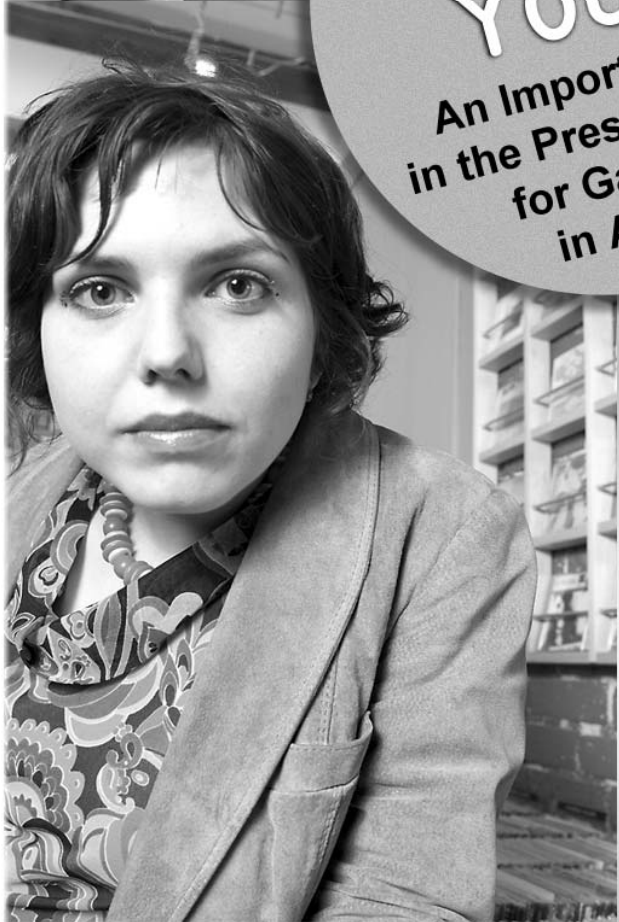




CHRISTIAN YOUTH

An Important Voice
in the Present Struggle
for Gay Rights
in America



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*Christian Youth: An Important Voice in the Present Struggle for Gay Rights in America
(Southern Baptist Version)*

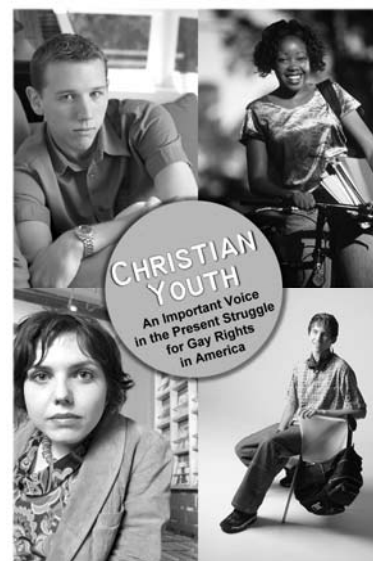
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	4
Letter from a Young Christian Leader..... <i>Evangelical Lutheran Church in America</i>	5
Bible Study..... <i>The Radical Ministry of Jesus: Widening the Kin-dom</i>	6
Letter from a Young Christian Leader..... <i>Presbyterian Church, USA</i>	11
Bible Study..... <i>The Inclusive Spirit of God: Persuading Peter</i>	12
Letter from a Young Christian Leader..... <i>United Church of Christ</i>	18
Ex-Gay Ministries..... <i>Failing to Recognize What God Has Made</i>	20
Letter from a Young Christian Leader..... <i>United Methodist</i>	25
Absent Voices..... <i>Victims of Anti-gay Teachings</i>	26
God Bless Our Family..... <i>Gay Community and Family Values</i>	34
Conclusion..... <i>Where Do We Go From Here?</i>	42
Resources.....	44
Websites.....	46



Cover design and study guide layout by Jamie McDaniel



Gandhi always considered the youth an important segment of society for two reasons. First, there is the expectation that the minds of the youth are still unpolluted by the dogmas and prejudices that corrupt society everywhere. Second, it is from the youth that the next leaders of society are going to emerge.

—Arun Gandhi, grandson of Mahatma Gandhi, in a letter to youth and young adults encouraging them to join the movement for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender equality.

INTRODUCTION

by Jamie McDaniel and Jacob Reitan

As a young Christian, you may have been told that you are the future of the church. That is true, and yet in a real sense you are very much the church—people of God at work in the here and now.

Young people can make a positive difference in their schools, communities, nation, and even the world. Indeed, youth have been a part of every major movement for equality, freedom, and justice. The road to the future will continue to be shaped by the power of youth.

The Soulforce Southern Baptist Team has looked forward with great anticipation to the production of a resource geared towards Baptist youth. We feel strongly that the Spirit of Justice is moving powerfully throughout the church and society to bring about the full inclusion and acceptance of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people. We are equally convinced that Christian young people are an important voice in this present struggle.

As a Southern Baptist in the early 21st century, you have likely heard religious leaders speak negatively about homosexual people and those working for gay rights. We invite you now to hear our side.

This study will guide you into a serious look at the radical Jesus and the Biblical mandate that no child of God be considered second-class. A section is devoted to the failings of ex-gay ministries and what leading health organizations have to say concerning reparative therapy.

Also featured are open letters to Southern Baptist young people from youth and young adult leaders in other Christian denominations.

Please use this study in your church and youth department. May the God of peace and love, the one who calls us into relationship and wholeness, help us all to be agents of healing and grace in our world.

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MESSAGE FROM THE SOULFORCE SOUTHERN BAPTIST TEAM

Christian Youth: An Important Voice in the Present Struggle for Gay Rights in America (Southern Baptist Version) was produced by the Soulforce Southern Baptist team. This resource contains many educational materials including biblical studies. Soulforce is an interfaith movement. We do not ask people to agree on any one interpretation of scripture. In addition to a Southern Baptist team, we have a Catholic, Lutheran and Methodist resistance team, among others. Each team creates materials that are appropriate to its own faith tradition. This is a booklet prepared by the Soulforce Southern Baptist team aimed directly at Southern Baptists and their understanding of the scriptures and spirituality. If it is also appropriate to you, we are glad.

LETTER FROM A YOUNG CHRISTIAN LEADER

Dear Southern Baptist Youth or Young Adult,

As denominations around the world are encountering the moral dilemma of dealing with gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people in the church, it is important to keep in mind the commonalities that tie Christians together. We find these similarities in the melodies of our favorite hymns, the themes of our pastor's homily, and the kind voices of our congregation as the peace is passed. They are the underlying, unifying Christian messages of love and acceptance that Jesus built His teachings upon.

I was raised embracing the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America and have reciprocally been embraced by the ELCA in countless ways. During my adolescence when I was seeking for any type of acceptance, I was fortunate enough to attend a meeting of the national Lutheran Youth Organization. There, amidst my peers and several wonderful advisors, I found grace and love. The gospel was finally spoken and acted out in a way that I understood and could apply to my own life. As years passed, my desire to serve grew and my faith community was bolstered by key advisors who seemed to devote every aspect of their life to the Church.

Soon, the ELCA began to examine the role of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people in the church, and it came to my knowledge that a couple of the leaders who had guided me for so many years were also homosexual. Learning this about my now close friends was like learning that their great-great-grandfather invented the telephone—an interesting fact, but nonetheless inconsequential, having never once hindered their ability to share God's word with me and the many other youth who looked up to them.

Please keep this simple account in mind as you meet together in faith this week.

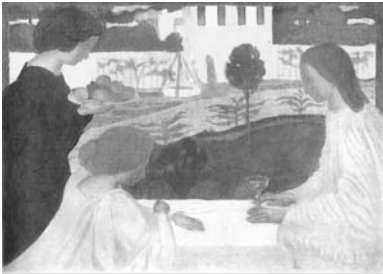
In His Love,

Mary E. Boyer



Mary E. Boyer, age 18, serves as Co-Chair of the Council of Synod Lutheran Youth Organization Presidents. She is currently attending the University of Norte Dame in Indiana.

The author of this letter is speaking as a member of his or her denomination and not necessarily for the denomination as a whole.



Maurice Denis, *Martha and Mary*, 1896.

Sanctify the fiftieth year; make it a holy year. Proclaim freedom all over the land to everyone who lives in it—a Jubilee for you: Each person will go back to his family's property and reunite with his extended family.

—Leviticus 25:10

Understanding Jubilee religiously—then and now—requires that people dwell in God's creative presence; trust God's liberating action while recognizing it usually occurs through human beings; experience God's forgiveness, hope in God's promises; and practice God's justice. Religious wholeness characterizes Jubilee.

—Maria Harris in
Proclaim Jubilee
page 81

BIBLE STUDY

The Radical Ministry of Jesus: Widening the Kin-dom

Written by: James Deaton

Scripture Reading: Luke 4:14-30

Prayer: Holy Spirit, come upon us today and convict us when we hinder others from enjoying the blessings of Your kin-dom. It is Your kin-dom, not ours, to unveil. We believe this kin-dom is made up of members of our extended spiritual family. We are interconnected with You and with each other. We cannot escape that. Thank you for inviting us into Your kin-dom. In Jesus' precious name, Amen.

To officially kick off his ministry here on earth, Luke's Gospel takes Jesus back to the town where he grew up—Nazareth, in Galilee. After having just returned from the wilderness where Satan had been testing him for forty days, Jesus is led by the Holy Spirit to proclaim a radically new message of inclusion and restoration.

On the Sabbath day, Jesus visits the synagogue in Nazareth and begins to read out of the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Quoting Isaiah 61:1-2, Jesus proclaims a holy jubilee year which, according to Leviticus 25, frees all oppressed slaves, redistributes previously-owned land, and cancels all debts. With the eyes of all in the synagogue on him, he continues and says to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (4:21). Those listening to him heard this and were amazed and thankful for his timely blessing.

However, Jesus turns the tables on them and begins to explain how prophets, including himself, are never accepted in their hometown. He goes ahead and pushes his message further by giving two Old Testament examples where God favored Gentiles over chosen Israel. This provoked a hostile reaction among those gathered. Luke's account tells us that they got up and drove Jesus out of Nazareth, steering him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built with intentions of throwing him over the edge.

Why did Jesus ruffle their feathers? What upset them so much?

Basically, Jesus said that Gentiles, those who were non-Jews and foreigners, at times experience favor and even salvation through the power of God. This was a totally radical teaching! The religious leaders at that time did not like that idea of including Gentiles. For one, Gentiles were considered unclean. If a Jewish person even entered the home of a Gentile, he or she was considered unclean (see Luke 7:1-17 where Jesus accepts the remarkable faith of a Gentile centurion; cf. Acts 10:28).

Another reason why they didn't like Jesus' statement was the fact that Jesus' inclusion of Gentiles went against their traditional beliefs about how God fairly dealt with the world and God's chosen nation. How could God love Gentiles as much as God loved them?

So, instead of living out the greatest of all commandments (Matthew 22:34-40), the religious leaders replaced this cornerstone with the “tradition of the elders” along with unbearable expectations for righteous living (Mark 7:5; Matthew 23). In effect, the priests and elders had locked people “out of the kingdom of God” because of their teachings and rules (Matthew 23:13).

As the Holy Spirit came upon him in the synagogue that day in Nazareth, Jesus left and began his full-time ministry, fulfilling his prophetic call to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, and freedom to the oppressed.

The “year of the Lord’s favor” had come (Luke 4:18-19) and Jesus was inviting all to come into his kin-dom.

Questions

1. What would it look like for a jubilee year to be declared in this country? What kinds of debts would be lifted? Who would you forgive? Who would you free? How would you practice justice?
2. The Holy Spirit empowered Jesus during his temptation in the wilderness and during his time in Nazareth. In fact, the Spirit is mentioned four times in Luke 4 alone. What does it mean to rely on the Spirit’s guidance? How did the Spirit empower Jesus to speak new, completely radical truths?
3. **Thinking Critically** – Do we, as followers of Jesus, unintentionally lock certain people out of the kin-dom of heaven by our words and actions? Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender Christians feel that a lot of church leaders put unfair obstacles in their way, preventing them from fully entering into God’s kin-dom (faithful relationships are not blessed, calls to ministry are rejected, dedicated service is ignored, etc.). If so, many of these Christians are serious disciples of Christ, brilliantly exhibiting the “fruits of the kingdom,” according to Matthew 21:43. Why do so many churches lock them out? Doesn’t Jesus promise that he will give the “kingdom of God” to those who produce the fruits?

Scripture Reading: Mark 5:25-34

Jesus’ Radical Heart for Women

While spreading the good news of the year of jubilee throughout Galilee, Jesus began unlocking the kin-dom to those who previously did not have access to it and began to expand its borders. As news spread about the radical teachings and healings of Jesus of Nazareth, all kinds of people with various kinds of diseases sought him by faith.

The Gospel of Mark gives an account of a poor, though courageous, woman who had suffered with a hemorrhaging condition for twelve years. When Jesus passed through her town, she made her way through pressing crowds to touch his robe. She believed that a simple touch, even with one finger, would make her whole again.

If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, and if you spend yourselves on behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday. The LORD will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail.

— Isaiah 58:9b-11

Until the rise of feminist exegesis, few scholars noticed how unusual Jesus’ treatment of women was. Through the lens of feminist biblical interpretation, however, we can now see that in every single encounter with women in the four Gospels, Jesus violated the customs of his time. Indeed, his approach to women had no parallel in “civilized” societies since the rise of patriarchy over three thousand years before his birth.

— Walter Wink in
The Powers That Be
page 69

When you go to war against your enemies and GOD, your God, gives you victory...and then you notice among the prisoners of war a good-looking woman whom you find attractive and would like to marry, this is what you do: Take her home; have her trim her hair, cut her nails, and discard the clothes she was wearing when captured. [After a full month,] you may go to bed with her as husband and wife. If it turns out you don't like her, you must let her go and live wherever she wishes. But you can't sell her or use her as a slave since you've humiliated her.
— Deuteronomy 21:10-13

Jesus called his disciples over and said, "The truth is that this poor widow gave more to the collection than all the others put together. All the others gave what they'll never miss; she gave extravagantly what she couldn't afford—she gave her all."
— Mark 12:43-44

In the eyes of the religious leaders of the time, allowing a woman in this condition to touch you would have been a dangerous step.

First of all, she was a woman and women in first century Palestine were considered, for the most part, second-class citizens. In the Old Testament, women were often considered property, without any legal rights (cf. Exodus 21:7, 22:1-17; Deuteronomy 22:28-29, 24:1).

Second of all, this woman was "unclean" and no Jewish man was permitted to touch an "unclean" person, especially an "unclean" woman. According to Old Testament holiness law, women were considered "unclean" during their menstrual period and also during any other periods of bloodletting. Leviticus 15:25-30 explains this in full detail. If a woman has a discharge of blood beyond the time of her period, every bed on which she lies and everything on which she sits becomes "unclean." Anyone who touches these things becomes "unclean." Once she is healed of the discharge, she must wait seven days and on the eighth day she must take two doves and two pigeons and bring them to the priest as an offering of atonement.

One last strike this woman had against her was the fact that she was poverty-stricken. Verse 26 tells us that she had sought treatment from many doctors who ended up treating her badly and taking all her money. During his entire ministry, Jesus always had a special room in his kin-dom for the poor. When Jesus visited the home of a prominent Pharisee in Luke 14, Jesus challenged the Pharisees and the experts in the law to invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind when they host a dinner party or luncheon. Instead of inviting friends, relatives, and rich neighbors who can afford to repay you, Jesus told them to invite the needy and the marginalized because of the spiritual blessings attached to it. Jesus knew the heart of the poor and he welcomed them, with wide open arms, even though the religious leaders of the time wanted nothing to do with them. Poor people were pests, at best.

On all three indictments, Jesus' ruling was **NOT GUILTY!** He single-handedly broke the illogical rules and simply ignored the cultural norms, or widespread customs, and taboos.

When Jesus finally found out that she had touched him, he did not chastise her for touching him. Rather, he praised her faith, saying, "Daughter, you took a risk of faith, and now you're healed and whole. Live well, live blessed! Be healed of your plague."

Through his inclusive ministry to women, the sick, and the poor, Jesus continued breaking rules and expanding the kin-dom.

Scripture Reading: Luke 17:11-19; Mark 1:40-45

Expanding the Kin-dom

Certain groups of persons who encountered a tremendous amount of shame and rejection at the hands of the community at large were the leper communities. Jesus, however, was not afraid to encounter them despite the danger of being defiled.

In Luke 17, Jesus' ministry was taking him farther towards the border between Galilee and Samaria. As Jesus traveled to the edges of his familiar countryside, Jesus encountered a group of ten lepers who shouted for him to heal them. Lepers, according to Numbers 5:1-4, were required to live outside the city and were quarantined because of their skin conditions. In addition, they were also required to go through tedious purification rituals involving multiple atonement sacrifices, depending on whether or not you could afford the right sacrifice (Leviticus 14).

Jesus commanded them to go show themselves to the priests and, as they made their way to the local synagogue, each was miraculously healed. One of them, a Samaritan, turned back once he saw that he was cured and thanked Jesus for this wonderful gift. Despite the Samaritan's social status as an outsider (not simply because he was a leper but because he was also a Samaritan – a people held in contempt by most Jews), Jesus saw the inherent worth in him as a human being and accepted the man for who he was. His nationality or life history had no bearing on Jesus' acceptance of him. The same was true with the Samaritan woman Jesus met at Jacob's well (John 4:1-42).

In Mark's account of the leper who approached Jesus, it's striking to see the amazing heart of the Savior. "Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. 'I am willing,' he said. 'Be clean!' Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cured." (Mark 1:41-42) What an amazing story this is! Jesus took a risk and touched this unclean man and healed him. Again, he ushers in the jubilee year—one of restoration, one of inclusion, one of justice, and one of freedom.

Jesus once again knocks down the door of the kin-dom of heaven and welcomes all into it! To him, leprosy was not considered "unclean" or shameful in any way.

Questions:

1. If you come from a church that limits God's call on women, do you think that is consistent with how Jesus challenged his own patriarchal culture? Do you think this is a barrier that Jesus would knock down today? If so, how can young Christians work towards positive change in their church?
2. If Jesus were a teenager at your school, who do you think he would hang out with? What positions do you think he would take regarding issues at your school?

Any person with a serious skin disease must wear torn clothes, leave his hair loose and unbrushed, cover his upper lip, and cry out, "Unclean! Unclean!" As long as anyone has the sores, that one continues to be ritually unclean. That person must live alone; he or she must live outside the camp.

— Leviticus 13:45-46

It is a sin to believe anyone else is inferior or superior to ourselves. We are all equal. It is the touch of sin that pollutes us and never that of a human being. None are high and none are low for one who would devote his life to service. The distinction between high and low [untouchability, as known in the caste system] is a blot on Hinduism which we must obliterate.

—Gandhi, 1932

The Pharisees traced their spiritual lineage back to the pious groups which, in the days of the Maccabees, resisted all temptations to assimilate their faith and practice to pagan ways, and suffered martyrdom rather than betray their religious heritage. In the first century A.D. they are reckoned to have numbered about six thousand. They banded themselves together in fellowships or brotherhoods, encouraging one another in the defense and practice of the law. The law included not only the written precepts of the Old Testament but the interpretation and application of those precepts—what Mark describes as ‘the tradition of the elders’ (Mark 7:3).

— *Hard Sayings of the Bible*,
page 396

Conclusion

Jesus was someone who had a diverse list of friends that included tax collectors (Zacchaeus, Matthew his disciple), women (Mary Magdeline and Mary and Martha, the sister of Jesus’ friend Lazarus), lepers, the poor, and others who, for various reasons, were deemed unworthy.

These people, who were despised by the larger community and pushed to the margins of society, seemingly flocked to Jesus. Consequently, Jesus began to draw the circle of inclusion a little farther and a little wider than the religious elite expected or even wanted. As a Jew himself, and a teacher of the law, Jesus separated himself from the religious leaders. In the eyes of the Pharisees and other traditionalists, Jesus was a radical calling for sweeping changes. Politically, he was a threat to those intent on preserving the status quo. Spiritually, he was a threat to their comfortable, orderly *kingdom*.

Through his “jubilee” message of inclusion and restoration, Jesus widened the kin-dom of heaven to include a host of people typically excluded from religious communities. Today, as our gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender sisters and brothers persistently knock on the door of the Church and pray for it to open, the prophetic message of Jesus speaks volumes to their marginalized spot on the fringes of society. Loved by God for all their beautiful intricacies, including their sexual orientation, they hear and believe the radical call of Jesus on their lives.

How long will the Church wait to hear this call for inclusion and reconciliation?

Until then, we continue to knock and to pray for that wonderful time to come.

Come, quickly, O Lord! Maranatha!

LETTER FROM A YOUNG CHRISTIAN LEADER

Dear Southern Baptist Youth or Young Adult,

Imagine this: In the United States of America, the greatest nation in the world, a group of individuals is systematically discriminated against in legislation, in the courts, in nearly every aspect of society. Though the discriminators use the Bible to somehow justify their actions, those discriminated against rely on the same Bible for hope, praying to God for help in their struggle. The group asks God why God made them in such a way that others hate them? Why did the creator of all things create other people who hate them so much? Perhaps most discouraging, the Church discriminates against these people too. The Church fails in its call to further God's Kingdom. Slowly though, society begins to see the error of its ways. Some churches and church members begin to support societal change, freeing the group from discrimination. Eventually all people look back at their discriminating past and pray for God's forgiveness. The people of God, the Church, had made a grave error. They had not understood racial equality and discriminated against African-Americans.

Greetings to you through our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. I hope the above illustration clearly conveys that society can make huge changes for the better. Sometimes the Church supports this change. Far too often however, the Church complies with the discrimination. But God does not call us to merely support the *status quo*. God calls us to action, to justice, to compassion for all God's children no matter their sexual orientation.

Just as in the past when people used the Bible to justify slavery and racial discrimination, many today use it to justify discrimination against homosexuals. In this short letter I cannot address every Biblical passage that people use to discriminate against Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, or Transgender persons. I can however, make two important Biblical notes: 1) the Bible never addresses a healthy homosexual relationship as society understands them today and 2) Jesus says nothing about homosexuality. The Bible says precious little about homosexuality because 2000 years ago the understanding of sexuality was completely different. In Biblical times most people married by age 15, families arranged marriages, dating did not exist.

Today society has a different (and largely better) understanding of sexuality. I am allowed to date my girlfriend for years before we consider marriage. Marriage is my choice not my family's. I can wait to marry until I'm in my 20s, or 30s, or whenever. Social marital standards have changed even though the Bible hasn't. Still today we are created in God's image, and called to Christian community.

I'd like to ask you to do three simple things to help the Church, and indirectly help society. First, note that as in the fight for racial equality, we can change for the better. Second, never abandon the teachings of the Bible. And third, get to know a GLBT person. The third point takes a bit of work, but it's crucial. Many of our Grandparents were as scared of people of different skin color as we might be scared of people of different sexual orientation. I trust that if we all take these three points to heart, the Church can move to include all of God's children, black or white, straight or gay.

Yours in Christ,

Adam J. Copeland



Adam J. Copeland is a junior in college. He served as Co-Moderator on the National Presbyterian Youth Ministry Council from 2000-2003.

The author of this letter is speaking as a member of his or her denomination and not necessarily for the denomination as a whole.



This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised.

—Genesis 17:10

Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.

—Genesis 17:14

Circumcision: The removal of the foreskin from the penis. While practiced by some ancient Near Eastern peoples for various reasons and in specific ways, circumcision had a unique place in the worship and practice of the people of Israel. According to Genesis circumcision was first practiced by the patriarchs and involved all males of the household, including slaves; even resident aliens had to be circumcised in order to observe the Passover. Normally male infants were circumcised when eight days old. Circumcision became the most critical distinguishing mark separating the Israelites from surrounding peoples.

—Circumcision: *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*

BIBLE STUDY

The Inclusive Spirit of God: Persuading Peter

Written by: Jamie McDaniel

Scripture Reading: Acts 10:1-8

Prayer: God, you are the uncreated one. The universe is the product of your imagination. You breathe into us life and then your love for us endures forever. Hold us close, speak to our hearts, and help us to understand your thoughts so that we might better love you, better love our neighbor, and better love ourselves.

The book of Acts is an exciting read—a sequel to the accounts of Jesus and the disciples found in the Gospels. It is an important document that records the history of the early church under the direction of the Spirit after the death of Jesus. Tradition holds that the author of Acts was Luke, the same person who produced the third Gospel. It is also thought that Luke is the only Gentile (non-Jewish) writer to contribute to the New Testament.

The story begins in Jerusalem. Jesus has been crucified. The women who went to the tomb were the first to preach the good news of his resurrection. The early church is born on the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit descends. Peter and John are leading the Christian community in continuing the work of Jesus. The Pharisee Saul begins to strongly persecute the disciples and, in one incident, stands over a dying Stephen, who had been put on trial and stoned. Then there is Saul's dramatic about-face on the road to Damascus where he has an epiphany of the risen Christ. Saul, later known as the Apostle Paul, launches a new mission proclaiming God's peace.

During this place in history, there was also a child of God who was considered second-class at best and immoral at worst. At the top of the list he was not circumcised as clearly required by Genesis 17:10. He was also a centurion of the Roman army. He was a Gentile, and his name was Cornelius.

Ah, but the Inclusive Spirit of God was at work.

Protesting Peter

Peter had been a close friend of Jesus. He had been present at all the major incidents in Jesus' ministry.

It could be said that Peter had a somewhat argumentative personality. It is interesting to read how he was inclined to initially disagree with Jesus and others. When Jesus first asks Peter to put the boat out into deep water and let down the nets, Peter's first response is, "But we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything."

When Jesus predicted his death, Peter promptly took him aside and said, "Never, Lord! This will never happen to you!"

At the Last Supper, Jesus washed his disciples' feet to teach servanthood. When he came to Peter he was questioned.

"Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" Peter inquired. When Jesus said yes, Peter protested. "No, you shall never wash my feet."

Also at the Last Supper, Jesus stated that Peter would end up denying him before the night was out. Peter quickly shot back saying, "Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will."

Despite these things, Jesus charged Peter with the task of leading the disciples. And it is in this role that Peter will further God's plan of inclusion that Jesus set in motion.

God Does a New Thing

The author of Acts describes Cornelius as a devout man who gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly. But this was inconsequential to the religious fundamentalists of his day. To them, Cornelius was simply an uncircumcised Gentile, and the Bible was indisputably clear when it came to circumcision.

Despite the fact that many of God's other people would not associate or visit him in his home, Cornelius kept the faith. He knew that God loved him and that was what mattered most.

One day an angel appeared to Cornelius and said, "Cornelius, your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God. Now send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who is called Peter."

And so Cornelius' men set off for Joppa. But God still had to find a way to get Peter to see the new thing God was doing.

Questions:

1. Based on Peter's prior record, how do you think he will initially react to the command to go to Cornelius' home?
2. In this story, why do you think the Spirit is working to expand the realm of God given what the Bible says about circumcision?
3. What other examples from the Bible and history can you give where God is concerned about the outcast and marginalized?

Scripture Reading: Acts 10:9-16

Peter's Vision

A serious study of the Bible requires an understanding of the cultural setting where the events take place.

Jesus and all his disciples were Jewish. From early childhood Peter had

Gentiles were allowed in the outer courtyard of the temple of Jesus' day, but Greek and Latin inscriptions threatened death if they ventured further into the temple precincts (cf. Acts 21:28-29).

—Gentile: *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*

Roofs: In Old Testament times, the roof was made by laying beams across the width of the walls, and laying smaller beams at right angles across them. Layers of brushwood, earth and clay were then added to the beams, and the whole structure was made firm by using a stone roller which was kept on the roof. As building skills improved, permanent upper stories became more common. The roof was a very important part of the house. Sometimes a trellis was put on the roof and vines trained over it. If the house was built into a steep hillside, the roof was sometimes used as a threshing-floor. It was also used for drying fruit and grain. The roof was a cool place on a hot evening, and sometimes the family made a tent of branches and slept out on the roof. Householders would shout their news from roof to roof above the noise from the streets below.

—*Nelson's Illustrated Encyclopedia of the Bible*

been taught that certain foods were not just distasteful, they were abominable. The list is found in Leviticus 11 and includes pigs, rabbits, lobster, shrimp, scallops, various birds, snakes, and lizards. "You are to detest them," was the command written into the Law of Moses.

This was just one of the reasons why Jewish people did not associate with Gentiles. Gentiles, after all, might eat pork chops, serve bacon, or feast on seafood that included lobster and shrimp. The Bible was clear—God said not to defile oneself by consuming such foods.

In the scripture passage we find Peter staying with a friend in the town of Joppa. At about noon he goes up on the roof to pray to God. Instead, it is God who labors to speak to Peter's heart.

After a while, Peter becomes hungry and his mind starts to wander. He falls into a trance. It is then that he sees something coming down from the sky, something like a large sheet being lowered to the ground by its four corners. On it are all sorts of animals. As the sheet draws closer, Peter starts to recognize the animals as being the ones deemed unclean by scripture.

With the sheet now before him and his stomach growling, Peter hears a voice. "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat."

Peter is scandalized and his reaction to God's command is this, "No! By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean."

God was not discouraged by Peter's initial reply. The command was simply repeated.

In response, Peter upped his protest and in an effort to remind God of rules, he likely started quoting Leviticus.

The scene is repeated a third time. Once again, the voice tells Peter to get up and eat. There is real tension—not the tension that results from an unfriendly conflict, but rather a "creative tension" that exists just prior to a new truth being birthed.

Before Peter can decide what to do, however, the sheet is suddenly lifted back up to heaven and the message given to Peter is this: "What God has made clean, you have no right to call profane."

At this point, Peter's head is spinning. God's purpose, however, was not for Peter to go against his convictions and eat certain foods—for the real message was not about the food. It was about the table.

Scripture Reading: Acts 10:17-48

Can Anyone Withhold the Water?

Even after an astonishing vision, Peter was still struggling to reconcile the notion that God would accept what the law rejected. The book of Acts states twice more in verses 17 and 19 that Peter was still contemplating the vision—apparently having second thoughts regarding what he had witnessed.

“How could this have possibly come from God?” he may have asked himself. “This goes against my tradition and what scripture seems to say.”

God again speaks to Peter’s heart, saying, “Simon, three men are looking for you. So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them.”

Peter obeys but is still somewhat reluctant. He does not warmly greet the men at his door. Rather he gives them a somewhat cool reception, simply stating, “I’m the one you’re looking for. Why have you come?”

Cornelius’ men seem to sense Peter’s reservation. They paint Cornelius in the best light, stating that he was a righteous and God-fearing man who, though a Gentile, is respected by all the Jewish people. To further convince Peter to come with them they quickly reveal that they did not come on their own, but that an angel had sent them.

Eventually Peter invites them in and the next day he goes with them to Caesarea. Notice that Peter also took some of the disciples along, perhaps to serve as witnesses. The following day they arrive at Cornelius’ home

As students of the Bible, we can appreciate the significance of this event in that culture by observing what Peter does when he first enters Cornelius’ home. He addresses those present with, “You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him.”

Then the words that broke down a great wall of separation—“Nevertheless,” Peter began, “God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean.”

With that, the Spirit—being the prime mover of this event—descends upon all the Gentiles present. The disciples stand in amazement of what has been later described as a “Gentile Pentecost.”

Peter comes to understand the inclusiveness of God and abandons all his prior uncertainty and arguments. Moved by what he has seen and heard, Peter boldly proclaims, “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?”

And so on that day Peter and the disciples with him let go of their prejudice and embraced their Gentile brothers and sisters as first-class children of God.

The rabbit, though it chews the cud, does not have a split hoof; it is unclean for you. And the pig, though it has a split hoof completely divided, does not chew the cud; it is unclean for you. You must not eat their meat or touch their carcasses; they are unclean for you.

—Leviticus 11:6-8

Of all the creatures living in the water of the seas and the streams, you may eat any that have fins and scales. But all creatures in the seas or streams that do not have fins and scales – whether among all the swarming things or among all the other living creatures in the water – you are to detest.

—Leviticus 11:9

Do not defile yourselves by any of these creatures. Do not make yourselves unclean by means of them or be made unclean by them. I am the LORD your God; consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am holy.

—Leviticus 11:43-44a

The story does not end there, however. When the news of what Peter had done reached the early church back in Jerusalem, many were angered and demanded answers.

Scripture Reading: Acts 11:1-3

No Small Debate

The book of Acts continues to build up the coming doctrinal debate in the early church. Many of the disciples, along with the believers who followed the Pharisaic interpretation, were insisting that the Gentile believers be circumcised and required to follow the Law of Moses.

“Scripture clearly says circumcision and a proper diet are required by God,” someone likely argued.

Another may have taken a more gentle approach. “Peter, this just doesn’t sound right. Yes, we should show love towards the Gentiles—but proclaiming they are Godly when they do things contrary to the Law of Moses? To me that shows disregard for God’s word.”

Another may have been more forceful by bringing Peter’s faith into question. “You either believe all of Scripture or none of it!”

Scripture Reading: Acts 15:1-29

Discussion Idea: Divide the youth into two groups. Have one group represent the side of the conservative Pharisees and the belief that Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the dietary laws. Have the other youth argue the side of Peter and the belief that Gentiles are loved by God exactly as they are. Use both scripture and experience as persuasive evidence.

Questions:

1. What might have happened if Peter had questioned his experience on the rooftop and decided to seek out the traditionalists’ opinion first?
2. Where do you think the church would be today if the early Christians had decided to withhold acceptance from the Gentiles?
3. In what other ways has the church wrestled with the idea that all God’s people are first-class? How has the church grown in its understanding of God from these struggles?

The Present Struggle for the Full Inclusion of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender People

The church today is in the midst of no small debate. Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people claim that they love God and that God loves them—exactly as they are, without reservation.

Several fundamentalists have claimed that gay people must become heterosexual. Other conservatives and traditionalists say that while having a sexual orientation other than heterosexual is not sinful, gay people must never be allowed to marry, cannot hold key positions in church leadership, and must be required to live a life of celibacy.

There is much we can learn about the inclusiveness of God from the book of Acts. Those of us who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender Christians find assurance in the story of Peter and the rooftop vision. We understand that we are fully welcomed and accepted by God regardless of what a few debatable biblical passages may or may not say.

Homosexual and heterosexual persons alike are made in the image of God, capable of doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with their Creator.

God has told you, O mortal,
what is good; and what
does the LORD require of
you but to do justice, and to
love kindness, and to walk
humbly with your God?

—Micah 6:8

But the fruit of the Spirit is
love, joy, peace, patience,
kindness, goodness,
faithfulness, gentleness and
self-control. Against such
things there is no law.

—Galatians 5:22-23

When the Pharisees heard
that Jesus had silenced the
Sadducees, they gathered
together, and one of them, a
lawyer, asked him a
question to test him.

“Teacher, which
commandment in the law is
the greatest?”

Jesus said to him, “You
shall love the Lord your
God with all your heart, and
with all your soul, and with
all your mind.’ This is the
greatest and first
commandment. And a
second is like it: ‘You shall
love your neighbor as
yourself.” On these two
commandments hang all the
law and the prophets.”

—Matthew 22:34-40



James Darnell, age 19, is actively working in the United Church of Christ. He currently serves on the Western Association Council in the Illinois Conference of the UCC.

LETTER FROM A YOUNG CHRISTIAN LEADER

Dear Southern Baptist Youth or Young Adult,

Greetings to you in the name of Christ, our Hope, from the United Church of Christ. I trust that your youth meeting is proving to be an uplifting and spiritually fulfilling time. No doubt you are doing wonderful work on behalf of the Southern Baptist Convention in spreading the Good News of the gospel of the Lord.

You may not know it, since the media portrays our denominations as churches on completely different ends of the political spectrum (which is quite false actually), but our churches do have striking similarities. Like most Christian churches, both the UCC and the SBC require prospective members to accept and proclaim Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. But the government of the church is also quite similar, as the churches of the United Church of Christ are also divided into associations and conferences which are very similar to statewide conventions and fellowships.

I write to you today not especially about our commonalities, but concerning something that Christians are deeply divided on. No issue divides the Church more than sexuality and the questions that go with it: is heterosexuality the only true form of sexuality? Can homosexuality be cured? Is one's sexuality a choice? Is sexuality genetic? What does Scripture say about homosexual practice? This issue threatens schism in many denominations. In fact, a few hundred Southern Baptist churches that disagree with their governing bodies on this issue have left the Southern Baptist Convention to form the Alliance of Baptists. Most denominations have interest groups on both sides of this issue.

So what does Scripture say? Now, that really depends on how you personally interpret the Bible. Only in reading modern translations do we find the Bible speaks of homosexuality. That is because there was no name for the concept when earlier versions were written. Modern-day translators have chosen to translate the word in some parts of the Bible to be speaking specifically of homosexuality. But many scholars agree that in the passages from Paul's letters traditionally thought to be referring to homosexual behavior as sinful, actually refer to male temple prostitution and pedophilia instead.

For many years, the story of the destruction of Sodom has been used to justify beliefs that homosexuality is wrong and immoral. But when taken in its historical context it proves nothing of the sort. The story of Sodom occurs in Genesis immediately following the story of Abraham's great hospitality to the three strangers (God and two angels). When the townsmen demand that Lot let them see the strangers so they can rape them, they do so to indicate how unwelcome the strangers are in Sodom. The rape was in that time a way to strip a man of his dignity. So the focus is not on the sex act, but on the extreme inhospitality of the people of Sodom. Ezekiel 16:49 (KJV) tells us, "this was the iniquity of thy sister Sodom, pride, fullness of bread, and abundance of idleness was in her and in her daughters, neither did she strengthen the hand of the poor and needy."

The author of this letter is speaking as a member of his or her denomination and not necessarily for the denomination as a whole.

All these are but examples of how the Bible can be interpreted as not speaking condemningly of homosexuality. There is more than one traditional way of reading these texts.

I urge you, on your own, to study Scripture and what scholars say about key issues of faith. Take in different perspectives, and then decide what you believe. Remember always, that Jesus never spoke on this issue. How important can it really be if he never even spoke about it?

Homosexuals and people perceived to be homosexual are among some of the most discriminated against people in the world. Much of this discrimination comes from the fact that some people believe that because their faith teaches against homosexuality, they can treat people of a different sexual orientation as second class citizens. This is not the truth. Jesus tells us to love each other as he loves us, including those we find difficult to love. So no matter where you stand on this issue, please, above all else, act with compassion. Acts of hatred only build up more walls of division. Conversely, when we act in love we help take down those walls that divide us and exhibit a truly Christian way of life.

Sincerely,

James A. Darnell



EX-GAY MINISTRIES

Failing to Recognize What God Has Made

Written by: Jacob Reitan

Last year the SBC launched its first ever ex-gay ministry. Ex-gay ministries operate on the belief that all gay, lesbian, and bisexual people can and should change their sexual orientation by religious and/or psychological deliverance. This belief is false and extremely dangerous. This section of the booklet is devoted to conveying the truth about ex-gay ministries including: why they don't work, why they are so harmful, why their "successes" aren't really successes, and why they operate in the face of God's creation.

Why Ex-Gay Ministries Don't Work

There is no reliable scientific evidence that ex-gay ministries succeed in changing an individual's sexual orientation. This statement is supported by every major health and mental health organization including the following:

The American Psychiatric Association

"There is no published scientific evidence supporting the efficacy of 'reparative therapy' as a treatment to change one's sexual orientation, nor is it included in the APA's Task Force Report, *Treatments of Psychiatric Disorders*. More importantly, altering sexual orientation is not an appropriate goal of psychiatric treatment."ⁱ

"The American Psychiatric Association opposes any psychiatric treatment, such as reparative or conversion therapy, which is based upon the assumption that homosexuality *per se* is a mental disorder or based upon the *a priori* assumption that the patient should change his or her homosexual orientation."ⁱⁱ

The American Medical Association

"The AMA opposes, the use of 'reparative' or 'conversion' therapy that is based upon the assumption that homosexuality *per se* is a mental disorder or based upon the *a priori* assumption that the patient should change his/her homosexual orientation."ⁱⁱⁱ

The American Academy of Pediatrics

"Confusion about sexual orientation is not unusual during adolescence. Counseling may be helpful for young people who are uncertain about their sexual orientation or for those who are uncertain about how to express their sexuality and might profit from an attempt at clarification through a counseling or psychotherapeutic initiative. Therapy directed at specifically changing sexual orientation is contraindicated, since it can provoke guilt and anxiety while having little or no potential for achieving changes in orientation."^{iv}

The American Psychological Association

“Even though most homosexuals live successful, happy lives, some homosexual or bisexual people may seek to change their sexual orientation through therapy, sometimes pressured by the influence of family members or religious groups to try and do so. The reality is that homosexuality is not an illness. It does not require treatment and is not changeable.”^v

Despite these statements which definitively state that ex-gay ministries do not work, the Southern Baptist Convention continues to place support behind efforts to change the sexual orientation of gay, lesbian, and bisexual people. To justify their actions, the leaders of the SBC attempt to discredit the above statements by claiming that they dishonor the authority of the Bible and/or church doctrine.

For example, Dr. R. Albert Mohler, President of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, stated: “Modern notions of sexual orientation must be brought to answer to Scripture—not vice versa. Scripture must not be called upon to defend itself in light of modern notions. Paul will not apologize to Sigmund Freud or the American Psychological Association, and the faithful church must call this approach what it is—a blatant effort to subvert the authority of Scripture and to replace biblical authority with the false authority of modern secular ideologies.”^{vi}

Statements such as Dr. Mohler’s ignore the evidence and years of experiential data that serve as the basis for conclusions for the above health and mental health organizations. Furthermore, statements like Dr. Mohler’s create a dangerous wall between religion and science that serves to harm the common cause of truth that is—and should be—the root of both.

Why Ex-Gay Ministries Are So Harmful

Ex-gay ministries are harmful because they put into question the faith and the sexual orientation of the individuals that they target. Ex-gay ministries operate on lies and untruths about what it means to be a gay, lesbian or bisexual person which serve only to inject fear and lower the self-esteem of the individual targeted by the ministry. Furthermore, because ex-gay ministries rely on an individual’s faith for “deliverance” from the homosexual or bisexual “lifestyle,” when they inevitably fail, they do so at the cost of weakening the targeted individual’s faith.

The psychological damage of these two effects can be deep and long-lasting.

The American Psychiatric Association warns of these risks:

“The potential risks of reparative therapy are great; including depression, anxiety and self-destructive behavior, since therapist alignment with societal prejudices against homosexuality may reinforce self-hatred already experienced by the patient.”^{vii}

As does the *American Psychological Association* which states:

“A psychologist who harbors prejudice or is misinformed about sexual orientation may offer responses to the questioning or conflicted client that may exacerbate the client’s distress. Such an uncritical stance would consist of a psychologist’s agreement with the notion that the only effective strategy for coping with such conflict or discrimination is to seek to change the lesbian, gay, or bisexual person’s sexual orientation.”^{viii}

At times the damage done by ex-gay ministries can be so great as to lead to suicide. That is what happened in the case of Stuart Matis, a gay Mormon from San Francisco who committed suicide because he was unable to change his sexual orientation.

(The tragic story of Stuart Matis can be found on page 30.)

Stuart Matis died because he was wrongly told he could change his sexual orientation. He died because he was made to feel sick and sinful on account of who he was. His life, and the countless others who have died and suffered, are the intolerable costs that come along with the practice of ex-gay ministries.

Why Ex-Gay Ministry “Conversions” Are Not Really Conversions

Ex-gay ministries continually parade their success stories in and out of churches and across the media. As Southern Baptist youth, there is a good chance that you have heard of their stories: ex-gays that claim to be “living proof” of the effectiveness of such ministries.

However, you most likely have not heard of the stories of ex-ex-gays who also share their stories which tell of how their prior “successful conversions” never did amount to any actual success. You can read some of the stories of these ex-ex-gays online at the Human Rights Campaign website (www.hrc.org) in the downloadable booklet *Finally Free: How Love and Acceptance Finally Freed Us From “Ex-Gay” Ministries*.

So what is the truth? Are ex-gay ministries actually able to sustain “successful” conversions for homosexual or bisexual people?

The short answer is no. There is not a single ex-gay ministry that has claimed to be successful at conversion of sexual orientation which has also stood up to scientific examination or peer review of its results and methodology.

In other words, the scientific examinations of “ex-gay” ministries have shown that ex-gay ministries are suspect at best and outright failures at worst.

As the *American Psychological Association* points out:

“Some therapists who undertake so-called conversion therapy report that they have been able to change their clients’ sexual orientation from homosexual to heterosexual. Close scrutiny of these reports however show several factors that cast doubt on their claims. For example, many of the claims come from organizations with an ideological perspective



Resource: *Finally Free: How Love and Acceptance Finally Freed Us From “Ex-Gay” Ministries*. Available for free download at www.hrc.org

which condemns homosexuality. Furthermore, their claims are poorly documented. For example, treatment outcome is not followed and reported overtime as would be the standard to test the validity of any mental health intervention.^{ix}

Furthermore the *American Psychiatric Association* points out:

"The 'reparative' therapy literature uses theories that make it difficult to formulate scientific selection criteria for their treatment modality. This literature not only ignores the impact of social stigma in motivating efforts to cure homosexuality; it is a literature that actively stigmatizes homosexuality as well. 'Reparative' therapy literature also tends to overstate the treatment's accomplishments while neglecting any potential risks to patients."^x

Despite the lack of scientific proof, those who run ex-gay ministries still claim they have high "success" rates. For example, Exodus international, the largest ex-gay ministry group, claims to have a success rate of 71.6%.^{xi} Yet, when pressed to provide proof of those figures, Exodus cannot do so. As a *Newsweek* article pointed out, "because Exodus keeps no statistics and does no follow-up, it cannot say how many of the 200,000 people who have contacted the group since its founding in 1976 have actually maintained a heterosexual lifestyle."^{xii}

When it comes down to it, the original founder of Exodus Michael Bussee said it best when, after leaving Exodus, he admitted that he had never actually met anyone "who went from gay to straight." He stated further, "Even if you manage to alter someone's sexual behavior, you cannot change their true sexual orientation."^{xiii}

Why Ex-Gay Ministries Operate in the Face of God's Creation

The reasons why ex-gay ministries do not work, why they are harmful, and why their successful conversions are not real successes have been covered above. Ultimately, however, the reason why ex-gay ministries fail is because God created and loves gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people exactly as they are without reservation. As Southern Baptist youth, that is the most important message that this booklet has to offer you.

Growing up in the Southern Baptist denomination, this message of Christian acceptance of GLBT people may not be something you have been exposed to prior to reading this booklet. You may have been under the impression that most Christian faith institutions join with the Southern Baptist Convention in supporting ex-gay ministries.

The reality, however, is that the Southern Baptist Convention is one of the few religious organizations that officially support ex-gay ministries. Most religious institutions, including the following, do not: the Roman Catholic Church, the National Council of Churches, the United Methodist Church, the American Jewish Congress, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, The Evangelical Lutheran Church, The United Church of Christ, The Alliance of Baptists, The Episcopal Church USA, and The Presbyterian Church USA.^{xiv}

The fact is the practice of ex-gay ministries is something supported by only a small segment of America's Christian Community and for the ex-gay ministries to paint the struggle as a debate between Christians and secularists is simply not true.

There are millions of Christians who love and accept gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people as equal brothers and sisters in Christ's Kingdom, just as there are millions of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender Christians who live out and accept Christ's unconditional love.

Ex-gay ministries serve to hide this reality. They mask themselves as being about Christ's love and the power to overcome obstacles. But in reality they are a fountain of misinformation from which flows a stream of suffering, self-hatred, and wasted gifts. Ex-gay ministries obscure the true message of the Gospel and serve only to drive gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people away from Christ rather than to him.

As young members of the Southern Baptist Convention, you are the future of your denomination. Take it upon yourself to examine the real effects of the ex-gay ministries that the SBC practices. Ask yourself, "Is that where I want to see the future of my church in regards to ministry to homosexuals?"

ⁱ American Psychiatric Association Fact Sheet on Gay and Bisexual Issues, 1997

ⁱⁱ American Psychiatric Association Statements Pertinent to Gay and Lesbian Issue, Dec. 1998

ⁱⁱⁱ American Medical Association Policy: H-160.991 Health Care Needs of the Homosexual Population

^{iv} From a policy statement entitled "Homosexuality and Adolescence," published in the journal *Pediatrics*, Oct. 1993.

^v American Psychological Association pamphlet, "Answers to Your Questions About Sexual Orientation and Homosexuality," 2004

^{vi} Mohler, Albert R., "First-Person: Homosexuality & the Bible – twisting the truth," BP News, May 2004

^{vii} American Psychiatric Association Statements Pertinent to Gay and Lesbian Issue, Dec. 1998

^{viii} American Psychological Association, "Guidelines for Psychotherapy with Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Clients."

^{ix} American Psychological Association pamphlet, "Answers to Your Questions About Sexual Orientation and Homosexuality," 2004

^x American Psychiatric Association Fact Sheet on Gay and Bisexual Issues, 1997

^{xi} Statistic from a 1994 PBS documentary "One Nation Under God." Their "success rate" could have fluctuated since then.

^{xii} Newsweek, July 28, 1998:

^{xiii} "Ex-Gay Ministry Founders Recant," "Keeping in Touch," The Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches, May 1990.

^{xiv} Facts about the Roman Catholic Church, the National Council of Churches, the United Methodist Church, the American Jewish Congress, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations were attained from a National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Report "Challenging the Ex-Gay Movement: An Information Packet." The other religious institutions were added based on knowledge of the author.

LETTER FROM A YOUNG CHRISTIAN LEADER

Dear Southern Baptist Youth or Young Adult,

I write to you as a member of The United Methodist Church, a denomination that has struggled significantly regarding the issue of homosexuality to the point that there were calls for a split at our quadrennial gathering held this past May in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. I also write to you as a faithful and practicing Christian who is currently pursuing her call to ministry and obtaining a Master of Divinity from Harvard Divinity School. I have been a member of the Christian community since birth and have come to love my faith ever more fiercely the past several years as I have developed spiritually. Finally, I write to you as a leader in young adult work in The United Methodist Church. I have served as chairperson for the United Methodist Student Movement, a national movement of college students, and have participated in and led numerous events for young adults in the church.

I have been asked to write a letter concerning the issue of homosexuality and how the churches are addressing it. This is something with which I have had much experience and am glad to discuss. As a straight woman, I grew up with an understanding that homosexuality was wrong and sinful. It was only when I began to watch my friends be torn apart that I knew I needed to consider my understanding more carefully. Contrary to popular belief, I did not change my opinion of homosexuality to adopt a more culturally viable option or to simply move along with the times. Instead, it was out of my deep Christian faith that I found no other option but to reconsider my previous stance that homosexuality was sinful. In doing so, I have remained truthful to the Bible and my faith. I witnessed the pain, fear, and confusion facing some of my friends as they began addressing the sexual orientation that they had held tightly inside since adolescence but could no longer contain. These were my friends. These were the people I worshipped with. These were the people that comforted me as Jesus comforted his people. These were my spiritual companions. In no way did their admission to being attracted to people of the same sex deter their Christ-filled life. I looked hard to find the sin in them. Yet, I could find nothing but love, honesty, truthfulness, and peace as I watched them fall in love, only this time with members of their sex.

As a Christian, I come to you pleading that you will take a moment to step into the life of a homosexual Christian and search for the sin. Watch them interact with their families; watch them work hard; watch them strive for the same goals in life that all of us strive for. As a Christian, I realized how clearly I was sinning when I so unjustly hurt, oppressed, and drove away my fellow brothers and sisters in Christ simply because they love in another way. Homosexuality is not merely about a physical act. Some homosexuals—just as many heterosexuals—engage in purely sexual encounters. Such behavior does not mean all heterosexual relationships are void and neither does it prove the sinfulness of all homosexual relations. I encourage you to respond in a way Jesus would respond to these oppressed people. Offer them a place in Christ's kingdom and share with them the peace and beauty found in Christ. They deserve it as much as we all do, and God welcomes them in. I am certain that God does not care who they love but rather that they are capable of loving in Christ's image.

Peace and grace,

Christina Wright



Christina Wright serves as Chairperson of the United Methodist Student Movement.

The author of this letter is speaking as a member of his or her denomination and not necessarily for the denomination as a whole.



ABSENT VOICES

Victims of Anti-gay teachings

Soulforce regards anti-homosexual religious teachings as the primary source of suffering for God's gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender children. Some members of society have used these teachings as a license to kill gays. Sometimes these teachings are used as a motive for gay people to kill themselves.

The following are seven young people who have been murdered or who were shamed to the point that they felt they could not live another day in a world hostile to non-heterosexuals.

Take a moment to read their stories and hear the deep feeling of loss from the people who loved them.



Jacob Orosco

Although Jacob Orosco was not a Mormon, he lived in Utah, a state where the teachings of the Latter-day Saints Church profoundly influence public policy and the atmosphere in the schools. State law forbids Utah's public school teachers from saying anything in the classroom that would imply acceptance or advocacy of homosexuality.

Jacob was out of the closet, not just to friends and family but to the entire community. He had helped found a gay club at his high school, a move that had prompted the Salt Lake City school board to shut down all extracurricular activities rather than grant the club official status.

Jacob was highly regarded by his friends and peers in the East High School Gay/Straight Alliance. He was gentle, funny, and warm-hearted. He was slated to be the Alliance's president in the 1997-1998 school year. When he took his life in his mother's home on September 3, 1997, he was seventeen, a senior in high school.

—Affirmation: *Gay and Lesbian Mormons*
www.affirmation.org/suicides/jacob_orosco.asp

“Gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered youth have reported to researchers time and time again the horrible conditions they face in high school. Forty-five percent of gay males and twenty percent of lesbian females experience verbal or physical assault in high school. Twenty-eight percent of these youth cannot endure the torture and drop out. Gay youth are also two to three times more likely to attempt suicide than heterosexual young people. I urge you to take steps to help these students.”

—Judy Shepard, mother of
Matthew Shepard

Gwen Araujo

NEWARK, Calif. (Reuters) – Three California men were charged with hate-crime murder Friday for allegedly beating a seventeen-year-old youth to death after he arrived at a party wearing women's clothing.

Michael Magidson, 22, Jaron Nabors, 19, and Jose Merel, 24, appeared in court to face charges stemming from the Oct. 3 murder of Eddie Araujo, a student at a local alternative high school who frequently dressed as a girl and sometimes identified himself with a woman's name.

They entered no pleas and were being held without bail. Another man, Paul Merel Jr., was arrested after the incident but has not yet been charged.

Araujo was described as a friendly, if troubled, youth who had long been struggling with questions of sexual identity. Friends told reporters Friday that he had been dressing as a woman for almost a year, and often suffered abuse for it.

The alleged killers were described as popular former athletes in the small suburban community.

—*ABCnews.com, October 18, 2002*



"Angels don't have a gender and he's my angel now. I know that he's safe somewhere where no one can hurt him."

"He was born this way. He always felt like a girl. Eddie was different, and people were mean to him. But he was my baby."

—*Sylvia Guerrero, mother of Eddie Araujo*

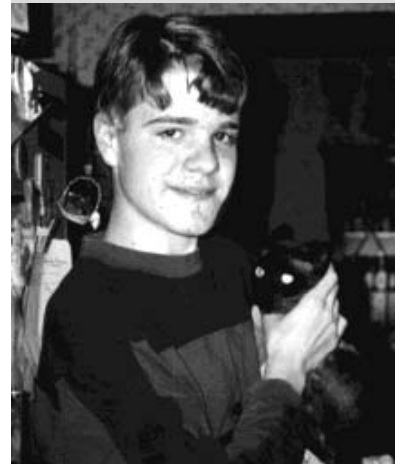
Robbie Kirkland

On January 2, 1997, my darling fourteen-year-old son, Robbie Kirkland, committed suicide after a four year struggle to accept and find peace with his homosexuality.

Our family loved, supported, and accepted him but could not protect him from the rejection and harassment he experienced at his Catholic schools or his overall perception of how society and religion view homosexuality.

Robbie, my only son, was a very special and loving person. He was kind and sensitive with a witty sense of humor. He loved writing and had dreams of being a writer.

—*Leslie Sadasivan*
mother of Robbie Kirkland
<http://lgcsc.org/robkirkland>





Anna Wakefield

At age 5, Anna had committed her life to Christ and wanted to be baptized with her mother, since her mother had only been baptized when she was an infant. Anna was baptized with her mother, Mary Lou Wallner, at First Baptist Church of Ferguson, MO (suburb of St. Louis) when she was about 6 or 7 years old.

As Anna grew older, her parents created an environment characterized by legalism and shame, not grace and understanding. The fundamentalist Christian environment built by her parents and her church made the coming out process for Anna extremely difficult and painful. Anna knew what the Bible said—according to her church—and she was taught that being a lesbian was sinful and far from the will of God. For years, she lived in a closet of depression, self-hatred, and loneliness.

Her view of God was shaped by her parents and her experiences in church growing up. For a long time, Anna felt that “God was always standing there with a big stick and would hit her when she did something wrong” (from her mother’s autobiographical account, *The Slow Miracle of Transformation*). Later on in life, Anna ultimately stopped going to church altogether, stating that she was taught that she was dirty and useless.

On December 4, 1988, while at college, Anna wrote a letter to her mother explaining the pain that she had been going through regarding her sexuality. She talked about being uncomfortable around men and how, now, she loved women and wanted to be gay. She told her mother that she hoped she wouldn’t try to change her. Anna expressed her love for God and she believed at that time that He loved her no matter what happened along the way.

Mary Lou responded to Anna’s letter and told her that “I will *never* accept that in you. I feel it’s a terrible waste, besides being spiritually and morally wrong...I do, and will continue to love *you*, but I will always hate that, and will pray every day that you will change your mind and attitude.”

Over the next nine years, Anna and Mary Lou struggled to reach an uneasy truce over the issue, with her mother holding to her “hate the sin, love the sinner” approach.

Their relationship deteriorated in 1996 as Anna, a Masters Degree educated social worker who had graduated summa cum laude as an undergraduate, was beset by depression.

As Anna struggled with depression and possible bouts of schizophrenia, she turned to medication and illegal drugs to get her through the pain and self-hatred. At one point, Anna entered a psychiatric hospital in Kansas City to be fully evaluated for mental illness.

As Anna struggled with various forms of mental illness and depression, she eventually sent her mother a letter announcing that she wanted nothing to do with her because of the “colossal damage to her soul” her mother had caused with her shaming words.

“This body is like a prison
That binds me to another
time
Reminding me of the torture
And the scars it left behind
Every violation touched my
very soul
And though I long SO, but I
fear NO
Will this body ever truly be
mine?
Defective! I feel defective!
This body screams its
ritualistic wounds
And my soul is shredded
into fragments
Lost within the tomb...of
this body”

—Anna Wakefield, poem
written a month before
taking her life

Six months later, in February 1997, Anna committed suicide at age 29, leaving no note.

Anna had many amazing gifts. She played the piano, wrote her own songs, and sang with a beautiful voice. Before she took her own life, Anna had attended the Springfield, MO Metropolitan Community Church and sang during Sunday morning worship services.

Mary Lou, Anna's mother, has taken this traumatic story, through her own pain, and transformed it into a message of healing and mercy. After her daughter's suicide in 1997, Mary Lou and her husband Bob came to believe that Anna's suicide was largely due to the fact that they did not accept her as a lesbian Christian. A major source of this rejection, according to Mary Lou and Bob, was their homophobia and misunderstanding about gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) Christians.

Listen to Mary Lou's comments about her amazing journey from rejection to full acceptance of GLBT persons:

"My journey from homophobia to full acceptance of gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgender persons has been long, arduous, and nothing short of a miracle...[I believe] the anti-gay rhetoric taught in our evangelical churches is literally killing gay people. Do you know that the leading cause of death among gay teens is suicide? Anna wasn't a teen, but she attempted suicide when she was a teen. She just didn't 'complete' it until she was 29."

"My transformed beliefs have nothing to do with guilt, or trying to 'make it up' to Anna. They simply have to do with getting to know gay Christians, reading, talking with people on both sides of the issue, and above all, studying the Scriptures. It never ceases to amaze me how we take verses of Scripture out of the context and culture of the day."

—www.soulforce.org/sbc_letters.html and
"The Slow Miracle of Transformation" by Mary Lou Wallner
(www.teach-ministries.org)

"If you had suggested to me the day I lost Anna that I would ever even begin to heal from this tragedy, I would have told you that was impossible. If you had told me that anything *good* could possibly come from death, as is suggested by Romans 8:28, I probably would have told you that you're crazy! However, thankfully, through God's grace and mercy, I *am* healing. Equally amazing, losing Anna has dramatically changed my whole belief system and opened my heart to a wonderful community of God's most precious children."

—Mary Lou Wallner,
mother of Anna Wakefield



Stuart Matis

It had become an all too familiar sound. Late on the night of Feb. 24, Stuart Matis's mother lay awake in bed, listening to her 32-year-old son pacing his room, unable to sleep. She worried that his depression was worsening. A year earlier Matis had told his parents he was gay, and all three, as devout Mormons, had struggled to reconcile Matis's homosexuality with the teachings of their church. Matis found little comfort in Mormon doctrine, which regards homosexuality as an "abominable" sin. A church therapist instructed him to suppress his sexuality or to undergo "reparative therapy" to become a heterosexual. Matis was especially frustrated by the church's energetic efforts to pass Proposition 22, California's ballot measure banning same-sex marriage. The *yes on prop 22* signs that dotted his Santa Clara neighborhood, many placed there by church members, were a reminder of his failure to find acceptance as a Mormon and gay man.

Matis concluded he could not be both. That night, his mother got out of bed and wrote a letter asking the church to reconsider its position on gay Mormons. Only later would she learn that her son had been up writing his own letter, to his family and friends, explaining why he couldn't continue to live. Early the next morning, 11 days before voters would overwhelmingly approve Prop 22, Matis drove to the local Mormon church headquarters, pinned a do not resuscitate note to his shirt and shot himself in the head.

To Mormons, who adhere to a strict moral code of conduct, disapproval by the church can be especially devastating. For Stuart Matis, it apparently was too much to bear. Even as a young boy, friends recall, Matis cherished his Mormon identity and the church's moral demands. But at 7, Matis began harboring a terrifying secret: he realized he was attracted to boys.

For the next 20 years he kept the secret from everyone he knew, and prayed fervently for God to make him heterosexual. He tried to make up for what he considered his shortcoming by being perfect in other areas of his life. He studied hard in school and attended every church function he could. Though he deeply loved his family, he showed little outward affection, fearing he would blurt out his secret in an avalanche of emotion. "He would punish himself if he had a [homosexual] thought," says his childhood friend Jenifer Mouritsen. "He wouldn't allow himself to go to a friend's birthday party or [wouldn't] watch his favorite TV program." Instead, he would sit in his room and read Scripture. He set goals for himself not to think about boys for a certain length of time.

—*To Be Gay And Mormon, Newsweek, May 8, 2000, pp. 38-39*

"The Church has no idea that as I type this letter, there are surely boys and girls on their calloused knees imploring God to free them from this pain. They hate themselves. They retire to bed with their finger pointed to their head in the form of a gun. Every waking moment of every day they must be on constant alert to not divulge any clues that will identify themselves to their peers. 'Was my glance at that boy too long? Does he think I'm gay? Will he now publicize my secret and beat me up?' They are afraid of their parents. They are afraid of their bishop. They are afraid of their friends. They have nowhere to go but to lay on their floors curled in a ball and weep themselves to sleep."

—*Stuart Matis, in a letter to his cousin written a few days before his death*

"On Friday, I had to do one of the toughest things I've ever had to do in my life. I had to dedicate the grave of one of my best friends, Stuart Matis, who was also my brother. As many may already know from the press, he was the gay LDS (Latter-day Saints) man who shot himself. He chose this course of action because he felt, as he said in his own words, 'Either one is gay or one is Christian. As I believed that I was a Christian, I believed that I could never be gay.' He tried desperately to change for over 20 years, but in the end, he realized that it was not to be. This was more than he could handle."

—Bill Matis, brother of Stuart Matis, in a letter to the *BYU Daily Universe*

Sakia Gunn

Fifteen-year-old African American lesbian Sakia Gunn was stabbed to death while waiting at a bus stop in Newark, New Jersey during the early morning hours of Sunday, May 11, 2003. A sophomore at West Side High School in Newark, Sakia had just spent Saturday night with her friends in Manhattan's Greenwich Village.

The Christopher Street Pier is a popular area for LGBT youth of color to hang out, and Sakia and her friends had spent the evening there and on the promenade along West Street.

"The pier is somewhere we go to feel open about ourselves and have fun," explains Victoria Dingle, a sixteen-year-old lesbian friend and fellow West Side student who was with Sakia on the night of her murder. "Me and Sakia and some friends were just chilling and having fun and feeling good about being together."

They all returned to Newark via the PATH train. Victoria took a cab home from there, while Sakia waited at a bus stop with four other friends.

While awaiting the bus, a car with two men in it pulled up to the curb. Valencia Bailey, a friend of Sakia, recalls what happened next.

"Yo, shorty, come here," one of them said.

We told them, "No, we're okay. We're not like that. We're gay."

After refusing the men's sexual advances, Sakia's alleged killer, later identified as 29-year-old Richard McCullough, got out of the car, and a fight ensued. During the fight, McCullough allegedly grabbed Sakia by the neck and thrust a knife into her heart.

Rushed to the hospital by a Good Samaritan, Sakia died in the emergency room in the arms of her friend Valencia.

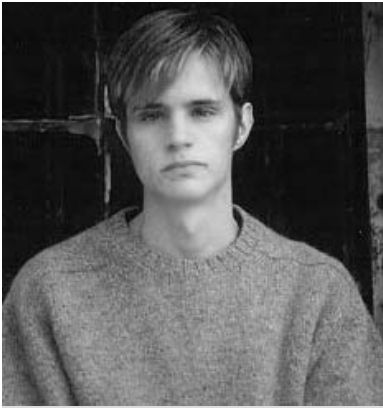
Sakia had always been candid about her sexual orientation.

*—National Gay and Lesbian Task Force
Education Policy: Issues Affecting Lesbian,
Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Youth*



"I loved Sakia and I always will. All of you who can't tell your mommas — I love you."

—Latona Gunn, mother
of Sakia Gunn



Matthew Shepard

Matthew Shepard was beaten and tied to a fence for eighteen hours in freezing cold temperatures. Once found, his face was caked in blood—except for where the tears streamed down his cheeks.

—*Journey to a Hate Free Millennium*
Stories of compassion and hope
www.newlightmedia.org

“Matt is no longer with us today because the men who killed him learned to hate. Somehow and somewhere they received the message that the lives of gay people are not as worthy of respect, dignity and honor as the lives of other people.”

—Judy Shepard, mother of Matthew Shepard

Judy Shepard: It was about 5:00 A.M. in Saudi Arabia on Tuesday, October 8th when the call came from the Laramie hospital advising us of Matt’s condition as they knew it. Every time we could get a call at such an odd hour my first reaction would be a silent prayer—please God let Matt be all right. This call, he was not.

We were unable to check on his condition once we began to travel. And when I would think of Matt, the image that would come to mind was of Matt alone in the prairie and tied to a fence.

Dennis Shepard: Normally there aren’t seats—every seat is full on a flight. This one just happened to be one where there were a lot of empty seats. So, we had rows where we could stretch out—just lift up the arms. But you can’t sleep. You keep thinking about Matt, you know, memories of him as we grew up together. And you’re just haunted.

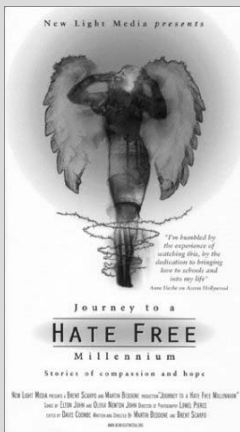
We get to Minneapolis. Judy is on the phone to Denver, to Fort Collins to find out how Matt is. I have to tell Logan about Matt, because at the time he had no clue. In the meantime, I have been told that Matt’s picture is pasted all over every newspaper, every lead story on every TV channel, the lead story on every radio, and it’s all over the internet. And we still have no idea why.

So, we’re halfway between Minneapolis and Denver and one of the flight attendants comes to where the three of us are sitting.

“Are you the Shepards?”

“Yes, sir.”

“There will be two policemen, Denver policemen, waiting for you when you step off the plane. Do not go any further than the doorway.”



Resource: *Journey to a Hate Free Millennium: Stories of compassion and hope.* Available in DVD and VHS format from www.newlightmedia.org

Dennis Shepard: We get to Denver and the police officers are waiting. We go right out the doorway, right there at the plane entrance down into a vehicle. We circle the airport, sneak in basically, pick up our luggage because reporters are waiting at the end of the jet-way for us to get off the plane. We go to Fort Collins. Instead of going to the hospital we go to a convenience store and we wait for a representative from the hospital to show up so we can figure out how to sneak in the hospital. And this is really getting bizarre. So we finally get into the hospital and then we start finding out about the injuries to Matt. And we're both nervous wrecks by this time.

Judy Shepard: When we arrived in Fort Collins late afternoon on Friday the ninth, we were escorted into Matt's room. What we found was a motionless, unaware, young man with his head swathed in bandages and tubes everywhere enabling the body to hold onto life. I wasn't even sure that this was Matt.

When we approached the bed I saw that it was indeed Matt. I could tell by the cute little bump that was on the top of his left ear. One of his eyes was partially opened and I could see the clear blue color. And who could mistake those long black lashes. But the twinkle of life wasn't there anymore.

We kissed his face, stroked his arms, held his hands, and talked to him. We so desperately wanted him to know we were there.

Logan, Matt's younger brother, refused to go into the room at first. He didn't want that image of Matt to be the one that would appear when he would think of his brother. He wanted the smiling, laughing, bright-eyed, handsome young face to come to mind.

Matt officially died at 12:53 a.m. on Monday, October 12, 1998, in a hospital in Fort Collins, Colorado. He actually died on the outskirts of Laramie tied to a fence that Wednesday before, when you beat him. You, Mr. McKinney, with your friend Mr. Henderson, killed my son.

By the end of the beating, his body was just trying to survive. You left him out there by himself, but he wasn't alone. There were his lifelong friends with him—friends that he had grown up with. You're probably wondering who these friends were.

First, he had the beautiful night sky with the same stars and moon that we used to look at through a telescope. Then, he had the daylight and the sun to shine on him one more time—one more cool, wonderful autumn day in Wyoming. His last day alive in Wyoming. His last day alive in the state that he always proudly called home. And through it all he was breathing in for the last time the smell of Wyoming sagebrush and the scent of pine trees from the snowy range. He heard the wind—the ever-present Wyoming wind—for the last time.

He had one more friend with him. One he grew to know through his time in Sunday school and as an acolyte at St. Mark's in Casper as well as through his visits to St. Matthew's in Laramie. He had God. I feel better knowing he wasn't alone.

—Dennis Shepard, father of Matthew Shepard, during the trial of Aaron McKinney



GOD BLESS OUR FAMILY

Gay Community and Family Values

The following are profiles of twenty-seven families. Some are same-gender couples who have been in committed, faithful, loving relationship for many years. Others are families with gay members.

Though gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people are a minority group, we are in every city, town, and neighborhood. We are thy neighbor. And you are our neighbor.

In the present struggle for civil rights, anti-gay leaders often try to paint GLBT people as a threat to family values. This is a falsehood that must be confronted. The truth is that despite harsh discrimination and prejudice, gays and their families continue to endure and rely on love.



Ellis Family

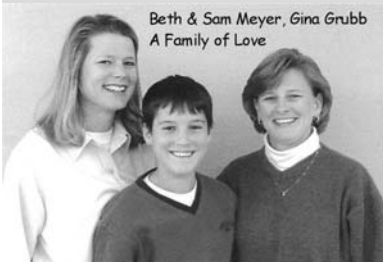
This picture is of Jeff and Patti Ellis with their sons Adam and Austin. Their oldest son, Adam, is gay. They live in a small southern town in Georgia. They have lived there for twenty-four years—sixteen of those years in the same house. Jeff and Patti's coming to terms with Adam's sexual orientation can be read on their website www.familyacceptance.com



Parelli and Ortiz Family

Steve Parelli and José Ortiz are a same-gender couple who found each other while being heavily involved in ex-gay ministries. They have been together since October, 1997.

Steve grew up in the General Association of Regular Baptist Churches and holds a Master of Divinity. José has a bachelor degree in Bible and missions and a graduate degree in psychology. Steve and José live in New York and love to do many things together, including traveling, roller-blading, and speaking French.



Meyer and Grubb Family

Beth Meyer and Gina Grubb are a same-gender couple of nearly seven years living in Oak Ridge, Tennessee. Together they are raising Sam.

They live their lives openly, honestly and with integrity and are active in their community and church. Beth is a first grade teacher and is loved and respected by her students, their parents and her colleagues. Gina is a retired police officer who now runs her own successful business as a legal service broker. And Sam is a thriving teenager with a bright future. They are truly a family of love!

Lutes and Stein Family

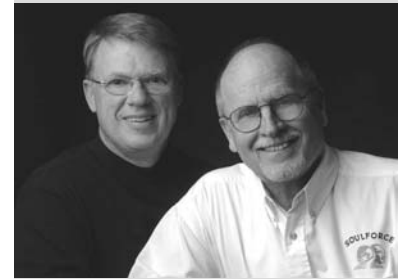
This picture is of Gary Stein, Jeff Lutes, and Niko Lutes-Stein. Jeff and Gary have been together for seven years and live in Austin, Texas. Jeff is the son of a Southern Baptist deacon. Together they are raising their seven-year-old adopted son, Niko.



White and Nixon Family

Gary Nixon and Mel White, life-partners for more than twenty years, are co-founders of Soulforce, Inc. Mel is the author of *Stranger at the Gate: To be Gay and Christian in America*

They currently make their home in Lynchburg, Virginia.



Reitan Family

This is a photo of Randi and Phil Reitan with their sons Ben, Jake, and Josh, and their daughter Britta. Jake is gay and recently graduated from Northwestern University in Chicago. He serves as the Youth and Young Adult Coordinator for Soulforce.

Randi and Phil live in Minneapolis. The family grew up in the Lutheran church where Phil's father and brother serve as ministers.



LoCicero and Hale Family

Dixie LoCicero and Deb Hale had their commitment ceremony on September 14, 2001. They live in Palatine, Illinois.



McCormick and Molnar Family

Matt McCormick and Guy William Molnar were married on November 26, 1996 in their hometown of Traverse City, Missouri. They have been together since 1991.





Elkins and Hannold Family

Cris Elkins and Gene Hannold are two gay men who have been married for thirty years. They live in Fredericksburg, Virginia.



Berry and Sapp Family

Robbi Sapp and Dotti Berry met and fell in love in 2001. They both enjoy riding motorcycles and playing golf. Robbi likes photography. Dotti enjoys presenting workshops. They live in Blaine, Washington with their dog, Rylee.

Robbi and Dotti were recently married in Portland, Oregon.

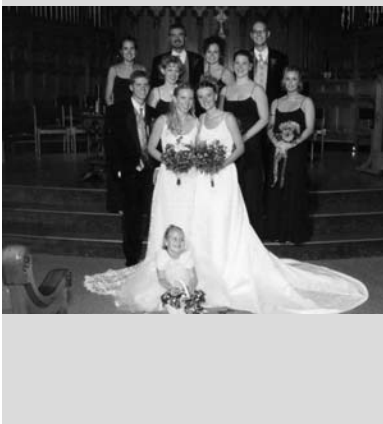


Dietrich and Webster Family

Jim Dietrich and Steven Webster first met in an Episcopal Church at a gathering of GLBT Christians in 1980.

Before this meeting, Jim, a single father raising two young daughters, had begun to come to terms with his same-gender sexual orientation after his wife of fifteen years asked for a divorce. Together, Jim and Steve raised the girls through middle and high school. Both daughters, now in their thirties, are married and Jim and Steve are proud of their daughters and sons-in-law.

Together now for nearly a quarter century, Jim works as a commercial artist, and Steve is employed as a church accountant. Both are committed Soulforce volunteers working towards the day when Christian churches truly teach that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons are children of God.



Hess-Wilson Family

Janet and Carrie Hess-Wilson had their wedding ceremony on September 14, 2002. This marriage was performed at Mt. Auburn Presbyterian Church in Cincinnati, Ohio by Rev. Stephen Van Kuiken.

Janet and Carrie just celebrated their one year wedding anniversary and four years of being together. Their wedding day was a huge celebration of their love for each other and their love shared with family and friends.

Carrie and Janet plan to enlarge their family with children.

Osborne Family

Judy Osborne and (left to right) daughters Hazel and Jill and wife Sally, were speaking to the crowd at Judy's birthday party last August when the photo was taken.

Judy is a transgender person. Judy and Sally were married twenty-five years ago while Judy still was struggling to live in her assigned male role. The retired owner and operator of a popular Seattle restaurant, Judy spends most of her time now working on behalf of basic human rights.

Hazel creates beautiful metal sculptures and furniture.

Jill, a restaurant bar manager, often proudly introduces her father to friends as "my dad Judy."

Sally, retired from her years as a flight attendant, designs and makes jewelry in addition to helping to manage her family's farm.

Judy writes that she is "...living at last an open, loving, joyous, moral, and creative life as a woman of faith after ending my false existence as a man."

"My struggle to reach this miraculous place was long and difficult, much of the period mired in senseless shame and concealment. The Church taught me to hide and feel shamed, taught me to endure a life made less valuable, less creative, less dignified, less giving, less holy even, by convincing me that my God-given differences are wrong."

"The Church is wrong instead, tragically wrong in its refusal to question and begin to understand the inherent need of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people to walk honest paths in faith, service, and quiet pride."

Barnett and Charlton Family

Jeanne Barnett and Ellie Charlton are a same-gender couple who were together for twenty years.

This picture is of their Holy Union ceremony on January 16, 1999 in Sacramento, California.

Jeanne (left) passed away in 2003.

Golbourne and Murphy Family

Richard Murphy & Dennis Golbourne make their home in Miami, Florida. They have been together for seven years.



A transgender person is someone whose internal feelings of gender identity strongly differ from his or her biological gender at birth.





Weldin and Bain Family

Susanne and I have been together for fourteen years. We met in Oklahoma City while we both were in the closet. We spent the first six years of our relationship juggling fear and anxiety until we discovered Mel White's book, *Stranger at the Gate*, which was the catalyst for us coming out. I went to Lynchburg with Soulforce in 1999 and we both have been active in Soulforce ever since.

We live in rural Oklahoma on a lake. I am a retired Marriage and Family Therapist and Susanne is a retired business owner. We love to be on the lake, golf, go to church together, and entertain guests in our home.

Susanne has two grown sons who live in Dallas. We have a dog named Lucky.

We are both out now to our friends and family. Susanne's 90-year-old mother, brother, and two sons are accepting of us. My family is not. Susanne grew up Presbyterian and I grew up Southern Baptist.

Our "homosexual lifestyle" includes taking care of our home, our dog, caring for Susanne's mother, paying our bills, sharing what we have with others, going to church, seeing an occasional movie, being responsible citizens, reaching for goals to better ourselves, and taking an occasional trip.

Our "homosexual agenda" entails being the best persons we can be as we do the best we can loving each other and loving others.

On Valentine's Day 2003 Susanne gave me a red plastic heart with a fortune cookie in it. When I broke open the fortune cookie and read the fortune it said, "Will you marry me?" We were married in San Francisco March 1, 2004.

—Karen Weldin

Farmer-Wiley/Walker Family



Aloha! We live on the island of Maui and are active in our Church Community. Jean (bottom left) and I have been together in a committed relationship for twenty-seven years and spouses since our Vermont Civil Union in October, 2000.

In the Hawaiian church that we attend the children are all being raised as Ohana (Family) to one another. That shouldn't be that hard for all of us to do. We want our children to learn to love and accept all others. Our other two girls (hanai = adopted) couldn't make it home for the family photo.

Remember: Words have power for good or evil and that the end product of hate speech is the denigration of our children, both heterosexual and homosexual. They listen, silently learning either to hate themselves or someone else, to abuse or expect abuse. That is not the legacy we want for the souls that we have been given charge over.

—Sandy Farmer-Wiley

Biddick and Van Dissen Family

This is a photo of Alisa Van Dissen and Carolyn Biddick with their son, Carson James Biddick-Van Dissen.

The family writes:

"Our decision to become a family was made over 5 years ago. After countless fertility treatments over several years, the opportunity to adopt was basically given to us, God-given we believe, by Carson's paternal grandmother. She said to Alisa, 'If you're serious about wanting to become a mother, why don't you call my son. He and his girlfriend are expecting a baby in 4 weeks and they are placing the baby for adoption.'"

"Well, needless to say we called immediately and within 6 weeks we were flying home from Seattle, WA to our home in the San Francisco Bay Area with our brand new baby boy!"

"The adoption was legal and finalized 3 months later. We maintain an open adoption agreement with Carson's birthmother and other members of his birth family."

"Everyday, we thank God and Carson's birthmother for giving us the love of our lives. Being a family and a mother to Carson has made our life complete."

Nelson and Gira Family

This picture is of Valerie Nelson, Madison Nelson-Gira, and Diane Gira.

The family writes:

"When Madison was born June 16, 1998, our Methodist pastor refused to share our good news from the pulpit. When we called him and asked him to come to our home for a pastoral visit, he said he was too busy! Six weeks later our son was denied baptism by this United Methodist pastor."

"We left the church we had belonged to for seven years—where we had been active leaders and faithful servants. The very next Sunday we attended a small ELCA church that welcomed us and made us feel at home. Six weeks later we joined the Lutheran Church. Madison was baptized on September 26, 1998 by our dear friend Pastor Glenn Anderson, an ELCA pastor."

"Thanks be to God for the grace we have been given!"

Charlton and Yeager Family

This is a photo of Bill Charlton, Andrew Hewlett, and Howie Yeager. Bill and Howie have been together for thirty-six years as of February, 2004.





Hayes and Waite Family

Jack Waite (right) celebrated his 90th birthday on September 3, 2003.

Ted Hayes is a former ordained Southern Baptist minister, counselor, and university professor.

Jack was employed by IBM for 33 years. Both are veterans of the Army and Navy respectively.

Jack and Ted are retired and now live in a small village called Stone Ridge about 100 miles north of New York City.

"My life is a thing of greater beauty since Jack became a part of it," writes Ted.



Adriel Family

Erin and Jennifer Adriel are both 20-year veterans of the U. S. Navy. They met in 1985.

"You can't be out at all in the Navy, but we were a couple," Erin says. "We were stationed sometimes thousands of miles apart. It's not an easy existence for a couple. Husbands and wives can have spousal duty together, but two lesbians can't."

Jennifer is currently studying to be a justice minister with the Metropolitan Community Church.

Erin works as a part-time sign language interpreter.

Both are involved in organizations that work for peace and justice, including Soulforce and the Faith Action Network. They live in Detroit, Michigan.



Lister and Callahan Family

Jerry Lister and Bud Callahan met in April of 1971 by the leading of God through one of the first computer matching services for gay men. They each answered 300 questions and were given a list of possible matches. They met and knew this was who God wanted for each of them. They celebrated their 32nd anniversary in October, 2003.

Jerry formerly worked for the Philadelphia College of the Bible. But after 2.5 years (1969-1972) he was asked to leave because he was found out to be a gay man. Now they both enjoy their retirement and attend Central Baptist Church in Wayne, PA—a welcoming and affirming American Baptist Church.

Horowitz Family

"This is a photo of our family. It includes our son, Daniel, our daughter-in-law, Vikki, our two grandchildren, Alexandria (the older) and Talia Grace (the baby), our daughter Wendy, and her partner, Julie Bowers. Wendy and Julie will be married in a ceremony on September 14, 2003 at which I will officiate, in St. Paul, Minnesota."

—Rabbi David and Toby Horowitz



Daly and Schneider Family

After eight years as a couple, Linda Daly and Cathy Schneider took advantage of Canada's new same-gender marriage laws. They were legally wed in a beachside ceremony at Pointe Pelee National Park on September 13, 2003.



Perez Family

This is a photo of Mike Perez (right), his son Robert, and his son-in-law Tom.

Mike Perez is a gay Catholic from Seattle, Washington. His son Rob, who is also gay, has been with his partner Tom for twelve years.



Lovett Family

This picture is of Rev. Kyle Lovett and her sons, Alex and Ben. Rev. Lovett is the pastor of St. John's United Church of Christ in San Francisco, California, where she is open about her sexual orientation.





CONCLUSION

Where Do We Go From Here?

We started this journey by walking with Jesus and observing how he worked to further the message of God's love and grace. We went to Jerusalem and heard news of Peter's vision on the rooftop and witnessed the church-wide debate caused by God's welcoming of the Gentiles.

We then ventured into the present struggle concerning the welcoming of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people. We looked at ex-gay ministries and the dangers of asking a person to reject or change their sexual orientation. We heard from young Christians who are leaders in their denominations. Along the road, we stopped to read the markers where a young GLBT person had died—due to hatred from others or feelings of self-hatred.

We covered a lot of ground on this journey. In the end, however, we let our lives be a witness to what the Spirit is doing.

To the next generation of Southern Baptist leaders, we say this: It is our prayer that this will be the start of a bold new journey—one that leads you to work for positive changes in your local church and denomination.

How might you go about this? Here are some suggestions:

- Help to create a safe place in your Sunday school class where discussion of important issues can take place and different points of view can be shared openly.
- Attend a church of another denomination one Sunday. Claim your identity as a Baptist, but learn how your other sisters and brothers praise God and go about learning discipleship. Form ecumenical ties with young people in other churches.
- Read a parallel Bible and study various interpretations of scripture.
- Research the civil rights movement of the 50's and 60's and investigate how faith in God and God's justice was an important component in the movement. Study the life and ministry of the Baptist pastor, Martin Luther King, Jr. Also read how scripture was widely misused to support slavery and later segregation.
- Become friends with a young person who is open about being gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender or who has same-gender parents. Listen and share stories of growing up, what groups or activities you are involved in, and your dreams for the future.
- Talk with a Christian who has been discriminated against in the church because of his or her sexual orientation.
- Ask your leaders to stop their anti-gay teachings and rhetoric.
- Speak out when others tell "gay jokes."
- Help fight against homophobia. The fear of homosexuals creates a harsh environment for gay people. Likewise, the fear of being *perceived* as homosexual causes heterosexuals to sometimes avoid forming emotional friendships with members of the same sex.
- Talk with a gay or lesbian person on why marriage is important to him or her.
- Pray about God's call on your life concerning Christian activism. Join an organization working for social justice.

To gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender Southern Baptists, we have a special message. You are not alone. You are beautifully and wonderfully made in the image of the Divine—loved by God exactly as God created you.

You currently live in a society that oppresses you and a church that speaks falsely against you—but that is changing. We bring testimony of what the Spirit is doing.

The Spirit is always ahead of the church, beckoning her to come join in God's work of bringing justice, peace, and healing to wounded hearts. The same inclusive Spirit that was going against the established religious order of the day as recorded in the book of Acts is the same Spirit that fought against the socially accepted institution of slavery. It is the same Spirit that worked for the end of segregation and it is the same Spirit that proclaimed the call of women to ministry. It is the same Spirit that is working towards full inclusion of GLBT people today.

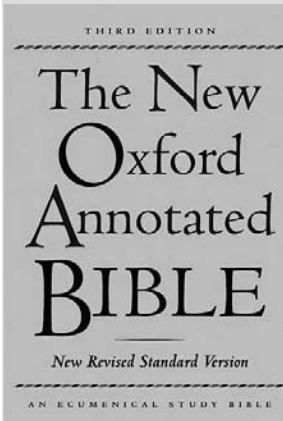
God Bless You!

The Soulforce Southern Baptist Team

RESOURCES

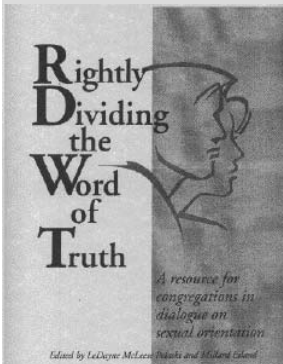
The New Oxford Annotated Bible (Third Edition) New Revised Standard Version

An ecumenical study Bible that incorporates the latest in biblical scholarship. Many of the "Teen" study Bibles today that are marketed towards young people contain anti-gay commentary that is a product of the present struggle for gay rights in America. The annotations in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* do not further the misinterpretation of select verses that have been used to condemn homosexual people. Rather, the scholars contribute in a way that seeks to assist the reader of the Bible in gaining a better understanding of the historical, sociological, and ideological background of the text.



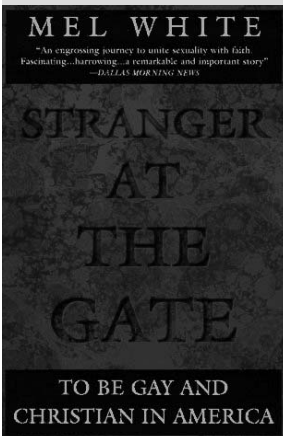
Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth: A resource for congregations in dialogue on sexual orientation

This book is distributed by the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America and the Alliance of Baptists. It is the product of much energy on the part of Baptists who desired to develop a resource to help lead a healthy and respectful dialogue on sexual orientation. *Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth* can be purchased from the website of the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America (www.bpfna.org) or by calling their office at 704-521-6051



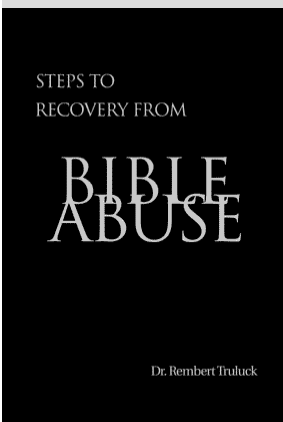
Stranger at the Gate: To be Gay and Christian in America

In this moving, best-selling autobiography, Mel White comes out of the closet to give hope to other gay and lesbian Christians, to confront the misleading anti-gay rhetoric of the radical right, and to launch his own fight for justice and understanding for God's gay and lesbian children. Mel and his partner Gary have received (and answered) more than 50,000 letters from readers who were both inspired and informed by this book.



Steps to Recovery from Bible Abuse

Dr. Truluck has a Doctor of Theology from the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. He was a Southern Baptist Pastor from 1953 to 1973; Professor of Religion at Baptist College of Charleston, South Carolina, from 1973 to 1981; and writer of Southern Baptist Sunday School Lessons from 1973 to 1979. The studies in this book deal with the Bible and sexual orientation, God's inclusive love and acceptance of all people, how Jesus confronted religious abuse and other problems that we face today, and how we can help ourselves and each other to recover, grow, learn, and heal. You can read excerpts from *Steps to Recovery from Bible Abuse*, as well as order a copy, at www.truluck.com



GLBTQ: The Survival Guide for Queer & Questioning Teens

All teens face many challenges. For gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (GLBTQ) teens, these challenges may include prejudice, discrimination, homophobic remarks, and violence in their communities, schools, and sometimes their own families. In this frank, sensitive book, Kelly Huegel offers practical advice, knowing encouragement, accessible resources, and first-person comments from GLBTQ teens. Topics include coming out, facing prejudice and pressure, getting support, staying safe and healthy, surviving and thriving in high school, and more.

Always My Child: A Parent's Guide to Understanding Your Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgendered or Questioning Son or Daughter

Parents whose children are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or who are going through a "questioning phase" are often in the dark about what their children face every day.

In *Always My Child*, Kevin Jennings guides parents through the world their children inhabit. Jennings encourages parents to learn about their children's culture, helps dispel the myths of sexual orientation and identifies warning signs for alcohol and drug abuse, depression, eating disorders and suicide. With *Always My Child*, parents will learn how to handle everyday incidents and crises with confidence, and will be able to create the kind of relationship with their children that allows them to grow into emotionally healthy adults.

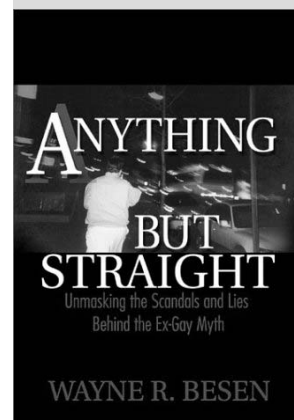
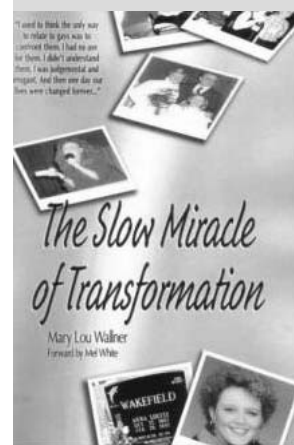
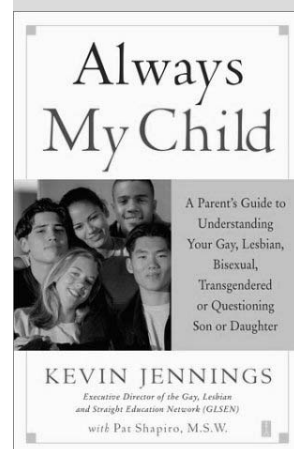
The Slow Miracle of Transformation

Mary Lou Wallner lost her lesbian Christian daughter to suicide in February of 1997. Being raised in a fundamentalist, legalistic church environment, Mary Lou was taught the untruth that homosexuality is a sin. Her journey from "tragedy to transformation" is nothing short of amazing. She and her husband, Bob, are strong allies for Gays, Lesbians, Bisexual and Transgender people. They have a sincere desire to see the church accept and welcome GLBT people just the way God made them, and they spearhead a weekly Bible study in their home for GLBT Christians.

The Slow Miracle of Transformation can be ordered from the website www.teach-ministries.org or by calling 501-843-7121.

Anything But Straight: Unmasking the Scandals and Lies Behind the Ex-Gay Myth

Nationally recognized activist Wayne Besen spent four years examining the phenomenon of "ex-gay" ministries and reparative therapies—interviewing leaders, attending conferences, and visiting ministries undercover as he accumulated hundreds of hours of research. The result is this groundbreaking exposé of the controversial movement that's revered by independent religious groups and reviled by gay and lesbian organizations.



WEBSITES

Religious Organizations

Soulforce
www.soulforce.org

Soulforce Youth and Young Adults
www.soulforce.org/youth/

Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists
www.wabaptists.org

Affirmation – United Methodists for
Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Concerns
www.umaffirm.org

Evangelicals Concerned
www.ecwr.org

More Light Presbyterians
www.mlp.org

The United Church of Christ
Coalition for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Concerns
www.ucccoalition.org

Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches
www.mcccchurch.org

Dignity/USA – Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Catholics
www.dignityusa.org

Lutheran Lesbian and Gay Ministries
www.llgm.org

Lutherans Concerned / North America
www.lcna.org

A Letter to Louise: A Biblical Affirmation of Homosexuality
www.godmademegay.com

Education Organizations

PFLAG (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays)
www.pflag.org

GLSEN (Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network)
www.glsen.org

Soulforce is an interfaith movement committed to ending spiritual violence perpetuated by religious policies and teachings against gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people. We teach and apply the nonviolent principles of M.K. Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr.

For Soulforce Alerts send an e-mail to journey@soulforce.org and write "subscribe" in the subject line.

Soulforce Inc. is recognized as a public service non-profit organization. Our work is totally dependent on our Soulforce friends who send us tax-deductible donations that we use for this one purpose: to teach and apply the Soulforce principles for GLBT liberation.

You can make a tax-deductible donation to Soulforce Inc. by sending a check to:

Soulforce Inc.
P.O. Box 3195
Lynchburg, VA 24503
877-705-6393

Or make a donation online at www.soulforce.org with your credit card over our secure server.

Local Contact:

