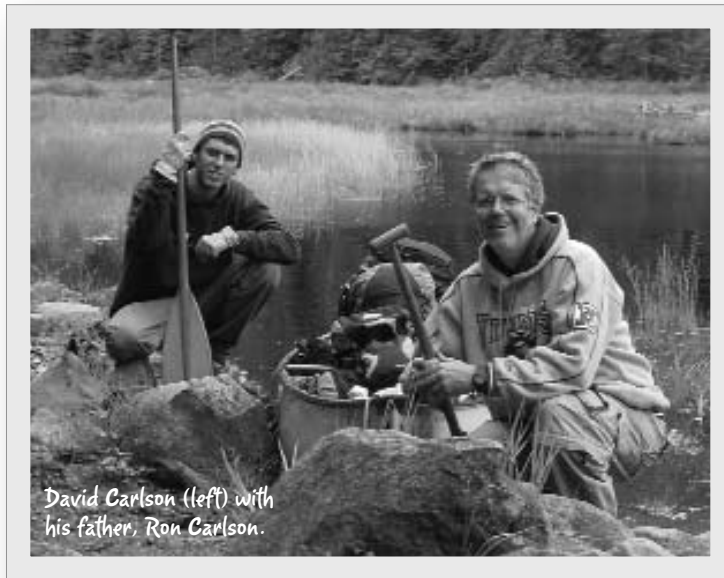


## I'm a Pastor and My Son Is Gay | BY RON CARLSON

**“Trust Me.  
Love him.  
Don’t push  
him away.”**



That was the beginning of my special journey with David thirteen years ago. I quickly called reliable friends and family for advice. Soon I discovered organizations and counselors familiar with same-sex attraction and reached out to them. David, a sincere Adventist Christian, was willing to do anything to understand and deal with his unwelcome feelings.

Yet the stress took a toll. Later in the summer, for no discernible medical reason, his back went into spasms so he could barely

The phone rang on a warm Sunday afternoon. My seventeen-year-old son David was on the other end. He was working at our summer youth camp between his junior and senior years of academy. I could tell he was not calling simply to say hello. After a few minutes of small talk, his voice broke a bit.

“Dad, I have a crush on a guy, and I don’t know what to do.” I knew I had heard him correctly but wasn’t sure how to respond.

“Tell me about it,” I said, sending up silent prayers. I lay on my back in the grass of our backyard, listening to his description of fears and confusion about feelings he could not deny. We talked for more than an hour. During that time, amidst all of my own fears and confusion, I heard my answer from God. It was: “Trust Me. Love him. Don’t push him away.”

walk. Today we believe it was a result of the extreme emotional stress he was experiencing.

David and I talked regularly, sharing deeply. When school began, we had arranged for him to begin phone sessions with a therapist on the West Coast who claimed to eliminate same-sex attractions. The academy chaplain was made aware of David’s situation and acted with grace and professionalism.

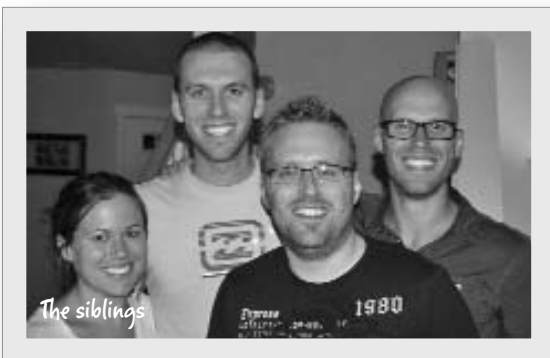
He stayed involved in academy life, participating in gymnastics, choir, drama groups, and worships. His religious life remained open and authentic. He became a leader in the dorm and school, was elected student body president, and graduated with honors. He even had a girlfriend, so I breathed some prayers of thanksgiving. I didn’t try to dig into what his counselor told him, yet I was always willing to listen whenever he wanted to talk.

## College journeys

David was impressed by the therapists working with him, so at Union College he majored in psychology. He became an advocate for marginalized people, demonstrating a passion to help the hurting and those feeling cornered by their circumstances. As a student leader he brought in speakers to address relevant issues such as pornography, eating disorders, and self-esteem. He became known on campus for his love for people as well as his faith in God. He dated a couple of very nice Christian girls at different times, but neither worked out.

By then he had attended several retreats designed to help him connect with his manhood. I attended a weekend retreat in the woods of northern Minnesota with him. When he came home from one of the retreats, I sensed he wanted to tell me something. His face glowed and his body vibrated with excitement.

"Dad, I'm not gay!" he exclaimed. We embraced, and neither of us could hold back the tears. He told me he had discovered that he needed more male companionship than most guys did and that maintaining regular physical contact with guys was critical. It was an emo-



tional moment. Maybe for the first time we both realized the level of fear and tension we had been carrying.

During these years David and I made our annual summer trips to the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness on the Minnesota-Canada border. The hard work, days in the wilderness, gorgeous scenery, and poor attempts at fishing proved priceless. In the evening as we lay side by

side in our little tent, after reviewing the day and making certain everything was prepared for any unexpected night storm, we prayed. I was humbled to hear his sincere and specific prayers for his friends, many facing tough times and some making poor decisions. He was my son. I was proud of him, and I loved him deeply. Still, I knew he was still in an emotional wilderness himself, with more questions than answers.

College life for David went quickly. His brothers were graduating and getting married, both entering careers in pastoral ministry. His sister was one year behind him, preparing to be an elementary teacher. Faculty and staff would often stop my wife and me on campus to tell us what an amazing guy David was and extol his faith and leadership. Some knew about his journey of sexual orientation, others did not.

Yet five years into this, in spite of therapy, retreats, prayers, and the loving, unconditional support of his family and friends, David was still attracted to men. David told me he pleaded with tears in his private prayer times that God would heal him of this curse and cause him to be attracted to women. Only as I began to realize that his attraction to men was just as powerful and involuntary as mine was for women could I even slightly enter his reality.

### "What would you think?"

One day after some awkward silence in the car, David asked, "Dad, what would you think if I were to try dating guys?" I was learning not to react. I asked a few questions, trying to buy time and waiting for God to give me that "fix-all" answer. No easy answer appeared. The only answer I seemed to hear from heaven was the one I had heard lying in my backyard several years before: "Trust Me. Love him. Don't push him away." So we talked. We confirmed God's love, grace, and care for us. I confessed my fear and confusion. Yet, I trusted God and I trusted David's walk with Him. No conclusions were reached.

I expected him to begin dating guys, but he didn't. College degree in hand, David determined to expand his ability to serve people by learning

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Spanish. He enrolled for a summer session at our Adventist college in Spain and then a full school year at our Adventist college in Argentina. His year overseas seemed good for him. Through letters and Skype he told us about his new friends, his experiences, his plans for his future. He believed God was calling him to get a master's degree in counseling. He wanted to earn his degree from a highly respected school, yet one that taught from a Christian perspective. When David received his letter of acceptance from George Fox University in Portland, Oregon, he sensed God was confirming his dreams for his future. David knew that God had never left him.

We will never forget the day we pulled away from his new apartment near Portland, seeing a few tears in his eyes as tears ran down our cheeks. Our son, now twenty-three, would have to deal with the reality of who he was without the support of Adventist schools, friends, family, and everything familiar. Eventually, all of us have to face ourselves. David made good Christian friends, both male and female, at GFU. He excelled in school, attended an Adventist church,



and explored the beauty of the Pacific Northwest.

Yet a deep loneliness haunted him. David reached out to a male friend he'd made at some of the retreats he'd attended, and this friend visited David in Portland. While there, their relationship moved past a platonic friendship, and this left David feeling very unsettled, especially because his friend had a wife. David witnessed a life divided between what society expected and his actual attractions. It was a vivid example of what it meant to be in denial of one's sexual ori-



entation. David believed in a God of health, wholeness, and honesty and wanted to live an authentic Christian life rather than a life of pretending. He did not want to be gay but couldn't deny that there was no change in his sexual attraction after years of doing everything possible to change it. Feeling trapped, for the first and only time in his life he considered suicide. He saw no hope in his future. Late one night in the middle of a panic attack, David phoned us—life was caving in on him. Our own panic, 1,800 miles away from our son in distress, was killing us too. We were able to reach two of his close friends, who went to his aid and helped him through the darkness.

Because most of us have "normal" sexual attractions, where guys like girls and girls like guys, we rarely realize how much our sexuality defines us. In spite of years of therapy, love, prayers, and understanding, David still did not know who he really was. As a result of recent painful discoveries, he believed that he couldn't stay true to the God he loved while living in denial of who he was. David prayerfully and deliberately chose to begin mixing with other gays. Again I heard God's voice: "Trust Me. Love him. Don't push him away."

A few weeks later, David let me know that he had an upcoming date with a guy. A friend had set them up, and they were meeting for dinner. We talked. We prayed. Repeatedly on the day of David's date, his mother and I prayed. We had learned by then that the only request we could feel confident with was to ask God to speak to David's honest, God-loving heart and lead him. David called the next day to tell us that his date never showed up.

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David realized quickly that, just like straight people, gays are kind and cruel, trustworthy and corrupt, morally strong and decadent, people of faith and agnostics. This was a precarious road.

His oldest brother, Jeff, had finished studying at the Seventh-day Adventist Seminary and was assigned to a church in Auburn, Washington, just a few hours north of where David lived. Jeff and his wife, Mary Ellen, are both wise and deeply compassionate people, and they provided a safe haven for David. Occasionally, David would make the trek north for the weekend and worship with them on Sabbath.

David heard about a gay Christian network and a special weekend in Portland that year, where gay Christians come together for inspiration, safe worship, and fellowship. When he told us he would be going there, we prayed our prayer of trust in God's unchanging love for David, confidence in David's faith-filled heart, and that the combination of those two would be enough for us.

The next thing we heard was about Colin. He was a wonderful Christian young man from Vancouver, British Columbia. David met Colin at the event, they were both blessed by it, and they decided to stay in touch. We prayed some more. Several months later, David asked if he could bring Colin home for Christmas to meet the entire family.

Jeff and Mary Ellen had already met Colin several times and agreed with David that he was an extremely nice guy, a deeply committed Christian gay man. Like David, Colin was raised in a loving home where Jesus was honored and faith was welcome. His story of teenage confusion and pain closely mirrored David's.

### One change

All of our children came home to Topeka for Christmas 2010 with spouses and babies, to open gifts, eat, sing, pray, laugh, play games—and to meet Colin. This was new territory for all of us. Everyone was committed to allowing God to lead while enjoying the holidays. There were even a few “gay” jokes, as only Jeff can get away with.

Today, David and Colin are married and liv-

ing in Surrey, British Columbia. Our whole family attended their wedding in 2011. David finished his post-graduate degree and is a full-time counselor for children and youth. Colin and David attend church each week. There aren't many churches for them to choose from that will allow a gay couple to attend. Colin is a loved part of our family. They have started the process of adopting children from the foster care system and are praying for siblings who need a home and don't want to be split up.

Is this what we prayed for or expected? No. Has it been a confusing and sometimes painful



journey? Oh, yes. Have we been told that our son is living in sin? Not directly. We are surrounded with very nice people but are aware that many Christians believe just that. Have we heard about families who have rejected their gay children? Yes, sadly. Have we heard all the theological arguments on either side? Yes. Do our hearts go out to families with gay children? Yes! A thousand times, yes!

After thirteen years on this journey with David, my only clear answer from God now carries a slight change from what I received before: “Trust Me. Love them. Don't push them away.” ■

**Ron Carlson** grew up in Minnesota and graduated from Union



College. He has served as a pastor in North Dakota, Missouri, and California for about twenty-four years before transitioning to church administration and has been president of the Kansas-Nebraska

Conference since 2006. Ron and Sue have four children and four grandchildren. Ron enjoys preaching, camping, running, and building model ships. Grandchildren now top his list!

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his private  
prayer times  
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would heal  
him of  
this curse.**