

WHY I STAY

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I was excommunicated from the Church in 1986. I am a gay man in a twenty-five-year-long relationship with my husband Göran Gustav-Wrathall. We were legally married in July 2008. Over the years, people have asked me how it is that I could consider myself Mormon if I'm not a member of the Church. What covenants are there for me to renew on Sunday morning, sitting in the pews, as I pass, without partaking, the sacrament tray to the person sitting next to me? To the extent that there is a relationship between me and God that has the Church as a context, real as it is to me, it is invisible to outside observers. That's okay. I stay because I cannot deny what I know.

God is real. Christ is real. The Spirit is real. When the Spirit is present, I know it is present. When it is gone, I feel its absence. When I obey its promptings, I have it with me. And when I disobey, I lose it. I can and do lose it on occasion. And with the Spirit, my life is infinitely fuller and richer and more peaceful and meaningful than without it, so I obey to the best of my ability. And when I lose it, I do whatever I need to do to get it back again. And one of those things is to stay active in my ward and to keep the discipline of the Church and the Gospel in my life.

I stay because God has told me that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is his church and it's where he wants me. It's where, time and time again, as recently as the last time I attended my south Minneapolis ward two weeks ago, the Spirit meets me and teaches me.

This is the text of the talk I gave at the 2017 Sunstone Symposium session "Why We Stay" at the Ray A. Olpin Student Center, at the University of Utah in Salt Lake City, on Friday, July 28, 2017. Other presenters were Robin Linkhart, Maxine Hanks, and Nathan McCluskey.

My heart is softened, the Lord shows me my weaknesses and works with me and draws me to him. At times, I have been reassured. At times, I have been corrected. I find myself renewed as I meditate on the sacrament prayer, as I make those promises in my heart, and ask for the Lord's help to keep those promises. I have had sacred experiences with my priesthood leaders, including through blessings they have given me, that convinced me of the reality of priesthood power. I have witnessed and been the beneficiary of the miraculous healing power of the priesthood. I revere the priesthood as I revere God. I have been blessed to have my fellow Saints claim me as one of their own, and care for me, and encourage me. They accept me and my husband with love and without judgment, and they trust me to find my way forward through faith and hope and love the same way as everybody else.

Are there complications and contradictions? The main one is that I feel prompted to stay true and committed to my husband. We experience all the challenges of any couple, as I've observed both among those who've managed to make their marriages work as well as those who haven't. My marriage to Göran is a school in which I learn patience and sacrifice and empathy. I learn what it is to be one with another human being. My relationship with Göran does not cause me to lose the Spirit. To the contrary I've experienced a richness of the Spirit as I've honored my commitments to him.

What does this mean? I trust that the seeming contradictions between my experience with my husband versus church teaching and policy will all work out. It will work out for me personally as long as I keep that Spirit guide in my life. In my last meeting with my stake president, he simply counseled patience. "What is time unto the Lord?" he said. I am learning patience above all. Time and life experience will grind away everything ephemeral and show what is eternal and what is not.

The older and more experienced I become, the more I am aware of my weaknesses and failings and my need for grace. I have learned how utterly dependent my happiness is on the first principles of the Gospel,

faith and repentance. Faith is not merely belief, it is allowing oneself to trust divine providence, even when one cannot see the ends toward which that providence guides us. Repentance is not merely an act, it is a posture, a way of life, an openness to learn and grow and become. When we fall, it is a willingness to pick ourselves up and start over. I am grateful for the grace God has shown me time and time again, often when I knew myself unworthy of it. This is a journey that must be renewed daily. It does not matter how far I've travelled in my journey up to this point. I will never reach my destination if I ever stop walking.

Sometimes I can barely believe I've been on this path for 12 years already. There have been a couple of moments in my journey with the Church when I have wondered how I would continue on with it. Not necessarily doubted that I would continue, but wondered as in having a sense of amazement. One of them was in the immediate aftermath of the November 2015 LDS policy on gay families.

On the afternoon of November 5, 2015 I was chatting on Facebook with other leaders of Affirmation when news of the policy began to break in social media. It wasn't until I saw copies of authenticated text from the new handbook that it really began to sink in. My initial personal reaction was not positive. I think among the first words out of my mouth were, "That's barbaric." It seemed vindictive to me. In that moment, it looked to me like revenge for the Church's stunning defeat in the Supreme Court, in *Obergefell v. Hodges*. And to me it was barbaric to use children to strike at the parents. I knew, and still know the personal situations of enough LGBT Mormons in same-sex relationships raising children in the Church to immediately grasp what impact this would have on them, not to mention the larger impact that this could have on LDS attitudes toward the LGBT community.

As I continued to reflect, there were two dominant thoughts in my mind. The first was that any hope of broadening connections between the larger LGBT community and the Church had been dashed. During my time of service as senior vice president and as a member of the

board of Affirmation I and other leaders in the organization had been working hard to broaden those contacts. We had opened up a dialogue with church leaders at all levels, and had been meeting with LDS Church Public Affairs since December 2012. We were striving to make room for LGBT Mormons to claim their faith as Latter-day Saints, as I have since my profound conversion experience in September 2005.

In September and October 2016, Affirmation conducted a survey of its membership worldwide. Based on the survey data, which looked representative of the Affirmation community that we served, over half of Affirmation members reported being active in the Church prior to the policy. After the policy that percentage dropped to somewhere between twenty percent and twenty-five percent. In a January 2016 leadership gathering in Los Angeles, Affirmation leaders expressed anger, a sense of betrayal, and even guilt for having encouraged LGBT Mormons to engage with the Church. We had observed widespread trauma among LGBT Mormons and their families.

My other dominant thought was less a coherent thought and more a sense of gnawing hurt, sadness, and doubt. If I had to put words to it I would say I was wrestling with my sense of my own place in all of this. Hadn't the Lord told me to come back to the Church? Hadn't the Lord reassured me that my relationship with my husband was blessed by him, that I should honor it and safeguard it as one of my greatest personal treasures? I was running for president of Affirmation, and had made the decision to run based on personal prayer and fasting and a clear sense that this was also something the Lord wanted me to do. How was I supposed to do this now? I remember the morning of November 6, I got up out of bed, went downstairs to kneel in our living room and pray before beginning my daily scripture study. I remember feeling heartsick, wishing that what had happened the previous afternoon had been just a bad dream.

But then I began to pray. I began to pour my heart out to the Lord, saying simply, please help me to understand. Please help me to know

what to do. And it was like a light went on. Peace flooded through me. My mind was filled with light and reassurance. And the Lord in essence said to me don't worry about this. I've got this one. And you and your husband are still okay.

It was hard for me to articulate what this personal revelation meant, because my sense of things was so counterintuitive. Most members of the LGBT Mormon community saw the policy as a giant step backwards, as a triumph of bigotry. I saw it now as a step forward. A step through. We had to go through this to get to the other side. And the other side would be very, very good.

What had we lost? We had lost some illusions about a liberal progressive evolution of church policy on this issue. I was always skeptical of that kind of a scenario. I always suspected that this issue could only be tackled head-on, in the form of listening deeply to the real stories of LGBT Mormons, followed by doctrinal searching and prayer for new revelation.

What we hadn't lost was ourselves, our stories in their depth and totality. The Church might not understand us, but God does. God sees us. God saw me and said I was okay and that I need not worry and that he had this one.

In the weeks after, I saw signs that ordinary, mainstream, believing heterosexual Mormons were really struggling with this. My bishop called me to see if I was okay. We met and talked. He told me that by his estimate at least sixty percent of the members of our ward were struggling with this. The Sunday after the policy a stranger came up to me in church and asked if I was John Gustav-Wrathall. When I told him I was, he told me that he was investigating the Church. He said to me, "I just wanted you to know that I'm with you on this one." Other members of my ward came up to me and hugged me and promised me that I was not alone.

At the end of November my mother passed away, and I spoke at her funeral. I told the story of her own personal revelation telling her

that her gay son was okay, and prompting her to accept my husband as her own son. After the funeral, it seemed like there were a procession of members of my dad's ultra-conservative Springville, Utah ward coming to me and wanting to talk about the policy, many of them with tears in their eyes.

In early December, I asked for and was quickly granted a series of meetings with church representatives and leaders in Salt Lake. I met with an apostle, and, after telling some stories of the trauma that I had observed among ordinary LGBT Mormons, I said, "On the drive up here, I was discussing the policy with my father. My father was very troubled by the term apostate. I am now defined as apostate under this policy. I told my father that I did not believe it was the Church's intention to stigmatize me or others in my situation. The concept of apostasy is simply used to draw a line between what the Church currently understands as doctrine and what it does not. Was I correct in what I told my father?" The apostle's response was that what I had told my father was exactly right. It was clear to me that in his willingness to meet with me there was a desire to engage, to draw in and include despite very difficult doctrinal understandings. After writing about this meeting in a blog post in *Times & Seasons*, I was accused by some of lying about having met with church leaders. The disbelief was proof of what I already knew about the situation, namely that it is more complex, and our leaders recognize it as more complex, than labels like "apostate" are widely understood to imply.

Yes, there has been defensiveness. There has been retrenchment and doubling down and an intensification of anti-LGBT attitudes in some quarters of the Church. But there has been an opening up as well, an opening up and a deepening of dialogue. For good or for ill, this is an issue that the Church can only move through, not back or away from.

The policy did create genuine trauma for LGBT Mormons. And it has been a duty of mine as president of Affirmation to make space for people to distance themselves from the Church. But I believe that some

of us are called to stay, and the Lord has a very important role for us as part of his plan to move us not away from or around but through.

My testimony has never required members of my ward to “be nice” to me. Nor has it required that the Church treat me as equal. It has nothing to do with the membership of the Church somehow collectively holding correct beliefs about everything. It doesn’t piss me off when somebody says something stupid in Sunday School or priesthood meeting. My testimony doesn’t require an aesthetically pleasing account of Church history. As an historian, I like my history messy, by the way. I like it human and real. The hand of God is more recognizable in that kind of story. I don’t know what to make of the Book of Mormon, other than to say that it is the most spiritually powerful and transformative text I’ve ever encountered. For me, the jury is out as far as Book of Mormon historicity goes. I haven’t been satisfied by the critics that it’s a fraud, but there are certainly aspects of the text that are puzzling if we want to try to take it literally (which the text itself somewhat demands of us). I suppose that’s fundamentally no different from any foundational scriptural text that exists anywhere. But I certainly know that the Book of Mormon is true in the way that is most meaningful to me, which is in the reading and the application of it.

For me the Church is not true “in spite of” the flaws of its members, “in spite of” our individual and collective missteps. It is true in them. It is true in our bearing with one another through them. The scriptures are more or less an archive of human error and divine correction. The trueness of the Church is in having an authentic relationship with a living God who is drawing us into a more god-like life. That’s what priesthood, at its core, is about. That kind of relationship, which demands the discipline of priesthood, necessarily involves us making both individual and collective mistakes, and requiring correction. I’m not sure God’s plan works any other way.

So I’m here, I’m queer, I’m Mormon. Get used to it.

In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.