

Families of Gays Share Their Experience

Clergy Families & Friends of Lesbians and Gays (CFLAG) is an online network of Episcopal clergy and lay people with gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender family members. The network is itself a listening process, providing a forum for family members to share experiences and support. CFLAG members work to share their experiences with the wider church and make the church a safe and welcoming place for the whole family.

We are Episcopal clergy and lay families who have gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender (GLBT) children, siblings and other family members, including spouses.

We are everywhere. While the portion of humanity with same sex attraction is very small, nearly every GLBT person on earth has many heterosexual family members. We are spread out across the theological, social, national, cultural, and political spectra in every province, nation, race, and culture.

Whether visible or not, an estimated one in five persons in the world—including those who worship and preach in Anglican churches and support its ministries—has a family member who is not heterosexual. We fill the Communion's pulpits and pews.

Most of the time, the church speaks about us as if we were not in the room. We seldom hear our experiences and insights, and those of the GLBT people we love, reflected in the current debate.

Yet our experiences can help the church, especially at this time. We have struggled with the reality that a beloved family member is gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender. Many of our families have come not only to accept, but to rejoice in that reality. Often with great difficulty, we have explored our fears of sexual difference, learned how to live with difference in our own families, and have been blessed and enlarged by the experience.

Other families like ours have agreed to disagree, arriving at a truce that keeps the family together.

All too many families of GLBT people have been deeply wounded or, most sadly, broken by the experience.

Having a GLBT child or other family member has taken all of us on a journey. Now the Anglican Communion is traveling the same road—and responding as many of our families did when a family member came out.

Bishop Gene Robinson's consecration was like a gay child coming out in the Anglican family. Afterward, no one in the church family could deny the presence of our gay and lesbian members. As in our own families, some Anglicans were prepared to accept the reality, while others were deeply shocked and rejecting. But in truth, most really only began to pay attention to the reality of homosexuals in the church family for the first time when Bishop Robinson was consecrated.

In our experience, it takes a person we love to bring a family face to face with the reality of sexual difference and seriously begin to explore what it means.

Coming to terms with sexual difference in the family is a process that takes time. The Episcopal Church has been at it for four decades. In a church and a world that still denies the full humanity of GLBT people—including many parts of the United States—this is not surprising.

We want to help. As our contribution to the Listening Process, we offer the following experience and observations in seven of the categories of inquiry outlined by the Anglican Communion. We are confident that others will adequately express our understanding of the scriptures.

The Mission of the Church

Marks of mission of the Anglican Communion:

- *To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom*
- *To teach, baptise and nurture new believers*
- *To respond to human need by loving service*
- *To seek to transform unjust structures of society*

The Good News cannot be separated from God's unfailing, unconditional love for all that God has made. When we become parents, we are given a taste of God the Father's profound parental love for all of humanity. When we realize that God has made a beloved child or other family member with same sex affection, we are forced in a deeply personal way to confront the reality that God created, delights in, and unconditionally loves someone so different from ourselves in this way.

For the most part, the church has not helped us understand this reality. In fact, we have been hurt by religious teaching that vilifies and marginalizes those we love. All too often, families like ours have been taught in church to fear and reject homosexuality as disordered or sinful. Our GLBT family members have been taught the same thing.

Gay adolescent boys commit suicide at five times the rate of their heterosexual peers. This is no accident. They have been taught by church and society that who they are is an abomination in the sight of God. Their parents have been taught that homosexuality is an illness or perversion. These teachings destroy families and lives. The church bears enormous responsibility for this unnecessary suffering.

We have been hurt by the silence of churches where the subject of sexual differences is a social embarrassment and subject for shame. In these churches, our children and other GLBT family members feel invisible and outside the scope of God's love. No wonder so many are alienated from the church.

Recently, a CFLAG member and her cousin were on the way to New York's Gay Pride march. The cousin had been invited to another event that morning. He told her, "They are all church people so I couldn't tell them that the reason I couldn't make it is that I was planning to go to the Pride parade."

A priest, parent, and CFLAG member recalls raising her family in the American south, where the predominant religious rhetoric labeled her gay son an abomination. One year, a local church called for a celebration on the anniversary of the death of Matthew Shepard's entrance into hell. Shepard, a young gay man, was murdered in 1998 in an anti-gay hate crime in Wyoming. In contrast, she says, the Episcopal Church respected the dignity of every human being. Today she wonders about the wider communion.

For the parents of gay children and other straight family members, it is deeply wounding to the soul to hear preaching and teaching about sexual morality and homosexuality that is uninformed by the actual experience of GLBT people and their families.

The church's failure to embrace sexual difference makes a mockery of the 'marks of mission' listed above. It is time for clergy leaders to take responsibility for the damage wrought by unexamined, age-old assumptions about sexual difference. For 40 years, the Episcopal Church has been reexamining these assumptions in the light of the Gospel and evolving human experience. For some of us and our children living in areas of the United States hostile to GLBT people, the Episcopal Church and its openness to listening has been a welcome refuge during this time. But the journey is slow.

The Witness of Tradition

- *Has the tradition of the church remained static on sexual relationships?*

The Episcopal Church is now in a place very familiar to GLBT people and their families. The Anglican family is shocked by the reality of gays in the family, and some family members are no longer welcome home for Christmas. The message is, "We didn't agree that you could be gay. You can't be gay until we understand what that means and we tell you it's OK. Please don't come home—or, if you have to, please don't talk about it or bring your partner. You have disobeyed by insisting on being who you are, and you make us so uncomfortable!"

We church people love our traditions—including the family celebrations where everyone pretends that we're all straight and all's right with the world. Yes, church tradition on sexual relationships has remained static.

In our experience, while banishment is extremely painful for GLBT people, it's actually the family that pays the highest price. When we banish our children, we cut ourselves off from the many gifts they have for us, most importantly the gift of themselves. Some parents literally stop having any knowledge of or involvement in their children's lives. Gay people go on to create new families in their community of friends and go on with their lives, carrying the scars of rejection, but so often they are amazingly resilient.

But what a horrific loss their families of origin have brought upon themselves. This is precisely what the Anglican Communion is now in danger of doing to itself. We Episcopalians find ourselves in the sad and frightening place that so many homosexuals have known in their families and in the church. For those of us with GLBT family members, the church today offers us a chance to experience solidarity with those we love; we are given a taste of their much more extended and deep suffering.

The church pays an enormous price when it fails to reexamine the traditional assumption that homosexuality is disordered or sinful. In addition to alienating many GLBT people and their families, who understandably leave to seek God elsewhere, the church loses the tremendous gifts that non-heterosexual people bring to the community—chief among them being the gift of enlarging the community to embrace the whole human family, the great diversity of God's creation. This is a deep spiritual loss that damages the souls of those who remain.

Some families who cut off their gay family members eventually realize how much they've lost. They start to come around. For some, this process takes a long time. But it can happen. The

transformation many families experience gives us hope that the church can move through this painful process and let God's grace do its healing work.

We are still watching this process take place, slowly and painfully in some places, with the acceptance of women in ordained ministry. Dioceses that still exclude women clergy continue to cut themselves off from the gifts women bring to ministry, to their own loss as much as the women they exclude. A Canadian bishop recently recalled that when his church approved women's ordination, only two of his parishes would initially consider hiring a woman. Over time, as the church has experienced women in ministry, the idea has gained general acceptance.

The straight spouses of gay and lesbian people in our CFLAG network go through a different, invariably painful process, often leading to divorce. One of CFLAG's straight spouse members speaks of the church's need to look at how the larger family remains family, even when members are drawn in different directions. Another speaks of remaining friends with a former spouse in a very different relationship. Here, Gene and Boo Robinson have set a remarkable example by the way they and their children have remained a family in the most generous sense of the word.

Homosexuality and Science

- *We ask for the experience of gay and lesbian people, including those who have struggled with unwanted same sex attraction and their experiences of therapy.*

We have never met a person who wanted his or her same sex attraction when he or she first discovered it. Gay or straight, we do not choose our sexual attraction. We all discover this God-given part of ourselves as we grow. In a world where the church and society reject the full humanity of those attracted to their own sex, virtually all same sex attraction is initially unwanted. GLBT struggle mightily to understand their own inherent orientation.

We know many who choose to accept their gay orientation as a given, but none who wanted or decided to have same sex attraction. Could we heterosexuals make such a choice?

The problem is not that people struggle with unwanted same sex feelings. It is that the church still teaches them, overtly or covertly, that those desires—manifestations of an inherent part of who they are—are an abomination in the sight of God.

Homosexuality and Culture

- *We ask for contributions from around the communion. We will seek to understand how human sexuality is understood in the diverse cultures of the communion.*

We hear TEC's consecration of Bishop Robinson described as another instance of American arrogance and go-it-alone attitude. We see other influences in our own culture and history.

For all of its problems, America is a land that has welcomed immigrants throughout most of our history. America has often found ways to incorporate the insights and experiences of many cultures living side by side. Over all, we are a society that has creatively embraced human difference and been enriched by diversity. Arguably, this creative facet of American life has also led to breakthroughs in women's rights, racial justice, and now makes us open to a new public understanding of sexual difference.

In the past, American Christians have deeply influenced social movements for justice and full inclusion, particularly in civil rights. Today's enlightened corporate cultures have worked through and accepted sexual diversity as something to be respected and valued in corporate life. We Americans deeply value diversity. It is the experience of our culture and society that diversity strengthens community.

Sexuality and Identity

What does it mean to say we have our identity in Christ?

- *The St Andrew's Day Statement said:*
- *"Our sexual affections can no more define who we are than can our class, race or nationality."*
- *Is this a reality for us? How does this relate to the wider Biblical understanding of humanity.*

We ask for reflections of those who have experience of victimisation and diminishment due to their ethnicity or gender and seek to ask if there is any relationship with the victimisation of gay and lesbian Christians.

To have our identity in Christ is to know that our whole person is acceptable in Christ, loved in Christ, redeemed in Christ. For those of us with opposite sex attraction, it is unthinkable that our identity in Christ should summarily exclude our capacity to express love in the God-given way that our sexuality gives us.

A CFLAG member says, "After all these years of essentially positive experience with my church on this issue, I am concerned about a message that my son's full humanity demands a celibate life, while mine does not. As a mother and priest I now hope that my church will find a way to keep the valuable communion we have without appearing at all confused about the full humanity of my son."

Another believes that "God is always calling us to become our most authentic selves, able to love God and others freely and fully. That means not being "in the closet," as so many people—including church leaders—have been, down through the centuries; instead, it means becoming who we are as God sees us."

When the church fails to embrace the full humanity of its GLBT members, including blessing sexual intimacy in mutual, loving, lifelong relationship as a God-given gift, it diminishes and victimizes them and their families. GLBT people are made to feel that the community of God does not fully include them; that a deep and unchangeable aspect of their personhood is a mistake. Their straight family members are made to feel ashamed of them or worse, to reject them.

Deep shame and fear of rejection also keep large numbers of gay clergy in hiding, while heterosexuals promote a culture of 'don't ask, don't tell.' How does the church's hypocrisy in expecting GLBT people to 'pass' as heterosexuals serve the kingdom of God?

Sexuality and Spirituality

- *We ask for contributions on how marriage enriches our personal and corporate spirituality.*
- *We seek reflections on the impact of gay partnerships on marriage.*
- *We are aware of the huge contributions of gay and lesbian Christians in the mission and ministry of the church and we would like reflections on what, if any, specific contribution to spirituality for the whole church has come from and is available to/ from those who are attracted to people of the same sex.*

We family members have found, often to our surprise, that our experience of loving and listening to a child, sibling, parent, or other family member with same sex attraction is a holy one. Listening deeply to the GLBT people we love brings us closer to God, to all those we love, and to people who are different from ourselves in many other ways as well.

We see God's image in our GLBT family members and in the loving, intimate relationships they have with those of their own gender. Those in long-term, mutually loving partnerships have much to teach all of us about marriage. To maintain such a commitment without the support of church and society, and often without the support of family, speaks volumes to a society with 50% divorce rate.

For us, loving a GLBT family member makes it difficult, if not impossible, to believe in a God who would create a person with same sex affection and then forbid him or her to express their love spiritually, emotionally, and physically with another person. To accept same sex orientation without accepting same sex behavior is to deny sexuality as God's gift to all humans. It is to deny the humanity of GLBT people.

We keep hearing homosexuality referred to as if it were a problem. It is not a problem. It is simply a distinct human difference. Like all consensual sexuality, same sex expression is a gift from God.

A CFLAG member reminds us that "The Episcopal Church has undergone study and change to recognize that our bodies were designed by God for sexuality that is fulfilling not only when procreation occurs, but also, and more often, when it provides spiritual connection with our life partner, enhancing our thankfulness and connection to God. We recognize that God designed us for that very gift—one that everyone, including same sex couples, can be thankful for."

Having GLBT family members deepens and expands our awareness and experience of God's love; enriches our marriages; enlarges our hearts. We see them as wholly created by God in God's image.

We experience our gay family members as precious gifts from God, and we are deeply thankful for them. When the church is able to do the same, its life will also be enriched, expanded, and enlivened.

Developing Skills in Listening

- *How can we as a church enable listening in safe space and common ground?*
- *We seek best practice and stories of listening.*
- *We specifically want to hear how listening can happen in places where homosexuality is illegal or the prevailing culture is hostile or even dangerous for gay and lesbian people.*

We family members learned to listen when our courageous children and other GLBT family members came out to us.

Love is the essential ingredient for deep listening about sexual difference. Even when love is deep, it takes enormous courage for GLBT people to share this truth about themselves. A son of one of our members told his mother after he came out that he knew she loved him, but he wasn't 100% sure she wouldn't kick him out of the house. The daughter of another member in a very loving family took her mother to the mall to tell her in a public place, because she was so afraid of her mother's reaction.

The only 'safe space and common ground' for listening is space and ground in the heart. To create it, we need clergy and other church leaders to speak from the pulpit and in other forums about their own GLBT family members and friends; to model their love for those who are different in this way; to show the rest of the church how much they love the GLBT people in their

lives, and how much God loves them just as they are. We need the church to do what many of us have done: reexamine our assumptions about sexual orientation.

The prevailing culture is hostile and dangerous for homosexuals almost everywhere, even in many parts of the United States. If it were not, Matthew Shepard would still be alive. Listening in hostile places can only happen when GLBT people find the courage to tell their truth. The church can give them this courage only by signaling that they will not be murdered—spiritually or physically—by telling us who they are.

Creating safe space and common ground in the heart of the church is a long-term project. Even today, in New York City, Los Angeles, and Chicago, many Episcopal family members are still silent about their GLBT loved ones. They have been taught to be ashamed and embarrassed. We family members are telling our stories to help create that safe space. God gives us the common ground—we are all His children.

—Jane Tully, *Founder*

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With contributions from, and review by, the CFLAG online network