



## **Journeys Of Faith: Christian Social Workers Serving Gay And Lesbian Clients**

**By: Denise L. Levy**

### **Abstract**

Christian social workers are often faced with the task of managing differences between personal values and professional ethics. This article will address one such instance, working with gay and lesbian clients. I will describe my own experience as a doctoral student in social work researching the process by which gay and lesbian Christians resolved conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs. In their own words, I will highlight the experiences of the study participants that led some to deepen their Christian faith and others to abandon it. Finally, I will provide suggestions for Christian social workers in their practice with gay and lesbian clients and their families.

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# Journeys of Faith: Christian Social Workers Serving Gay and Lesbian Clients

*Denise L. Levy*

*Christian social workers are often faced with the task of managing differences between personal values and professional ethics. This article will address one such instance, working with gay and lesbian clients. I will describe my own experience as a doctoral student in social work researching the process by which gay and lesbian Christians resolved conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs. In their own words, I will highlight the experiences of the study participants that led some to deepen their Christian faith and others to abandon it. Finally, I will provide suggestions for Christian social workers in their practice with gay and lesbian clients and their families.*

I AM WAITING FOR MY FIRST DISSERTATION PARTICIPANT TO ARRIVE AND I have many questions. As the seconds tick by, I wonder what the interview will be like. Will Mark (all names used have been changed) feel comfortable talking with me, a stranger, about the conflict he experienced between his sexual orientation and Christian upbringing? What will it be like for him to share very personal information with a heterosexual woman who has not been in his situation? What will I learn from Mark and from the other men and women that I will interview over the next several months? Amidst all of these questions, I remind myself why I chose this topic for my dissertation research.

Growing up in Southern Georgia, I was raised in a religious family. I attended youth group each week, was involved in a local non-denominational church, and spent a year after college volunteering for a

Christian organization on campus. I also had several close friends who were gay. I witnessed firsthand how my friends' intensely emotional struggles related to sexual orientation and religion affected their family lives, friendships, and faith. In fact, watching my friends struggle caused me to question my own faith.

Years later, as a doctoral student in social work, I knew that this was a topic that I wanted to explore further. Specifically, I was interested in understanding the process by which individuals resolve the conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs. In order to get a sense of how they resolved this conflict and how it impacted their faith, I interviewed both people who identify today as Christians and those who are no longer Christians (Levy, 2008). Using grounded theory methodology, I simultaneously collected and analyzed data, generated codes and categories from the interview transcripts, constantly compared data, wrote memos to assist in the analytic process, and constructed a theory based on the data. Throughout this process, I tried to recruit diverse participants using both maximum variation and theoretical sampling. As Mark knocks on my office door, I try to put aside any preconceived ideas I have and simply listen to his story.

### **Participants' Experiences**

Now, over a year after I first met Mark, I have learned much from the 15 men and women that I interviewed. They spoke at length about their Christian upbringing, the conflicts they experienced between their faith and same-sex attraction, and how they have been able to resolve this conflict for themselves. The stories they told were often heartbreaking and certainly impactful. Mark, for example, explained that his mother and sister have barely spoken to him since he came out to them more than 10 years ago. Six participants discussed the severe depression, and in some cases suicide attempts, that they experienced as a result of this conflict. Several talked at length about how certain reactions from family members, pastors, and congregations actually turned them away from religion altogether. In fact, of the 15 participants, nine continue to identify as Christians, three as spiritual but not religious, one as atheist, one as agnostic, and one as Wiccan. Each one received many different responses when discussing sexual orientation with Christian family members, friends, and pastors. The five types of responses discussed by participants are outlined below.

### **“You’re Going to Hell”**

Often, the first response to participants’ revelation was, “You’re going to hell.” This was true for William, the oldest participant in the study, whose sister’s reaction was, “Well, you can’t be a Christian” and “You’re going to hell.” Like William, some of Deborah’s family members held that “it was immoral and [it means that you are] going to hell.” Allison, who grew up attending Methodist, Catholic, and Baptist churches, relayed her experiences this way:

When I started to kind of get out of that box and explore my life and what I was really interested in [and] I kind of discovered things that didn’t have the stamp of God’s approval on them, all of my friends kind of ditched me.

Her friends would send her e-mails that said she “was an abomination in the eyes of God and being gay is a sin and that I’m going to hell for it.” Hannah, whose parents kicked her out of her house for a short time after she told them she was a lesbian, said that her dad compared her lesbian lifestyle to bestiality and told her that she “was ruining the family name and [being] a bad example for my sisters, God hates me, I’ll always be miserable.” Statements like these often led individuals, like William, to “a complete shutdown and rejection of religion altogether.” Similarly, Chad said, in regard to his religious community, “Well, you’re not rejecting me. I’m rejecting you.”

### **Silence**

A second type of response that participants received was silence. Jake’s dad, for one, said that he “didn’t want to talk about it” and that he “didn’t want to know anything about it and that was understood.” Mark, whose mother and sister have barely spoken to him over the past ten years, said that, in his church, “the only way to bring you back is to shun you. If they are true to their tenets they won’t have a dialogue with anybody who leaves the church.” Allen decided to be silent about the issue himself when his mom said, “If one of my sons came out I would still love them, but I couldn’t have anything to do with them.” Allen explained, “Therefore, I never felt like my parents would really love me if they knew who I was.”

### **“Hate the Sin and Love the Sinner”**

Some participants, like Sarah and Logan, mentioned a third response, for people to “hate the sin [and] love the sinner.” Sarah explained, though, that her lived experience of this message just did not pan out. For example, one of her friends was kicked out of her private Christian high school for coming out as gay. Based on this and other experiences, Sarah did not tell anyone in high school that she was attracted to both men and women. She was afraid that people would hate the sin and hate the sinner. Logan had a somewhat different experience. When he was in college:

There was an openly homosexual high-schooler at the time. Everybody kind of ignored that fact in terms of directly, but he was welcomed and always involved and supported and an active member of the church. Not that anyone directly addressed the homosexuality, but everyone knew and no one seemed to overtly care in terms of not allowing him to participate.

Similarly, when Jennifer’s parents made her go speak to a priest, he told her that “if you come to church that’s fine. We want you to still be here, but just don’t make a blatant show out of [being a lesbian].” Melanie, who has a gay uncle, explained that her mom reacted by saying, “You know I still love you and you know God still loves you.”

### **Faith-based Counseling**

A fourth response was to suggest or, in some cases, force these individuals speak with a religious leader. Luke, who grew up Catholic, explained:

When I came out to my parents though, I remember my mom saying, “Have you thought about talking to a priest about this or going to confession or seeking some kind of religious guidance about it?” . . . I sort of felt that in her saying that you should go talk to a religious leader about it, that it was to say that there was something wrong or there was something that’s just morally not right about being gay.

Luke's sister also pointed out to him that he might want to consider whether or not he should receive communion or even attend church. Hannah's mother took her to a "Love Won Out" seminar in high school, and she had to walk past gay and lesbian protesters to get inside. The seminar was mostly comprised of ex-gay individuals talking about their experiences. Trey, who was the participant to come out most recently, explained that, even though he is gay, he found that his particular church will still "take you in." For Laura, who learned in her Sunday School class that "AIDS was God's punishment for homosexuality," it was devastating when her youth minister's wife told her that she was "a predator and a child molester."

### **Addressing the "Cause"**

Finally some family members wanted to address the cause behind participants' same-sex attraction. For instance, Deborah's grandmother thought that her all-girls college or unknown sexual abuse "made" her gay. Jennifer's parents also thought that sexual abuse caused her to be a lesbian. Additionally, several parents blamed themselves or the media for the situation. Participants, though, wanted family members to accept who they were rather than to attempt to figure out what "made" them this way.

### **Effective Practice With Gay and Lesbian Clients**

As social workers, it is likely that we will serve clients or families who have been touched by this issue. As professional social workers we are required to follow the NASW (1999) Code of Ethics, including self-determination and respect for difference and diversity. Additionally, we are expected to serve clients based on evidence and best practice (NASW). Based on my dissertation research and existing literature, I provide below five practical suggestions for Christian social workers who are struggling to respond to someone who has come out to them. Practitioners may be called upon to assist clients in processing hurtful responses from family members and friends such as those mentioned by participants in my study. Effective responses outlined below include listening, communicating support, asking for time to process, seeking additional information, and seeing the whole person.

**Listen**

First, the social worker should listen and allow the individual to share additional information (Barret & Logan, 2002). Certainly, if this individual is a Christian, he or she has likely wrestled with his or her sexual identity for some time. In fact, many participants in my study discussed the exorbitant amount of time they spent researching the religion and sexual orientation before coming out to others. Listening to these individuals not only communicates care, but also allows for better understanding. For clients, like the participants in my study, who have heard such sentiments as “you’re going to hell” or “I am hate your sin but I love you,” social workers should especially allow time for the client to talk through these responses. Participants in my study explained that these clichés are hurtful and do little to improve respectful discussion. Because of the homophobia and heterosexism present in our society, many gay and lesbian individuals have experienced bullying, violence, intimidation, and discrimination due to their sexuality (Van Den Bergh & Crisp, 2004). Simply listening and allowing clients to talk through their experiences can provide a much-needed, safe outlet for their emotions (Barret & Logan, 2002).

Listening also means allowing our clients to tell us their stories without making assumptions. For instance, during initial meetings with all clients, social workers should not assume heterosexuality (Barret & Logan, 2002; Van Den Bergh & Crisp, 2004). In addition to using inclusive language when discussing sexuality or significant others, social workers can ensure that their agencies are not heterosexist and do not privilege heterosexual clients. “Remember, the responsibility is yours, as the practitioner, to create an affirming therapeutic environment where clients feel safe to self-disclose” (Barret & Logan, 2002, p. 42).

Finally, listening means attending to language and terminology. Language is important when serving many diverse populations, and gay and lesbian individuals are no different (Barret & Logan, 2002). For example, many prefer terms such as gay, lesbian, or queer as opposed to homosexual, which has a negative connotation due to the way it has historically been used by medical doctors, researchers, fundamentalist religious leaders, and psychologists (Levy, 2009). Social workers should “avoid prematurely imposing labels, and allow the client to self-identify” (Barret & Logan, 2002, p. 61). Additionally, sexual orientation can be a more accurate descriptor than sexual preference, which implies choice

(Van Den Bergh & Crisp, 2004). A good rule of thumb is to use identity terminology and descriptors employed by individual clients.

### **Communicate Support**

Second, a social worker should not only listen to clients but also communicate support. Social workers can communicate support by expressing warmth towards, concern for, and commitment to clients. In fact, the Code of Ethics explains that we must treat individuals respectfully and with care, engaging them as partners in the helping process (NASW, 1999). Not surprisingly, gay and lesbian clients prefer service providers that are respectful, welcoming, accepting, and affirming (Saulnier, 2002). Social workers who convey genuine warmth towards clients and utilize a strengths perspective will be more successful in developing rapport and serving clients (Crisp, 2006). Additionally, we can provide clients with a list of supportive resources in the area. Local groups such as Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) and welcoming churches can provide much needed resources for clients. Social workers should know about the supports available in their communities for gay and lesbian clients.

### **Ask for Time to Process**

Third, social workers should ask for more time to process the information if necessary. Social workers, in general, should be familiar and comfortable discussing sexuality with all clients (Barret & Logan, 2002). It is often difficult to know what to say initially. Additional time will allow one to think through the situation rather than reacting based on raw emotions. Participants in my study appreciated those who were honest about their struggles and asked for time to process the information before further discussion.

Reflection should be a vital component in this processing. It is important for Christian social workers to incorporate self-reflection into their practice with gay and lesbian clients. Practitioners should identify their own biases, explore conflicts between personal and professional values, and seek to eliminate the impact of personal biases on professional practice. Continuing education and supervision, as described in the next section, may also be helpful (Van Den Bergh & Crisp, 2004).



**Seek Additional Information**

Fourth, social workers should seek out further information to aid in their understanding of the situation (Barret & Logan, 2002). The NASW Code of Ethics (1999) explains that social workers should “obtain education about and seek to understand the nature of social diversity and oppression with respect to . . . sexual orientation” (Sect. 1.05c). Although some social workers may be tempted to refer clients to others who are more knowledgeable, the Code mandates that social workers acquire the knowledge to competently serve this population. There are numerous books, articles, and religious literature discussing same-sex attraction and sexual orientation. Continuing education is important when serving diverse clients, and social workers should familiarize themselves with multiple perspectives on sexual orientation. This will enable us to better understand the variety of responses our clients receive when coming out to family, friends, and colleagues and, if necessary, to expose clients to alternative views.

In seeking additional information about this population, social workers should carefully avoid stereotyping gay and lesbian clients based on the generalized information they find. As with all communities, there is significant diversity within the gay and lesbian population (Van Den Bergh & Crisp, 2004). It is important to be attuned to the cultural richness in this group. Although not discussed in this article, the term gay often encompasses other groups such as lesbians, bisexuals, transgender persons, queer-identified individuals, and so forth. Within these groups, there are other aspects of identity, such as race, ethnicity, religion, socio-economic status, political affiliation, and personality, which are important to consider (Barret & Logan, 2002).

**See the Whole Person**

Fifth, social workers must see the whole person. In discussing sexual orientation, clients may differentiate between their sexual attraction or desire, behavior, and identity (Barret & Logan, 2002; Parker, 2007). For example, a male client may describe his attraction to other males, identify as heterosexual, and have a monogamous, sexual relationship with his wife. In addition to understanding the intricacies of their clients' sexuality, social workers should be familiar with theories of gay and lesbian identity development such as Cass' (1979) model,

Troiden's (1989) model, Coleman's (1987) model, and queer theory (Jagose, 1996; Levy, 2008). These models focus on coming out as a process rather than a one-time event (Van Den Bergh & Crisp, 2004). In a society that often assumes heterosexuality, gay and lesbian individuals must decide whether or not they want to come out or disclose their sexual orientation whenever they meet someone new, including their social worker.

Finally, social workers should see individuals in terms of who they are as people rather than only attending to their sexual identity. Many participants in my study discussed the vast and negative differences in their relationships after coming out to people in their lives. For some of these relationships, it was as if someone turned off a light switch and things were completely different. One should remember that these individuals are the same people that they were before this conversation happened. Additionally, practitioners should not assume that a client's sexual orientation is the presenting problem but instead should "examine the presenting challenge in the context of the client's life as a gay or lesbian person" (Van Den Bergh & Crisp, 2004, p. 233).

### **Conclusion**

Sexual orientation is certainly a controversial, yet rarely discussed, topic in many churches. However, after completing this study, I realized how important it is to talk about difficult subjects such as this. Most of us know someone, whether it is a friend, family member, coworker, or neighbor, who identifies as gay or lesbian. Gay or lesbian identity and Christianity are seen by some as dichotomous aspects of identity that cannot exist simultaneously in the same individual. Christians who experience same-sex attraction often face a crisis of faith as they seek to resolve the conflict between religion and sexual identity. Based on practice experience and the literature, I suggest five affirmative responses: listen, communicate acceptance, ask for time to process, seek additional information, and see the whole person. Christian social workers should not remain silent on this issue even though it is a difficult and complex topic. It is my hope that we can take the lead in continuing this conversation about religion and sexual orientation in our communities in a way that is civil and respectful. ❖

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