

EXCOMMUNICATION AND FINDING WHOLENESS

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In the 1970s and '80s there was a common attitude in the Church that a Latter-day Saint could not be gay, and the Church handbook was written in such a way as to allow individuals to be excommunicated just for being known to have a sexual orientation other than heterosexual. Even after the Church clarified that the mere fact of being gay was not grounds for excommunication, given that the majority of gay people choose a same-sex relationship over celibacy or marriage to a member of the opposite sex, disproportionate numbers of gay men and lesbians ended up excommunicated. An analogous situation exists for trans people, who generally need to transition in order to be healthy. Also, at least some Church leaders have continued, despite handbook clarifications, to excommunicate individuals for the mere fact of being LGBTQ. More recently, I know a number of gay and lesbian individuals excommunicated for “apostasy” during the forty-one months of “the policy” (categorizing same-sex marriage as apostasy).¹ For LGBTQ individuals who are Latter-day Saints, the experience or anticipation of excommunication looms large in our emotional and spiritual landscape.

I was excommunicated in 1986. I've known many other LGBTQ Latter-day Saints who have been excommunicated. I've seen the range of emotions and reactions to the experience of being excommunicated: devastation, liberation, sadness, bravado, loneliness, fear, resilience,

1. The policy categorizing same-sex marriage as apostasy and forbidding the baptism of children whose primary parents were same-sex couples was initiated on November 5, 2015 and retracted April 4, 2019.

anxiety, and peace. Excommunication can be a heartbreaking experience, with huge repercussions for one's self-image as well as for one's family and social relationships. For some, excommunication represents a desired break with an institution with which one has irreconcilable differences. But for others, excommunication carries a social stigma to be avoided at all costs. For some, the spiritual penalties that come with excommunication are most feared, since they see excommunication as banishment from God and the severing of covenants that bind us to our individual families and to the larger human family.

Regardless of one's feelings about it, excommunication is rarely seen as a positive thing.

One very common response to the threat of excommunication is to simply drop out of activity, to try to stay "off the radar" of one's Church leaders. I remember a number of years ago having a conversation with a gay Latter-day Saint who told me that he wished he could attend church, but he was afraid of being excommunicated. I was attending church regularly, despite being excommunicated. I remember thinking how ironic it was to stop attending church for fear of excommunication. Many individuals informally excommunicate themselves because of their fear of the formality.

I understand this is complex. Because I am contacted from time to time by LGBTQ Latter-day Saints asking about the experience of being excommunicated from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, my desire here is to share insights that come with having lived with excommunication for over thirty years, half of which has been lived as a believing and church-active LGBTQ Saint despite being excommunicated.

While the focus of this essay is dealing with excommunication, just about everything that I have to say here could apply to how people might deal with other forms of Church discipline, such as having one's temple recommend taken away or being disfellowshipped. While this essay is written with a focus on the experience of LGBTQ individuals, I also hope this can be helpful to any others coming to terms with

painful Church disciplinary actions. At the heart of any advice I would share is my conviction that there are things in life we can control, and there are things that we cannot control. We cannot always control the consequences of our choices, but we are the ones who make the choices. If we take the time to discern what we truly want in life, and then if we pursue that which we truly desire with integrity, we will be happy even when the consequences of our choices are difficult.

My Experience with Excommunication

I am a believing Latter-day Saint, actively attending my ward, participating as much as I am able, and practicing my faith as much as possible within the constraints of my membership status. I have a strong desire to someday be a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in full standing.

I was excommunicated in 1986. At the time I had committed no offense worthy of excommunication. I had had my temple recommend taken away, and my bishop at BYU had told me that I should not partake of the sacrament until I had been masturbation-free for at least three months. After a bout with severe depression and nearly committing suicide, I felt prompted by the Spirit to write a letter to my bishop to ask that my name be removed from the records of the Church. Instead of performing this administrative procedure, my bishop convened a Church court and excommunicated me *in absentia*. My father attended the court.

My response to the excommunication was one of relief, with a little bit of annoyance. I had asked to have my name removed from the Church records and didn't understand why a full-blown Church court would be necessary in order to do that. However, in my mind the end result was the same, and I was grateful that my request had been fulfilled and that I was no longer a member of the Church.

Five years after my excommunication, I met and entered into a relationship with the man who is my husband to this day. We became a

couple in 1991; we held a public commitment ceremony in 1995, a time when same-sex marriage was legal nowhere in the United States; we purchased a home together in 1996; and we legally married in California in 2008. Regardless of how or why I was excommunicated in 1986, current Church policy is such that if I were a member, my bishop would have grounds for excommunicating me now, and I cannot currently be reinstated into membership.

In 2005, nineteen years after my excommunication, I had a series of spiritual experiences that led me to begin attending at my ward. I've remained "active" since then. I've been through five bishops and three stake presidents now and have met with each of them over the years, some of them on a regular basis. My church leaders and my ward are very supportive of me. They respect my agency and my desire to remain faithful to my relationship with my husband. They also hope and pray with me that I can someday be restored to full membership in the Church, however that may come about, whether by a change in Church policy or a change in my marital status.

There have been times when my excommunicated status has felt burdensome and when I have yearned to be able to be baptized and partake of the bread and water each week at sacrament. However, I firmly believe that I am currently where the Lord wants me to be, and I have felt reassurances through the Spirit that eventually all will work out so long as I remain faithful and attentive to its promptings.

I view my excommunicated status as a by-product of current Church policy and the state of our collective understanding of LGBTQ issues. I don't resent it in any way. In fact, I'm grateful for the opportunity that my unique life circumstances afford me to learn valuable life lessons of patience and love.

Those are my biases, that is my experience, and that is my perspective. That having been said, I hope that what follows will be helpful to people regardless of where they're coming from or what relationship they have or hope to have with the Church.

I've spoken with a number of close friends who are currently excommunicated, and everybody I know is in a different place with it. Of course, excommunication is an intensely personal experience, and I want to speak to some of the ways that we can navigate it despite the intense personal pain that we can experience around it. But excommunication is not merely personal, it is also social. So I also want to talk about some of the aspects of dealing with excommunication within our families and with our friends in the Church. If you live in a region of the United States where there is a Mormon majority, excommunication can have even more thoroughgoing impact, and I want to take a moment to address that situation as well.

Relationship with God

Ostensibly, Church disciplinary processes are all about our relationship with God. Some no longer believe in God by the time of their excommunication. For others, belief in God does not survive the excommunication process. For yet others, belief in and relationship with God remains an important factor throughout the process. Regardless of personal belief in or about God, the symbolic aspects of a process that is presented as a form of divine judgment on us is important to consider.

One of the most common ways that people typically think of God is as morality writ large. In psychological terms, God is identified with the superego. Our ideas about and relationship with God are often a function of our relationship with our superego. If we find ourselves frequently in conflict with authority figures, chances are likely that we will feel ourselves in conflict with, angry at, or disbelieving in relation to God. Whether God exists or not, it might be worthwhile to consider what that means personally.

Another way to think about God was articulated by Protestant theologian Paul Tillich. How do we relate to ultimate values in our life? Our ultimate values are those values that matter the most to us. They

are the values that we will not sacrifice for anything else. Where do we stand in relation to our ultimate values? If, for example, an ultimate value for us is having a deep, loving relationship with our family, but we have been neglecting family for our job, we may find ourselves out of sorts in life, feeling like something important is missing.

If we know what our ultimate values are and we have aligned our lives in such a way that we are in harmony with them, it's unlikely that we will need external validation in order to feel good about ourselves. It is even possible that in pursuit of our ultimate values we come into conflict with Church policies. It's possible to be a very moral human being, a human being who has high standards of ethical behavior, and be in conflict with Church policies. This has happened many times in the history of religious institutions. It is my personal conviction that eventually those kinds of conflicts will be resolved through divine mediation. But in the meantime, we may have to be prepared to find ourselves in inconvenient or uncomfortable situations. If we act with integrity, from an eternal perspective we have nothing to fear.

If, on the other hand, we do not know what our ultimate values are, or we know what they are, or have a vague sense of what they are, but we're not sure if our life is in harmony with them, external invalidation can be devastating to us. Others invalidating our choices can heighten the buried sense of doubt and fear that we already might have about the well-being of our souls.

For me, the most effective way to get in touch with my ultimate values is through spiritual practice such as scripture study, meditation, and especially fasting and prayer. It is important to approach these things in a completely open way, in a way of letting go of what we think we know and letting in what we don't know. We may think we already have the answers to critical questions in our lives, because somebody else has told us what they think those answers are. It doesn't matter if the people who have told us this are Church leaders or not. We need to figure these things out for ourselves. If we're experiencing doubt or

conflict about something, it is precisely because we don't have answers that are compelling and we need some broader perspective. And as we get in touch with that, we will get the right answer, even if it is an answer that is unexpected.

There are other ways to get in touch with our ultimate values in addition to fasting and prayer. What matters is taking the time and making the effort to know our own mind and our own heart and then to reflect on our place in the larger scheme of things.

This can actually be a lifelong process. So we shouldn't be surprised if we get answers and still have to wrestle with doubt about whether these are truly our ultimate answers. It's OK to make mistakes. It's OK to get an answer and to try that answer on for size and then discover further down the road that it's not the right answer. That's the nature of life, and to use the language of the Church, that's why we have the Atonement. That's why this mortal coil is defined by agency as well as by trust in the mercy and the atonement of Jesus Christ: so that we can learn through experience.

It can take time and work, but if we seek to get good with God (or our higher self), everything else will make sense and fall into place.

Family Relationships

My excommunication from the Church created a profound crisis in my relationships with my parents, my grandmother, and with other family members. It resulted in, among other things, my parents temporarily withdrawing their financial support of me in college. I mentioned that my father attended the Church court resulting in my excommunication. I've subsequently discussed that experience with him and learned that it was one of the most heartbreaking moments in his life as a father.

I was fortunate in that I managed to come to terms with being gay and figured out a way forward for myself before getting involved in a heterosexual marriage and having children. I know many, many gay

men and lesbians who exercised faith as they had been instructed to by Church leaders and married in spite of strong same-sex orientation, resulting in family situations that eventually became unbearable. Dealing with the full reality of being gay or lesbian and simultaneously facing the prospect of excommunication and divorce is something that I never had to deal with. And I recognize how damaging excommunication can be under those circumstances.

The most important thing we can do is to open our hearts and communicate with our loved ones. I say this knowing well that we may find ourselves in a predicament with our loved ones precisely because what is most important to communicate with them is also that which we have been most afraid to communicate with them. We may have been lying to ourselves and to them for years. So this often requires us to get as aligned as we possibly can with God, with the Holy Spirit, or with our ultimate values. But fully open-hearted and honest communication is the only chance we have at salvaging and strengthening these relationships that are and will always be the most important relationships that we can have in our lives.

It is possible that despite our best efforts to communicate openly and with integrity, our sharing results in some sort of a break. We cannot control how we will be received by others. Sometimes loved ones will respond harshly and unkindly and without understanding. Our mental health and well-being may require distancing from them at least for a time.

Family relationships, however, are different from other relationships in that they are the relationships that we will often ultimately need to keep working out even when there are breakdowns and failures that are long-lasting and damaging. So my second bit of advice would be to always find some way to keep a door or a window open to these relationships, even when we need to take a break from them. And we should always keep hope that redemption in these relationships is possible.

An open door or window could be an occasional letter or a phone call. It could be an appearance at a family reunion. It doesn't matter as long as it is a non-judging and authentic act of love expressing a desire for a positive relationship. We might need a therapist to help us figure out what our appropriate boundaries should be in relationships that have been or become abusive. Having an open door or window doesn't make sense if our house is in shambles or if we are not taking care of ourselves.

After a break with my parents that lasted for several years, over time we were able to start over and eventually come to a point where my family are among my most loyal and committed allies and supporters in my journey as a gay man. I know gay men and lesbians who have beautiful relationships with former spouses and with children, despite being divorced and excommunicated.

These are the kinds of outcomes I would hope for everyone. It may take a lot of patience, faith, and a little long-suffering in order to achieve them.

Church Relationships

I want to start here by bearing testimony that it is possible to completely break with the Church and live lives that are fulfilling and happy. Many of us grew up in Church cultures that taught us to believe that without the Church we could never be happy. In fact, we can be very happy. If we desire, we can find other religious or spiritual communities that will sustain us in our life journey, that will help us connect with our ultimate values and live our lives in alignment with those values. It is also possible to be quite happy without any church at all in our lives.

If you are peculiar in the way that I am peculiar and you have a desire for a positive relationship with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, despite being excommunicated from the same, I have a few additional bits of wisdom to share about this.

First of all, make sure that your desire for a relationship with the Church comes from an authentic place deep within. If you are making the effort as a default, because you can't imagine being happy in any other church, you may find church an increasingly frustrating and unsatisfying experience. If you have any doubt about your testimony of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, even the slightest doubt, being excommunicated is an excellent opportunity to explore other religions and to learn more about how other people view faith and see if it works for you. If you find something that brings you equal or greater joy than that which you experienced as a Latter-day Saint, it's a win!

If you've explored and come back, or you are 110 percent sure that this is where your heart is, the rest is relatively easy.

Yes, you will encounter skepticism about you and your motives and your testimony. If you find yourself demoralized by every off-putting comment, by everybody who stares at you when they think you're not looking, by words over the pulpit that you disagree with, by Sunday School discussions that are less than uplifting, church participation becomes an exercise in masochism. But if your motive for being there is because you have a testimony of the gospel, because you know this is where you belong, and you're eager to learn what the Holy Spirit has to teach you in the context of relationships with other believing and imperfect Saints, what to do in the various situations you encounter will be relatively easy to discern.

You will know that when somebody says something that offends you, the moment to deal with that is never a moment when your response is coming from a place of anger. You might know that a response should be put off indefinitely until your relationship with that individual is deeper, when an opportune moment presents itself and you feel the Spirit prompting you to speak. You will know that the most important purpose of gathering as a church is in fact to deepen our relationships with one another.

If that is your understanding, whether you are a formal member or not, you will be engaged in ministry. You will serve whenever and wherever and in whatever capacity opportunities for service present themselves. You might help vacuum the sanctuary on a Saturday morning, or show up when the elders quorum asks for volunteers to help somebody move, or bake a meal for sharing at the annual ward Christmas party.

You will stop worrying about whether your relationships with members of your ward are reciprocal. The question will always be: Are you becoming a more loving person? What are the areas in your life that you need to work on? Which way is the Spirit leading you? And you will find that as those things become your focus, members of your ward and your church leaders will open up to you. You will find yourself in surprising situations where members of your faith community become your advocates and your defenders and your best friends, the people who, in the whole world, make you feel most safe and most loved.

And added to that depth of human love you will experience divine love. You will feel the sweet and distinct and irreplaceable and unique presence of the Holy Spirit, whispering love and divine approbation. There will be moments when you can call upon priesthood blessings by worthy priesthood holders in your ward and you will feel those blessings coming not from men but directly from loving heavenly parents.

If we go into any ward situation with an evangelistic agenda, with the idea that we know what and where the Church should be and we are here to teach people, we will lose the Spirit. It doesn't matter if the Church does need to change. The fact remains that however or in whatever way your fellow Saints and leaders are imperfect, from the viewpoint of our Heavenly Father and Heavenly Mother, we are imperfect in exactly the same way. We might have certain lessons down pat, but there are other things we struggle with that others don't. Some of the lessons that they have down pat are things we need to work on.

Until we have that recognition, there can be no Zion. And the attitude that we are there to fix things will militate against that recognition. In fact, it will lay for us the same traps of judgmentalism that many others fall into in relation to us as LGBTQ folks. Our sole agenda in the framework of the gospel is to learn and apply the lessons of the Atonement.

As we all learn those lessons, the Church becomes that which we all pray and yearn for: a place where there is no male nor female, bond nor free, black nor white, gay nor bi nor lesbian nor trans nor queer nor straight. A place where there is no excommunicated, where the walls of separation have all been torn down, where there are no strangers, where we are all fellow citizens as Saints. The Church will become the kind of church where you can belong, because you will belong.

You already belong there, as difficult as it might be to believe. I have learned on this journey that Zion appears when we begin to live in it. It might feel like you are the only one living there at first. But live in it long enough and it will start to spread from you to others.

Social Stigma/Social Support

At the time that I requested that my name be removed from the records of the Church, I had just completed my third year at Brigham Young University and would normally have returned to Provo for my senior year. I had just survived a summer when my intention upon leaving BYU had been to commit suicide. My decision to resign from the Church and to not return to BYU were made knowing of my psychological vulnerability and the risk of plunging back into a deep depression if I returned. I was also very aware of the social stigma that I would face as an ex-member of the Church, not to mention the problems that might pose in relation to my enrollment at BYU.

I don't know for certain exactly what kind of social stigma I would have faced at BYU or the challenges that would have involved

because I chose instead to transfer to Northern Michigan University in the Upper Peninsula (UP) of Michigan, where I completed my undergraduate degree. If there were Latter-day Saints in the UP, I certainly never encountered any! And I didn't seek them out. I joined a Lutheran congregation with evangelical leanings, and my status as an excommunicated member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was seen as something of a badge of honor. I had transplanted myself into a community and into social circles where I received ample love and support from many new friends who were eager to help in any way they could.

If you are LGBTQ facing excommunication from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and you live in the Intermountain West in a Mormon-majority community, you will definitely be facing some social challenges. My advice to you and to anyone facing excommunication, regardless of where you live, is find your post-excommunication social network. If you don't have a circle of friends and family who can be a part of that network, it is important to create one.

My story is a bit unique in that I was not excommunicated for being gay, I was excommunicated for requesting that my name be removed from the Church records. I was not out to the Church leadership. My story is also unusual in that my post-excommunication support network were evangelical Christians who also didn't know that I was gay. Evangelical Christians shared most of my core beliefs about God and Jesus Christ, and they were a very warm, compassionate community where I received lots of love in transitioning out of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. But they were not a great support community for coming out, something I learned a few years later. Then I had to find my post-coming-out support network!

No LGBTQ person takes lightly the decisions that lead one to come out or take actions that lead to being excommunicated from the Church. We make these decisions through much heartache and wrestling, often plagued by fear of the consequences and self-doubt about the wisdom

of our decisions. Nevertheless, our decision is made with integrity, and we deserve to have a community of people around us who are willing to support us. Unconditionally.

So if you don't know who those people are, you need to find them as soon as possible. Affirmation: LGBTQ Mormons, Families & Friends is a good place to start. There you will find plenty of people who understand the piece about being excommunicated, as well as the piece about coming out and coming to terms with being L, G, B, T, or Q.

No matter where you go for support, nobody will fully understand all of the nuances of your particular story. Wherever you go for support, the most important kind of support to cultivate is self-support. Take time to look at the aspects of your journey for which you are grateful and begin to imagine the future that you want. Take steps to realize that future. As we learn to do that for ourselves, we will eventually be able to do that with others, and we will find a natural support community growing around us.

I should add, finally, that it is not necessary to write off friends and family in the Church as part of your post-excommunication network. In theory at least, members of the Church are supposed to rally around those who been excommunicated, showing an increase of love. I am aware that that doesn't always happen. I do know of individuals, though, who have made that work. They communicated with family, friends, and leaders in the Church about their coming out process and their decision to enter into a relationship or to transition. Often members of their church community understood and were supportive. This is not unheard of.

You get to be in the driver's seat through this process. You get to decide what kind of support you need, and you have a right to seek it.

The Contexts We Bring

I remember having a conversation with Mike Quinn, my former professor and mentor at BYU, shortly after his excommunication in

1993. Mike was one of the “September Six” who was excommunicated for apostasy, for things he had published on the ordinations of women in Nauvoo in the 1840s. Mike had played an important role in helping me to recontextualize things I had learned about Church history in my freshman year at BYU that shook my testimony. In many ways, I credited him with helping to save my faith. What impressed me about that conversation was his lack of acrimony, his generosity and equanimity in the face of an event that most people would consider shattering. Mike later spoke to me about a dream he had had of meeting Boyd K. Packer, the apostle who reportedly had ordered his excommunication, in the afterlife, and the two of them finally embracing. Mike taught me something important.

Recently I was listening to an interview on National Public Radio. In the interview, they were discussing stress and its impact on our well-being. One piece of the discussion caught my attention. They were discussing whether stress is good or bad, or if there are certain kinds of stress that are good or bad. The answer to the question was that our body doesn't really differentiate between good stress and bad stress. The physiological reaction that occurs when we experience stress as positive is identical to the physiological reaction when we experience stress as negative. Long-term or intensive stress can be bad for us. However, stressful situations can be managed (or not) depending on the context that we bring to them.

If, for example, we see a stressful situation as an opportunity to learn something new, to overcome a challenge, or to see what we're made of, the likelihood that we will navigate that stressful situation and ultimately manage or deal with the stress positively is much greater than if we view a stressful situation as calamity, as misfortune, or as persecution. The most important variable in how we come out of a stressful situation is our own context for looking at that situation. Certainly that is the only variable over which we can exercise any control.

Some people will call this a cop-out. But if we go into stressful situations telling ourselves we are powerless, we will end up being

victims in that situation whether we are truly powerless or not. On the other hand, if we go into a situation acknowledging that certainly there are things we do not have control over but recognizing that there are things we can control and then discerning which choices will be most positive based on what we can control of the situation, we have a fighting chance to manage that situation and come out victorious.

There are any number of contexts that we can use to come to terms with the situation of being excommunicated from the Church. We can look at it as an opportunity to get closure on a relationship in which we have experienced harm. We can look at it as the consequence, fault of no one, of a situation of insufficient understanding of complex issues, and we can forgive. We can see it as a test of faith, an opportunity to deepen our relationship with God.

This is heavy stuff. When we experience an overwhelming blow, asking ourselves to take a step back and recontextualize the situation might be asking too much in the moment. Our brains seldom work like that when we are in intense pain, and few things in life can be more painful than the rejection we experience when our church takes action to cut us off, including in that cutting off a message that we are unacceptable to God. There is no shame or wrong in simply acknowledging that a situation is too much and seeking support or help wherever we can find it. There are many individuals and communities within our reach who are there for us. If you don't know who to turn to, reach out to me and I will help.

I encourage allies or supporters of the LGBTQ community, either in or out of the Church, to be proactive in reaching out to LGBTQ individuals. It's always OK to ask someone how they're feeling, to get to know them better, and to find ways to be there for them, advocate for them, and stand with them as they speak their truths.

The most important thing that I've remembered through my own process of excommunication and the various contexts that I've applied to try to make sense of it is that God looks at the heart, and God never abandons us.

Prior to my excommunication, my fear of rejection by God and rejection by the Church left me terrified and even suicidal. Realization that God knew me intimately, knew the desires of my heart, knew who I was and how I was made, and loved and blessed and claimed me as his own, enabled me to face my excommunication, an event I once considered the ultimate failure, with equanimity.

In time, as I felt God calling me to reengage with the Church even as an excommunicated person, I experienced something new. I saw my excommunication and the circumstances surrounding it as a time of trial through which both I and the Church, as we came to understand it and the conditions that produced it, were growing into a deeper understanding of God's plan for all of us. And that recognition made possible by the Spirit leaves me with profound hope and anticipation. I now see my excommunication as a symbol of God's grace in my life and as a finger pointing toward something greater. And as my wise trans Latter-day Saint friend Sara Jade Woodhouse once said, reflecting on her own storied relationship with the Church, I can't wait to see what God does next.

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