



Living Life in the Closet:

The Hidden Lives of Gay
and Lesbian Adventists

By Rene Drumm

All throughout my growing up years, I felt I was different. Not that I wasn't popular, I was one of the leaders in school. It's just that I wasn't "normal." My pastor-father worked as an administrator for the Church and I grew up in the mission field. Our family came back from overseas when I was in the eighth grade. I remember when I was fourteen or fifteen a good-looking boy liked me. It wasn't too long before he tried to kiss me. My first thought was, "Gross!" I knew I didn't like that at all. After that, I didn't date in academy because I knew something wasn't right.

In junior year in academy I realized that I had homosexual tendencies. I realized it over time, but I remember one incident when my roommate was crying and I was comforting her. I remember thinking that it felt good, but I didn't put any labels on it, didn't have any to put on it. In college as my realization grew, I became depressed. Finally, I forced myself to do something. I began to make myself date guys. All my energy went into liking guys as more than friends, but I wasn't successful at it. I made some friends that I could trust and told them of my struggle. I was tormented by trying to change my feelings. Some of my friends were helpful in finding Bible texts I could use to admonish myself and finding promises of overcoming.

I finally decided to become a student missionary. I thought that if I had a year off to do nothing but concentrate on ministering to others, that could overcome this. It was a great year, but things didn't change. But more and more I was finding myself attracted to women; the more I tried to fight it, the stronger it got. I was getting suicidal and I called mom and said that I needed to talk to Dad. Mom located Dad, who was traveling for the General Conference, and told him I was desperate to talk to him. My dad cancelled one week of his itinerary and on his own money flew to [my mission post]. That week after spending time with my dad, I got up the nerve and I told him I was a homosexual. (Sue)

Are there really gay and lesbian Seventh-day Adventists? Isn't the term "gay Adventist" really an oxymoron? If you are Adventist, you certainly couldn't be a homosexual. Homosexuals have no true interest in a spiritual walk with God, right? Not true, according to over fifty gay and lesbian persons I interviewed before, during, and after completing my doctoral dissertation on identity development among gay and lesbian Seventh-day Adventists.

"How did a 'nice girl' like you get interested in studying such an off-color topic?" I've been asked that question on more than one occasion. As a teacher in Andrews University's department of social work in 1995, I was disappointed by my students' willingness to dismiss this population of at-risk people. When it came to women's rights, ethnic equality, or ageism, students were willing to advocate and support people's struggle to survive and thrive. However, when it came to gay and lesbian populations—the group most discriminated against in the United States—a typical response was,

Growing Up Adventist

Most of the people I interviewed grew up in Adventist homes and were firmly entrenched in the Adventist religion. My first question to those I interviewed was, "How did you become an Adventist?" Here's how Marvin replied:

"I don't want anything to do with them."

When invited to speak at a Kinship Kampmeeting (a yearly gathering of gay, lesbian, transgendered, and bisexual Adventists), I saw the invitation as an opportunity to hear from this group directly. I wanted to gather stories from people who had Adventist backgrounds. I hoped that my students could come to understand the experience of individuals they despised, yet didn't even know. I was right; the engagement at the camp meeting did seem to help. Later that year, I used the stories in a qualitative data analysis research class that I was taking. The teacher scrawled at the bottom of my final paper, "This would make a great dissertation." The rest is history.

The following information is taken from in-depth interviews and autobiographies of more than fifty gay and lesbian, current and former Adventists. Their names have been changed to protect their privacy unless they specifically requested otherwise. I am not a theologian. I make no recommendations about what to do with this information in a theological sense. I offer this information simply to enlighten and educate others about people who are frequently invisible, ignored, and persecuted within our church.

My message is simple and threefold: (1) there are gay and lesbian Adventists, and they are much like "us"; (2) being gay or lesbian and Adventist is often painful; and (3) we can do something about the pain of the "different other."

To answer the question of how I became an Adventist, I'd have to say that I don't know—what else could I have been? I was born in an Adventist hospital (on the Sabbath, no less), to SDA parents who had graduated from SDA schools, sent there by their SDA parents. I went only to SDA churches and my parents socialized almost exclusively with SDAs. My aunts and uncles were SDAs. One set were missionary doctors, another uncle was an academy Bible teacher. My mother's father had been a missionary to Japan.

Most people I interviewed described having family worship, following a vegetarian diet, keeping the Sabbath, and attending Adventist schools. Almost all recounted that they came from close-knit families. "I come from a very loving and caring family. We are very close to this day. I call them all the time and assure them that I love them. They do the same" (Donald).

These findings challenge popular myths that gay and lesbian persons are products of dysfunctional homes with domineering mothers or absent fathers, or that they are, more frequently than the norm, victims of sexual abuse. The gay and lesbian persons I interviewed come from homes much like my own—loving, involved, and committed to the welfare of their children.

The Pain of Self-Discovery

The Adventist Church traditionally teaches the sinfulness of homosexual behavior. The Church isn't very loud about this stance because if it were it would actually have to say something about sex. Our church is very quiet on issues that involve sexuality of any kind. Nevertheless, the question comes to mind, "How can someone who believes that she/he is condemned to hell for being attracted to the same sex come to identify him or herself as gay or lesbian?" The answer is, "Not easily!" Understanding one's sexuality, when it is not heterosexuality, is often a long and painful process.

Many gay and lesbian Adventists go through several common experiences trying to understand their sexuality. These experiences included being in



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denial, turning to religion to overcome, and progressing toward self-acceptance. All the people I interviewed went through a period of denial, sometimes spanning years, and in some cases they had heterosexual marriages. The people I interviewed for my study often connected their denial with religion or God. One woman reported, “My first reaction [to realizing my homosexuality] was screaming inside, ‘No! God, No! I’d rather die.’”

After or during a period of denial, these lesbian and gay Adventists frequently used the tools they had learned in their family homes to “ward off” or resist their homosexuality. Since they believed homosexuality was a sin, they frequently relied on religious means to help overcome what they saw as temptation. These individuals prayed and got very involved in church activities hoping to rid themselves of same-sex attraction.

“I have prayed my entire life (since age thirteen) that the Lord would change me. I didn’t want to have these feelings. I didn’t want to go to hell. I didn’t want to be this way” (Mitch). “I did a lot of praying. I got involved with church activities like leading out in song service, youth activities; [I] helped out with Pathfinders and I led out in Sabbath School” (Nathan). Most of the people I interviewed also claimed Bible promises that focused on “overcoming.” Some participated in such religious rituals as being anointed or prayed over by pastors or elders of the church with laying on of hands.

Along with using religious mechanisms to fight homosexuality, the gay and lesbian Adventists that I interviewed tried many other means not be homosexual. Some got married, hoping to change. Some attempted suicide because they could not change. Others went through psychotherapy or a “change ministry” program. Probably the most painful experiences reported to me were from those who attended Quest Learning Center in Reading, Pennsylvania, a church-sponsored residential treatment center to help homosexual persons become heterosexual. The center was headed by an “ex-gay” former Adventist minister who sexually abused the gay men who came for treatment.¹

As people came to realize or believe that their sexual orientation would not change, they took steps to move toward self-acceptance. One woman shared her experience.

I’ve prayed, memorized Scripture, fasted, changed my diet, been anointed, prayed for the Lord to “cast out the demon of homosexuality” from me, been in counseling—all in the attempt to eradicate this sexual orientation from my heart and mind. I’ve suppressed my desires and longings to express love, all with the one goal of living a life of holiness, in obedience to God’s commands and his ideal for my life. After nearly twenty-five years of praying for God to change me, to take these desires away, to give me the strength to “live a life of purity,” my sexual orientation was as strong as ever. (Joanne)

The Pain of Coming Out

What happens to people after struggling to understand their sexuality? Some “came out of the closet,” admitting their homosexuality to spouses and family, friends, or other gay or lesbian persons. The coming out process was often one of the most painful life events for these gay and lesbian Adventists. When gay and lesbian Adventists came out to family members, they were frequently rejected. This rejection was primarily on religious grounds. Almost all the people I interviewed for this study experienced some rejection by family members. This rejection varied from mild distancing behavior to total disowning.

Sue, from the opening example above, felt acceptance from her father. After coming out to her dad, he said, “Sue, there’s one thing I have to tell you. There is no amount of fasting or prayer that will help you overcome this. For some reason, it’s not something that God chooses to change. I was in shock,” Sue reported, “and yet much relieved. Dad went home and told my mom. Mom had a more difficult time accepting it. I did feel a distance from her when I got home. Mom and I talked a couple of times and it was strained.”

Sue’s experience contrasts with that of another homosexual, a young man. He recalled the night he came out to his parents. “My dad took it hard. At one point he came into my bedroom and said, ‘if your mother and I would have known about this, she would



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have had an abortion” (Nathan).

Sometimes, along with emotional rejection, these gay and lesbian Adventists were forced to leave home. Joel recalls, “One night I was out late and returned home. My parents started questioning me. They said, ‘We both think you are homosexual, tell us the truth, are you?’ ‘Yes,’ I told them. My mother immediately burst into tears, ‘What did we do wrong? What made you do this?’ My dad, on the other hand, stormed out of the room and slammed the door. He came back about thirty minutes later and said, ‘I won’t tolerate you in my house any more. Pack up and leave.’ And so I did. I left home at age eighteen.”

Over time, most families came to accept the sexual identity of the interviewee in varying degrees. Some families could accept lesbian or gay family members only as long as their sexual identity was downplayed or suppressed. For example, no one in such families spoke of same-sex partners. In other cases, families accepted the participant and his or her partner as an “in-law.”

One participant thinking about the process of his family’s acceptance shared the following observation:

I think that my family’s acceptance of me is related to *when* I chose to tell them about my sexuality. I was able to come out to them after I was comfortable with myself and could be positive and tell them that I felt that God was using me. When my partner came along, not many years later, they liked him and liked what they saw of us together. There was a very touching moment one morning when we were visiting them when dad and “mum” drew us together and dad made a little speech saying how much they liked him and welcomed him into the family. (Richard)

Now that I’m Out, Can I Stay In [the Church]?

Not everyone I interviewed had decided to come out. Some gay and lesbian Adventists remain closeted. Two primary reasons for doing so involve fears of rejection from family or church. One individual I interviewed was deeply closeted, and to this day I don’t know his real name. I only know him as “Mitch,” the pseudonym I gave him during our first meeting. For people like Mitch, staying in the closet is the choice that seems

best. Staying closeted allows them to stay in the Church and close to family, and to carry on their lives with as little confrontation as possible.

That choice is not without its own pain, however. The fear that closeted individuals feel about the possibility of being discovered can be painful. I recently talked to an Adventist educator voted best teacher for many years in her educational institution and often invited to speak at commencement services because of the positive relationships she has with students. She confided, “Thinking about my employment and my church standing is sometimes sad for me. In spite of all of the accolades I’ve received in my years of service, the positive influence I’ve had on students, I know it would end if it was known that my ‘roommate,’ is also my soulmate” (Evona).

Another way of remaining in the Church is by choosing to remain celibate. Some people in my study are known to friends and family as lesbian or gay individuals, yet choose to live a celibate life. This choice is fraught with difficulties and pain. Sometimes “helpful” people in their churches and families do not accept the fact that sexual orientation seldom changes, and from time to time these people will “set them up” on a date, hoping that “the right one” will win them over. These situations are always uncomfortable and hurtful for the other unsuspecting person.

Another more dangerous issue with people who remain celibate is that few are able to live their entire lives without keeping the hope alive of someday having a life partner and experiencing sexual fulfillment. The dynamic sets in motion sexual tension that builds, ending with promiscuous episodes. These times of promiscuity leave individuals at greater risk for contracting HIV or some other sexually transmitted disease. One person reflected:

Right now, I know that total celibacy is possible but it may not be healthy for MY body. I think I needed the experience of celibacy to overcome what was probably an addiction to sex. Promiscuous sex, sexual activity without love and commitment can often exacerbate feelings of loneliness and lead to a “revolving door,” a vicious cycle of unproductive, unhappy behavior. What is the solution for me personally? I do not know yet. The jury is still out. But I am quite happy leaving it in God’s hands.

I do get lonely at times, but I pray and ask him to provide, and it gets better at once. He will provide. He always has. (Ernest)

The majority of people I interviewed try to integrate their religious heritage with their sexual orientation by coming to believe that they can remain Adventists and have a same-sex life partner. The gay and lesbian Adventists to whom I talked emphasized monogamy and commitment in the heterosexual tradition as part of this choice. The following interview excerpts illustrate the integration of homosexual orientation and Adventist affiliation.

Despite the church's official opinion, there are two things I've always been—always will be—a Seventh-day Adventist and a lesbian. God doesn't expect me to try to be something I'm not, or say I can't be something I believe in. (Nan)

I am still a quite conservative Adventist. The Adventist lifestyle is something that works for me and something that I worked out with God on my knees after many hours of prayer and studying and tearful contemplation. The same goes for my homosexuality. I have peace in my heart that God accepts me as I am. Being the omnipotent God that he is, he knew I was going to be gay long before I was a gleam in my Dad's eye. Now I see my homosexuality as a blessing. It took a long time to get there—thirty-four years. (Hans)

Yes, there are gay and lesbian Adventists. There is probably at least one gay or lesbian person who belongs to your church. He or she may be closeted, living a celibate life, or living singly and looking for a life partner. These individuals know the pain of believing that who they are is unredeemable. They have struggled to come to some self-understanding and realize what it means to be gay/lesbian AND Adventist.

As stated at the beginning of this article, I make no theological inferences about this information. However, I do know that, for me, the gospel commission is to "love one another." It is my mission to love. What does it mean to love our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters? Here are some ideas.

- Learn about sexual orientation. Most experts agree with participants in my study that sexual orientation is not a conscious choice. To my knowledge, there is no empirical evidence

(peer-reviewed studies) that change in *orientation* is likely.

- Make opportunities to get acquainted with gay or lesbian people in your congregation or community. It is difficult to "love" someone you do not understand or know. If no gay or lesbian people come to mind, go to the Kinship Web site <www.sdakinship.org> and get acquainted with someone there.
- Create caring environments in our home, work place, community, school, and church. Do whatever is in your power to ensure that the system in which you participate shows tolerance and respect to everyone. Speak up when you hear derogatory comments about gay or lesbian people.

In the end, I believe I will not be judged by my ability to be kind and good to people like me—people I automatically admire and understand. I believe I will be judged by how I treated the "different other," the person I didn't understand or agree with.

Lord, teach us to love.

Notes and References

1. The center eventually closed because of widespread abuse. Its history is documented in a paper by Ronald Lawson, "The Caring Church? The Seventh-day Adventist Church and its Homosexual Members," presented at the meeting of the Andrews Society for Religious Studies, San Francisco, November 1991.

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