



gala**news** THE LETTER

Serving members and friends of the
Community of Christ

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Retreat Reflections



Photo by Della Mowrey

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Retreat Reflections *by Clyde Frey*

Labor Day Weekend in Temple Grove, PA for the annual GALA Retreat...WOW!

This was my first 'GALA Retreat' and my expectations for the weekend were far exceeded! The scenic location is used by our Mission Center as reunion grounds, so I've had some contact with the location but usually with tents, RVs and a lot of people. The quiet serene atmosphere with wonderful weather heightened the celebration, affirmation and spiritual qualities of the weekend.

Together with my partner, Nathan, we planned and prepared for activities such as GAY Bingo, the Great Race – GAY Olympics, and the Talent Show; we had a pretty good idea how those would 'flow' and should turn out. We came prepared to help others enjoy the activities that had been planned for their benefit and it was apparently a huge success.

Although we'd generally spoken of the various other elements of the weekend in our meetings with David Howard, we were far less prepared for the celebrations, dialogue, education and spirituality that we discerned during our sharing with the other participants. I was not surprised to find that we had a commonality with gay, lesbian, and straight allies, but I was somewhat overwhelmed at times at the honesty, understanding and the pain of the journey that they were willing and able to share.

I've always felt that I can be a social type of person in the proper circumstances and the genuine love that I felt expressed in the dining hall, during social events, verbalized in the sharing sessions, and thoughtfully given in the classroom experience brought out the social person within me.

The feeling of comfort and safety permeated the entire weekend; everyone had their story of coming out and treatment by family and church. Some of the stories were alike in many ways and different in others, but the bottom line for me was the love for each

other expressed by all of the participants...without reservation, in an atmosphere of understanding and confidentiality. I truly felt uplifted and invigorated as I listened and participated and found that there are new friends around the country with whom we can communicate and share.

I was reminded of a devotion that I read recently in which a person stated, in part, "A home is a place where you feel safe..." and I realized that this was the feeling that I had in Temple Grove during the GALA experience...safe and at home!

The trip to the Kirtland Temple was an experience that I shall never forget. Although I have lived in the Buffalo-Niagara region for a number of years, this was my first visit inside the temple. The service was phenomenal, the music was full of energy, and the Spirit was truly present in our worship. The fellowship of the group gathered spoke volumes to my heart and I am so very thankful to have been a part of such an inspiring weekend and look forward to the possibilities of next year!

Retreat Reflections *by Pat Danielson*

As I departed the healing service held at the Kirtland Temple, as part of this year's GALA Retreat, I felt different. I felt warmth from these, my new friends, which I had not felt in a long time. I wanted that feeling to stay forever. I told my partner, Geri, that "I felt like I was home."

It was a wonderful coincidence that I, along with David Howard, and the other member of our pastorate, was scheduled to speak in our congregation on the Sunday following the retreat. David asked if I would be willing to share with the congregation about the GALA Retreat. I said, "Sure!" It was something I could hardly wait to do, but also knew that this would be the first time I would speak about GALA, or the gay community and to say the word, 'lesbian' from the pulpit. I was nervous as to how my message would be accepted.

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I prayed to God that if it was not a wise thing for me to share at this time, then please let me know. I prepared and while still not sure was about a mile away from church when I felt the peace of the Holy Spirit. I felt confirmation that what I was to say would be fine with Him.

Our goals that Communion Sunday and World Hunger Day were to emphasize not only the hunger for physical food; but, also the hunger for spiritual food which can come as a result of injustice. I used the opening scripture from the 62nd chapter of Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the suffering and afflicted. He has sent me to comfort the broken-hearted, to announce liberty to the captives and open the eyes of the blind. He has sent me to tell those who mourn that the time of God's favor to them has come." I told the congregation of those who hunger for love and acceptance. There are those who hunger for the miracle of healing, of communion, where Jesus says, "Come, and eat with me."

I shared some of the testimonies of those in attendance at the GALA Retreat. I told the congregation of those at the retreat who had been told they could not serve in their priesthood office or any activity of the church. One participant, when expressing her desire to continue to serve the church in her priesthood responsibilities and other activities, was told that the *one* activity she *could* do was to clean the church. Another man's testimony touched me so much. After being disillusioned by so many denominations, he told us of how loved and accepted he feels by his local Community of Christ congregation. But, these words bore through me, when he said, "If this church breaks my heart, I'm done." He shared that he would just stay home and worship God in his own way.

I shared in my sermon how time after time, I heard people at the GALA retreat, say, "Community of Christ is my church. It was the church I was raised in, I love my church. I believe in this church and I want to be accepted and loved within this church, and no other church!" I told the congregation that if this

church is breaking hearts it is not the church of Christ! If this church is not allowing people to be as active as they want to be, then this is not the church Christ wants us to be! We are *not* the Community of Christ!

Section 163 of the Doctrine & Covenants opens with this proclamation, "Community of Christ, your name, given as a divine blessing, is your identity and calling. If you will discern and embrace its full meaning, you will not only discover your future, you will become a blessing to the whole creation. Do not be afraid to go where it beckons you." I told the congregation that I have said from the pulpit and I'll say it again that until there is no 'us' and 'them', the Kingdom of God will not be realized. That what was Jesus was about in his ministry, making sure that there was no division of 'us' and 'them.' It is Jesus who calls all to His table to remember Him. All are called to this table! All are called home! All are to partake of the healing power of communion as we become one!

Following the church service that Sunday, many shared their warm comments. Many told me that it must have been difficult to share this from the pulpit. I did not hear anything negative from anyone! This is from my home congregation where some have struggled in their feelings about the gay community's involvement with church activities. I was so pleased when one particular member came up to me and said, "Thanks for sharing your testimony. You know, there are some of us who are still growing."

This GALA Retreat empowered me and healed me with a renewed commitment to be more courageous to speak out for the broken-hearted, to free captives of hate and ignorance. I can hardly wait till the retreat next year and I would encourage all who can to plan to attend. May we continue to pray for those 'who are still growing.' I believe that God is very much at work in this church and the time will come when *a//* will share in the leadership of this church. God bless us all as we meet the challenges of sharing our stories and being disciples of Jesus

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Christ. I pray that if not now, that some day soon, all may be able to feel *at home*.

Retreat Reflections *by Peter Smith*

"No." For ten years (since 1997), that had been my response when somebody would invite me to a GALA retreat. "No." I was too afraid to take the risk, unwilling to share myself as an openly gay man, especially with a group of people whom I did not know.

My eyes were opened to the beauty of GALA as I shared with over 30 people at Temple Grove campground in Pennsylvania this Labor Day weekend. I was very nervous at the beginning, but my partner Mark assured me that I would have a good time. I ended up having a wonderful time. Never in my life "out of the closet" have I felt so accepted and welcomed and loved, just as I am. Never in my life have I felt such a bond with the GLBT community. After hearing so many amazing personal stories, I realized how important it is for me to share my own story, and to never be afraid to stand up for what I know in my heart is true—that God created us and loves us just as we are.

Every activity at the retreat touched my heart, but our worship service at the Kirtland Temple was the most significant for me. While we were there, I felt our bond strengthen as we worshipped as brothers and sisters, and I also felt a connection to those who first worshipped there so long ago, and the struggles they faced. We, like they, know what it's like to feel rejection and isolation from the world around us. And we, like they, have chosen to press forward anyhow, and to share our stories and our message wherever people are willing to listen.

I now wish that I had said "Yes" all those years. However, I look forward from this GALA retreat with new hope for my life; with new friends across the country; and with a new expectation of the wonderful places God will lead us from here.

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President's Message

It is with great anticipation that we start the new GALA year with new leadership and a fully elected Board. This is a critical time in the life of GALA on the macro scale. We need to start planning for the 2010 Conference, develop a strategy of how we integrate WCN and the welcoming resources network into a cohesive approach, and support the election of members and allies as delegates to the Conference. But we also need to continue defining who we are, increasing involvement in the life of GALA, and providing opportunities for pastoral care and support for our members on their journey. This is a huge agenda, but as we work together, we can accomplish it.

I want to thank Alan Zimmerman for getting me engaged with GALA, and renewing our friendship; Carol Cavin for her years of help and support and the fine job she did with the minutes, the newsletter, and institutional memory; and finally, thanks to Allan Fiscus for stepping up to the plate one more time and navigating GALA through the recent transition. His leadership, insights, dedication, and mentoring have been and will continue to be priceless to this organization.

David Howard, GALA President

New Executive Board Members

Welcome to the following new members of the GALA Executive Board: Clyde Frey of Buffalo, Neordw York was elected Secretary; Pat Danielson of Oberlin, Ohio was elected Treasurer-Elect; and Chuck Hewitt of Independence, Missouri was elected to the 3-Year Member-At-Large position.

A Letter to Bill Russell

by
John
Lents

February 24, 2008

Hi Bill,

My name is John Lents....You may know of my family through our church affiliation--my father's long tenure in the Council of Twelve, or through other unexpected connections that seem to occur within this church community.

Several months ago, my mother asked if I'd read your book, *Homosexual Saints*. Gay rights/life/issues and "causes" have become areas of keen interest to her since I came out to her, my immediate and extended family two years ago. Somewhat wearily, I replied that I hadn't read it...but privately assumed that she'd make sure I had the opportunity to do so before long. Sure enough, during a recent visit she loaned me a copy and sent me back home with it. Quite candidly, Bill, I expected to read another church publication without much passion or interest. But to my great surprise, I read it in one sitting...having occasionally to put the book down to wipe away my tears, to regain my physical and emotional composure.

Unlike many of the stories recounted in *Homosexual Saints*, I have been very blessed in my own coming out/coming to terms experience. Nonetheless, I found many of my own fears, experiences and the gentle broadening of my spirituality echoed in each of these testimonies. And so, in appreciation of and for no reason other than to add my voice to this community of trailblazers, here is my story.

I was the youngest of three in a home full of love, in which our personal and professional lives were focused on the RLDS Church (Community of Christ). My father was in the church's Quorum of Twelve Apostles, while my uncle was a member of the First Presidency. As a result, I was fully immersed in the weekly routines of our church and its belief structure, and was well-acquainted with many of the church's leaders of the day. Although my life was sheltered, it was still a rich life for a child, being known, appreciated and supported by many "giants" of the church.

And so I lived my life according to those tenets and expectations, pleasing both family and friends, being active in my congregation, in Boy Scouts, in Zion's League, at reunions, while attending Graceland...and finding great satisfaction in the

richness of my adult responsibilities, spirituality and expectations. Along the way I found that I was frequently drawn to interests, neighborhoods and friends that were also attractive to the homosexual community. I knew where the gay boys hung out at Graceland, and I always sought out information about gatherings supportive of this population, but not once did I seriously consider that I, too, might be gay. Instead, I just attributed these interests to coincidence... similarities in "personality types."

Marriage in my mid-twenties was not a result of church or parental expectations, but rather the result of a mutual attraction, similar interests and goals. It was a marriage that for years was satisfying and happy, but which, in retrospect, lacked much of the physical comfort and connection that I knew existed for my family, and that I also sensed in the relationships of our friends. Adoption of our two children completed our family, and I worked to ensure that my family came first, that I was fulfilling, as best I could, the commitments I'd accepted as both husband and father.

Over time it became increasingly clear to my family, and later to me, that despite outward appearances and denials, all was not as it should be. Although I was active in the Melchisedec priesthood, professionally respected, very involved with my family, there was still an unaddressed emptiness in my life. In response, I took on more of an activist role, among other things broadly questioning and refining my professional practice, relocating to the west coast, serving as pastor of our small local congregation. I crafted a resolution on behalf of San Francisco Bay Stake when confronted with the continuing endorsement of the 1982 statement and policy regarding human sexuality.

I was fortunate during these years to find a few men in whom to confide my growing conflict. To each of them, I made it clear that my family was my first priority, and to their credit, they never once asked me to reconsider this commitment. Nonetheless, my relationship with them allowed me some emotional safety from which I explored a growing awareness of my sexual orientation and how I might feel about a same-sex relationship.

For many years I was able to look at my

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conflicted sexuality, "pigeon hole" it, and continue with my life as I wanted it to be. But as the children matured, I became increasingly impatient with them and uncomfortably hypocritical. More than anything else, I wanted the boys to be happy with themselves, but I couldn't model that for them myself. And as they slowly began to "own" my anger, I realized that they felt my love was conditional, that they were somehow responsible for the changes in our relationship. So after 25 years of marriage, I finally owned my life and my decisions, and came out to my wife.

Although I had dropped hints before, I always denied that I was gay when asked directly. So this time, it was a shock when there was no denial, when we both felt the foundation of our relationship suddenly shift. In response to my "self-outing," my wife's first comment was that "It doesn't change the man I fell in love with. Sex is such a small part of who you are." It was an incredibly loving response, more than I could have asked for. As we continued to search for a solid foundation for our family, my wife asked for five more years to allow time for both children to finish high school. I agreed, with every intention of doing so. But as happens to many of us in this situation, I discovered that it was another promise I couldn't keep. To come out, but then to keep it under wraps, to draw the entire family into my secret as though it were something filthy, was something I simply couldn't do. And so, six weeks later when I withdrew my agreement, our marriage technically ended.

After three days apart, my wife came home, and I told the children that I was moving out at the end of the school year. To say that this was a monumental shock would be an understatement; it was an announcement without warning. When I told them I was gay, the world as they knew it imploded. In the emotion of the moment, my oldest son threw an ottoman at me, and my younger son, through his tears, reassured me that I was still his dad. After a few heartbreaking questions, at their request, I left and walked the streets for two hours, waiting for my wife to call, to begin the long process of healing and restructuring our family.

The next day I began contacting family, opening myself and my life to them with a candor and intimacy I had never before attempted. The façade of my life had finally cracked; my secrets were secrets no more. Although I had hoped for their understanding, I couldn't have anticipated the love

with which my family received my news. They reassured me of their love, expressed an openness to the journey we were beginning, and voiced a deep concern for me and each member of my family.

Over the next few weeks as I came out publicly, I also wrote letters to extended family members, to family friends, and to friends in the congregations where I had worshipped over the years. It was my best effort at being honest, at "owning" the turmoil my coming out had created for us all. On another level, it was a cry for support, for understanding, and an opportunity to begin a dialogue. And it is here that much of my pain during those early days remains so raw.

Although there are a few notable exceptions, most of our family friends and those in my church community remained silent. At a time when I and my family needed their full support, we had to settle with sides taken, voices that were silent, and the echo of "How could he have done this?" I still find it ironic that those who were most supportive and least judgmental have been the students and parents of the school where I am principal—an "outing" that every male educator fears, and for good reason.

Moving out of our family home, I moved in with the man who has become my partner, my companion in love, life and spirit. I long to marry him...to formalize our relationship, to recognize what he is to me. However, fearful of painting him with the brush of the "man who broke up my marriage," I have taken time before "sharing" him publicly. And because my separation and divorce has taken nearly two years, we have wanted to be sensitive to the needs of my wife, my children and the community in which we all live and work. But now, as I become officially single, I am looking for the institutional acknowledgement that my feelings for Lawrence are honored; that our commitment has the same weight and legitimacy of those who surround me, who were models as I was growing up. I am looking for a spiritual home for us...for what we share and want to create.

I wish I could say that I've been back to my congregation, that I'm again active in my priesthood office. But the reality is that the last time I attended was on Palm Sunday two years ago —when I knew that within a week, my world and that of my family would be turned upside down. I cannot deny the presence of God in my life, in the watchcare with which I've been blessed these past few years. But the resurrection of my very being, the joy I have

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Congratulations to Pat and Sam Marmoy who will be celebrating their 50th wedding anniversary next month. We send our best and thank them for their spiritual, emotional and financial support over the years; but most importantly for walking with us in our quest for justice and inclusion in the Church we claim as our own!

Mark your calendars for the 2009 GALA Retreat. We will meet over the Labor Day weekend at Camp Doniphan, Excelsior Springs, MO and will plan how to address issues at the 2010 World Conference. President Veazey has accepted our invitation and will be in attendance.

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found in my life and in my relationships has instead come from those who haven't attended church in years, who have been able to look at me clearly without the filter of religious dogma.

I mourn the loss of my relationship with my wife, who cannot yet come to terms with the turn her life has taken. My children, to their credit, have accepted me as they now know me, but it has not been without cost. And I grieve for a church that has squandered the opportunity to lead in love, but instead settled for a cowardly decision to remain mired in fear.

At times in these past two years, I have spoken out against the point of view that I have "adopted an alternative lifestyle." I have done nothing of the sort. Instead, my lifestyle is as it was: I iron, I cook, I care for my family, I work and socialize, and live my life well-aligned to the values I hold most dear. I cannot imagine a more authentic life. There is no difference in the way I love, or why I love...it is only in the expression of that love that I differ from others. And of what consequence is that, if it allows me to live honorably, to the benefit of those with whom I daily interact?

Last year, prior to the church's World Conference, I wrote an open letter to the church leadership in the hope that it would once again open a dialogue and move us forward, as we sought a way to meaningfully include all members of the Community of Christ in an inclusive and legitimate manner. I hoped to see some form of this letter in the Herald, on the church website, to get a response from someone. But despite sending it to the church leadership council...to 21 leaders, I heard nothing for three months...no phone calls, no notes, no e-mail, nothing from anyone. Finally I received a letter from Steve Veazey, current president of the church.

The letter "celebrated" my journey, the fact that I had found support within my church experience. It was benign, boring, and read like a response that was carefully crafted to make no promises. After a cursory reading, I tossed it aside, a physical reflection of how I felt my effort to dialogue, to explain, to support, had been

received. And so, with my partner, I have become one of the unchurched, creating instead a serenity that draws from the peace and support of our own community, from our early spiritual awakening, and from a vision of who we want to be individually and together.

Will I begin attending church again? Will I take advantage of organizations like GALA? Frankly, I doubt it. Their silence in my time of need, the continuing deferral of legitimate timely discussions, and the appearance of "playing at church" have freed me from the need and desire to maintain an active relationship. I will not revoke my membership, for I can't deny the experiences that have been mine as a lifetime member of the Community of Christ. But for now, I find my solace, my worship, my theology in lives well-lived, in actions of inclusion rather than mundane and mandatory acknowledgement.

I sound angry and resigned. I've tried hard to avoid this, but truthfully, I am all that and much more. Simply put, I had expected more of my church. While I appreciate the sincere efforts of those who have asked after me, and supported me and my family, they do not speak for, nor represent, the institutional thinking of this organization. Until the Community of Christ finds a way to accept the gifts of its *full* membership, then let's face it—we are not, in reality, a community. So as a fringe member of that presumed community, my life and voice will instead be lived and spoken where they can be acknowledged and accepted for what they are: true gifts of God.

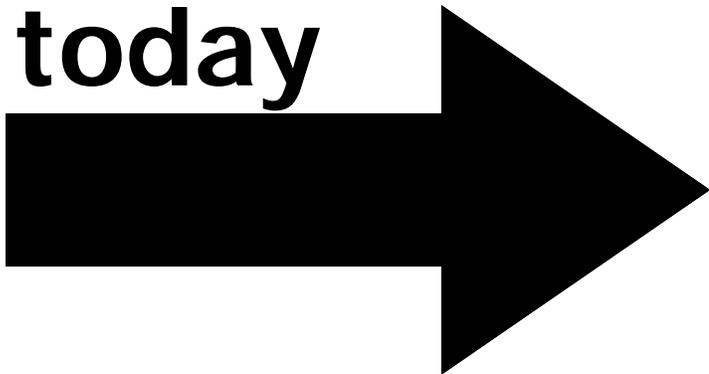
Thank you, Bill, for giving me the opportunity, the reason, and the nudge to write my story. May you be reassured that in giving us a collective voice, you have validated the individual lives we struggle to create, to share, to understand. Thank you for this gift.

Step by Step

GALA has received permission to use the name of the church, Community of Christ, on our letters and materials from this point forward; a significant step in our faith journey. As many of you know, when GALA was beginning in the late 1980's, use of the church name was strictly prohibited.

The Eastern Canada Mission Center is considering two resolutions dealing with priesthood and commitment/marriage ceremonies. More details can be found on their website, www.communityofchrist.ca/east/east.htm; click on "Calendar & Events," "Mission Conference," and "Notice of Motion 2007." Please give them your prayer consideration as they embark on the journey with us.

Renew Your Membership today



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