



TELLING OUR STORIES

CAL-PAC ANNUAL CONFERENCE
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These are the stories of courageous women and men who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender, and their parents, family members and loved ones. These are persons of “sacred worth” whose stories are meant to build bridges of understanding and awareness among all who read them with open and compassionate hearts.

It is our hope that these stories will be a resource for conversation within your local church and that from them you will see all the more clearly the powerful and unconditional love of God and God’s call to love our neighbor. It is such love that calls us to life, affirms the gifts of our lives, and leads us to care for ourselves and others.

Inspiration is to be found here that may strengthen your faith, your compassion, and the ministry of your congregation. We pray God’s Spirit is with you and evident in our words and actions.

- Rev. Ed Hansen

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EVERY PERSON HAS A SACRED STORY

Rev. Karen Clark Ristine

Bishop Swenson, Members of the Annual Conference, and Guests –

I address you each as colleagues in the ministry of all Christians as we receive these holy stories, these sacred stories of how Christ has journeyed with these men and women and children, these families who are part of the family of God.

I speak now to ask us how we will care for one another. How will we be in ministry and community with one another? We are called to care for one another as God cares for us. How can we open our hearts and our minds and our doors more fully to all of God's people?

I hear in these stories a call to pastoral care, a call to community.

I hear in these stories a call to evangelism, a call to welcome not just the stranger but a call to welcome the mothers and fathers, the brothers and sisters, the daughters and sons, the grandmothers and grandfathers, the aunts and uncles who dwell in the hearts and homes of so many of our families.

Many, many people in our congregations long to worship with their loved ones and share the message of grace and peace, hope and unending loving-kindness that they have known through their own experience of faith and faith community. Our congregation members long to share a message of full welcome to all of their family members and friends into the life of their faith communities.

How is the Holy Spirit of God working within our churches, working within our communities, working within us to welcome all of God's children?

Just as each pastor has a unique story of call to ministry, each person has a unique story of call to selfhood. In our society, for years on end, we have asked gay and lesbian men and women to remain silent about their sense of self if they want to remain in community. How can our churches reassure them that their stories are vital and that they and their families are welcome?

I speak, too, to testify to the truth that all of our words and assurances of welcome will ring false until not just our pews but our pulpits are open to all. How can we tell anyone that they are welcome in our congregations but their kind are not welcome to proclaim the Gospel?

And so, my friends, I speak, too, for those who cannot. I speak to give voice to the untold sacred stories of the gay and lesbian pastors who already serve with faith and hope and compassion as ordained clergy in our annual conference.

I would love for them to be able to share their stories with you, too, so we, as the body of Christ, can hold all of the body of Christ in meaningful care and prayer. I would love for them to be able to share their stories, but they cannot.

What I can tell you is that each and every person has a sacred story. Each and every person is a beloved child of God. Each and every person is welcomed and loved by God, with Christ as savior and brother, and with the loving, comforting and sustaining Holy Spirit of God guiding us all to new and everlasting life.

Thanks be to God.

DEAR MOM & DAD

This letter was written by a 16-year-old young man, a third-generation California-Pacific United Methodist, while a resident in a locked treatment facility. He was admitted there to receive treatment for clinical depression following a suicide attempt.

April 18, 2010

Dear Mom and Dad,

I have hated myself for far too long over something I cannot control. Each day and night has been filled with shame and sorrow that will not end unless I myself can finally accept me for what I am. The feeling of detachment and the fear of being alone forever have taken their toll. The guilt has caused scars, both on my body and heart, scars that will never go away. Why must I be cursed and seen as an outcast for what God has made of me since my birth? Why does one who loves the Lord as much as I do suffer for no wrongdoing of my own?

This curse has resided within me, buried under denial and self-loathing, for as long as I can remember, and I have finally realized that I'm tired of running from who I am. I have no choice over it; it's no question of willpower or a display of lack of purity. I would change it in an instant if I could, yet I know I cannot, and that nothing in this world ever will.

Who I am has caused so much pain, so much loathing, so much grieving, and all of that could have been prevented if I could have only accepted myself. Sixteen years I have run from this, five of which I was more terrified of it than of anything I could imagine. What has bothered me for so long, destroyed my self-confidence, plagued me with despair and caused my own hand to punish my body, is what I am. And what I am, suppressed under years of denial and silence, wished away and prayed about, to no avail—my very reason for all of my depression, yet the pinnacle turning point in my life (if I accept it)—is my being gay.

You can't even begin to understand the difficulty that I have gone through to finally admit this to myself and now to others. I have hated every ounce of myself because of this, and I am ready to move on and begin to finally accept who I really am. Yet I can't stand that disgusting word and now feel like some kind of freak or monster to finally put it upon myself. It's not what makes up my soul and is not all I am. I am [name], not just a freak in the crowd that can be categorized by that one hateful word. I'm a person, a musician, a son, a friend, a child of God, and I am also gay. It's just a miniscule part of who I am and always have been, but I've beaten myself up over it to such an extreme that you cannot even imagine the pain I've caused to my own self.

I pray that those I know and those I meet will hold off their judgments and resentments toward me and possibly accept—in even the slightest way—what I am. I am desperately ashamed and sorry for letting you down, but I again remind you and myself that there is nothing I can do to change this. I hope that in the months to come we will all be able to be more comfortable with my disease and finally will get me out of my self-hate and depression and push toward a life that yields joy.

Love, Your Son

WE ARE ALL CHILDREN OF GOD

April Moore

My grandmother always said that being a Methodist is something that's in your blood - it defines who you are and the choices that guide you through life. As a lay leader to conference for many years, she would tell us that it didn't matter where we were in the world - if we saw a United Methodist Church it was as good as being home. I always found so much comfort in that - of knowing that I was truly connected to something bigger than myself and a part something that served God. I was born and raised in the same United Methodist Church for 20 years and I was active in our churches ministries - everything from teaching Sunday school to Choir to Nurturing committee.

Unlike many people who come out in the church I never associated it with something negative. I was raised in a very small community and I always felt loved. Even though I was "different" I knew that God loved and cared about me. I felt that as an absolute truth in my life that I never questioned. What I did feel, however, was the pain of the members I had known all my life who were faced with the choice of upholding the church's stance against homosexuality or accepting me as a beloved child of God. I've always regretted that the greater Church put that stance in place as it divided people and forced them to choose the side of hate instead of love, of bigotry instead of compassion, of anxiety instead of hope.

I knew in my early teens that I was gay but as I grew older in the church, I began to sense that my sexuality was pulling my hometown church apart. I had always been taught that being divisive in God's church was sinful so I did the only thing I knew to do to salvage the church and the people I loved so much. I walked away. I wasn't strong enough back then to speak out and tell them that the church's policy was wrong. I wasn't strong enough to speak out against my family's decision to side with the more conservative side of our church. And I certainly wasn't strong enough to seek the comfort or council of another church. I just left. I never hated God for this. I never felt cursed or unloved or ashamed of who I was because I know that God claims me as one of His own, and in His eyes, I'm not broken or damaged but full of life and love.

Now, through the eyes of age, I'm strong enough to speak out against policies that separate and divide God's church. As the Lay Leader in our church, I don't consider it my purpose to welcome just the congregants who are gay, but it's my job - *and your job as leaders in Christ* - to welcome ALL congregants.

I pray that we never let another person leave God's house because they don't "fit" or they don't measure up to what we feel is God's calling. We are all children of God and as such we all deserve inclusion, love, and respect for one another.

WHEN I DISCOVERED MY SON IS GAY

Bev Peace

Born and bred a Methodist! My great-grandfather (Charles Wesley Ball!), my father, my first husband (now deceased) and my current husband - all Methodist pastors. And I went to Duke Divinity School! So I am well within the framework of our denomination. Yet when I discovered that my son is gay, my church was not the source of information or support I needed. That was almost 25 years ago and, thank goodness, many local churches now are truly welcoming and inclusive. BUT, he cannot marry or be ordained, though he and his partner are active in their church and are the only ones of our four children who are and who tithe.

They say a mother knows all, has eyes in the back of her head, super intuition and yet, I had no clue about my son. Paul was a happy child - talented, studious and outgoing. As he grew into the teen years, he was also handsome and athletic. Other moms used to tease me about having "the perfect son" and pushed their daughters in his line of vision. The fact that he wasn't "girl crazy" didn't worry me. I chalked it up to his pursuit of good grades and proficiency at the piano, his primary interest. Then his father died suddenly and at age 12 my son, Paul, became "the man of the house". Our world turned upside down as I, a stay-at-home mom, had to move out of the parsonage, find and furnish a home and go to work. But that's a whole different story!

To make a long story shorter, when I discovered my son's orientation, I was in turmoil. A close friend had just watched her son die from AIDS and I thought that was our future. Furthermore, I knew NOTHING about sexual orientation. Now, we have the Oprah show, Ellen DeGeneres, books and even Episcopal bishops... many opportunities to see that being gay is NORMAL, just less frequent than straight. As my husband and I have come "out" as parents of a gay son, we've discovered many within this Annual Conference who share our situation. Sadly, our church has not followed the model of Jesus' inclusivity. For us, we joined PFLAG (Parents, Family & Friends of Lesbian and Gays) and found it a source of information, support and advocacy for gay rights. (I'm quite proud that I joined them in marching in the Gay Pride Parade in Westwood!)

Finally, Paul and his partner of 20 years have a wonderful home. They share careers in music, my son being the assistant conductor of Los Angeles Opera. I love his partner and can't imagine our family without him. They are a constant blessing to us. I am proud to claim Greg Norton as my "son-in-law"! I continue to fight homophobia wherever I find it. If anyone says "but the Bible says," I'll be glad to get that Bible out and read what it DOES say! In the words of the hymn "Help us accept each other as Christ accepted us". Amen!

BEING AN LGBT CHRISTIAN IS A CALLING

Bruce R. Watkins, Ph.D.

I would like to share with you my experience of God calling me as a gay Christian. I believe that being an LGBT Christian is a calling! I believe God has a calling for each of us. And, in that calling, there are many purposes that interweave and progress, one from the other. God's purposes become our purposes, and herein we derive meaning.

God calls us based on the talents and skills that She has given us. So, I need to share a little bit of my background.

I was raised Roman Catholic, with 16 years of Catholic education, eight of which were with the Jesuits. In fact, I graduated from Loyola University with a major in Psychology and three full minors in theology, philosophy and foreign languages. Then, I received my Ph.D. in clinical psychology from the University of Oregon. In fact, I am a clinical psychologist in private practice, and have done much teaching as a professor at UCLA and CSPP.

There have been three main purposes in my spiritual life:

(1) I am a gay Christian. Thirty years ago, that was quite a conflict. And, as a good psychologist, I set about solving that internal conflict. This was my first purpose for God, but I didn't know that at the time.

My mate, Dan, and I joined a straight Christian, spirit filled Church - Presbyterian. As a Catholic, being gay was something to hide or confess. But in this new church, I did something very different - I worshipped God as a gay person. In effect, I came out to God. Usually, one comes out to oneself and then to others. But, I believe, that coming out to God is even more important and much more work. I did this for ten years as a Presbyterian, and then Dan and I were ready to do something more.

(2) We helped start and develop a gay Pentecostal Church, Christ Chapel of the Valley. Now, my purpose turned outward. Whereas before, I was solving an internal conflict, now I was focusing on an external conflict between the Christian Church and LGBT people.

I realized that the Christian Church was the greatest source of homophobia in America. If we could change the Church, we could get rid of a lot of homophobia. I started a Counseling Center at Christ Chapel, and put together many classes and workshops to increase gay self-esteem. I will mention just two of them.

(a) "Homosexuality and the Bible." I researched the major passages of Scripture that supposedly condemn homosexuality and discovered that there is nothing in the Bible that condemns homosexuality.

(b) "God in our relationships: trust, intimacy and commitment." A lesbian and I did this workshop. So, we had me, a gay man talking about my relationships with men as they reflect my relationship with God. And next to me, was a lesbian talking about her relationships with women as they reflect her relationship with God. We took this on the road.

(3) When Dan and I arrived at the Methodist Church, I found them deep into diversity. They don't just tolerate gay people. They don't just accept gay people. They *integrate* gay people.

For example, when I did the homosexuality and the Bible class, they told me to open it up to everyone. I asked, "Do you think straight people would be interested in such a class?!" "YES!" they responded. And straight people attended. The discussions between the gay and straight people were incredibly healing of homophobia.

But a better example is the Relationship Workshop we ran. When we didn't have a lesbian for that, *a straight man*, Jay Sowell, stepped forward and offered to take the lesbian's part. So, we had a gay man, me, talking about my relationships with men as they reflect my relationship with God. And, we had a straight man, right next to me, talking about his relationships with women as they reflect his relationship with God. The result was miraculous.

Coming out to the Christian Church as gay is quite difficult. But, it pales in relation to coming out as a Christian to gay people. And, what's even harder, is coming out as a gay Christian to the profession of psychology.

A couple of years ago, I joined the Lesbian and Gay Psychotherapy Association. I am now involved in a new purpose - mainstreaming LGBT therapists, people and issues into the profession of psychology in California.

Each of these three purposes have interacted and fed off each other in God's calling me as a gay Christian. Many LGBT Christians might believe that being an LGBT Christian is a curse. But it's not. It's a blessing. Indeed, it's a calling from God . . . for me.

MY LIFE AS A CHRISTIAN BEGAN AT BIRTH

Daniel G. Garay

My life as a Christian began at birth. My mother, who died soon after my birth, was a devoted Christian. I went to foster parents, who raised me in the church. It was a Pentecostal Church. I grew up loving God. My Christianity took a side track in my later youth when I converted into a Catholic at the age of 14.

My first committed relationship as a gay person was with a Baptist Minister. I had already graduated from college and had been in the military. He introduced me to a new Christian life and I was baptized Baptist. Our relationship was very closeted, because he was still performing his Baptist minister duties.

In 1974, I met Bruce at a Christmas party at our present home. We started dating and decided to commit to each other. Soon after our beginning, we started attending Church together. We have spent ten years as Presbyterians, five years as Pentecostals, five years as Lutherans, and three years at MCC.

One Sunday, we decided to visit Hollywood United Methodist Church. Ed Hansen was the pastor. Right away we felt the love and inclusiveness of this church. We feel that the Methodist spirit is very socially aware and embraces everyone. We are at a church that is very diverse in color as well as culture. Bruce and I are very happy at HUMC.

We started an LGBT Fellowship at HUMC. The fellowship pivoted primarily around a monthly potluck that we held in our home. LGBT people of diverse ages and backgrounds attended, each bringing an inspired dish to share. Typically, Bruce interrupted the meal with a short Christian program about LGBT people. The potluck provided these people with a good way to socialize with other LGBT Church people.

We also provided the fellowship with regular classes, bible studies and workshops, ranging from "Homosexuality and the Bible," to "LGBT self-esteem: the heart of the Christian faith." Once, we did a day long workshop called, "God in our Relationships: Trust, Intimacy and Commitment."

Bruce and I celebrated 35 years of being together on Jan. 11, 2010. We thank God for putting us together and for keeping us together all this time. We hope we can be an example to young gay people, in that they can see that gay couples can stay in a committed relationship forever.

COMING OUT IS A PROCESS

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My story is probably less mature than many of the other stories you will read, because even though I am a 'senior', I did not come out until three years ago. Three years ago I was able to say, 'I am bisexual.' Most who know and love me know that I am bi, but the whole world does not know, and after a great deal of prayer and consultation with wise elders, I have chosen to remain anonymous for this piece. I long for the day when writing about my sexuality is not an issue. I long even more for the day when the Church (including the United Methodist Church) is completely inclusive and welcoming. I have learned that coming out is a process (as are most things in life) and not an arrival. So currently, the U.M.C. and I are in this process.

I am grateful to the United Methodist Church for much of this process. Two United Methodist Clergy, Bert All and Ed Hansen began a camp for people living with HIV/AIDS called Strength for the Journey. In 1996, I became involved with Strength for the Journey.

My first camp experience was interesting. I initially could not sleep thinking about myself as a minority -- a straight man surrounded by gay men (most of the campers were gay back then). But I quickly realized I was treated just like every other gay man at camp. I mean this in the most positive way. Actually, everyone assumed that I was gay. So I was very included and respected. Over the years I met men who were impressive leaders, and I decided homosexuality was ok, wondered what the fuss was about, and really loved being around gays.

I understand my journey with LGBT issues is slightly ahead of the general consensus of the U.M.C. So that makes me hopeful for the church. I realize it is only a matter of time (a relatively short period of time) until the U.M.C. will wonder what all the fuss was about. This might (probably) happen after I'm gone, and that is fine except thousands of our LGBT brothers and sisters have been waiting for a very long time to be included.

Following is a list of why the U.M.C. should become completely inclusive of LGBT people:

- A fresh biblical perspective
- A liberative theological view
- Interesting, relevant rites and liturgy grounded in deep spiritual truth
- Gifted people with backgrounds that can help further the kingdom. We are missing out on an enormous resource without LGBT brothers and sisters.
- Huge potential to fill our churches with people and our coffers with money

CHRIST'S INVITATION TO THE TABLE

Rev. Debbie Gara

As I continue in my faith journey, the message of God's overflowing grace for all is the most important story to tell, the most important message in response and actions with others. This means a keen awareness of the people around, and of how we say things, even in subtle ways. This is important for anyone who may feel like they are less than others in any way, and anyone who may have received this message from the church at some point. There are always people who are searching for their sacred worth, needing to feel invited and included. It is important to be very intentional in our welcoming language and actions with the LGBT community specifically, and anyone wrestling with their sexuality, for throughout history they have received messages contrary to God's grace from society and from the church.

For me, this awareness and sensitivity to anyone around has become a key part of being true to God's call for me in Ministry. There are so many people who have received messages about God and the church that are contrary to the true message of Christ. Many have given up on the organized church. My only brother is gay, and he made the decision to discontinue his membership in the UMC after the 1996 General Conference did not change the exclusionary language regarding homosexuality. My grief in that, and deep Bible study and relationship with so many in LGBT community, has affirmed and deepened this commitment through the years of my Ministry.

Our churches are incomplete without so many who should be there sharing their gifts and graces. It's not enough to be passive or avoid this subject because it is uncomfortable for people or they are tired of hearing about it. I believe we must be intentional in naming Christ's invitation to the table and make sure our altars and our meeting rooms include that voiced invitation. For all these reasons we must continue to share our stories, and listen to one another, opening our selves to new understanding. We must help one another discover and re-discover the ability to be real together, to celebrate our diversity and sexuality, all part of the wondrous gift of God's creation.

AN UNEXPECTED ALLY OF EACH PERSON'S TRUE SELF

The Journey of an anti-homosexual who thought there's no way in hell he'd ever accept sexual differentiation, but had a Change of Heart

Derek Lundgren

When I was 12 years old, I met a boy who was sexually attracted more to males than to females. At first, I was fearful of him, but I discovered with time he had a great measure of goodness, despite his mistakes, wrongdoings, and the complexity of his humanity. Even though I had some discomfort with aspects of his character, I had no real problem with his sexual orientation. When my father found out I was associating with “that gay person” he gave me the only close father-to-son life guidance talk during that stage of my life that I can remember. My father explained that the path that he was on, in terms of his sexuality, was the equivalent of going down “a one way street backwards”, and when you go against what the majority of society is doing, it makes life more difficult. The spoken message I received from my father, in so many words, was that sexual differentiation is not acceptable. The unspoken message, however, was that the full scope of “that gay person’s” basic humanity is not acceptable. In other words, that person is not good enough. A gay person is flawed, defective, and inadequate as a human being.

I couldn't tell you exactly what else my father said to me during that conversation, but the other messages I received said, “that gay person is a threat to your happiness and to the over-all quality of your life”, and “your image is more important than having that homosexual in your life”. In other words, “image is everything”. For that reason, over the course of time, I learned to avoid the person I met when my family was living in Montana. His name was Lonnie. I would still hang out with Lonnie from time-to-time in private and in hiding, but I disowned, rejected, and alienated him from my public life at school and elsewhere in order to do the best I could to maintain “my image” because that was my ticket to acceptance.

Twenty years later, the small town report I received from Montana was that Lonnie, (the boy with the donkey-sounding laugh and coke bottle glasses that were coca-cola colored), attempted to commit suicide by driving his car off a bridge. Wow. ...On the other hand, though, when I considered the loads of institutional and societal shaming he was inundated with from his peer group in school, the local community, and the culture we all share, it wasn't that much of a surprise.

Following that time, more and more I gained a considerable amount of knowledge about the effects of toxic shame. I became familiar with what's called “life scripts” of which some are “tragic life scripts”. Tragic life scripts end in killing oneself or living out one's life in a form of chronic suicide and are among many different clear identifying aspects of hidden toxic shame in a person.

Digging a little deeper into the case, I discovered that I'd become toxically shamed too, from the major sources of shame operating in my family and our society. The way it played out for me is that I ended up shaming others as a strategy to cover up my own

shame. Because of that, I felt terribly guilty over the very real probability that I contributed to Lonnie's shame and agonizing despair that led to his attempted suicide. Worsening my terrible guilt and shame over the way I treated Lonnie, was the realization that I, in a sense, knew what it was like to walk in his shoes to the extent that I'd been toxically shamed and felt the rupture of my authentic self, and the accompanying depression that goes with that.

A part of my authentic self was lost when I received the message that it's okay for my parents to be angry but it was never okay for me. A part of me was lost when my basic childhood needs were chronically neglected and I lost a sense of my own personal value. A part of me was lost as I did the best I could to adapt to the sickness of my multi-generational addictive family and our addictive society. A part of me was lost when I bought into the success myth espoused by our society, and was living my life based on the belief that success means making money, having prestige, and being well-liked. A part of me was lost when I was taught it's better to act nice than to be nice; to say things I don't mean and pretend to feel ways I don't feel. A part of me was lost when I bought into the rigid sex roles promoted by society, and conformed to a crude and restrictive gender stereotype of what it means to be my gender role (to be a real man), which made my (true) self feel nonexistent, invisible. A part of me was lost to the extent that I felt I was falling short and not measuring up to the culture's norms for beauty and success in terms of financial status, ethnicity, intelligence, popularity, physical appearance, athletic ability and talent. A part of me was lost when I suffered physical abuse. A part of me was lost when I suffered sexual abuse.

Looking at my life from the outside in was somewhat chilling, but the allure of the underground and the mysterious aspect of it all strangely fascinated the side of me that likes to be scared by a horror story, which sometimes blurs and bleeds over into my spiritual side that is so amazed and perplexed over the wonders of life.

Shock set in when I realized I had been in my own version of Lonnie's world for many years but I didn't know it. Not only had I been guarding others from knowing my painful secret, but also I was guarding my conscious self from knowing it by using various behavior strategies (or cover-ups), because the pain of toxic shame was excruciating. Like all shame-based people before healing, I survived the pain by putting up a false front. I created an image; a false self that I hoped would be more acceptable. I didn't even know what I had done because the image I projected became so second nature and such an automatic reflex that I merged with my mask. Life revealed to me that shame-based people escape themselves in ways that may be as polar opposite as a super-achieving perfectionist or a down-and-out addict in an alley, but each is still driven by toxic shame. Author John Bradshaw writes, "In fact, the most paradoxical aspect of toxic shame is that it is the core motivator of the superachieved and the underachieved, the star and the scapegoat, the self-righteous and the wretched, the powerful and the pathetic."

In my desperation to take away the intolerable pain of deep shame, I compulsively used bingeing, starving, overeating, exercise, striving for power and control, work, staying busy, sex, relationships with people, entertainments, gossiping, and a preoccupation with putting together and maintaining a certain image all as drugs to mood alter, which then became out-and-out addictions. For years, I used the drug of grandiosity, in whatever forms

I could manage to attain it, and all that eventually progressed to using illicit street drugs. After each of those addictive relationships that I had wed myself to betrayed me and broke our commitment, “till death do us part”, I then launched my personal war against my socially acceptable and illegal drugs of choice, which very much resembled the Government’s war on both drugs and violence in our cities. I was approaching the conflict primarily from the outside in, and not really addressing the inner conditions that, for the most part, fueled all my outer problems. I continued to deny that the way I was handling my problems wasn’t working very well, and that the answer lies not in trying to change the world “out there” but instead in changing the conditions within. In time, I discovered that these underlying conditions were the common denominator between my addictions and all addictions (from the mildest forms to the most overtly destructive forms). Eventually, I was lost. I became completely defeated. I was a casualty of the war.

Operating from within a system of addictive beliefs on “cruise control”, driven to cover up my own intolerable pain, and driven by toxic shame, these destructive forces ultimately sent me right off a bridge, in a sense, the same way they drove Lonnie off a bridge. And like Lonnie, I finally hit bottom. That’s when it became obvious that I’d been trying to cover up my hemorrhaging wound, the rupture of my true self.

From there, I found real love in the last place I thought I’d ever find it, the church. My friend, Keith Menoher, and I, somehow found our way to the doors of Hollywood United Methodist Church, the church with the big tower that sits just across the way from the Kodak Theatre in the heart of Hollywood, California. Keith quickly found his way in, but I found myself standing with one foot in and one foot outside the front door, so to speak, for years. In the process, I found a great measure of unconditional love there, which served to open me up enough to embrace the twelve step program, along with “the twelve gateways to spiritual growth” by author of *Way of the Peaceful Warrior*, Dan Millman, found in his book, *Everyday Enlightenment*, and eventually (imagine), even embrace “the church” itself.

Among the many people at HUMC that served my growth, the most influential person that moved me to not only follow the recovery path and Jesus (which I equate with the way of the peaceful warrior), but drop the prejudices I had long held toward Christians and Christianity, was former senior pastor, Ed Hansen. Through his sermons, his real-life walk, and his personal words of wisdom and counsel, Ed shared with the congregation and me life-giving concepts, teachings, and guidance. These were later underscored and affirmed for me through the parallel and overlapping principles and practices that acclaimed author and teacher Joseph Sharp shares in his gentle guidebook, *Spiritual Maturity*. Ed, along with many of the members of HUMC helped me to see that what many others in our culture taught me to believe was “true” was actually “false.”

As unbelievable as it was to me, HUMC revealed to me that Christians are not all narrow-minded, hypocritical, too focused on getting converts, bigoted anti-homosexuals, old-fashioned, boring, out of touch, and unwilling to deal with the grit of the everyday lives of people. Nor are they all harshly judgmental or overly motivated by a right-wing political agenda. They do not all hide behind simplistic solutions and answers, nor did I experience all of them as being religious addicts who hide their own shame and transfer it to others, by means of patronizing religious self-righteousness. They do not all cover up their dark

secrets by espousing moral “shoulds”, “oughts”, and “musts” that have been sanctioned by subjective interpretations of religious revelation. They do not all use God as a drug in the way that I used food, exercise, sex, and crack cocaine as a drug. They do not all use prayer, meditation, serving others, going through sacramental rituals, quoting the Bible, or reading Bible passages as mood-altering experiences to cover-up their own toxic shame. A good number of them actually use these practices for their own spiritual growth and maturity and to help others. HUMC didn’t merely teach a perfectionistic “how to get it right” behavioral script where it’s actually more important to *act* loving and righteous than to *be* loving and righteous.

Through the process of disillusionment, it became clear that for years (even decades) I proceeded in what was considered a consensual reality, at least among a certain group of people. Those of us who belonged to this group might have been the only ones consenting, but we thought “that” was reality the same way a kid believes a movie is real. Furthermore, I discovered that a number of other beliefs of mine in other areas of my life, which people taught me were “right” or “logical”, in the end, were also shame-based, life-diminishing and set me up to be in conflict with myself and with the world. HUMC and real-life experience continued to open my eyes to the fact that there was a reality outside my old distorted perceptions.

Along with this time came a new kind of escape for me, a spiritual “high”. Disappointingly, however, this fix didn’t last that long. When the newness wore off, the ups and downs that are frequently close together in not only the drug world, but also the world in general, turned out to be here too. For that reason, I found myself, yet again, left down instead of up. I was profoundly disappointed with the realization that merely showing up at church, in itself, would not magically fix my past wounds. These wounds showed up on the surface to the degree I attained a measure of success, but I was ultimately left unfulfilled, driven, but without purpose, not alone, but lonely, or life brought rewards, but no real lasting peace or satisfaction.

Another big letdown for me was the awkwardness that went with belonging to the same group of people I previously stereotyped and felt antagonistic toward, because our roles had now reversed. Certainly, some groups of people who receive messages that they’re defective or inferior compared to others face far greater discrimination than others. Even so, because I’d become a Christian and was associated with the negative image of Christians held by many outsiders, my past experience told me that it was my turn to be the target of stereotyping, teasing, put-down jokes, and even discriminatory rejection to some degree for now being associated with the church. I came to know what it was like to walk in “their” shoes. Still, in spite of this relatively minor annoyance, the value of the unconditional love and acceptance I experienced from many people within the church far outweighed our cultural baggage and social garbage and so I continued going back.

Throughout this time, I finally came to realize that in order to get and stay free from toxic shame and feeling trapped by circumstances, a relationship, or life in general, I needed to adopt healthy recovery beliefs, which are those that are life enhancing; those that convey honor and respect for ourselves and all others. I needed to reconcile the parts of my being I disowned because they conflicted with values that I learned when I was growing up. I

needed to reconcile rejected aspects of my character that are not necessarily negative, immoral, or evil but they seemed so, which is why I disowned them. I needed to embrace and integrate my darker shadow qualities. I needed to bring together the parts of my identity that were “waiting to be reclaimed like lost children”, in order to become whole, complete, and real. I needed to find my inner kid and unconditionally accept him. I needed to heal my wounded child within. Additionally, I needed to take responsibility by reclaiming myself and become a reliable, protective good parent to myself – to become skilled at giving unconditional love to my inner kid, even if I have things I don’t like about myself or my body image. To experience lasting inner peace, I needed to re-order my priorities and allow important things to become important to me now: people, my family and friends, living in the moment, helping others, and somehow seeing the up-side of every down-side, in even the most difficult circumstances.

Among the great challenges I was facing, I received yet another shock with the discovery that Pastor Ed (the person most responsible for helping me discover my unconditional human worth) is gay. I rejected Lonnie because he’s gay, should I let that be a barrier between Ed and me? Yet, Ed was one of the key persons there to help save me at the bottom of “the bridge” I indirectly drove off. Now what? What would my father say this time around? Would he want me to somehow reject or discriminate against the person most responsible for me reaching the point where I became willing to make the necessary decisions for solid recovery and following the path of Jesus – the way of the peaceful freedom fighter? Would it seem to him there are things for me to worry about that are more important than other people’s sexual orientation?

Even more important than what my father would say, at this stage, were my questions to myself of whether I could ever fully accept the sexuality Ed has the courage to own as healthy and sacred, or would I hold onto the viewpoint that homosexuality is a sickness, a syndrome, a perversion, or a simple choice? If a gay person expresses one’s own individual sexuality do I really believe that’s a sin? Looking back in time, was Ed’s homosexuality in combination with his position as senior pastor of the church a threat to anyone or harmful to the sanctity of the institution?

I concluded that Ed’s sexuality wasn’t an issue for the church given that he answered his call to ministry, served his lifework as an ordained pastor with the UMC and has since retired. Still though, was it possible for me to become “okay” with the sexual orientation he’s had the courage to own, or would my discomfort with his specific sexual identity interfere with all that’s needed to sustain the fierce bond of our close friendship that developed over time?

That last question weighed especially heavy on me, because early on I was taught to despise sexual differentiation in exchange for the supremacy of image. I learned to hate or disparage gays or lesbians who act out sexual behavior in accordance with their own sexual identity.

The worry I had over whether my issues with sexual differentiation would be distancing in relation to my friendship with Ed proved to be for legitimate reasons in the following months when it became glaringly obvious that some of the choices I had made, which certainly flowed in part from my prejudices, hostilities, hatreds, and fears, somehow put

some distance between us. My behavior was predictable though. I didn't just relate to anti-homosexuals, I had developed a number of traits that characterize anti-homosexuals. I came to know what it was like to walk in "their" shoes, given that I'd become out-and-out homophobic.

While I needed to come to terms with a number of concerns, I also needed to move forward toward solid recovery by adopting new healthy, recovery beliefs. But how could I tell whether certain beliefs I've held for most of my life are shame-based addictive beliefs or the life enhancing variety to ourselves and all others? More than ever, I needed to somehow rise above the labyrinth of all the competing messages that told me how I should live. It seemed I nearly met death a couple times already in part from the conflicting ideas that were sold to me by a world which does its best to make individuals into someone else. Considering the fact that many spiritual and religious leaders don't agree on many things and the fact that organizations, spiritual groups, religions, cultures, and even nations all have their dark shadow qualities, just like individuals have their own hidden parts, who could I trust to guide me? My father? The church? Ed? People zealously defending their unconscious beliefs and ideas as ultimate truth, who are possibly confusing their opinions with the word of God?

Ultimately, I decided to not take things at face value. Instead, I chose to trust only in something, someone, some place, or some belief that offers true aliveness and gives full expression to my heart's deepest longings and needs, not the short-lived aliveness that goes with all-too-fleeting moments of comfort, relief, or power. I made the decision to live my own life, free of idealism or dogmas that don't serve my wholeness or my reality. Not to imply that I will not read, appreciate, or learn from the concepts and teachings within Bible scripture, but I will weigh it against the scripture teachings of real-life consequences, both positive and negative. No longer was I going to blindly conform or blindly rebel.

As that applies to choosing healthy recovery beliefs and healthy sexuality, I reconsidered the stories and the voices of adults and kids harmed by others because of their sexual orientation or gender identity; I thought through the arguments made by different sides and measured them against realities, not hypothetical situations. I rethought how I, and a sector of our society, have treated our nation's lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgenders, and at last I came to agree with the comment of John Bradshaw, one of the *100 Most Influential Writers on Emotional Health in the Twentieth Century*. He writes, "common sense should tell us that no one would choose to be gay or lesbian. In a society where certain churches condemn them to hell, where they are the continuous butt of comedian's jokes and the very quality of their lives (including their work lives) is threatened by warring fundamentalists, including mainline 'redneck' homophobics and white supremacists, why would anyone choose to be gay or lesbian?"

In the same way, I came to agree with the comments of spiritual teacher and author Dan Millman. He writes, "Religious dogma is not wrong; it is just not realistic. Nor is it supposed to be. The purpose of religion is to awaken our highest ideals and possibilities, make demands, stretch our souls, and draw forth the highest and best within us. Religion calls us to our human maturity. ...Whatever faith we practice, we need to realize that sexuality has no inherent morality or immorality. Such ideas are a human invention. No

absolute, sexual guidelines exist. Every culture and era has its own beliefs and ideas of sexual right and wrong.”

So, to answer one of my initial questions: “Could I somehow discriminate against Ed, the person whose unconditional love, acceptance, guidance, affirmation, and living example of Christ’s teachings were the topmost factors that made the Church and Christianity accessible to me?” Well, whatever “It” is that for many years was working to shake me up and wake me up, and calling me to let in the light of awareness, revealed to me the answer, which is, I could not. Spirit led me to the decision to fully accept Ed and his sexuality, and the sexual orientation of all people.

Today, I’m doing relatively well on the path of solid recovery and fully engaged in the process of learning unconditional self-acceptance and overcoming toxic shame. Today, I’m learning to live according to certain life-affirming principles, such as honesty rather than denial and delusion, humility rather than grandiosity, accountability rather than irresponsibility, community and service rather than self-preoccupation, and – most important – self acceptance rather than self-hate. At the same time, I am proceeding with caution in order to do what needs to be done so that I don’t discover years later that I had been compulsive about my spirituality, still operating from within an addictive structure, and still have the same old hole in my soul.

As a part of giving back the love I received, and partly for making up to Lonnie for treating him unjustly, I decided to become an ally not only to LGBT persons, but to all individuals in their stands against the oppression of having their true selves in repression, which causes a gnawing inner turmoil compounded by a sense of emptiness, boredom, and futility. I’ve decided to be a supporter of all people becoming free from the discriminatory restrictions that are placed on their true selves by the bindings of toxic shame. Additionally, I’ve decided to let go of the ways in which I’ve been an anti-homosexual, and instead to be a strong supporter of everyone’s true selves and individual sacred sexuality.

Having made it this far, I was stunned to discover from an ever-growing number of people who summon the church to a higher level of integrity that there are policies and practices in the United Methodist Church which are exclusionary and discriminatory toward LGBT persons relationship to participation in all aspects of the church’s life. This said to me that the impression that I got of the UMC from my initial experience at HUMC was not entirely accurate. It was no bolt from the sky though that the UMC is involved with forms of oppression and discrimination when I look back on my past experience.

On the other hand, based on my experiences at Hollywood United Methodist Church, I would never have known that the UMC promotes sexual shame and toxic shame – however unintentional - by treating individuals unfairly and with contempt. It would make sense to me that the leaders of the UMC would want the overall organization to be structured in a way that is more respectful and inclusive toward all those who participate in the institution. First, as I understand, Jesus would not promote disrespect, injustice, or oppression. Second, respecting a person’s dignity pays off in increased attendance, loyalty, and participation. Third, participating in singling out LGBT persons from having equal rights to full participation in the life of the church fuels the fires of toxic shame, which not only threatens to undermine the stability of their own institution, but also leads to chaos and disaster in

our families, community, and, ultimately, our nation. I discovered within my own inner battle that not fully appreciating and respecting the diversity of all the aspects of my humanity, led to fragmentation and division, and ultimately caused my downfall.

My personal inner battle's connection to America's great and ongoing civil rights struggles is about much more than just parallels or analogies. Consequences taught me that if I don't become free of division and discrimination within myself, by bringing equality, liberty, and justice to all the diverse aspects of my whole character through becoming integrated and whole, my true self will be forced to live under another type of oppression that occurs within, when one's inner kid's desires, needs and feelings are repressed. At the end of the day, that leaves me depressed, within a society that promotes the supremacy of image.

At this stage, I find myself in the process of reconciling the split between my real self and the artificial front I put up. I find myself in the process of reconciling my puritanical and hedonistic aspects to find a balance between self-indulgence and self-denial. I find myself in the process of reconciling my left-brain qualities that tend to be masculine and right-brain qualities that tend to be feminine so that I can finally feel whole. By unifying my right and left sides, I can truly embrace my own mate and sexual partner as well as others as my brothers, sisters, and fellow human beings in spiritual communion. I'm in the process of fully accepting my sexuality, since that is the only way to accept my humanity and finally feel whole. Rather than being caught up in the perceived sexual dilemma of an either-or-choice between my body and physical senses or my emotional and spiritual being, I'm in the process of reconciling and unifying flesh and spirit so that I can finally take hold of my sexuality more resolutely, lovingly, and responsibly. I'm in the process of reintegrating those values and aspects of my character that I previously excluded because I believed they represented weaknesses or didn't conform to polarized sex-role ideals or popular image expectations of "the image society".

On this journey of reconciliation, I'm also in the process of learning to treat myself with the nurturing, understanding and compassion with which I would treat a child, meaning I'm becoming my own "good parent". Therefore, *The Parents Reconciling Network*, an outreach program for United Methodist parents and families of LGBT persons working for both policy and practice that accords all persons full participation in the life of the church takes on yet another significant meaning to me.

While it's true that I can't change what happened to me when I was growing up, it's also true that I do have the power to give myself all the support, forgiveness, reasonable limits, and whatever else I might need now for my own healing. For that reason, I've decided to become an ally to my true self, my inner kid. I'm now in the process of doing the best I can to fully accept the part of me (I didn't know existed) whom I met when I was just twelve years old, a part of me that let me know I'm gay. I'm now becoming a good, protective parent and ally to my inner kid whose sexual orientation is gay. Had I not learned to reject myself as a twelve-year old boy, I probably would not have become the anti-homosexual that I grew into, and would not have shamed and rejected Lonnie whom I met three years later.

At this point, I'm in the process of changing my inner kid's identity from being an addict, not good enough, or inadequate, to instead a wounded-healer and "a child of the universe", who happens to have the courage to own his own sexual identity and bring his toxic shame out of hiding and be his (true) self.

The scripture teachings of real-life experience and long-term consequences have taught me that accepting all people's individual sexual identities in our society and allowing people of all sexual orientations equal rights is not the threat that could destroy the rock on which our society is built. From my point of view, the real threat to the foundation of our lives, our society, and the future of our children and grandchildren is accepting active toxic shaming practices within our families, institutions, and society, which indirectly attack the individual and the family, the most vital cells in our society. The real threat to our institutions and society are people who participate in and perpetuate institutional and societal shaming. They tell certain groups that they are defective or inferior by treating them unfairly and disrespectfully. This led me to reflect upon the various groups that are labeled, discriminated against, and ridiculed, in differing ways and degrees:

Women	Relatively recent immigrants
Blacks	People who are overweight
Hispanics	People dealing with more overtly destructive addictions
Native Americans	Victims of abuse
Jews	People who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender
Catholics	People you think are unattractive
Arabs	People who are divorced
Born-again Christians	Atheists/agnostics
People who are homeless	People who are (financially) poor
People who are old	Persons with disabilities

I've come to share the deep conviction of many that toxic shame significantly contributes to hatred, prejudices, bullying, violence to others and self, gang life, criminality, war, and all forms of destructive addictions. I've come to see that I cannot treat others as though they're second rate or less than equal without promoting shame. All of which also means, to whatever degree I participate in treating people with inequality, dishonor, or disrespect, I in turn fuel the fires of toxic shame, and contribute to the addiction epidemic as well as the other major troubles we face that bring harm to all of us. Once I could see the real stakes, I realized that I have an interest in helping to build stronger families, and communities.

I've come to believe that expressing one's individual sacred sexuality is not a sin, but the sin instead is allowing one's sexual expression to become, in the words of Dan Millman, "a promiscuous recreational sport or even an exploitative and loveless form of suffering, an addiction to erotic endorphins or sexual adrenaline." The sin is suppressing the surging force of one's sexuality, or encouraging others to do so, given that the suppression of one's drives creates compulsions, obsessions, guilty secrets, and toxic shame, which brings harm that affects all of us.

As a person who's struggled for relief from the inner torment that goes with toxic shame, my prayer and hope is this: Whether you're a member of a group that faces far

greater discrimination than others, you're involved in the civil rights or social justice battles of the day, or you're simply battling to experience the inner bliss that's your natural birthright, that you confront and challenge shaming behavior directed at you and that you work to counteract societal shaming.

As suggested by Ronald and Patricia Potter-Effron, "We counteract societal shaming by refusing to do it ourselves, and by taking the risk of providing support for those who are being shamed. We can learn to appreciate differences, and speak up against the shaming we see. In addition, we can better understand how we may fit into stigmatized groups, and come to terms with the effect that societal shaming has had on us. We can teach ourselves and our children to recognize, and not be a part of, societal shaming."

Special thanks to HUMC, Pastor Ed Hansen & Art Zweig, Moses Tung, Wallace Napier, Pastor Nan Self, Sue Laurie & The Reconciling Ministries Network, my SFTJ Family, my family of origin, my twelve step circles family, and to Evan Wolfson, Dan Millman, John Bradshaw, and Joseph Sharp. Special thanks to my entire human family of brothers and sisters with whom I am interdependent, and to Spirit working through everyone and everything, including Project Justice Prison Break, a twelve step advocacy program to help free person's who were, in a sense, unjustly imprisoned, because of first innocently ending up in the imprisoning dynamics of toxic shame.

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THE SIN OF FALLING IN LOVE

Rev. Diane Rehfield

My name is Diane Rehfield. I am a lifelong Methodist from several generations of Methodists. I am an ordained deacon, and I'm here to tell you about my daughter.

Michelle was born in 1982. She was beautiful, intelligent, and capable from the very beginning. She is a natural athlete, and finds herself in leadership positions wherever she goes. As a teenager, she was everybody's favorite babysitter, and she earned enough money doing that to buy herself a car when she turned 16. I can't tell you how many people told me how impressed they were with her, and that they hoped their kids would turn out to be like her. She was a leader in our church youth group, and worked for several years as a site director for the Sierra Service Project. Countless people have told me what an inspiration she was to them there. She graduated with honors from college, and became fluent in Spanish when she studied abroad in Chile. She lives on the East Coast, where she works as a houseparent and teacher in a unique boarding school. The fact that she is a lesbian is not a secret from the board members, the other staff, or the students at that school, but it is also not a big topic of discussion, just as being heterosexual is not for the other teachers. She is a member of her local church, where she leads a Bible study.

Michelle came out to us when she was in college. We were not terribly surprised. She had tried dating boys, and it always seemed awkward, but when she introduced us to her first real girlfriend, my husband says it was like the lights came on; like moving from black and white into color. We are fortunate to have several gay or lesbian people whom we love in our extended family and among our friends, so we were not really upset at the news, except for the fact that we knew it would make her life harder in some ways. After years of being told what a great kid we had, it hurt to think that for some people this would be all that defined her.

What hurt more was thinking about her relationship to the church. Suddenly, although Michelle has loved and served the Church all of her life, she now has a limited membership in it. As it stands, she will not be welcome to celebrate her marriage in any of our churches. As a pastor, I will not have the option to preside over her wedding, or any ceremony at all that celebrates her love for the person of her choice. And although she feels a call into ministry, and has the qualities we say we seek in young clergy today, she will not be eligible to be ordained if she chooses to openly love someone. I have encouraged her to seek out another denomination, but she comes from generations of Methodists, and she says that's who she is. She has faith and hope, that one day we will work this out. Since she does not currently have a partner, she would be acceptable for ordination now. The "sin" she may someday commit in the eyes of the Church, is not being homosexual, but falling in love. It makes me very sad to realize that though we worship a God whose very essence is love, what will make Michelle unacceptable in the eyes of the church, is for her to express her love with the person of her choice.

A "WOUNDED HEALER" – GUIDED BY GOD

*I found a special purpose for my life in being an understanding
and compassionate pastor*

Rev. Ed Hansen

Sometimes it is only by looking back that we see the hand of God at work in our lives. In the midst of our struggles and challenges, we may feel abandoned by God, but later we see that God's Spirit has been at work.

This is what I see in my own life. God gave me the foundation of a faith that taught me, "Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world..." And that, "Jesus loves me, this I know..." God took me, skinny "Eddie Spaghetti", and challenged me with my father's abandonment and took me with my mother and brothers to a new home over a thousand miles away. God took that pain and hurt and gave me a yearning for love and for a world that would be better for me and others. God used my feelings of weakness and vulnerability to develop compassion and empathy.

God saw my questioning spirit, my yearning for answers, and my struggle to be a loving person and led me to talk with my minister about feeling called by God to do something meaningful with my life. God led me to Claremont School of Theology where feelings that had hungered for my attention in the past took on a new intensity and became so powerful I couldn't ignore them. But God's hand was in the words of the professor who, when I told him I had homosexual feelings, said, "Oh, put that out of your mind."

God guided me to a wonderful person to be my wife in a marriage that lasted 30 years and produced two beloved sons.

In seminary, God led me to apply for an internship at Glide Memorial Methodist Church in San Francisco and God put me in the Tenderloin district to work with homosexual people and hustlers. From this experience, God led me, in 1966, to write my dissertation on "The Church's Ministry with Homosexuals." From this awareness and knowledge, God called me to use my voice to speak in this Conference for greater compassion and understanding for our lesbian and gay members, while keeping silent about my own feelings and remaining faithful to my marriage and family.

While it must have been obvious to God, I kept asking, "Why me? Why am I gay and what am I supposed to do with this reality in my life?"

Then God inspired the Rev. Bert All, a colleague and a gay brother, to ask me to help start a retreat for persons living with AIDS, which we called "Strength for the Journey." I found a special purpose for my life in being an understanding and compassionate pastor to those who attended this retreat. In the midst of this ministry, God called me to be more authentic, more real with these brothers and sisters who faced the pain of being gay or lesbian and who faced the uncertainties of an early death from AIDS. There I found I couldn't hide any longer the truth of my own homosexual feelings and my identity as a gay person.

God asked me to participate in the dialogues in this Conference surrounding our church's position on homosexuality, to give leadership to the AIDS Ministry Committee, and to be an ongoing leader in the Strength for the Journey retreats.

God's Spirit guided our Bishop to my appointment as the pastor of Hollywood United Methodist Church, to bring healing, to strengthen the AIDS ministry, and to continue the welcoming and loving community of faith that already had included many gay and lesbian members.

Now, God's Spirit has brought me here to participate in "telling our stories" so all may better understand that we are your sisters and brothers, and God is working in our lives. As so many of us are, I am among you as a "wounded healer" seeking to bring the message of God's grace, God's healing and empowering love, to all of God's children.

DEAR VALERIE
Ellen Tsuneko Kameya

With wondrous delight we greeted you,
That rainy night in October.
Sixteen long hours of labor
Then...a beautiful gift from God.

Valerie Mieko, we named you
Meaning: brave, beautiful, graceful child.
You grew into a magical person
Kind, sweet, smart and gentle.

Honors and accolades were many
Throughout your years in school.
Through those years you always remained
Our kind, sweet, gentle daughter.

Unaware I was of your inner struggles,
Unaware of your private pain.
You trusted us and began to speak
The truth about who you are.

Disbelief, shame, guilt and sadness.
Afraid I was, for you and for me.
A good life was what I wished for you,
Darkness and grief was all I saw.

Patience and understanding you gave me.
Your hope was for my change of heart.
Over the years I have come to know
Your sisters and brothers in a new community.

Thanks to you for being my teacher
You have done an incredible job.
I have learned that being different
Is just another way of being.

I LOVE YOU!

Mom

- Ellen Tsuneko Kameya 1995

IT WAS OBVIOUS TO ME...

Harold Kameya

Our daughter Valerie came out to us in 1988 when she was 20 years old and a junior in college. We floundered helplessly. Those were the days before the Internet. Books on sexual orientation were not readily available. As a Japanese-American, born and raised in Hawaii, the notion of people physically attracted to the same gender had never crossed my mind. I had assumed, of course, that all men were physically attracted to the opposite sex.

We slowly faded away from our Presbyterian Japanese American church in Little Tokyo. We felt that we no longer belonged there, although no sermons ever mentioned gays (or any other controversial topic for that matter). In many Asian cultures, difficult topics are “solved” by the use of silence.

In 1990, after agonizing for a year and a half, we finally found the organization PFLAG (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) and moved from ignorance to understanding. We learned that there was nothing wrong with our daughter. Society just had to learn that people of all sexual orientations exist in all cultures throughout the world.

Because we were the only Asians in the Los Angeles PFLAG at that time, we were soon asked to speak on a panel to an Asian gay audience. We were the first accepting Asian parents that the men in the audience had heard. They expressed their thanks with tears streaming down their faces. We had been unaware of their pain caused by Asian cultural values and a rejecting society.

Changing society’s negative attitudes about gays? That seemed impossible in 1990! The task of educating society and erasing the negative views of gays seemed impossible to me!

Since it was obvious to me that my daughter did not choose to be gay, I recall asking myself, “If God created some of us to be gay, the common-sense conclusion would be that God would then have expected straights and gays to learn to work and live in harmony. Could that be?” After some thought, I concluded, “Why not?” Indeed, why not?

Gradually, we learned of the existence of churches and ministers supportive of gays and lesbians. With their foundational support, we spoke out whenever asked at schools, universities and churches.

Sometimes parents with gay children feel that they need to leave the church because it is too painful to be at a non-affirming church. Other parents of gay children might be unable to leave their churches because of family ties or other reasons, and they sit silently in the pews.

As a result of the issue of gay marriages, many Christian fundamentalists have become very vocal. To them, I offer them the following statement (after conferring with a retired minister, being inspired by Bishop John Shelby Spong and other prominent religious advocates, exposure to Process Theology, the Historical Jesus, and theological schools offering the concept of the Bible being a record of man’s search for God):

Scholars in colleges and universities have studied the intricacies, the wonders and the mysteries of human sexuality over many, many decades. There is still much more to learn. I

feel that parts of the Bible reflect the cultural attitudes that existed 2,000 years ago, which included beliefs that the world was flat, unequal attitudes about women, slavery, and homophobia.

I urge people to reconcile their religious beliefs with the reality that people do not choose their sexual orientation.

END MY LIFE OR CHANGE

Glenn Whitaker

It was 1950. I was just five years old. I grew up on Long Island, New York, about five miles from the beach, a favorite place for spending weekends under extremely crowded conditions. Mom and Dad would pack myself and my two brothers in the car and we would spend all day there. It was explained to us that if we were to get lost in the crowd, we had to find a lifeguard station. The lifeguard would hold up the lost child and blow his whistle and your parents would come and rescue you. The only problem was, when I got lost and the lifeguard had to hold me up and blow his whistle, I wanted to stay with him.

Looking back now, I know why, but I have to laugh because I have been asked many times at what age I knew I was different? When I was five. Why is that significant? Because I had no more idea what straight or gay was at five, I only knew I was attracted to the same gender. This was not a choice. It was the way my creator made me.

We had a great aunt. We never talked about her much, though we would occasionally journey to a mental hospital where she had been institutionalized. It was surrealistic and reminded me of something out of a Hitchcock movie. Stark, red-brick buildings, a pronounced absence of trees, and attendants dressed up in white uniforms. I was relegated to an antiseptic waiting room until my parents were ready to depart. Years later, I was to discover that my great aunt was a lesbian. She had been sent there - a mental hospital - because she was "mentally ill".

Then there was my dad with his comments about Uncle Albert. He was the "one" every family had. Uncle Albert was quite flamboyant, even for his time. If dad had only known. The topper came at 14 when I shared my deepest desires with my best friend, promising him to secrecy, only to be blackmailed with the possibility that he would "out" me. By 16, I had decided that this was much too much of a burden, and since I could easily pass for straight, that was how I would live my life.

I pulled out all the stops, graduating from high school and then enlisting in the service. I found that being surrounded by other males, some of which I was attracted to, did not make things easy, and then the very threatening thoughts of would happen, if I were to accidentally do something to give myself away. In those days, in the military, if they even suspected you might be gay, there was a good possibility of a dishonorable discharge, a stigma at the time that was very daunting as it would follow you for the rest of your life.

After the service, there were thoughts of finding somewhere that I could be myself, but then there was Stonewall. Gay beatings, and even worse, vigilantes that were hunting down gays and killing them. I had so longed for conformity in my life, I couldn't even imagine living my life in the shadows. I also really wanted children and there was no possibility for a gay man to have children at the time.

My parents encouraged me to come home after I left the service in 1969. They had moved to California from New York. I agreed to come home for a few months and while I was there I was set up with a blind date. My mom worked with this other gal who had a sister and they kept badgering until I agreed to meet. Well, if there was any female that I

could be with it was her. We shared all the same interests, hobbies, hopes for children and even our religion, me being a lifelong Methodist and she a Presbyterian.

I was sure this was what I needed to set me on my journey - to the so called straight and narrow - and it did for a few years. I came to find that even though there was a lack of physical attraction, there was a definite emotional and psychological pairing. When we decided to have children, it just didn't seem in the cards. We put in for adoption and lost our first prospective child, but then found out, against all odds that she was pregnant. Two years later the second one came along and then the panic started. What if someone were still to find out I was attracted to men, not like anyone would have guessed, but what if I were to spill the beans, my life would be over. This obsession became so pervasive that I became a severe agoraphobic, to the point I couldn't function in my daily life. I had trouble walking out the front door of my house. I knew what was causing it and decided to get help. This was in 1982. After spending large amounts of money on therapy I still couldn't get out to the therapist what was going on inside of me. Also during this period, I was no longer important to my wife, other than a provider and problem solver, so all the things we had in the beginning to hold it together had evaporated.

As time went on, I became more and more aware of my orientation and desire to be with men. I never strayed as I felt that if I needed to, I would have to leave. I dealt with the agoraphobia and eventually worked my way out of it but the journey made me acutely aware of who I was.

Fast forward ten years to the early 1990's, and I was a very unhappy person. Realizing my mortality and the fact that I might never get to experience a full relationship the way God had made me became a very important theme, one that was starting to cause depression. After working my way out of the agoraphobia, I was determined not to fall into a pit I could not escape from.

I decided to do something I learned in college, and that is when I needed to make important decisions, I could usually spill out my most inner thoughts by journaling. I took a few days off, went to the coast, and filled up a small note book with my inner turmoil. When I read what I wrote it made me cry as I realize that I had taken something so base to who I was and had suppressed it all these years. I knew at that point I either needed to end my life the way I knew it or end my life.

When I was 26, my dad had taken his own life. To this day I still miss him and am angry he did that to us. He left because of his pain, but it is just something that never leaves you when a close loved one does this and I just couldn't imagine doing this to my family.

The rest of the days I was there were spent working out an exit plan. When I got back home and told my wife that I needed a separation she was destroyed. This strong woman was reduced to falling to her knees and hugging my legs, crying, begging me not to leave. When she left, I felt horrible and I knew I had to share the rest of the story. When I explained the rest, it was over because within 24 hours she had told everyone that was close to me what was going on.

Through all the pain, the fear of losing my 14 and 17 year old, the trauma of a divorce, the severe financial impact, I knew I had made the right decision.

I mentioned being a lifelong Methodist. The church has always been very important to me. I was in a quandary as I knew I had to leave the church my family I was in. I lived in Fresno, California at the time, an extremely conservative community. I was sitting in a coffee shop one Monday morning, feeling sorry for myself when I heard these two guys in the next booth talking. One said to the other that his wife had gone to this church and could you believe it, they actually welcomed gay people. I about broke my neck trying to hear which church it was, and low and behold, it was a Methodist Church right in the community. I quickly looked up the church - Wesley United Methodist Church - and called. I asked if I could speak with the minister and left my number. She called me back and told me she had about an hour that afternoon if I wanted to come in and talk. When I met with her and told her my story, she cried.

This church was incredible and was instrumental in my healing and spiritual nourishment during this period. Instead of slamming the door in my face, they welcomed me with open arms. I became whole again, knowing that God did have a plan for me, and I was just as much of one of his children as any straight person. This wonderful minister left the church because she was lesbian, and she and her partner could never serve openly because the church didn't allow it.

I have some female friends that had a commitment ceremony in Sacramento in 1999. Their service was held at the Sacramento Convention Center because the ceremony had attracted so many well wisher there was no place big enough to hold the event. Sixty nine Methodist Ministers were in attendance, and because they prayed to bless this union they were brought up on charges by the Methodist Church. One of the attendees, a black friend of mine, who did not get his deacons orders because he was gay, was asked why would he stay in a church that did not accept him. His answer was simple. He said the struggle for civil rights took a few hundred years and the struggle for the church to accept gays was just a few decades old.

If he could stay so can I, in hopes there will be hearts softened by our painful stories and that we too will be looked at as fully accepted children of God by our church!

HOW THE CHURCH BROKE MY HEART

Jay Sowell

I was born with Methodism in my DNA, the descendant of generations of southern Methodists in Mississippi, and the son of two United Methodist clergy. I was born Methodist, and have chosen throughout my life to remain actively so, because our Wesleyan emphases on inclusiveness and the social gospel reflect the truth of the Christ I have come to know and seek to follow. Methodism has taught me that God calls us to do no less than to build the kingdom of God on earth, and that the church is God's instrument for fulfilling that calling. I am committed to the idea that when we make disciples for Jesus Christ we truly can transform the world.

So that's who I am, a true believer in the church, and especially the United Methodist Church. And I have become convinced that in order to be the church that we are called to be, we United Methodists must open our hearts and minds and doors to LGBT people.

As past lay leader at Hollywood UMC, and currently an active member there, I could tell you about how much we rely on the gifts and talents of our LGBT members at HUMC, who serve with distinction in many prominent administrative and ministry roles, and whose contributions of talent, time and money make possible everything that we do. Closed hearts, minds and doors would cost us the one-third of our members who are LGBT, including many of the leaders upon whom we rely the most. Without them we would not be growing in attendance and membership. We would not be answering God's call to feed the homeless in Hollywood, to rebuild houses and lives with UMCOR in Mississippi and with Habitat for Humanity in Los Angeles, to proclaim the social gospel at home and around the world. We would be less than what we are, less than who God is calling us to be, and we would be doing less than what God has called us to do.

But there's something more important than the practical effect of denying ourselves these gifts and talents. The heart of the matter, for me, lies in this story:

Four years ago, I attended a 6-week study at our church that was considering what the gospel has to say to homosexual people. One Sunday afternoon, the men in the group began to talk about the messages they had heard from the churches that they belonged to in their youth, some Catholic, some Protestant, all teaching that it was a sin to be gay. You could see the pain that this had caused, but I took comfort in the fact that time had passed and each of these men had found a church that truly welcomed them, and had come to know a God who loves them for who they are. Looking for confirmation, I said, "But you know now that this was wrong, and so it doesn't matter anymore." And they said, "Yes, in our minds we know that, but in our hearts we still feel rejected, condemned, and inferior in the eyes of God." The hurt was too deep to heal. For many of these men, it will never heal.

I felt crushed, shocked. It was as if my eyes were opened for the first time, like I was waking up from living a dream in a fairy tale world. In my fairy tale world, the church was a force for good, indeed the only force good enough to truly make the world a better place, and I loved the church for it. But I was forced to confront a real world in which the church

hurts people, wounds them so deeply that they carry the pain all the rest of their lives. And there was nothing I could do to completely repair the damage. It was too deep.

That's the story of how the church broke my heart. I am heterosexual, white and male. I have never been subjected to the rejection that comes with being otherwise. But that day I saw what rejection looked like, what it felt like, the everlasting damage that it does. And that the church could be the instrument of that damage broke my heart.

The church has repented from condemning people of color for not being white and from condemning women for not being men. Why have we not learned to avoid the same sin as it leads us to condemn LGBT people for not being heterosexual? For twenty years we denied my mother her calling to be a pastor because we misunderstood what God had to say about women. From whence comes our confidence in today's discrimination against LGBT people in the name of God? How long will we repeat these mistakes? How much pain must we cause? How many people must we hurt?

We say that homosexual people are of sacred worth, but we lie when we say it, because when we say that homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching it crowds out everything else. We believe, and we act out, the idea that LGBT people are less, that they are inferior, perverted, damned. We do not love them as they are, and we tell them that the God who made them does not, either. Thus we hurt people. Oh God, forgive us. The church that you called to transform the world instead unjustly condemns and hurts.

The truth is that God loves and values people regardless of race, gender, age, station in life, or orientation. In truth, it is the condemnation of LGBT people that is the lie. And when we perpetuate that lie we make the church to be less. Not just because we deny ourselves the gifts and talents of LGBT people who could help us make disciples and transform the world, but because making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world is incompatible with our condemnation of LGBT people. Rejection and condemnation are incompatible with Christian teaching, and that is the truth that we must proclaim and live out. When we do, we are closer to living out our calling to build the kingdom of God, to change the world. We are more. We are the church that God calls us to be, and that you and I believe in.

OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD AND EACH OTHER

Jeff Goodwin & Russ Knight

Jeff and I love to tell the story of how we met 12 years ago on a sunny Sunday morning in San Francisco because the circumstances surrounding our meeting seem to have been uncannily beyond our control. We sometimes refer to the story of “how we *didn't* meet” because our paths crossed several times in the city that weekend before we *actually* met—and when we did, it was completely by accident: Jeff stepped on the back of my shoe as we disembarked the METRO train at Union Square. He had me at “Oops, sorry!”

Compared to others’ coming out stories, ours seem modest. In fact, ours might very well be exceptional in their uneventfulness. We had no long-term anxiety; no emotional confrontations. Neither of us lost the support of family or friends in our coming out. We didn’t rebel against the church, which was a major influence in our adolescence. Jeff grew up Baptist, and their family church administered the private school he attended from first grade through high school. My family was Catholic, and I was an altar boy until my Confirmation at age 18. Although our religious life as kids was positive and fulfilling, our spiritual needs shifted when we began our life together as adults.

Looking back, we realize that the Hollywood United Methodist Church had a dynamic role in our spiritual journey, which progressed in three distinct stages over the course of the past decade: (1) settling into a spiritual community that affirmed our relationship with each other *and* with God, (2) validating the spiritual development of our “untraditional” family as it grew and (3) giving us the strength to be positive role models of faith when the time came to move from the area.

When Jeff and I started a home together in 2000, our first priority was to find a church that would provide spiritual depth *and* advocate practical, constructive applications of faith in our lives together. Our year-long search ended when we found the Hollywood United Methodist Church, for which “open hearts, open minds, open doors” is more than a marketing banner. We were struck by the diversity of the congregation, but we were especially glad to have finally found a church that had the key elements for which we searched: a traditional worship experience, a smart, sensible presentation of the scripture, and a socially relevant service to the community.

When our daughter was born in 2006, our spiritual needs shifted again, and the role of the Hollywood UMC in our lives shifted too. It was now the spiritual center of our *family*. As new concerns and anxieties of fatherhood and personal responsibility eclipsed all previous interests, the Hollywood UMC provided unending spiritual reinforcement. But more than that, the congregation set an example of a truly welcoming community of faith. Our daughter was baptized at the Hollywood UMC, and Jeff and I look forward to the day we get married there.

In 2009 our jobs motivated us to move to the relatively isolated and strongly conservative community of Murrieta, where trendy pop-Christian bumper stickers compete in their size and complexity. We consider this temporary position to be a healthy challenge to our family mission: to set a positive example *of* and *for* our community. At this stage in

our spiritual journey, the Hollywood United Methodist Church is never too far away—in fact, we feel that it is more important than ever to remain connected to the church that reflects and empowers our family mission.

On the day Jeff and I met, I was unfamiliar with the subway system, so I waited on the METRO platform for the only train that (I assumed) would take me where I needed to go. I remember the advice I got from a stranger who noticed my repeated glances at the schedule posted on the kiosk: “Downtown? *All* the trains at this station go there.” The Hollywood United Methodist Church is somehow like the train that brought Jeff and me together twelve years ago—many go to the same place, but *this* one was special. We were lucky to have found the Hollywood UMC (or did it find us?), but we are deeply saddened that it should be so unique. There may be many churches that share the same written message, but only this one lives up to the expectations of the congregation. Perhaps this is why the Hollywood UMC has had such growth in recent years and draws families from so far away. We believe there is an opportunity for the larger Methodist network to learn from the example of the Hollywood UMC—to bring people together, to grow *with* them on their spiritual journey, to defend the *true* meaning of family values and to teach their members how to set a positive example in their communities.

DARING TO BE THE MAN GOD MADE

Jim McKlenshaw

I was born on May 2, 1953. But May 2, 1983 was my true birth as a gay man. Thirty years of hiding and shame was replaced with courage and daring to be the man God made. My journey was just beginning. I found a boyfriend and we dated for two years. I was never promiscuous. I went camping, bicycling, swimming and had FUN, FUN, FUN for the first time in my life. I have had three boyfriends all together.

There were problems that I had picked up before I came out. I was addicted to compulsive eating and spending. I discovered a genetic defect that rendered me incapable of having children and it's still a great disappointment not having children.

I joined 12-Step programs for eating and spending and developed for the first time a spiritual connection to God that has never wavered. I joined the Metropolitan Community Church in Santa Ana, California, seeking to join a like-minded church in my community. I never considered a mainline because of the fear emanating from them. However, I left the MCC after five years because I never felt the connection to God in the church that I had found in 12 Steps. I returned to 12 Steps for the connection to God found in those rooms.

I am active in LGBT politics, working to defeat the propositions forcing us to live in fear. I also joined a vaccine study by VaxGen for an HIV antiviral. I met my future husband, Irvin Lee McClendon, at a party given for the guinea pigs by VaxGen and the Orange County Department of Health. Lee was wearing an outlandish green fedora covered in pins mostly from Europe. He was also the only other man in the room over 40. We had a lot of fun at the party and started dating.

In three short months I knew Lee was the one I had been searching for my entire forty-seven years. Lee moved in with me after one year and we have been living together for nine years. Lee invited me to the Methodist Church he was attending. I started going with him but was never comfortable. Church to me was religion and dogma. I went for awhile, but the straw that drove me away was sitting down in a pew and everyone else got up and left. I never returned although Lee stayed for awhile for the choir. We started looking for a new church when Lee realized how closed-minded the ministry of that church was. Lee found Community United Methodist Church in Huntington Beach. This church has a fantastic music program for all ages and talents. I went for several years and 2 years ago started being a cheerful giver, a tither. Yet, I was not a member. I was welcomed heartily by the entire body of the church and have found a home for my spiritual journey. Last year, I joined CUMC and am the happiest I have ever been. I am on the Missions Committee and a firm devotee of Heifer International; the two blend so well.

On July 1, 2008, Lee and I were married by the Registrar of Orange County, California, with my best friend attending. July 1, 2008 is the happiest day of my life. Lee and I have fought, yelled, and loved for nine years and our marriage is the culmination of everything I have been working toward my entire life. Last year, Lee and I had a sacred ceremony on our anniversary. Our families and friends attended. Professional photographs were taken and a chocolate wedding cake with mint icing - just like I always wanted - was sliced to great applause. I never smiled and laughed so much.

The saddest day of my life was my sacred ceremony because the ceremony was not at Community United Methodist Church, and my pastor could not officiate. The United Methodist Church says that I am a person of sacred worth... BUT! The "BUT" denies me the sacrament of full inclusion into the greater body of the church. I hope and pray that the UMC will cast off fear and embrace me as I have embraced you. I hope and pray that courage finds its way into the body of UMC and we will all thrive together. AMEN.

IT'S ALL ABOUT LOVE, NOT GENDER!

Joe Henry

I'm Joe Henry, a long-time member of Pasadena First United Methodist Church, a former lay delegate to this conference and a Methodist "PK."

From childhood, I knew I was "different." Even with my exceptional height, there were no sports for me, but a lot of artistic endeavors. I wanted to be a designer!

I had girlfriends and dated frequently as a teenager and young adult, but my innate sexual attraction was to men. Even in the repressive culture of the 1950s, this wouldn't have concerned me, except for the fact that my father passionately wanted grandchildren. As an only child, it was clearly my job to fulfill his dream!

My mother, to whom I was very close, died between my junior and senior years of college. That same summer, I met a man I was quite attracted to. I've always felt that, had my mother lived, we could have talked through my dilemma and found a solution that would have allowed me to become whole. But such was not the case, and I continued toward my goal of marriage and fathering a child, which I achieved in my late twenties.

At no time in my early struggle, or later when I finally came out to my family and in my public life, did I ever question that God had made me as I am and blessed me. We are all children of sacred worth. Who I am is not an abomination! It never occurred to me that being gay could prevent me from full inclusion within the bonds of my Christian faith, yet the United Methodist Book of Discipline tells me that isn't necessarily so.

But FUMC believes in open hearts, open minds and open doors! Since coming out, I'm as active in my church as I was before, and am embraced as a valued member of the congregation. On Sundays, I still sit with my ex-wife, who is my dearest friend.

And I found love with another man! We've been together for 15 years, and in 2008 were among the 18,000 gay couples in California who married before the passage of Proposition 8. We have a wonderful life together, and it was important to us to publicly and legally affirm our love and commitment. Sadly, that celebration couldn't take place in my own church, but we had a beautiful wedding in our home with a lesbian rabbi officiating and participation by my pastor.

The straight community doesn't realize the number of long-lasting gay relationships.

We have many friends who have been together 25 years and more, and know one couple who were married on their 51st anniversary. It's all about love, not gender!

My husband and I serve on the Reconciling Committee at FUMC with the hope that, in the not-too-distant future, our denomination will change its Book of Discipline to remove the wording that makes homosexuals the only group excluded from full participation in the clergy and in the sacraments of the church. It's a change long overdue!

CHILD, I MADE YOU IN MY IMAGE

Kristy Strange

My name is Kristy, and I am a young professional who happens to be gay. I have been blessed with a wonderful life, but things have not always been so easy. As an adult, I have been fortunate to live in a city where being gay really is not an issue, but growing up gay was not nearly as simple.

From a very young age, I felt I was different, but for a long time, I never knew how to define that difference. When I was in the 3rd grade, everything changed. I stood up at the lunch table and announced to my friends that I was going to marry Robin. Robin was the girl I would play with at recess and admire from a distance. Little did I know that making such a bold statement would cause such an uproar. The room grew silent and then, as if over a loud speaker, I heard these words, "You can't marry Robin! She's a girl and so are you! Girls can't get married!" I was crushed. I wanted to crawl into a hole and bury myself and my feelings. My friends did not even know why it was 'wrong;' they just said that it was. I decided then that I would never share my feelings about liking a girl ever again.

The rest of grade school was not that challenging. I kept myself busy trying to be the best reader in the class or trying to have a cool toy to bring in for show and tell. Then came middle school, and boys and girls seemed to be gravitating to each other more and more. I decided that sports would be my focus. Meanwhile, I chose to entertain fake crushes on random boys to distract others and myself from how I really felt. Then, of course, the big leagues arrived - the ever-exciting high school! I was growing even more confused because all of my friends were obsessed with boys, and all I wanted to do was hang out with them. I can remember countless times having a crush on one of my girlfriends when she would announce to me that she was going on a date with the guy she was pining away for. I wanted to scream at the top of my lungs! I felt trapped in my own body.

These feelings, despite my endless prayers to God, were not going away. I was angry at God for not changing me, for not making me normal. I remember being on my knees one night, praying to God to take my life. As I cried, my face flushed, my hands trembling, I felt a sensation that something or someone was embracing me. It was Jesus. Then I heard a voice in my head saying to me, "Child, I made you in my image. You are exactly who you are supposed to be." I stood beside my bed trembling, wiping the tears from my eyes. I knew at that moment, as I do now, that God loves me and accepts me the way I am. I understood that God loves all of the children on the earth and that his wish for us is to love each other despite our differences.

From that day forward, I was changed, but the road ahead was still not an easy one. I went to church on Sundays with my family and would listen to the pastor speak about horrible acts like homosexuality, adultery, cheating, and lying and all the while, I felt that something was missing. It was love. The pastors were men and women who were knowledgeable and went to seminary, but how they could miss this one simple message? It just did not make sense.

For many years, I was put off by religion and struggled to find a balance between my love for God and the rejection I felt from His churches. Then I found Hollywood United Methodist Church. When I met my partner, we were both looking to reconnect with God and decided to look for a church home together. I remember the first day walking into Hollywood United Methodist with my partner. We were both nervous, not knowing what to expect. We put on our best armor and walked in hand-in-hand. I was expecting a disparaging look or maybe a shaking of a head from someone, but instead, we were greeted immediately with smiles and expressions of love. "*Were these people blind?*" I thought. "*Did they not see that we were two women holding hands in God's house?*" Then, I realized, in an instant, that we were surrounded by Christians, loving people who practiced the words of God.

Over our time since becoming members, we have been lovingly embraced by the family at HUMC who have shown us the unconditional love of God towards all of his children. Being a part of a church that is accepting has changed my life and has made me want to get involved in serving others in ways I had never wanted to before. I am very grateful that God has led me to this church because it has truly changed my life and brought me back to the arms of Christ. Knowing how influential HUMC has been on me, I pray each and every night that other churches will learn by their example to be accepting of what gay Christians bring to the body of Christ and to practice God's love for all humanity.

LET'S JUST CALL IT HELL

Lee Albert

It is hard for me to put my story into a sensible and simple form. My life was a living hell from the time I was born until my late 60's. This hell existed in many guises and forms. The worst of these was my mother.

For example, she raised me to be a girl of which I am definitely not. I later found out that she was lesbian and had frustrated my Dad the entire time they were married. She would be in jail today as she treated my sister and me as sexual toys. All this time she professed to be a Christian woman. I was totally afraid of her and she never shared any genuine love for any member of her family or our family. I was forced to go to church (at that time the Church of the Brethren of which her father was a minister at one time) and Sunday School every Sunday come hell or high water and it was usually hell. My Dad was completely controlled by her. I was constantly told that I was going to go to hell and would never amount to anything and burn forever if I didn't do what she told me to do. I cannot go into detail of her actions in raising me, but let's just call it Hell. I never, even to this day, got out from under her demands. I do have better control over her lies and wives' tales. There were many incidents that are too difficult to repeat.

As I entered college I had dedicated my life to Christ and planned to go to seminary after college, which I did (my mother demanded it) where I received my Masters Degree in Christian Education. During ALL of this time growing up into manhood I was a practicing homosexual, keeping it hidden (I thought) from my family and my friends.

I married right after college and should have not done so. I am the father of three children and five grandchildren who refuse to have anything to do with me. I should have never married. Upon graduating from seminary I served the Methodist Church as a Director of Christian Education. Think of how my living a huge lie had affected that. I finally divorced as it was not fair to my wife or children to live that lie day to day. Divorcing was a personal hell for me as I loved my wife and children; still do.

Now I am a member of a Methodist Church that REALLY has an open door policy. I am active in this church in several ways: I sing in the Chancel Choir and am a liturgist on several occasions each year (my seminary training came alive again!) by serving in this capacity. Most every one in the church knows I am a gay man and it doesn't bother them. This particular Methodist Church has become the most important force in my life and brought me to the realization about 8 years ago of who I am and why I am. If it were not for this congregation and its staff, I would not be the man I am today. And, yes, I have a wonderful partner. Without all of this support I would be dead, literally, since I have had AIDS for 22 years now. I cherish the prayer quilt I received from the congregation as it is a constant reminder of caring people.

I am still searching for missing parts of my life.

SAVING MARIE

Marie Michael Fairman

My name is Marie Fairman. I've been coming to Annual Conference since 1997. I am a member of the Hollywood United Methodist Church and was their lay delegate for most of those years. In the last few years my professional obligations have not allowed me to participate in the Annual Conference as fully as I have in the past but this year unemployment has assured my full involvement. I come here this year as the Co-chair of the Communications Commission to the Annual Conference and I come for the second time as Marie. Prior to last year, I came to the Annual Conference as **Mike** Fairman. Of the LGBT community that you have heard so often about I represent the "T". I'm transgendered. How did this happen you might ask? The answer is President George W. Bush. It is a circuitous route but it is how I came to this revelation.

It was the spring of 2003 and the war in Iraq was very upsetting to me. The more it dragged on (at the time it was only over a year) the more frustrated I became at MY apparent ineffectuality of stopping the war. I know I'm only one person and I can't make national and international policy changes but I was irrationally overwrought and I needed to do something. In a moment of clear spiritual inspiration, I realized, as a member of Annual Conference, I could write a Resolution condemning the war. I decided that would be too obvious and so instead I wrote a Resolution that called to End Poverty in the Middle East citing that that same poverty is what fueled the desperateness of terrorism. I pulled out the previous year's AC book and saw how a resolution was written and I wrote it in about fifteen minutes. It was adopted and passed eventually. I was very proud that I had finally stood up and spoke truth to what I believed God had called me to do. It was an electrifying and transformational moment. I believe now God's love had given me the courage to speak out against the war and then that same love allowed me to see myself for the first time. Unexpectedly, feelings that were vaguely familiar started to overwhelm me. Instead of sparkling clarity which I assumed I would have for finally letting God into my heart, I became utterly confused.

My wife and I talked openly about it and we decided I should turn to my church and my pastor to seek guidance. I told my Pastor that I thought I might be gay. YEAH I WAS HAVING THOSE KINDS OF FEELINGS!!! Hearing the news he said with resounding affirmation, "Congratulations!" The Hollywood United Methodist Church was and continues to be a great place to be gay. Not only are you surrounded with love and support from a strong LGBT community but also the congregants that are straight are just as supportive and affirming.

But it turns out I wasn't gay. Not being gay was frankly disappointing. Not only for aforementioned reasons but I thought that's what was happening. Now I was really lost. The Pastor and I kept talking. After several weeks of meetings, a lot of thinking and praying it was determined that my ennui might be GID or Gender Identity Dysphoria. It sounded crazy but this was a process of discernment where I felt God was very present. Still it was utterly improbable, seemingly impossible and preposterous that I wanted to be a woman.

Accordingly I didn't jump into a dress right away. I didn't dismiss it either. I went home and told my wife what my "problem" might be. She said quietly, "That could be it." There was some history.

When I was going through puberty I started dressing up in my Mom's clothes and I did it reflexively like it was normal. I didn't really even think about it until I got caught by my Mom. Both my parents did not take this well. When they wanted to "talk" with me about it that evening, I noticed my Dad was shaking. It frightened me. I realize now that he was not mad. He was shuddering with fear. They knew what happened to sissy boys and they were truly concerned. My parents didn't yell at me. Well my Mom did a little bit because I had stretched out her clothes.

Dad asked, "Do you like girls Mike?" I thought about it for a second and then very assuredly and honestly said, "Yes!" because I did. In fact I like them so much I wanted to be just like them. But Dad didn't get that twist from my answer. He was relieved that I "liked" girls and not boys. Both Mom and Dad said that it was inconceivable for me to be a girl. God had made me a boy and I was going to be a man who likes girls. I have to say that made sense. The thinking then was if you wanted to be a girl then you had to be attracted to boys. I wasn't. I was attracted to girls big time. Consequently my wanting to be a girl didn't add up. Why would I want to be a girl if I didn't like boys? So in the fall of 1966, at the age of fourteen, I turned away from what I know now was my natural self.

I tried to be the best boy and then man I could be. It is challenging to be the best person you can be for anyone but it wasn't that difficult to be a heterosexual man. I loved women. I enjoyed their company and it was not a chore to date girls. It was fun and easy in every sense of the word. In high school I had girl friends and it didn't feel weird. It felt right.

I somehow got into college (that's another story) and in my first year of college I met the person who would be my wife. Actually she was in my first class! By the end of my freshman year we had fallen in love. In two years we were married. We both had ambitions in the Entertainment Industry. My wife was and is an artist and costume/scenic designer of astonishing talent and I had my gifts too. After Graduate school together and a short stint for me as an Instructor at the University of Georgia we decided we would go to Hollywood. She actually had a job waiting for her when we moved out here in the sixth year of our marriage. After a few years of some success but frustration, she decided she didn't want to pursue a career in the Arts at that point. I had had a couple of breaks and was working a little so she looked for other opportunities and I started my career in the Entertainment business.

While I worked occasionally as an actor, director or producer she became the breadwinner. Mostly I was at home or taking a temp job while looking for work in the industry while she steadily and methodically built a career in advertising. I did the grocery shopping and the cooking and was essentially a house husband. At first it didn't bother me. My wife and I were right there as young adults with a front row seat for the birth of feminism and I thought we were living the new paradigm and I was an extremely enlightened male. I was not the provider but I wasn't going to let that bother me. But it did. The traditional roles of the man being the breadwinner and the woman being a wife and mother

living and ultimately thriving off his success was hard for me to dismiss. I was a man, and yet was identifying more with women and their adult problems than I did men's. I felt emasculated and that does not mix well with testosterone. That's the other reason I didn't completely dismiss the idea that I might be transgendered.

It's early fall of 2003 and I went into counseling (reluctantly) still in disbelief. It helped but my no means was I ready to go public about this. My therapist wanted me to go to "group". I did not want to do that. You see I REALLY didn't look like a woman. Not only was I losing my hair on my head but I was getting it everywhere else. I was hairy as Sasquatch and I had been spotted! I didn't want to go into a small room and see a bunch of pretty HAIRLESS skinny men who could easily move from being great looking guys to beautiful women. I was sure I would look and feel like a miscreant. Eventually I went and there were some great looking skinny hairless women but there were others as well. They were also women but they were built like linebackers and weight lifters. Very few of us in the room were what you would call pretty. The bottom line is they were just people. In other words, I could be one of the girls.

Over the next year and into the next I found the whole experience of "group" to be liberating. My life started to make some sense. I would dress up as a woman for the group meetings and I started getting full body waxes. The worst pain I have ever experienced but I kept doing it because I wanted my skin to be smooth. This yearning to be a woman became palpable. I decided to try HRT (Hormone Replacement Therapy) in the summer of 2005. Now you don't decide this on your own. It takes letters and tests and patience but by the fall I was approved and went on HRT. If it wasn't supposed to be, my body would tell me. It just wouldn't have felt right. But it did. Almost immediately, it was like a switch was turned off. Over the next few weeks and months I experienced a calm that I had never felt before. Even though my appearance had hardly changed inwardly everything had changed. I felt whole and even though I was hiding from everyone else my true self I finally knew who my true self was. Ironically I didn't feel like a fraud anymore.

The truth is I have always identified as a woman but in a masculine way. Women related with me atypically than they did with other men. I often was their girlfriend and it felt natural for both of us. I discovered as I went through my transition that for some people gender is not binary. It is a more fluid experience. I was becoming very comfortable looking like a guy and feeling like a woman but there comes a point where your change begins to be noticeable. I felt I was getting to that point at beginning of 2007. Only a handful of people knew what was going on with me. My wife and I met with our Senior Pastor, who knew everything to plan my coming out. She felt it had to be a carefully thought out. I wanted to get it over with but she felt and rightly so that our church family, as Progressive as we are, would need to be prepared for this. We had Trans people in our church but no member of our church had **transitioned** from one sex to the other. By the summer we were ready for the church as a whole to know I was transitioning my sex. First a letter went out to the congregants that explained what was going on and that my appearance and apparel would be changing and I would be called Michael Marie. Two Sundays after church, a listening post was set up where other Gender Identity experts would explain to those who wanted to understand what GID was and is. Meanwhile in the spring

of 2007 I began telling my colleagues at work and close friends. My coming out would culminate in a little performance piece that summer where I would could tell my story. I didn't let a lot of people know about it because like me it was a work in progress. But a few people came and that's how many of my friends found out. We're all of these people supportive? Oh yes. Were some of them astonished? Oh yeah.

No one at work or church or work ever showed me anything but unqualified affirmation but I learned later that some were having trouble with it. One told me that they were mourning the death of Mike. Others said they it would be hard to let Mike go. I was blown away by the various reactions. I was so solid in how I felt but I recognize now why they had so much trouble. I still looked like Mike. My body and my face were feminizing but it was very subtle and you don't want to rush it. Many do and they suffer both physically and emotionally. This is a profound change and no matter how impatient I was to get to the other side this process had to take all the time it takes.

By the end of 2007 I was feeling pretty good and people were calling me by my new name Michael Marie. While I was dutifully taking my hormones, I was not taking care of the rest of me. My cholesterol was too high and I was overweight more than I had ever been. That didn't stop me from stuffing my face with fatty foods (it was the Christmas season) and I was under a lot of stress but I always was under a lot of stress. We all are. Denying all this didn't make it go away. It just made it untenable for my body to handle. On Sunday, December 30th 2007, I had a massive coronary.

I had it on the altar at HUMC. It was after the service in which I gave the sermon where I mentioned this Trans thing I was going through. It wasn't the point of the sermon but I didn't have to hide anymore. I'm a Lay Speaker in the Methodist Church and I have given many sermons in our church but that was the first time that I didn't feel like a fraud. It was well received and afterward I felt so relieved.

I was on the altar gathering up my papers when I felt ill quite suddenly. I felt like I was getting a bear hug from well...a bear! I didn't think it was anything serious and I was sure it would pass. It didn't. Two dear friends helped my wife and me to understand that something serious was going down. We called the paramedics and they put me on an EKG machine and didn't like what they saw. They asked me on a scale of 1 to 10 with ten being the worst pain I had ever experienced how would I rate the pain? I said that it was like a seven. I saw the curious almost disappointed look on the Paramedic's face that I had said seven. For me ten was having your virginal chest hair pulled out of you. It might even be an eleven. But I understood he needed to hear a higher number because I was evidently in some mortal combat and a seven wasn't going to cut it. So I amended it immediately to a nine but honestly it never got to a ten in pain. It was awful though, like I was drowning and couldn't find any air to breathe. It was the worst sensation I've ever had in my life. My wife and I realized this might not go well and we told each other that we loved the other but didn't say good bye.

The Paramedics (did I mention they were all handsome hunks) rushed me to the hospital. Suddenly I was the POV shot in the ER TV show. Lights steaming overhead as a team of medical professionals are rushing my gurney down a corridor. There was a doctor running along aside yelling in my face, "You're having a major coronary?!! Do you

understand??!!!" I nodded. I think. They got me to a stall in the ER and started ripping off my clothes and hooking me up, taking x-rays and really got going on me. The screaming doctor (not shouting anymore but still uncomfortably loud) asked what I was doing just before I had the heart attack. I told him that I had just given a sermon and he cut me off. "WE GOT A MINISTER HERE!!!!!" he exclaimed to the ER staff. Suddenly two more doctors and three nurses appeared from out of nowhere. I tried to explain that I wasn't a minister but actually a Lay Speaker but no one was listening.

They finally got a room prepared for me and another doctor started working on getting a stent in me. They first had to do an angioplasty to open up my clogged artery that was causing the heart attack and then they could do the stent. Somewhere in this process I coded or stopped breathing. The medical team immediately started CPR and kept zapping me to get my heart and my respiration going again but to no avail. They evidently worked on me for nearly eight minutes and had stopped and were ready to pronounce my death when I took a breath. They got right back to work and the surgeon successfully placed the stent. I woke up and didn't even know what had happened. All I knew was that I was alive. They wheeled me into cardiac intensive care and in a little while I saw my family. I could not wrap my head around this for months.

The Paramedics, Doctors may not have known I was not a minister but they all knew that I was on HRT and transgendered. I let the Paramedics know exactly what I was on and the dosage. Nobody paused. No one thought for a moment if I should be helped. They didn't hesitate. They saw a human being in need and they used all of their skills to save my life and they did.

Indeed it was my "lifestyle" was the reason I had a heart attack. Not the HRT but the Big Macs, Double Doubles, brownies, super sized French Fries and my no physical activity "lifestyle" that nearly killed me. I now eat with much greater discipline than I ever have and am in the best health of my middle aged life.

After that, I felt more compelled than ever to complete my transition. I have been living as a woman since February of 08 and in July of that year I changed my name and my gender on my driver's license. This January I changed my name LEGALLY to Marie Michael Fairman. I am looking forward to completing the process and become as much of a woman as I physically can be.

Why would God put me in the wrong body? God didn't. The more we learn of Creation the more it becomes unfathomable. The diversity in the humanity we see is staggering and yet it is real. We can see it with our eyes. What about what we can't see? Can that be even more startling? It follows that it must.

My Mother used to say to me that God does not give you more than you can handle. I have held that in my heart every day as I faced challenges that I feared were too much. They weren't. I've always got through them and so it must be the same for the children of God. God has over the vastness of time revealed to us slowly and deliberately the incomprehensive nature of Creation. Gender Variance has been with us since Genesis. It is only now that we are becoming equipped to appreciate and understand the complexity of it all.

As I have gone through this gender change, my relationship with my wife has always been my deepest worry. We didn't know what would happen to our relationship when I went on HRT. We didn't make any promises to each other nor did we turn away from each other. We just took it a day at a time like we have for the last nearly 37 years of our marriage. To our great surprise and joy, we grew closer to each other and found that our love deepened.

Remember what Paul wrote in Romans. "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:35, 38-39)

My wife and I are still married but now we are a same-sex couple! We know now that nothing can separate us from God's love or our love for each other. Not even gender.

AGAIN HOLDING MY FRIEND JESUS' HAND HIGH

Mark William Smith

I grew up in a small town in the hills of East Tennessee. It was in a region called the “buckle” of the bible-belt, because there was literally a church every half a mile. My family went to an old-timey clapboard church, and even though the majority of my parents were Baptist or Church of God, my parents and grandparents were United Methodists.

In the south, the church is the center of the community, and there was always something going on there, be it covered-dish socials, choir practice, community outreach, circle meetings or just plain church. We all spent a lot of time there. Some of my earliest memories is singing the song “Do Lord” with my cousins at a Sunday night prayer meeting. I loved church so much, and felt so loved and protected by everyone there.

Even at an early age, I felt the presence of God in my life. My family used to tease me, because I would walk around our farm with my hand up in the air, and when asked what I was doing I told them “holding my friend Jesus’ hand.” I loved going to vacation bible school during the summer and was always the first person in my Sunday school class. I felt completely protected and loved by all my church family. I found that I had a talent for singing and I became a regular singer in our morning worship service.

I began to feel differently when I started to develop little crushes on boys down the road and in my school. I knew I shouldn’t feel this way, but I did. Back then homosexuality wasn’t talked about, or preached about. I knew the bible verses preaching against “a man lying with a woman” but obviously as a kid, had no real feelings toward them. I do remember seeing films in MYF about the sins of drug abuse and what it would do to poor innocent kids like me. Homosexuality wasn’t preached against, but in the early 70s south, being a hippie was a BIG DEAL. The musicals Godspell and Jesus Christ Superstar were around but boy, MY church didn’t cotton to it! The worse thing you could be was a drug addict.

My world changed in 1977, around the time Anita Bryant was promoting her campaign to legislate laws against gays in several states. She was at a news conference and got hit in the face with a fruit pie. My mother and I were in our car listening to a news report on the incident in our car when my mother turned to me and said “I’d would rather you be a drug addict then a homosexual. You have to know, southern boys and their mamas have a very close bond. My mother was, and is today, my greatest support. I relied on my mother to love and protect me unconditionally, but by then I KNEW what gay meant and I KNEW that I was. To think that my mother would rather me be the lowest of the low (drug addict) then what I was, changed my whole life. Now we have talked about that moment in my adult life, and my mother has no memory, and was horrified to think those words had such and effect on my life, it was just some throw away thing, that was meaningless to her, and when I came out, she was 100 percent behind me. But at that moment, to hear my mother say that, I was destroyed.

I set out to change. I prayed every day for the Lord to lift this from me. I made good grades, volunteered, was the leader of my youth group, and went to youth conferences in

the summer at Emory and Henry, a United Methodist College. I was in bible club and went on Lay Witness Missions, and in my Senior year of high school felt the call to become a United Methodist minister. In college I started my pre-ministerial studies and began my candidacy for ministry. I knew from the Book of Discipline what the official stance of the United Methodist church was to homosexuality, even though more liberal than other denominations, still took a stance against homosexuality, and now my ministers were starting to speak against it as well. I vowed to be the best minister I could be, hoping one day, God would change me.

I have to say though - throughout my life - I have had wonderful people in the United Methodist Church who were very open minded and loving, but who were just products of there upbringing. The Church had been a strong supporter of civil rights and many Methodists practiced the idea of Social Gospel. Many that I meet called themselves liberal, but yet drew the line at gay people, loving them, but still believing they were walking out of step with Gods will. I never once doubted the presence of God in my life, but how could He possibly love me, when my church was telling me I was walking in sin.

Through out the entire time I was preparing my studies for ministry, I was also singing and dancing, which I had such a passion for. I decided to take a summer off, and go to Galveston, Texas to perform in a show. It was there that I that I truly fell in love - with one of my fellow performers - who was a man. It was the happiest I had ever been in my life, but made me so much more confused. How could this bring me so much joy, yet be so wrong in the eyes of God. This love didn't fell dirty or bad. On the contrary, next to my parents, it was the deepest, purest love I had ever felt. I couldn't turn my back on it. It was then and there that I decided I couldn't pursue a ministry in a church that felt this love was incompatible to God's plan. I became a performer and left the church that had raised and nurtured me all those years.

Throughout the following years, I would have moments of extreme guilt, and even once enrolled in a reparative gay program to help "cure" me. Nothing helped of course. I eventually quit praying and stopped going to church altogether. I tried other spiritual paths like Buddhism and New Age philosophy, but nothing made me feel connected to the higher truth that I had known as a child.

My life changed when I was home in Tennessee visiting my parents. I had since moved to California to start a new life and was home for a family reunion. My old MYF leader , who was one of my church "moms," called me and wanted me to come to her house to have lunch. When I was there, she told me "I know you're gay, and you're probably thinking that you are broken and God doesn't love you, but I'm here to tell you he created you that way, and you are precious in his eyes". I had told NO ONE in Tennessee I was gay, and I asked her how she knew. Her daughter had come out to her 6 months earlier and she had thrown her out of the house, for approximately 10 minutes, before she started praying about it. She then ran after Alice, asked for her forgiveness and they began the journey of what the bible really says, and studied different interpretations of scripture and came to believe God made us gay for a purpose - His purpose. We looked at the bible and I prayed with her for the first time in years. That gave me the strength to come out to my own family, and come back into the church I had missed so much.

At Hollywood United Methodist, I have found a loving, warm, amazing family, who teaches acceptance, follows the social gospel of my childhood, and teaches us what John Wesley meant to be a Methodist. I look at all the children who may be gay there who are raised without ever doubting that God loves them and they are perfect in His eyes.

IT HAS BEEN A LONG JOURNEY, AND IT ISN'T OVER YET

Phil & Sharon Bowles

Over thirty years ago a fellow high school teacher cared enough to share the struggles of his life. Larry recognized that Sharon and I were open to discuss any topic, including our mutual love for God, his deteriorating eyesight and his same-sex attraction. He showed us the scars on his wrists and told us how he had shared with his parents the most intimate reality of his life, only to be rejected.

Then Sharon's friendship with the church organist – also her spiritual mentor – helped put another human face on our developing understanding of what it means to be gay and Christian. There were also Robert and Gary, my dormitory unit mates from college and close friends to Sharon, coming out of their closets finally in midlife, willing to talk, to share the worry, the discord. The stories of a local church willing to accept Gary's money but, after so long, not his leadership on the church board.

But it was Samantha who pushed us over the edge into activism, whose mother had been my first piano teacher, like an older sister to me. I had known Samantha since her birth, as Tad, eventually the bright computer programmer and family man who as a youngster had been shamed by his grandmother when she found him trying on his sister's clothes, telling him he was going to hell. Samantha's family would not walk with her through the ultimate transition from male to female. Sharon and I looked at each other and said, almost simultaneously, "We have to go. We have to be family at the hospital." After that vigil, meeting other transgender patients with similar goals, our hearts were heavy. We had also heard about several recent graduates of the university, our workplace, who had ended their own lives in part because of the dissonance between their same-sex attraction and the position of the church on this issue. We would never be quite the same.

Interestingly, our early work in Creation Care opened a wonderful avenue for us. In 2006, I attended the LGBT Pride Weekend in San Diego for the first time with a friend. Trash in hand, I found that there was no recycling option for attendees. I offered, at my friend's suggestion, to help the next year. This summer will be Sharon's and my fourth year to be part of the Pride organization's effort to divert sustainable materials from the landfill. We have also enjoyed these opportunities to meet persons we would never have known and to allow some of these persons to teach us about their lives, their families, their hopes for the future, not unlike our own.

By this point, integrating our lives with our growing sense of Christian mission, and discerning the work of the Holy Spirit within us, we had to be more active, we had to convene and lead conversation on LGBT issues and faith. It was no longer just an interest. It was a mandate, a thumb in the back.

Our foremost concern was the need for honest conversation in the conservative church-related university community where I have worked for thirty years. I asked, "May we host weekly conversation?" The response came back, "We think there needs to be a conversation, but we are not sure how to do it. We're sorry, but no." Some brief limited campus-wide programming did come together – one a faculty-staff instigated discussion,

and another program planned and executed by student leaders. It is amazing the degree to which the current collegiate generation is open and ready for a conversation!

Shortly thereafter, Sharon and I began to host a weekly conversation at a church near the university campus. That series of meetings just closed its third academic year – a combination of testimonials, documentary films, study of short texts, examination of key scriptures and traditions, and commentary by professors and ministers out of their vocational and scholarly expertise.

More recently at our home church of twenty-four years, we have been pleased to be part of the *All God's Children Task Force*, to see it fully institutionalized at the Annual Church Meeting, to see it offer screening of documentary films, Bible studies that explore Christian tradition and multiple interpretations of scriptural passages that have been used to condemn gay persons, to see it partner with the San Diego chapter of PFLAG (the highly-respected nationwide mainstream organization called *Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays*) on our church campus to host special programs such as the visit of Anglican Bishop Christopher Ssenyonjo of Uganda last month, speaking about the proposed Ugandan law that would criminalize homosexuality, making the orientation punishable by death.

The Reconciling Ministries Network (RMN), based in Chicago, composed mainly of United Methodists, but not part of the General UMC, has been a major support to our development on this issue and to our envisioning what might be in the UMC. We have attended two RMN convocations in the last four years and have been nurtured by the Bible study, the worship, the networking and the history of the struggle in the UMC for full inclusion of all persons. The Parents Reconciling Network (PRN) of the RMN has also been helpful to our work. Sharon has agreed to coordinator for PRN-RMN in our Cal-Pac Conference. I left the convocation in Estes Park, CO, on Labor Day 2009, saying to Sharon that the spirit of revival in the RMN is potent enough to be a means of grace to the denomination at large.

It is our younger daughter who is our reason for becoming active in the Parent Reconciling Network of RMN. A year and a half ago, Emily, ready to come home for Thanksgiving, told her siblings, their spouses and us that she, like them, had found somebody to love – another woman – and that she was sorry for any pain or frustration that news caused. Sharon cried because Emily felt she needed to apologize for any pain or frustration in her extended family, caused by her prayerfully and fearfully working out what it meant to be a whole person, a follower of Christ, a person in a loving relationship. How sad that she had to concern herself with those matters, but, gratefully, she had. She cared. And we had been on the journey before her.

GOD LOVES US UNCONDITIONALLY

Stephen Blaha

I was born gay. I had profound feelings for other boys well before I understood what it was or what it meant. For those of you who have been powerfully attracted to another person, you will understand how this is a core feeling from your *being*. Not like choosing mint chocolate chip over pralines n' cream. It is in your essence. I see it now as the way God made me - the same way He made you. He is teaching us how to love.

My life has been blessed. I was adopted at only two months old and raised in the foothills of sunny Los Angeles. I grew up as a sincere Catholic along with my also-adopted brother and sister. Mom and Dad took their job seriously and provided everything we needed: love, home-cooked meals, a beautiful house, a Catholic education and a great family. Mom is sassy, adventurous, generous, and an amazing cook. Her Italian Sausage soup is my favorite. Dad worked his whole life for the same company, has a big heart and a talent for investing. As a varsity athlete and excellent student in my Jesuit high school, my future looked bright and promising...until my feelings for boys began to show.

My Mother suspected from early days and aggressively disapproved, quietly putting crucifixes under my mattress and sending me to a renowned Christian psychiatrist to "convert" me. She was scared. I was forbidden to go out with my "friends" and many occasions flared into arguments. "Don't upset your Mother," my Dad would say. What I couldn't understand is why my Mom would believe the Colorado Coalition for the Family over the son she knew and raised from birth.

But back then, homosexuality was your Mother's fault. And according to the church, guaranteed a place in hell. I knew the teachings and so I felt shame and hurt. Instead of learning to grow with myself, I, like my parents, believed that God had created me flawed and only the "good" parts of me were acceptable and lovable. It was an "all-or-nothing" contract - the church deciding I should be thrown out with the bath water. So then I thought I had to throw out God. I began believing that the world was just a big machine and a profound crisis of faith was born.

I went away for college and have led an exciting life living in Paris, Milan, San Francisco and London, making a host of friends and many travel adventures. Shortly before 9/11, I moved back home from London where I pursued a college love for the arts. My fear at starting a new career mid-life and the energy it required set the stage for a new wolf in lamb's clothing: methamphetamine. I slowly developed an unmanageable fondness until my life became a slave to it.

In 2006, God intervened and I found a twelve-step program that re-introduced me to my Higher Power. My life quickly turned around. I started going back to church to spend quality time with Mom and Dad and surprisingly found I was getting a lot out of it. At the same time, Prop. 8 was passed, and California voters decided - along my parents and the Catholic Church - that I was not fit to marry.

When they sold our childhood home and moved away in December 2009, I decided to look for another church - one that might, if possible, welcome ALL of me. A friend took

me to his church - Hollywood United Methodist Church – and miraculously, I was welcomed. From the first loving words out of Rev. Kathy's and Dave's mouths, I knew I was home. I felt like God was opening all the doors in my life, and I just had to walk through them. I formally joined the church only a few months later in Feb. 2010. I love the service to the community that HUMC does and jumped right in. We make dinners for the homeless, lunches for people with AIDS, proudly proclaim that "H8 is not a Christian value", march in community parades, and sing out loud. I am EXCITED to be a member.

To me, this is not about being gay, but about following the words of God and the example of Jesus' life. Christ says the two greatest commandments are this, "Love me and love your neighbor." I am incapable of deciding who is worthy of joining our church and who is not. How does one decide who to reject? Who would *you* send away?

God loves us unconditionally. I first had to believe that I was loved – ALL of me. And in believing that God made me and said, "It was good", can I welcome every one of you and love ALL of you.

I'd like to end my story with favorite prayer - our 11th Step prayer - the Prayer of St. Francis:

*Lord, make me a channel of your peace
That where there is hatred, I may bring love
That where there is wrong, I may bring the spirit of forgiveness
That where there is discord, I may bring harmony
That where there is error, I may bring truth
That where there is doubt, I may bring faith
That where there is despair, I may bring hope
That where there are shadows, I may bring light
That where there is sadness, I may bring joy.
Lord, grant that I may seek rather to comfort, than to be comforted
To understand, than be understood
To love, than to be loved.
For it is by self-forgetting that one finds.
It is by forgiving that one is forgiven.
It is by dying that one awakens to Eternal Life.
Amen.*

I read that as it is up to me to love *first*. To be understanding, forgiving and joyful. Let *us* open our hearts and minds first and welcome EVERYONE to our church – the United Methodist Church. I believe that is our task. The rest is up to God.

THE SEARCH FOR ACCEPTANCE & SPIRITUAL NOURISHMENT

Terry Coan & Keith Young

Keith:

As a kid growing up in Kansas City, I was in many ways extraordinarily lucky. I had loving parents who made their kids their first priority. My dad was the son of a Methodist minister and my mom was a Methodist deaconess. Teenage organizer that I was, I'd plan our Youth Fellowship summer trips and my parents were always troopers to chaperon our posse when other parents were just too busy to make the time.

By the time I went to college, I knew I wanted to keep my spiritual life vibrant and to maintain this important connection to the church, so I chose my alma mater, Central Methodist University in Missouri. But long before I made it to college, I was deeply aware that I was different. I was also aware of having been taught that *my difference, being gay*, somehow made me unacceptable in the eyes of the church. I dared not utter feelings about my whole self, my authentic self, to anyone, most especially anyone in the church.

By the time I made it to medical school, I finally recognized just how great an emotional and spiritual price I was paying for hiding my identity: hiding from my family, my friends, and even myself.

For the first time in my life, I sought the advice of my pastor. Dr. Ed Ankeny at Mt. Vernon Place UMC in Baltimore was just the pastor I needed when I was most deeply in need. It was Dr. Ankeny who counseled that I could be myself and still be a beloved child of God. At this profoundly vulnerable junction in my life, I had been brought to this man of God in this very special United Methodist Church. I had been given the blessing of continuing my journey as a Christian and as a Methodist as a whole, integrated person. What a glorious gift!

Terry:

My journey to find Jesus Christ came much later in life. I was not raised in a Christian family and rarely went to church. But in my early thirties, I began to seek a spiritual connection to God and wanted to develop a deeper sense of purpose in my life. I'd visited a few churches in Los Angeles but never found anything that felt quite right.

Then came a Sunday afternoon in 1996. I was attending a Thanksgiving brunch hosted by some friends and a late-arriving guest, Keith, showed up in a coat and tie along with a change of clothes. Curious, I asked him from where he had just come. He replied that he had just attended Sunday services at Hollywood UMC, surprising me a bit since none of my friends went to church.

I told him that I'd been looking for a church home and a congregation in which I could feel connected and experience a sense of community. Sure, I wanted a community where I would be embraced as a gay man, but I also wanted one that was as diverse as the city I called home. I wanted a church community that included families with children, straight people and GLBT people, and people of different ethnicities.

What I found at Hollywood UMC was not only that community but also a connection with a very special person. Our love for one another was not only “allowed,” it was encouraged. With Keith by my side, I became active in the congregation, finding spiritual nourishment with God and this community of faith. In April 1997, I was baptized at Hollywood Church by Dr. Ed Hansen.

Keith:

Today, between our busy professional lives as a psychiatrist and as an information management consultant, we spend our weekends in Palm Springs, where the UMC of Palm Springs is now our church home. There, we have found yet another embracing pastor, Dr. Amanda Burr, and an embracing community of faith. When we were married in 2008, after twelve years together, our day of celebration was enriched by the presence of many members of our church, representing the diversity of our church family, who were able to celebrate our commitment to each other and before God.

As a psychiatrist, I regularly hear stories of how GLBT people have felt forced to choose between acceptance of themselves and acceptance by their communities of faith. Our experience of genuine acceptance by two United Methodist church families in this conference gives us hope that our conference can be a beacon of God’s inclusive love. We really do have the potential to be a church of open hearts, open minds and open doors.

A FAITH JOURNEY TOGETHER

Vicky Cook & Sandie Duff

Fourteen years ago, I met my partner, Sandie. We made a life commitment to each other and a commitment to take a faith journey together. That faith journey began with an invitation from a Methodist pastor. The pastor knew us and knew we were searching... searching for a church that would welcome us as a couple and where we could grow our faith.

Our faith journey began the day we walked into Anaheim United Methodist Church (AUMC). Neither of us had ever been “churched”, but both of us had a strong faith foundation to build on and a belief that God loved us as we were. AUMC members welcomed us without question, without any hesitation. Within a year of regularly attending, the church identified us as potential church leaders and asked us both to be a part of Missions and Outreach committee and then I was asked to be the Church Lay Leader & Church Council chair. We were one of you!

By the end of the first year at AUMC, I had finally come to a point in my life when it was time for me to be baptized. I wanted to “make it official”. We were both members of a mainline Christian church and both baptized. Our church family has been with us, side by side, through many of life’s challenges, including marriages, births, deaths, cancer diagnosis and life’s daily struggles. The greatest honor the church family has given Sandie and me, is not the leadership roles on committee’s or volunteer awards, but acceptance.

Our church family knows us as simply, Vicky and Sandie, not as the “Lesbian Couple” or the two gay girls or even “those people”. Our church family never labeled us and never judged us, they simply met us where we were in life and saw in us a desire to be fed, to grow in our faith and to walk on a faith journey. They saw us as “one of the them”, a loving couple, faithful/seeking Christians and Methodists. Yes, we are one of you... there are many of us, gay and lesbian Christians among you, who work tirelessly on behalf of local Methodist churches, on District and Conference committee’s and in the mission field beyond the walls of our churches. We are grateful for our church to have had the courage to meet us where we were in our life...to invite in those on the fringes... and to love us for who we are, two of God’s children. One of God’s greatest commandments is to Love God with all your heart, soul, and mind and the second, is to love your neighbor as yourself.

Can it really be as simple as that, accepting those who may be different from you? Didn’t God create diversity? As leaders in the church, are we not called to accept diversity, treat all persons equally, and work for inclusiveness? We communicate our faith to the world by how we treat others and how we live our lives.

The members of Anaheim United Methodist church are communicating to those in the world that they have faith... faith in God and faith in those they have yet to meet!

ABOUT US



REV. KAREN CLARK RISTINE
Mission Hills United Methodist Church



APRIL MOORE
Hollywood United Methodist (2 years)
Waverly Hall United Methodist (22 years)
Hospital Marketing
Domestic Partnership, 15 years; two children



BEV PEACE
Married



BRUCE R. WATKINS, PH.D.
Clinical Psychologist
Committed to Dan Garay for 35 years.



DAN GARAY
Retired elementary school teacher.
Committed to Bruce Watkins for 35 years.



REV. DEBBIE GARA
United Methodist Church, Ordained Deacon
First United Methodist, Pasadena, Associate Minister
Married to Dan Gara; My wonderful family includes two adult daughters, step-children and grand children; dogs and cats



DEREK LUNDGREN
Hollywood United Methodist Church



REV. DIANE REHFIELD

Lifelong Methodist

Ordained Minister

Married with three adult children (all of them wonderful by the way!)



ED HANSEN

United Methodist Pastor, retired

Charge Conference relationship: Hollywood United Methodist Church

With partner of 12 years



GLENN WHITAKER

United Methodist (since 1960)

Pharmacy Manager

Together with Bob for 10 years and two daughters Heather and Holly



HAROLD & ELLEN KAMEYA

St. Luke Presbyterian Church, Union Church of Los Angeles, Northridge Congregational Church
First Congregational Church of Long Beach (5 years)
Methodist Federation for Social Action (MFSA)
Retired Engineer and retired Teacher (Ellen)
Daughter and two sons; three grandchildren
Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) since 1990
Progressive Christians Uniting



JAY SOWELL

Hollywood United Methodist Church (6 years)
Sales and Marketing
Married for 25 years to Rae with one daughter Kathrine



RUSS KNIGHT

Hollywood United Church (9 years)
University Lecturer

JEFF GOODWIN

Hollywood United Church (9 years)
Internet Strategist



JOSEPH R. HENRY

Retired Senior Vice President of Art Center College of Design, Pasadena, and
Founding Director of Art Center (Europe), Switzerland

Spouse: Stanley Gordon

Retired Optometrist and Entrepreneur

Together 15 years, Married September 7, 2008



KRISTY STRANGE

Hollywood United Methodist Church

Construction Development

Engaged



MARIE MICHAEL FAIRMAN

Hollywood United Methodist Church

Entertainment Production/Performance Professional

Spouse - Joyce and 2 adult children

MARK WILLIAM SMITH

Hollywood United Methodist (5 Years)
Talent Agent



PHIL BOWLES

San Diego First United Methodist Church
(25 years)
Cal-Pac Annual Conference (6 years)
Professor of English at church-related univ.
Husband of Sharon; 3 adult children

SHARON BOWLES

San Diego First United Methodist Church
(25 years)
Cal-Pac Annual Conference (10 years)
Former Director of Christian education
Managing Editor of Christian university press
Wife of Phil; 3 adult children



STEPHEN BLAHA

Hollywood United Methodist Church
Photographer



TERRY COAN

Palm Springs United Methodist Church (5 yrs.)
Hollywood United Methodist Church (8 years)
Consultant
Married to Keith

KEITH YOUNG

Palm Springs United Methodist Church (5 years)
Hollywood United Methodist Church (11 years)
Mt. Vernon Place UMC, Baltimore (4 years)
Physician
Married to Terry



VICKY COOK & SANDIE DUFF
Anaheim United Methodist Church (13 years)
Real Estate & Social Worker
Domestic Partners

FOR MORE INFORMATION

For more information about what you can do within your local area and church, we suggest contacting:

The Reconciling Ministries Network
3801 N. Keeler Avenue
Chicago, IL 60641-3007

www.RMNETWORK.ORG

773-736-5526 Office
773-736-5475 Fax

Within the Cal-Pac region, you can also contact:

Ed Hansen
323-229-2920
ehansen643@aol.com