

# THE **galaNEWS** letter

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Spring 1998

## **A Church for Us**

By Sharon Troyer

The 1998 World Conference was a giant leap forward for the lesbian, gay and bisexual RLDS community. Despite the fact that the process seems eternally slow for some folks who have worked so hard and waited so long, significant progress is being made in the church in addressing and accepting our participation and ministry. Several events during the week signaled this change. The service "Living With AIDS: We Walk Together With Those We Love," lead by John Billings, on Wednesday afternoon was well attended and much appreciated. People lingered long afterwards to talk together. Guest speakers were Larry McGuire from Chicago Urban Ministries and Russell Hawkins, a Methodist minister from Kansas City. A GALA choir of nearly twenty people also sang at the service. A special thanks to Nilda Rodriguez for sharing her story and for her commitment to making a difference in her community and the lives of others.

The attendance and experience at the PFLAG meeting on Thursday afternoon in the Stone Church was wonderful, too. Groups facilitated by GALA members and friends provided much needed support to many individuals. There were many gay and lesbian church members attending their first-ever GALA event, numerous family members, friends, and church leaders present, including Grant and Joyce McMurray. A special thanks to Barbara and Dick Howard for their presence and touching ministry at this service.

J.C. Stuart, the chair of the Human Sexuality Task Force, and Sue McLaughlin, from Temple School, made presentations to each of the quorums of priesthood and all delegates, prior to the Task Force's report being presented on Saturday afternoon. They shared about some of the preparation going into two new Temple School courses and answered questions about them. The first one, entitled "Contemporary Issues in Human Sexuality," should be published by the end of May. And the second course, which Ray Biller is working on, is due to be completed this summer and is called "Sexual Orientation and the Church." After the presentations by J.C., there was widespread eagerness from many stakes, districts and congregations for the materials. The task force hopes that jurisdictions will seek teachers who are experienced with peace dialogue skills and have the appropriate education to lead these courses.

The single-most visible moment regarding gay persons was Saturday, during the final delegate legislative session. J.C. Stuart asked delegates and visitors to, first, raise their hands if there is a gay or lesbian person anywhere in their family. He then asked them to keep up their hands, while those who "have a friend who is gay or lesbian" also raised their hands. Not surprisingly, estimates by balcony observers were that nearly half of all hands in the conference chamber were raised! The point needed no explanation, and J.C. proceeded to emphasize the importance of dialogue on this topic, and urged a careful and prayerful review of the temple school classes. Of course, diversity of opinions will be expressed, and out of that diversity can come healthy dialogue, personal growth, and that much needed "reconciliation and healing of the spirit" to which we are all summoned.

As a result of having our "first ever" official GALA booth, located in the Stone Church, numerous people stopped to visit. Thanks to Mark Dixon and Brian Sadler for organizing the GALA booth and to the many members who staffed the booth during the entire week. We hope many of the new GALA brochures will find their way into the hands of those who need them. Many people expressed appreciation for being able to make a donation to receive a GALA logo lapel pin. The GALA logo, which so beautifully combines the triangle and the dove, is symbolic of our commitment to the pursuit of social justice and peace.

The week ended with a GALA reception held on Saturday afternoon at the beautiful and spacious home of Maridan and Larry Christensen. Over seventy people attended including many new GALA members and several church administrators. It was a great event. Thanks to the gracious hosts, Elaine Cochran, Todd Davison and Alan Cochran for organizing the gathering.

Due to good planning before conference and the work of several individuals, the organizations of GALA and PFLAG were more visible and audible than ever before. The respect given by conference planners and participants was greatly appreciated. All in all, the activities of Conference this year were a testament to the truth that the transforming call to proclaim Jesus Christ is a call that includes us all!

*Sharon P. Troyer, Ph.D. works as a psychotherapist in Denver, Colorado, and is an associate pastor of Greenwood Congregation. Sharon serves as a facilitator for Denver PFLAG and is on the Human Sexuality Task Force for the world church. Alan Cochran, Todd Davison, and Lauren Hall contributed in writing this article.*

## **A Word from the President**

So many events have taken place during the past few months it is difficult to know how to begin this letter. I will start with the Central Region midwinter retreat that was a huge success. Congratulations to Kip and Larry for organizing and hosting the retreat. This is the second year in a row that this retreat has been offered. What a wonderful tradition Central Region GALA is beginning to establish.

The executive committee met in mid-February and discussed many administrative issues that are of concern for GALA. I would like to thank Mark, Todd, Nick and Lauren for their dedication to seeing that GALA continues to strive for excellence and to meet the needs of an ever-changing membership. We discussed the mission statement, and through hours of creative thought we revised it to more accurately reflect our current outlook for the organization. Our Mission Statement is: GALA is committed to the pursuit of social justice and spiritual wholeness through dialog, education, and action for all persons gay, lesbian, straight, and bisexual. We celebrate diversity and affirm the worth of each individual in a community united by Jesus Christ. We had a lively discussion regarding GALA's website. We would like to commend Meredith Bischoff for her creation and management of this important GALA outreach resource. Also, this newsletter has become an awesome outreach tool. We extend our heartfelt thanks to Aaron for his dedication to providing such an excellent way to keep us all connected.

Over the past six months a very dedicated group of individuals worked hard to create a new brochure that would speak for GALA. The brochure is included with this newsletter. I hope you agree that it is a beautiful piece. There are a few thousand available for distribution. I also worked with our graphic designer in creating a new GALA lapel pin. These are available for a \$5.00 donation. We are hopeful that the brochure and lapel pin will be on the website to view in the near future.

RLDS Camp Buckhorn, in the beautiful San Bernardino Mountains, was the setting for the Western Region's fifth Passover Seder the weekend of April 17 - 19. The Southern California GALA group continues to meet regularly. The Eastern Region has been focusing their activities in Michigan where they continue to have meetings.

It is almost election time again. This is a wonderful opportunity for three members to become actively involved in the leadership of GALA. Please read the article on page 11 for more details and feel free to contact me, Todd, Mark or Lauren if you would like to find out more about the leadership opportunities. Remember that only paid members may run for election or vote. So if you have not joined GALA, now is the time to send in your membership, for which I would extend a sincere "Thank you."

There are so many good things going on. The RLDS World Conference was a great experience. We were able to reach out to so many different people. The dedicated GALA members who staffed the booth deserves our warmest thanks. The AIDS Ministry Service and the PFLAG event were very successful. My thanks to Sharon, John, Gail, Forrest and Donna for a wonderful job of organizing and ensuring successful outreach and ministry. Thanks again to Sue Sloan and the First Presidency of the RLDS Church for supporting GALA by inviting us to exhibit and to sponsor the activities.

May this spring bring renewal to all. Renewal in our faith to a loving creator, renewal in our compassion to each other, and renewal in our calling to bring peace to a world that is in desperate need of love and acceptance.

My Peace To All, Alan

## Wichita Retreat in Review

by Mike Brush

Recharged . . . Renewed . . . Revitalized . . . these are all great adjectives that describe how I feel after having attended the Wichita Retreat. Although I went initially with some apprehension, my faith has been restored. I believe we're on the way to great things, gang! I only wish Grant could have been there.

Kip Dawson and Larry Pickering had arranged for the use of a wonderful private retreat center just outside of town, and the accommodations were wonderful. Friday night's greeting brought warm food and fellowship to all the road-weary travelers — all except Jan and Don, who had apparently encountered a large bigfoot somewhere near Emporia. (Sorry you didn't make it, guys — you were missed — hope Ripley's pays you a bundle for the story.) We were all thankful for the cozy comfort of the retreat center at the end of our various journeys. I was especially thankful for the cozy comfort of the jacuzzi. After the usual introductions and reunions, most of us retired early in anticipation of Saturday's activities.

A moving morning devotion led by George Jones started and set the tone for an uplifting and eye-opening day. John Billings introduced us to the power of stories and challenged us to discover in sharing our own, the cycles that connect our lives. Jack Ergo artfully and actively engaged us in the ministry of music, expanding our minds to new hymns, new ideas, and new ways of looking at God and "her" church.

Afternoon free time led to quiet reflection and bold exploration, both of ourselves and of the beautiful countryside. Although the winter air was brisk, the landscape drew many of us outside to stroll the pastures, cross the streams, frolic with the horses, and bask in the beauty of God's creation on a sunny day at a Midwestern getaway.

The culinary highlight of the weekend, for those of you seeking the food section, came at dinnertime. Kip, Larry, and several family and friends from Wichita prepared all the food. With tossed salad (awesome dressing, Kip!), baked potatoes, and filet mignon grilled to order, it was a dining experience rivaling even the finest of restaurants. Fresh fruit pies and vanilla ice cream finished off the dining extravaganza, and me — I could barely get out of the hot tub later.

The sharing of stories has always been a particularly special part of GALA retreats for me, as we are able to discuss many of our personal joys, problems, and concerns in a spirit of acceptance, support, and love. I felt God's presence as we gathered again for that purpose Saturday night, and I was touched by the openness of the group and the healing power of the Lord that dwelt among us as we met. I was profoundly affected by the energy of that room. Thanks to all who shared. An energetic, yet worshipful, campfire led by Jerry Dale closed out the day. Harmonies of praise and celebration filled the hall and our hearts — even though somebody didn't think we could do a three-part round. I guess we showed him. What a great way to end a day — in song.

The Sunday communion service left me excited to begin life anew, but saddened that the weekend was at an end. I longed to stay with my GALA friends for another day . . . or at least another meal — you know how us RLDS folks like to eat. Thanks to all the wonderful people who came to the retreat, and a special thanks to those who did such an excellent job of arranging this unique and energizing experience. I'll look forward to seeing you all again soon.

*Mike Brush lives and works as a special education teacher in Independence, Missouri, and is a graduate of Graceland College ('92).*

## The Journey Is Worthwhile

A letter to GALA  
from Richard C. Greenaway  
Scarborough, Ontario

On a recent visit to the Los Angeles area I had the opportunity to reconnect with Ted and Gail Biller. After an enjoyable afternoon of catching up on what has been happening with GALA, having not had contact for the past few years, I asked Gail to re-submit my name and new address to the GALA newsletter. Since receiving the Fall '97 issue my thoughts have often come back to President Grant McMurray's address to the participants of the '97 GALA international retreat: "I want you to know that the gay and lesbian community is a welcome part of the body of Christ." The joy I felt as I read those words enveloped me with a warmth of spirit and elation of God's all encompassing love. Although the journey is not yet finished, it does not seem as ponderous an undertaking as it did so many years ago.

When I first approached the church about my sexual orientation, back in 1972, the counsel given to me by my pastor was to develop a relationship with a woman and marry, if I wanted to fulfill my desire to follow God's will in my life. Six years later during the breakup of a five-year marriage, I was blessed with a powerful experience of God's love and acceptance of me for who and what I truly am. Finally, I was able to accept the person God had always intended me to be. As I struggled over the next few years, seeking out what course my life should take, I was blessed periodically with various people directed into my life. We were able to share our mutual experiences and talk of concern for the need of a form of dialogue to take place within the church, regarding our standing and role with the Zion concept.

Now over twenty years later, the establishment of dialogue and reconciliation has taken root. I am grateful for the steadfastness of those in GALA in pulling together a group that had wandered far too long outside of the church's embrace. Never more do we need to feel apart from our non-gay brothers and sisters. We can now become active participants, sharing in the work to bring about Zion here on earth, by utilizing the talents God has blessed us with.

We stand now at a time when no individual should feel their difference as an isolation from the whole, thinking they are the only one feeling the way they do. A time when no individual need experience the turmoil of drowning their feelings, in contemplation of suicide, because of their uniqueness of being. GALA has provided a lifeline, by which one can grab a hold, manned by a well-established group on Zion's shore. A group able to work within the church in removing the barriers of ignorance, caused by the fear and misunderstanding of others. No individual need waste too many years of their lifetime seeking out others with whom to connect. People who are able to understand, care, and give the nurturing needed to aid individuals journeying into the body of Christ.

Much thanks goes out to all of you who have served on the electoral body of GALA, to those who have labored to put together the GALA newsletter, and to those who have worked the front lines, as well as behind the scene, to organize the various retreats and gatherings for fellowship throughout the past years. It brings to bear more fully President McMurray's statement: "But surely it is a journey worth taking."

The journey surely has been worthwhile, and Gay and Lesbian Acceptance has become more than just an acronym thought up by an assembly of people searching for meaning, within their church family, one Fall afternoon at a home in Kansas City. GALA is now truly a concept realized, witnessing of God's grace and love for all creation. We can finally feel the wholeness of spirit that comes from reconciliation and its healing qualities. To be part of the process taking place within Zion in establishing an avenue by which God's spirit of healing can reach out to all of His creation.

May God's spirit continue to bless and guide all of you in GALA, on the remaining journey still ahead, as we strive to further fulfill God's direction for our lives. Keep up the good work.

*The following is excerpted from The Kansas City Star, April 30, 1998:*

## **A Call for Togetherness**

RLDS leader tells conferees to work for unity on tough issues

By Helen T. Gray

President W. Grant McMurray recalled his church's early beginnings of persecution and conflict in his sermon Sunday night at the world conference of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. Yet the church considers itself a people of peace — a peace that comes from “the heart of God,” he said in a speech to 5,000 people attending the service at the RLDS Auditorium in Independence. As the church prepares to go into the next millennium, it is still struggling with the question, “What kind of people shall we be?” McMurray said.

Tough issues lie ahead, but McMurray warned that members should not become divided. One issue will be decided today. For the first time, the church will vote on whether women will be admitted into one of the highest church bodies. McMurray is proposing that two women be called to the Council of Twelve Apostles. On another issue, “We struggle today with the proper way of expressing the sense of calling and giftedness of persons with varying lifestyles and orientations,” he said, “including those who identify themselves as gay or lesbian.” “In a world which cannot come to common ground on any of the medical, psychological, cultural and social issues which swirl around this topic, the church cannot be expected to have those ready answers. But here is what we can expect: that every person who walks through our doors will be received with open arms,” McMurray said.

## A Matter of Choice

by Glenna Henry

As a new District President a few years ago I was taken by surprise when a young elder, serving as pastor of a small congregation, and his sister approached me following a District Conference with the information that he was gay. He came to me because he was filled with an overwhelming desire to be open and honest with his congregation and community, but he was deeply concerned about their feelings. He wanted to know what he should do. In that moment I was confronted with an administrator's nightmare and also with an overwhelming awareness of my own inadequacy to meet the challenge that was before me.

As I listened, I realized this young man had literally been walking a tight-wire between two identities for much of his life. In that instant I felt the awful weight of his burden. His sister told me the family had been informed and assured me that though it was a struggle they were doing okay.

My first concern was for the well being of this sensitive young man and his immediate family, but my next concern was for his church family. I asked how he thought his congregation might react if he came out. He felt some would be okay with it, some would totally reject his ministry and others he just didn't know about. In all honesty I felt unprepared to give him any guidance at that moment, but I said I would talk to some people and get back to him right away. In the meantime I suggested he pray about his decision and approach it with utmost sensitivity and care.

The Church Administrator's Handbook was helpful in my search for direction and I passed the information along to the young elder. A phone call to a friend at World Church further clarified the church's stance, though much of the final interpretation appeared to be left to the administrator of the jurisdiction with regard to gays serving as priesthood. A subsequent visit with our Regional President helped to strengthen my personal conviction that to heavy-handedly silence gay ministers was not an acceptable answer for me.

A couple of weeks later I received an angry phone call from a priesthood member in the young elder's congregation. She said she had heard rumors around town that he was gay. She demanded to know if they were true and if so, what was I going to do about it? This attack came from someone I had known personally for years and had thought was my friend, however it was quite clear we had major differences of opinion on this sensitive issue!

I tried to be as patient and gentle as possible in explaining she should not base opinions on speculation and that any such personal information was privileged and private. She stated some truths, some half-truths and lots of hearsay regarding the situation. Scripture was then quoted which she felt supported her belief that to be gay was to be living in the depths of sin. In her opinion being gay meant he should not be serving in public ministry and in fact she thought he should be silenced. After sharing information about church policy, I suggested she should address any personal questions about lifestyle to him directly. He would, I said, respond to her questions openly and honestly.

Following her call I informed the young elder about her concerns and he took the initiative to visit with her privately. Unfortunately his effort to address the issue with her was to no avail. She began contacting members of the congregation with the information, attempting to garner support for her position. The net effect was very disruptive to the little congregation and distressing to the young man and his family. At my request two evangelists met with the woman and her contingent to try and defuse the situation. Even this effort met with little success.

Several members eventually left the congregation, though those who remained loyal drew great strength and support from one another. Due in part to the pressures, the young elder stepped down as pastor but continued to minister effectively in his office. The priesthood member who created the disruption left the district shortly thereafter. In my opinion if the behavior of a priesthood member is such as to lead people astray and not to uplift and edify them, then the integrity of that individual should be called into question. In this case the actions of that priesthood member were far more destructive to the congregation than the gay elder's coming out!

It took a lot of soul-searching and information-seeking to finally come to a decision to allow the young man to continue in his priesthood office. It would have been so very easy to have just taken his priesthood license and thus deprive him of the authority to function in an office to which God had clearly called him. However my personal understanding of God's calling of individuals into His service powerfully affirms the worth of all persons. My decision was probably equally a reflection of personal conviction and faith in Jesus Christ. When I tried to look at the situation through the eyes of Jesus, I found I could not condemn this young man, neither could I deny him the right to serve his Lord through priesthood. I hold no claim to perfect understanding and I certainly have my share of prejudices, but it seems clear to me that God would neither deprive someone the opportunity to minister nor deprive someone the opportunity to be ministered to just because of sexual orientation!

For me, having a gay son and a gay niece has been both a struggle and a joy, but it has also broadened my perspective and sharpened my perception with regard to the worth of souls. In addition it has brought deeper understanding of the divinity of individual giftedness and calling. The struggle, as those who have been there will understand, comes not because of who they are, but because of who I am. The joy comes when we recognize we are all one in Christ!

My experience as an administrator was extremely difficult and my stance officially may have been a bit precarious at times. Given a few years to insulate the event, though I am still convinced that what transpired was in line with what God wishes for all humankind, I can now look at the situation with a little more compassion for those who objected. I believe we are all recipients of the Grace of God and thus worthy of His love. Additionally I believe He desires that we view and accept one another equally . . . regardless of who or what we are!

*Glenna Henry is a High Priest who lives in Columbia, Missouri, with her husband Jerry and is the mother of Dan Henry, an active member of GALA living in Columbus, Ohio. When Todd Davison openly acknowledged that he was gay, Glenna was the church administrator with jurisdiction over the Macon, Missouri congregation where he was pastor.*

# HOMOSEXUALITY AND THE CHURCH

## A Call to Be Transformed

By John Billings

We are all hearing it, the voice of “Transformation 2000”. We hear the voice loud and clear calling the church to a mission that suggests we commit our actions, creativity, and resources to an incredible transforming goal: “We will become a world-wide church dedicated to the pursuit of peace, reconciliation, and healing of the spirit.” What an extraordinary goal we have set for the RLDS Church as we move forward into the future. It calls us to understand and articulate a clear theology regarding peace and justice. It brings us into relationships with children, youth, and young adults. The goal of Transformation 2000 calls us to discover new gifts and resources, to respond to new ministries, and to enlist new workers. Yet, there is a question in my mind as I consider a part of the church that, despite our best intentions, really is not accepted as part of the church. What does it mean for the RLDS gay and lesbian community when the church calls us, both members and friends, to the journey of “Transformation 2000”?

I was recently reviewing the Autumn 1997 edition of a newsletter called “Dialogue”. It is printed by the Brethren/Mennonite Council for Lesbian and Gay Concerns. The lead editorial speaks loudly and clearly about “Transformation”.

“Transformation is a word often heard in discussions on homosexuality, bisexuality, and the church -- as well it should be, for transformation is central to our Christian confession. As Christians, we profess to believe that even death can be transformed into life by the power of the love of God.

Too often, however, transformation is spoken of as if it were one-dimensional. Too often it is asserted that God’s transformative power is unilaterally directed and uniformly predictable. Too often Christians assert that we can wield God’s transformative power as if it were the tool of our own will.

In reality, transformation cannot be neatly packaged into “dialogue sessions,” studies, conference deliberations, or one-sided ministries aimed at changing individual lives (my own side note: including Temple School courses on human sexuality and sexual orientation). God’s transformative power cannot be scheduled, voted upon, limited, or enforced. It cannot be construed to touch someone else’s life but not our own.

Transformation happens, and most importantly, transformation happens in relationships. We know it is God’s transformative power that has been unleashed when everyone involved has been changed.”

The question arises again, “What does it mean for the RLDS gay and lesbian community when the church calls us to the journey of “Transformation 2000”?” Does GALA, as a representative of the RLDS gay and lesbian community, have the needed relationship with the church in order to be part of Transformation 2000? Are we victims of a one-sided view of transformation? Is the RLDS church willing to engage their gay, lesbian, bisexual members and friends in relationships that allow God’s transformative power to make real the words, “peace, reconciliation, and healing of the spirit?”

I have personally experienced God’s transformative power. God’s power has healed my spirit and has brought me into many wonderful friendships with persons who are gay, lesbian, and bisexual. I have been blessed by the gift of God’s Spirit resident in their lives. We have shared in a mutual experience of transformation. These winds of change - of transformation - have provided my life with an incredible experience of understanding and wholeness. God has gifted me to understand relationships by looking at the quality of love in the relationship, whether it is a heterosexual or homosexual couple involved. The love of same gender relationships is a gift from God and surely a part of the created order of life.

I know the testimony of others who have also experienced this gift of God’s transformative power. Yet, if the RLDS church and the mission of “Transformation 2000” is to have real meaning in the lives of hundreds of gay and lesbian members and friends, the commitment to transformation must be embraced by all who proclaim Jesus Christ, not just a few.

Yes, there is evidence in society and the church of changing attitudes towards homosexual people. This was evidenced recently by a more inclusive attitude towards GALA at the 1998 World Conference. There is growing rejection of the traditional stereotypes that have caused so much misunderstanding and abuse of homosexual people. There are many biblical scholars who now express the view that the same-gender sexual relationships portrayed and condemned in the Bible are irrelevant to our modern understanding of homosexual orientation. Some interpret the biblical and modern understandings of homosexual relations in such a way as to affirm that loving, long-term committed homosexual relationships are not condemned in Scripture at all. The number of Christian and church-related organizations providing fellowship for gay, lesbian, and bisexual Christians and advocating for changes in attitudes, church regulations and laws regarding homosexuality have grown rapidly in recent years.

However, the damaging stereotypes are still alive and well in the actions and attitudes of many people and congregations of the church. The debate regarding biblical understandings is a hot and difficult issue. Often the transformative power of God is rejected as hostile pressures persist. Many continue to hang on to the empty statement, "love the sinner, but not the sin." For some, whatever may be said of homosexual orientation, any acts of love expressing that orientation are seen as intrinsically evil. The only acceptable Christian lifestyle for such people on this understanding is celibacy.

Yes, real-life situations confront the church with questions that demand action and answers. What does it mean for the RLDS gay and lesbian community when the church calls us to the journey of "Transformation 2000"?

- Will sexual orientation remain as a barrier to the admission of gay men and lesbian women into full opportunities of leadership and ministry within the church?
- Is the answer to the question above the same if the gay man or lesbian woman is openly living in a loving relationship of committed permanence?
- Will gay and lesbian people have the opportunity to work, worship, live, and create their families without being oppressed for loving whom they love?
- Will we recognize that within the RLDS Church there are gay and lesbian people hoping for a place in the journey of "Transformation 2000" -- hoping for a place at home in the church?

"Transformation 2000" means nothing unless we are willing to embrace new truth and greater love for all of God's creation. We must journey together in "the pursuit of peace, reconciliation, and healing of the spirit."

*John Billings is the Regional Administrator for East Central States Region and the Stake President for St. Louis Stake. He has been an appointee of the church for fourteen years and an active member of GALA since 1986.*

*The following are official statements of the RLDS Church addressing sexual orientation and homosexuality:*

## **Affirmation of Human Diversity**

Adopted by the World Conference on April 10, 1992

The gospel of Jesus Christ reveals the unqualified love of God and the inestimable worth of all persons. An awareness of God's love and of the love of others is essential to human fulfillment. For these reasons, we celebrate the rich diversity of human life.

However, human beings often fear, hate, and abuse each other because of ignorance about such factors as socioeconomic status, culture, race, gender, age, size, sexual orientation, and mental or physical disability. Such prejudicial behavior undermines the personal and spiritual development of both abuser and abused, and denies the mutual benefits of shared giftedness.

As persons of faith, we confess our own imperfections in attitude and action. Nevertheless, we accept the responsibility to resist fear and hate in all forms and to strive continuously to eliminate expressions of prejudice and discrimination.

We declare our belief that "all are called according to the gifts of God to them." We therefore acknowledge and affirm human diversity by creating a spirit of openness and peace within our congregations where all persons may find acceptance and the opportunity to share their giftedness.

We commit ourselves to work with all persons of goodwill to promote mutual respect, appreciation, and peace in all relationships.

## **Statement on Homosexuality**

Adopted by the Standing High Council on March 18, 1982

The following guidelines should be noted by administrative officials in carrying out the teachings of the church and performing ministry involving cases of homosexuality:

1. The church recognizes that there is a difference between homosexual orientation and homosexual activity (defined as sexual acts between persons of the same sex). The former is accepted as a condition over which a person may have little or no control; the latter is considered immoral and cannot be condoned by the church.
2. The church affirms that Christian marriage is a sacred covenant relationship, ordained of God between a man and a woman. The sacrament of marriage has a long theological and ecclesiastical history, and the symbolism is exclusively heterosexual. Homosexual unions are not and should not be considered marriages in the sacramental sense.
3. The church affirms the worth of all persons. Homosexuals as well as heterosexuals are children of God and have full claim upon the acceptance and reconciling ministry and care of the church. That is, individuals with a homosexual orientation who refrain from homosexual acts should be fully accepted into the ongoing life of the congregation. Those persons who engage in homosexual acts should be dealt with in terms of redemptive ministry and/or church law procedures in the same way as those who engage in heterosexual acts outside of marriage.
4. In the critical matter of ordination, the church should not admit a practicing homosexual to the priesthood. It cannot sanction homosexual acts as morally acceptable behavior any more than it can endorse heterosexual promiscuity. If a member of the priesthood admits to, or is found to be engaged in homosexual behavior, the administrative officer having jurisdiction should institute procedures for silencing according to church law.

There will be instances in which those in leadership positions will become aware of individuals who are non-practicing homosexuals and who are seeking help in the area of sublimating their sexual impulses. For such persons, the possibility and opportunity for ordination should be kept open.

## Simple Truths

by Jeffrey Hiles

My sister held my hand in the waiting room at the University of Kansas Medical Center. We sat silently as any attempt of reassuring conversation seemed stilted and artificial. The year was 1987. We both were afraid.

I was grateful for her presence which bolstered my not-too-resolute courage as I was about to confront a possible life-threatening diagnosis. A prolonged respiratory infection coupled with my gay sexual orientation had resulted in tests for both HIV status and AIDS-related pneumonia. I now awaited the results.

After a period of time which seemed like a small piece of eternity, we were ushered to a room to await the doctors. The infectious disease specialist entered accompanied by two interns who mimicked their mentor's demeanor. I inhaled a large gasp of air. No, I didn't have pneumonia. I had bronchitis. But I was HIV positive.

My mortality and the prospect of a painful demise were frightening and a constant vision during those initial few months. I felt betrayed by my own body and I was depressed. Those people and activities that had traditionally brought joy and meaning to my life now appeared unimportant, and I was mired in self-pity.

I knew I needed to find something that would lift me out of the "shadows" I found myself in. A transition from self-absorption to engagement in the world about me was mandated. I found solace in the scriptural reference, heard repeated throughout my childhood, that it is our calling to help those in need. Jesus said, "In as much ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me." I believe this admonition teaches us that when we care for the most vulnerable in our world we move closer to God.

I heard of a new fledgling organization whose sole purpose was to help people with HIV/AIDS. I applied and was accepted to its Board of Directors. Its name - Good Samaritan Project. I experienced at Good Samaritan Project intense sorrow and rapturous joy. I remember the faces of dying individuals whose hands I held seeking both to give and receive solace. And saddest of all I remember desperate young men coming to Good Samaritan Project who were alone, abandoned by companions, friends and family, and who were sick and unable to work, without any means of help for financial resources for their physical needs and for their spiritual/emotional well-being.

It was painful as I felt great empathy for these people and as I could not help but wonder whether a painful future awaited me. Yet, I knew I was doing God's work. Allowing myself to experience and attempting to help with the suffering of others, paradoxically, lead me from my sadness, and I began to experience, as if a child, the wonders of joy and love.

I felt rather like the young seminarian in the play Mass Appeal when he expresses the following: "I had a tank of tropical fish. Someone turned up the tank heater and they all boiled. I woke up on a Friday morning - went to feed them - and there they were - all of my beautiful fish floating on the top. Most of them split in two. Others with their eyes hanging out. It looked like violence, but it was such a quiet night. And I remember wishing I had the kind of ears that could hear fish screams because they looked as if they suffered and I wanted so badly to save them. That Sunday in church, I heard that Christ told his apostles to be fishers of men. From then on, I looked at all the people in the church as fish. I was young so I saw them as beautiful tropical fish and so I knew they were all quiet screamers. Church was so quiet. And I thought everyone was boiling. And I wanted the kind of ears that could hear what they were screaming about, because I wanted to save them. A few years later, the people in the church lost the stained glass look of tropical fish, and they were only catfish to me - over dressed scavengers. So I drowned out whatever I might be able to hear. I made my world - my tank - so hot that I almost split. So now I'm back - listening - listening for the screams of angels."

Too soon, complications from AIDS rendered me unable to engage in my profession of law. Other activities such as speaking on behalf of AIDS service organizations and tutoring at DeSalle [Education Center] became difficult if not impossible.

I experienced many hardships including AIDS related pneumonia triggering an acute asthmatic response, I experienced an inability to eat and hiccuping and belching lasting months caused by the opportunistic disease MAC (I was kept alive by first an 18 hour intravenous feeding of total protein nutriment, then a 12 hour drip.), and I experienced loss of vision caused by the CMV retinas.

Suddenly I was not the individual who I had been but rather a frail, needy shadow of my former self. Who was I now? It was a difficult time.

But, I remember the kindness and love given to me: Nancy Ditch who has caused and continues to cause me to exercise weekly by sharing stretching and yoga techniques; Merrill Proudfoot who calls and visits despite his own battle with prostate cancer; my friend Larry who despite some reluctance due to a fear of hurting me gave me injections of pain medication when I suffered almost daily nausea; my older sister Barbara who, during a visit, allowed both of us to cry releasing much of our anguish; my sister Nancy who insisting in a kind firm way that the nursing assistants at St. Luke's take better care of her older brother; My younger brother Tom who in an attempt to share his feelings called me "sweetheart" – an expression I never expected Tom to direct to me; my father who spent nights with me in the hospital so I would not have to be alone; my mother who long after fatigue had set in wiped my brow unceasingly and into the early morning hours to relieve my 104 degree temperature, and most of all my companion Bob, who always loved me and took care of me during long days of illness – hours spent preparing and giving me the intravenous food and medicine I needed to avoid death. All the time willing me to stay alive, supporting me, caring and loving me. And so many other acts of kindness – prayers, cards and letters, telephone calls, food and visits.

I would not choose to have AIDS but it has taught me to try to be in the moment and to give to others. Medical ethicist at Kansas University Medical Center, William Bartholome who is dying of cancer states:

"I am . . . unwilling to allow my life to revert to the common pattern of living primarily in the future, and, to a lesser extent in the past. I had spent precious little of my life living in the present; living in the almost overwhelming intensity and richness of the world around us. This means not only doing things like "stopping to smell the roses," but allowing oneself to be radically open to what is going on in the world. I find myself stopping over and over again to see or hear or feel something that before my illness would have been lost in the rush of experiences that seem to constitute our lives. I've grown increasingly intolerant of living on fast forward; of never having time for what makes life so precious and intensely satisfying; the incredible people who constitute our web of being."

Jesus challenges us to feed and house the needy, clothe the naked, visit the sick and come unto those in prison if we are to inherit the kingdom of God. Jesus also tells us to love one another. As the poet e. e. cummings articulates: "Unless you love someone, nothing else makes sense." My life prior to AIDS was filled with work and play often forgetting these simple truths. I have learned what truly is important is the love received from and given to others. This is our calling; this is my challenge to you.

## **IN REMBERENCE**

*Jeffrey Paul Hiles died in March at his home in Kansas City, Missouri. He preached the above sermon at Central Presbyterian Church in Kansas City in October of 1997. Hiles was a member of the Walnut Gardens, RLDS congregation in Independence, Missouri, and he authored the article, "Journey into the Light," which addressed HIV/AIDS and homosexuality and appeared in the July, 1994 issue of the Saints Herald.*

*Jeff was a partner at the law firm of Ramsey & Ford, a member of the Clay County and Missouri Bar Associations, a Member Emeritus of the Board of Directors of the Good Samaritan Project (an HIV/AIDS service organization), and was the recipient of the Ribbon of Hope Community Service Award. He graduated from Graceland College in 1974, entered law school at the University of Missouri, Kansas City in 1977, and passed the Missouri Bar in 1980.*

*The beloved companion and partner of Robert J. Cody, Jeff was considered by family and friends to have a great heart, a generous spirit, and a keen mind. His niece Sarah Mesle shares the following memory of Jeff:*

*“I don't know exactly how this ritual began, but for as long as I can remember Uncle Jeff has presided over any family gathering of any importance by composing a game of Jeopardy. On Christmas Eve he sits in the middle of the room, near the fire, slim legs crossed, a yellow legal pad propped on his knee, a glass of water at his side. He carries his courtroom manner full swing into every game of Jeopardy, conducting every interaction as though he were interrogating a star witness. We receive no sympathetic aphorism from Jeff during Jeopardy. He merely stares down his long, Hiles-family nose, points his finger imperiously and demands from each of us, in a voice I can't possibly imitate, ‘Question form, please.’ Yet his authoritarian demeanor never [diminished] his elegance, his generous gift of expending his precious energy to entertain us, his attention to our interests, his expansive ability, his joy in the whole experience of playing Jeopardy with family and friends.”*

## **GALAINfo**

GALA (Gay and Lesbian Acceptance) is an association of gay, lesbian, bisexual and straight persons, their families and friends of the RLDS (Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints) faith community.

GALA is committed to the pursuit of social justice and spiritual wholeness through dialog, education, and action for all persons gay, lesbian, straight, and bisexual. We celebrate diversity and affirm the worth of each individual in a community united by Jesus Christ.

### ***GALA***

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