

God Loves Gays

The Church and the Struggle for LGBT Equality in America

Introduction

The last twenty-five years have seen a near-exponential rise in American acceptance of LGBT equality and in the codification of rights reflecting that equality. The AIDS crisis increased the visibility of gay men, and of gayness itself, in the 1980s and '90s. Democratic politicians slowly adopted more pro-gay stances, and Republicans used that fact to drive a wedge between their base and an emerging pro-gay majority.¹ Legislative and judicial changes in the law have eroded anti-gay evidence from those who understand legality as equivalent to morality. Even television shows have become more gay, as gay characters have shifted from being campy sidekicks (as on *Will and Grace*) to heroes for equality (Kurt in *Glee*) to just-another-couples struggling with marriage (*Modern Family*). Millennial adults (people born roughly between 1980 and 1996) are more likely than other Americans to have a close friend or family member who identifies as LGBT,² more likely to support gay rights,³ and (at least when Obama is running) more likely than previous cohorts at their age to vote,⁴ swinging the tide in favor of equality. As important as any of these factors, however, may be the increasing role of LGBT people in churches and the increasing role of churches in the movement for equality.

Although religiosity and church affiliation have declined in recent decades, the United States remains deeply Christian, with more than three-quarters of all adults identifying with some Christian tradition.⁵ For many, church is the primary place for being in community, for discussing values and

¹ Frank, "The History of the Struggle for LGBT Equality."

² "News Release | American Religious Landscape Transforming as Support for Same-Sex Marriage Dramatically Increases."

³ Ibid.

⁴ Seipel, "Millennial Voters Are Paying Attention — So Why Don't More Vote?"

⁵ *U.S. Religious Landscape Survey*.

politics, and for making friends. As a result, churches have substantial influence on Americans' beliefs and relationships. In many ways, this force has been destructive. Just as many ministers refused to perform interracial marriages in the 1910s and marriages between previously married and divorced people in the 1930s, most ministers were staunchly opposed to marriage equality and other rights for LGBT people as late as the 1990s. Many LGBT people and their allies experienced hateful vindictive from the pulpit and the pews in their childhood, and they never looked back.⁶ However, churches, especially mainline Protestant congregations, but also a smattering of evangelical, Catholic, and other groups, have taken part in the movement toward LGBT equality in religious life and in the political sphere.⁷

Even more substantial than those formal entries into the movement, perhaps the most influential way churches have advanced LGBT equality is through informal relationships. People are most likely to encounter people of similar background and experience on the job, and people are most likely to form friendships with people like themselves, choosing less difference in their social circles amid an increasingly diverse society.⁸ While largely not racially diverse, churches are among many people's greatest experiences of diversity along dimensions of age, class, and gender. Churchgoers encounter the LGBT daughters and sons of their friends, and they foster younger LGBT adults into leadership. They encounter otherwise foreign-seeming individuals in a setting where values are discussed and LGBT people are more rounded than the characters who appear on television or in the news media. Through these relationships formed in church, people have the opportunity to gain a more grounded and robust understanding of LGBT people. This relationship development allows people to understand LGBT people as more fully human and thus more deserving of equal rights and treatment.

⁶ "News Release | American Religious Landscape Transforming as Support for Same-Sex Marriage Dramatically Increases."

⁷ Michaelson, "Ten Reasons Women Are Losing While Gays Keep Winning."

⁸ Bahns, Pickett, and Crandall, "Social Ecology of Similarity."

This paper will explore that argument through vignettes that are very close to my experience. I grew up in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), a mainline Protestant denomination of around a million people,⁹ through the decades when LGBT people went from being largely vilified to being largely accepted. What follows is a kind of oral history of the role of the church in promoting friendships between LGBT and straight people over three decades.

Gays in the Church: 1992

Setting the Scene

In 1992, twenty states and the District of Columbia had laws on the books outlawing sodomy.¹⁰ Bans on gay people in the civil service had begun to be lifted, but the ban on military service was fully in place. Equality of rights to marriage and adoption were far on the horizon. And the AIDS epidemic was in full swing, with more than 30,000 deaths in the U.S.¹¹ Funeral homes were being sued for refusing to care for the bodies of those who had died of AIDS.¹² In Indiana, Ryan White, the charming, heterosexual young symbol of anti-AIDS discrimination, died of the disease.¹³

Dying of AIDS in Indianapolis

In Indianapolis, churches were refusing to offer funeral services for AIDS victims, a fact Rev. Barbara Blaisdell learned only a decade later from advocates at a local LGBT organization. Blaisdell is my mother and Disciples minister. This story is told based on an interview with her.¹⁴ In 1990, she was called to serve Central Christian Church. Central was then a once-thriving urban congregation willing to call a woman pastor only as it was on the verge of disintegrating, like so

⁹ *U.S. Religious Landscape Survey.*

¹⁰ "Sodomy Laws in the United States."

¹¹ "The AIDS Epidemic: 1988-1990."

¹² Gross, "FUNERALS FOR AIDS VICTIMS."

¹³ Johnson, "Ryan White Dies of AIDS at 18; His Struggle Helped Pierce Myths."

¹⁴ Barbara Blaisdell, interview.

many churches at the urban core emptied by urban blight and white flight. In the first years of her ministry there, one of the church matriarchs asked her to call on one of her long-ago Sunday school students. Jay¹⁵ was in his early twenties and dying, the parishioner said, of cancer. Though Jay had not attended the church in many years, Blaisdell visited the young man as a favor to his old Sunday school teacher. She soon realized that Jay was not dying of cancer, but of AIDS.

Jay's partner had been raised Nazarene in rural Indiana and wanted a church funeral for Jay. Jay was beloved and well known in the gay community in Indianapolis, and some 500 people attended the funeral. However, that same week, a Baptist preacher had said publicly he believed AIDS was a curse for the sins of the gay community, and so those who came to the funeral were clearly uncomfortable to be in church. The discomfort in the room was palpable, and Blaisdell knew she needed to address it. "All of you are wondering if you are welcome here," she told them from the pulpit. "You are."

Life After the Funeral

In the coming weeks, several gay men visited Blaisdell at her church office. "We want to attend your church," they told her, "but we don't want to cause you trouble." Blaisdell knew it would be trouble, but told them she was convinced the fundamentalists were wrong, and so they should come.

And trouble it was. Even some of the most kind-hearted people in the congregation were troubled. They were thrilled to see the young men at church, but they were also really uncomfortable, saturated in a culture that had yet to accept the normalcy of homosexuality and a religious belief that choosing a 'gay lifestyle' was a sin. "We had to talk about that over and over and over again," Blaisdell says, "and there were folks who left because they couldn't put up with it." But she notes, with two more decades of experience growing churches since, that long-time members are

¹⁵ Jay is a pseudonym, since I was unable to contact his partner or his family for permission to use his name.

always uncomfortable when their church begins to grow. “It was hard to tell how much [of their discomfort] was about gay people and how much was about just lots of people joining the church and the look of the congregation changing.”

The number of lesbian women and gay men joining the church did cause trouble, but it was also an opportunity for ministry “in both directions.”¹⁶ An older couple in the church had a lesbian daughter with whom they were not in good relationship. They became caregivers for a single, divorced seminarian with two children, and through her, gained a stronger relationship with their daughter. The seminarian and their daughter were later married and continued work in the wider church. For this elderly couple and others like them, proximity and relationship to openly gay people for the first time allowed them to develop a sense of understanding. Their participation in an increasingly diverse church community humanized those whom they had felt to be too different from themselves. Their core religious tenet – withholding judgment in favor of welcoming even “sinners” – gave them grounding for offering, if not yet full inclusion, then tolerance to those once shunned.

Relationships Creating Change

Blaisdell argues relationships like these are necessary to acceptance. “They now knew someone. So they could love someone, care for someone, that before they could never even have imagined knowing. Empathy is an act of the imagination, and if you don’t have any experience around which to do an imaginative leap, you can’t do it.” She says this pattern of development was true for her as well. She watched Jay and his partner act so loving to each other, watched the community rally around them. “In the prejudice I grew up in, gay people were promiscuous, couldn’t form lasting relationships... it was an illness. But in my experience, those nine months that Jay was dying, contradicted all that,” she says. “I still couldn’t then imagine being a lesbian. But I

¹⁶ Barbara Blaisdell, interview.

could imagine if the most central part of who I am and what I am called to be were rejected by the church. I had some experience of that as a woman in ministry. So that was the imaginative leap: that we have more in common than difference.”

Gays in Ordination: 2002

Setting the Scene

Ten years later, more and more churches had made the decision to explicitly welcome LGBT people. However, inclusion was still slow in the traditional strongholds of the Disciples church: the rural Midwest and the South. Disciples minister Michal Anne Pepper notes that, in her home state of Texas, the tension that advanced the need for conversation about welcoming gay people was the AIDS crisis.¹⁷ In the early 2000s, major advances had been made in treating HIV, but as people were living longer with the disease, they had greater need for long-term care.¹⁸ Gay men moved south from the cities for warm weather and a return to the homes they had left. In Dallas, Midway Hills Christian Church began to realize the need for HIV care in the community and formed a group to offer care to the growing number of men in need.

Gay in a Texas Church

Midway Hills became Open and Affirming (voting to offer welcome to LGBT persons) in the 1970s, but, Pepper notes, the church was not advertising that fact when she, her wife, and her daughters joined the church, one of a handful of families headed by gay couples. This story is based on an interview with Pepper.¹⁹ She says she and her family were welcomed, but, “One of the things that may have startled some people is that we always sat in the second row, because that’s where my parents sat, and Gail and I would hold hands, and that startled people. But they got over that.” As

¹⁷ Michal Anne Pepper, interview.

¹⁸ Steinhauer, “The New Landscape of AIDS.”

¹⁹ Michal Anne Pepper, interview. The story that follows is taken from this interview.

Pepper and her family were being welcomed by the church, Congress passed the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), which denied federal recognition of the marriages of same-sex couples.²⁰

Pepper says that one of the men in her Bible study group, a staunch Texas Republican, sought her out to say, “You pay your taxes too, and that [the passage of DOMA] was totally political.” The presence of her family and others in the community, she argues, highlighted the absurdity of DOMA for people who would not otherwise have been concerned or even aware.

Ordaining the Gay Away

Six years later, that fellow-feeling was important as Pepper decided to pursue a calling to the ministry. The congregation offered to sponsor her for ordination, but the regional government (equivalent to a diocese) grew anxious. As Pepper puts it, a member of the Committee on Ministry told the gathering, “We've got a lesbian coming through,” and what followed was “pure homosexual panic.” The Committee’s meeting with Pepper was antagonistic and uncomfortable, as she tells it. Despite support from her congregation and her seminary, the region declined to ordain Pepper. East Texas churches threatened to pull their membership, and their money, from the region if it chose to ordain a lesbian.

At this point, a mentor of Pepper’s suggested she speak with another of my favorite advocates in the church: the Rev. Chuck Blaisdell, who was then the regional minister (equivalent to a bishop) in the Northern California-Nevada region, and is also my father. Blaisdell readily agreed to officiate Pepper’s ordination, asking how she wanted to proceed. She could come to Northern California, develop a relationship with a congregation, and be ordained there. But, he argued, “There would be more opportunity for the communities to come together if the ordination were at Midway Hills.” Since she sought that reconciliation, Pepper’s ordination was jointly sponsored by a Berkeley, California, congregation and Midway Hills. Blaisdell flew in to a region that refused to ordain

²⁰ *Defense of Marriage Act.*

Pepper, and performed her ordination, which, as he notes, did not earn him any friends in the region.²¹ However, the ordination was a galvanizing experience for the congregation. The same staunch Republican who had called DOMA nonsense asked to chair the church committee to get Pepper ordained. She argues that it was his leadership and the effort of other members of the congregation who carried off her ordination.

Relationships Creating Change

“This was beyond me as a person or me as a minister,” Pepper suggests. “It was like this is an opportunity to do something important. People had been fighting this fight for a while and were happy they could do something.” She notes not everybody was on board; there were those who left the congregation. But those who remained were committed to their relationship to the larger community but also to their relationship with Pepper. “So many individuals in that community were being the best person they could be. What I was so impressed with was that they had the capacity to see what was going on and call out the bullshit, and at the same time be in relationship.” Through that relationship, the church has continued to be committed to LGBT persons in their midst. Midway Hills was recently in the news for hosting a wedding officiated by a United Methodist minister who risked defrocking by performing it.²² Although the larger church continues to have a distance to go to embracing and advancing full equality for LGBT people, churches like Midway Hills, in relationship with people like Michal Anne Pepper, are pushing equality forward among their members and in their communities.

²¹ Charles Blaisdell, interview.

²² “Methodist Church Suspends Retired Dallas Minister for Performing Same-Sex Wedding.”

Beyond Gay: 2012 and Onward

The Lingering Challenge

Through church membership, many people who believed they had never known a lesbian or gay person in the 1980s now have increasingly close relationships to openly gay people in their congregations.²³ They may even have heard a gay minister preach or been to a gay couple's wedding. People have come to recognize the full humanity of gay people by spending time talking to others in the pews, and churches as institutions are increasing their welcome of gay members.²⁴ ²⁵ However, LGBT equality has not experienced a full takeover even in these churches. Lesbian and gay Christians may be full members of the community, but the other two letters are often missing – bisexual and transgender people are far less represented, and as a result, far less understood.

Invisible in the Pews: Bisexuality

Bisexual persons face a range of ongoing challenges to full acceptance into many kinds of communities, including churches, perhaps foremost of which is that bisexuality is often invisible. Because many people of bisexual orientation have opposite-sex partners, they may choose not to outwardly identify as bisexual. Bisexual people in long-term relationships are perceived as either gay or straight, depending on the gender of their partner, a fact which limits onlookers' ability to come to understand bisexual persons as facing a distinct set of struggles.²⁶ Whereas homosexuality is more visible than ever, bisexuality continues to be largely hidden. This bisexual invisibility makes it difficult for churchgoers to perceive bisexual people in their midst and to develop their empathetic imagination on the issue.

²³ Barbara Blaisdell, interview.

²⁴ Ball, "The Quiet Gay-Rights Revolution in America's Churches."

²⁵ Meg Sumner-Moore, interview.

²⁶ *Bisexual Invisibility: Impacts and Recommendations*.

As a result of these limits on relationship and empathy, bisexual stereotypes persist in people who have largely eradicated their stereotypical thinking about lesbian and gay people. Bisexuality does not infer promiscuity any more than being gay does; both gays and bisexuals have the capability to be monogamous, just like straight people, regardless of the pool of people to whom they are attracted. However, bisexual people regularly confront the misplaced belief that, because they are attracted to people of a variety of genders, they lack the emotional or moral fortitude for commitment.²⁷ Furthermore, and perhaps because of these stereotypes, many people who experience attraction to people of a variety of genders struggle to apply the label 'bisexual.' For some, bisexuality connotes a phase, a refusal to choose an orientation. This connotation is maintained by a stereotype even allies and members of the lesbian and gay community hold.²⁸

The persistence of these stereotypes in society as a whole, together with the invisibility of bisexual people within church communities, places barriers against the full acceptance and inclusion of bisexuality even in churches that are accepting of homosexuality. A dear friend, with whom I grew up singing in the church band, told me that she could not come out as bisexual to her mother. Her mother, who marched behind the church banner with us in gay pride parades and AIDS Walks, did not think bisexuality was a "real orientation." She did not realize that one of the church's student intern ministers at the time was bisexual. Deb was partnered to a woman at the time, and so she was perceived as lesbian, which was broadly acceptable to the church community. Some years later, she married a man, but because that was long after her relationship to that congregation, her story was not part of the congregation's understanding. Barbara Blaisdell was aware, however, and describes that relationship as part of her growth in understanding bisexuality. "I learned about bisexuality from a student intern who had incredible integrity. So that whole promiscuity thing just doesn't cut

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

it with me. But I wouldn't know that if it weren't for Deb."²⁹ Bisexual stereotyping and invisibility make it difficult for people to draw the connection between their relationships with fellow church members who are bisexual and the larger struggle for LGBT equality.

Lost in the Pews: Transgender People

Many of the same challenges of invisibility and stereotyping that erect barriers for bisexual people persist as well for transgender people.³⁰ The struggle for gay rights at the national level and the struggle for gay inclusion in the church is often just that – a struggle for the gay community, to the exclusion of transgender people.³¹ Conversations about acceptance focus on sexual orientation, omitting transgender people by accident, because they seem to be a small minority, or by intention. “Why do they even want to be under our umbrella?” one friend, a gay man in his 50s, asked me once. Despite facing many of the same struggles as lesbian, gay, and bisexual people, transgender people are often viewed as a ‘separate problem.’

Like bisexual people today, and like lesbian and gay people some decades ago, transgender people are understood to be confused, unable to find their correct place in the natural order.³² Their struggle is often with the gender expectations placed on them by culture because of their biological sex, and yet they are blamed for their inability to find a place in that culture or along the gender binary.³³ They are viewed as less sure, less natural, and less attractive.³⁴ “There is an ick factor.”³⁵

These stereotypes create a difficult cycle in the life of a community and in the lives of transgender people. Transgender people are sure a church will not accept them, and so they stay

²⁹ Barbara Blaisdell, interview.

³⁰ *Bisexual Invisibility: Impacts and Recommendations*.

³¹ Meyers, “Trans* Invisibility.”

³² Gazzola and Morrison, “Cultural and Personally Endorsed Stereotypes of Transgender Men and Transgender Women.”

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Frank, “The History of the Struggle for LGBT Equality.”

away from church.³⁶ As a result, most people's schemas of transgender people come from larger-than-life images in popular media.³⁷ This priming, from drag queen comedians and *Saturday Night Live* cross-dressers, means that when people do encounter transgender people, they often laugh.^{38 39} They know how to laugh at people who defy gender norms, but they have no cultural training in accepting people as fellow participants in the near-universal struggle with the gender norms exerted by society. As a result, churchgoers who learned to love lesbian and gay congregants through relationship with them never have the opportunity to do the same with transgender people.

Moving Forward

What church leaders should do to advance bisexual and transgender inclusion in their churches and in society is a difficult question. Barbara Blaisdell argues that the church needs transgender and bisexual people to be fully vulnerable, to show up to church and fully own their identities, for the church to change.⁴⁰ “That’s how change happens: when people make themselves vulnerable to people and say, ‘Here I am. Deal with it.’ And there will be folks who are just shitty. And there will be folks who are incredibly able to be empathetic. And sometimes you can’t predict.”⁴¹ She is aware of the challenge with this argument: it places huge onus on those who are victimized by individuals and oppressed by cultural systems. However, she continues, “Vulnerability is what allows transformation on the side of the culture that needs transformed.”⁴² To her earlier axiom that individuals must work to develop their empathetic imagination, she adds that true change

³⁶ Taj Michael Smith, interview.

³⁷ Gazzola and Morrison, “Cultural and Personally Endorsed Stereotypes of Transgender Men and Transgender Women.”

³⁸ Barbara Blaisdell, interview.

³⁹ MacKenzie, *Transgender Nation*.

⁴⁰ Barbara Blaisdell, interview.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

of heart requires the vulnerability and presence of those who at first seem fundamentally different.

“I have watched hearts change when loving people are faced with their own bigotries.”⁴³

⁴³ Ibid.

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