

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

A Halfway Covenant?

As someone who has worked over the past several decades to try and bring greater understanding to the experiences of gays and lesbians in Mormon culture, I was pleased to read John Gustav-Wrathall's "Trial of Faith" (40, no. 2 [Summer 2007]: 78–107). A number of years ago at the annual Affirmation conference, I gave the keynote address, "Sacred or Secular: The Choice for Latter-day Homosexuals." In it, I argued that many of the homosexuals I knew desperately wanted a relationship with the Church, one that would allow them to worship, sing the songs of Zion, and be a part of a religious community with which they had deep spiritual connection and for which they had an earnest longing. I had also found that the majority who were no longer associated with the Church (because of official or self-excommunication—or who had just quietly lapsed) found it difficult to connect with another faith tradition and so had no active religious life.

What Gustav-Wrathall is demonstrating is that, within a very limited scope, homosexuals can worship in a Mormon community. Of course, as he honestly reveals, doing so under present conditions requires an amazing degree of faith and hope, to say nothing of charity. That is, to be openly gay (in a committed relationship or otherwise) in a Mormon congregation requires one to be committed enough to tolerate homophobia in its various manifestations, many of which are extreme. It

also requires one to live within such a faith community under a heavy burden of limited expression and opportunity. Nevertheless, given an understanding and supportive bishop, which Gustav-Wrathall has, he demonstrates that it is possible.

Several years ago I wrote to a General Authority friend that, given its present position on homosexuality, I thought the Church should consider doing something similar to what the seventeenth-century New England Puritans did for church members who could not claim conversion: institute a method of accommodation for homosexuals who were willing to enter into committed relationships (which are now officially and legally binding in some states and countries). What is now known as the Halfway Covenant was the inspired and practical solution of the Congregational churches to accommodate the second- and third-generation children of those who came to America to find religious freedom. Since one of the requirements of membership was that one had to have had a conversion experience and testify of such in the congregation, when the children of the first generation of believers could not rise to that level of piety, they were forbidden baptism and the sacrament. This created a crisis since it meant that, within a short time, membership would diminish and, worse, that children of the faithful would be separated from the communion of their parents.

The Halfway Covenant solved the problem by allowing such children