

Pastoral Care *Newsletter*

*For Member Care Committees,
Ministry and Counsel, Overseers,
and others who provide pastoral care
in unprogrammed Friends' meetings.*

Vol. 15, No. 3 March 2008

Friends Coming Out: Does Your Meeting Offer a Caring, Spirit-led Ministry? by **Melody Brazo**

As Quakers, we are sometimes challenged by our belief that the light of holiness shines in everyone. It is not so hard to believe in the abstract, but when we are confronted with people whose experience seems very different from our own, it can be difficult to know which beliefs to let go and which to hold onto, as we seek to welcome difference into our community.

Many identities exist—lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, intersex, queer, questioning—and behind each one is a complex, complicated and unique human being. We do not know who may have family members, friends or neighbors with one of these identities. None of us knows what identities our children may grow into. None of us even really knows what lies ahead in our own lives. And yet we are called, as a community and as individuals, to be the human embodiment of Divine love. To do this, we must help each other to live in a diverse world.

When I was first asked to write this article, I envisioned a list of steps that meetings might take to help members who were coming out to feel more welcomed and even celebrated. To help me capture a variety of experience beyond my own, I asked Friends from many different Yearly Meetings to tell me their stories of how they came out to their meetings.

Stories of Joy, Pain

Some people told me stories of such tenderness and caring that I could still feel the power and the breadth of love transmitted across years and contexts as the story was related to me. Other people shared stories of

such pain that I was brought to tears listening to the anguish that still lived within people despite the intervening years.

Many Friends spoke of being held lovingly by their meetings as they came to terms with their identities. One Friend told of coming to realize while in a marriage, that despite his love for his wife, his true path was as a gay man. He felt that he should be honest with his wife and with the members of his small meeting because he needed the support of this spiritual home more than ever if he was to make the transition to living the life he was meant to live.

The meeting formed one committee to support him and another one to support his wife as they sought to discern a way forward that would be in unity with the divine. This process led the entire meeting into a time of searching and seeking about relationships, ethics, and the nature of love. The work was hard but the gifts were many for the Friends involved. They were able to stay with it

because they were grounded in and guided by love. That love continues today, some thirty years later, and has allowed the former couple to remain close and committed even as they have expanded the boundaries of their family to include others.

Other Friends were not so lucky. Several told of having to choose between trusting their still small voice within and the louder voice of their meeting. They could not stay grounded in love as they sought that place between earnest seeking and judgment. In my own case, I remember sitting through my entire



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first pregnancy in a meeting that was struggling over whether to allow gay men and lesbians to marry.

One of the most frequently cited reasons for marrying only straight couples was that marriage was for procreation and raising children, and gay men and lesbians could not do that. But though I, a lesbian, rose and offered myself as living proof of the fallacy of that statement, the argument never changed. I felt invisible. I felt ignored. I felt despairing that the truth of my heart could be so inaccessible to others when it was so clear to me.

As I talked with Friends about their actual experiences in coming out to their meetings, as well as offering support to others, I quickly discovered that no single set of steps will work for everyone. Each individual is different and so is each meeting. Sometimes our differences seem so glaring that we can find no way to bridge them. What may be welcoming support in one case might be unnecessary, excessive or even intrusive in another.

Sometimes we may look for a bridge that offers a way over, but not through the differences, ignoring them in favor of some common ground that will relieve the discord surrounding issues of sexual and gender identity.

Having said that, I believe there are some generalities to remember and some homework which meeting communities must do, preferably *before* this issue becomes an active one. As a result, the caring meeting community can become able to be both proactive and reactive, preparing to welcome the stranger who may soon walk through the door, while also deepening the bonds of trust and connection between those already within.

To truly honor and welcome our differences requires that we take the time to know ourselves and other people deeply. We must listen carefully not only to the still small voice within ourselves, but also to the voices of others whose experience may be vastly different from our own.

Commonly accepted statistics hold that one in ten people is gay or lesbian. How can a meeting foster a climate of welcome and acceptance? Some meetings have been grappling with such questions for years. Other meetings are only just starting to do this work.

The role of the Pastoral Care committee in these issues can be difficult to navigate, yet there are many places where the ministry of care is needed, not only for LGBTQ members, but also, for the families—parents, children, siblings—of these members who need to come to their own understanding of these issues. We must take care of the love that flows

Questions for Reflection

1. How can your meeting foster a climate of welcome and acceptance for coming out members?
2. What kind of pastoral care do you offer to LGBTQ members? To their families? To the meeting as a whole?
3. When the time for discernment on the issue of same sex marriage has come, how has your meeting responded?
4. How does your process reflect Friends' belief in "that of God" in everyone and in equal treatment for everyone?
5. In what ways can your meeting be proactive in meeting the needs of LGBTQ members and their families?
6. How does your meeting honor diversity in your corporate worship, action, decision making?
7. If your meeting has postponed or avoided seeking a "sense of the meeting" in this matter, how can you, as pastoral care givers, move the process into the Light?

from the divine source through us as it is directed toward those in need, and not allow it to be blocked by old ideas and entrenched biases.

The suggestions listed below are starting places. Your meeting can use these as guidelines to move forward no matter from where you are starting. You may also use a variety of formats as you seek to address these issues. Called meetings, special committees, facilitated workshops, films, and worship/sharing are some of the tools that meetings have used in their labors.

Listening, Sharing

Take the time to truly get to know each other so that you may share in each other's joys and sorrows.

Set aside regular times to talk to each other. Some meetings already have members or attenders who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, queer or questioning (LGBTQ). Do any among you identify themselves in this way? Who among you has a family member or loved one who claims one of these identities? What are their joys, their sorrows, your own feelings? What do you, as meeting members, need to learn? Where would you like support? Begin with yourselves and what you

already know and go forward from there.

Seek out opportunities to become familiar with LGBTQ culture and concerns on your own.

You have many options, including books, web-based resources, television, radio and movies. Talking with people who identify as members of a sexual or gender minority can be a good way to learn more, but be sure that they are willing to play the role of teacher before you jump into the conversation. And, be sure that this is not your only source of information. No one person can represent all the dimensions of a multi-faceted identity, and certainly no one person can speak knowingly about all the identities that our culture identifies as sexual and gender minorities. Talk with families of loved ones who have come out. They will have valuable insights as well.

Begin a dialogue about these issues before there is a “need” in your meeting.

I have sometimes heard Friends object that they do not need to talk about LGBT issues because they have no one with those identities in their meeting. Even if that is true (and it is not always easy to know), these issues are at the forefront of many discussions among Friends, so the chances are good that everyone knows someone. Everyone needs the reality of his or her life to be recognized. We

need our spiritual communities to reflect the true and wide variety of experience—many cultures, family constellations and identities—so that we will be able to recognize the divine in all its forms and guises.

Words Have Power

Learn the terms and practice using the language out loud.

We live in a linguistically deficient culture when it comes to describing the ways that people can love each other and the ways that people can create a family. For this reason it is important not to make assumptions in place of asking questions. Ask people how they would like to be identified. Ask children, who are the members of their families?

Many of us are unfamiliar and/or uncomfortable with the language that already exists. You may need to practice saying words like *lesbian*, *gay*, *queer*, *transgender* out loud until you feel comfortable saying them.

Different communities and generations may use the same words differently. We all remember a time when words like *queer* and *dyke* were vicious slurs. We may hesitate to use those words now because of the deep pain those insults have inflicted. Some of us have been trying to reclaim the power of those words by changing their meaning to encompass positive attributes. What

Learning the Language of the LGBTQ Community

Many words have become part of the community's and the broader society's language. Here are a few, excerpted and adapted from sites available on the Internet, including but not limited to http://www.ohio.edu/lgbt/resources/educate_def.cfm and <http://www.metrokc.gov/health/glb/definitions.htm>.

Lesbian: A woman who loves other women. The word derives from the Greek island of Lesbos, where the poet Sappho ran a school for young women, and often wrote erotic poetry about love between women.

Gay: Homosexual. In the 17th century the term was expanded from its earlier meaning of “cheerful” and by the 1970s, it had become a standard, non-slang synonym for homosexual.

Bisexual: A person who is emotionally and/or physically attracted to both men and women.

Transgender: Persons who identify more strongly with another gender, other than the one to which they were assigned at birth.

Transsexual: Persons who identify so strongly with another sex or gender that they choose to change

the body, perhaps through hormones and sometimes surgery, to look and feel more like the other sex in order to reflect how they feel inside.

Queer: A word used for homosexual without indicating a definitive label. Some may use the word as a general term to encompass the entire LGBTQ community. For them, the term can be positive and empowering.

Questioning: Someone who is challenging inner beliefs and feelings toward homosexuality. Also, a person who may be dealing with his or her own homophobia.

Intersex: A person who may have both male and female sexual characteristics and organs. At birth an unambiguous assignment of male or female may not always be made.

Dyke: A lesbian. Derived from 19th cent. slang, *dike*, referring to male clothing, and carrying a derogatory connotation of masculine appearance or behavior. The connotation may still be present, but many lesbians have adopted the word as their term of preference..

is most important in this regard is to remember to *ask questions* and to stay grounded in the spirit of love.

Speak up, Speak Out

Practice speaking up against bigotry.

Jokes, slurs, put-downs all chip away at the humanity of everyone—the target, the teller and the listeners. The only way to counteract that damage is to speak from your own experience of the many ways that the “still small voice” can be obscured by pain, by shame, by embarrassment, by rage, etc.

Learn More

Become acquainted with the supports available to LGBTQ people in your community at large and in your meeting in particular.

What is it like for a gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered person to live in your community? Are there resources for LGBTQ families and/or students in your local schools and do they welcome and celebrate all types of families? Are there services for elderly LGBTQ individuals? Are there welcoming congregations among the churches in your community, housing and job opportunities for people who are open about their identities?

Who would you recommend if a LGBTQ member of your meeting needed a doctor, lawyer, accountant or other professional? What is it like for LGBTQ people to attend your meeting? Do you welcome and celebrate all types of families? Your answers to these questions will vary depending on where you live. The Internet can be helpful, as can individual community members familiar with local resources. You can also ask questions of your meeting members, your service providers and your neighbors.

Become acquainted as well with resources for families and friends of gays and lesbians.

Families may face different challenges or struggle with different emotions. Two websites can be very useful, not only to families, but also, to your meeting's pastoral care givers. A national organization offering local and regional resources and support is found at <http://www.pflag.org/> the web site of Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG). Support and advocacy for children of LGBTQ parents can be found at <http://www.colage.org/> the web site of Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere (COLAGE).

Remember that when you are talking about LGBTQ issues, that does not always involve

talking about sex.

Mostly, the daily lives, hopes and dreams of lesbians, gay men, bisexual, transgendered and queer people are pretty similar to everyone else's. Many of the differences lie in the way that we are received and perceived by others. The “sexual minority” label tends to obscure the rest of our identities in the eyes of some. One Friend, with whom I have been acquainted for the past twenty-five years, still asks each time we meet, if my partner and I are together. I have seen him at Yearly Meeting, greeting other Friends who are not part of his daily life, and I notice that he does not ask this question of them.

Community Commitment

Commit yourselves, as a community, to the hard questions that will allow you to discern a deeper purpose and alignment with the divine.

What is holy about human sexuality? With whom, and when, are sexual relationships rightly ordered? What does marriage mean? How is our understanding of gender influenced by our social context and what does that mean? How are we to reconcile the call to listen to the promptings of divine truth in our own hearts with our desire to be in loving fellowship with our faith community when those things are in conflict?

Do not minimize the experience of LGBTQ individuals, even when it is painful or difficult for you to hear.

Sometimes the most helpful thing we can do for another person is to just *be* with them. Listening can be a precious gift, both for the speaker whose story may take on new meaning in the telling, and for the listener who may learn from another's experience. And while we cannot prevent others from experiencing prejudice, we can help each other recognize and name prejudice, and replace it with justice and equality.

Remember that for many LGBT people, coming out is never finished.

Coming out is not a single, discrete event. Because our culture presumes that every one is straight and gender conforming, many people must come out over and over again or risk being seen as dishonest.

Each time someone assumes that I am married to the *father* of my children, I face a choice about whether to correct them or let it slide, a choice that can turn a pleasant idle conversation into a “teachable moment.” Sometimes I choose to correct those assumptions, to answer superficial

questions truthfully. This can lead to moments of true connection where I feel blessed by the opportunity to know and be known by another human being in the light of divine truth. But it does not always work this way. Not everyone wants to be educated. And not everyone wants a life filled with teachable moments. For them, these can be draining experiences which take energy away from the work to which they are called in their daily lives.

Strive to see the gifts that are available to those who do not turn away from conflict.

Many people avoid conflict because it is uncomfortable and because we are conditioned by the dominant culture to view conflict as a failure to find common ground. But our faith is supported by continuing revelation of the divine presence, which requires a constant sifting and examination of all that we think we know, so that we can be open to leadings that are yet to be revealed. All change requires conflict.

The gifts we receive lie in the new and unexpected resolutions that can flow from that conflict when we face change with our hearts open (a feat made easier when we know that we are not facing this process alone). The Pastoral Care

Committee can lead by creating a vehicle for these issues to be carried by the meeting at large. This process will look different in each meeting, but it is the responsibility of the members of the Pastoral Care Committee to embody the constancy and depth of divine love for individual members and for the meeting as a whole.

If we are to be the beloved community that makes the concept of divine love real in human terms, then we must simultaneously honor the divisions between us *and* unite in the places where we share common ground. Issues that elicit strong and deeply held feelings can be vehicles which lead us directly into the holy spirit if we are willing to be changed by the experience and to stand in places of discomfort while our hearts are made tender towards each other.

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One Meeting's Experience

Friends in Maine Affirm 'That of God' in Each Other

Portland Friends Meeting thought of itself as very open to gay and lesbian members and attenders. Personal relationships seemed warm and cordial and we had a history of supporting the local gay pride march. On the record, we *thought* we were "open," but that's not how it always appeared to many of the gay and lesbian people in our meeting community.

Concerns about our seeming ambivalence led several gay and lesbian people to address this issue, starting with an open dialog about life as a gay or lesbian in our meeting. The goal was to identify what steps might help gay people feel more accepted and comfortable, and would make all of us more aware of the underlying issues.

A diverse group of gay and lesbian Friends requested a special meeting of our Ministry and Counsel committee, at which they shared their personal stories. One somewhat conservative member of the committee shared, as he left that meeting, "I used to think it was about sex, but I found out it was really about love!" One result of this meeting was that Ministry and Counsel later recommended a minute affirming that a request

from a same-gender couple for marriage or a ceremony of commitment under the care of the Meeting would be handled in the same way as a similar request from a heterosexual couple.

A threshing session was scheduled to begin what was expected to be a lengthy process. During that session several gay people identified themselves and shared some of their personal struggles. An ad hoc committee, including a lesbian member, was established to bring the discussion to every meeting committee—providing a forum for all of us to share and listen.

"At the first committee meeting," said one lesbian member, "I was speaking all around the issue and an elder committee member said, 'I don't get it.' So I took a deep breath and came out to the committee as a lesbian. I realized that I would need to come out to all of the committees in the meeting and not only tell my story but listen to the many stories of others, as many families have a gay relative tucked away in one of the family closets or maybe even struggling to be out within that family. For me this journey of disclosure and sharing was a deeply spiritual time."

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The proposed minute was presented at a meeting for business. The members encouraged continuing dialogue throughout the meeting. The minute was revisited in subsequent business meetings, with the dialogue continuing for a two-year period. While few spoke openly against the proposal, it was troubling that some who appeared to be uncomfortable absented themselves from the process. Our clerk reminded us that since Friends believe that the Spirit guides those who gather to discern the sense of the meeting, it would be those present who would determine the final outcome. He encouraged anyone who had reservations to come forward to express them. In the end, the proposed minute was adopted, with no opposition, and with many enthusiastic statements of support.

Several factors helped Portland Friends Meeting come together to adopt this minute:

- the presence of several lesbian and gay people who were willing to openly share insights about their lives;
- the thoughtfulness and clarity of Ministry and Counsel;
- the wisdom, patience and skill of the clerk;
- the level of tender regard among all members and attenders.

It was not until several years later that the meeting did receive a request for marriage under our care from a lesbian couple. These two women had been deeply involved in the life of our meeting—one was a former clerk—and their spiritual depth and the strength of their commitment to each other was never in doubt. Still, some Friends who had not been part of the earlier discussions welcomed a chance to review our whole process, and affirm again the rightness of our accepting policy. We were extremely glad that consideration of our marriage policy was not tied to the personal situation of any one couple asking for marriage.

Is everything complete and in good order? Of course not. Even with the best intentions, Friends carry into our community some of the homophobic attitudes that pervade our society. But the openness, patience, and faith of all continue to help us as we seek to love one another, to affirm that of God in all of us.

Rita Clifford
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Portland (ME) Friends Meeting

Resources

FGC Epistle on LGBTQ Friends, Twelfth Month 22, 2004 fgcquaker.org, Concerns of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer Friends, *FGConnections*, Fall 2005

North American Quaker faith community affirming that of God in all people: Friends for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Concerns, <http://flgbtqc.quaker.org/>

A Year of Discernment, Striving Toward Faithfulness, FGC, 2004 Annual Report, <http://www.fgcquaker.org/info/annualreports/>

Each Of Us Inevitable: Some Keynote Addresses At Quaker Gatherings (1977-1993), Robert Leuze, editor: A revised and expanded volume of 19 keynote addresses offers a collective wisdom on being gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or an ally. *FLGBTQC 2003* http://www.quakerbooks.org/each_of_us_inevitable.php

Minutes, Queries, Epistles, Faith & Practice (See also Same Sex Issues.), Quaker Electronic Archive: <http://www.qjs.net/~daruma/index.html>

National organization offering local and regional resources and support: Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays <http://www.pflag.org/>

Support and advocacy for children of LGBT parents: Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere (COLAGE), <http://www.colage.org/>

Definitions and Terminology: Ohio State University, http://www.ohio.edu/lgbt/resources/educate_def.cfm

Discussion of definitions and the complicated issues surrounding them: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/LGBT>

Pastoral Care Newsletter is published quarterly by the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting and distributed by subscription to meetings and individuals throughout North America and beyond. Editorial Committee: Susan Heath, clerk, Suzanne Day, Dona Garrettson, Patricia McBee. Editor: Carol J. Suplee. Please do not duplicate without permission. Subscriptions and back issues information: contact Evan Draper at (215) 241-7182 or (800) 220-0796, ext. 7182 or evand@pym.org or write to PCN, 1515 Cherry St., Philadelphia, PA 19102-1479.