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a forum for people struggling with faith and church issues

**values being real
supports faith stage transition
respects and validates the journeys of others
allows questions and doubts
lets God defend God**

This issue looks at homosexuality and faith..... the difficulties confronting people who have a Christian faith and a homosexual orientation. These stories help us to get inside what it is like for people and to understand the dilemmas facing them. So often gay people are spurned by the Christian community for being gay and by the gay community for being Christian. There is a challenge here to the church to rethink its responses.

My Story of being Christian and Gay

If you expect an exciting story, think again. This is a very ordinary story.

I grew up in a Brethren family as one of five boys. My youngest brother came out as gay in his late teenage years, at considerable cost to his acceptance in the family and the Brethren.

Personally I never had the vocabulary to deal with my sexuality. There were lots of pointers that I was somehow different from my friends and my other brothers. I was called 'Mary' by my schoolmates. I never had any interest in girls, although I had lots of friends. I have a very extroverted personality, and many close friendships made up for the lack of intimacy. Also I have since my conversion at the age of 8, been very passionately committed as an evangelical Christian. By nature I am an activist. I have always been involved in many Christian organisations. The Brethren are a

small and introverted group, but I have long been an active member, eager for them to be involved in a wider world of Christian commitment. I agitated for acceptance of women as equal members, even though just because of my Brethren links I have a reputation for a conservative outlook.

My activism and my sheer enjoyment of being a Christian, of sharing my faith and enjoying the deep layers of Christian community has been expressed for many years by mixing with a huge circle of Christian friends in various interdenominational organisations. These organisations have been fairly harsh on gay people, and they were renowned for opposing the law change in 1986. But I was out of the country at the time, and was very uncomfortable at the things being said. Like a lot of gay people I was inclined to be emphatic on disapproving of gay sex, in a kind of homophobic defence, but in some ways I was

almost totally naïve, without really a level of understanding to analyze myself, and consequently reluctant to do so, for the way in which it would disturb my life. I wrote articles on some of the law changes, but I wouldn't deal with the issue inside myself. It was too hard. I was not the only one. As I now know from letters from all sorts of people, there are many gay and lesbian and bi-sexual and transgendered people (each kind every different from other forms) in evangelical churches. I now believe that self acceptance and acceptance by their community of faith is really important for their safety and growth.

Probably for me a very crucial step was hearing the story of Roy Clements, the highly respected evangelical preacher and writer and pastor of a Baptist Chapel I attended in Cambridge in 2000, who had acknowledged his sexuality and been dismissed from the pastorate. The story was close enough to my own to shake

my security. Also I was reaching out to needy people and sometimes in the process I encountered issues of sexuality. They didn't have the inhibitions that I had. So I was placed in challenging and tricky situations in which I had no answer.

So when I had an unexpected sexual encounter, I was very confused. It didn't seem the terrible wrong thing that I had painted in my own mind. It seemed like something very natural for me. With all the determination that I can muster when I feel compelled, I began to think and read and talk to close friends. To my astonishment most of the women already knew I was gay, before I had articulated it myself.

Learning these lessons while I was the chair of the elders of a Brethren assembly, and fully engaged in preaching, teaching and leading in several contexts was traumatic. I made it my business to honestly explain to people who needed to know about my changed understanding of myself. The price was high in the trauma of people's reactions. To compress a painful story into a few sentences, I voluntarily ceased to exercise leadership in the church; I made a public statement to my church about my sexuality; and I offered my resignation to all the organisations that I was part of. In one case this was accepted enthusiastically. In other cases I was accepted on condition I was up-front about my behaviour. People left my church, people made outrageous statements, and people were shaken.

Do you know any gay people? I find that most people are freaked out when they discover that I'm gay and that I am involved in the gay Auckland Community Church meeting in St Matthew's and then they realise that the sky hasn't fallen down and life is still OK! But I haven't changed in any fundamental way, and almost all my old friends are my current

friends. Not everyone agrees with me, but I can handle this. I still love God, read my Bible and pray daily, and seek to honour God where he has placed me. I mix in more circles now than I used to, but I still am very loyal to my old values. I just really want the evangelical Christian community to get over their fear, and to read scripture with more faith and understanding.

For me to share this story is hard, because I have to let you inside the pain; the pain of an intelligent adult male with a PhD who wouldn't deal for so many years with his sexuality. I have to admit

that I am still a little scared of talking about it here. I'm not ashamed, you understand; I asked to be permitted to stand up in front of my church and tell them all this; but I know how stories get distorted when they are passed on. I want to tell my own story. For me living comfortably with myself and telling my own story without shame has been a good experience.

beliefs and perspectives

Like most evangelicals I cannot resolve the issue just by trying to take a pastoral attitude to it. For me this is very much about what I believe, and that affects the way I approach the issues.

... scripture has to make sense in the context of our experienced reality.

As an evangelical believer I have a very high view of biblical authority and the real issue all along has been how I understand the scriptures on this subject. I've tried to bring my behaviour under their authority. But this proved much harder than I expected. My Brethren church produced a statement on the biblical guidance, and as they worked on that and consulted me, I realised how much their own values had got loaded into the lessons they

drew up for me to follow. I've not been able to accept their interpretation, and that has resulted in my exclusion from any public role in the church.

When I had my first gay sexual experience I realised that scripture has to make sense in the context of our experienced reality. I realised that the boundaries and rules I had put around the sex act should really be exactly the same for sex between men and men and men and women. It wasn't possible to call one natural and the other unnatural. Sex was an activity built into the human life-force, but it is different for different people and in different circumstances.

Fundamentally we have to work from first principles, and then check them against the texts and the culture. I don't mean that love justifies everything; it doesn't, but a love that is holy and just and honourable and within covenant commitments comes pretty close to biblical standards. I have come to believe that my faith and my values are applicable in guiding me in how to live human relations justly and lovingly, in full respect for the other person and for myself.

I soon realised that the loving caring relationships I observed, while different from the heterosexual married homes of friends, were just as loving, committed and fulfilling, although different from marriage – although personally I don't think that the word marriage is appropriate for them. So although I am not in a relationship I have no doubt that such relationships can be good and moral.

I am well aware of the debate about the ordination of gay clergy. Personally I see ordination as simply a setting apart to one ministry of a particular kind, but I can't really accept that there is a special level of demands for ordained people. Any people who speak or act on behalf of the church need

to be committed to Christian moral standards and beliefs. It is clear enough that some gay people like some heterosexual people ought to be excluded for these reasons, but I have several close friends who are ordained Anglican clergy in committed relationships. I believe that their Christian morality is enhanced by their relationships, and I wish the church had a way of honouring those relationships.

some dilemmas

Firstly I continually struggle with the issue of finally getting scripture to make sense. I know my understandings are tentative. I am very aware from 2 Peter 2 of the risk of false prophets deceiving the people, and the last thing I want to do is lead God's people off track.

Secondly I worry a great deal about those who don't understand. I've discovered it takes people a while. I have sat in the back seat in my Brethren church for 2 years now, and cried my way through the service. Slowly people have become more understanding. I have had

to allow people to have their own views as long as they allow me to have mine. I am personally prepared to live in a church where there will be sometimes robust debate, but I long to have acceptance and an opportunity to use the gifts God has given me.

Thirdly I continually puzzle over what God has in it for me. Does he have some relationship for me? Has the pain and the joy been something to mature me? Why do I have to be so open and

hurt myself so much? Is this the only way for me? The trouble is that I believe in Christian community, of mutual accountability, but I also have richly grown through the acknowledgement of my sexuality, even though it has pained and hurt the community.

Fourthly I'm frustrated when people make this issue centrally important. I really don't think it is fundamental. Issues of poverty and justice, making known the saving power of the Lord are so much more important, and I think it's tragic that we lose so much energy over this issue. But it won't go away. You can tell me, as some have told me, to go away and that you don't want my help. And I guess that has hurt me the most. **Peter Lineham**

biblical passages

There are six verses in all:

Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 are among verses that view semen and menstruation as unclean and forbid the mixing of woollen and linen. The high vision of humans made male and female is fine, but there are many points of law listed here that most Christians would not see as binding today.

Romans 1:26-27 is a strong condemnation of moral degeneracy in society, as part of Paul's argument that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Paul's warning of sexual abuse as the marks of moral decline remain just as real and as forceful as in the past. But Paul wasn't condemning committed adult gay relationships because on the whole they were hidden in his day. His vocabulary indicates that he sees homosexual sin as the product of a sick heterosexual world. There are plenty of issues within the gay world that a Christian must challenge, but perhaps not the issues of sexuality itself, which they don't really understand.

1 Corinthians 6:9-10 has two phrases among its list of evil behaviour which marked the Corinthians before they were converted. The *malakoi* ('the soft ones') is sometimes translated male prostitutes and the *arsenokoitai*, the sodomites, may well be a reference back to the Leviticus evils, but no-one knows for sure since it is not used beyond the New Testament.

1 Timothy 1:10 in the context of a diverse list of acts of lawlessness. Fundamentally these three Pauline passages presuppose homosexual acts as acts of exploitation, abuse, older men abusing young men, normal males sexually exploiting other males. It seems to me that they do not address the case of the person with a same sex orientation where the sexual act is in the context of love, commitment and justice. Fundamentally they simply do not address the case of the person with a same-sex attraction. They list certain acts that affected the values they were addressing – the preservation of the family and of the weaker person, and thus do not address the case of the loving relationship between two adult men – and do not even address the case of same-sex attraction between women.

Romans 1 is seen as targeting those who abandon 'natural relations.'

Michael Parmenter, renowned dancer and choreographer, talks of his faith and sexuality with Rev Dr Graham Redding in an excerpt from an interview in Spanz Oct 2003

In your autobiographical work, 'A Long Undressing' (1995), you talk with disarming honesty about personal issues of faith, sexuality and AIDS. What have been the key stages in your faith journey?

"My journey began with the Plymouth Brethren in Invercargill. The Brethren youth movement provided an escape from a difficult home environment, and during one summer camp I accepted Christ as my saviour. Throughout high-school I withdrew into myself and my faith started to falter, and as I started to suspect that I was homosexual I also sensed the degree to which my "affliction" was despised by both society at large and the Brethren church in particular. My two closest friends at school (one of whom was undoubtedly gay) both committed suicide, and by the time I headed off to University in Dunedin, I was a real mess.

Despite being baptised in 1973, things got worse, and in an attempt to answer nagging questions I undertook a year's study at the Brethren Bible College in Wellington. When I returned to Dunedin I joined a small group called the Dunedin Independent Church, but my faith was shaky and I was having huge struggles with sexuality.

After beginning dancing in 1977, I "came out" as gay and began a rather nomadic existence following dance work, both of which made it very difficult to find a permanent spiritual home. Two Dunedin friends, remained my only Christian contacts for over 20 years, and though I read theology and identified with other Christian artists I often questioned whether I was a Christian.

During my work on 'Jerusalem', where I was greatly assisted by Sister Sue Cosgrove from the Sisters of Compassion, I felt a desire to find a Christian home again, but the places where I felt welcomed as a gay man had theologies that were not sufficiently orthodox for me. My search eventually brought me to St John's, where I sensed this would be a place I could feel at home.

From very early on I've been interested in the interaction of faith and art, and believe that being an artist is a worthy way to live a Christian life. All my work as a choreographer is informed by my Christianity.

Theologically, early on, I was influenced by thinkers like Francis Shaeffer, Martin Lloyd-Jones, Jacques Ellul, Thomas Merton, Rosemary Haughton and James K. Baxter. Then I discovered Charles Williams, whose ideas still excite me. Lately I've been drawn to Tom Wright, whose vision and lucidity are thrilling. Philosophically, I've found Michael Polanyi helpful, and in the area of Christianity and the arts, Calvin Seerveld and Jeremy Begbie have been very influential."

open dialogue - a space for reader response

The adventure .. of Church

I read Bruce Puddle's story in the previous issue of *Spirited Exchanges* with both interest and sadness. Interest, in that I first knew Bruce when he was a very little boy but had lost touch with him in recent years. And sadness because I was left wondering if there could have been a better way.

Our backgrounds were surprisingly similar. We were both influenced by Roy Puddle .. he was Bruce's dad, and my first Baptist pastor. Bruce describes himself as having been strongly evangelical and charismatic. I started following Jesus in a fringe Pentecostal church .. maybe in the late 50s they were all fringe! Like Bruce I was initiated into an experience of Christianity that was full of certainties. There were nine gifts of the Spirit, God wanted us all speaking in tongues and always wanted his people healed; the determining factor was our faith! And when it came to who was to be saved, we knew who were "in" ... and who were "out."

But I didn't stay there. Maybe my "ecumenical" beginning, having a father who was a non-practising Catholic and a mother a non-practising Presbyterian, then growing up in a Salvation Army Sunday School

and a Methodist Bible Class before my life changing conversion in a Pentecostal Church and finding my true home with the Baptists, gave me an appreciation for the whole church. When I was on Baptist Union staff, I attended National Council of Churches' meetings. I intensely disliked their focus on justice issues almost to the exclusion of everything else. But their insistence that we face the issues of racism and feminism and gender issues for example, was a goad that pushed me out of my comfortable one dimensional understanding of what God and church was all about. It was a lesson that I was to learn time and time again ... the primary catalysts for growth in my life have come out of uncomfortable and painful times and not jumping ship!

And I think that this in part brought me to the realization that following Jesus was not just a journey, but an adventure. I began to learn that as God gave me the prod, I needed to keep moving ahead, stepping out, and often into the scary unknown, like...

- exploring seven day spiritual retreats nearly 20 years ago and, with John North and the wonderful help of Dominican Sister Mary Concannon, and introducing most other

Baptist pastors to them and to spiritual direction;

- living cross culturally, first in Papua New Guinea and then in Japan. At first very difficult, leaving all of our kids back in New Zealand and living in the dangerous environment of Port Moresby, but in retrospect the most formative years of my wife, Heather's and my life. I doubt that I will ever be as privileged again as I was then, in seeing the transformation of a community of 2,000 people by the gospel of Jesus;
- living not only cross culturally in Japan, but in a Christian community of people from the Greek Orthodox to the Catholic churches and everything in between. Uncomfortable at first for most, but in the end, life changing for us all;
- and more recently, experiencing God in perhaps the most surprising of places, in conflicted churches! Yes, stressful, but also deeply rewarding as God again and again restores hope and community, and the church begins again to function as the Body of Christ.

Bruce tells us that he found that he had outgrown the general spiritual ethos of most evangelical churches with their *"frightening shallowness in worship and sermons .. and control assumptions."* Churches I have been a part of have moved into Taize services, silent retreats, stations of the cross, labyrinths, dipped their toes into classical music and moved beyond *"swearing and dirty jokes as the big sins"* to explore some of the big church and society issues today. We have rolled up our sleeves and worked in squatter settlements in Port Moresby, partnered an orphanage in Bacolod in the Philippines and worked alongside Japanese churches in helping the homeless living on the streets in Osaka. And most in the churches I have been in have in the end been very happy to read more broadly, and to think more deeply about what it means to be a follower of Jesus today in our much more secular and pluralistic culture.

In the words of one of our faculty at the Baptist Theological College when I was a student (Stan Edgar), I am now more certain about less .. and a lot less certain about most things. But two of my strong certainties, are that Jesus was God incarnate and God's gracious answer to the prayers of people of all traditions and beliefs for forgiveness and hope ... and secondly, that following Jesus is something we must do in company with other believers. And that has come from broad reading .. and continuing the great adventure. In this I have been helped by the stories of Asians in particular who in coming to faith in Jesus Christ have expressed it in terms of moving from darkness to light. And helped also by the depth of scholarship and insight of present day evangelical

authors like Tom Wright, Leonard Sweet, Mark Noll, Alister McGrath, John Stott, Clark Pinnock, Brian McLaren, Gordon Fee, Cornelius Plantinga and numerous others

I understand that there are many people who have been deeply wounded by others in the church. I have met some of them. But isn't it true that we have all been both hurt, and have created hurt, in churches? That's the nature of churches, they are communities of people *"on the way."* And without being too simplistic, there is another category of Christians it seems to me: those who have left churches that they have significantly helped to shape, and no longer like! But I have long since come to the conclusion that the strength of churches is in their mix of great people (and I have learned that if you expect to find such people in any church, you will always find them), and difficult people who make living Christianly difficult but who in this strange twist, become the catalysts for character and spiritual growth.

But I will leave the last comment to one of my favourite writers, Eugene Peterson, who in an interview in the March 2005 issue of Christianity Today, was asked to respond to the comment that many would look at the church today and say it was dead, merely an institutional expression of the faith. He answered:

"What other church is there besides institutional? There's nobody who doesn't have problems with the church, because there's sin in the church. But there's no other place to be a Christian except in the church. There's sin in the local bank. There's sin in the grocery store. I really don't understand the naïve criticism of the institution. I really don't get it."

Friederich van Hugel said the institution of the church is like the bark on the tree. There's no life in the bark. It's dead wood. But it protects the life of the tree within. And the tree grows and grows and grows. If you take the bark off, it's prone to disease, dehydration and death."

So yes, the church is dead, but it protects something alive. And when you try to have a church without bark, it doesn't last long. It disappears, gets sick, and it's prone to all kinds of disease, heresy and narcissism. In my writing, I hope to recover a sense of the reality of congregation – what it is. It's a gift of the Holy Spirit. Why are we always idealizing what the Holy Spirit doesn't idealize? There's no idealization in the Bible – none! We've got two thousands years of history now. Why are we so dumb?"

Gerard Marks
April 2005

spirited exchanges newsletter... is making a few changes.

- as from this issue the newsletter will concentrate on a particular theme each month. This will still be in the form of people's stories and experiences as well as other articles that help broaden the subject. There will continue to be other snippets and book reviews. The topics coming up are under the broader headings of misuse of power, mental health and faith, doubt. If you would like to contribute to any of these topics please email: spiritex@central.org.nz
- there will be a space for ongoing dialogue from readers to previous articles. They may be in the form of your own story, a broadening or different view of the issues raised, pointers to other resources or any other. We would ask that the same guidelines that are followed in Spirited exchanges groups:
 - * we are not trying to produce one answer that everyone must adhere to.
There is freedom for differing views and opinions
 - * each person is free to share his/her own view even if that is different to others or 'heretical' from some people's perspective.
 - * we ask for respect for each person's opinions
 - * we let God defend God
- we are shifting from 6 issues per year to 10 issues per year

Did you know that this newsletter:

Is distributed to over 425 households each month
Of which 94 are sent electronically
To 8 countries
For 10 issues per year
Takes 20 - 25 hours on average each month to produce
And costs around \$3,000 per year to publish

Which is why we would like you to pay a subscription of \$10 per year to help us cover costs.

Subscriptions can be paid by cheque to Spirited Exchanges, PO Box 11551, Wellington or via internet banking or direct credit to 03-0502-0169965-00 Please reference to Spirited Exchanges.

Spirited Exchanges Facilitator Training Weekend June 24 – 26

A number of people have expressed interest in running a Spirited Exchanges group. In order to enable this to happen we are developing a training weekend free of charge. Accommodation will be provided though you will have to get yourselves to Wellington and pay for some meals.

By the end of this weekend we hope you will understand:

- what the ethos and aims of Spirited Exchanges are
- more about faith development and journey – yours and others
- why people leave churches and the resultant issues
- the skills needed to facilitate a group
- your own readiness to lead such a group

If you would like further information about this weekend please email: jenny@central.org.nz

For any contributions to, or comments you would like to make about the newsletter or if you would like to come off the mailing list please write to the Editor: **Jenny McIntosh** at P.O. Box 11551, Wellington or on email: spiritex@central.org.nz or jenny@central.org.nz For Alan Jamieson: alan@central.org.nz or aj@paradise.net.nz