

TED'S STORY

After God's apparent refusal to answer his many years of prayer Ted faced a crisis of faith. The loss of his wife and the pain he caused his children brought him great sorrow, but he believes God has at last answered his prayers.

I Grieve For My Family

My name is Ted. Telling my story takes great effort because it requires me to share thoughts and experiences which are painful, personal, and private with people I fear will be judgmental and a church which I fear will reject me. I have chosen to share my story, anyway, in the hope that it will help to spare others the tragedies I have experienced.

To this day I have a mental picture of my fiancée, Mary, and me sitting on the front steps of her parents' home one evening near sunset as I told her that I had feelings of attraction to men and that I had experienced them since childhood. Because I had never experienced an intimate relationship with another man and had grown up in the sheltered community of Collegedale, Tennessee, in the shadow of Southern Missionary College, I did not understand my real sexual orientation or the implications of what I was saying. I couldn't say I was gay or homosexual because those were unthinkable horrible or unknown terms. I certainly didn't believe they described me.

Mary responded that she was sure these feelings would go away once we were married and she wasn't worried about it. She was quite self-confident in her reply, and I wanted her to be right. But marriage did not give me what I had expected or hoped. My unbidden attraction to men did not disappear. The sexual relationship with my wife literally took effort and prayer. However, I believed that my ability to have a sexual relationship with her was proof that I was not homosexual. You see, I believed then that homosexuals knew so clearly who they were that they never married and were unable to have a sexual relationship with a woman. I prayed earnestly over many years that God would remove the continued unwanted feelings and give me joy and fulfillment with my wife, like the man I understood He wanted me to be.

Mary and I had two wonderful children. I feel deeply blessed to be their father. I wanted them, and I have cultivated a close, supportive relationship with them. Being a parent has refined my own character and taught me many important life lessons. I'm thankful for the privilege of being a father, but I regret the pain my children have experienced in adjusting to having a gay father. I know this is hard for my children, even though they have been intentionally accepting (while not always understanding me). I was never concerned about their sexual orientation; it always seemed obvious to me that they were "straight". Perhaps this was also because I didn't acknowledge the reality of my own sexuality until they were in their late teens.

After twenty years of marriage, I faced a severe crisis of faith. I realized that God had said "No" to my prayers about my sexuality and my marriage. I seemed to be faced with tough decisions and choices: I could either believe God didn't exist or hear my prayers, I could believe those who told me that I hadn't prayed hard enough or had enough faith

(how cruel!), or I could believe God had said no because I was asking something He felt didn't need changing.

Additionally, I was also facing the realization that my wife was suffering from a diagnosed mental disorder for which she refused treatment. She had been verbally abusive for years. She was now becoming increasingly physically abusive. My children were afraid of her, and so was I. My Christian therapist told me I must confront the reality that Mary was indeed dangerous and take steps to protect myself.

I was blessed in having a wonderful Adventist pastor with whom I could share my questions. I asked whether he felt God could still change me. I asked if he felt God still loved me and whether I could remain an Adventist if I accepted my sexuality. I asked him if God intended for me to stay in my abusive marriage. And, finally, I asked him if the God who had said "It is not good for man to be alone" expected me to remain in desperate loneliness.

This pastor helped me to grow in the assurance that God certainly did love me. He encouraged me to believe that I could remain an Adventist if I chose to, although that might not always be easy. He encouraged me to understand that I had not chosen to be gay and could not expect to "change". He confirmed the counsel of my therapist and encouraged me to leave my abusive marriage. And finally, he courageously told me that he felt God would bless me if I prayed for and sought a gay Christian companion.

After twenty years my marriage ended. About a year before this I had been standing in the bathroom combing my hair one morning when the realization dawned on me that, should my marriage end for any reason, I should not enter another heterosexual relationship. I was intentionally seeking personal integrity, and beginning to realize that this included the painful acceptance that I was indeed gay and that wasn't going to change.

Mary and I have been divorced since 1995, and I still mourn the failure of our marriage. She refuses my gestures of love, friendship, or caring and has totally cut me off except for a very occasional exchange regarding the care and education of our children. The children were old enough at the time of our divorce that custody was not a question. I believe I will always grieve the loss of our marriage, and part of me will always love Mary.

The crisis of faith through which I passed brought me to the conclusion that God did love me, was with me, and that I could choose to remain an Adventist, which I have. My faith is stronger than ever. Having been shaken and tested, it is firmer because I have renewed it by choice. I value my church membership, but I matured in my relationship with the Lord to the point where I no longer feel that membership in the Seventh-day Adventist Church is essential, just desirable.

As I write, I am part of a relatively accepting congregation where I am out to many of my fellow members. I fear, though, what would happen if I should move some place where this isn't available. Where would I find a church home and a Christian, hopefully, Adventist, fellowship? I trust this to the Lord who knows and can provide.

I have been blessed to share the love of a wonderful Adventist attorney who has had similar experiences to mine. He, too, was married, is a father, and is a committed Adventist Christian. Together we have an Adventist home which we strive to use for the blessing of others. We pray together, worship together, and are committed fathers. We repeatedly remind each other that, in spite of the pain and disappointments, we are blessed.

Knowing what I know now, I wish the church and its members had taught me what sexual orientation is. I wish I had been taught that most people are born heterosexual, but some are born homosexual and that this does not mean they are bad or less loved by God. I long for the day when gay and lesbian Adventist youth will be taught how to develop appropriate relationships rather than relationships based on denial that will most likely fail.

All of my schooling was in the Adventist school system. Having grown up in the sheltered, conservative community that I did, I feel that the church and my socio-cultural environment failed to prepare me to be an authentic person and avoid the problems I experienced and created. I was not empowered to understand myself or be truthful about myself in a way that could have spared me, my wife, and my children a great deal of pain.

I'm sharing this story because my life experience has caused me to believe that Adventist society and the Adventist church do their youth a terrible wrong in refusing to teach them that sexual orientation is not chosen and does not change. I was kept in ignorance by a church and a culture that chooses to deny and remain uninformed both regarding sexuality and its biblical interpretation.

The Adventist church must know that celibacy has not been a success for Roman Catholicism. While individual pastors and leaders within the Adventist church acknowledge their opinion that a committed, monogamous homosexual relationship may be an acceptable solution, the church still condemns, rejects, and removes from membership those who find they do not have the "gift" of celibacy. I feel that the church has wronged me, and many others, by refusing to address this topic in a realistic and sincere manner; similar to the way they have studied issues such as women's ordination.

I wish the church and its members had been more understanding and caring when I did have to come out. I have been deeply hurt by the rejection of many of my friends, although God has graciously provided me with cherished new friends (both straight and gay) in their place.

I wish I did not feel so fearful and marginalized when I seek the Adventist fellowship I crave. And I wish that others in the church would not suggest that having the integrity to be an "out" gay Adventist means I'm giving up everything I've ever believed in. The suggestion that I'm less of a Christian or Adventist is discouraging and painful.

Please, never say or believe that *gay Adventist* is an oxymoron, as one writer in the *Adventist Review* stated a few years ago. I believe God loves me and wants me. I want to serve Him within the Adventist church. Please don't drive me and others like me away.

“Suffer [your gay children] to come to me.” What if Jesus says to you when you reach heaven, “What you did for my gay children, you did for me. Did you make them feel wanted and welcome at church? Did you teach them that I love them unconditionally? Did you offer them fellowship rather than judgment? Did you respect them because they were your brothers and sisters? Did you perceive their sins as greater than yours?” Jesus told us clearly to leave judgment to Him. Please love me the way He does.