

Running Head: HOMOSEXUALITY AND CHRISTIANS

Looking at Homosexuality from the Eyes of Christians Living a Homosexual Lifestyle

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“Homosexuality is Satan’s diabolical attack upon the family that will not only have a corrupting influence upon our next generation, but it will also bring down the wrath of God upon America” (Fallwell, 2003). About six months ago, I never imagined myself as willing to look into the idea of homosexuality within my Christian worldview. My understanding of the Bible’s interpretation of homosexuality remained clearly defined; simply put, homosexuality was wrong, and no room existed in my mind for any other interpretations of scripture. Though I would not agree with the extreme views of Jerry Fallwell, I believed God did not desire for people to be homosexuals. Not only was I ignorant to the issues at hand, but I was unwilling to allow my worldview to be stretched in ways outside of my comfort levels. As my husband began to look into the matters of homosexuality, it challenged me to start to look at the issues myself. He shared information with me, talked with me, and helped me see that all my parents and the church taught me to believe about homosexuality may not be truth. Though completely out of my comfort zone, I recently began the journey of taking myself out of my box, full of narrow-minded, ignorant opinions, to look into the lives, experiences, and theologies of those Christians in support of homosexuality.

To learn more about homosexuality in the context of Christianity, I participated in an action plan methodology consisting of three components: observation, information seeking, and participation. My overall objective for the action plan encompassed, and continues to encompass, gaining a greater understanding of how homosexuality and Christianity co-exist with one another by allowing myself to seek the viewpoints of Christians in favor of homosexuality. Within this overall objective, I also wanted to educate myself about the needs and life of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people in general. The objective for my first action plan experience of observation was to examine a predominantly LGBT, Christian congregation in

worship to help me view this population of people as true believers in Christ. I desired my walls and prejudices to be taken down in order to see this group as more than simply “homosexuals”. For the second action plan experience of information seeking, I hoped to gain knowledge and allow myself to learn about varying Christian perspectives and experiences relating to homosexuality by looking at information from varying religious organizations and churches. For the third action plan component of participation, my goal involved hearing the personal experience of a respected, Christian homosexual to realize more about what his daily life included and how he came to the decision of accepting homosexuality. As best as I knew how, I desired to place myself in his shoes. This action plan paper discusses the methodology used to participate in the three steps noted above, an overview of the literature regarding the LGBT population, my learning from the experiences of the project, and a discussion of how they apply to my life and student affairs.

Methodology

For the observation piece of the action plan, I attended Metropolitan Community Church (MCCLA) of Los Angeles. MCCLA’s church congregation consisted predominantly of LGBT people. MCCLA openly accepts and caters to the needs of the LGBT population while maintaining a Christian worldview. The senior pastor of the church, Neil Thomas, lives a gay lifestyle. The church service contained worship, prayer, a message, and communion. In relation to the objective set forth for the observation part of the action plan, attending MCCLA allowed me the opportunity to view LGBT people worshipping God. People’s passion for the Lord and enthusiasm for His kingdom remained evident throughout every part of the service.

In order to seek out information regarding the Christian, homosexual population, I used several methods: reading materials from varying churches with acceptance statements regarding

homosexuality and looking at Christian websites containing homosexual theologies. In finding information, my goal was to allow myself to openly learn and think about Christian perspectives outside of my current comfort levels. Looking at the statements from churches opened my eyes to help me see that many believers do find nothing wrong with homosexuality. The large number of websites containing Christian theologies and experiences of homosexuality surprised me. Information was easily accessible, and I learned of many thoughts and experiences which had never before been shared with me.

To participate with the homosexual, Christian population, I went to coffee with a Christian, gay man who works in Christian higher education (Doe, J., personal interview, December 18, 2002). I drove to meet him at a coffee shop owned and run by two gay men. As we sat for two hours, I asked him questions and listened to his story. He shared openly about his experiences, struggles, and coming to a decision about his sexuality. His openness and willingness to share with me helped me see him for who he is: a strong Christian with a deep faith, who simply happens to be gay. Through our conversation, I found that he strongly feels his homosexuality is not his core identity; his faith in Christ makes him who he is, and his homosexuality is simply of part of many aspects of his identity. As I met with this man, I could not help but listen and ask questions. I wanted in no way to communicate any condemnation or lack of acceptance. While in conversation with a Christian, gay man, I desired to soak in information and learn from him. I became enthralled with all that he spoke about including his past, present, and the journey of growth along the way.

With the understanding of the steps I took to observe, find information, and participate with the Christian, homosexual population, information found in the literature will now be

addressed. The literature review assesses the overall themes found within the articles and books regarding the LGBT population.

Literature Review

Though this project focused mainly on Christian LGBT people, most of the articles focused greater attention to the GLBT population in general, with varying statements regarding religion intermixed within the overall context of the articles. The information found discussed the negative affect of religion on homosexuals, the need to educate people regarding stereotypes held about homosexuals, hope for civil rights to include protection from discrimination in the area of sexual orientation, and the desire for homosexuals to be given the privilege of marriage.

Comments directed toward religion's affect on homosexuality most often noted religion's negative influence on the LGBT population, in large part because of conservative leaders, who hold the viewpoint that homosexuality is wrong. In his autobiography, Mel White, author of Stranger at the Gate: To be Gay and Christian in America, discussed Christianity's negative influence on the lives of homosexual people. For instance, the religious right fights against and protests homosexuals' lifestyles because they believe only man and woman to be created for one another in the context of sexual intimacy (1994). The religious right also works to prohibit gays and lesbians from marrying one another (1994). White finds Christian leaders and their negative views of homosexuality to be discouraging, though he continually tries to dialogue with them regarding the issues at hand (1994). Within the Christian community, he feels showing love and grace to people is of greater importance than condemning people for their actions (1994). In "Lesbians and Gays Banned from St. Patrick's Parade", an article by Patricia Lefevere, she noted the discrimination homosexuals faced by being banned from a St. Patrick's day parade. At the end of the article, she quotes Brendan Fay, a "Catholic gay activist", who finds, "inclusion is

only a matter of time” (2001, p. 233-234). Many religious people with strong faith in God believe that inclusion and acceptance of homosexuals is a response God would honor.

Another of the issues facing the LGBT population is stereotyping. The article, “Anti-Gay Stereotypes” by Richard D. Mohr, pinpointed two of the stereotypes often attributed to the homosexual population: the appearance of “mismatched” gender (males with feminine characteristics and females with male characteristics) and “sex crazed maniacs” (2001, p. 518). These stereotypes contribute to society’s negative view of homosexuals. A different article, “Homophobia as a Weapon of Sexism” by Suzanne Pharr, contains statements indirectly about the above mentioned stereotypes. People’s views of lesbians included underlying thoughts that these women lost power because of their sexuality and trying to live in more stereotypical male roles; other statements found that many people in society see lesbians as a threat to male dominance and the nuclear family (2001, p. 147). People view gay men similarly in that they threaten male dominance because they are not “real men” (2001, p. 147). These statements acknowledge the stereotypes of the gender roles of lesbian women and gay men; in many people’s minds, these people act in ways inappropriate for their gender. Much of the literature, though noting these stereotypes, discussed the need to work at educating people that these beliefs are not a reality for all, or even many, homosexuals.

Another theme found in the literature focused on giving homosexuals equal civil rights by taking away discrimination based on sexual orientation. For instance, Paula L. Ettlbrick, author of “Confronting Obstacles to Lesbian and Gay Equality”, notes that many states continue to maintain sodomy laws which prohibit sexual acts by same sex partners (2001). Mel White, a Christian author, homosexual, and author, also sees promoting civil rights agendas for gays as lesbians as crucial. Though not discussed in complete detail, White mentions many times he

participated in activist presentations fighting for the civil rights of the LGBT population (1994). Gays and lesbians simply desire the existing civil rights laws to include protection of “sexual orientation”; they do not desire to change the laws themselves, but rather want to be included in the protection granted by these laws (Ettelbrick, 2001).

Marriage is the last need of the homosexual population addressed in a majority of the literature. Paula L. Ettelbrick notes the following:

The legal ability to marry is also a test of one’s full citizenship. Laws that once banned marriage to Jews in Germany or between white people and people of color here in the United States were intended to send an unequivocal message about full equality. Unlike these earlier miscegenation laws, current marriage laws were never adopted with the goal of depriving lesbian and gay couples of that right. However, the resistance to providing them the right to marry certainly reinforces their lack of social status. (2001, p. 503)

Homosexuals want to have the choice for their love to be expressed in the context of marriage.

Mel White’s autobiography also spoke to this concept. Though he and his partner have committed to one another and gone through a commitment ceremony, they wish their partnership could be recognized as a marriage (1994). In part, homosexuals simply desire to be allowed to make a decision about marriage for their lives, just like heterosexuals; they also hope to have the benefits granted to couples through the context of marriage.

The issues found in literature gave me insight into the understanding of my experiences of observing, finding information, and participating with the homosexual, Christian population. Though the literature mainly spoke of the homosexual population in general, much of the information addressed also came up in my experiences with Christian homosexuals. The following will discuss the results of my learning during the project (results) and the implications my learning has for both my life and the student affairs field (discussion).

Results

Today, I am still overwhelmed by the experiences I took part in throughout the entire action plan. Observing MCCLA, seeking out information, and talking with a gay man led me to look into my beliefs and why I hold them. My understanding of the LGBT, Christian population grew immensely. I continuously found myself to be more open to learning and truly hearing what others said regarding homosexuality issues. My heart and mind remained open in all of the varying happenings I had, which truly surprised me. In every situation, I prayed that God would allow me not to put up walls that would prohibit me from true learning. I also prayed for God to let me see Him in the lives of those I interacted with. The action plan experiences truly stretched my understanding of the LGBT, Christian population; the following will address some of the specific lessons I took away from the project.

One of the biggest lessons I learned involved how I previously saw the LGBT population; I frequently placed stereotypes on how I viewed LGBT people. I did not allow myself to see them as individuals with many differing aspects to their lives; rather, I placed their homosexuality as the prime factor in determining their identities. When at MCCLA, I realized the deep faith of many of the people in the congregation. The church's atmosphere had more energy and was more alive than any church I had been in recently. I started to view the LGBT population as capable of true relationships with God; for much of my life, those I respect taught me that *only* LGBT people trying to rid themselves of their "sicknesses" could have true communion with God. Being at the church, worshiping alongside of people in love with the Lord, and seeing how they reached out to me helped break down my misconceptions of this population. I knew in my heart that their faith was real, and I viewed them more as brothers and sisters in Christ than as simply "homosexuals".

Looking at information about the LGBT, Christian population also helped me to rid me of stereotypes I held. Regarding the homosexual population, Richard D. Mohr notes that, “The void which ignorance leaves has been filled with stereotypes” (2001, p. 518). Before this project, my understanding of the LGBT population contained many of the stereotypes Mohr discussed in his article, including acting like the opposite gender and being “sex-crazed” (2001, p. 518). By allowing myself to be ignorant of this population of people, I allowed myself to take the extreme stories of a few LGBT people in which these stereotypes hold true and apply them to a much larger population of people. For instance, I did not see the Christian, LGBT population as much different than the secular LGBT population. I held the stereotype that most LGBT people slept around with anyone else desiring to do so; though I knew this population was capable of monogamous relationships, I thought that the vast majority did not adhere to this, even the Christians. Talking with a Christian, gay man also allowed me the opportunity to break free from some of the stereotypes I held. Through speaking with this man, I saw his desire to be seen as a man in love with God; his gay lifestyle was a part of his life, but did not explain his identity. I also saw a man committed to his partner for life. His relationship exhibited monogamous characteristics, just like heterosexual relationships I have seen.

Visiting MCCLA and visiting with a gay, Christian man gave me the chance to break, at least in part, from my stereotypical viewing of the LGBT population. All spoke different lessons into my life and my beliefs, which I am grateful for.

From doing this project, I also realized that I am at a place in my life in which I am willing to hear viewpoints different from what I have believed most of my life. Though these varying opinions may make me uncomfortable at times, I am open to hear them out and learn from them. For example, walking into the church congregation full of LGBT people stretched

my comfort levels, but I truly desired to be there worshiping alongside of the congregation. Though it was out of my comfort zone, I wanted to learn from these people and allow God to speak into my life through them.

Talking with a gay, Christian man also showed me that I hope to learn all I can from all different types of people. It surprised me that I simply wanted to listen and soak in everything my gay friend said. God gave me a gift by allowing me to talk with him and hear his story, which he still does not share with all too many people. My willingness to allow my guard to be dropped and my walls to be broken down revealed to me my desire to truly learn from all people, even if their lives are different than my own.

Because I wanted to learn all I could, I looked at information more openly and with less criticism than I have before. I tried to come at the issues and information with as little of the prejudice from my upbringing as possible. From seeking out information from varying religious organizations and churches, it seems that the issue of homosexuality does not fit clearly into a black and white frame of mind; this means the issues surrounding homosexuality are not as clear-cut and straightforward as many “conservative Christians” want to make them. Looking at the information pushed me to examine scripture further and find original meanings of words. Though I have not yet had time to truly get into all of the theologies regarding homosexuality, my interest has been peaked.

Another way issues encompassing homosexuality do not appear black and white shows up in story after story where homosexual people claim they were created with homosexual orientations from birth. The man I spoke with explained it by stating, “my homosexuality is my sexual orientation, not just a preference that I have control over” (2002). Mel White discusses throughout his autobiography how he remembers his homosexual feelings existing from early on

in his life. In school, he showered with other boys after gym classes and learned to control his sexual desires so others would not know his attractions toward other boys (1994). Suzanne

Pharr, author of “Homophobia as a Weapon of Sexism”, writes the following:

...Homophobic people often assert that homosexuals have the choice of not being homosexual; that is, we don't have to act out our sexual identity. In that case, I want to hear heterosexuals talk about their willingness not to act out their sexual identity, including not just sexual activity but heterosexual social interconnections and heterosexual privilege. (2001, p. 149)

The gay, Christian man I spoke with also noted that he felt attraction for other males as far back as he could remember (2002).

For me, these consistent viewpoints presented “gray” issues, and I started asking myself questions such as the following: Why would God create people to be innately homosexual if He viewed it as wrong? How does Romans 1:26-27, which talks about exchanging natural relations for unnatural relations apply to homosexuals? For homosexual people, if they are born with their sexual orientation, would it not make sense that their natural relations would be with those of the same sex? Everything my parents and church leaders taught me about homosexuality being a person's choice came into question because of the overwhelming, consistent response of homosexuals that their sexuality started from birth.

Looking at literature and talking with the gay, Christian man raised many questions for me to address in my understanding of the issues surrounding homosexuality. I learned that I will not allow myself to settle for ignorance surrounding the topic. I also will not allow myself to sit comfortably within a community of believers often un-accepting of the LGBT population without seeking out answers myself. I think we live in a society of believers who often take what they *hope* to be true, because it is comfortable for them, and accept it as truth, without ever really looking to understand the meanings of scripture. This project reminded me that I need to

assess the Bible's truth, not take man's word to be truth, even when it is commonly accepted among many believers.

One last result of my learning came in a really unexpected form. What I discovered pertains to the way other Christians, whom I have interacted with since the experiences of the action plan, responded when the issues of homosexuality came up in conversation. The responses of the majority of people contained negative reactions and feelings toward homosexuality and LGBT people; this in itself did not surprise me because of the church's overall negative response to homosexuals. What stunned were the ways in which I felt looked down on for even being willing to look at the topics and issues surrounding LGBT people. I sensed people's negative response in the walls they put up to me; they became defensive, unwilling to really listen, and even angry at points. In some small way, I felt some of the persecution common to the lives of LGBT people. I understood minimally their anger, frustration, and hurt caused by those around them—many times caused by Christians. In this small way, I felt that I was able to place myself in the shoes of Christian homosexuals. The persecution and discrimination projected on the LGBT population by Christians must make them feel bad and shamed for their sexual orientation.

The gay, Christian man I talked with spoke of similar concerns. He noted feeling hurt at times by the church's response to homosexuality. He told me a story of a man whom he observed one Sunday in a church service. The man, who exhibited "stereotypical gay characteristics", walked in a little late, probably about the time the pastor planned on starting his sermon. When the pastor saw this man walk in, the man I spoke with noticed the pastor completely changed his message to be one of condemnation and judgement toward homosexuals. The pastor communicated no message of grace or love at all. As the service came to an end, the

man I spoke with noticed the gay man get up and leave the church with tears streaming down his face. This man, who took a risk by going to church, left feeling torn down and condemned by the God who created him. As I listened to this story, my heart broke. I noticeably felt angry at the church and at the pastor who spoke this message. No matter what, I believe the church and God's people are called to live lives of love. Judgement belongs to God. I feel shamed because of the response of many Christians to the LGBT population.

The lessons I learned from the experiences taught me a lot about myself and the LGBT population. My walls started to come down, and I wanted to learn all I could from this project and the people I interacted with. The following section discusses implications my learning has for my own life as well as the field of student affairs.

Discussion

Thinking about my worldview and what my learning means in the context of students affairs, I become aware that I, and many others, hold stereotypes regarding many different populations of people, not just the LGBT population. For me, I know at some level stereotypes will continue to exist in my mind, but I hope to be more conscious of approaching people with fewer pre-conceived notions in my thoughts; I also hope to challenge others to do this, too. One way this can be done comes through interacting with people who have limitations placed on them in some way by society. For instance, I must go out of my way to talk with those different from myself including those of different races, religions, orientations, or other factors. In particular, one way to accomplish this may be placing myself, and encouraging others, to work in environments consisting of a diverse population of people. For me, learning from those different than myself does not simply come from placing myself in situations with them. Another

necessary component to true learning is my willingness to let myself be challenged and hear viewpoints different than what I may be used to hearing.

In myself, I saw a willingness to hear and understand differing opinions during the duration of the action plan project. In order to allow this desire to continue, I should take intentional action to place myself in places where I can foster personal growth in my views. I am currently more conscious of the walls that I place up against varying groups; often, these walls are put up with no true knowledge of a particular group and/or person. I aspire to be intentional about seeking understanding, which takes effort. I also believe this means I cannot allow myself to remain ignorant of issues. This means I must take myself out of my comfort zone on a regular basis and look into issues, people, and whatever else contributes to my ignorance. One of the most common causes of ignorance for me continues to be lack of looking into information. Regarding the issue of homosexuality, this project helped me see the necessity to look deeper into issues, not settling for ignorance, and therefore stereotypes, because I simply have no experience or true understanding of the population. When considering what this means for student affairs, I see the importance of professionals challenging others to expand their knowledge regarding other people different from themselves.

As I started looking into literature and asking questions regarding homosexuality, it became apparent to me that the issues regarding homosexuality are not “black and white”. When thinking about homosexuality as a “gray” issue, several thoughts come to mind about what I ought to do to allow myself to grow in my understanding of the issues. First, I want to continue working my way through varying theologies in acceptance of homosexuality and those in disagreement with homosexuality. I would like to eventually come to a conclusion about what I believe surrounding the issues of homosexuality and push myself to be able to articulate

Biblically why I believe what I do. Though this may take some time, I will allow myself to be uncomfortable and ask questions in hopes of truly learning. Second, I hope to continue to gain opportunities to talk with Christians believing homosexuality to be accepted. Hearing about people's journeys helps me understand more than simply reading about the topics. I also long for these characteristics to remain true in my life regarding other issues in which my first response tends to be placing walls up. I hope to remember this when faced with situations, people, or things that make me uncomfortable. Regarding student affairs, I believe these "gray" issues to be a crucial part of the field. Student affairs professionals have a unique opportunity to challenge those around them to be open to many others. Student affairs people need to remain open to learning about diverse populations, and need to guard themselves from putting walls up to people they work with.

This brings up the ways other Christians responded to me when I spoke with them about my experiences. Very few people truly listened to me without automatically putting up their defenses. Though I am not scared to share my beliefs, or struggle to come to beliefs, with others, I tend to back off when others put walls up to me. I see the concept of listening and hearing what is addressed applying to my life and student affairs in two ways.

First, it is important to be a person who really values what others share. The need to hear out differing viewpoints prior to placing judgement exists. Both myself and student affairs professionals will need to consciously work to guard against putting walls up. It is appropriate to listen and be able to assess truth without belittling the beliefs or opinions of others. At times, I know I have been guilty of making others feel small because I do not listen to them. I am more aware now that I must be careful of coming across as a person placing judgement on others; my

hope is to be loving and accepting no matter the person, even if I do not agree with a particular lifestyle.

The second way in which this concept affects my life and students affairs can be found in the ways information is shared with others. I have been on both sides of the equation in the ways people's response has affected me; I have felt both valued and belittled. I see the need for myself and other student affairs professionals to be challenged to not back down in the face of those who put walls up in their lives. I wish to be a woman who will allow myself to process and share with others, even when I feel opposition to what I am sharing. I believe that in small ways, this may challenge the views of those who hold rigid opinions without really knowing why they hold them.

The last of the lessons I learned from the action plan focused on the faith of the LGBT congregation that I visited. It overwhelmed me to see the people worship God, and my stereotypes of this population broke quickly. I realized quickly that this population of people praised the same God as me and their relationships with Him seemed authentic, vulnerable, and real. When thinking about what this means for my life, I am ashamed and humbled at the same time.

I feel ashamed because, until this year, my views of this population were limited in understanding. I generally placed LGBT people into the category of "living in sin", which to me also meant their relationships with God may not be as dynamic as others trying to free themselves from sin in their lives. Though I still do not know completely what I believe regarding a LGBT lifestyle, I am convinced that I am not the one to place judgement. God commands me to love people, and this includes the LGBT population. I consider myself humbled because I realize the constant struggle between good and evil. My narrow-mindedness

causes me to think of myself as more “spiritual” or more “together” than others at times. The reality is that my life is no better than anyone else’s life. Though I do not know all that this directly means for me, I do believe that I am to focus on the bigger commands given by my creator: love God and love people. The right to judge others belongs to God.

Conclusion

I never could have guessed how much I growth could happen in my life over such a short period of time. Thinking about the narrow-minded, ignorant views I held regarding the Christian, homosexual population just a few months ago makes me sad. I stand amazed at how much less ignorant I am today and how much more open I am to homosexual Christians. My mindset and views have been changed forever, but I know I still have a long ways to go in learning about the Christian homosexual population. Though I am less ignorant, I do not know fully what the lives of homosexual Christians encompass. My journey of growth in understanding this population is just beginning. I will continue to seek out answers and learn, without placing judgement before I take the time to understand. I also will not claim to have a set opinion on the matter of homosexuality. Even though I am open to learning, I still have questions that need answers. In my journey of understanding, I think it is important to love and accept people along the way; God set the ultimate example of love, which I am to follow in my life. I do not want to contribute to the condemnation that others feel. Mel White notes, “...We have no ‘agenda’ that threatens the spiritual or moral standards of this nation. We just want the right to love and to be loved without fear, ridicule, or discrimination” (1994, p. 262). It is my prayer that I will be a person to love this population of people, without making them feel belittled or condemned.

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