

# “In a Dark Time the Eye Begins to See”: Personal Reflections on Homosexuality among the Mormons at the Beginning of a New Millennium<sup>1</sup>

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THE TITLE OF MY REMARKS, “In a dark time the eye begins to see,” comes from one of Theodore Roethke’s poems.<sup>2</sup> I believe it is a dark time as far as our understanding of homosexuality is concerned, and yet I also believe that in some ways darkness has the power to enlighten us. Rabbi David Wolpe speaks of the importance of darkness: “God is intimately tied to the night. . . . In the greatest dark, the dark of Egypt, redemption occurs. In the ultimate night, that of the future, redemption is promised. God moves between the poles of night, danger and promise.”<sup>3</sup>

I speak to you as someone who has attempted to find light in what I consider the darkness of our understanding about homosexuality. I speak to you as one Latter-day Saint follower of Christ who has tried, through study, thought, and prayer, to comprehend what it would mean to be homosexual. Most of my comprehension of this human phenomenon comes from counseling Latter-day Saint homosexuals over the past fifteen years. As I have spent time with these people in the darkness of

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1. This paper was originally presented at Family Fellowship, Salt Lake City, 27 February 2000.

2. Theodore Roethke, *In A Dark Time* (San Francisco: Poetry Society, 1964).

3. David Wolpe, *The Healer of Shattered Hearts: A Jewish View of God* (New York: Henry Holt, 1990), 24.

their souls, I have tried to understand my spiritual responsibility to them.

Although I do not speak for the church on this subject, I do speak from the point of view of someone who is a faithful, committed Latter-day Saint, one who believes in the reality of the restoration, in the divinity of the Book of Mormon, and in the special destiny of Christ's church. I serve the church fervently and take seriously the covenants I make in the House of the Lord. I sustain the authorities of the church, and I support the doctrines of the church, including the church's teaching on sexual morality.

As part of my faith, I believe I have a responsibility to use the best thoughts of my mind and the best feelings of my heart to search for and live by whatever truth I am able to discern. I subscribe to B. H. Roberts' description of a true disciple: one who is not content with merely repeating the doctrines of Mormonism but who, "cooperat[ing] in works of the Spirit, . . . take[s] profounder and broader views of the great doctrines committed to the church; and, . . . cast[s] them in new formulas. . . until they help to give to the truths received a more forceful expression, and carry it [i.e., the church] beyond the earlier and cruder stages of its development."<sup>4</sup>

#### "A DOOR TO THE DARK"

I begin my discussion with a quote from one of Seamus Heaney's poems: "All I know is a door into the dark" ("The Forge"). In another poem ("Personal Helicon"), Heaney says he writes poetry "[t]o see myself, to set the darkness echoing."<sup>5</sup> Heaney's words seem apt for how I see myself in relation to the question of homosexuality. I am not a medical researcher, a genetic scientist, or a psychotherapist. In other words, I have no professional expertise when it comes to sexual orientation. The only door into the dark that I have is a compassion for homosexuals borne out of my experience in helping them and their families with a variety of issues relating to same-gender orientation.

As I have said, I believe this is a dark time as far as our understanding of homosexuality is concerned. There is a long, sad history of brutalization and persecution of homosexuals, not only over the centuries, but also over recent decades. In many places even today, homosexuals are considered evil, depraved, or worse. The FBI estimates that assaults

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4. B. H. Roberts, "The Book of Mormon Translated," *The Improvement Era* 9 (1905-06): 712-13; reprinted in *Defense of the Faith and the Saints*, Vol. 1 (Salt Lake City, *Deseret News*, 1907-1912), 310.

5. Seamus Heaney, *Poems: 1965-1975* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966), 40, 49.

against gays doubled between 1990 and 1998. Matthew Shepard was beaten and left to die on a desolate road in Wyoming, Billy Jack Gaither was beaten to death by two friends, and Barry Winchell was beaten to death by one of his fellow soldiers. These are not examples of abstract homophobia but cold-blooded murder of people simply because they are gay. Yet the darkness is not confined to these ultimate acts of violence; it is pervasive in societal attitudes and behavior. Here, in the midst of the world's greatest and most progressive democracy, at the beginning of this new millennium, most homosexuals do not feel safe.

I also believe that this is a dark time with regard to the church and homosexuality. I have made a careful review of official church statements about homosexuality over the past half century, as well as an assessment of the clinical approaches to homosexuality employed by Latter-day Saint therapists, and a survey of the mythology surrounding homosexuality within the Mormon community. All point to a slowly evolving, but not yet fully evolved, understanding of homosexuality. The current practices, beliefs, and attitudes of some Mormons suggest we are not yet out of the dark. For example, completely apart from the merits or demerits of the church's vigorous campaign in California to pass Proposition 22, the Knight Initiative or the Protection of Marriage Act, the church's involvement in this political issue elicited deplorable homophobic sentiments and behavior among some Latter-day Saints. In spite of President Hinckley's strong admonition not to let support of Proposition 22 lead to prejudicial treatment of homosexuals, I heard more homophobic sentiments expressed in our meetings during the campaign than I can remember over an entire lifetime.

I am familiar with such sentiments because they once characterized my own attitude toward homosexuals. I grew up in a homophobic family, a homophobic community, and a series of homophobic Mormon congregations. When I was in high school, I had friends who harassed and threatened homosexuals. I also had violent feelings toward gays and lesbians. I felt I was expected to hate them, and in some ways perhaps I did.

When I was fifteen, I was molested by my homosexual band teacher who happened to be a Latter-day Saint. Contrary to what some might believe, while that was a confusing experience, it did not cause me to have any homosexual feelings. Well into my mature years, I considered homosexuality a perversion and had a visceral reaction against homosexuals.

On my mission I joined with other missionaries in teasing or saying hurtful things about missionaries who were effeminate or whom we suspected of being gay. We sometimes cruelly called these missionaries "Sister." I am not proud of such behavior.

My attitude toward homosexuals began to change when I became aware that my beliefs were inconsistent with what I read in the New Testament. Further changes took place when I started teaching at UCLA

where two of my teaching assistants and not a few of my students and colleagues were gay or lesbian. While I didn't pretend to understand their homosexuality, I found these people were basically like everyone else. At this same time, I became acquainted with some gay Latter-day Saints, all of whom were in pain over the conflict between their sexual identities and their relationship with the church. I believed that homosexuality was something they could overcome if they were sincerely desirous of doing so.

When I was editing *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* during the late sixties and early seventies, we published what might have been the first article on homosexuality by a gay Latter-day Saint. I was haunted by one line from this anonymous author's essay: "In a lifetime of church activity," he said, "I have yet to hear a single word of compassion or understanding for homosexuals spoken from the pulpit."<sup>6</sup> During that same time, I interviewed a group of Latter-day Saint homosexuals for what was to be a published conversation about their experience. That dialogue was never printed, and when I listen to the tape now and read the typescript of what I said, I am embarrassed by my ignorance and prejudice, by my inability to listen to and understand these people's experiences.

#### A FAMILIAR PATTERN

I don't think I had any real depth of understanding about homosexuality until I became bishop of the Los Angeles single's ward in 1986. It was my privilege during the years I served as a bishop to counsel with a number of Latter-day Saints who were struggling with issues of faith and same-sex desire. It was during those intense spiritual and emotional encounters when my heart first began to open, when my mind first began to grasp the complexity and the tragedy of what it means to be a homosexual Latter-day Saint. I owe much to those dear brothers and sisters who challenged my axioms, who schooled me in faith and sacrifice, and who taught me much about love that I did not already know.

Many in my congregation had endured what for most homosexuals is a familiar pattern: becoming aware of their homosexual feelings, usually at an early age; denying and repressing those feelings, then facing them tentatively with great fear and loneliness; becoming absorbed with feelings of guilt, unworthiness, and self loathing; in some cases acting on their homosexual feelings; entering reorientation therapy; making a covenant with God that they would make any sacrifice if he would just change them; often serving missions, throwing themselves furiously into

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6. "Solus," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 10, no. 3 (Autumn 1976): 94-99.

church activity, fasting and praying for long periods, and going to the temple; and sometimes marrying and having children in a desperate attempt to transform themselves.

This pattern often includes an emotional breakdown, accompanied by self-destructive thoughts and action, and always there are feelings of profound alienation and isolation. Very often individuals involved in this pattern conclude that either God does not love them or they are unworthy of his love. They become estranged from their families and from the church. Many are excommunicated. In far too many cases, their lives end in suicide or death from AIDS.

#### A DIALOGUE

As I say, this pattern is familiar to almost every Latter-day Saint homosexual and his or her family. Recently I talked with a young returned missionary who is gay. Except for a counselor from whom he sought help while on his mission, I am the only person he has told about his sexual orientation. As we talked, I asked him about the strength of his homosexual feelings, whether he had any attraction to the opposite sex (he did not), whether he had ever had a sexually intimate homosexual experience (he had not), and what he intended to do about his situation. As he shared his feelings, I felt great sadness over what I saw ahead for this young man. The following is part of a subsequent e-mail exchange we had about reorientation therapy and other topics (I'll refer to him as "John"):

*John:* Thanks for talking the other day. It sounds like you are opposed to the idea of reorientation.

*Bob:* You didn't listen carefully to what I said, and it is important that you understand my position. Some people may be able to change, especially if they have weak as opposed to strong homosexual feelings. What I consider as the most recent and reliable research and therapeutic practice suggest that many can't change. If some can, that's wonderful, but they and others should not generalize their experience to all homosexuals. Among the homosexuals I know personally, were change possible for them, they would have changed because they were so highly motivated to change, worked so hard over long periods of time to change, and were so intensely spiritual in their efforts to change.

*John:* I have been giving that whole thing a lot of thought for some time. On the one hand, I was not incredibly impressed with some things that the counselor on my mission said, but, on the other hand, some of it made a lot of sense. He did not work for the church, but was a church member, so I would like to think that church policy was not dictating his thoughts.

*Bob:* I don't know this individual, but many LDS psychotherapists are

influenced by the policy, philosophy, and therapeutic practices of Church Social Services and the BYU clinical psychology program. The American Psychological Association has taken the position that homosexuality is not a perversion and that aversion and other types of re-orientation therapies are not ethical. The fact of the matter is we need more scientific studies.

*John:* I don't know. If, as some people claim, there is a 25 percent success rate in reorientation, that is 25 percent more of a chance than I have at the moment of being more normal. The way it is showing up for me is, "What have I got to lose?" Get depressed and discouraged? Already been there a whole lot. Get suicidal? Well, been there tons too.

*Bob:* I am concerned about your depression and self-destructive impulses. You must not let either go untreated by a professional psychotherapist. Your worth to your Heavenly Father is inestimable, and you must not forget that. I will be your friend, whatever you decide to do, and I will be happy to talk with you as you work things out.

*John:* It is a miracle that my mission president did not send me home. I don't know. I just need more information. If I were to get married, some day even as I am now, I would be able to consummate the marriage, and my therapist seemed to think that would be all I would need as a starting point for recovering within the marriage covenant.

*Bob:* This is contrary to what President Hinckley and Elder Oaks advise. I know homosexuals who entered into marriage with the hope that it would work, but then the marriage ended, often with tragic results for the homosexual, the spouse, and any children that resulted from the union. My psychotherapist friends at BYU tell me they know of successful marriages that have lasted twenty years, but again, they couldn't say whether these individuals were bi-sexual or homosexual. Certainly it is physically possible to consummate a marriage, but a marriage is much more than that, and the question you have to ask yourself is whether you could be intimate in a way that would be physically, emotionally, and spiritually satisfying for both you and your wife. You have to ask yourself if it would be ethical for you to enter such a marriage without disclosing to your partner your sexual feelings. I think it would be good for you to talk to people who represent a range of feelings and experiences—people on various sides of this issue.

I gave John the name of a friend, Stuart Matis, a gay Latter-day Saint who has struggled for years over issues relating to his homosexuality, but who has remained faithful to the church. A couple of days after they had spoken, John sent me an e-mail message:

*John:* I talked to Stuart for about two hours on Sunday night. He really echoed what you and others have been saying about reparative therapy. I am probably going to call up the therapist I saw on my mission and have a conversation with him about it, to see if he has any other angles

that I have not thought of yet, but I doubt he will have anything new to tell me.

*Bob:* I hope you understand that all I am encouraging you to do is gather information, explore various possibilities, consider other people's experiences, seek for guidance (both spiritual and psychological), and keep open the possibilities. I wanted you to talk to Stuart because I believe he is one of the finest Latter-day Saints I have ever met, a person of great integrity who has struggled with this issue for many years.

During the past four months, I have had several discussions with Stuart. The first time I met him, I observed to my wife that he seemed to be among the finest that Mormonism produces: a truly outstanding and upright man. He served an honorable mission, served as an elder's quorum president, and worked in the temple. He has never been sexually intimate.

I spoke to Stuart just a few days ago, and he had once more lapsed into depression and suicidal feelings. (His mother told me her son had made several attempts on his life and he had recently purchased a gun.) He revealed that he had developed a romantic relationship with a man. Nevertheless, he has remained celibate. What he would like, he said, was to try to find someone with whom he could have a life-long relationship. He said, "Bishop Rees, the reason I don't like the word 'homosexual' is that the sexuality part is not the most important part of what I want. I want an intimate, loving relationship like my mother and father have." When I testified to him of God's love, he replied, "If he loved me, why didn't he answer me all those years when I pleaded so earnestly for his help?" I said I couldn't account for unjustified or inexplicable suffering, I could only testify of what I knew: God loves us and wants us to be happy.

I worry about this man, and I pray for him, and for the countless others like him who suffer unspeakably because, for reasons none of us understands, they love those of their own gender.\*

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\*On returning home from delivering this paper on Sunday, February 27, 2000, I found a message on my answering machine from Stuart Matis's mother saying Stuart had taken his life the previous Friday. During the past several years, he had vacillated between periods when he felt liberated from depression and those in which he had strong suicidal impulses. His family and friends hoped he was reaching a more stable state, but he had been terribly disturbed by the church's involvement in Proposition 22 (the "Protect the Family" initiative on the California ballot) and had become increasingly depressed over the plight of homosexuals in the church. My tribute, "Requiem for a Gay Mormon: In Memory of Henry Stuart Matis," is published along with this essay by Family Fellowship. Copies can be obtained by writing to The Family Fellowship, 1763 North 1500 East, Provo, UT 84604; by calling (801) 374-1447; or by e-mail: [Wattsfam@aol.com](mailto:Wattsfam@aol.com). Family Fellowship's website is: [www.articmen.com/family/fellowship](http://www.articmen.com/family/fellowship).

## SHIFTING ATTITUDES TOWARD HOMOSEXUALITY

As I have reviewed church practice over the past century, I have observed that both historically and contemporaneously, the church has made certain accommodations for heterosexuals. For example:

- In the New Testament Christ taught that "whosoever shall put away [or divorce] his wife, except [it be] for fornication [or other sexual sin], and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery" (Matthew 19:9). As far as I know, there has been no revelation rescinding this admonition, and yet we honor marriages of those who have been divorced for reasons much less serious than sexual transgression.
- Although condemned by society at large, the nineteenth-century Mormon practice of polygamy liberalized the traditional definition of marriage from that between one man and one woman to that between one man and several or even many women.
- It was the custom at one time for Latter-day Saints to confess sexual transgressions openly in meetings. I can remember when the results of church courts were announced openly in priesthood meetings with the transgressor identified by name. We knew that "behavior unbecoming a member of the church" generally was code for sexual transgression. At certain times and places in the past, fornication and, especially, adultery would have been considered automatic grounds for excommunication. Except under special circumstances, this is no longer the case.
- At one time Latter-day Saint couples were admonished not to practice birth control. However, in recent years the church has taken a more liberal attitude toward family planning. Current policy makes clear that matters of family planning are "extremely intimate and private and should be left between the couple and the Lord." Church policy also makes clear that marital sexuality is a private matter between a husband and wife and that it is a gift not only for procreation "but also as a means of expressing love and strengthening emotional and spiritual bonds between husband and wife."<sup>7</sup>
- Currently, in some countries where it is illegal for citizens to obtain a divorce, the church allows people to marry again without obtaining one, and in some states and countries the church recognizes common-law marriages

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7. *Church Handbook of Instructions, Book 1* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1998), 158.



Thus, the church, without compromising its core position on what sexual misconduct is or weakening its vigilance against those forces which undermine sexual purity and fidelity, has liberalized some of its policies with regard to heterosexual behavior.

What about attitudes toward homosexuality? In 1946 when President George Albert Smith discovered that the then Patriarch of the Church had been involved in a homosexual affair with a young man, the Patriarch was quietly released.<sup>8</sup> The only restriction placed on his membership was that he not function in any church capacity. Sometime later, this restriction was lifted. About the same time, a music teacher was released from the faculty at Rick's College for homosexual behavior. A counselor in this man's stake presidency wrote to the First Presidency asking what action should be taken. President J. Reuben Clark recorded the following in his office diary: "I said thus far we had done nothing more than drop them from positions they had."<sup>9</sup> A change in emphasis and policy began in 1959 when President David O. McKay asked Apostles Spencer W. Kimball and Mark E. Peterson to address problems associated with homosexuality. Drawing upon current medical and therapeutic theories and practices, Apostle Kimball began to formulate a vocabulary and an attitude that would become the basis for official and unofficial statements about homosexuality for at least the next three decades.<sup>10</sup> This period was characterized by what I would term a decidedly Old Testament view of homosexuality—that it was an abomination in the sight of God, that it was against nature, that it was a plague on society. While such attitudes may have been well intentioned and even reflected to some degree the attitudes of the prevailing society, there is no question that they were destructive to a number of individual Latter-day Saints and their families.

Although, unfortunately, some vestiges of the older views continue—among some church leaders, among a few church-associated psychotherapists, among certain self-appointed spokespersons, and among the general membership—in recent years there seems to have been a gradual softening of church teachings and official statements about homosexuality, although not about illicit homosexual relations. This shift in discourse can be seen in Elder Dallin Oak's article, "Same-Gender

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8. For a full account, see the diaries of George Albert Smith and Joseph F. Smith, and office diary of J. Reuben Clark, as cited in Connell "Rocky" O'Donovan, "'The Abominable and Detestable Crime against Nature': A Brief History of Homosexuality and Mormonism, 1840-1980," in *Multiply and Replenish: Mormon Essays on Sex and Family*, ed. Brent Corcoran (Salt Lake City: Signature, 1994), 145-46; nn75-78.

9. J. Reuben Clark diary, as quoted in O'Donovan, "The Abominable and Detestable Crime against Nature," 146.

10. *Ibid.*, 147; nn81-85.

Attraction," in the October 1995 *Ensign*<sup>11</sup> and in President Gordon B. Hinckley's recent statements calling for more Christian treatment of homosexuals.<sup>12</sup>

Such changes in attitude and policy toward heterosexual and homosexual matters should leave us both humble about what we know and open to greater understanding. The history of every field, including religion, indicates that at least some of the axioms of previous generations are overturned by new discoveries, new revelations. For example, most of us no longer believe that blacks sat on the fence in the preexistence, that Native Americans are cursed by God, or that women are inferior to men. Perhaps it is reasonable, therefore, to suggest that some of our ideas about homosexuality will be revised in the future, that societal attitudes will become more enlightened, and that scientific discoveries will expand our understanding of this human phenomenon.

This possibility is reflected in a speech given at BYU in 1969 by President Hugh B. Brown, who stated, "We have been blessed with much knowledge by revelation from God which, in some part, the world lacks. But there is an incomprehensibly greater part of truth that we must yet discover. Our revealed truth should leave us stricken with the knowledge of how little we really know. It should never lead to an emotional arrogance based upon the false assumption that we somehow have all the answers—that we in fact have a corner on truth. For we do not."<sup>13</sup>

As Christians, we need not passively wait for further light and knowledge, but actively seek for it. I once wrote that since enlightenment about homosexuality "is a matter of great significance to the church and since it involves the suffering of so many of our brothers and sisters, perhaps as individuals and as a church we should make the solution of this issue a matter of urgent fasting and prayer. . . . Surely [this] deserves very high priority among those matters for which we knock upon the door of Heaven."<sup>14</sup>

11. Dallin H. Oaks, "Same-Gender Attraction," *Ensign* 25 (Oct. 1995): 6-14.

12. For example: "Nevertheless, and I emphasize this, I wish to say that our opposition to attempts to legalize same-sex marriage should never be interpreted as justification for hatred, intolerance, or abuse of those who profess homosexual tendencies, either individually or as a group. As I said from this pulpit one year ago, our hearts reach out to those who refer to themselves as gays and lesbians. We love and honor them as sons and daughters of God. They are welcome in the Church. It is expected, however, that they follow the same God-given rules of conduct that apply to everyone else, whether single or married" (Gordon B. Hinckley, "Why We Do Some of the Things We Do," *Ensign* 29 (Nov. 1999): 54.

13. From a speech given at BYU in 1969, quoted in "An Exalted Quest: Freedom of the Mind," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 17 (Spring 1984): 79.

14. Robert A. Rees, *No More Strangers and Foreigners: One Latter-day Saint Examines the Question of Homosexuality in the Church*, pamphlet (Idaho Falls, Idaho: Grand Teton Graphics, 1992).

As we seek for more understanding about the nature of same-gender attraction, we should make every effort to ensure that homosexuals feel welcome in our meetings and at our activities. In his teaching to the Saints at Bountiful, the resurrected Lord taught, "And behold, ye shall meet together oft; and ye shall not forbid any man from coming unto you when ye shall meet together, but suffer them that they may come unto you and forbid them not; But ye shall pray for them, and shall not cast them out; and if it so be that they come unto you oft ye shall pray for them unto the Father, in my name" (3 Nephi 18:22-23).

Sometimes as Latter-day Saints we act as if we have forgotten our unique and radical understanding of God's mercy and judgment. Sometimes we speak of homosexuals as if they had no hope of redemption. Some Mormons treat homosexuals as many fundamental Christians and Muslims do: like pariahs condemned to an eternal hell. Yet one of the great, enlightening, and ultimately consoling doctrines revealed in Mormonism is that we will all inherit kingdoms, even the least of which will be more glorious than what we experience here.

#### A PROPOSED PLAN OF ACTION

I would like to suggest some concrete steps we might take to help lead us toward a better understanding of homosexuality.

First, I think we need to gather as much information as possible about the nature of homosexuality in our unique Mormon culture. This will be difficult because of the fear and secrecy which attend this issue; nonetheless, I think we should try. Can we with some confidence estimate how many gay and lesbian Latter-day Saints there are in the church, how many have left of their own volition or been excommunicated, and how many have died of AIDS or committed suicide? I have been told by someone who has an enormous archive on homosexuality and the church that there is a higher incidence of homosexuality among certain well-established Latter-day Saint families than among others, implying a genetic link for this condition. It would be useful to have data that would confirm or counter this anecdotal information. We need to have better research, both historical and contemporary, and more of it, and we need to start a database that will serve as the basis for further research.

Second, we need to find more powerful ways of presenting to our communities the experience of Latter-day Saint homosexuals, so they can be seen in their human complexity rather than as stereotypes. I suggest that one of the best ways to do this is through art forms. These might include collections of poetry, fiction, and personal essays dealing with homosexuality among the Mormons. Perhaps some aspect of the Mormon homosexual experience could be dramatized in plays and films.

Such expressions would help us to see homosexuals within a human context, as real people with the same basic needs and desires as heterosexuals.

Third, we need to be vigilant about the kind of language we use and permit others to use in regard to homosexuals. Here I refer not only to words clearly pejorative or prejudicial, but also to terms such as "gay agenda," which suggest some kind of sinister homosexual program; "homosexual lifestyle" (or simply "the lifestyle"), which implies that the homosexual experience is characterized by unbridled lasciviousness; "so-called homosexuals," and "presumed homosexuals," which suggest that homosexuality is not a real condition. Such language is dehumanizing.

Fourth, we need to expand our strategies for informing the general church membership about the nature of homosexuality. In our church culture there is much mythology and misinformation that is destructive to homosexuals and their families. For example, some mistakenly believe that homosexuality is contagious and that by merely associating with homosexuals one may become homosexual. Responsible forums and informed dialogue can help people see both the complexity of same-sex orientation and our collective responsibility to ensure that homosexuals have all the human and civil rights to which citizens of a democracy are entitled.

Fifth, we must be willing to let our voices be heard in defense of our gay brothers and lesbian sisters. This means, among other things, countering prejudice, working to pass legislation which protects the rights of homosexuals, and helping to create a safe place within our schools and communities for those with same-sex attraction.

Sixth, we need to form chapters of Family Fellowship and similar organizations in other cities where families need help and support. At the same time, we need to begin building a network of people who can befriend, listen to, encourage, and bless homosexuals. This includes identifying counselors, therapists, church leaders, and ordinary saints to whom homosexual Latter-day Saints and their families can turn with confidence.

Seventh, and perhaps most importantly, we all must be willing to comfort, love, and help these individuals and their families. We can do this by opening our hearts to them, by letting them know that we are available to listen and—when necessary—bind up their wounds. We can become their nursing mothers, fathers, brothers, and sisters.

#### OUR CHRISTIAN RESPONSIBILITY

As a bishop, I once received a call from a woman with a brother dying of AIDS, who wondered if I would call on him. I did so, and in-

vited him to come back to church. During the course of his last year in mortality, I had the privilege of seeing this man return to full activity in the church and prepare to go to the temple. The members of my ward treated him with much love and acceptance. Not too long before this lovely man passed away, he was able to go to the temple with many members of his family. One of his brothers, who had been inactive in the church for some years, said to me, "What I saw through you, your family and the members of your congregation was a church that was compassionate, that reached out to my brother in love. It has changed my life."

I believe it is to such compassionate care of his homosexual children that Christ calls us. Wordsworth spoke of

That best portion of a good man's life,—  
His little, nameless, unremembered, acts  
Of kindness and of love.<sup>15</sup>

Surely these acts are to be performed as graciously and as generously for those who are different from us as they are for those who are like us.

Some have suggested there is an analogy between what has happened with blacks in our society and what is now happening with homosexuals. In the special issue of *Dialogue* on blacks and the Priesthood, which included Lester Bush's landmark research showing there was no scriptural or revelatory basis for denying priesthood ordination to blacks, Hugh Nibley suggests that the problem presented by this matter represents "the best possible test" for us. Nibley says, "The Lord has often pushed the Saints into the water to make them swim, and when our own indolence, which is nothing less than disobedience, gets us into a jam, He lets us stew in our own juice until we do something about it. The most impressive lesson of Bush's paper is how little we know about these things—and how little we have *tried* to know." Nibley says that from Adam on down, God's children have been "expected to seek for greater light and knowledge." He continues, "In searching for the answers we must consult our feelings as well as our reason, for the heart has its reasons, *and it is our noble feelings and impulses that will not let us rest until God has given us the feeling of what is right*. Charity does not split hairs or dogmatize, and charity comes first" (emphasis added).<sup>16</sup>

Perhaps homosexuality, as the issue of blacks and the priesthood once was, is the best possible test of our humanity and our Christianity today. For some, it may also be the best possible test of their devotion to

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15. William Wordsworth, "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey," lines 33-35.

16. Hugh Nibley, "The Best Possible Test," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 8 (Spring 1973): 74.

the church. In this, as in all matters relating to our behavior toward others, we should remember what the Savior said about showing kindness unto all our brothers and sisters (Matthew 25: 35-45).

Part of what it means to be a Christian is that through the grace of Christ we have the capacity to imagine what it is like to suffer as another person suffers. Christ has the power both to sensitize and to magnify our imaginations. As Paul said of him, "Wherefore in all things it behooveth him to be made like unto his brethren [and sisters] that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God" (Heb. 2:17). An essential difference between Christ and Satan is that through his infinite love Christ has an infinite imagination, one that allows him to place himself totally and completely within our experience, no matter how dark or painful. On the other hand, Satan, totally devoid of love, is incapable of imagining anything outside his own experience, and therefore seeks to make all of us as miserable as he is.

Christ became like us, but he also has the power to help us become like him. Peter says Christ calls us to his glory and virtue, and one of the "great and precious promises" he gives is that we "might be partakers of [his] divine nature," and in so doing, imitate his virtues, including "brotherly kindness and charity" (2 Pet. 1:4-7). It is impossible to do this if we have hatred or abhorrence for another. Compassionate, imaginative understanding is possible only within the context of love. Thus, those who revile and persecute homosexuals, who consider them perverted and evil, who feel they have some kind of sinister agenda, cannot possibly take on their suffering, cannot possibly hope to feel what they feel. However, those who, because of the example of Christ, cannot escape imagination, can feel, at least to some degree, what it must be like to be anathema to society, to be denied fellowship within the church community, and to want to blot out deep soul suffering through suicide.

With our Christ-inspired imaginations, not only can we not entertain any feelings of hatred or violence toward people who are homosexual, but we are able to imagine a world in which they do not suffer injustice and indignities. We are able to imagine a world in which the love and mercy of God and his people are more real to them than are the judgments of individuals and institutions.

God's business is God's business, and I don't pretend to know all his ways. I can answer questions out of the whirlwind about his mystery and majesty no better than Job could. I only know he sent his Son to teach me how *I* must act. As I read the life and teachings of Jesus, I cannot escape the reality that I am compelled to stand against injustice, to speak the truth as I know it, and especially to respond to those who suffer with whatever abundance my heart is capable of expressing. As Rumi so nicely put it:

Where Jesus lives, the great-hearted gather.  
We are a door that is never locked.

If you are suffering any kind of pain,  
Stay near this door. Open it.<sup>17</sup>

What this means for me, to paraphrase the words of Alma, is that I am willing to bear the burdens of my homosexual brothers and sisters that they may be light, to mourn with those of my homosexual brothers and sisters and their families and friends who mourn, and to comfort my homosexual brothers and sisters who stand in need of comfort—and in this way to stand as a witness to God that I am a true disciple of his Son.

I do not understand why God has created some of his children so that they love their own gender. Job, who wrestled with similar conundrums, said that God “discovereth deep things out of darkness.” Perhaps we can, too. All I know is a door into that darkness. I stand before that door with an impulse to keep it closed, but instead I open it, and with love I walk through. May we all so do.

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17. *The Essential Rumi*, trans. Coleman Barks (Edison, N.J.:Castle Books, 1995), 201.