

*This is my story....*



*Voices Unheard*  
*NC Annual Conference 2005*

**Reconciling United Methodists and Friends of North Carolina seek to make the United Methodist Church inclusive of its gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender brothers and sisters.**



Please join us in our upcoming meetings and events to share your stories

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<http://rumnc.tripod.com>



**By working together, we can truly make the United Methodist Church a place of open hearts, open minds and open doors.**

## My Story

### Part I: Sorrow

Three years ago I was the most average United Methodist you could imagine. I attended Sunday services fairly regularly, as I had most of my adult life. I attended adult Sunday school regularly. I had served as an officer on the church's preschool board of directors for as long as it had been open and I had been a steady volunteer for Vacation Bible School, finally serving as director for the 100-student program. I was married and pregnant with my third child.

My story really begins that spring when I was finishing up a Disciple study which was led by my dear friend, Mary, an excellent and gifted teacher who was in the second year of her three-year probationary status as a United Methodist deacon. Toward the end of the 32-week Bible study program, one of the members of the class read a prayer that included the following as a closing prayer for the group:

*"Heavenly Father, we come before you today to ask Your forgiveness and to seek Your direction and guidance. We know Your Word says 'Woe to those who call evil good,' but that is exactly what we have done. We have lost our spiritual equilibrium and reversed our values. We confess that...*

*...We have worshipped other gods and called it multiculturalism.*

*We have endorsed perversion and called it alternative lifestyle.*

*... Search us, Oh, God, and know our hearts today; cleanse us from every sin and set us free. Guide and bless these men and women who have been sent to direct us to the center of Your will, io open ask it in the name of Your Son, the living Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen"*

It included a number of other political rants thinly disguised as confession and had been read in the Kansas State Senate. My classmate had found it online. I was appalled and disgusted, but I didn't open my mouth and say so. I wondered if the rest of my class felt as he did.

A military therapist once described me as having "Catholic Schoolgirl Syndrome", and I hadn't changed my ways for Disciple class. Every week I faithfully (neurotically?) read the readings and wrote out the homework questions. That week our text informed us that Jesus had dragged his reluctant band of disciples out to the lepers, tax collectors and even to the women to preach. For homework we were asked to list the groups of people that our church was not reaching out to. I had a long list. I wrote, "poor people" (our church is in an imposing-looking building situated in the midst of a geographically segregated upscale neighborhood.) I wrote, "alcoholics" - no AA program. I wrote, "non-whites" - not very many of those here. I wrote, "single mothers" - no one here like that. I had a list of six or seven groups before I finally wrote, "homosexuals".

Immediately, a light bulb illuminated in my head. Our church sits right across the street from a large and expensive condo complex. Other than retirees, I thought, who would be taking out extended mortgages on apartments but people (or couples) who were not expecting children. This must certainly include gay people, I thought. Here was a group that we were not reaching out to, a group who might feel perfectly at home in this church - if only we would let them know that they were welcome. I was to learn that I was being quite naive.

Until that night I had had very limited experience with gay people. In the 1970's, as a 16-year-old homeless person, I had found safety sharing an apartment with a number of gay men who had welcomed me. Many years later, I had several gay female friends in the army who felt comfortable being open with me. I had worked with openly gay people in the pharmacy of Duke Hospital for a couple of years. But that's it.

I had, until then, not given a single thought to sexuality in the context of the church, except that I had been repulsed by the reference to "perversion" in the prayer read by my classmate. I resolved to atone for my silence the previous week by suggesting that we be intentional about inviting homosexuals to our church during the next homework discussion.

Now "homosexual" is a word I had never spoken before in public, and certainly one I had not spoken in church. I harbored some concern that the bigotry expressed in the Kansas Senate prayer might be shared by

the rest of my class. I could feel my face go red-hot with fear and embarrassment when I brought the topic up in class. Sure enough, the word brought silence to the classroom and an abrupt end to the conversation.

Afterward, however, Mary approached me and told me that the United Methodist Church had done a study on the topic of homosexuality, and that there were study materials available. She added that the study materials had even been mandated for use by local churches by the previous Annual Conference. She gave me the names of some people at the nearby Aldersgate UMC, which had successfully completed the study just a few months earlier.

I learned what I could about the UMC's homosexuality study, and asked my pastor if we could offer the study at our church. He acted as though he would consider it, and told me that he would need the church council to approve it before it could move forward.

I was to learn that this was but a tactic to placate me. He never brought it up to the council, even after repeated requests. Over the next two years he stalled and delayed until he finally told me that the discussion of homosexuality does nothing but divide churches and cause problems. He made it clear that we would not be talking about sexuality or, for that matter, any other topic that could prove divisive in his church, ever. Sadly, he was so fearful of this discussion that he made life for me very difficult at church. Worse, when my dear friend, Mary began to speak words of inclusion from the pulpit he began to forbid her to preach, and finally even to share prayers or speak at all from the pulpit. Her last year of probation became nearly unbearable.

## **Part II: Grace**

During the next two years, I became active with the Reconciling Methodist movement and learned to work for inclusion in my church and denomination with some of the most loving, spiritual, knowledgeable and dedicated people I have ever met. I also found several others in my own church who shared my convictions about inclusion. We formed a Sunday school class centered on Christian peace and justice. With the RUMNC group I became active in church politics and in educating clergy and lay persons about inclusion, as well as working to provide worship, fellowship and support opportunities for people who felt excluded from other faith communities.

It was incredibly painful to feel excluded and rejected by the church that I had called home for many years. I had stayed long enough to see Mary ordained, but she left immediately thereafter. My church cancelled the Living Peace class, having determined that it was not "Christ centered" enough. Unbelievably, the General Conference of the United Methodist Church determined, in a 55%-45% vote, that Christians do not disagree about homosexuality. It became time for me to find a new church home.

I had begun this journey an average Methodist with a vague notion that excluding people based on gender or sexuality made no sense. During my time with RUMNC, however, I found that both my faith and my relationship with God had grown immeasurably. Through prayer, study and fellowship with these amazing peace warriors, I found myself able to more clearly understand my relationship with God, God's love and grace and expectations. I found scriptural basis for my convictions about inclusion. This, in turn, helped me greatly in finding a more appropriate faith community for my family.

Later this month I will be joining a new church. I know that his church is a wonderful place for all people to worship God and follow Christ, really and truly regardless of their race, economic status, gender or sexual identity, age, or stage of life. I know that this community will help me to find ways to worship and serve the God whom I love and who has always loved me. This church will support me spiritually through good and bad times. Moreover, this community will be a true partner in raising my children.

This has been an amazing journey. I have worked side by side with amazing people. I have been witness to true miracles of faith. I have been a part of sharing God's love with people who had not experienced it before. I have been energized in my faith. I am grateful to God and to my Living Peace friends and to Reconciling United Methodists. I hope that the United Methodist Church finds it's way to including all of its children. I must leave now and follow a different path.

## **It's Time to Come Out**

It's time for the Methodist Church to come out of its reliance upon a 19th Century Cultural Bias. The same biblical proof-text arguments that are used to condemn homosexuals follow the same self-righteous justification that was used in the pulpits in the 1800's to justify slavery. Too much of the stance of the church has been the result of political maneuvering and not careful examination of beliefs and faith. The discussion so far has shed more heat than light, and the emotional hysteria involving anything to do with sex is archaic Puritanism.

It's time to acknowledge that while many people have long-held sincere beliefs that homosexuality is a sin, there is no clear biblical justification for such a view. It has more to do with the "way we were brought up" than in biblical exegesis.

It's time for the Methodist Church to come out of a policy that excludes an entire class of people from full membership in the church. Let's quit arguing about whether or not to endorse homosexuality and homosexual relationships and start focusing on how to reach millions of people who have no church or have left the church for good reason.

It's time for the Methodist Church to stop the hypocrisy of "don't ask, don't tell." The church has struggled for the past 25 years with a schism of political maneuvering that puts the Baptists to shame. I've known too many gay ministers and lay leaders who have suffered from the capricious whim of someone who has chosen to "make a case out of them" or others who have been "tolerated" because of political connections. Openness and honesty is the only policy that makes any sense. A lot of parsing of "self-acknowledged" or "practicing" or any other adjective used to describe the status of homosexuals in the church ignores the reality that there has been inequality in the administration and enforcement of church policies and judicial proceedings.

Gays and lesbians are not fomenting a schism in the church that threatens to split the church. The ones who are left in the church are trying to bring about healing rather than proselytizing some liberal theology. Most already have left the church. We're simply trying to make the church more relevant (if not tolerant) in a very complex world in which many mainline denominations are viewed as irrelevant to most people's lives. The debacle of 9/11 revealed that most Americans are inherently religious and want to express their beliefs in a significant manner that is not dictated by organizational denominations quibbling over minor theological issues. The ecumenical movement of the 1970's has been replaced by a dangerous drift to doctrinaire declarations. The fundamentalists are growing in popularity because they offer a simple framework that provides answers for everything and no one has to think or to develop a faith beyond pure emotionalism.

I have been a Methodist for 54 years, and I have been proud of its Wesley tradition. I don't recall that John Wesley asked the coal miners to wash their hands before they could stand to listen to him or ask if they had paid their dues for a pew. Wesley was widely criticized for abandoning the Church of England and its rules. He did so because of his conscience. Why must only homosexuals pass a litmus test to be fully accepted into the church? Why is the church so hung up about a person's sexual orientation? Is that the defining element of who a person is?

It is time to embrace the Wesley tradition and to evangelize the great unwashed.

John Suddath

## The Church's Message

When our daughter came out to us, church was the first place we could not go because it was the most condemning place of all. We tried. Several times. But, as often happens, we went into the closet as our child came out. We were afraid: of what people would say, of what people would think, of what people would do. And we were most afraid in church.

We sat through several worship services figuratively looking over our shoulders, wondering who suspected, who could see the scarlet letter on our chests, the neon sign over our heads. The fear became even more intense when the service was over and we had to talk with friends and fellow church members we had known for as many as twenty years. We constantly had to monitor ourselves and what we said, as we also scrutinized what others said to us, or asked us. Did they suspect? Were they fishing for information? Had we said something to "give us away?"

It was horrible. The fear, the constant being on guard, the feeling that we were judged. All this in the place that had been our "home" for so many years; where we had been on committees and boards, and where our children had grown up attending Sunday school, Bible School, UMYF, church camp. Where our daughter was baptized.

Finally, we decided we could no longer endure being in a place where we felt so unwelcome. Even though we told no one "our secret" we still felt unwelcome. We were suddenly "outsiders" and "other." So we stopped going to church.

But, if it was this awful for us, how horrible it must have been for our beautiful, talented, smart, creative, wonderful daughter!!! No wonder she began resisting going to church when she reached high school and really began to struggle with her sexual identity. But, being unaware of her struggle, we insisted that we go to church as a family, never knowing the agony she was going through. When we experienced it for ourselves, we were amazed at her strength - and so sorry we had put her through that.

In all of this, before we knew our daughter was lesbian, in all the years of her childhood, in all the years of our own growing up in the Methodist church, no one ever said out loud in the church, "Homosexuality is a sin, and anyone who is homosexual is not welcome here." But we knew. The very silence around homosexuality (in fact around all sexuality) proclaimed loudly and clearly that this was such an awful thing that no one was allowed to talk about it (except to make snide remarks or "jokes"). And, if you were "that way" you had better not let anyone know. You had better get yourself "straightened out."

This is the message of the church. Not, "God loves you. You are welcome here more than anywhere," but rather, "You are unwelcome, because the church considers you 'incompatible with Christian teaching.' Go get yourself 'straightened out' so you are just like us, and then come back and we will welcome you."

How sad. How wrong. How sinful.

Helen King  
Durham, NC

## **We Know**

My 38 year old son called recently to ask what I was doing about a problem in our schools and churches. Bullying and physical violence is directed at gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) children. No child is immune.

We know that teachers and administrators frequently ignore or dismiss the problem, and in some cases have encouraged or participated in such abuse themselves.

We know this harassment has damaging and sometimes tragic consequences for GLBT youth. Studies consistently find they have about a 3 times higher rate of attempted suicide.

We know these struggles are compounded for GLBT youth facing other forms of oppression based on race, gender, disability, class, immigration status, religion or language.

We know the majority of youth who harass and assault GLBT people don't fit a stereotype of hate-filled extremists, but are average young people who often see nothing wrong with their behavior.

We know that in several tragic school shootings, including Columbine High, the youth who pulled the trigger experienced anti-GLBT harassment.

We know that anti-GLBT" harassment destabilizes the learning environment for all students.

We know every student has the right to a safe and equitable learning environment free from harassment, violence and discrimination.

We know that 83% of parents support putting in place or expanding existing anti-harassment and anti-discrimination policies to include GLBT students.

We know that, thanks to recent court cases and new laws, ensuring a safe learning environment is also a legal duty.

This safe environment for all students requires work on a number of levels.

The United Methodist Church has discriminated against Blacks and women. The Church has since apologized for that discrimination.

The UMC Book of Discipline's mention of "homosexuality" is both demeaning and manipulative. My prayer is that the bashing and bullying will stop. Let us go about God's work together.

Thank you,

Ginger Jackle

## In My Heart...

What's been in my heart and in my mind is an experience my husband Terry Frye & I had 3/28/04 in church. The senior minister of our very large Raleigh United Methodist church read Bishop Edwards' letter of condemnation of the jury in the Karen Dammann heresy trial to the congregation during the worship service. This is the legalistic letter that reviews and supports all the hurtful, excluding statements in the UMC Discipline and the Social Principles regarding homosexuality. Despite a few words near the end, it is not a loving letter reminding us of any of the words of Jesus or calling all to the table together in prayer for God's guidance.

Someone who had been to the early service who was as upset by the lack of respect for a duly constituted UMC jury as by the reading of the letter during a service of worship told the Sunday School class we were attending that morning that the letter was to be read again at the 11:00 service. After class, I was pressured to go by another person who felt that not going would be "avoiding the hard parts". I don't go to this minister's services any more because of his repeated exclusionary statements, not just about homosexuality, as I am not able to focus on worshipping. I do plenty of "hard parts", but I had to confess that the real reason that I didn't want to go that PARTICULAR morning was that I knew that I would cry through the whole thing and that I WOULD NOT be able to just sit there in the pew and cry, that I would have to do something - stand up - and that I was too chicken. Terry & I discussed it alone, and he said that if I wanted to go, instead of standing during the reading, he would go to the altar with me and pray.

The bulletin listed the Bishop's letter as one of the first items in the order of worship. The minister began to read the letter forcefully in a loud, stern voice, making clear his agreement Terry & I walked, weeping, to the altar, wept more while we prayed, and finally went back to our seats, weeping. It was very hard to let the huge congregation see the pain I felt, but that pain has to be seen, as Bishop Tuell, an authority on UMC law who testified at the trial, says in a letter I read two days later.

At the altar, I didn't howl out loud, but I howled in my prayers. I prayed over and over not to hate our minister and the Bishop, I prayed for all the people being hurt by the reading, for the mothers and the fathers of gay children, for the teenagers keeping secrets who had to hear it, for all the little gay children who heard what he said. I prayed to be less of a chicken, I prayed for help for all of us, I prayed for the UMC, and then I even heard myself pray to be able to LOVE THE MINISTER, which I did not want in my prayer, but it got in there somehow, so I prayed that, too. Then I heard that I should stop talking & listen, so I did. I heard, "I will take care of all these people and I will take care of all this pain".

I didn't know what to think about what came to me, so I didn't THINK. I felt wonderment and immense gratitude. I felt free. And I am still crying. I have never had a problem with PDA's, public displays of affection, but I am not too keen on my own personal PDP's, public displays of pain, and here I am, the Tammy Faye Baker of my church. And I'm still a chicken, scared to death. The hurt I feel is only for others - I am not gay, and my child isn't gay, and neither my mother nor my father nor my sisters nor my brother are gay. But there are many, many people love who are gay or who are the loving family members of other gay people. I hurt every day for what my CHURCH has done to my gay patients. Somehow, it feels like I hurt for Jesus more than anyone else, for his spidt at having to witness these things happening in His church, in His name.

Always, it seems that the biggest log in our eyes, mine, too, is the willingness to judge, to pretend to be God ourselves, while we're so busy trying to remove the speck in someone else's. We pay attention to everything BUT what Jesus said, remaking God in our own judgmental images any time we're not comfortable. There are so many things that are mysteries to us as humans, and we are grandiose enough to think that if WE don't understand them, there must be something WRONG with that which we don't understand! The history of Christianity, the history of science, the history of history is replete with examples. Why is it so hard for us to admit that we just don't have to understand everything, that it's not our job to have the answer to every mystery? For myself, as a physician, I am fully aware of current scientific findings that sexual orientation of any kind is not a choice. But all I really ever needed to understand to know what to do with my questions about homosexuality is that Jesus said to go to the street comers and invite ALL who would come to God's banquet, not just these or those, not just to the appetizers, but to the whole banquet. I am really scared when I have to stand up and walk, but it feels like the smallest thing to do when I remember with whom Jesus stood up and walked.

It seems that it is the United Methodist Discipline that is incompatible with CHRIST'S teachings. I am still crying, and I am still praying.

Jean Aycock, M.D.



## Child of God

All my life I've been a Lesbian and a child of God. I didn't know about those things at first, and it took a few years before I realized the gifts I was born with. It took only 21 years before I realized I was a Lesbian. Unlike many other people, this was not a difficult realization for me. It took 31 years for me to realize I was a child of God and to accept Jesus into my heart and life. It was tough coming out as a Christian. I didn't know what my Gay friends would think of me, or whether they would accept me for who I was. Fortunately, they have, although we don't always talk about that part of me.

I wish more Gay and Lesbian folk felt more comfortable with God. But for good reason, they don't. Most churches have not only chosen to close their doors to us, but they make it their business to attack and publicly degrade us. Some churches even resort to ugly, mean spirited protests of our private times, such as funerals and pride gatherings.

Fortunately, more and more churches are opening their doors, and more and more members of various congregations are working to change things according to the example set by Jesus. Jesus taught us to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. Seems clear enough to me.

It's not always so easy. I've been involved with the Reconciling Movement in the Methodist church for almost a year now. I felt a call from God to be involved. Over time what I've come to understand is that my call is not to reach out to Gay and Lesbian people. My call is to reach out and love those who hate me. It is to reach out and help those who don't understand who I am, who my friends are, and what my community is about. In order to do that, I had to first accept the love and grace of Jesus Christ, and heal my anger and hurt from being rejected and condemned by a very vocal segment of Christianity.

I care deeply for the Gay and Lesbian community and want each member to know the peace that knowing God brings to one's life. But my energy must go to love those that don't accept me, and that does take a lot of energy. It must go to my Pastors, who risk loss of employment and standing in the Church in order to speak out for me and all who are oppressed and marginalized. It must go to my straight friends who work by my side, who have not yet experienced the hate and the ugliness that this issue sometimes brings to light.

I don't want to push my Gay and Lesbian friends towards closed or partially open doors. I want to work to open the doors, so that my friends can simply walk in, hand and hand with their partners, without effort, without struggle, and without regret. I know that's the way God wants it to be.

## My Defenders

I have been very fortunate to not feel the persecution that a lot of gays and lesbians have dealt with during their youth years. I guess in some ways I may be a youth coming out success story, also considering that I was raised during the early eighties in a small town in Virginia.

I was raised by my wonderful parents to stand up for what I believed in, not to allow anyone else's opinion of me to change my opinion of me, and always be true to myself. With that said I was very determined to stand my ground when I realized I was gay. When I entered high school in the ninth grade (around 14 years of age), I knew I was gay and so did my close friends. Of course most of them happened to be girls (surprise). My sexuality was never an issue for them and I can't help but believe that this was partly because it was never an issue for. I was GAY. Get over it!

My high school years were not as bad as some of the stories I have heard from friends. On occasion someone at school would say something hateful and judgmental about my sexuality and have no fear somewhere looming the corners of that hall was a champion of mine waiting to defend my honor. I remember once a guy (a typical high school jerk) said something as I walked by, before I could turn to address him (hoping to educate him), two of my "girlfriends" (I love that word when you are gay) were already asking him what his problem was. I never felt so loved and secure.

My best friend dated the captain of the football team. Right after they started dating they were going to see a movie that was all the rage. I wanted to go, she knew this, so when he came to pick her up that night she told him I was going to tag along to see the movie. His response was less than welcomed; he said, "I don't want that queer with us tonight, I want to be alone with you". My best friend looked him straight in the eye and said "you will never be alone with me, ever, if you say something like that again. Further, if you don't accept Chris we will not be dating". Needless to say I went to the movie and he and I became really good friends as time went on. I see him today and he always stops and talks. I feel through the efforts of my best friend I broke through a barrier to show I was "normal".

I remember waiting at one of my best girlfriends house one night, making cookies with her mom, waiting for her to come home from a date. When she did we ran upstairs, locked ourselves away in her bedroom to get all the dirt. It felt normal, it was fun, and I never thought anything different.

I look back on all these memories and am so thankful that I did what I did, the way I did it. My youth experiences are probably not the norm. But if I could tell the youth of today who are dealing with their sexuality one thing it would be, "You can be proud of who are and never be afraid of yourself" I can also tell say that you will be so surprised to find out who will support you and be your "girlfriend" and "defender".

I am honored to be able to share a snapshot of my life, to relive those memories, and hopefully someone else out there can benefit from my past.

With peace and God's love.

Under the same sky,

Chris Wilson

## Letters to the Church

As I reminisce about my life in the Methodist Church, my thoughts go back to 1970 at age 17 the pastor of our church was asked to leave before his appointment had finished. To me, he was a God send to our church, he was active with our teens and had a singing voice from heaven. I could not understand how a few people in the church could not see the good in him. Thirty years later, I am not welcomed in the Methodist Church because I am a gay male.

For 20 years I attended the same Methodist Church. My family was very active in the church. For me, MYF was the highlight of my week.

I knew at an early age there was something different about me. I was taught boys liked girls but it didn't work that way for me. I dated girls in high school and got married. I have two wonderful children and one grandchild. After ten years of marriage, we divorced. Three years later, I met my new partner for life. We have been together for ten years. I feel like I am living the life my God created for me and I am truly happy. For the past four years we have attended and Joined a Methodist church in Durham. I am on the Administrative Board, sing in the choir and co-chair our homeless program. I do not share my life with everyone but many members know I am gay and love me for being, me.

A fellow Methodist

## My Dad

Dear Fellow Methodists...

At age eight, I was informed by my Mother that my Father was homosexual. My first and last thought was so what. I still love him anyway, and told him so.

At age twelve, I went to live with my Dad. He was a savior to me, during a rough spell in my life. He was also granted custody of me. My Dad was always there for me throughout high school and college.

My friends and my husband have always been supportive of my Dad, and I feel that Methodist Church should be as well. If his money, time and efforts for the Methodist Church are good enough, then he should be good enough for the Methodist Church.

I love my father, and he did a wonderful job raising me, and has always been there for me.

Sincerely,  
Kimberly Baines

*The Circle of Freedom*  
*An Expansion of Ecclesiastes 3:1-8*

*This is the time to be born for persons who are as courageous and unafraid as was the Christ. It is a time to die for persons who believe they have everything and are blind to the needs of their sisters and brothers.*

*It is a time to plant the seeds of justice and equality for all people. It is a time to pluck up seeds of prejudice and hatred which have been planted.*

*It is a time to kill ideas of inequality and subjugation. It is a time to heal the wounds of the insidious and nonverbal evidences of prejudice.*

*It is a time to break down barriers of all kinds which exist between persons. It is a time to build up mutual love and understanding among all people.*

*It is a time to weep for those who are spiritually blind to the liberating love of Christ. It is a time to laugh with those who experience Christ's liberation for the first time.*

*It is a time to mourn for those visions of human freedom that have passed away without being fulfilled. It is a time to dance with those, who through the giving of themselves, have made visions a reality.*

*It is a time to cast away the stones of hate and blame. It is a time to gather up the gemstones of love and responsibility.*

*It is a time to embrace our sisters and brothers who struggle with us. It is a time to refrain from embracing those filled with pious platitudes.*

*It is a time to seek for faith to stride through the frightening valley and to climb the hill of Golgotha. It is a time to lose our desire to remain in the glory and safety of the Mount of Transfiguration.*

*It is a time to keep the anger of the Christ when he found the temple turned into a den of thieves. It is a time to throw away the sweet Jesus, meek and*

*It is a time to rend the veil of the temple which keeps people from taking their rightful places. It is a time to sew together the designs of many people of different life styles.*

*It is a time to keep silence about trivial issues. It is a time to speak about those issues of life which are central to our very existence.*

*It is a time to love every question and doubt which leads to abundant life. It is a time to hate the easy answers and the certainties that lead to a living death.*

*It is a time for war waged forcefully against the chains that restrict the freedom of any person. It is a time for the peace that comes when we work for justice.*

*Nancy Ruth Gentry Best*

## Choices and Questions: Reflections on a Disciple Bible Study

I am writing from the perspective of a heterosexual woman, a wife and mother, and a lifelong Methodist who usually attends two Methodist churches every Sunday morning. I am writing because our denomination's teaching about homosexuality and the role of lesbians and gays in our denomination troubles me.

As I read the headline stories about the murders of Matthew Shepard in Wyoming and Billy Jack Gaither in Alabama, murders carried out because the victims were gay, I have been disturbed by the official policy of the United Methodist Church that "the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching." I've wondered if those who are looking for reasons to hate are able to make a distinction between the Methodist policy and the hostile statements from the "God hates fags" organizations or if they see the attitudes as simply different degrees on a continuum of rejection.

During this past year, as our Disciple II group has studied Luke and Acts, there were two major themes that kept grabbing my attention.

First, Jesus and the apostles were constantly doing and saying things that upset the religious authorities, those who saw themselves as the defenders of the faith against heresy. One thing that got Jesus and the apostles in trouble was that they kept reaching out to those whom others labeled as people to be excluded. Jesus and the apostles affirmed they intended to follow God's leading, not the rules of the religious authorities.

Second, in Acts, there is a controversy that could have torn the early church apart. The Jewish Christians were uneasy about the Gentile Christians, who were different and thus suspect. The Jewish Christians said that in order for Gentiles to become part of the church, they first had to become like the Jews. Peter had a dream that convinced him that no one that God created could be called unclean and the dream is reported twice, to make sure we get the message Peter and Paul insisted that God calls all kinds of people into the church and all who respond are to be welcomed.

I think we Methodists are being faced with a choice -- are we going to act like legalistic Pharisees holding tight to our rules or are we going to be faithful disciples of Jesus reaching out in love to the excluded and rejected? Another choice is whether we are going to be like the first century Jewish Christians who said "first you have to become like us" or are we going to think that Peter's dream is meant for us too and encourages us to welcome all and leave the judging to God?

Why do we point to some of our most caring, giving, talented members and say "your sins are worse than our sins"? Doesn't it seem hypocritical, if not mean-spirited, to say that sexuality should find expression only within the committed, monogamous relationship we call marriage, but then tell lesbians and gays that their committed, monogamous relationships will not be acknowledged and that pastors who do so will be punished? Are we really going to expel pastors who minister to gay men and lesbians in their congregations at the same time that we reject the call to ministry for lesbians and gays? Why are we so pre-occupied with sexual orientation when the needs of children, the elderly, the poor, the refugees are so overwhelming?

I would like to think my church is helping to overcome the hostility and alienation that I see everywhere -- in the city in which I live, in the nation, in the world at large. Instead, I see my church as an active participant in building up walls that divide people.

Janice Nicholson  
Durham, NC

## Remembering That We Are One Body in Christ

I was baptized and confirmed in the United Methodist Church, Loving parents and a nurturing church family raised my siblings and me. We enjoyed UMYF and the monthly Family Night Suppers at our church. When I realized that I was a lesbian, I felt I couldn't share my discovery with my family or my church for fear of rejection, and I didn't for many years. But I tired of the constant struggle to share parts my life with my family and friends without revealing the whole truth, especially the part about the woman I love. I was living two separate lives.

Finally I gathered the courage to come out to my family. All responded with support except my brother, who responded by sending me an article about gay persons who had been transformed and were no longer attracted to the same gender. When we met face to face my brother told me I was going to hell if I didn't change. He didn't understand that my orientation was not a choice. I tried to reassure him that I wasn't going to hell but he didn't believe me. We couldn't even agree to disagree. Now, ten years later, we are attempting to mend our relationship. We are talking again, We finally found common ground on which to meet; we love each other.

I still attend Aldersgate United Methodist Church in Chapel Hill, the church that nurtured me as a child, as do my parents. Many members of the congregation support my partner and me. And many members struggle with the issue of homosexuality. But we, as a congregation, are talking about it. We can share our differing beliefs with one another because we share the love of Christ and we respect each other.

I hope that our conference will continue to struggle with the issue of homosexuality, will continue to create opportunities for dialogue, in the conference and in the individual congregations, and will always remember that we are all one body in Christ, called to love our neighbor as ourselves.

Lois L. Wright  
Chapel Hill, NC

### *Architecture of Miracles*

*Hope cuts windows  
in the house of pain  
Light comes in  
with healing grace again  
Quickened love  
entombed before  
Now freed, finds strength  
and builds -- a door.*

*-K. Cameron*

## **The Person God Intended Him To Be**

It will stay forever in my memory as a special day because it held, for me, sudden understanding -- a dawning. Paul, the younger of our two sons, now graduated from college and working in Durham, was home for the weekend.

"Mom, are you busy?" he asked on Sunday afternoon.

"Well, I'd thought I might go to the Chatham Historical Society meeting. It's here at the church this afternoon. But I don't have to go," I added.

"Could we go for a walk, then? I'd like to talk with you."

We started down the street by the parsonage, cut across the lawn below the cemetery, and presently found ourselves seated under a large old tree. There Paul told me what he had on his mind, very simply and honestly. "I am homosexual," he said.

How had I not known? In all those twenty six years, how had I not become aware? Now, in one brief moment, so many things fell into place. But first -- first

"Paul, when did you know?"

"It was when I was in my early teens," he said. "When I realized that I was different from the other kids, it was as if a huge black hole opened up in my life."

I was weeping now, in agony for this son, this perceptive, compassionate, shy person, this lonely, self-effacing, often angry person. He had gone through those adolescent torments alone. If only I had known. Angus and I had tried to understand, tried to help. We had encouraged and supported as best we knew. But still we could see that as a teenager and even in college Paul seemed often remote, unable to focus in order to use his talents to the full, unable to realize and appreciate his attractive attributes. I had noticed in the past few months though, that he had seemed less tense, more outgoing and self assured. Now he explained that after years of private struggle and despair he had finally gone to a counselor to ask for help in changing his sexual orientation. The counselor told him that he could not change Paul's sexuality but assured him that he would listen and support him in his quest for discovery and growth. Feelings of gratitude toward that counselor surge through my heart and mind even as I write. How fortunate Paul was! He faced his situation in honesty, came with hope and determination, and was met with understanding and acceptance. I am sure that this was life-affirming for him.

As we continued to talk, Paul said that he had told his brother, Stephen, that he was gay several months before and that Steve had encouraged him to tell me. I was gratified that they both trusted that I would understand. It was not difficult for me to do so. I had loved Paul for all the years of his life. Now he had taken me into his confidence, trusted me with a most intimate and important part of his inner life. He was still my same beloved son. Now I was crying again as I realized the kind of misunderstanding and discrimination he would surely experience as a gay person. Though to me he was still my fine, talented, caring son, Paul, to many he would be first and only "a homosexual."

As we finished our conversation, Paul asked, "Do you think I should tell Dad or do you want to tell him?"

"I think he would appreciate it if you would tell him," I said. And that was the way it was.

Angus and I are fortunate. Our faith is in the boundless love of God for all persons. We are confident that none are excluded. We find reason for this faith in the words and acts of Jesus himself. We believe that Paul's sexuality is not his choice but a "given" -- an orientation. We believe his sexuality is not a mistake or perversion, but that, like all sexuality, it is a gift to be used in a loving and responsible way.

It was and is our intention to honor the trust that Paul has placed in us, and to support him in his continuing growth as the person God intended him to be.

-- Catherine M. Cameron

## **An Open Letter to the Bishop**

As the dialogue sessions are going on in our conference, I cannot remain silent on the main issue.

I have been a member of Edenton Street United Methodist Church for twenty-nine years,, a Methodist since I was born into a Methodist home almost sixty-seven years ago. I have always been proud of being a Methodist because of our faith and ministry. Historically, we have taken important stands and have been an inclusive church for the masses, as John Wesley began our path so long ago. The fact that we were the leader in establishing the North Carolina Council of Churches back in the 1930's to reach out in a united way to those too weak and too downtrodden to help themselves and to say: "We care about you and want to help in any way we can," characterized the church I belonged to.

It never occurred to me until these last few years that our members could care for anything else more strongly ... until I became a member of a group to whom many have not shown true caring.

Let me explain. My oldest of four children, Mark, was a gay man who died of AIDS. He was insulted in the church from the time he was in the sixth grade. It became almost impossible for him to go to church because of the messages he received there. After his death nine years ago, my eyes were opened when I became a volunteer for the AIDS Service Agency here in Raleigh and later became politically active to be in a better position to fight against the prejudice, hate, and bigotry professed by some of our most visible political leaders and unfortunately, for many people who are considered to be leaders in our churches.

If one member of Christ's body is in pain and suffering then so is the entire body? Is this not the message of Jesus who never seems to get quoted in this debate? I find it exceedingly strange that Jesus who is the Head of the Church is never turned to for advice -- He who ministered to the outcast, the lepers, those considered on the margins of society, He who came to bring us all together in His love. It is so inconsistent to pick and choose which part of the Bible these who would judge us so devastatingly are doing.

I am sorry this letter is so long. My heart is so full I cannot prune it back, although I have still not said all I would like. I appreciate your accepting it and listening to me. I do not speak for myself alone. I speak for legions.

I thank-you and wish every blessing upon you as you deal with this most important issue.

Sincerely,

Eloise M. Vaughn



**"I felt a calling..."**  
-reprinted from "Southern Voice"

When Dr. Mike Cordle walked into St. Mark United Methodist Church eight years ago, he was the downtown Atlanta church's "last resort," chosen to lead the declining congregation because of his reputation as a high-energy, charismatic pastor. After the service on that first Sunday, in June 1991, he stood outside watching the Atlanta Gay Pride parade go by

"A parade -- this is just like a small town!" he remembers thinking at the time.

A year later, Cordle once again stood outside St. Mark, observing the Pride parade. Looking back on a difficult year that brought only eight new members to a congregation of less than 100, he watched parade participants give his two-year-old daughter flowers, balloons and whistles as they walked by.

"As I watched the people, I saw they looked just like my brothers, sisters, peers, parents... They just wanted to be recognized for what they were," Cordle said.

From that moment on, he said, he felt compelled to open the doors of his church to the gay community. In the months that followed, Cordle struggled with his "calling," worrying it would be "professional and political suicide" within the Methodist church. But as he became more convinced that welcoming gays to St. Mark was the right thing to do, he presented the idea to church leadership, expecting the worst. To his surprise, they agreed. The next year, St. Mark members stood outside during the Pride parade passing out water to the participants, a centuries old church tradition, and leaflets inviting them to church.

"People cried. They were shocked.... They said, 'Do you know who we are?'" remembered Cordle. "We said, 'Just come and see.'"

This year, St. Mark boasts a thriving membership of 1,250, and the church expects about 10,000 visitors. Churchgoers drive from all over the Atlanta area and as far away as Macon to attend Sunday services. Cordle has become a national resource, receiving calls from all over the country from church leaders wanting to know more.

The congregation has formed numerous care and support organizations, including services for homeless people, an AIDS support/care team, outreach groups that travel all OVER the country, a growing throng of children, and a choir renowned throughout the city.

Though many in the gay community cheer the transformation at St. Mark's, some gays and some conservatives in his denomination are more skeptical -- suspecting a skillful marketing ploy to save a dying church.

"I am not that bright," laughed Cordle. "I thought we might get 10 new members. I was taking a chance late in my career, and no matter what happened, it was the right thing to do."

Cordle said he is pained by denomination regulations that prohibit him from performing same-sex weddings like the ceremony for a lesbian couple last week in California, administered by as many as 90 Methodist ministers who risk discipline for participating.

"I would love to be the full pastor for my congregation," said Cordle. "I think the bishop knows this, and feels my pain."

Cordle grew up during the black civil rights movement, and believes that experience began his fight for fairness and justice. He said he speaks out not about sexuality, but about human rights.

"I hear about the 'gay agenda'... but those of us who are straight -- with no agenda have to be willing to stand up because we know it's the right thing, it's the fair and honorable thing to do," he said.

"It's denying part of God's creation to try to make people change who they are, saying we don't accept people the way God created them, ... and I certainly don't have the courage to tell God that."

## True Acceptance

It is only recently that I have become personally aware of the vital importance of the Reconciling United Methodist Movement. I've recently been pleasantly surprised to find a place of worship where I am welcomed and accepted as a gay man.

I was raised in the United Methodist Church and attended with my family throughout my childhood. As a teenager, I struggled with my homosexuality and all the feelings of inadequacy and self-loathing that were forced upon me by people who teach the "all-encompassing love" of Jesus. I felt unable to confide my feelings in anyone. Thus, I created a wall around myself. It is a horrible way to exist.

Unable to communicate my feelings, I found that God had given me the gift of music. So instead of talking with my family or minister, I played the piano and sang to express myself. I poured myself into my music study. Soon, music was pouring out of my heart through the piano keys. It was the only outlet I had to express happiness, anguish, and the fearfulness that engulfed my life as my own homophobia crushed me tighter and tighter.

My gift was soon recognized and I began playing at churches. I was a church musician by my Junior year in high school. For the better part of the next ten years, I played in church nearly every Sunday. I was employed by Methodist, Southern Baptist, and Independent Baptist Churches, both small and very large. Ironically, no one ever welcomed the REAL me. Had anyone discovered my sexual orientation, I would've been fired. Thus, I came to consider my music as only a job. It was a paycheck, as I did not feel welcomed to worship.

Fortunately, salvation is personal and I came to accept myself and felt confident that surely God would accept me "Just As I Am". Anger and guilt festered inside me as I became dependent on the paycheck and felt forced to deny myself. On several Sundays I sat quietly at the keyboard, jaws clenched, as the minister spoke with apparent disgust about homosexuality. (Not realizing he was speaking of his valued pianist.) Many times I have regretted not standing up at those moments and walking out in front of a thousand people and never looking back.

Finally I quit playing for church and thus, quit attending church for over five years. I had become successful by mine and many other people's standards. I have health, stability, wonderful friends and family, a good job, and a partner of over eight years. I am happy and at peace. Only recently did I have the opportunity to substitute at a local church. It turned into an option to play full time again. Most refreshing, was the fact that the pastor actually KNEW I was gay, and accepted me anyway without judgment. Imagine that! I was welcomed into this wonderful, warm and friendly church. As I interviewed with the Music Committee, I disclosed that I also accompany the Triangle Gay Men's Chorus -- and not one nose turned up. Imagine that! It is terrific to finally be accepted and free to express and share my real self. I also discovered to my surprise, that I had been nearly spiritually starved to death. I am grateful that God brought me to this beautiful church family that is willing to accept me. It makes ALL the difference. Hopefully this story drives home the importance of how the people of God affect lives. There are countless people that have given up on the church. Who could blame them? Do you want to go where you know you are not welcome?

Thank you for providing this forum. I hope my story helps inspire someone to move toward reconciliation -- and honest love and acceptance of ALL God's children. There are more people in your community waiting for you to welcome them than you have seating for in your church!

Sincerely,

David Soyars

## Reflections on the Diversity Dialogue Sessions

As I participated in one of the small groups at the Diversity Dialogue session that I attended, I noticed two things. First, there was sharp disagreement among the persons in my group over the question of whether homosexual activity was inherently sinful. While the conversation was respectful, it was also intense, with strongly held opinions on both sides of the issue. However, the second thing I noticed was that virtually everyone who spoke said that, as far as they were concerned, everyone should be welcome in the church. That really struck me. I had not expected to hear that said so clearly and by so many people. We are -- or at least want to be -- a church that welcomes all people. I think these two factors are at work throughout our church -- we disagree with one another profoundly over the question of the inherent sinfulness of homosexuality and yet, at our best, we do genuinely want to be a welcoming church. I have certainly seen both of these factors at work in my own local congregation as we have wrestled with this issue.

At times, the depth of our disagreement on the question of homosexuality seems almost overwhelming to me. However, as I sat listening in my small group at the Dialogue session, I began to wonder if it might be fruitful to focus more of our energy on the point on which we seem to agree - that we want to be a church that welcomes all people. Even while we disagree on the issue of the sinfulness of homosexuality, how can we as a church be truly welcoming to all persons, including those who are homosexual? In particular, how do we as a church make the welcome real without putting those among us who believe homosexuality to be inherently sinful in the position of feeling that, by welcoming a homosexual person, they are thereby condoning something that they cannot accept?

I don't have a ready answer to these questions. But I do think it is something worth working on. Let us make the most of that on which we agree even as we continue to talk about our differences. It would be a shame to let our disagreement over the question of the inherent sinfulness of homosexuality overshadow our agreement that God calls us to be a church that truly welcomes all of God's children.

Jim Coble  
Aldersgate UMC

Chapel Hill, NC