

Discussed: Kenya, Uganda, right choices, sense of humor, loneliness, biblical integrity, praying, fasting, no-win situation, wrong prayer

# A Pastor's Story

*By Leif Lind*

I worked as a pastor and a missionary for the Seventh-day Adventist Church for twenty years, on three continents. I am the father of two grown-up children who, like me, have lived and worked in several different cultures and countries.

I am gay.

It took me years before I could say the word, even to myself. As a pastor and a married man, I struggled for years in a private hell from which there seemed no escape. As a minister, I felt I had no one to turn to, and, as far as I knew at the time, I was all alone in a frightening and traumatic dilemma.

## Third Culture Kid...and Gay

But I'm getting ahead of myself. My growing-up years were basically very happy ones. I came from a loving, two-parent family, and my parents were proud of me. I grew up essentially as a single child, as my two sisters were out of the home by the time I arrived. My parents being Norwegian missionaries in Kenya and Uganda (where I was born), I had wonderful opportunities for experiences that only travel can bring.

Growing up and going to school in eight dif-

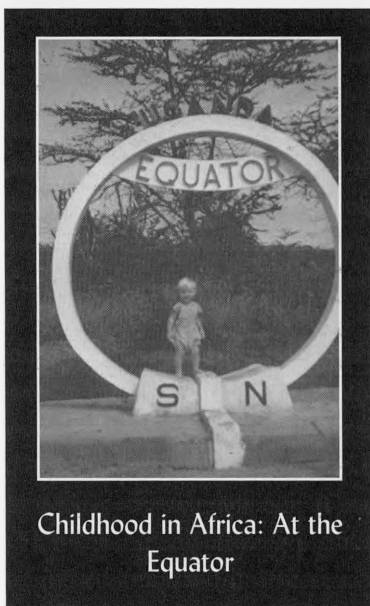
ferent countries, although disconcerting at times, was largely a beneficial experience. My father served in numerous church leadership positions—from mission director to division president—and was a legend in his day.

I was considered a “good” Seventh-day Adventist kid growing up, and my classmates generally liked me. I was straight looking enough that I did not attract the negative attention that sometimes torments gay youths as they grow up. My childhood asthma also provided a convenient excuse for me not to participate in some of the more active school sports, which I did not particularly enjoy and at which I did not excel.

During my adolescence, no one talked much about gays—the word was not even commonly used then. I grew up in remote mission fields in a conservative family in which the topic of sex itself was never discussed. In retrospect, I now realize I can hardly blame myself for being so late in discovering (or admitting) my sexual identity.

I also understand how the mind can play





Childhood in Africa: At the Equator

strange tricks in an attempt to deny the obvious—especially when acceptance is too painful or incongruous with one’s belief system. I knew I couldn’t be like those strange homosexuals, with their outlandish behavior and costumes I occasionally read about in the media. That simply wasn’t me. (It still isn’t!)

So how old was I when I first under-

stood who I was? I don’t really know for sure. Looking back today, I realize from early childhood impressions that I considered men attractive long before I had the vaguest notion of sex. But generally for me, it was a gradual, sickening awakening to the fact that I simply wasn’t the same as others.

In college, I know some of my friends were concerned about me for not having “enough” girlfriends, or at least not showing enough interest in the one or two that I did have. Again, I assumed I was “doing the right thing” by asking out a girl or two or going steady with them; I was probably unable to distinguish between simple friendship and genuine inner bonding.

What I did understand at some level, though perhaps I did not know why, was that I had a tremendous need for male bonding. Whether intentional or not, it turned out that all of my close male friends were straight. Perhaps this was simply an unconscious attempt to play it safe with feelings I still couldn’t understand.

## To Everything There Is a Season

Before I knew it, my high-school and college years had passed. Hindsight often distorts or changes one’s outlook, and it can be hard to remember exactly what one was thinking at the time. I don’t believe I knew or fully understood who I was when I made the decision to marry.

I worked at that time as a pastor in Norway while corresponding with my fiancée in Canada. What did I really expect? Perhaps I just hoped everything would turn out all right after getting married. In any case,

I was once again making the “right choices” in life.

This quest for doing right (even perfection) is, of course, commonly held within Adventism. I believe it is also common among gays and lesbians, who may try to overcompensate for their perceived inadequacies by showing their church and families that they can be successful, or “make good” in life.

Concerning marriage, I asked myself, Didn’t almost every man get married? Despite my sense of humor, I have always taken life seriously. I had never engaged in premarital sex—straight or gay. I had high ideals for marriage (I still do), and wanted to make a happy home for my wife and children. The option of not marrying simply did not occur to me.

Even Paul himself said it was better to “marry than to burn” (1 Cor. 7:9), although some of his ideas on marriage are hardly considered the norm. Scripture also says it is “not good that man should be alone” (Gen. 2:18), a text I consider as relevant today as when it was written.

So my fiancée and I married, and I continued to deny the inevitable. My conservative church upbringing did not prepare me to accept the overwhelming sense of devastation and loneliness I faced when I finally admitted a mental attraction to men that no amount of my praying or fasting would change. Yes, I believed God could do anything, but for some reason, it seemed, he was not answering my pleas.

## Return to the Birth Country

The years passed—by and large, happily. We experienced both joys and challenges raising a family in the mission field, where we had been transferred. Some nights I would wake up in a sweat, having dreamt (as a conscientious Adventist!) that I was in a courtroom scene at “the time of the end.”

In my dream, somebody asked me if I was gay, and I argued with myself about whether or not to tell a lie. (Yes, I am a poor actor, despite having desperately put on the biggest show for years!) If I admitted that I was gay, I would discredit my faith and the church I loved; if I told a lie, I would be eternally damned. It was a no-win situation.

Sometimes I would dream of being eternally lost for having same-sex desires that I couldn’t even explain. Then I would beg God again to forgive me for being what I was. Years passed before I discovered that I was praying the wrong prayer.

Quite apart from the sheer terror of facing my orientation head-on was the overriding concern I had for biblical integrity. For me, this was paramount. How could I possibly understand the handful of scriptural references to homosexuality without seeing in them an outright condemnation of my very being?

Well-meaning relatives later warned me about God's judgment and the danger that I might rationalize away Scripture. How could I disagree? Rationalizing can be a danger for anyone, even the accuser. I was probably more aware of that peril than they realized. But I also knew that growth in understanding can be painful for anyone—straight or gay—and that many are unwilling to look honestly at all aspects of the question.

As Adventists, we all know the so-called problem texts relating to the Sabbath and the state of the dead—yes, on almost any subject—texts that on first reading seem to say one thing, but that we know after careful study say something entirely different.

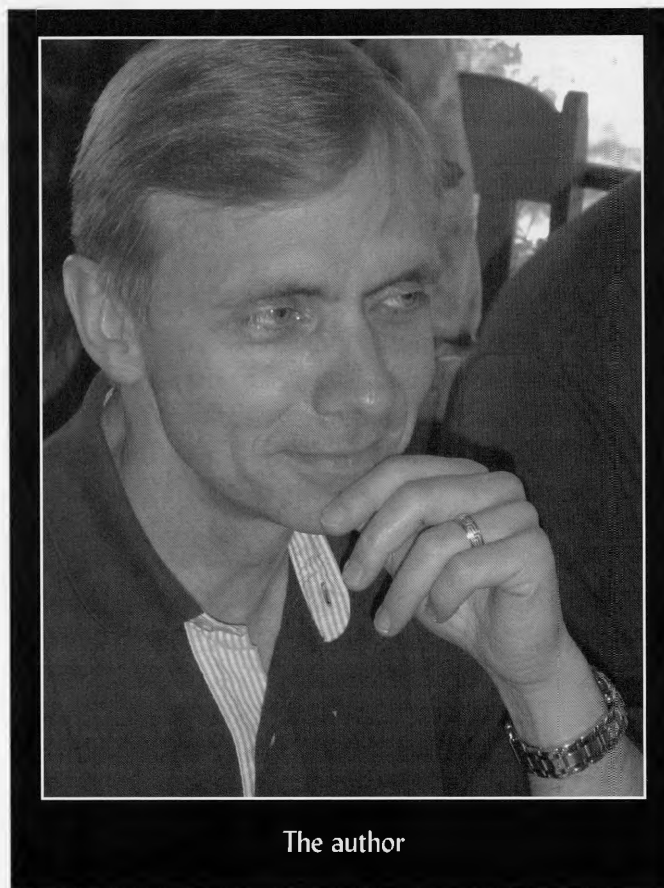
Part of the reason for this difficulty in understanding is that the Bible's authors wrote in a culture, time, and language foreign to today's world. We strive to understand the principles involved and learn what the writer has tried to tell us. With prayer and careful study we as church members are encouraged to tackle any biblical subject. Why should we treat the topic of homosexuality any differently?

And so I avidly, in secret, studied Scripture and read books on the subject, sometimes disagreeing with both

the "traditional" (conservative) and "progressive" (liberal) viewpoints. I had to know in my own mind what I believed and why. Years later, I prepared a thirty-five-page biblical study for myself, summarizing my own understanding on the subject.



Growing up in East Africa



The author

## Gay...and Adventist?

In the early 1980s, the concept of the existence of other gay Adventists first dawned on me after I read a special issue on the topic in *Spectrum*. I read and reread the experiences of other gay church members, hardly daring to believe their stories. It still seemed too remote for me; North America was a world away.

The same issue (as well as an earlier one of *Ministry Magazine*) presented the sad saga of Colin Cook. Former-pastor-turned-counselor Cook, himself a "former" homosexual, claimed the ability to provide counseling to church members struggling to become straight. Although the Church promoted his program as "the answer to homosexuality," I remember being extremely skeptical of his claims at the time and thinking, Either this man was never really gay or he is simply not being honest. Time revealed the danger of his claims after repeated charges and evidence of his sexual abuse of male clients.

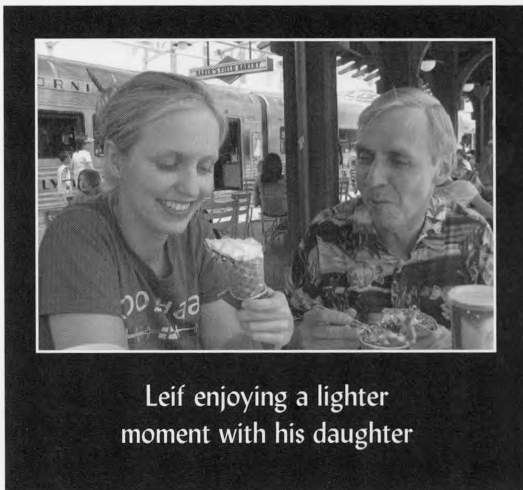


## Going to America

In 1990, after eight years in the mission field, we returned to North America. My wife's health was not good after repeated bouts with malaria, and we felt it was time for the children to attend church school after having been home schooled for years. We gladly accepted a call to pastor two churches, and for several years we put down new roots, with our children attending local church school and my wife taking nursing studies.

The pressure inside me mounted, however. I began to realize that continually living in fear was draining an enormous amount of energy while I was trying to deny an essential part of my core being.

## Out of the Closet



Leif enjoying a lighter moment with his daughter

I will never forget the day I finally decided to come out to my wife of almost twenty years.

True to

form, I had planned months ahead. I had compiled a list of books, tapes, Web sites, and personal phone numbers to help her cope with what I knew would be a traumatic event for her. I would wait until a week after she had graduated from nursing school so that the news would not affect her studies. I planned to tell our two teenagers a few days later.

This was without doubt the hardest thing I have ever done. I was literally sick to my stomach for months beforehand. I kept arguing with myself that I really had no reason to tell her anything. I even got melodramatic, telling myself it would be better for me to die alone with the secret I held. I wasn't even "living the gay lifestyle." But I also knew it was time to be honest; I was living a lie. Although our married life appeared normal, I was experiencing mental torment

in an effort to conceal inner longings that my wife could never meet.

I also knew that, at some level, my wife knew all was not well, and that she was hurting. "I sense there's a barrier between us," she said on a couple occasions. I just scoffed at her words, terrified that she might guess the truth. I knew what she meant, but I sensed she didn't really understand.

On Friday, February 2, 1996, with our teenagers away on a church campout, I finally told her about the real me. Knowing my tendency to joke, she didn't believe me at first. When it finally hit home, we both sobbed on each others' shoulders for what seemed an eternity. We talked until the early hours of the morning, and then again for most of the next day.

For her, it was the beginning of a nightmare; for me, the weight of the world had been lifted off my shoulders. To her credit, never once (then or since) has she blamed me for being gay, nor has she tried to convince me to change my orientation. Her disappointment in my years of deception was to be expected. Still, we were, at least for several weeks afterward, probably closer than we had ever been before.

In my own planned way, I knew full well what the consequences could be. I knew that our marriage, like the overwhelming majority of "mixed marriages," would probably break up. (This is something we both eventually agreed on, as we worked through anger issues, a normal part of any grieving process.) I knew it would be difficult for our children to accept, although they, too, have been amazingly understanding about the gay issue—far more than I had expected. By their admission, the breakup of the marriage was hardest on them.

## After Coming Out: Facing the Conference and the Future

News of our story did not break for several months after my coming out. All that had changed in my life was that my family now knew who I was. During this whole time, I fully understood that I would probably lose not only my pastoral job, but also my career. I knew the difficulties unemployed pastors face, particularly because they have usually not been trained for other occupations.

Confronting this at midlife would not make things easy. How would I continue to take care of my family?

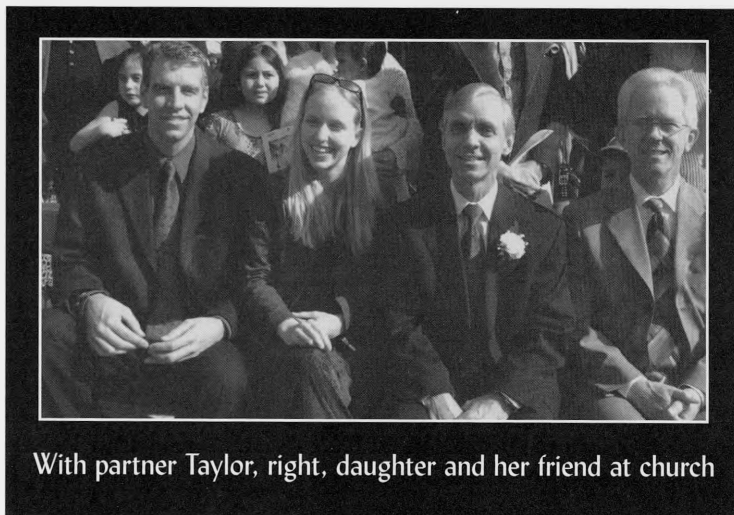
What about medical coverage for myself and other family members? What about losing retirement benefits? Would unemployment insurance—assuming I got it—cover me long enough to finish retraining? It was, for me, a frightening scenario.

I had hoped that our family would shortly be able to move and make a graceful transition to nondenominational employment elsewhere, but this did not happen. Understandably enough, my wife needed to talk to others about our crisis, and although she tried to be careful about the people to whom she spoke, one shocked church member felt it their duty to report me immediately to the conference.

When the conference finally found out, I was given what I can only describe as an ultimatum: immediate resignation without the usual severance pay, despite twenty years of church service with a clean record. The ministerial director of the conference, a pastor who had repeatedly insisted that we think of him as our “buddy” rather than merely our boss, never once sought to talk with my wife or me once he knew I was gay. It was as if I had ceased to exist.

Now, most people would describe me as fairly easy-going and agreeable. Those who know me well understand that I can be also quite determined, and I considered the ultimatum of “immediate resignation without severance” unfair. I did not feel like being a doormat.

Not only did the conference’s ultimatum go contrary to local government law, it also violated denominational policy. In a phone conversation, the conference president at that time appeared sympathetic, saying that he understood how I could see my treatment as unfair. He also agreed that had the issue been anything other than homosexuality, the decision would probably have been different.



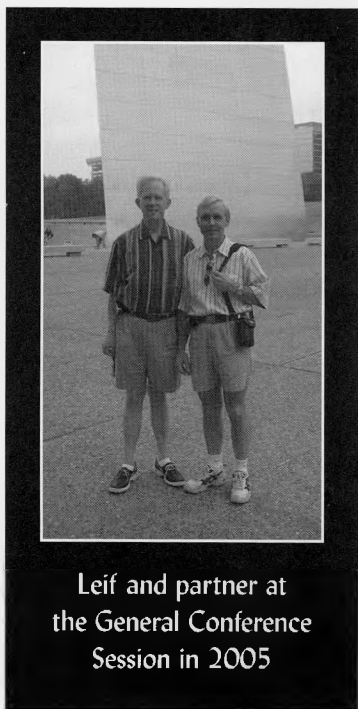
With partner Taylor, right, daughter and her friend at church

The conference leaders summoned me to appear before them. I showed up, but I did not inform them that I would attend with someone they knew very well: an attorney previously terminated from denominational service for being gay. Although this approach was foreign to me, I felt trapped and was afraid.

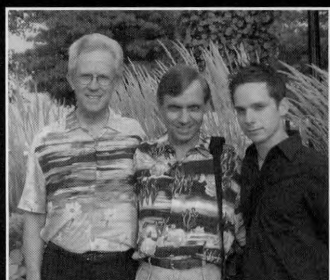
I will never forget the expressions on some of the faces the moment we appeared together in the conference committee room. It was a Kodak moment, had I only brought in a camera! On being questioned, I assured them that the attorney was there only as “a friend.” Although he said almost nothing during the meeting, I had made my point, and we reached a considerably happier compromise than would have otherwise been possible. One could only wish that the perceived threat of legal action had not been necessary to achieve this result.

I remained unemployed for about two years, retraining while looking for work. During that period, I received unemployment insurance for as long as I was eligible because the government believed my version of the story: that the conference had fired me rather than that I had resigned, as my termination letter from the conference had guardedly stated (for obvious reasons). The conference president even went so far as to inform me verbally that the denomination might still employ me “if”—and he said it was a big “if”—I were to remain celibate and “if” I could find a local church willing to accept me as a pastor on those terms.

I will never know whether or not he was serious, but he undoubtedly knew that the Church needed to



Leif and partner at the General Conference Session in 2005



Leif with his son and partner  
in Annapolis

be cautious for legal reasons, and he was perhaps uneasy about the steps I might take. He need not have been concerned.

I was then on my own. The family had separated, my wife relocating thousands of miles away and the

children, aged fifteen and seventeen years, going off to church boarding schools. I felt, as I know they did, that the world had fallen apart. I moved a few miles away and started to attend a local Adventist church, where the pastor and his members accepted me warmly, and I was even permitted to teach the adult Sabbath School class regularly.

I found a two-bedroom apartment in town, where I could share the rent with another man. For this, the new conference president criticized me. In my response to a letter from him, I wrote in August 1997:

If someone who wishes to judge me for my rooming situation would be willing to help pay my rent for a one-bedroom apartment instead, I would gratefully accept such an offer. Since I don't realistically expect such assistance, I don't believe anyone else has much to say either. Would it be better if I chose to share a two-bedroom apartment with a female roommate? This is part of the Catch-22 situation we often find ourselves in: we are censured by others, regardless of the company we keep.

Furthermore, I expressed my desire to remain a church member:

I personally feel the call and the fulfillment from working within the Church's mission. Should I be restricted from doing what I feel God has given me talents to perform, particularly when I commit myself to Him on a daily basis? I do not personally believe such limitation would come from Him.

Throughout this process, I was relieved to find that many local church members supported both my wife and me during this difficult process of coming out. A

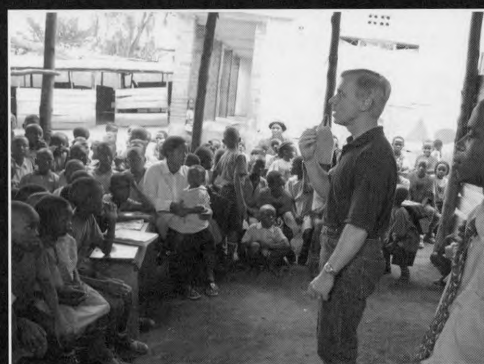
couple months later, however, I received a letter from the new pastor at my former church in which he questioned me regarding my request for church membership transfer.

As you know, you have many friends in the \_\_\_\_\_ Church who are deeply concerned with your well-being and your relationship with the church, and who sincerely hope that we will all one day walk the streets of gold together. In responding to your request we are constrained to uphold the teachings of the church in this regard and therefore find it a necessity to ask you to respond to the following questions before we can decide whether or not we can grant your transfer.

1. Are you presently practicing the homosexual lifestyle?
2. Are you determined by the grace of God to keep yourself from practicing the homosexual lifestyle?
3. Is it your understanding that the homosexual lifestyle is scripturally defensible?

Leif, we are uplifting you in our prayers to God as we await your response to this matter.

I was not "practicing the homosexual lifestyle" and did not at that time have a partner. I still felt the questions unnecessarily intrusive, and wondered how many straight men or women would have such direct questions addressed to them when they asked for membership transfer. Although my request for membership transfer was initially granted, I was later required to drop church membership.



Addressing Uganda orphans in 2005

## Relative Concerns

Probably the hardest part of the coming-out process—after coming out to my wife and children—was the effect it had on other relatives of mine. I had not anticipated the storm it produced, particularly from the Adventist side of the family. Although I prefer not to divulge some of the intense feelings that emerged (some of which unfortunately remain to this day), I was shocked to hear of my nieces threatening to inform my eighty-six-year-old mother about my sexual orientation unless I told her myself. I wasn't sure at the time about the necessity of doing so, but I was sure it wasn't their place to inform her and that, if it were done, I would much rather do so myself.

One of the first missives I received from my family came from a concerned niece who wrote in 1996:

Dear Leif,

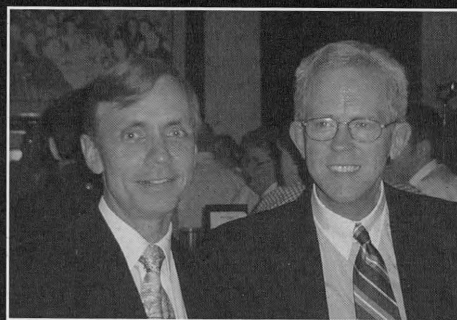
You are my uncle, you're part of my family and I want to love you as I always have. Nothing you do will change that or make me stop praying for you—or hope the best for you. But this love and concern compels me to say that you are making a terrible mistake that will and has affected the lives of so many people—family friends and your congregation....

Are you willing to abandon your responsibility as father and husband to pursue a sexual lifestyle that "makes you happy?" The biggest tool Satan uses is selfishness. When your priorities take precedence over everyone else's, then God cannot speak to you. It is [my husband's] and my opinion that you have bought a lie straight from Satan....

It appears that by your actions which are purely self serving, that you are not serving God—who is COMPLETELY SELFLESS. You can search the scriptures all you want to—Satan knows them better than we—and I am sure that he can persuade you to believe any lie he wants. But from our study of scripture, this lifestyle is completely against God's will (Rom. 1:26, 27, 1 Cor. 6:9, 10) and as such is outside of Christianity—because it destroys family and it will eventually destroy you.

We've prayed and thought about this and in our opinion here are some lies that Satan is telling you:

You were born this way and thus do not have a choice to stop. We all have lusts, anger and frustrations that we can make decisions about every day.



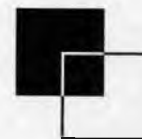
Leif with his partner at a banquet

Some people are compulsive—that is not an excuse to be an alcoholic. Some have too many hormones—that is not an excuse to cheat on your spouse. We all have choices to make and Satan wants you to believe that you don't have a choice in this matter. That is the biggest lie!... This lifestyle has been condemned by God Himself. As proof—look at the hurt going on around you and in you right now. This has already destroyed your family—that should be enough of a signal from God.

Leif, I have to tell you that this whole situation hurts me very much. I can't talk with any of my family without the hurt of your actions coming up in conversation. I have relived my divorce to some degree by this and my heart aches for [your wife] and the kids.

I responded to her letter as best I could, believing her intentions, at least, to be good. Besides commenting on some of the assumptions and stereotypes she believed, and noting what I considered her inappropriate comparison between homosexuality and alcoholic addiction, I noted the following:

You mention that because of the hurt and pain around our family right now that I should see this as a "signal from God." However, I believe all this is a reminder of the fact that we live in a world of sin. You will remember that Job's friends thought the same about Job's plight (and no, I am not comparing my difficulties to his! only making the point that problems are no definite proof of anything except that we live in a world where sin causes problems). His three friends were con-



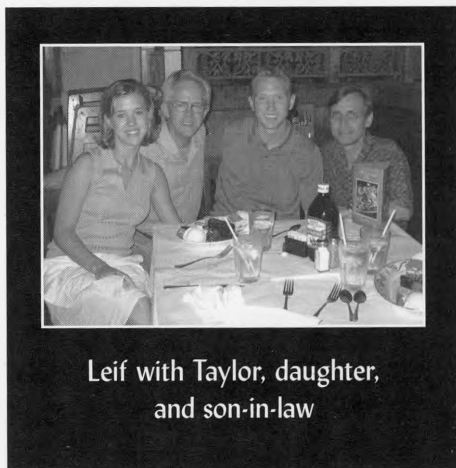
vinced it was a “signal from God.” So were the disciples in Jesus’ day (John 9:1–3) who held the common Jewish belief that suffering had to be the result of the individual’s sins.

I find it ironic that we as Adventist Christians still fall into some of the same pitfalls as the ancient Israelites!

That was the last I ever heard from this niece, but there was more to come from other family members.

## Move to the Washington, D.C. Area

By early 1998, my partner of a few weeks and I had decided to move to the Washington, D.C. area, where we both found work. We had met through a support



Leif with Taylor, daughter, and son-in-law

group for Adventist gays and lesbians, and we both felt a commitment to the Church in which we had been raised and worked. We started to attend one of the Adventist churches in

the area, and there we heard again, rather indirectly, from one of my relatives.

Although we did not know about this immediately, we later discovered that my brother-in-law, a retired pastor, had felt conscience bound to phone our senior church pastor and “let him know the truth” about my partner and me. Our pastor already knew, because we had been open with him and his staff from the beginning. There were no surprises here.

To his credit, the pastor ignored the phone call and never breathed a word about it to us until just before he left, alluding to it when we invited him and his wife to our house for a farewell Sabbath lunch. We first heard about the incident through other family members.

In 1999, my boss at that time, a church member, decided to inform one of the new pastors at our church about my partner and me. Literally within

the hour, the pastor complained to the pastoral staff about us. But again, those in the church office were not surprised, and they dropped the matter despite protests from the new pastor.

The year 2000 saw a flurry of correspondence from another niece (sister of the one who had previously written, and daughter of the brother-in-law who had phoned our church). She was also ostensibly concerned about my spiritual well-being.

You have proven to me that you are well versed in the Bible and I expected that much. On the other hand because God has blessed you with that knowledge He expects more from you too. If your lifestyle is so OK, why do you have to defend yourself so much from me and the entire world which, as you know, has a hard time getting over that orientation. I do believe that God made Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve. Why do you have a hard time with the verses that say, “Do not lie with a man as with a woman,” or “Do not lie with animals,” etc.? I suppose you think it is alright to go lie with an animal then?...

You can try to justify your actions as much as you wish. I am sorry you still think I am being judgmental, but until God brings some of my faults or wrong thinking to my conscience then I have to go with what I know. It is also hard for me to accept your lifestyle when I have had to try to explain to my children that their minister uncle is not a minister anymore because he has chosen to live a gay lifestyle. Your actions, like a ripple in a pool go out and affect a lot more people than just you... I think you have convinced yourself that you are alright in your thinking because you need to. And since you are a “devout” Christian that makes it right. Why do you keep Sabbath and the other commandments, but do not keep, “Do not fornicate?” What are you going to say when Christ comes back and your kids are not there, the kids that God entrusted to you? You were the head of the family and have NOT set an example.



Leif and his mother at home



I tried to reason, but, as I have since learned, use of logic in this subject is not always helpful! After a few more rounds of communication, I told her there simply wasn't any point in further discussion. It may have seemed harsh, but I could see no other reasonable way to deal with this matter. However, I was still to hear more.

Pastors at our church had come and gone. A few months later, our new senior pastor informed us that my niece had complained to her pastor about my partner and me, and her pastor had written an accusatory letter to our pastor. This time, our pastor talked directly with us, interrogating us about our relationship, posing personal questions that would never have been asked of any straight couple. It was almost the final straw, and we refused to discuss the matter further. The subject was reluctantly dropped.

## Worth the Price?

Do I regret the decision to come out and be honest? I regret the considerable pain I have caused both family and friends. I regret having lost my vocation as a pastor with a church that I still love and support. Although I now have a wonderful employer, my current job is not likely to provide a long-term career solution, and I am still unsure what path my professional life will take.

But not for one moment am I sorry that I was honest about myself. I am now at peace with myself and with God, and happier as a result. I have shared almost nine happy years with an Adventist partner who holds the same values and commitment in life. I just wish I had made the decision earlier in my marriage—had I been able. Doing so would have been easier on my former wife (with whom I still have an amicable relationship), though perhaps not on the children, who would have been younger.

To those who ask the question, "What makes a person gay?" I reply, "What makes a person straight?" The truth is, no one knows; no one really understands. "Weak father, domineering mother?" Certainly not in my case. And who would choose to be gay? Who would choose to pit themselves against all odds and make life as difficult as possible if it were really a matter of choice or sexual "preference?" Not too many people I know.

What does it mean to be gay? What does it mean to be straight? Certainly neither orientation is all about sex, as some may believe. As I mentioned earlier about my high school girlfriends, there is an emotional connection or inner bonding that a gay person simply cannot achieve by

living a straight life. In addition, an entirely different mindset is involved in which a general sensitivity (often including strong proclivities to music and the arts) makes itself evident.

Clichés perhaps, but still largely true. For a gay man, this often translates into seeing the whole world with gentler, more sensitive eyes than his straight peers. "Feminine virtues," as I have all too often been reminded? Or Christian ideals toward which all of us should strive (Gal. 5:22, 23; Matt. 5:3-12)? But that is another subject.

The current General Conference president—a fellow compatriot, my former professor, and a personal friend of our family—recently gave the following advice about homosexuality in his youth-oriented question-and-answer online forum *Let's Talk*. (His column on homosexuality is filed, ironically, under the heading Pop Culture, rather than the more logical heading Relationships—where the topics of Dating, Family, Marriage, and Sex are listed.)

He counsels the Church's youth:

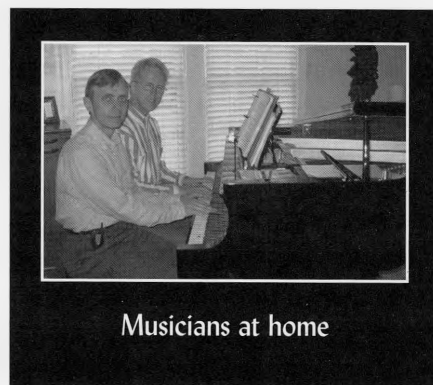
This means that the biblical expectation is for those who believe they have a homosexual orientation to live a celibate life or to limit sexual activity to within a husband-and-wife marriage situation.

It is precisely this type of advice that leads to the tragedy that our family, as well as many others, has experienced!

One can only pray that the Church will no longer take an ostrich-in-the-sand approach, but face the reality that its gay brothers and sisters are everywhere in the Church: from congregational laity to college faculty, church pastors, and even General Conference workers. We are hurting and isolated, and as much in need of denominational acceptance, support, and the forgiving grace of Christ as anyone else.

Please don't continue to ignore us. I believe Christ can use us all.

Leif T. Lind writes from Redlands, California.



Musicians at home