celibate. Is this a reasonable request? The apostle Paul states that, in his view, celibacy by heterosexuals is the preferred option for the time in which he lives, but he realizes that it is a gift that not all heterosexuals possess (1 Cor. 7:1-7). Must we then expect all homosexuals to have the lifelong gift of celibacy?

This is not an exhaustive criticism of the paper by the seminary faculty, but simply lists a few of the main deficiencies I see in it. Yet, let me repeat, the fact that the paper appeared is hopeful. Slowly but surely Adventists are beginning to seriously talk about homosexuality. And that is a huge step forward!

Dialogue in Hamburg

Thoughts on the
German Pastors'
Conference
of September 2015



By Joachim Deurling

It was not easy to write this response, not because of any difficulty but because it has taken time to realize all this meeting meant to me.

Lots of people have asked me if I thought the meeting was a success, if I think we have reason for hope. I answer yes to both questions. What stands out to me about this meeting is that the pastors asked gay and lesbian people to join them. They wanted to talk with us and ask us questions. All I have ever heard before this meeting was that church leaders wanted to talk *about* us but not *to* us.

A pastor I know, who attended the General Conference summit on sexual diversity held in South Africa, told me that Ekkehardt Mueller said, "Conclusions from the philosophy, psychology, and sociology which contradict scripture must be rejected. On top, tradition and science cannot determine the matters of faith. The scripture explains itself. Inside we find consensus, harmony, and clarity... The Holy Ghost is needed for the process of interpretation. He, however, does not take down previous revelation." It encapsulated the general tone, reported to me, that the theologians present talked about a consistent portrayal in the Bible that marriage between a man and a woman started with creation in paradise and should be maintained at all costs.

Because of this stance, data and studies presented by doctors and psychologists presenting a different view were rejected. Theologians speaking at the summit would not shift from their perspectives of Biblical teaching and rejected any other exegetical, scientific, or psychological position.

Because I heard this report from the South African meeting, I was surprised that pastors wanted to dialogue with us, that they wanted to know from us directly what moves us

and how we live our lives. They realized they did not know everything about homosexuality and that they did not have much experience with knowing gay and lesbian people. I found out that at no place in the education of pastors was there room to talk about or ask questions about same-sex lifestyles or relationships. My understanding of the official statements of our church leadership is that “the homosexual human has to be loved and accepted into our community of faith as long as they do not live their homosexuality.” If we live as they do, with spouses and committed relationships, at best we are helplessly excluded from our Adventist congregations and at worst bullied into suicide.

There were pastors and church leaders in my country who were concerned about this dilemma; they organized the Hamburg meeting. One of the first speakers, Carsten, shared his conclusion that the theological attitude of the meeting in South Africa was not promising and possibly crushing to those of us on whom the summit was focused. I am assuming from this that the higher administration of my church will not accommodate those of us whose love is condemned. Carsten said that he refutes the declarations of the conference and felt very out of place there. The pastors in Hamburg agreed.

I appreciated the way Reinder Bruinsma presented current scientific and social insights. He went on to say that pastors need a base of knowledge and experience about those of us who are LGBTI. Carola and I were invited to share our lives and our experiences with faith and homosexuality.

Carola tried to live the life requested by her church. Ignoring her orientation to women, she married a man with whom she has two children. As hard as she tried, it seemed to Carola that she had to deform herself to fit in with the church. She and her family suffered. Many of us know these kinds of circumstances. When I told my story, I concentrated on the time when I realized I was gay, began to come out, and faced the reaction of my church community.

After our talks, during breaks from the meeting, and into the evening we were available for questions and interviews from the pastors. I was told they never heard of SDA Kinship or of HAD, the former name of Kinship in Germany. They had no clue where to find help for themselves as pastors or for the homosexuals they met. The pastors gave more details about their education and how it had not prepared them or their congregations for what to say or do when a brother or sister comes out as gay. Most LGBTI people they met were left alone or told to go to the Bible or told God would help them if they pray. I got lots of questions. Here are some of them:

- Can you at least try to not live your homosexuality?
- Do you really want to be free from it?
- Who is to blame for your homosexuality?
- What role do you have in your partnership?
- Is healing possible if you believe and act right?
- How do you deal with the Bible texts?
- Is it not a twisted sexuality you live?
- In gay social circles, isn't the focus all on being youthful?
- Why do you live in these circles; can you be happy there?

I want to be clear that these questions were not asked to devalue or denigrate me. They were more about "This is what I have learned about homosexuality; what do you have to say about it?"

After our discussions, the pastors began to think so differently that I heard questions of a very different quality.

- How can we deal with the Bible texts?
- How is your life of faith?
- What place does faith and God have in your life?
- Do you feel confirmed and strengthened by God in your life?
- What does your partnership look like?
- What would be your position in the congregation?
- How can your congregation give you a home?

- How can all recover from this issue, congregation and persons concerned?
- If someone says “I am healed,” can we expect this also from others?
- Where is help for a pastor or congregation if they want it?
- What can we tell a gay person about where he can find information and help if he does not find it himself?

All of us have heard these kinds of questions. Some have seen that congregations, pastors, and families are broken by it. We tried to answer all the questions, and in personal conversations the topics could be deepened. Some issues, especially the handling of the scripture, everyone needs to research and to answer for themselves. I did share that my way of dealing with God and faith is founded in personal experience. I, myself, am not able to tell somebody he needs to see the Bible and theology in the same way. For me, as for every heterosexual believer, the priority is a personal relation with faith and God.

I told the pastors about SDA Kinship, *Building Safe Places— for Everyone*, MCC [Metropolitan Community Church], and an interdenominational organization called *Zwischenraum*. I talked about the material and guidance that can be given. I said that pastors and congregations should provide a safe place for homosexuals, knowing that all humankind is broken and in need of a loving God. I reiterated that pastors and congregations can get help from *Building Safe Places— for Everyone* (<http://buildingsafeplaces.org/>).

I ended my talk with this wish: “Please give the gay and lesbian people who are coming to you the chance to find a place where they can be themselves, a place where they can be safe from hatred, rejection, and bullying. If you cannot help, send them to people and organizations who can.”

Two days was too little time to speak about all the relevant topics. That said, they were two amazing days with seekers

who began their way to help people like me. I believe no day or opportunity is wasted. I hope and wish that the 25 people who were at that meeting will share their knowledge and that they will ask questions to the right people. If this happens, then I can live with the scars of the past, with faces and names that are no more in the church or even alive because our church has failed them. It is those people who catch in my throat when I am asked, “How is it possible to be gay, believe in God, and live in a church?” In God, I have an eternal church. I have found an Adventist congregation, which is a home for me, relatives who want to give gay people sanctuary.

God’s blessings for this work.



Pain nourishes courage. You can't be brave if you've only had wonderful things happen to you.

—*Mary Tyler Moore*

Visions of God and the Church [3]

Homosexuality “Bible Study” Day

Hannover, Germany

Niedersachsen-
Vereinigung (Lower
Saxonian Conference)



By Tanja Koppers

I had been asked to speak for Kinship. Because I knew *Coming Out Ministries* (COM) had also been invited, I was very concerned and nervous as I prepared my talk. I asked Kinship members for prayers and good thoughts. I talked with our ally Karsten who would introduce all the speakers. He was not happy about the decision to invite COM but knew the conference did so to make sure both sides of the story were presented.

I appreciated the first two speakers: Rolf Köhler and Mike Pearson. Rolf’s talk focused on the different ways Biblical texts often used to describe LGBTI people could be interpreted. He illustrated the issue that there is not always one way to read or interpret the Bible. He managed to do this without sharing his personal opinion. He was neutral and open. In the open discussion following his talk, Rolf was challenged to share his own perspective but managed to stay neutral. I don’t think it was easy for him, and it seemed that some members of the audience were frustrated because they did not get clear answers on the topic. Rolf had been requested to present in a way that the audience had to decide for themselves. He did a good job.

Mike Pearson chose the topic, “Strangers Bringing Gifts.” His first illustration was not about homosexuality but about refugees and immigrants—and the attitudes toward them and other strangers held by Old Testament teachings and by Jesus. Mike went on to say that homosexuals are strangers in our congregations who bring needed gifts to our church communities. He listed 20 different points, some of them quite radical, to support his premise. I cannot remember them all and hope there is a way to get a text of his talk.

I really liked hearing what he said. I can also understand why some people in the audience shook their heads when

he shared his more radical points. In the discussion time after his presentation, there were more statements than questions. Some members of the audience said the topic is important to them because the lives of friends and relatives have shown them the need to change their minds on this issue. One woman, who was divorced from her husband of 17 years of marriage when he came out as gay, spoke about the need for more openness for lesbian and gay people. She said that they need to have a home in our Adventist community. She said that she wishes no one should have to fear coming out. Her words and her demeanor brought tears to my eyes.

I was the third speaker. Approximately 120 people were in the audience. During my talk, I saw many people nodding. Sometimes I saw tears. I try to respond to an audience from “where they are.” It seemed to work this time. As soon as I stood in front of them, I calmed down and could speak without fear. I could only feel warmth and goodwill from the people in front of me. There was no formal discussion time planned after my talk. The informal break gave a more casual opportunity for me to connect with people. A lot of people came to me and thanked me for my courage to speak so personally. Some told me of their solidarity with me, and some told me of their sympathy. I was asked for the contact information flier that Kinship Germany developed. I hope, of course, that it will reach the people who need the information. There were no critical questions.

The last speakers were Wayne Blakely and Mike Carducci from *Coming Out Ministries*. Both experienced sad childhoods filled with abandonment, abuse, and violence. Both said they are still gay and do not support change ministries. Wayne said that through prayer he came to a celibate way of life. He also shared that this is his way and that it is not necessarily the truth for everybody. He wove his awful childhood and difficult family situation into a construct that original sin is why he is gay. From my perspective, he used badly translated Bible verses and out-of-context quotes

from Ellen White to support his credo. He first stated he did not support change ministries; but, towards the end of his presentation, began to talk about healing. I have to admit I sat next to Mike Pearson and mumbled, “Oh, can’t anybody stop him?”

After the official “end” of the conference, we had some lively conversations. Some people came to me and said the position of the *Coming Out Ministries* speakers did not seem authentic to them. Other participants told me that the COM speakers seem to be trying to blame others for a sexual orientation with which they were born. Perhaps it was their American style with a German audience. Perhaps the audience could see that the stories they shared were not those of people with “normal” lives. My story isn’t normal but more healthy and easier to understand.

Looking back, I believe the conference was well prepared and had an open atmosphere. All of us speakers shared concepts and stories on which the attendees will have a chance to reflect. I hope we opened a lot of hearts.



Whatever you do or dream you can do—begin it.
Boldness has genius and power and magic in it.
—Johann Goethe

Recent Research



By Arlene Taylor

Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome (AIS)

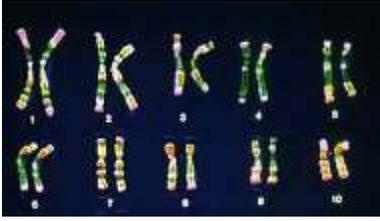
For the last three years we have been republishing a variety of research on sex, gender, and orientation. You have been given or now have access to (in the archives of our website, buildingsafeplaces.org) much of the most recent research. For the next year we are going to share with you essentially a very tiny alphabetical overview of research in this field, particularly in relationship to the brain. In each issue we will share four or five topics. This is the gift of Arlene Taylor, a brain function researcher, who is a familiar and much-appreciated speaker in many Adventist and non-Adventist circles. You can learn more about her at <http://arlenetaylor.org/>. As always, you are welcome to respond to us at info@buildingsafeplaces.org.

The following “brain bits” are from Dr. Taylor’s website at <http://arlenetaylor.org/>.

Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome or AIS is a condition where an individual has male internal organs with a vagina. AIS may be seen in a chromosomally normal male who had reduced sensitivity to masculinizing hormones during gestations. (Seligman, Martin E P., PhD. *What You Can Change... and What You Can't*. p 148-173. NY: Fawcett Books, 1993.)

Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome (AIS) – A congenital condition in which the androgen receptor is nonfunctional, causing affected XY fetuses to develop with the outward appearance of females. (LeVay, Simon. *Gay, Straight, and the Reason Why: The Science of Sexual Orientation*. p 297. NY: Oxford University Press, 1 edition, 2010.)

For most people, heterosexual impulses predominate, although all are bisexual to some degree. (Viorst, Judith. *Necessary Losses*. p 107-109. NY: Simon & Schuster, 1986.)



There are exclusive homosexuals and optional (bisexual) homosexuals. Compares exclusive homosexuality in males with Androgen-Insensitivity Syndrome (AIS) and MF transsexuality. (Seligman, Martin E P., PhD. *What You Can Change... and What You Can't*. p 148-173. NY: Fawcett Books, 1993.)

Androgenital Syndrome (AGS)

AGS is a condition where an individual has female internal organs plus a form of penis and scrotum. AGS may be seen in a chromosomally normal female who was exposed to a bath of masculinizing hormones during gestation. (Seligman, Martin E P., PhD. *What You Can Change...and What You Can't*. p 148-173. NY: Fawcett Books, 1993.)

Androphilia

Androphilia is a term to describe the disposition to be attracted to men; bisexuality to describe the disposition to be attracted to both sexes; and gynephilia to describe the disposition to be attracted to women. Of note: the presence of homosexuality is higher among males; the presence of bisexuality is higher among females. (LeVay, Simon and Janice Baldwin. *Human Sexuality*. p 166-180. MA: Sinauer Associates, Inc., Third Edition, 2009.)

Anterior Commissure

The anterior commissure (one of the three main bridges between the hemispheres) is 10%-12% larger in the female brain and in the brains of homosexual males. (Blum, Deborah. *Sex on the Brain*. p 45-47. NY: Penguin Books, 1997.)





Help for Families, Friends & Allies



available for free. But please also consider joining PFLAG. As a member of PFLAG, you are entitled to support education and advocacy materials whose focus are helping you help your child or loved one.

Get started with your journey now:

- **Find a PFLAG chapter.** (<http://pflag-chapter-map.herokuapp.com/>) PFLAG chapters exist in every state. Find the one near you here.
- **The PFLAG Family Story Center.** (<http://community.pflag.org/tellyourstory>) You're not alone. Read stories from real PFLAG families to get a better understanding about the coming out process and how PFLAG can help.
- **Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) About GLBT People.** (<http://community.pflag.org/page.aspx?pid=290>) Want to get answers to many of your questions? Here's where to start.
- **Terminology.** (<http://community.pflag.org/glossary>) What do some of these words mean? Use PFLAG's quick dictionary of terms to get the facts.
- **Our Daughters and Sons: Questions and Answers for Parents of Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual People.** (<http://community.pflag.org/freepublications>) One of our most popular publications, this is a "must read" for parents who are forming new and honest relationships with a loved one who has come out to them. This booklet answers several commonly asked questions about having a gay child. It includes a list of related resources.
- **Dos and Don'ts for Families and Friends** (<http://community.pflag.org/page.aspx?pid=541>)
- **Straight for Equality.** (<http://www.straightforequality.org/>) Are you a straight ally who doesn't necessarily have a close family member



or friend who is gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender?
Then Straight for Equality is the place for you!

- **Coming Out As A Straight Supporter**
(<http://community.pflag.org/allies>) A publication created by PFLAG National and the HRC Foundation (<http://www.hrc.org/hrc-story/hrc-foundation>) intended to be a welcoming guide for straight supporters to build bridges of understanding when someone they know comes out to them. The guide answers initial questions, shares facts and strategies, and suggests ways that straight allies can show their support of LGBT equality.
- **Tips for the holidays.**
(<http://community.pflag.org/AllyHolidays>) Stressed out about how to approach holiday gatherings? Use PFLAG's resources to get some ideas on how to respond to issues and create a happy holiday for every member of your family.
- **Gender Spectrum.** (<https://www.genderspectrum.org/>) Creating a gender-sensitive and inclusive environment for all children and teens through education, training, and support.
- See more at
<http://community.pflag.org/page.aspx?pid=539#sthash.dyZXO1uT.dpuf>



Resources [2]

A Millennial's Perspective on Gender, Orientation, and Being “the Other”



This resource comes with a warning that there are words and beverages not found in most Seventh-day Adventist meetings. We are including them for two reasons:

- Her information is accurate as far as we have researched.
- Most of us will have interactions with LGBTI Millennials and it is important that we understand them.

<https://youtu.be/81-FEauK9II> (Everything Gender (Part 1) | ABC's of LGBT)

<https://youtu.be/kJ9ly4cK9tg> (Got Gender Queer-ies? (Part 2) | The ABC's of LGBT)



Resources [3]

Play reveals gay struggle in SDA Church



**By Sheila Hagar
of the Walla Walla
Union-Bulletin,
March 28, 2015**

Bradley Nelson's "A Gay SDA Play" is coming out at a precipitous time in the Seventh-day Adventist Church as it wrestles with its traditional stance on homosexuality.

Since beginning work on the staged reading piece in 2008, the Walla Walla Valley resident used interviews he conducted over a year to portray the problems "of being gay and SDA" in a world that doesn't always understand either, he said.

The result is a documentary-style presentation based on more than two dozen interviews that explore the real-life struggle between the Seventh-day Adventist religion—highly represented in the Walla Walla area—and people who come out as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender within its membership.

His play will debut Wednesday on the Gesa Power House Theatre stage.

Being non-heterosexual while being Adventist does not match up, according to Seventh-day Adventist doctrine. The church's stand is unequivocal: While the church recognizes every human as valuable and deserving of dignity, the Bible clearly shows sexual intimacy is restricted to marriage between a man and a woman.

"For these reasons Seventh-day Adventists are opposed to homosexual practices and relationships," according to the Church's official statement.

Nelson, 37, sees it as a division between who he is and who his Church wishes he was. He grew up in the local Adventist community in a "very SDA" family.

"I went to all the Adventist schools here," he said. "My immediate family are all still active SDAs."

A search for support



Bradley Nelson, author of “A Gay SDA Play,” sits in front of the Walla Walla University theater building, Village Hall.
(Photo by Greg Lehman)

He did his theater undergraduate work at The Adventist Walla Walla University and earned a master’s at Ohio University. He tried Chicago on for size afterward, but felt more comfortable in the Walla Walla Valley when he returned about two years ago, he said.

Nelson’s work on “A Gay SDA Play” was influenced by a documentary-style play at Whitman College in 2001. That playwright had interviewed a number of young, gay adults and echoed their experiences on stage.

Nelson attended the presentation with others from the Walla Walla University drama department and discussions that followed in the classroom opened the idea of exploring the topic in Adventist culture.

“Within the next couple of years I worked for the college in media relations, and I was going through a bit of my own coming-out process, trying to figure out who I was in religion and sexually,” he said.

In his search for identity and support, Nelson discovered the community built into SDA Kinship, an international non-profit support organization that provides a safe way for its LGBT members to socialize and have fellowship.

“So I decided to go to their annual meeting,” he said. “And because I had been considering this idea of a play, I decided to just go for it.”

That meant bringing along a mini-cassette recorder and asking people — mostly strangers of “all ages, genders, ways of identifying themselves sexually and in religion” — to trust him with sensitive information.

His approach was to simply ask for their stories, and that was all the prompting it took.

“I think everybody has an interesting story if you give them the opportunity to tell it,” he said. “I heard some really



A rehearsal of ‘A Gay SDA Play’ at The Power House Theater, where the play took the stage.

painful things, and some of those make it into the play and some of those don’t.”

As he did himself, many of his subjects had not grown up hearing the words “homosexual,” “gay” or “lesbian” spoken at home.

“Literally, not once,” he writes in the “A Gay SDA Play” script. “I had very little concept of ‘homosexuality’ other than how it was condemned every once in a great while from the pulpit at church. As far as I knew homosexuality was not even an Adventist issue. I was very naive.”

Among other real voices, whose names were changed for the script, are Kay, who descended from a long line of Adventist missionaries; Cory, who converted to the religion; and Shawn, whose family has always been Adventist.

And there is the dawning of realization that the church they were raised in and that they love doesn’t want them for who they are, the play reveals.

There is struggling with different versions and interpretations of the Bible’s wording about homosexuality, exploring gender stereotypes as children, the awkward coming out as gay at while at Adventist colleges.

The big picture

The “docudrama” is a microcosm of a far bigger and more historic picture, said LuAnn Venden, the play’s director and a teacher of English and theater at Walla Walla University since 1999.

“The church position is exclusionary,” she said. “It’s very similar to the civil rights puzzle in terms of race; I feel the rhetoric is the same.”

Venden said she is as Adventist as the play’s subjects. Her grandfather, Melvin Venden, was “a pretty famous” evangelist for the church, and her father, Morris Venden, was an international Adventist pastor, speaker, and author.

Speaking as the play's director and not on behalf of the university, Venden said gay students don't have a place or acceptance in any official capacity on the WWU campus.

Despite an unofficial gay-straight alliance student group at the school, Students for Equality, Venden finds herself being a primary support for young adults seeking answers.

"I've become known as someone who is safe to talk to," she said. "I'm straight and I'm married, but probably every quarter I have at least three new students whom I have never met before show up at my door and say, 'I heard you are safe to talk to' and burst into tears."

They are young people struggling to reconcile their orientation and their religion, and "they are already torn apart," she added.

She believes the stance the church has taken on homosexuality is "morally wrong.

"And if I end up being wrong, I would rather have erred on the side of love, compassion and acceptance," she said.

"And that's the huge reason I am doing this play."

Nelson's play captures this turmoil in the church "100 percent," she said.

"There's still the majority that want people to be quiet, like 'Don't ask, don't tell' so they don't have to do something about it."



Journey Part V Missionary to Japan



Jerry McKay

I finished high school in 1974 with better grades than expected and more confidence in my academic abilities than when I started. I attribute that to an environment in which I felt safe and content. There was no comparing my years at Kingsway to my first year of high school back home. Graduation, however, did not mean I had to relocate to continue my studies. Because Kingsway offered the first two years of a bachelor in theology, I started my degree in Oshawa that fall.

Other than changes in the nature of my studies, my first year of college was not much different from high school except for two things. Donna did not stay in Oshawa. She went to Andrews University, a Seventh-day Adventist educational institution in Michigan; and I was introduced to the student missionary program.

In the '70s and early '80s, the Adventist church operated an extensive network of language schools throughout Asia. Most of the teachers were students from Adventist colleges and universities in North America. Most volunteered for one-year terms.

Perry—my subcutaneous-layer-of-fat friend—had spent the prior year in Japan, and it had transformed his life. He spoke with such enthusiasm about his experience that I was inspired to sign up for mission service. In fact, seven of us from my graduating class signed up. Perry also made plans to return to Japan for a second term.

I did not want to go to Japan, however. Despite Perry's enthusiasm, he was no more able to convince me to go there than he had been to influence my appreciation of the female form. I volunteered for Indonesia. Once the decision had been made, every free moment during the remainder of the year was devoted to organizing suppers, canvassing

churches, and washing cars to raise the money for our airfare.

As I said, despite Perry's glowing testimony about Japan, Japan was the last place I wanted to go. I have no idea why except that I had probably been influenced by my father's negative comments about Japan when I was growing up.

Dad was 13 when World War II began, so he was well aware of the war in Europe. He was 13 days short of turning 16 when the Imperial Japanese Navy bombed Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. From the safe but mundane environment of the family farm, Dad's fascination with the war eventually took over, and he ran away to enlist.

Even if he had been of age, he wouldn't have been accepted because a slight heart murmur was detected during a medical. Dad also had flat feet! As well, his father caught up with him and persuaded the authorities that dad was needed at home to help run the farm. Dad was sent home.

After that, he always resented being "forced to work on the damn farm." For the rest of his life, though, he was fascinated by war history. Although that made for easy Christmas gift ideas—there is no shortage of books about WWII—the downside was that I often heard him speak with disdain of General Tojo and the atrocities of the Japanese military. Add to that the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and you can see why Japan might not hold much fascination for me.

Of course, as you might expect, shortly before we were to leave for our respective destinations, I was asked if I would go to Japan. Apparently, there was a shortage of teachers. As this adventure had been on one of my numerous prayer lists, I was sincerely open to going wherever I thought God might indicate.

So, in June 1975, with one year of college under my belt and two weeks shy of turning 19, I hesitantly set out for The Land of the Rising Sun. It helped that Perry and two of my

classmates would be going with me. Our Japan-bound band of four parted ways with our fellow missionaries and drove to California. We made a great road trip out of delivering a car from Toronto to a friend of a friend who had moved to Los Angeles.



I don't remember much about L.A. other than Disneyland and Universal Studios. I grew up watching Disney's *Wonderful World of Color* every Sunday evening on our black-and-white TV!

Realizing a childhood fantasy of climbing up into The Swiss Family Robinson Treehouse was a thrill. Not to be outdone, Universal Studios gave me the opportunity to pass through the Red Sea from the safety of a tour bus. It wasn't quite as dramatic as when Charlton Heston parted the sea in the 1956 movie *The Ten Commandments*, but my Bible-believing imagination made up for the lack of drama.

Just before we were to leave the continent there was one traumatic event—getting our hair cut. Because we were to become a revered *sensei*—teacher—we were required to conform to Japanese grooming standards. Even though my hair only went to the bottom of my ear lobes—short for the mid-seventies—it would be too long for Japan.

As if we were about to join the military, we marched into a local barber shop and ordered the barber to take it all off. Well, at least enough to reveal the entire ear. While it was a bit traumatic and my concern over my appearance was in overdrive, I was willing to make any sacrifice for God!

From Los Angeles, we headed to Hawaii for a second mini-vacation. The drive to Los Angeles and the flight to Honolulu—the first I had ever taken—were exciting enough to push most preoccupation with my orientation to the back of my mind. It was easy to hope *it* had been left behind. To my disappointment, my feelings about guys, the absence of attraction to women, and the angst that accompanied both followed me like the rest of my baggage.



Caught in Honolulu

Hawaii is an island paradise. Despite that fact, or perhaps because of it, I was not let off the same-sex attraction hook. Honolulu, in particular, had surprises waiting for me.

First, Donna had signed up for Japan while at Andrews University. However, we had made no plans to meet in Honolulu. So, when she stepped off the airport shuttle in front of her hotel and I was standing on the sidewalk in front of her, she was so startled she “lovingly” hit me on the face and then laughed sheepishly! It seemed we couldn’t be separated.

I had mixed feelings about meeting her. Even though I was pleased that she was going to be in Japan, seeing her in Honolulu revived old anxious feelings about having to be more than I felt I could be. Meeting Donna, however, was not as stressful as the other surprises Honolulu had waiting for me. During our three-day stay, two awkward situations occurred.

One afternoon, a group of us decided to visit the Polynesian Cultural Center. To get there, we had to take a bus. At one stop, a man was sitting on a bench just a few feet from the bus. He was attractive. As I was inclined to do, I was looking at him while pretending to look through or past him. It didn’t work.

Suddenly, he looked directly at me and made a suggestive gesture while motioning for me to get off the bus. I was stunned. His solicitation left me feeling totally exposed. I became very self-conscious and terrified that my friends might have noticed and by chance discovered my secret. After the bus had moved on, I was left with a feeling of heaviness I had never felt before that lingered for hours.

The second event was similar but even more anxiety-producing.

This time, our group was in a small diner. Two of my fellow missionaries were facing out the window toward the street. I was facing into the interior as was the fourth member of

our group. After a few minutes, a man sitting a few tables away looked at us and shouted at us to stop staring!

If I felt exposed by the previous event, this time I wanted to disappear. The classmate sitting beside me spoke up and apologized for any misunderstanding indicating that no one was staring at him. We muttered something about looking at something behind him. That was not true, and I knew it. And, yes, the stranger was attractive. And, yes, I had been sneaking a peek or two while waiting to be served. Once again, I was caught.



**Jerry
back in Honolulu,
recently**

These events further illustrate the challenge I was facing because of my orientation. Although, for very different reasons, I knew why those guys had reacted as they had. They had caught me exercising my appreciation of their physical appearance. One had liked it, while the other clearly did not.

My companions' appreciation of physical beauty was as active as mine and no less controlling. Strolling with them on Waikiki Beach had proved that! They, of course, did not need to be as discreet as I had been. Their world was filled with attractive women; my world was filled with attractive men. I couldn't have explained why any more than they could have.

When we see objects that attract us, we want to *look* at them whether they are sunsets or attractive people. Why something attracts us is another story. When someone has an attractive smile or beautiful eyes, we want to look at them. And, yes, when they wear their clothes well, *I* liked to look, as well. My wanting to look at an attractive man said more about the nature of my orientation than most friends can ever appreciate.

This is, perhaps, the most difficult concept to explain to friends and acquaintances. However, as I have said before, I was never attracted to women *and* men. To borrow a word of the apostle Paul, I had never selected to *exchange* my

heterosexual interests for homosexual interests. My attractions had always been *only* for other men.

My uncle used to use horse blinds to keep his horses from being distracted by objects to their right or left. Even if I had borrowed those blinds, I still had to deal with what was right in front of me. I could try to ignore my orientation, but it was always there. I was drawn to what was attractive to me—and that was men. At that point in my life, I was not sexually active; but my orientation influenced what I wanted to look at. Pretending my attractions didn't exist was exhausting, as was the moral judgment I imposed upon myself.

At the end of those two days, feelings of social awkwardness had increased; and I had become more confused than ever about how long was too long to look at someone. I felt an uneasiness that I had never experienced before. Additional “why” questions were added to the lengthy list I was already rehearsing. The only way to cope was by compartmentalizing my world even further. This, of course, made the integration of my mind, body, and spirit impossible.

Of course, I didn't talk to anyone about those events. I wouldn't have known where to begin. If anyone had brought up the bus stop event, I'm sure I would have dismissed it or made fun of the person who had simply acted as a mirror of my reality. I might, in fact, have protested too much!

Unexpectedly, I was left with a preoccupation regarding the guy who had made the suggestive gesture. I kept thinking about him. I wanted to know who he was. I wanted to talk to him even if I had no idea what I would have talked to him about. It was a very strange experience being within a few feet of someone I thought probably understood something of my experience. I couldn't forget the guy at the bus stop.

Except for those unsettling experiences and getting the worst sunburn in my life, our little vacation was a blast. From Honolulu, Japan was only six hours into my future. As

our departure approached, my attention turned from beaches and bus stops to pagodas. I recalled the mission stories I had read when I was a child. Although those missionaries had gone overseas by boat, I was just as overwhelmed with excitement and some dread when our fully loaded China Airlines 747 took off for Tokyo.



In the Land of the Rising Sun

During our orientation sessions at school, Perry had talked about what we might expect in Japan. Nothing ever prepares you for the real thing. Japan had an element of shock. Our flight landed in Tokyo late at night. As soon as we stepped off the plane, it was obvious that English had vanished and that everyone around me had dark hair and brown eyes.

Being mid-June, the rainy season was well underway. Rainy season is a month of on-again-off-again rain. When we left the airport the warm damp night air hit us like a wall and brought every alien smell up close and personal. The ubiquitous lights of Tokyo were accentuated by the rain and made our drive—on the left-hand side of the road—to the church headquarters in Yokohama dizzying. Canada felt very far away.

At the church compound, we were fed and shown a place to sleep. My assigned roommate never showed up. He arrived the following day on a second plane load of would-be teachers. Once again, like my first night at Kingsway, I was on my own in a strange place. When I turned off the light for the night, I couldn't help wondering if I had bitten off too much or if God had made a mistake.

Once everyone had arrived, we were whisked away by Shinkansen—Japan's high-speed train—to Osaka where the flagship language school was located. There we had a crash course in teaching conversational English and were given more cultural tips for living in Japan. Practicing large-group English language teaching methods with people I did not

know pushed my introvert boundaries to the limit, but I survived.



I was not impressed with Osaka because it was too big for my liking, and the language school was the largest in the country. To accommodate the 500 students per quarter, a large group of teachers would naturally have to stay there. If Osaka was too big, Tokyo was colossal. The greater Tokyo area is one of the most populated places on the planet with a population similar to that of Canada—35 million. For this reason, Tokyo was that last place I wanted to live. Therefore, I hinted, hoped, and prayed about going to a smaller city and a more intimate school.

You guessed it. I was asked to go to Tokyo, and I accepted.



For the next year, I spent nearly every waking moment in Amanuma, a western suburb of Tokyo. The language school was on the same compound as the Adventist hospital. Founded in the early 1900s, the hospital and church were landmarks. In fact, the small one-way street that winds its way from the commuter train station to the hospital is called Kyokai Dori—Church Street. Everyone, for miles around, knew of the hospital and church.

The language school was in one of three unique two-story wooden buildings that had been constructed to house missionary families. It was a miracle they were still standing.



They were around during the Great Kanto Earthquake that had occurred September 1, 1923. In addition to damage caused directly by the earthquake, Tokyo had been ravaged by fire. The earthquake had struck at lunchtime on Saturday when people were cooking. I was told that each of the three houses had had a brick chimney. While the houses stood and escaped the fires, the chimneys collapsed and were never replaced.

Then, during World War II, Tokyo had been firebombed. One night in March, American forces had dropped some

1,600 tons of incendiary bombs. Approximately 15 square miles of the city had been destroyed and 100,000 people died. Although the bombing was centered near the docks, far from the hospital and those wooden houses, they too might have gone up in flames if the war had not ended six months later. I had students who were living in Tokyo during the earthquake and the bombing. They had fascinating and painful stories to tell.



In the 1970s, however, there were fewer foreign missionaries around. Because of that, two of those houses were used for other purposes. The SDA Language Institute was in one of them, and we all loved it. The history and architecture of the building created an exceptionally intimate and exotic place to teach and study. It was the very environment I had been praying for.

I clearly recall climbing the stairs to the second floor of the school and standing in front of the door to my first class. It was too late to turn back. Relying totally on our week of orientation, I walked into that class of 15 high school and college students. It was the perfect way to begin. Most of the students were my age, and we connected instantly. Many from that first class became lifelong friends.

We worked hard—teaching 30 plus hours per week. We had private and large group classes. We taught children, teenagers, and professionals of all kinds. And then there were the housewives' classes. We usually taught them in the morning and afternoon. They got that informal designation because when the husbands went off to work their wives were free to study English. Compared to the classes of university students, those housewives were the most enjoyable to teach. And when we had our end-of-term potlucks, those ladies were the ones who introduced us to amazing Japanese food.

Missionary Life & Spiritual Habits

Although we spent many hours teaching English, everything else we did was about missions and, therefore, had a

spiritual focus. We used every opportunity to introduce our students to Jesus. During the week, in addition to language classes, we offered Bible classes—in English, of course.



We were free to conduct those classes as we chose. I liked that they were small and intimate. We tried our best to unpack the mysteries of the Bible. Because I couldn't sing well and did not play the guitar, my classes weren't as musical as some of the others. That didn't mean they weren't popular. They were. All those thoughtful hours each day contemplating the life of Christ helped me bring the story of Jesus to life. It should be no surprise that I put a lot of thought and energy into those classes and that they were the high point of my week.

On occasion, someone would express a greater interest in the Bible and wanted to learn more about Jesus. When that happened, we suggested studying together privately. Those private Bible classes were the most precious hours I spent with people. Whether it was one of my students or that of another teacher, we were pleased when someone decided to study in Japanese with the local pastor.

In addition to our weekly Bible classes, we went to church each Sabbath with the Japanese Adventist community. We wanted to be there in case a student decided to attend, as well as to participate in worship ourselves. For most of the year, we understood little of what was said during church. Our ears would perk up, however, when the melody of a more traditional hymn filled the sanctuary. No matter what language they are sung in, *Amazing Grace*, *Rock of Ages*, or *Blessed Assurance* are recognizable and heartwarming hymns.

On Saturday afternoons, we had our own fellowship at the school. We taught students our favorite contemporary Christian songs—in English, this time. We shared our favorite Bible stories and tried our best to answer “simple” questions like the nature of good and evil and the meaning of life. The best part was sharing our personal testimonies



of faith in Jesus. By the time we were finished, the sun had usually set on another Sabbath. Then our socializing began. If we didn't play games at the school, we would head out for pizza or bowling—even skating. There was no shortage of things to do in Tokyo.

Every year, we had the honor of attending the baptism of someone from the language school. They were often the first in their family to become Christian. With less than one percent of Japan's 130 million people identifying as Christian, becoming Christian was no small decision and did not go unnoticed. It was an inspiration to know how courageous they were.

On a side note, I learned a lot about “witnessing” in Japan. Back home, sharing one's faith often seemed contrived. So much of my faith-sharing experience had been about debating doctrinal differences. It felt like we associated with people only to make converts. In Japan, we became friends and remained friends whether interest in Jesus was present or not. That experience had a lasting impact on me.

Because our life had a mission focus, I was more conscientious about my personal devotions in Japan than I had been when I was in school back in Canada. I enjoyed getting up early and heading off to the language school before anyone else. The school was quiet and those old wooden houses with their large sunrooms were the perfect place for long periods of reflection. Along with my Bible, I had my weathered copy of *The Desire of Ages* by my side. I methodically worked through both during the year. I cherished those hours of solitude.

I needed lots of time for prayer because my prayer lists were longer than ever. I sent lists of names back to Canada asking friends to pray for students. A number of friends, including my roommate Kelvin, received a prayer list or two. Those extended periods in prayer were no burden.

To my chagrin, my Bible study and prayer didn't alter my sexual orientation. It did not diminish because I was a

missionary. On the other hand, neither did it appear to limit God's presence and blessing in my life. The evidence of God's spirit in the lives of LGBT people is often a conundrum for some.



Here is a test to find
whether your mission on earth is finished:
If you're alive, it isn't.

- Richard Bach