

MARK AND INGRID'S STORIES

Mark grew up in the mission field. His father was a well-known and respected church leader. Mark had no other thought than to follow in his footsteps and become a pastor. When he finally acknowledged his sexual orientation to himself, he faced a frightening predicament.

Honest At Last

You may call me Mark. As a Seventh-day Adventist pastor and a married man, I struggled for years in a private hell from which there seemed no escape. As a minister, I felt I had no one to turn to and, as far as I knew at the time, I was all alone in a frightening and traumatic dilemma.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. As a child, my growing-up years were basically very happy ones. I came from a loving, two-parent family and my parents were proud of me. I was considered a "good" Seventh-day Adventist kid growing up. My parents being missionaries in southeast Asia, I had wonderful opportunities for getting the experience that only travel can bring. My father served in numerous church leadership positions, from ADRA director to division president—a legend in his day.

During my adolescence no one talked much about gays – the word was not even in common usage then. I grew up in remote mission fields in a conservative family where the topic of sex itself was never discussed. In retrospect, I now realize I can hardly blame myself for being so late in discovering my sexual identity. I also understand how the mind can play strange tricks in an attempt to deny the obvious—especially when acceptance is too painful or incongruous with one's belief system. I *knew* I couldn't be like those strange homosexuals with their outlandish behavior and costumes I occasionally read about in the media. That simply wasn't me. (It still isn't!)

So how old was I when I first understood who I was? I don't really know for sure. Looking back today, I realize from early childhood impressions that I considered men to be "good-looking" long before I had the vaguest notion of sex. But generally, for me, it was a gradual, sickening awakening to the fact that I simply wasn't the same as others. I don't believe I knew who I was when I made the decision to marry. In any case, I was once again making "the right choices" in life. Despite my sense of humor, I have always taken life seriously. I had never engaged in premarital sex, straight or gay. I had high ideals for marriage (I still do) and wanted to make a happy home for my wife and children. The option of not marrying simply did not occur to me. Why even Paul himself said it was better to "marry than to burn" (1 Cor. 7:9), even though some of his ideas on marriage are hardly considered the norm.

And so I continued to deny the inevitable. My conservative church upbringing did not prepare me to accept the overwhelming sense of devastation and aloneness I faced when I finally admitted I had a mental attraction to men which no amount of praying or fasting would change. Yes, I believed God could do anything, but for some reason, He chose not to answer my pleas. There were nights I would wake up in a sweat, having dreamt that somebody had guessed I was gay (I am a poor actor, despite having put on

a desperate show for years). Or I would dream that I was eternally lost for having same-sex desires that even I couldn't explain. Then I would beg God again to forgive me for being what I was.

It would be years before I would discover that I had been praying the wrong prayer. Quite apart from the sheer terror of facing my orientation head-on was the overriding concern I had for biblical integrity. For me this was paramount. How could I possibly understand the handful of scriptural references to homosexuality without seeing in them an outright condemnation of my very being?

Well-meaning relatives were later to warn me that there was the danger that I might rationalize away scripture. How could I disagree? I was probably more aware of that peril than they realized. But I also knew that growth in understanding can be painful for anyone, straight or gay and that many are unwilling to look honestly at all aspects of a question. As church members we are encouraged to search the scriptures diligently in all matters; how could I be unwilling to do less with this? And so I avidly studied scripture and read books on the subject, sometimes disagreeing with both the "traditional" and "progressive" viewpoints. I had to know in my own mind what I believed, and why.

I will never forget the day I finally decided to come out to my wife Nancy. True to form, I had planned months ahead of time when I would tell her who I was. I had compiled a list of books, tapes, websites, and personal phone numbers to help her in what I knew would be traumatic for her. I would wait until a week after she had graduated from university so that the news would not affect her studies. I would then tell our three teenagers a few days later.

It was, without doubt, the hardest thing I have ever done. I was literally sick to my stomach for months before the date I had chosen. I kept arguing with myself that there really was no reason to tell her anything. I even got melodramatic, telling myself it would be better for me to die alone with the secret I held. I wasn't even "living the gay lifestyle." (I hate these euphemisms: does anyone "live the straight lifestyle!")

But I also knew it was time, to be honest. I was living a lie. While our married life was to all outward appearances normal, I knew the mental torment I was going through in an effort to conceal inner longings that Nancy could never meet. I also knew that, at some level, Nancy was aware that all was not well, and that I was hurting her. "I sense there's a barrier between us," she said on a couple of occasions. I just scoffed at her words, terrified that she might guess the truth. I knew what she meant, but I sensed she didn't really understand.

So that Friday evening, with our teenagers away on a church camp-out, I finally told Nancy about the real me. Knowing my tendency to joke, she didn't believe me at first. When it finally hit home, we both sobbed on each others' shoulders for what seemed to be an eternity. For her it was the beginning of a nightmare; for me, it was as if the weight of the world had been lifted off my back. To her credit, never once (then or since) has Nancy blamed me for being gay or tried to convince me that I could change my orientation.

In my own planned way, I knew full well what the consequences could be. I knew our marriage would probably break up (this is something Nancy and I both eventually agreed on). I knew it would be difficult for our kids to accept, though they too have been amazingly understanding about the gay issue – far more than I expected. It was probably the marriage breakup itself which was hardest on them. I also knew I would probably lose my pastoral career. Although the news of my story did not break for several months, when the conference finally found out I was given no choice but immediate resignation without the usual severance pay, despite many years of service with a spotless record. Though I tend to be pretty agreeable to most things, I felt this was unfair, so through negotiations with the conference, we managed to reach a considerably happier settlement.

Through it all, I was also relieved to find that many local church members were very supportive of both Nancy and me during this difficult process of coming out. Do I regret my decision to come out and be honest? I regret the considerable pain I have caused both family and friends. I regret having lost my vocation as a pastor in a church that I still love and support. But not for one moment am I sorry that I was honest about myself. I am now at peace with myself and with God. I just wish I had made the decision earlier in our marriage if I had been able. It would have been easier on Nancy (with whom I still have an amicable relationship), though perhaps not on the children, who would have been younger.

To those who ask the question, “What makes a person gay?” I reply, “What makes a person straight?” The truth is, no one knows, no one really understands. “Weak father, domineering mother”? Certainly not in my case. And what does it mean to be gay? Certainly, this is *not* all about sex, as some believe. We are talking about a whole different mindset in which a general sensitivity (often including strong proclivities to music and the arts) makes itself evident. Clichés perhaps, but still largely true. For a gay man, this often translates into seeing the whole world with gentler, more sensitive eyes than his straight peers. “Feminine virtues,” as I have all-too-often been reminded? Or Christian ideals we should all, male and female, strive towards (Gal. 5:22, 23; Matt. 5:3-12)? But that is perhaps another subject.

In the meantime, I hope the church will no longer take a head-in-the-sand approach, but face the reality that its gay brothers and sisters are everywhere in the church: from congregational laity to college faculty, church pastors and General Conference workers. We are hurting and isolated, and as much in need of denominational acceptance and the forgiving grace of Christ as anyone else. Please don’t continue to ignore us. I believe Christ can use us all.

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Ingrid loved both of her parents and tried to keep them together, but after they separated, she realized they were both happier than they had ever been while married. She also grew to understand her father, accept his new partner, and become less judgmental.

What I Learned After Dad Told Us He's Gay

Checking my email one day, I accidentally opened one of my mother's sent letters. It was an email to a women's' chat group on the Internet. Curiously, I read their problems. I eventually read the last letter, written by an anonymous woman. She had been married for 17 years and had just found out that her husband was gay. She sounded devastated. Poor woman, I thought.

It wasn't until I read the next line that I instantly knew this woman was my mother. "The worst part about all of this," she wrote, "is that I have two children. My daughter is 16 and my son is 14. How am I going to tell them?"

I shut the email quickly. *This is Mom*, I said. How could I have not seen this before? Dad and Mom had been unusually silent for days. My brother Erik and I had been so oblivious.

I felt stunned. All day long, our family went through the same routine. We even had dinner together that night. I looked at Erik over the table and watched him. How will he handle this? I wondered.

It wasn't until that night, in bed, that I thought of divorce. Until then, I had always thought of my parents as the ideal couple. My mother was a nurse, my father a pastor. While several of my friends had divorced parents, I always thought our family was invincible. The thought of divorce chilled me. It was silly and selfish, but one of the first things I thought was, *Now I don't have a role model for my marriage.*

I didn't want to ask Mom or Dad about it, in case I had suspected wrongly, but for days I agonized over the situation. Would they divorce? I hoped they wouldn't. I didn't care how they felt about it, but I wanted them to stay together, at least for a few more years. Perhaps until I had gone to college.

I often worried about Mom. She seemed depressed. I started to wash the dishes every night. I tried to help with chores every day. I didn't want her to go through more stress.

I was a little angry with Dad, though. I didn't want Mom to get hurt and Dad was hurting her. That was all I knew.

A week after the discovered email, Dad sat us down for a family chat. It was a spring Sabbath afternoon. Dad was solemn. I knew what was happening, but I hadn't expected it so soon.

"Sit down, kids," Mom said, ushering us into the family room. We sat on the couch and Dad sat in a chair facing us. He seemed anxious and nervous. Mom remained standing.

"I have something to tell you," he announced. He breathed deeply, just as if he was about to preach a big sermon. "It might be difficult for you to hear this," he laboriously continued.

"What, are we in trouble?" asked Erik.

"No, it's not that," Dad assured him and laughed a little. Mom nervously chuckled.

"Well, what is it then?" Erik questioned again.

"Well, kids," Dad re-announced slowly, "I am gay."

Erik laughed at first. He thought it was a joke. But Dad was still serious. It was final, then. I had already known, but I still felt numb.

"I had to tell you," Dad said. "It took me several years to come to terms with being gay. But when I realized who I was, I told Mom. I told her that weekend that you both went to the volleyball tournament. We cried and talked about it all weekend. It's been very difficult for both of us."

"How do you kids feel?" asked Mom.

Erik paused, then asked, "Does this mean that I'm gay?"

"No, it doesn't," Dad replied. "It's not hereditary, it's genetic. It's something you're born with."

"Will you get a divorce?" I asked pointedly.

"Yeah," added Erik, "will you?" I waited for the answer with fear.

"We're going to separate for now," said Dad, "and see how things go. I'm going to move downstairs, into the guest room, for now, because Mom doesn't feel comfortable with me sleeping upstairs."

This was a relieving thought. Separation wasn't as bad as divorce, I reasoned. "Hey, what does this mean for you as a pastor, Dad?" I asked.

He breathed deeply again. "I don't know. Like I said, we're going to see how things go for now."

It was an odd few weeks that followed Dad's private coming-out. Erik and I both questioned our own sexuality. I even talked to Mom's counselor about it. I didn't want to become gay. I didn't want to marry a gay man, either, like Mom had.

"Well, you will know if you are attracted to men," the counselor explained, "and when you get to know a man, you will know if he is sexually attracted to you."

The counselor then asked me how I was handling the divorce?

“Divorce?” I asked fearfully. I suddenly, for the first time, wanted to cry. My parents hadn’t mentioned divorce yet, and to hear it from a stranger was worse.

“They will eventually divorce,” she told me, “Your mother can’t continue to live in a relationship where she is not completely loved.”

I still wasn’t devastated about the divorce. Perhaps I felt that way because I knew that no one was to blame and that it was an unchangeable thing. I knew that it was something Dad had been born with.

I started to take the role of the responsible older sister. Erik was only 14 years old. I watched after him and during those months, we became very close friends. That summer we grew into great friends.

I also became the responsible daughter to both Mom and Dad. Mom would cry to me and Dad would talk with me. It was sometimes quite hard, however, because Dad didn’t want either Erik or me to tell anyone about him. I felt had to tell someone, and it was difficult keeping it in our small family circle. Even our relatives didn’t know yet.

Dad moved downstairs into the guest room. Each day, Mom was an emotional wreck: either bitterly angry or weepy. I remember hearing her lament to her sisters when they visited. I heard the same story every time and I had soon memorized it by heart. “I didn’t see it coming, but maybe I did. I always felt like there was something wrong.”

Away from the house, I was having a fantastic summer. I got my driver’s license. I also had my first boyfriend. Erik and I would often drive away from the house with friends to buy magazines and sweets at the local gas station. Sometimes we would drive to the beach. It was always pleasant to get away from the pressure point that was home.

It was difficult not to be able to talk to my friends or my boyfriend about Dad. It was still such a new issue—and so unbelievable—that I didn’t know what to think. Out of respect for Dad, though, Erik and I kept quiet. It was an agonizingly loud silence. One day, during band class, I suddenly needed to get away. In the bathroom, I locked myself in a stall and cried for several minutes. When I returned, my boyfriend asked me if I was OK. I said yes.

One day Erik, his friend and I got drunk in the forest near our house. Erik and I told him everything. We didn’t know what to expect as a reaction. His friend was surprised but very nonchalant. It was such a relief to talk about it with someone my age.

Dad, it seemed, was content with his charade. He lived in the same house and still prepared his weekly sermon every Friday night. He, after all, had a secure position as a church pastor, and I think he would have continued his act for years if Mom hadn’t finally asked for a divorce. It was very difficult for her to live with him in the same house.

The church soon discovered about Dad. Somehow it had leaked. Dad began to confess that yes, he was gay, to some of his friends in the church. Erik and I were very angry with him because, while he had asked us not to say anything, he suddenly was willing to tell

all of his friends. As more people learned the news, fury rose in the church. Dad even had anonymous death threats sent to him from church members. Some of his friends and family also stopped contact with him.

I was worried for Dad's safety now. The reality of anti-gay hatred hit me and I had a sudden distaste for the Seventh-day Adventist church. My distaste only grew as more and more people began to beg Dad to change his "sinful ways." The conference asked him to resign as a pastor. It was unbelievable how much hatred had emerged from Dad's coming-out. It amazed me how cruel Christianity could be.

As much anger as I had towards Dad, I was worried sick for his life. Knowing about those death threats frightened me.

My friends were surprised. All they could say was, "They seemed like the perfect couple." My brother and I became curiosities. It was, in a way, a newfound popularity.

Mom quickly found a new boyfriend on the Internet. He was also in the middle of a divorce. He lived across the country but flew in to see her. It had only been a few months after my parents' separation and it was difficult to see one of them with someone else so soon. Erik and I both knew that she was on the rebound, and we became angry with her for jumping immediately into a new relationship. It didn't help when we found out that the boyfriend was also a jerk. We were protective of Mom and the last thing we wanted was for her to get hurt again. Nevertheless, Mom was soon engaged to him.

Through Dad, Erik and I learned about the Adventist homosexual support group (Kinship), that had its own camp meeting, website and newspaper. It was an enlightening experience as we realized that we were not alone. We also realized that this was a bigger world than we had ever imagined. There were other gay Adventist pastors who were unhappily married. After Dad became more comfortable with his sexuality, Erik and I endured a gradual avalanche of informational videos, books, and anything that related to homosexuality in the church. It was sometimes an overload of information. My brother and I were exasperated within weeks.

It wasn't long until Mom decided to move across the country with her new fiancé and Dad had to move to a city apartment. Erik and I had to decide who to live with. We also had to leave our house, our friends, and our dog. This was the hardest part of the divorce.

Erik opted to move in with Mom, but I just wanted to run away from the situation. It was the summer before my junior year in high school. I had the choice of living with Dad while going to school with my best friends, or to move away from everyone, into a boarding academy near Boston. I chose the Boston SDA Academy. People often say it isn't wise to run away from problems, but I think that was the best decision I could have made. It was incredibly assuring to move into a new school and a new life. I sorted out my feelings on life, on my sexuality, and on my family. I missed Erik, though.

Then came the war of words. Mom and Dad were pitted against each other. For months I heard Mom and Dad whine about each other. "She wanted to take all the furniture," Dad complained. "He had no right to mislead me for all those years he knew," Mom

exclaimed. I didn't take sides most of the time. I sometimes argued with them though, defending the other parent.

During summers, I would split my time between them. I enjoyed spending time with Mom, but I didn't like her fiancé. Erik clashed with him too. Erik was going through an identity crisis and became very depressed and moody. He couldn't talk with Mom, either, because his problem was her fiancé and he felt that she was biased. I convinced him to come to Boston with me the next year. I knew it would help him. It did.

While Erik and I were at academy, during my senior year, Mom realized her mistake and left her fiancé.

During my high school graduation, my parents met for the first time in two turbulent years. They reunited as friends. It was the ultimate graduation gift.

Dad, on the other side of the country, had moved out of his apartment and in with a new Adventist partner. He was excited that we should meet the new man of his life, so we met him that Christmas.

It was an unusual moment, meeting Dad's new partner. If the man had been anything less than nice, we wouldn't have liked him at all. He was polite, though, and patient. And Dad was obviously very happy with him. It was odd for my brother and me to sleep in the same house as them, but we started to like them as a couple.

After being together for three years they got married. I don't think anything of it. When I spend time at their house, it's just as if I'm spending time with my father and an uncle. I don't think Dad could have chosen a better partner.

Mom is also happy now. She has a new fiancé who loves her very much. Nothing makes me happier than seeing my parents happy.

I started to tell my friends about Dad during my first year of college. For the first time, I told my two best friends. It was incredibly awkward to admit it, but I knew I needed to.

"You know the real reason my parents divorced?" I asked.

But they had guessed already. "Your dad's gay?" one of them replied.

It took pressure off me and slowly I felt like I could tell all of my friends. Their reactions were different. Most accepted it, although they remained confused about whether or not homosexuality was a sin. I was and still am-confused, too. I've read and studied both Biblical arguments (I even wrote an essay on same-sex marriages last year) but I still am unsure. That doesn't bother me, though. When I realized that it doesn't matter so much what I believe but how I treat others, I changed my viewpoint. I believe that homosexuality is genetic. I don't believe that the homosexual life, with its criticism and hatred, is one that people choose. I don't know if it's a sin to have a homosexual partner. All I know is that my father and his partner are the happiest they have been all their lives. I also know that they will go to heaven. I have seen their lives and know that they are what many Christians struggle to be.

There are definite advantages to having a gay parent. It has made me look at others differently. A few years ago I might have looked down on someone and judged him or her more quickly. Now I am slow to judge and more patient with people. Someone may look at a situation and say, "Oh, they won't be in heaven" or "How can they claim to be a Christian when they act like that?" But when I see that situation, I think, "There must be another side to this." Because there always is.

Another advantage is that it has made an excellent screening process for me. If a friend can't accept me (although no one hasn't) because of my family, then I will know that I can't be their friend. This is an exceptionally wonderful method if I'm thinking about dating a guy.

Now Dad and his partner are just another part of my family. I can think about him and his husband as a father and a stepfather. Mom is content with her life, too. She has become a strong role model for me over the past four years. I've seen the emotional war she went through and she is now independent and more confident than ever. I enjoy seeing her bravery and energy. She is the guiding light in my life.

This experience, strange as it was, bonded our family. It exposed us to the darker side of Christianity, but in the end, we grew up as a family. When people ask me if it's difficult to have a gay father, I reply that yes, it sometimes can be. "But at least I know that both of my parents love me. That's all that matters."