



Safe Places

October/November 2013

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Dear Colleagues,

October 2013

As always, I hope you have had blessings this last month. I notice that some of you took advantage of the end-of-summer holiday sales and lack of crowds to vacation. What a great time of year to do so. Northern Hemisphere autumns can be quite beautiful.

This month's issue addresses a difficult topic: self-harming and suicidal behaviors in lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people, and the probable causes for their pain.

Mitch Tyner's devotional is from a talk he shared during a gathering of lesbian/gay Seventh-day Adventists and their allies in April 2013. As you may have read in a previous issue, Mitch was a pastor in Missouri and North Carolina for ten years. He then became director of the trust services and religious liberty departments for the Kentucky-Tennessee Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. After earning his law degree, Mitch became associate director of public affairs and religious liberty for the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. He spent the last thirteen years of his career with the Seventh-day Adventist Church as associate general counsel of the General Conference. Instead of a traditional celebratory dinner to honor their fifty years of marriage, Mitch and Patsy Tyner took an adventure tour of Kazakhstan.

Recent Research includes a fact sheet from the American Association of Suicidology, and five short research reports.

We have included a list of references and other readings for those of you who have wanted research citations and the opportunity to peruse additional materials.

Our Resource section this month includes five sites dedicated to suicide prevention, as well as three more general sites and other materials for working with lesbian, gay, and bisexual Seventh-day Adventists and their families.

Two writers were willing to share a difficult time in their lives for Stories of the Heart.

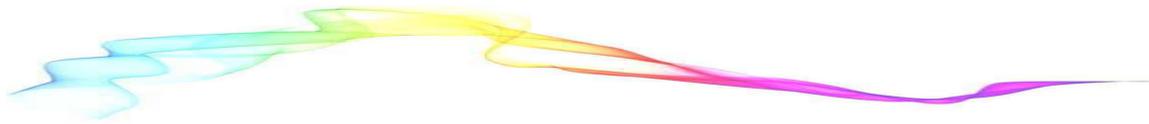
Roberto Londis is a voice teacher who specializes in training students for operatic roles. He lives in Costa Rica.

Ben Kemena reports: "I'm the son of immigrant parents to the United States. My parents are both retired Adventist-denominational church workers. I attended Mile High Academy and Loma Linda University School of Medicine. After teaching at Loma Linda University for several years, I returned home to practice medicine in Colorado. Over the last twenty years I have served in several capacities but now work in one of our local medical centers as a hospitalist. I have been with my spousal partner, Michael, for nearly 20 years. Michael is an attorney specializing in GLBT civil rights. I mountain climb the 14-ers (peaks over 14,000 feet) in Colorado with great joy. I have been involved with SDA Kinship International since 1992 and credit this group with reconciling my love with our Jesus."

Please feel most welcome to share this newsletter wherever and with whomever you think it might have value or be helpful. If anyone you know would like to subscribe to Safe Places, please feel most welcome to let us know. If you would be like to be taken off our mailing list, just let us know. As always, we look forward to hearing your thoughts, comments, questions, concerns, ideas, and requests. You can reach us at info@buildingsafeplaces.org.

We wish you many blessings,
Catherine Taylor

The *Building Safe Places – For Everyone* Team: Frieder Schmid, Ingrid Schmid, Floyd Poenitz, Elodie Souil, Ruud Kieboom, and Catherine Taylor



Quotes to Consider

"If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them if a large millstone were hung around their neck and they were thrown into the sea." —Mark 9:42

"That which distinguishes the people of God from worldlings is their sympathy for others. In their tenderness, their meekness and lowliness of heart they reveal they wear Christ's yoke and are recipients of the gift of the Holy Spirit." —Ellen G. White, *The Youth's Instructor*, December 6, 1900.

Visions of God and the Church

Discernment



By Mitch Tyner

Does inconsistency bother you? It does me. It seems to be evidence of deception or, at best, inattention. But sometimes a closer inspection of the facts reveals that it wasn't inconsistent at all.

For instance, let's look at Jesus' seeming inconsistent reaction to three sets of facts as recorded in the gospels.

The first is in Matthew 23:1-35 (NIV). Jesus was addressing his disciples and others gathered to hear him, a crowd that evidently included a number of Pharisees. In 36 verses, he is recorded to have berated the Pharisees seven times, in what is often considered the most biting passage in the Bible.

- ✚ “They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people’s shoulders; but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them.”
- ✚ “Everything they do is done for people to see.... They love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues....”
- ✚ “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people’s faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to.”
- ✚ “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert; and when you have succeeded, you make them twice as much a child of hell as you are.”
- ✚ “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill, and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy, and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.”
- ✚ “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisees! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean.”
- ✚ “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous; but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.”
- ✚ “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You build tombs for the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous.”

Who were these people who merited such very strong reproof?

The name Pharisee linguistically indicates “those separated.” The Jerusalem Talmud indicates that in the 3rd century BC, there were 24 sects in Judaism. The major ones were the Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and Zealots. Jesus undoubtedly knew them all but singled out the Pharisees for by far the strongest criticism.

Of the four groups, the Pharisees had most support among the common people. They were also the only one of the groups to survive the destruction of the temple in AD 70 as a continuing entity. Later, they were responsible for the compilation of the Mishnah. Modern scholars consider that modern Orthodox Judaism is essentially Pharisaism.

To the Pharisees, keeping the letter of the law, both written and oral, was everything. They gave equal authority to rabbinic law—what Jesus called “traditions of men.” The condition of a person’s soul was of less importance. Because of their strict adherence to the laws of purity, they kept themselves separate from sinners, for fear of defilement. External appearance was more highly valued than internal experience.

Jesus singled out the Pharisees for intense criticism, as opposed to the Sadducees or other groups. Snakes, vipers, hypocrites—why such very strong words?

Could it involve their reverence for extra-biblical authority? One explanation that comes to mind is that they did everything possible to exclude others. Their attitude was “We alone have the truth! And we don’t want to share it with those who are not fit to receive it.”

The second incident occurred on the Monday of Passion Week, four days before the crucifixion. It is recorded in John 2:13-16: “When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple courts he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money. So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple courts, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. To those who sold doves he said, ‘Get these out of here! Stop turning my Father’s house into a market!’”

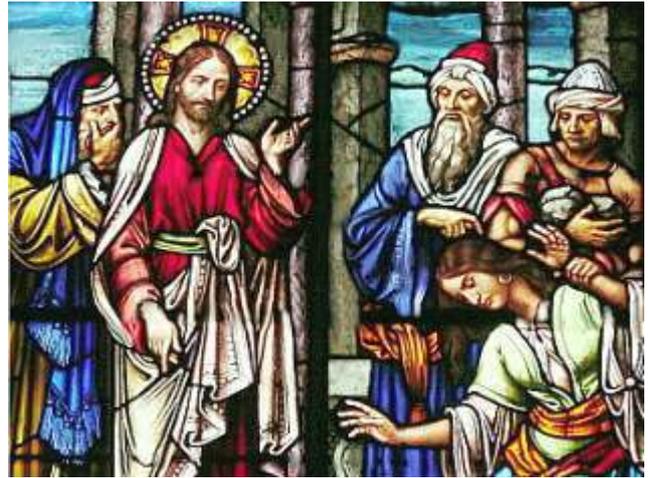
This is the only mention of Jesus using physical force, and also the only mention of money changers in the Bible. John assumes that his audience understood their function, as he gives no explanation in the text.

Pilgrims (this was Passover time) brought all sorts of coins to the temple. The money changers exchanged them (for a tidy profit, shared with the priests) for Tyrian shekels, the only coin the priests would accept for the annual temple tax. So in upsetting that system, Jesus placed the entire temple financial scheme in crisis. Yet He found their activities so revolting that He at least raised a whip, whether or not He actually struck anyone, and drove them out of the temple.

So what do the driving out of the moneychangers and the denunciation of the Pharisees have in common? Could it be that in both instances Jesus was reacting to and condemning a severe misrepresentation of the character and requirements of God?

The third instance is recorded in John 8:1-11: “But Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him; and he sat down to teach them. The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group and said to Jesus, ‘Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of

adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?' They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing Him. But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, 'Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.' Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground. At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. Jesus straightened up and asked her, 'Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?' 'No one, sir,' she said. 'Then neither do I condemn you,' Jesus declared. 'Go now and leave your life of sin.'"



The Pharisees should have taken the woman to court, not to Jesus. Their plan was a plot to catch Jesus in an inconsistency: if he holds a strict line, then he has allowed them to prevail in their ungodly treatment of this woman and has opened himself up to trouble from the Romans, for he will be held responsible if they stone her. If he doesn't, they will claim he abrogated the Law of Moses.

They didn't count on him simply writing in the sand a list of their own sins. But, in the only recorded instance of Jesus writing, that's what he did.

So why was there no lecture on the gravity of her sin? There was no need, as she made no defense. She tacitly acknowledged her guilt, and didn't need more piled on. Instead, she needed relief—and that is what she received.

Was there inconsistency between Jesus' treatment of this woman and the Pharisees and money-changers? Not really. In both cases Jesus did what needed to be done. In each case, he delivered the treatment most likely to be effective. He gave each individual what he or she most needed. He comforted the disturbed, and disturbed the comfortable.

So what do we learn from these stories?

First, that it is important to represent God correctly—not merely to preserve the status quo or buttress tradition.

Second, we should resist the temptation to generalize. Of the 70 members of the Sanhedrin, five were Pharisees, and we know the names of three: Joseph of Arimathea; Gamaliel, who counseled waiting to see if the new teachings were from God before opposing them; and Nicodemus, who came to Jesus by night seeking truth. None of these would seem to fit the description of those characterized as vipers and hypocrites. And there are those who oppose truth and progress today who are hypocrites, but others who quietly seek greater truth and understanding.

Third, we must recognize that religion can be used as either a comfort or a cudgel. There's a long tradition of religion being used to justify the systematic denial of equality and human rights. To rightly

evaluate that fact, we must understand the circumstances and needs that result in such a misuse of religion.

In America, for instance, religion is being used to defend the status quo from all sorts of change: immigration, demographic change, the changing status of previously privileged dominant groups. Resistance to LGBTI rights is one manifestation of that resistance to change.

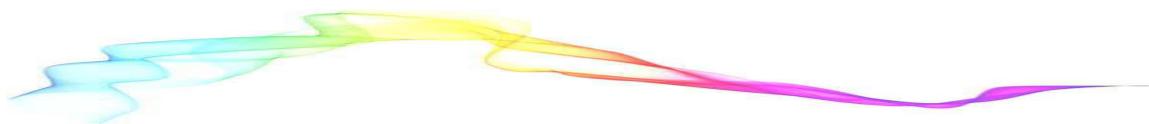
One scholar of religion has argued that people turn to religion because “humans don’t have their own bearings, and they want to be oriented... They want to find their own place.” To stay oriented and feel in place, we build walls around our homes, and less visible boundaries around our communities—and churches.

In the 1950s, that process produced places of worship that felt safe and protective. But by the late '60s that whole system was breaking down, and boundaries and sheltering walls no longer seemed to matter so much. Rather than stay safely at home, people wanted to take “journeys,” “explore new vistas.” If it was unpredictable and chaotic, the risks seemed worthwhile because of the payoff: an unprecedented sense of freedom. All this was understandably frightening to many people. They fought back with a struggle for spiritual discipline that gained prominence in the 1980s and that continues today. But there is no way to go back. The efforts to do so have come to be seen as expressing concern about the wrongdoing of others more than a means of recapturing some lost sense of certainty. Some see these ongoing—and accelerating—changes as symbolic of freedom. To others, they see the key to a safe, orderly life crumbling around them. No wonder they resist change.

An example: after a young woman theologian made a presentation to the group studying the theology of ordination, another member said to her, “I’m very sympathetic to all you said. But if I accept it, my entire biblical world view crumbles.” Fear, insecurity, and perceived threats so often result in unthinking resistance.

So how do we react to all this? As Jesus did: comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable.

Within some circles there is a discussion as to whether the emphasis should be on providing a safe place for the victims of homophobia or activism to prevent such harm. The proper answer is that we must do both. Those who come in need of comfort and safety should find it. Those who smugly deny the need for change should be urged to rethink their stance: comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable. And finally, what about us, as individuals? Do you need comfort? Accept it from the Lord. Or do you need to be disturbed? But having received that comfort, it becomes our duty to speak up when others act the part of Pharisees. It’s easier to say than to do—but that’s our example.



Suicidal Behavior Among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Youth



- Many studies have found that LGB youth attempt suicide more frequently than straight peers. Garafalo et al. (1999) found that LGB high school students and students unsure of their sexual orientation were 3.4 times more likely to have attempted suicide in the last year than their straight peers. Eisenberg and Resnick (2006) found LGB high school students were more than twice as likely as their straight peers to have attempted suicide.
- Safren and Heimberg (1999) found that among youth who had attempted suicide, almost twice as many LGB youth as their straight peers said that they had really hoped to die.
- Little research has been done about transgender individuals, but in one study of adults and young adults 30.1 percent of transgender individuals surveyed reported having ever attempted suicide (Kenagy, 2005). For United States adults overall, 4.6 percent of adults and young adults report having ever attempted (Kessler et al., 1999).
- Numerous studies confirm that LGB youth have higher rates of suicidal ideation than their straight peers; for example, the Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Survey found that youth who self identified as GLB or reported any same-sex sexual contact were more than three times more likely to report having seriously considered suicide in the last year (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2006).
- Because no reliable data exists, we do not know whether LGBT youth die by suicide more frequently than their straight peers. Sexual orientation and gender identity data are not included on death certificates so aggregated national death data do not include this information. In addition, many LGBT youth do not disclose this information to family members and friends; as a result, sexual orientation and gender identity often do not show up in psychological autopsy interviews.

Risk and Protective Factors Among LGBT Youth

- While LGBT youth think about and attempt suicide more often than their straight counterparts, most LGBT youth do not attempt suicide. LGBT youth have many of the same risk factors as straight youth, but many LGBT have more or more severe risk factors. It is important to note that being LGBT is not a risk factor in and of itself; however, the minority stressors that LGBT individuals encounter—such as discrimination and harassment—are directly associated with suicidal behavior as well as indirectly with risk factors for suicide.
- The strongest risk factor for suicide death is previous attempts, and LGB youth attempt more frequently than non-LGB youth (see above).

- Most people who die by suicide have mental illness and/or a substance use disorder. Fergusson et al. (1999) found that LGB youth showed higher rates of major depression, anxiety disorder, conduct disorder, and co-occurring psychiatric disorders than their straight peers.
- D'Augelli (2002) found high rates of victimization among LGB youth from community settings: more than three-quarters reported verbal abuse and about one in seven reported physical attacks, and victimized youth reported more mental health problems.
- Ryan et al. (2009) found that family acceptance was important for LGB youth; in fact, LGB youth who experienced severe family rejection were more than 8 times more likely to report having attempted suicide compared with peers from families with little or no rejection.
- Eisenberg and Resnick (2004) found that family connectedness, caring adults, and school safety serve as protective factors from suicide for LGB individuals.

Implications for Suicide Prevention

Because much of the risk for suicidal behavior among LGBT youth stems from the social and cultural environment, a cultural competence approach is recommended by many. Youth workers who understand and help address the stressors that the LGBT youth minority face can be most effective. See <http://www.hrc.org/issues/cultural-competence.htm>.

SPRC recommends that youth-serving agencies:

- Implement in-service staff training about the issues faced by LGBT youth, particularly the higher rate of suicidal behavior, victimization, and family rejection and recognition and response to warning signs for suicide;
- Establish policies and protocols for appropriate response to suicide attempts, self injury, and suicides; and
- Institute non-discrimination policies that extend equal rights to all sexual orientations and gender identities (SPRC, 2008).

Studies

- Clinical social worker Caitlin Ryan's Family Acceptance Project (California State University, San Francisco) conducted the first study of the effect of family acceptance and rejection on the health, mental health, and well-being of LGBT youth, including suicide, HIV/AIDS, and homelessness. Their research shows that LGBT youths “who experience high levels of rejection from their families during adolescence (when compared with those young people who experienced little or no rejection from parents and caregivers) were more than eight times more likely to have attempted suicide, more than six times more likely to report high levels of depression, more than three times more likely to use illegal drugs, and more than three times more likely to be at high risk for HIV or other STDs” by the time they reach their early 20s. (“Helping LGBT youth, others learn to cope,” April 27, 2012, Visalia Times-Delta.)
- In a study of lesbian, gay, and bisexual adolescents Mark Hatzenbuehler examined the effect of the county-level social environment. This was indexed by the proportion of same-sex couples and

Democrats living in the counties. Also included were the proportions of schools with gay-straight alliances as well as anti-bullying and antidiscrimination policies that include sexual orientation. He found that a more conservative social environment elevated risk in suicidal behavior among all youth and that this effect was stronger for LGB youth. Furthermore, he found that the social environment partially mediated the relation between LGB status and suicidal behavior. The problem of LGBT suicide is thus the result of hostile cultural conditions rather than pathology inherent to LGBT individuals. Lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth were significantly more likely to attempt suicide in the previous 12 months, compared with heterosexuals (21.5% vs 4.2%). Among lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth, the risk of attempting suicide was 20% greater in unsupportive environments compared to supportive environments. A more supportive social environment was significantly associated with fewer suicide attempts, controlling for sociodemographic variables and multiple risk factors for suicide attempts, including depressive symptoms, binge drinking, peer victimization, and physical abuse by an adult.” (“The Social Environment and Suicide Attempts in Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Youth,” *Pediatrics*. 127 (5), 2011: 896-903)

- ✚ “Sexual minority youth, or teens that identify themselves as gay, lesbian or bisexual, are bullied two to three times more than heterosexuals,” and “almost all transgender students have been verbally harassed (e.g., called names or threatened in the past year at school because of their sexual orientation (89%) and gender expression (89%).)” (GLSEN's Harsh Realities, The Experiences of Transgender Youth In Our Nation’s Schools.)
- ✚ Citing a study by Jordan et al., school psychologist Anastasia Hansen notes that hearing teachers make homophobic remarks or fail to intervene when students make such remarks are both positively correlated with negative feelings about an LGBT identity. Conversely, a number of researchers have found the presence of LGBT-supportive school staff to be related to “positive outcomes for GLBT youth.” (Hansen, Anastasia. “School-Based Support for GLBT Students: A Review of Three Levels of Research.” *Psychology in the Schools*. 44.8(2007). 839-848. Eric.ed.gov:80. Retrieved 2011-08-21.)
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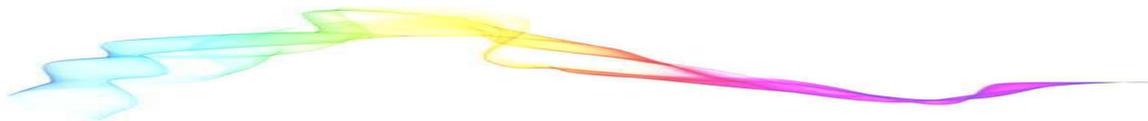
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Recources

It Gets Better

The *It Gets Better Project* is an internet-based project founded in the United States by Dan Savage and his husband Terry Miller. Begun in September 2010, its formulation was in response to the suicides of teenagers who were bullied because they were gay or because their peers suspected that they were gay. Its goal is to prevent suicide among LGBTIQ youth by having gay adults convey the message through social media videos that these teens' lives will improve. The project has grown rapidly: over 200 videos were uploaded in the first week, and the project's YouTube channel reached the 650-video limit in the next week.



http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Suicide_among_LGBT_youth - cite note-Savage sfgate 1010-29

The project is now organized on its own website, *The It Gets Better Project*, and includes more than 30,000 entries, with more than 40 million views, from people of all sexual orientations, including many celebrities. A book of essays from the project, *It Gets Better: Coming Out, Overcoming Bullying, and Creating a Life Worth Living*, was released in March 2011. The link above is the one made by and for Adventists. <http://www.itgetsbetterforadventists.org/>.

The Trevor Project

The Trevor Project was founded by writer James Lecesne, director/producer Peggy Rajski, and producer Randy Stone. They are creators of the 1994 Academy Award-winning Young Adult Fiction short film, *Trevor*. This young adult/fiction/comedy/drama is about a gay 13-year-old boy who, when rejected by friends because of his sexuality, makes an attempt to take his life. *The Trevor Project* is an American non-profit organization that offers an around-the-clock crisis and suicide prevention help-line for LGBTQ youth. The project "is determined to end suicide among LGBTQ youth by providing life-saving and life-affirming resources including our nationwide, 24/7 crisis intervention lifeline, digital community, and advocacy/educational programs that create a safe, supportive, and positive environment for everyone." Though the crisis line is not available outside the United States, the digital community and information about the advocacy/educational programs is. <http://www.thetrevorproject.org/>



American Association of Suicidology Warning Signs of Suicide

<http://www.suicidology.org/web/guest/stats-and-tools/warning-signs>.

The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

A free, 24-hour hotline available in the United States to anyone in suicidal crisis or distress. Call 1-800-273-TALK (8255). Learn more at <http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/>.

American Association of Suicidology Risk Factors for Suicide and Fact Sheets

<http://www.suicidology.org/web/guest/stats-and-tools/fact-sheets>.

Someone to Talk To

<http://www.someone-to-talk-to.net>

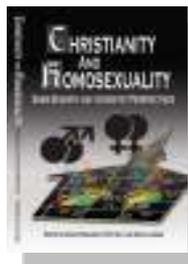
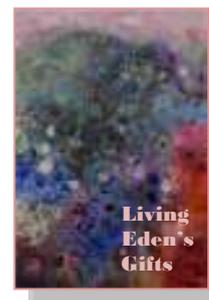
This ministry is for friends and families of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex Seventh-day Adventists. Its goal is to:

- provide a listening ear for parents who desperately need a “safe” person with whom to talk;
- help parents work through their initial emotions of shock, anger, shame, grief, and pain;
- enable parents to get past focusing on their own suffering so they can begin to understand their children’s situations and the confusion and rejection they have experienced much of their lives;
- encourage parents to demonstrate God’s unconditional love to their children; and
- provide information and resources in the hope that they will help our church to move beyond ignorance and prejudice and to reach out with true compassion and understanding to those who so often have not been treated the way Jesus modeled.

Living Eden’s Gifts

A Bible study that addresses Old and New Testament texts often used to condemn same-sex relationships. You can order a copy or copies of this study in pamphlet form by writing to info@BuildingSafePlaces.org. You can find it online at

<http://buildingsafeplaces.org/index.php/resources/living-eden-s-gifts.html>



Christianity and Homosexuality: Some Seventh-day Adventist Perspectives

More information at <http://buildingsafeplaces.org/index.php/resources/christianity-and-homosexuality-some-seventh-day-adventist-perspectives.html>.

Homosexuality: Can We Talk About It?

<http://buildingsafeplaces.org/index.php/resources/homosexuality-can-we-talk-about-it/homosexuality-can-we-talk-about-it-english.html>

Havens



By Robert Londis

Puberty started early for me, about age 10. I remember feeling strong sexual responses to men on the way to school, riding the New York subway system where people are crammed like sardines during rush hour.

I was baptized into Adventism at age 11 and started seventh grade at a church school that year. At 13 I went away to a Seventh-day Adventist boarding academy where I thought I would enter a heavenly place. Soon I was being told, with disgust, that I acted “just like a girl.” I was pulled out of bed in the middle of the night and given “pink bellies” (the act of rendering a person's stomach skin bright pink with a series of sharp, open-handed slaps.). I had crackers and bananas put between my sheets to “greet me” when I crawled into bed.

I experienced serious depression because of my guilt over my homosexual feelings. When I was sixteen, a respected and well-known theologian, college religion professor, author, and minister came to our academy for the annual Week of Prayer. Because he complimented me on my vocal solo I decided to go to him for “counseling” and advice, as we were encouraged to do. The secret and shame that society and the church had given me about what were, to me, natural feelings were killing me. I believed that, since the speaker would be gone the next week, my secret would be safe. Weeping, I told him that I had sexual desires for men. What should I do? He told me to buy and read a book about homosexuality (in 1962 the book was focused on the negatives of same-sex relationships), pray, and read the Bible.

The following week our academy principal called me into his office and told me the Week of Prayer speaker had related to him what I had hoped was my confidential information. He kindly said, “Please let me know if there is anything I can do for you.” This exposure left me feeling traumatized and exacerbated my depression. I thought everyone knew my secret: his wife, his children, other students. I failed my senior year in high school as a result. I could not even get out of bed to get to class on time. I failed my post-senior year. The fact that I never marched down the aisle with a graduating class broke my heart. Today I think I was punishing myself for being homosexual by failing at life. I hated this unsafe environment.

Fortunately, my passion for vocal music kept me alive during those years. I frequently was able to get standing-room-only tickets for the Metropolitan Opera. Each Sunday I attended a church famous for doing oratorios. I sang in the chorus of an opera with Metropolitan Opera stars. I created my own life away from the academy. If I had not been able to build this double existence, I would have killed myself. When I finally found Kinship, at age 35, the people and the community there helped me resolve a lot of the old pain.

Honestly



By Ben Kemena

It is a painful challenge for me to think about and to write about the ways homophobia has affected my feelings of suicidality or the desire to self-harm. Let me simply “think out loud.” You will probably be able to feel some of the rawness of this unsettling topic in my heart.

There is a part of me that simply wishes to whitewash the painful period that was my life 22 years ago. If I speak honestly about the way I was treated, my ingrained loyalty to Adventism leaves me feeling like I will be church-bashing. It also seems like I will be disrespectful to the church members and leaders who have become my allies over these last two decades.

As I grew to accept myself as a gay man, and others realized or came to know this aspect of my life, I lost many things that were connected to being part of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. My family threw me out in the name of God and Church. My friends, family, church, and school were very self-righteous in proclaiming me “unclean” and casting me into the streets. I lost people I thought were friends. I was functionally disfellowshipped. These “moral leaders” slept in comfortable beds at night. I slept in my car with nowhere else to go.

Today I am welcomed as a guest or visitor but I never really belong. Being faced with that attitude can exhaust the reserves of the healthiest human being. I had a wilderness experience where to live a whole and honest life meant I had to leave the church to follow the Savior. It was the only pathway to my healing. I believe it brought on an existential crisis in my life where I experienced angst at the possibility that God’s love might be conditional and that I was not acceptable to Heaven. I had virtually no social support, and constant worry.

The 1999 “no accommodation clause” adopted by the church, and the present move to reiterate the church stand condemning loving and committed same-sex relationships, breaks my heart. At the very least, these actions harm gay people who love God. The cruelty we face and the moral judgments that fuel it bring many of us to suicidal ideation and actions. When the church leaders, elders, teachers, and parents, whom we were taught to respect, close the door in our faces I do not have the words to clearly and powerfully enough express how awful it is. As recently as 2011 Loma Linda University strongly discouraged me from returning to campus for my 25th anniversary reunion from medical school. They let me know (in kindness, mind you) that if anyone complained about my presence at an event, I would be removed by campus security.

Devoid of Adventist support, for many years I wandered through my spiritual journey, gradually maturing enough to realize that God loves me unconditionally. Indeed, every day that I lived without being struck down by God helped me question the claims of those who judged me “evil.” It was hard to keep any sense of value and self-worth when I faced these challenges. For my sanity, I chose to stay away from any sort of those dynamics. Meeting Kinship folk and our allies was the first time I was able

to reconnect any part of the Adventist church with a picture of a loving God. Today, I have good friends, a new church family, and a loving partner who better represent the face of Christ to me.

Last week, the guy who was my best friend from third grade, in a Seventh-day Adventist academy, through medical training at an Adventist University, contacted me. With one brief momentary exception of a family funeral, I had not seen him in 22 years.

He called to say that he is having trouble with his three teenage children who now attend a Seventh-day Adventist academy, and that he has his “suspicions about one of them.” That’s the closest he can get to saying “gay.” We did not talk in terms of an apology or forgiveness. He only asked if I was willing to be a part of his life again, after 22 long years.

I met his children, as a stranger, for the first time last week. We spent seven days together laughing about our “ancient history” and making present memories as we hiked to happy exhaustion in the high country. The “elephant in the room” was the 22 years of life without contact or mutual support. In my respect and concern for my old friend, I chose not to address the issue verbally, but to serve as his children’s first contact with a “gay person”—an ambassador, if you will.

When Catherine asked me to write for Safe Places, this family flowed through my mind. What will I tell the 16-year-old son attending an Adventist academy? What will I tell his father, my friend, sobbing in my arms over his worry? What if he treats his son the way he treated me? I have ideas and also a heart-felt desire to respect Adventism.

I want to recognize how far Adventist church culture has moved forward despite harsher church policies against those of us who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or intersex. I want to recognize that good, decent, moral people of faith have the right to disagree without being disagreeable. Many congregations do not welcome gay people. They have the choice to worship their vision of God. I'm okay with that. I have found another face of God and a fellowship with those who welcome me to worship.

That said, sharing my personal experience, and the similar ones still occurring throughout the world, is something akin to playing with fire. For those that cast me out, there are no words to describe the agony they created and inspired. For those that took me in, there are no words to describe my appreciation and relief. Heartrendingly, I recognize that many Adventist people with same-sex orientations, or who are transgender, have not been able to manage their suffering or find “safe places.” I know about the drug overdoses, the jumps, the “accidents.” I know about the addictions, promiscuity, and depression caused and exacerbated by homophobia and rejection.

I often consider what can be done to make these “castaway transitions” a little safer for our tribe of Adventist gay folk. It requires a personal Shepherd who cares both in spirit and human form. I think that's why “being out” is so important for those that can safely be so. We never know when our example, no matter how flawed or imperfect, inspires hope or creates an environment where someone can reach out to us, like my friend reached out to me after 22 years.

I was fortunate to have a few people in my “cast-off” time who I knew loved me. They gently brought me back from bitterness to joy. Their care ultimately helped me build my new life: new family, new job, new history, new school, new church, etc. For me, the rebuilding took decades. I am grateful to the people, loving Adventists among them, who made it possible.

For my own mental health, I choose not to dwell in the misery of my depression, mental illness, suicidal ideation, and rage that were inspired by the events of 22 years ago. I choose to follow the counsel, “The best revenge is living well.” I have no issue “calling the church out” for the hatred and bigotry it continues to inspire. Those actions and choices kill or maim far too many of us. I also have no issue expressing my gratitude towards loving Adventists who have helped me!

We need to develop recipes for successful transitions from closets to open air, from deception to honesty. They must include an acknowledgement and appreciation that within Adventism, there are a brave and courageous people, gay and straight, who support us completely.

I think our individual journey toward wholeness begins when we are able to be honest with ourselves and then with others. I cannot emphasize honesty enough because we cannot truly appreciate the open arms of Jesus unless we have an honest foundation from which to face this loving Creator. We cannot fully accept the genuine pastoral nature of our God until we stop keeping secrets that lead us to believe we are the only exceptions to the Savior's love. It's a process. It can include counseling, support groups, a welcoming church community, rebuilding community friendships, creating new memories, and keeping an open, forgiving mind and heart for our heritage.

Many of us may have to be reconciled to leaving Adventism along with all the other implications of that departure. I simply hope those Adventist clergy, leaders, teachers, and parents who cast us aside can come to think of us as fragile and valued human beings. If they can't stand us or love us anymore, could they at least direct us to those that might? To paraphrase Bruce Bawer: “If you can't consider loving us more, could you consider hating us less?” It remains an earnest plea. “God So Loved the World.” John noted no exceptions.

There will be no Second Coming until every nation, kindred, tongue, and people learn about a loving Savior. I am firmly convinced that as long as the Adventist church can routinely relegate millions of gay Christians to the trash bin of hell, their attitudes postpone our return to our Heavenly home and prolong human suffering. In the meantime, I suggest we live in grace and hope: it's the best way Home.

If you are a parent, educator, pastor, or church leader, please know that the teens in your life (gay and straight) are learning from your example and need your unconditional love. If you think the church needs to rethink how we treat our LGBTI members, stand up and say something. “In the end we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends.” —Martin Luther King, Jr.

