

Discussed: redemptive fellowship, HIV infection, Colin Cook, dehumanizing fear, the Bible as a lethal weapon, need to worship without fear, open door, forgiving heart, wilderness exile

A Report to My Gay Brothers and Sisters

By Ben Kemena

*Then Moses climbed Mount Nebo from the plains of Moab to the top of Pisgah....
There, the Lord showed him the whole land.... I have let you see it with your eyes,
but you will not cross over into it. (Deut. 34: 1-4)*

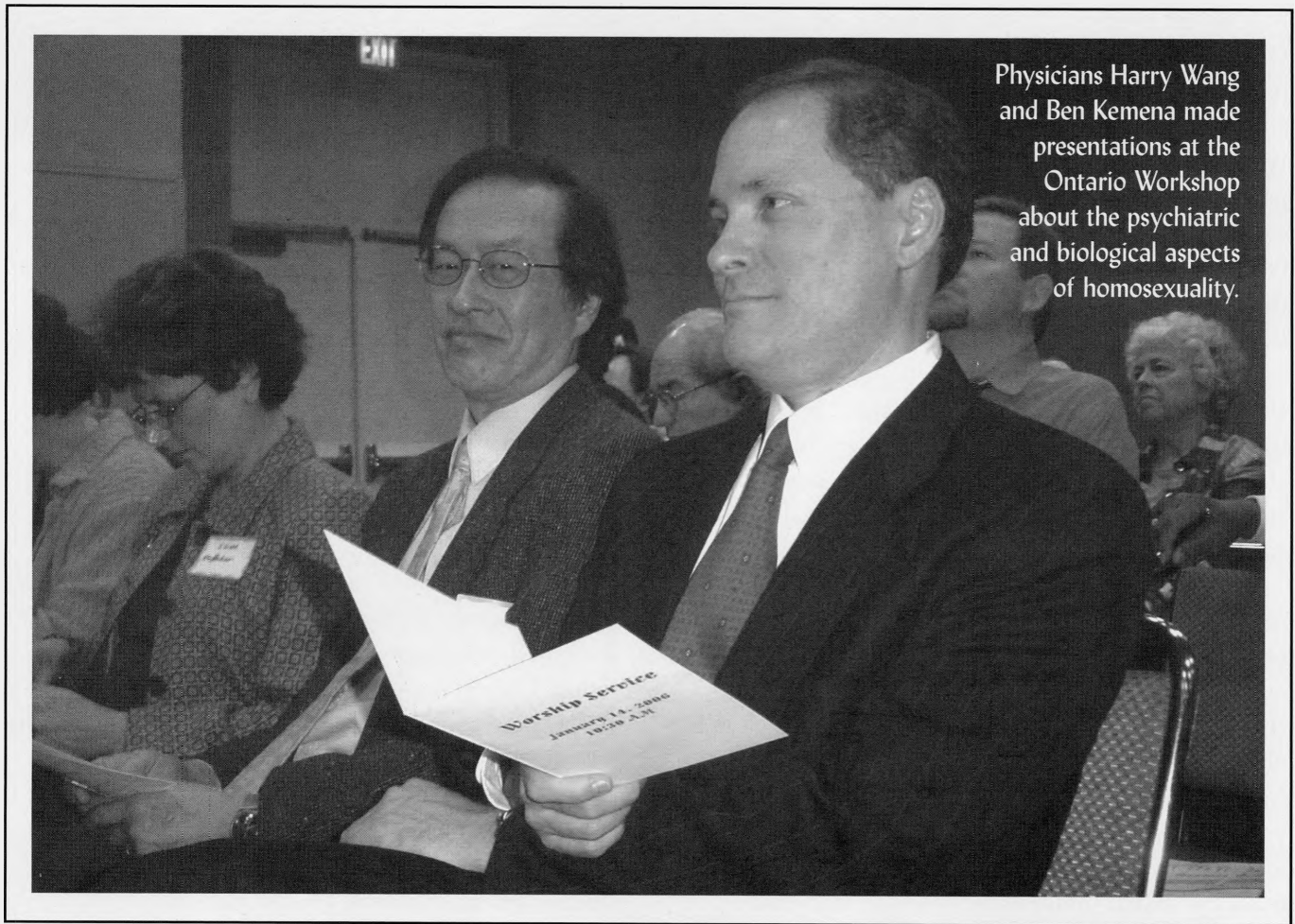
My path has been your path—your life has been my life. Our lives and the bigotry we have endured is neither better nor worse than any other minority group that has faced discrimination. But this is our story about “our tribe”—and it bears repeating if only because it shows where we have been and where we might now be going.

In the beginning—1977—gay and lesbian Seventh-day Adventists rejoiced in the simple accomplishment of meeting fellow believers. The reunions were nothing short of miraculous and the fellowship nothing short of redemptive. Seventh-day Adventist Kinship was functionally born.

Although these joyful gatherings were not officially endorsed by the institutional church, there was a fragile dialogue with church leadership, scholars, and administrators. The first Kinship Kampmeeting of 1980 inspired great

hope. In retrospect, it is fair to say that neither gay Adventists nor their Church knew the ground that lay ahead.

There can be no nostalgia or sentimentality regarding the next two decades. Cast under the shadow of HIV infection, Kinship members faced unspeakable loss under the looming shadow of a silent church. The Adventist Church would not establish an AIDS Task Force until 1999. Spiritual and physical losses were compounded by the catastrophe of repeated sexual abuse admitted by the Seventh-day



Physicians Harry Wang and Ben Kemena made presentations at the Ontario Workshop about the psychiatric and biological aspects of homosexuality.

Adventist Church-sponsored “ministry” of Colin Cook.

I do not know what Kinship expected of the institutional church—and I certainly don’t know what the institutional church expected of Kinship. But one thing is certain—hopes were transformed to anxiety and evolved into a dehumanizing fear.

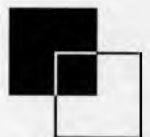
Gay and lesbian Seventh-day Adventists have been in a lonely exile from the institutional church for a number of years. Unknown as it occurred, that exile was heralded by a church lawsuit against Kinship initiated in 1987. Although this lawsuit was fought successfully, it was a traumatic time in Kinship history.

In December 1987, the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists filed a U.S. federal lawsuit against Seventh-day Adventist Kinship for a “breach of trademark” demanding a change of name and financial damage compensation. This was done in the name of “church moves against support group for homosexuals.” In October 1991, federal courts rejected the suit and allowed SDA Kinship to keep its full name. On legal advise-

ment, the General Conference did not appeal this decision. (Ron Lawson)

That exile grew into a deeper wandering in the spiritual wilderness when the General Conference specifically forbade church leaders from meeting with gay and lesbian Seventh-day Adventists. Fortunately, a courageous few were willing to ignore the rules and genuinely minister to gay and lesbian Adventists despite cruel church directives.

In view of the fact that homosexual behavior is clearly contrary to biblical teachings, Church beliefs,...and in order to avoid the appearance of giving the sanction of the Church to such behavior, it was voted: To request all General Conference personnel to decline invitations to speak to gatherings of homosexuals. Signed, Robert Folkenberg, 1994



Robert Folkenberg was removed as president of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists under pressure for violations of ethics in 1998.

With the 1998 murder of a gay Wyoming university student, Matthew Shepard—motivated at least in part by sexual orientation—a church response was expected. This was particularly noteworthy because the behavioral recklessness of Shepard that led to his murder was rooted in the response of his church to the issue of sexual orientation.

Shepherd was an Episcopal church member, church acolyte, and regularly attending member, and his bishop voted to deny church enfranchisement to homosexuals. When the bishop announced his decision, many gay Episcopalians—including Shepherd—walked out of the Anglican service.

Shepherd called his mother, disavowed his Episcopalian Church, never returned to it—and died within eleven weeks of that announcement. We can only assume that his behaviors reflected the assumption that he was beyond grace—and this unfettered his discretion.

In 1999, poorly timed to coincide with the one-year anniversary of Matthew Shepard's murder, gay and lesbian Adventists received this strident message from the institutional church on the matter of "homosexuality":

The Bible makes no accommodation for homosexual activity or relationships.

It was a much harsher policy than previous directives—and builds on a chorus of chilling messages to gay and lesbian Adventists. More than twenty-five years after Kinship's founding, another generation of gay and lesbian Adventists flee the institutional church and seek refuge in Kinship or other Christian communities of faith.

The litany continued, and almost as a postscript the Adventist Church statement on "same-sex unions" was delivered in 2003.

Homosexuality is a manifestation of the disorder and brokenness of human inclinations and relations caused by sin coming into the world....

God's Word does not countenance a homosexual lifestyle....

More years and lives passed. An active debate with-

in Kinship emerged suggesting that the only way to cope with such a brutal institutional church was to avoid it—and to steer "our tribe" far from harm's way. Dialogue was a dream. The people of the Book appeared to use the Bible as a lethal weapon.

With no formal church response to AIDS, a church-initiated lawsuit that almost destroyed the fledgling Kinship organization, the violence of Colin Cook, and toxic church rhetoric—our wilderness wanderings appeared the safest course of action. Approaching the metaphorical Jordan appeared unthinkable—and, indeed, for our most vulnerable members, irresponsible. I fled with fury and fear—and gazed from a safer corner of the wilds.

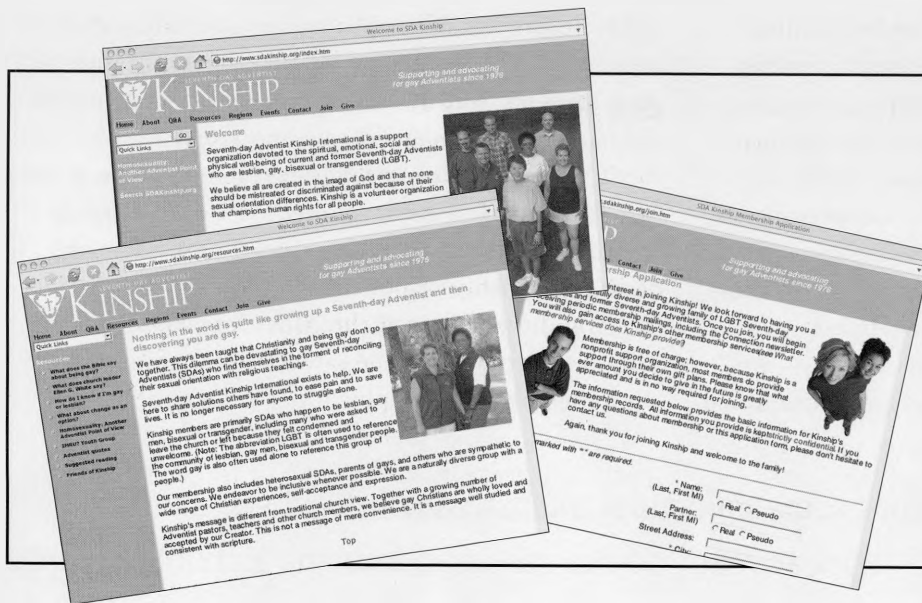
Recite this litany of history because it bears repeating. It is our history. I do not memorialize it to stir more ill-wind against the institutional church. Rather, I affirm our demand to exist, our need to worship without fear, and our desire to live full and healthy lives. We have been lonely in our wilderness journey, but we have not been alone.

We have had many loyal friends and allies providing genuine spiritual oases. Many have shown more patience and charity than I—and a few have reminded us that one day, we must—and can—reapproach the banks of the Jordan.

The wilderness has shaped our character and tempered our souls. We have learned to treasure each other; we have rejoiced in the respite we provide one another. We have learned to savor an act of kindness. We have cheered each other in prayer. We have honored the simple dignity of emptying the sand from worn shoes and resting our feet to walk another day. We have learned that love wins and wins and wins.

The people of the Book have accused us of many things, but when they have met us, they have been wholly unprepared to witness our loving hearts. The Church has tried to obliterate, deny, repress, and condemn our being. With glorious providential disobedience, we continue to sing hymns, read the Gospels, and pray to the same everlasting Parent God. There can be no greater testament of the Holy Spirit than observing an oppressed and beaten people pray.

Gay and lesbian Adventists have prayed in anxious anticipation for a sign that their church exile might be over. At the 2005 General Conference of the



Online information about SDA gay people is available at Kinship's Web site <www.sdakinship.org>, and Carol Grady maintains a Web site for families of gay children at <www.someone-to-talk-to.net>. Harry and Janice Wang have produced a three-minute DVD on three prominent Adventist families with gay children. Contact them at harrycwant@comcast.net and janicenakaw@comcast.net.

Worldwide Seventh-day Adventist Church in Saint Louis, gay and lesbian Adventists around the world heard these words:

God has set before us an open door, which is not our privilege to close and keep others out. I have a word of caution to anyone who is looking for bad grapes in the church: only God can safely grade people. God loves all people globally...I want the Adventist family around the world to be known as a compassionate family. (Jan Paulsen, July 9, 2005)

I must admit that these words fell on my increasingly deaf ears. I listened to the sermon and reread the transcripts. I wanted these words to apply to me and my tribe. I tried to summon more charity and a forgiving heart. As one might expect at this moment in my life, I have been scarred by spiritual rape.

After decades of abuse, I'm never sure whether another attempt at church reconciliation is merely an exercise in self-victimization—or is a moment of divine inspiration. Nonetheless, I was fearfully close to hope with respect to the institutional church. Harboring hope means standing on the banks of the Jordan.

On January 12–15, 2006, members of Kinship met with a varied group of Adventist church leaders and theologians regarding the topic of homosexual orientation in a workshop format. The workshop was designed to help invited authors to write chapters for an upcoming book on the issues of homosexuality and the Seventh-day Adventist Church. It was not a

meeting regarding church policy by intention, but it provided a historic forum.

It is easy to vilify people you never meet—gay or straight. It was the first meeting of its type in almost twenty years and it marked the latest tidewater in the relationship of the institutional church with its gay and lesbian members.

Although it may be a bit premature to suggest that the long exile and wilderness wandering of gay and lesbian Adventists is over, there is a definite feeling that the darkness may be giving way to the joy of morning. It was an event that I believed would not happen in my lifetime—and because it carries such hope, I remain wary...but hopeful, nonetheless.

Gay and lesbian Seventh-day Adventists have long been amputated from the complete body of Christ insofar as the worldwide Adventist Church is concerned. It has been a painful amputation; it has been a treacherous separation. Could it be that our church would consider kinder political rhetoric? Could it be that our church would offer safer schools? Could it be that our church would welcome us back?

It is a shocking and frightening question. We are shocked that such a possibility can even be pondered—after all, we are familiar with our wilderness expe-

rience and its constantly changing landscape. But does that suggest that we would prefer continuing estrangement rather than conversation? Are we afraid to hope? Have we been hurt too much?

If we still have the capacity to hope, if we have nursed our most crippling wounds, it is because we have labored together in love and prayer. This effort has also included brave Adventist allies daring to cross church picket lines to love us. Although we are refugees from our church, spiritual mentors have continued to walk with us—providing us spiritual nourishment, affection, affirmation, and

are more comfortable in the wilderness than any other present environment—and we may need to return on occasion—but we have the opportunity to meet on the banks of the Jordan and cross the river.

That river crossing will be treacherous—and the nature of compromise discontented—but I posit to all of you that we owe it to ourselves, to our beloved dead, our youth, and our infinite Parent God to give the crossing our best effort. Most importantly, I believe there is enough goodwill on the other side to welcome our endeavor.

I'm here to tell you that some influential mainstream Adventists—both individually and collectively—appear ready to see gays and lesbians as human beings and to see our lives as injustice personified.

prayer. To name all of our beloved allies would be akin to the begats of Matthew—but just because I don't name each one of them doesn't mean I treasure them any less.

The wilderness has been challenging and difficult—but it has also been a place and time of awesome beauty. Because it is so frightening to ponder something beyond wilderness, it is intimidating to relish the full majesty of hope. We are afraid to have our hopes dashed, afraid of a mortally wounded soul. We are afraid of what might be our own unrealistic expectations.

Perhaps it is better to wallow in the cynical mire of the familiar than savor the joyful thrill of possibility. I have chosen to believe that this conference workshop heralds the end of our status as shunned—and offers a new welcome as refugees and long-lost comrades. This weekend, I stood at Pisgah and gazed across a new and promised land.

Brothers and sisters and intersexed and transgendered of my tribe—it is not easy for me to admit that I have reached this spiritual place. You know the pains and hardships of this journey. You know the sorrow of my casting out and wilderness exile. You have felt my anger, bound my wounds, and cradled me in your arms. You know the fears of my heart—and I love you for showing me the human face of God.

I'm here to tell you that some influential mainstream Adventists—both individually and collectively—appear ready to see gays and lesbians as human beings and to see our lives as injustice personified. We

I have deliberately recited a venomous history to remind you just how vulnerable I am willing to allow my own heart to be and as proof that I am not naive. I have recited the history to remind you that our Parent God has brought us to these banks. I have recited our history so that you might witness Providence. I have recited the past as an invitation for prayer. Please pray for us and all God's church.

In the future, the main area of concern will remain theological in the Adventist context—rooted in deep controversies that surround the nature of divine inspiration, hermeneutics, biblical exegesis, and discomfort with the notion of a present truth. At the deepest level, human beings are discomforted by change.

There is no excuse for anyone in taking the position that there is no more truth to be revealed, and that all our expositions of Scripture are without an error. The fact that certain doctrines have been held as truth for many years by our people is not a proof that our ideas are infallible. Age will not make error into truth, and truth can afford to be fair. No true doctrine will lose anything by close investigation. (Ellen White)

In many instances, the discussions, conversations, and debates will border on the supremely esoteric. Yet I rejoice in the academic traditions of our church.

Let us spar over the texts, the translations of the Hebrew and Greek testaments, and the nuance of tradition, context, and intent.

We are standing on the shoulders of a grand tradition—a tradition that led us to question, ponder, reflect, debate, and review. These are exactly the types of scholarly conversations that must occur. And when they involve us as gay and lesbian Adventists, we respectfully ask for a seat at that church table.

I cannot tell you where the analysis and reviews will take us—but I fear neither scrutiny nor setback. Ultimately, our goals cannot (and should not) be to coerce church policy. Rather, we should endeavor at every opportunity to allow the witness of our own lives to shine brightly. An integrated, healthy, mature, and well-lived life is the most eloquent testament to our Parent God.

Gay and lesbian Adventists (along with other oppressed minority groups within the denomination) shall always be comforted by knowing that with respect to divine legitimacy, we have never been on trial. Indeed, many of us pray for change in the institutional church because we understand that until the Word of God is presented to gays and lesbians in a manner recognizably Christ-like, the promise of a Second Coming will remain unfulfilled.

There will be tempests at times and—built upon the shoulders of a new generation—we will continue to guide the weary to refuge in the coming storms. After thirty years (and much longer for some), we know how to wait—and we know the price of waiting. I may not stand with you in the land of future promise—but I have lived to see it, breath the air, and feel the love. I have recognized our spiritual birthright.

May we rejoice in the notion that institutional church silence is cautiously giving way to dialogue. We have many leaders and visionaries within Kinship and the institutional church to whom we should express thanks and thanksgiving. Forged in our wilderness crucible, may our characters remain charitable and forgiving.

May we choose to hope once more. I know that any relationship with the Adventist Church remains frightening to many of you hurting today, but I believe this hope is sunlight rather than a train in the tunnel. Let us spread this good news.

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When one reads past the tired old arguments and proof texts for the gift of prophecy (Rev. 12:17 and 19:10; come on!), it becomes clear that Ellen White actually did a great job of pushing Adventist thinking forward. But all too often, it seems that when Adventism aligns itself with the prophetic tradition it grabs a few verses of dubious context from Daniel and Revelation and uses them to justify our existence. Clearly, the Adventist atavists have confused the gift of prophecy for the gift of apocalyptic literature.

In fact, this literalistic fetishism of the prophetic gift has kept it hidden under the obfuscating bushel of idolatry. The mere myths of her prescient or historical insight are props for a shallow faith, calling for signs and wonders when the gift is here, now, incarnate.

It doesn't have to be this way for another generation of Adventists. Writing on hope in Lamentations, eminent biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann suggests that, "the capacity to turn memory into hope in the midst of loss—a capacity that is defining for Jews and Christians—is not a psychological trick or an opting for optimism or even a focus on signs of newness. It is a pivotal theological act, attesting to the fidelity of God, who is the key player in the past and future."²

But instead of action, Adventism has codified its progressive memories, cut out by the atavists who dichotomize: "Ellen White, our way or not way." This has cut off our prophetic memory, blinding us to the power that made Adventism rise out of great human disappointment, to the gift to peer through our Judeo-Christian past and foresee a future of personal and public hope for humanity.

For a new generation, perhaps our doctrine of prophecy could belong to more than one person and her editors; instead, it could be embodied in the Adventism of progress, of a blessed hope envisioned by Ana and Fernando Stahl, the Community Services volunteer, the indigenous ADRA worker, or the Union College chapter of Amnesty International. The spirit of prophecy, more than miraculous prognostication or possession, could lead us to see and save the poor—in spirit, in resources, in justice, in peace.

No longer embarrassed, I see that the spirit of prophecy tells us that:

All who became the subjects of Christ's kingdom ... would give evidence of faith and repentance. Kindness, honesty, and fidelity would be seen in their lives. They would minister to the needy, and bring their offerings to God. They would shield the defenseless, and give an example of virtue and compassion. So the followers of Christ will give evidence of the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. In the daily life, justice, mercy, and the love of God will be seen"³

The prophetic vision continues through Isaiah:

Then justice shall abide in the wilderness
And righteousness shall dwell on the farm land.
For the work of righteousness shall be peace,
And the effect of righteousness, calm and confidence forever.

Then my people shall dwell in peaceful homes,
In secure dwellings,
In untroubled places of rest. (32:16–18)

That weekend in Washington, still standing on the Capitol Hill, we closed with a prayer of lament and liberation inspired by Walter Brueggemann's thinking on Lamentations. As it was read, we turned to face outward across the Mall. The day was overcast, and I shivered. I looked down at the grass, noticing it missing mostly, the exposed earth as dirty brown as the sky.

Through the cloud-filtered light, the stone, cold monuments, and bureaucracies looked like a big daguerreotype-o. A frozen, two-tone world. I thought about the millions of protestors who had stood here before and of politicians who drive by. I wondered: why do we stick to the same old sight? And I dreamed: whither the gift next?

Notes and References

1. All Scripture passages are taken from the *Tanakh* (New York: Jewish Publication Society, 1985).
2. Walter Brueggemann, "Hope in the Face of Loss," *The Other Side*, 35, no. 2 (Mar./Apr. 1999), 17–20, 49.
3. Ellen G. White, *Desire of Ages* (Oakland, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1898), 107.

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