

THIS IS MY CHURCH.
YOU'RE STUCK WITH ME!



Allan Fiscus

Allan Fiscus has been a member of GALA since 1986 and was its first president. He has been a leading GALA activist ever since. A nurse by profession, Allan is an elder in the Lansing, Michigan, congregation of the Community of Christ.

FROM MY EARLIEST recollections, I've been active in the RLDS faith: attending church with my family in our home congregation or in the congregations of my grandparents. Living in a community where we were the only RLDS family was difficult. My peers didn't understand why we were driving twenty miles or more to attend church, bypassing the local Catholic or Methodist church. Kids can be cruel and prejudiced when faced with differences. But attending Zioners, Zion's League, singing in youth choirs, attending reunions, and participating in retreats were a great joy in my life and a safe place. I learned about community and the love of Christ through the fellowship of the Saints.

Looking back, my first awareness of my homosexuality (though I didn't know the terminology then) was at about age six or seven. Somehow I knew that I was different. As I continued to mature, I didn't have the same feelings I was hearing the other guys talk about.

My junior high and high school years were a terror for me. I didn't fit into the cliques. I didn't join the sexual games or activities that were occurring in the gym showers or bathrooms. Sure, I was excited about what I was seeing, yet it wasn't right. That isn't what being gay is all about.

I was "the queer." I was the guy who received the gay slurs. The other students ripped my clothes, defaced my books. They shoved me into lockers and slammed the doors on me. Once, I had to go to the emergency room to have a partially severed ear reattached. When I told the principal what happened, his response was, "You'll just have to deal with it." A teacher whom I later learned was a lesbian tried to give me hope. She encouraged me "hang in there," promising that it would get better. It never did. I hated school, and my grades showed it.

My only solace was attending church and being with the youth and Saints I could trust. But other church families were twelve or more miles away, so daily contact was impossible.

I prayed for God to "fix me," to make me normal. The sense that I had a work to do in the "gay world" was always present. When I talked to my pastor about my gay thoughts and ideas, his response was, "It's a phase. You'll get over it." As a freshman in high school, I was given to know that I had a calling to the priesthood. As I continued in earnest to pray about that calling, again the sense of having a special work to do filled me.

At age seventeen, I received my patriarchal blessing. It reinforced my calling and that there was future work for me to do. As the years have gone by, I have seen many things stated in my blessing come to pass. I was ordained later that year in September 1972 by my grandfather and my pastor.

In my senior year, knowing my grades were not good enough for college, I joined the Navy, using the delayed enlistment program. Af-

ter graduating, I started to have doubts about this choice. Seeking clearer guidance, I prayed for answers to five questions, feeling that unless I could have these answers, I could not join the the Navy. I received the answers during a reunion two weeks before my enlistment date. God does answer prayers! I went to my enlistment with great reassurance.

I have to laugh about the government's "Don't ask, don't tell" policy. I had never seen so many gay and lesbian people in my life. I learned more about the gay life and came out in the Navy. I also had my first boyfriend. We dated for two years, until I left the Navy.

For some reason, I seemed to be a person other gay people could talk to. My home was filled with gay and lesbian military who needed a safe place to be themselves. I listened to others struggling with their orientation, their fear of the Navy's "witch hunts" (investigations to rout out gays), and tried to provide stability for those dwelling on suicide.

While I was stationed on Okinawa, I wrote to the First Presidency, asking for guidance regarding homosexuality and the church. I stated that, if being gay was incompatible with my priesthood, then I would surrender my priesthood card. I received a response generally stating that I should continue to do the work I had been called to do.

In 1980, I left the Navy, returned to Michigan, and decided to enter nursing school. I love the medical/nursing field and figured that church reunions and retreats are always looking for nurses. This way I could attend church camps, which I dearly loved, and provide a service, too.

While attending Nazareth College, I had confided to a Community of Christ woman that I was homosexual. She responded supportively, stating that she still cared about me. But a few weeks later, I learned that she had gone to my pastor (the same man who had called me to the priesthood) and told him. He came to my apartment and asked me if it were true. I said it was. He then told me that I was being silenced. When I asked why, he said, "Because you are a homosexual, you can't control your sexual urges and will abuse children." I was shocked by his ignorance of homosexuality and the breadth of

his assumptions. Never in my life have I been interested in children, only in men my age or older—in fact, ironically, in men of his age.

I told him about my letter to the First Presidency and asked him if he had consulted the First Presidency. He said that the letter didn't matter. He was handling this situation locally.

The next day, the district president telephoned to say that I would no longer be needed at the camps and reunions where I was scheduled to work. He would notify the camps. I was not to attend any church function without a family escort. I could no longer play the piano or organ for church services. I could no longer clean the church or mow the lawns. I could attend church services, but only with my family. The congregation was not to be informed.

I was devastated. It seemed as if my whole world was gone. My family was just as shocked as I was.

Then a couple of weeks later, we found out that my stepfather, a teacher in the Aaronic Order, was having an affair. When my devastated mother and I went to this same pastor and told him about the affair, his response was that the needs of real men are greater than a woman's needs. Mom should increase her activity with the Women's Department and other church activities. Not long afterward, my stepfather was called to a higher priesthood office. This really rocked my faith in the church. A man having an affair with a married woman not only keeps his office but is called to another, while I can't sweep the chapel floor because of the pastor's homophobia? It was unreal.

I tried to attend church; but when there was a need for a pianist and I wouldn't play, the Saints would hassle me for not helping out. Or when the communion emblems were not ready and the service should be starting, I would get pointed questions: "Why aren't you doing your job?" Other comments followed: "Allan, the lawn looks terrible. The church is dirty." I had a choice between accepting the injustice silently or disobeying the pastor and explaining the situation. People were mad at me. It was impossible to be part of the congregation under these circumstances. The final straw was that the district president didn't tell reunion and camp directors that I wouldn't be coming, so they were mad at me too.

When we visited my grandparents, Grandpa had always had me sit on the rostrum with him. Now I had to lie and make up excuses to leave before church time, so I wouldn't have to explain my silencing to the man that ordained me. My family was now lying to cover for me, too. I could no longer handle the anger and disappointment of the Saints. I stopped attending church. At this time, I was twenty-four years old.

To fill the void and emptiness, I started hanging out with friends, going to gay bars, and attending parties. Eventually I got mixed up with drugs and alcohol. For years I tried to cover the loneliness and pain with parties and drugs. I was a heavy user, a fifth of alcohol a day, two or three joints a day. I dropped out of nursing school, lost my home and car, and eventually filed for bankruptcy.

Finally, I realized that this was not the world I wanted to live in. My church life had been taken away from me. The drugs and alcohol were separating me from my family and my God. So I decided I wanted out of this world. One Saturday, I made plans for committing suicide. That afternoon, my mother showed up at the door, her mom-telepathy telling her I might not be alive tomorrow. We talked.

She understood my despair, and she really couldn't give me a reason to go on. She admitted, "Your church has let you down. We have let you down. Your gay friends have let you down. Your dreams to be a camp nurse are gone." She pleaded, "Allan, before you do anything, go to your God. The one person in your life that hasn't let you down has been God. Remember the times in your life when you were healed when the doctors said you would be blind, or that one leg would be shorter than the other? He's answered your prayers clearly when you've gone to him. Go to him before you do anything." We said goodbye.

I spent the rest of the afternoon and evening on the living room floor with a butcher knife in front of me, praying: "God, help me find a way back to the church and to a productive way to live, or help me leave this world." In the very early hours of the morning, I felt surrounded by a warm presence and heard a calming voice saying that I was loved, that the things I desired in my life would come to pass if I healed myself of the drugs and alcohol, that I should prepare my-

self to do the things I have always known I would be doing in this church.

The following morning I went to church and sat down next to Mom. I was twenty-eight and had been driven away from the church four years earlier. That day I stopped the alcohol and drug use. I terminated the negative friendships. I started to rebuild my life. I started being active in the church as I felt led.

Over the next few months, I spent a great deal of time in prayer while going through self detox. Part of my prayer focus was “God, help me find other gay Saints.” One evening, while working as an orderly at a local medical center, I happened to be doing CPR on a patient when a phone number came into my mind. The number had the 816 area code, which includes Independence, site of RLDS world headquarters. For days that number stayed in my mind. Finally I dialed it.

When a man answered, I said, “My name is Allan. I’m a member of the Community of Christ, I’m gay, and looking for anyone who knows of any possible Community of Christ gay support system.” He asked how I got his number. I told him.

He said okay. He then told me that he, too, was Community of Christ and gay. In fact, at that very moment, he was meeting with a group of GALA (Gay and Lesbian Acceptance)¹ members in his home in Kansas City. I then shared my story with him.

Eventually I met the members of the GALA group. A GALA non-gay support person asked me, “Why were you silenced? If you did nothing wrong, what were the charges that created the silencing?” I had not been violating any policy, so I should not have been silenced. This person encouraged me to write to World Church and ask for an explanation. I did. The response was that I was silenced because I couldn’t handle being gay, that I had voluntarily surrendered my priesthood—this was a surprise!—and that I should contact my local leaders if I had any more questions.

¹ GALA (Gay and Lesbian Acceptance) was formed in 1984 by a group of Community of Christ members, to offer support and education to our faith movement’s gay, lesbian, family, friends, and congregations. See www.galaweb.org.

When I went to the pastor—by now a different man—I shared my story with him. I asked if he could find out what really happened. He checked with all the congregational priesthood present at the time of my silencing. None of them had supported the pastor's action, although nobody had spoken to me about it. My new pastor started proceedings to reinstate my priesthood. A year later, the paperwork was complete and my priesthood restored. That was in 1988—eighteen years ago; and despite my joy, it has only been within the last twelve years that I have stopped fearing another silencing and felt safe within my church community.

The things I knew as a child have started to come to pass.

I finished my associate nursing degree in 1994. That same year, I was camp nurse for a reunion at the grounds where I had my first reunion experience at age five. It was the fulfillment of a dream.

In 1998, I was called to the office of elder. I'm now the pastor of a mission group in Lansing, Michigan.

In the Michigan Region in 2000, I was asked to be the program director for Gay and Lesbian Ministries, the first such assignment in the Community of Christ. I worked with regional Church leadership, other Saints, and GALA members to develop a workshop on "Homosexuality in Our Faith." It's been presented to all districts in the Michigan Region, and now is being presented in other jurisdictions.

GALA helped build support systems I could trust again. I became GALA's first elected president. Since 1987, I've been working with GALA and the leaders of the Community of Christ to build trust and openness about homosexuality so that the church can minister to the gay members of this faith and their family, friends, and congregations. It has been a challenging and exciting journey. It's also a bumpy road, but one worth traveling because I'm not alone.

In June 2002, I was one of the guest ministers at a church reunion in Ohio. After I shared my story, someone asked, "Allan, after all the hassles you've been through and the hassles people give you at the workshops and in general, why do you stay with this church?"

I didn't hesitate in answering the person, using the same words I told President Grant McMurray, whom I am proud to call my friend: "This is my church. My faith community. Wherever I have been in

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my travels around the world, I have found family and friends by simply walking in the door. Each of us is called to ministry. Some paths are different from others. This is my calling—my path to reach out to those who are questioning, searching, and struggling to understand a volatile subject. To be an ensign of peace. This is my church, and you are stuck with me.”