



# gala news

THE LETTER

Spring 2006 – Volume 17 Issue 1

Dear GALA members and Friends,

Your GALA board met February 3-5 in Independence, MO, for its annual retreat to discuss the concerns and needs of GALA and WCN (Welcoming Community Network). Here's a brief summary of the weekend's events.

On Friday we gathered together from Arizona, California, Kansas, Michigan and Missouri for a casual evening mixer of devotions, conversation and snacks at the home of Mike Brush and John Braswell. We relaxed from our travels, shared together, and prayed for the upcoming discussions. (THANK YOU, MIKE & JOHN!)

Saturday morning, we met at the College Park Congregation. We were joined for the day by Sandee Gamet, from Community of Christ Peace and Justice Ministries, who had agreed to guide and facilitate our discussions. She was a great help! THANK YOU SANDEE!

First, we discussed the responses to the letter from Allan Fiscus and Alan Zimmerman sent in December to the GALA membership. We felt the depth of commitment and concerns from those voices and kept their words and hopes with us during the weekend. The Presidents' letter simply was a call for information from the membership. Our hope was to show that the president and president-elect of GALA are working together for GALA's future.

We then explored the mission and focus of GALA. We discussed our present strengths and weaknesses. We came up with a long list of strengths, including: great retreats, a diversely gifted and nurturing membership that incorporates family members, openness to all faiths, a level of acceptance not found elsewhere, and positive role models who are out in the forefront as advocates.

Some of the weaknesses: finances/fund raising, communication with board and membership, loss of active members, confusion regarding our place in the Community of Christ, concentration of leadership from the Midwest.

As our discussions continued, the following Vision Statement was developed: *GALA envisions communities which witness that persons of all sexual orientations and gender identities have sacred worth and are fully included, celebrated and affirmed within their chosen faith traditions.*

The board decided to continue using the Mission Statement found in the by-laws.

The board addressed concerns regarding the decrease in local retreats across North America. Local activities can help address needs that can't be met by an annual national retreat which isn't accessible to everyone.

We discussed and will be working to launch "GALA Reps" at the retreat this Labor Day. We desire to find individuals willing to serve as local GALA contacts, who can be resource persons in their Community of Christ Mission Center

areas. Guidelines and role descriptions for the representatives are being developed. If you are interested in being a GALA Rep for your area, contact me, Allan Fiscus (see home & e-mail addresses and phone numbers on page 2).

The board is developing a job description for the GALA Chaplain. More information on this will follow in the June newsletter.

John Billings recommended to the board that WCN become a separate entity with its own board and fundraising focus. After lengthy discussion and review of GALA's present financial concerns, the board approved the recommendation. (See the report from John Billings on page 3.)

Changes in the by-laws were discussed and approved. Those changes were mailed to the GALA membership for approval, with votes to be returned by March 10<sup>th</sup>.

At the time of the board retreat, GALA had only \$3,000 of usable funds for future mailings, newsletters, retreat costs and other GALA expenses. As a result, the board decided with great regret to end the paid Field Coordinator position as of March 7, 2006. The board expressed its deep appreciation to Sharon Troyer for her work as Field Coordinator for GALA and WCN. She brought a wonderful ministry, insight and energy to the position. We know that Sharon will continue to be active in both GALA and WCN. MANY THANKS, SHARON!

The board realizes the need for more fundraising for the future work of GALA. As our relationship with WCN is in transition, we are reviewing our future needs for fundraising. In the meantime, we encourage all who receive this newsletter to consider helping GALA by renewing or starting a membership with us. Donations for GALA will be gratefully received. GALA will hold the funds contributed to WCN while their financial tools are put in place.

I want to thank the members of the GALA board for their commitment, and their desire to see GALA and WCN be the best they can be. The group shared openly and freely, and being in their presence was very moving. THANK YOU – Alan, Fran, Sam, Dave, Pam, Meredith, Sharon, John, Sandee and our weekend scribe, Carol Cavin! If you have questions or concerns, please feel free to contact any of the GALA leadership team.

Blessings and hugs to all, Allan Fiscus, President

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## Treasurer's Report, 10/1/05 – 3/7/06

We feel it is important for members to see where our funding is coming from and how it is being spent, and to show how our actual income and expenses compare to the budget that was approved at last year's retreat. A copy of the detailed budget and income and expense report is available upon request.

	Actual Expenses	Budget FY '06
Cash on Hand 9/30/05.....	\$ 8,379	
<b>Income</b>		
Memberships .....	885	2,000
Contributions .....	11,055	50,000
Grants & Foundations.....		3,120
Merchandise Sales .....	15	
Fundraisers .....	222	
Special Projects .....	1,000	
Interest.....	<u>1</u>	
<b>Total Income.....</b>	<b>\$13,178</b>	<b>\$55,120</b>
<b>Expenses</b>		
Administrative .....	888	4,270
Field Organizer .....	13,631	34,200
Retreat .....	400	5,500
Newsletters .....	397	2,500
Welcoming Community Network.....	199	2,000
All Other Expenses.....		<u>6,650</u>
<b>Total Expenses.....</b>	<b>\$15,515</b>	<b>55,120</b>
Expenses in Excess of Income.....	2,338	0
Cash on Hand 3/7/06.....	\$6,041	

## Board of Directors

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## Board Nominations

Nominations are now being accepted for the following positions with terms beginning October 1, 2006:

- Secretary (two-year term)
- Treasurer (two-year term)
- Member-at-Large (three-year term)

Please send nominations before May 15, 2006, to President-Elect Alan Zimmerman at [zimmka@comcast.net](mailto:zimmka@comcast.net) or mail to 3355 Blue Ridge Blvd., Independence, MO 64052.

We are most grateful to Pam Mayfield, Fran Zimmerman and Sam Marmoy for their dedicated service to GALA. Each has made significant contributions to the ongoing work of GALA. Thank you, Pam, Fran and Sam.

The recent resignation of Leah Sheppard, Board Member-at-Large, leaves a vacancy as well. The term for that position runs through September 30, 2007. The current GALA president will fill that position by appointment. We wish to extend our appreciation to Leah for her service on the Board. We look forward to benefiting from her insights and energy as she contributes to GALA when her schedule permits.

With the expected acceptance of the newly revised By-Laws, a nominating committee will be appointed to develop a slate of officers for future open board positions after October 1, 2006. The committee will consist of two GALA board members (appointed by the president) and three at-large members (selected by the board from the general membership). Persons interested in serving on the nominating committee are invited to submit their names to Alan Zimmerman at the addresses listed above.

## 2006 GALA Retreat "Good News of Freedom" at Camp Sionito outside San Antonio, Texas Labor Day Weekend, Sept. 1-4, 2006

Cost is expected to be under \$100.  
Registration forms will be available by June 1.  
More information will be on the GALA website,  
<http://galaweb.org>, as it becomes available.

Classes will include transgender issues,  
legal issues for GLBT, Welcoming Community Network  
(WCN), GALA rep training  
Other possible activities: silent auction, variety show,  
GLBT rodeo, campground service project,  
square dancing,

*The GALA Newsletter would be delighted to print news about your local chapter and community activities, plus personal news/announcements you would like to share. Please send items to:*

Carol Cavin, GALA Newsletter Editor  
[carol.cavin@sbcglobal.net](mailto:carol.cavin@sbcglobal.net)  
214 E. Hansen Ct., Independence, MO 64055.

## KC Coalition of Welcoming Churches

The KC Coalition presented its first educational event, focusing on transgender issues, on Feb. 23, 2006. There was a good turnout, and it was well received. GALA was represented in the organizational work by David Woosley, Cricket Mercer and Sharon Troyer, with several additional members attending the event.

Donna Ross, one of the transgender panelists, sent a nice note to the organizers: "I'd like to offer my sincere thanks for the work the KC Coalition put into presenting last night's gathering. You offered an opportunity for a voice to be heard from a segment of the community that is too often and too easily marginalized and dismissed. I feel honored that I was part of the very first educational event of the Coalition and hope to be able to work with—and perhaps within—the Coalition in the future."

### A Celebration!

Larry P. and Billy V., Jr., of Wichita are celebrating this month their one-year anniversary of joint legal custody of Victoria (Tori), age 9, and Billy V., III, age 6. Larry and Billy Jr. have been together for three years. We wish them blessings and love as they continue their family's journey.

### In Memoriam

#### David W. Gilfillan, 1947-2005

David was instrumental in the beginning foundations of GALA, especially in the Toronto, Ontario, area. Those who remember David will recall his drive & advocacy for a greater GLBT presence in world and in his faith communities. Our love and appreciation are expressed at this time.

## Welcoming Community Network

On February 5, 2006, GALA Board of Directors decided to support the movement of the Welcoming Community Network to an independent nonprofit status separate from GALA.

The GALA Board discussed issues important to the program needs of both GALA and the Welcoming Community Network. A strong vision for the needs of the LGBT community was at the heart of the exchange of ideas. Points were raised regarding financial and fundraising needs, specific focus for programs, advocacy for social justice issues, and needs for fellowship and pastoral care. Through this extremely positive process of dialogue and discernment, the board determined that in order for GALA and WCN to respond to their specific opportunities and needs of the future, it was time to launch WCN as an independent nonprofit organization. Based on complete mutual support for both organizations, this decision was received with unanimous consent, and will now enable GALA and WCN to move forward in directions that are needed for each program.

At this point in the transition, WCN will be led by a volunteer transition team including Sharon Troyer, Arthur Butler, and Curt Filer, and chaired by John Billings, GALA Board member. They will provide leadership until a permanent board is established to give WCN continued direction and guidance.

The following initial steps have been developed to move this decision forward:

- Invite individuals to be part of this task group to help establish WCN as a working organization.
- Register the name Welcoming Community Network on the Internet and work with Meredith Bischoff on website development.
- Begin the process of filing the paperwork for WCN's nonprofit status.
- Create by-laws that will govern the operation of the Welcoming Community Network.
- Begin a fundraising process that will support the ministry and programs of WCN. Initially this can be done using GALA's nonprofit status.
- Continue to work with national welcoming programs through the Welcoming Church Program Leaders Network and the Institute for Welcoming Resources.
- Continue to provide strong support for GALA and its important programs.

For information regarding the Welcoming Community Network programs, please contact any member of the transition team. We will be most eager to answer any questions and respond to your needs.

We look forward to the future of the Welcoming Community Network, and pray God's blessing on our ministry and outreach. Imagine the possibilities, John N. Billings

*WCN's Mission: To be a program of inclusive ministry, which responds to the call of the gospel to "Welcome" everyone, including persons of all sexual orientations and gender identities.*

The Basileia Community of Christ (<http://basileia.net>) invites members and friends of GALA to attend the SoCal GALA group's Passover Seder, to be held at the Anaheim congregation on Sunday, April 9<sup>th</sup>, at 2:00 p.m. Those interested in attending, please contact Meredith Bischoff at [merigrll@merigrll.com](mailto:merigrll@merigrll.com) or Carol Kostura at [kostura@socal.rr.com](mailto:kostura@socal.rr.com).

## Farewell Greetings from your GALA Field Coordinator!

It is with a mountain of wonderful memories as well as a twinge of sadness that I conclude my work as Field Coordinator for GALA. When I first came on staff in 2003, we were anticipating the twentieth anniversary of GALA and planning the special celebration retreat at Camp Doniphan that proved so memorable for many of us! Since that time, numerous significant things have taken place.

GALA was a founding member and is currently a partnering organization the **Institute for Welcoming Resources (IWR)**. As a result, we are now viewed across the nation as being actively involved with numerous denominations in working to establish fully welcoming congregations! To witness the extent of these valuable ecumenical relationships, I invite you to visit IWR's website, [www.welcomingresources.org](http://www.welcomingresources.org). On their homepage GALA is listed as one of seven organizational partners, directly linked to the GALA website, [www.galaweb.org](http://www.galaweb.org). Both sites are managed by Meredith Bischoff, co-pastor of Basileia: an Open Door Community of Christ in Orange, CA. Basileia is one of the congregations that are officially part of the *Welcoming Community Network (WCN)*.

On these websites, you will find exciting news updates and outstanding resources for congregations. You also read about **the activities of various GALA chapters as well as congregations** like Basileia with their numerous community-based peace and justice activities. Though we have a lot of work yet to do, it is breathtaking to see the numerous ecumenical efforts to bring change in the landscape of Christianity as part of the greater Welcoming Church Movement.

I see all of these steps as exciting indications that there are members of GALA and its leadership team who are

committed to be "found in the forefront of those organizations and movements which are recognizing the worth of persons and are committed to bring the ministry of my Son to bear on their lives" (D&C 151). I believe it is because of this commitment that **the decision has been made for the Welcoming Community Network (WCN) to become a separate not-for-profit organization.** (See article on page ?) With the volunteer efforts of many, WCN can dedicate its full energy to working with congregations and other jurisdictions, while being fully supportive to GALA as it lives out its expanding vision.

We all know that, for many of its members and supporters, GALA has been a **haven of safety** where worship, fellowship, confidentiality, retreats, newsletters, personal contact and life-long friendships have been experienced. There continues to be great need for this community, and I will always be a GALA supporter and member. I view the work of WCN now as promoting that same unequivocal safety and hospitality in our Community of Christ congregations so that no child growing up in our faith tradition will be subjected to the messages of rejection or limitation that have dominated churches in recent generations.

I look forward to seeing many of you at **the next GALA retreat**, with the liberating theme, *The Good News of Freedom*, to be held at Camp Sionito in Texas over Labor Day! Until then, I send my deepest gratitude for the support you've given me in the last two and a half years. I pray for God's richest blessings to empower GALA in its ministry and fellowship to more fully share the peace of Christ.

*Shalom, Sharon P. Troyer*  
[sharontroyer@sbcglobal.net](mailto:sharontroyer@sbcglobal.net)



Participants in the Dec. '05, Ecumenical Welcoming Church Core Leadership Training at the Temple. See article on next page.

## PFLAG Makes a Difference!!

Through the encouragement of GALA members who have benefited from attending PFLAG (Parents, Family and Friends of Lesbians and Gays), interest has developed in starting a PFLAG chapter in or near Independence. In order to see first hand how the organization works, on February 12<sup>th</sup> three friends of GALA attended the Kansas City PFLAG chapter, which meets at Village Presbyterian Church in Prairie Village the second Sunday of each month at 3 p.m.

They were welcomed by a friendly group of close to 30 people, all of whom seem to really value their PFLAG connection! The KC PFLAG president, Jamie Lee, who spoke at a PFLAG meeting sponsored by GALA at the 2004 World Conference, was very glad to welcome visitors. After getting acquainted with each other, there was a program about legal issues that affect the lives of LGBT persons and their families.

A local PFLAG brochure reads, “*Rather than allow stereotypes to interfere with our love for our children, we have chosen to seek out accurate information. Rather than trying to change our children, we have chosen to change our attitudes. Rather than remaining silent as stereotypes are perpetuated, we have chosen to educate our communities.*”

If you are interested in finding a chapter near you, look up [www.pflag.org](http://www.pflag.org). It could be you have a friend who needs an invitation to go with you, or maybe a friend you haven’t met yet is needing the special support you alone can share.

## Ecumenical Welcoming Church Core Leadership Training – A Review

In the Community of Christ temple, from December 2 through 5, 2005, GALA and the Welcoming Community Network (WCN) bore witness to our unique work in the larger national welcoming church movement. 38 participants and a host of volunteers spent Thursday evening through Sunday afternoon learning faith-based grass roots organizing skills to help congregations learn to be welcoming to people of all sexual orientations and gender identity. (←←See picture.)

38 participants from eight states—representing United Methodist, Community of Christ, ELCA Lutherans, and United Church of Christ—were trained under the leadership of Emily Eastwood, the nationally known Executive Director of *Reconciling in Christ*, the welcoming ministry of *Lutherans Concerned of North America*. Assisting as staff were David Weiss, a poet and theologian from Minneapolis, Susan Laurie from *Reconciling Ministries Network of Chicago*, Rebecca Voelkel, Executive Director of *Institute of Welcoming Resources* and UCC, and Sharon Troyer, GALA’s Field Coordinator and Director of *Welcoming Community Network*.

Paul Davis, Presiding Bishopric, and Allan Fiscus, GALA president, welcomed participants on Thursday evening after a tour of the temple. During the next three days, the group worshiped, studied, and shared wonderful meals prepared by Barbara and Dick Howard, Pat and Sam Marmoy, and Arthur Butler. Staff and participants shared a sense of gratitude for having been in a sacred space dedicated to the pursuit of peace, reconciliation and healing of the spirit. The Kansas City Coalition for Welcoming Ministries was strengthened by this training and will continue to provide educational events in the Kansas City area. (See article on page 3.)

## Religion and Public Life

The theme for February’s *Theology and Ministry Forum*, sponsored by Community of Christ Seminary at Graceland University in Independence, was “Religion and Public Life.” Challenging keynote addresses were brought by Stephen Veazey, President of Community of Christ, Bill Tammeus, Pulitzer Prize journalist from the *Kansas City Star*, and Mary Ann Zimmer, a theologian and Sister of Notre Dame.

Tammeus is a Presbyterian and outspoken supporter of the welcoming ministry of More Light Presbyterians. When asked about the role of religion and the current division within churches on topics of ordination, same sex unions and other topics, he shared his own personal story and deeply touched his listeners.

In addition to the plenary sessions there were numerous concurrent classes, including one entitled “Walking the Talk of Welcome.” According to Howard Booth, retired religion professor of Graceland University, this workshop was very valuable. It attracted those interested in learning about the Welcoming Church Network and the development & availability of its training and resources. Two sessions of the class were well attended and stimulated questions about congregational work in several different jurisdictions of the church.

## Shower of Stoles Project

It is with great joy and deep gratitude that the Institute of Welcoming Resources has accepted the gift of the Shower of Stoles Project.

After ten years of tireless work, Martha Juillerat, National Field Organizer for the Shower of Stoles Project, has discerned that it is time to move on in her ministry. As she was making this decision, she met with members of the Institute for Welcoming Resources (IWR). It became clear that IWR, whose mission is to resource, equip and collaborate with the welcoming church movement, is a natural partner for the Shower of Stoles Project.

And so, IWR has accepted this gift. The crucial work of sharing the stories of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender lives and our calls to leadership in our churches will continue, only under the name of IWR.

If you would like more information about the Shower of Stoles Project or want to order a display of stoles, please contact us:

[StolesProject@welcomingresources.org](mailto:StolesProject@welcomingresources.org)  
[www.welcomingresources.org](http://www.welcomingresources.org)  
612-821-4397 (IFWR)

As with any new thing, we very much need God’s presence and guidance as well as the prayers and support of our communities. And so we would ask that you hold us in your hearts and lift us up in your meditation and prayer. God has called all of us to the gospel task of witnessing to God’s Extravagant, Abundant, Ridiculously Joyous Welcome. The Institute for Welcoming Resources and the Shower of Stoles Project is but one manifestation of this call. May our work and yours be blessed.

Rev. Rebecca Voelkel, IWR Executive Officer

Last summer on a visit to Independence I was driven out to Harvest Hills, a cooperative housing development begun by some Community of Christ members in the 1960s, for a tour by one of its residents. As we left the crowded city lots behind and made our way out to the eastern edge of Independence, we talked about Harvest Hills’ history, especially about how the community had grown from the original five or ten units I’d seen during a visit in 1978 and the challenges the community has faced since. My guide filled me in as best she could on the intervening years, showing me her home, introducing me to her neighbors and driving me around the now more than 40-unit complex.

On our way back to Independence, the discussion turned toward the topic of gays and lesbians in the priesthood. My host asked me what I thought about the church’s moratorium on ordaining open, non-celibate gays and lesbians to the priesthood. At first I answered that I was okay with it, noticing uneasily the number of break-away Restorationist branches which have sprung up since 1984 when the church started ordaining women to the priesthood. My guide mentioned rumors that some congregations in Haiti and Africa, where the church is now growing remarkably, might leave the church if the decision is made to continue ordaining gays and lesbians—just as some Anglican (Episcopal) churches in Africa had threatened to do after a gay man was ordained bishop in the U.S. earlier that year.

I told my guide I was okay with the church’s policy on gays and lesbians because I was still heady from delightful reunions with old friends and from exploring for the first time the nautilus-shaped silver-spined Temple (a sight which still makes my heart leap with joy). The next day, however, I began to wonder if I had somehow “let the side down.” My gay partners and biological family are what we used to refer to in the church as “non-members.” They refuse to take the Community of Christ seriously due to its official exclusion of sexually active gays and lesbians from the priesthood. For many years I’ve tried to persuade my partner, Winfred, that my church is something special, and that it is a loving community which has a unique witness of Christ, but he doesn’t believe me. *How can your church be so loving and special, if it’s just like the majority of the other Christian churches which officially discriminate against their own gay and lesbian members?* he asks.

I realize that my partner has a point and that he is a good, rational man who puts his money where his mouth is when it comes to doing good—donating regularly to organizations such as Greenpeace, Amnesty International and Doctors Without Borders. From his perspective as a gay Dutchman, for him to attend my Community of Christ congregation in Rotterdam would be like crossing a picket line or suddenly changing his vote from the leftist Green party to one of the more conservative religious parties which for years opposed gay rights, domestic partnerships and the adoption of children by same-sex couples. From his perspective our church seems neither unique nor loving, but rather a throwback to the standard type of repressive sexual morality fostered by almost all Christian churches in Europe which controlled Dutch politics for centuries before gays were finally able to attain their legal rights.

Likewise, my biological family in Ohio—who are Catholics who are increasingly disenchanted with their own church due to the recent sex scandals and the dearth of official apologies —still don’t understand why I keep inviting them to go with me to church on Sunday when I’m visiting, or to drive 30 miles to the next county to visit the Kirtland Temple. They can perhaps understand my conversion to the Community of Christ on my 18<sup>th</sup> birthday as some sort of youthful rebellion, but 30 years later this decision seems a bit illogical for someone who moved to the Netherlands in 1993 because President Clinton broke his campaign promise to sign an executive order protecting gays and lesbians in the U.S. military.

I try to explain to my partner and my family that the Community of Christ is not universally oppressive to gays and lesbians, that there are some individuals in it from whom I have always received support and guidance, and that there are some congregations which are more broadminded. In addition, I have tried to explain that I keep coming to church because I have always felt the Spirit at work here – when I’ve received the sacraments or heard the gospel read or sermons given from the pulpit. My partner and family, however, aren’t able to experience this for themselves, because the official rules which deny gays and lesbians equal treatment keep them from giving the church a chance.

Unfortunately, this official non-acceptance has not only affected my ability to evangelize my family, but also other gay and lesbian communities where I have lived. Before moving to the Netherlands in 1993, I attended the San Francisco, California, congregation. In the early 1980s, the congregation had been originally located in a beautiful, large, turn-of-the-century building dedicated by Joseph Smith III. It was in the middle of the Castro, the city’s largest gay neighborhood. Unfortunately, this congregation didn’t initially respond favorably to the new influx of gay and lesbian neighbors. For example, when the congregation rented its building to a gay & lesbian synagogue, they were horrified one Sunday morning to find that this faith community had hung up AIDS quilts in the sanctuary. Eventually the stake moved the San Francisco congregation to a house church in a more “suburban” neighborhood outside of the Castro.

Five years later, the hanging of the quilts was still a hot issue. It came up in 1991 during the twentieth-century church history Sunday school class that I developed and taught on the request of the leaders of the congregation. During one discussion, a priesthood member who was one of the original members of the Castro neighborhood, stood up and said that he and others felt that the San Francisco sanctuary had been contaminated by the quilts. Then everyone in the room fell silent. Since my gay boyfriend and three of his friends (who were all members of Affirmation, the Mormon equivalent of GALA), were all sitting in the class, I didn’t feel that I could let the matter rest there. I asked the man if he felt contaminated by having me, an openly gay man, teach the class he was attending. The man responded that he didn’t and the heads of the other students nodded in agreement.

Unfortunately the congregation’s real tolerance was put to a test about a month later when the new list of priesthood calls was announced. Everyone who was actively involved in

## I Believe, continued

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leading church activities in the small church was called to the priesthood except me. I heard the news from my boyfriend while I was in the church office rushing to make extra copies of the Sunday school lesson material for some unexpected guests. (Some Sundays there would be more than dozen students in my 10:00 class for a church which had no more than 25 to 30 for the 11:00 service.) My boyfriend expressed his puzzlement. Coming from a Mormon church where all who actively attend church and are of sufficient age and good character are called, he couldn't understand why I was passed over. I tried to explain to him that it didn't work quite that way in the then RLDS church, but to be honest, I really didn't understand why my name wasn't on the list either. I had felt a call to serve in the San Francisco church and taken on the responsibility of a rather difficult class without the benefit of a teacher's gift of discernment. My class included a couple members who left every week after my class was over and before the eleven o'clock worship services started because they opposed the church's decision to allow women in the priesthood. Later when I had a chance to talk to the presiding elder about the priesthood calls, he said that I hadn't even been considered because I hadn't taken the proper Temple School courses. When the visiting gay Mormons heard this, they headed for the door.

Since then I've visited the San Francisco branch occasionally, the last time last August while on vacation. What was once a house church of approximately 25 to 30 in the early 1990s had six in attendance (including myself). The congregation has lost its critical mass and is teetering on the brink of extinction. Its former sister congregation across the Bay in Berkeley has long since closed its doors. I can't help thinking how the fate of these two congregations could have been different if they had been more welcoming to their young gay and lesbian visitors. I wonder what might have happened if, instead of the stake moving the San Francisco congregation out of the Castro, they had made a more concerted effort to reach out to the gay and lesbian community, especially with regard to ministry related to the AIDS crisis – providing a kitchen for meals on wheels, space for counseling, temporary housing referrals, etc. The original building in the Castro had room for all of these things.

I also wonder what would have happened to the congregations in San Francisco and Berkeley had the church recognized and valued the possible influx of gay and lesbian Mormons who were looking for refuge from or an alternative to the religion they'd been taught. Could these potential converts have helped strengthen these two congregations as Mormon converts had strengthened the Reorganization in the 1860s and 70s, becoming some of the church's most effective spokespersons and missionaries? I think the Berkeley and San Francisco congregations could have learned a lot from the Mormons about the importance of evangelism, sharing the gospel with friends, implementing good community PR and giving everyone in the congregation something important to do.

Further, I wonder when the church will finally treat its own gays and lesbians as equals and apply the same standards to them as they do to heterosexuals. I wonder when the church will take seriously the counsel in the Doctrine & Covenants,

Section 151:9, "...my disciples must be found continuing in the forefront of organizations and movements which are recognizing the worth of persons." I wonder when the church leadership will have the courage to lead, as former President Clinton could have done, and eliminate centuries of institutionalized discrimination against gays and lesbians. I wonder how long it will take, because the longer it does take, the more gays & lesbians leave the Community of Christ, disenchanted, many never to return.

When I look at congregations outside of Independence (at least the ones I've attended in Ohio, Utah, California and the Netherlands for the past 15 years), I am greatly disturbed. Many appear to be in very bad shape, with buildings—like the old San Francisco sanctuary—built to hold around 100, but with active memberships of no more than two dozen. In these congregations, many in urban locations, the church is fading away and closing its doors. Perhaps the congregations in Africa and Haiti, which have the advantage of being in a part of the world where the church is growing dramatically, should become more aware of what's happening elsewhere and be willing "...to bear the burden of their sin, nurturing them in faith, accepting that degree of repentance which is possible for them to achieve" (D&C 150:10b), as was done when the church reached out to people from a different culture who were previously thought undesirable for membership, or for the priesthood for that matter.

I believe that the church needs to reach out to the gay and lesbian community and treat its members as equals, in order to fulfill the Great Commission, and to perform the healing ministries for which the Independence Temple was dedicated. I believe that doing this will revitalize the church and not just fragment it. I believe that reaching out to gays and lesbians will give the church a new sense of mission and create new ministries. It could give many gays and lesbians and their families their first opportunity for a new life in Christ through participating in the church's ministries. I look forward to this day in the peace, hope, love, and joy of Christ, my Savior. Amen.



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