

## THE NOVEMBER 2015 POLICY AND ME

David Doyle

As someone who is gay and grew up in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, it has been an interesting journey to witness changes by the Church in how it understands and treats gay people. There have been changes in the language used, such as the switch from “homosexual” to “same-sex attraction” and more recently to “gay, lesbian, and bisexual.” There have been changes in the discussion as to why gay people even exist. Explanations have shifted from ideas like “It’s the parent’s fault,” or “The individual chose this and can change their orientation if they want to badly enough,” to “We don’t know why some people experience this orientation.”

While I was a teen, every year at church we read a talk from Boyd K. Packer titled “To Young Men Only.” In addition to denouncing masturbation and pornography, Elder Packer condoned anti-gay violence when he recounted a story of a missionary who hit his gay mission companion so hard it floored him. Elder Packer told the missionary, “Somebody had to do it and it wouldn’t be well for a General Authority to solve the problem that way.” Message received loud and clear, and not just by me as the straight boys in the quorum chanted “smear the queer.”

Everything I learned from church was homosexuality is not natural; it is a filthy perversion caused by sin and a lack of faith, and gay people are an abomination and an enemy to God. That didn’t feel like me. But I wondered, “Is this what I’m condemned to be?” The plan of happiness doesn’t include someone like me, so I surmised I was consigned to a lonely, sad existence and thought about ending my life.

In 1989, my bishop spoke with me about preparing for a mission and instructed me to go home and pray to know if the Church and Book of Mormon were true. I went home and prayed, but instead I asked God, “Do you love me? All of me? Can you love who I am and what I am?” Warmth radiated across my body, and I heard the words, “You are not broken.”

I went on a mission in 1990 to South Korea, but my orientation didn’t disappear. It remained my deep secret. One of the few books I was allowed to read as a missionary was *Miracle of Forgiveness* by Spencer W. Kimball, which strongly condemns homosexuality. How could I reconcile these words written by a prophet with the contradictory answer to my prayer that I was not broken?

I received an honorable release from my mission, and in January 1993 I began college in Rexburg, Idaho. That year Elder Boyd K. Packer declared there were three enemies of the Church: feminists, intellectuals, and homosexuals. As a twenty-two-year-old faithful returned missionary, I was surprised and disheartened to see myself on that list.

I became best friends with my first roommate. In fact, I fell in love. At the end of the semester, I learned he’d had some gay experiences in his past and that night he added another. I went to sleep thinking that this was my shot at happiness. Although we didn’t go far, the next morning he spoke to the bishop and we were immediately split up. I was humiliated but allowed to stay in school.

In 1994, the First Presidency announced its opposition to same-sex marriage in Hawaii. This was the first time I heard the idea that I could marry a man, and the way the temple taught the law of chastity gave me hope as it mentioned sexual relations with a husband OR wife. One day I might be legally married to a husband and meet that definition.

I began school at BYU Provo in 1995 and heard rumors that BYU security would sometimes engage in sting operations on campus to try to entrap gay students. These rumors added to the underlying stress I felt as a student trying to hide my big secret. It was also this year that

“The Family: A Proclamation to the World” was announced, which was a response against the fight for gay marriage.

A big highlight of 1995 was my business law class. Provo’s prosecuting attorney taught the class, and one day he led a discussion to evaluate the legal arguments—not the moral arguments—against same-sex marriage. To my surprise, he shredded the Church’s legal reasoning, and much of the class seemed to agree the Church’s efforts were doomed.

I began working at the Missionary Training Center in 1996 as a Korean language teacher. I loved the spirit I felt there, but I also had a faith crisis. As a student at BYU, I was getting a more complex version of Church history than I had previously known. Things that had seemed very straightforward were now murky. I discovered the foundation I had relied on was not as rock solid as I had assumed. It felt like I had been standing on a glass floor that shattered. I did not feel I could talk to anyone about this without possibly getting kicked out of school.

I ultimately sifted through the shards of my faith and held on to those things that were meaningful to me. Largely, the parts of Mormonism I valued were about loving others, treating others with kindness and respect, assisting those in need, being aware and protective of those who are vulnerable and on the margins, and expanding our circle of who is included.

I graduated from BYU in 1997, and a year later Matthew Shepard was brutally murdered in Wyoming. I thought of how that could have been me. Not that I went to bars and flirted with guys, but based on comments I heard from roommates over the years, I wondered if this might have been the result if I had come out at BYU.

After graduating, I moved frequently, and it was useful to attend the local young single adult (YSA) ward and plug into that support network. Family generally left me alone with regard to marriage as long as they knew I was attending a YSA ward. During these years, I would occasionally get the unexpected message from the Spirit that it was okay to seek a relationship. As my way of reconciling this with

the Church, I would think that one day God would fix the Church and then I could seek a relationship and get married. So, I waited to have the loving relationship that I longed for.

I was heartened to see in a 1999 *Ensign* article that President Gordon B. Hinckley welcomed gays and lesbians in the Church. But then in 2000 the Church joined the Proposition 22 fight in California against same-sex marriage. Marie Osmond and Steve Young became my heroes for publicly disagreeing with the Church's position. That year, Stuart Matis committed suicide on the steps of an LDS church building in California. This was truly a sad event, and one which brought to the attention of regular members what a tough life it is for a gay person in the LDS Church. Reactions to the news of Stuart's death led to the first kind and empathetic comments I had ever heard from church members about a gay person.

Eventually, I was too old to attend the YSA ward and became subject to questions about marriage and dating. Various church leaders told me about women crying themselves to sleep at night. They said that I was selfish for not doing my duty to get married and that I was cutting myself off from the highest blessings.

After I earned a master's degree from the University of Florida, I felt like I had a chance for a new beginning. In 2005 in Florida, only Disney and the state universities offered benefits to the same-sex partners of employees. I took a job at a university because I knew that I wouldn't lose my job if they found out that I was gay. Plus, I figured, maybe I would meet someone, and this job would provide some structure for us to build a life together. I have remained employed at that university for over twenty years.

In a 2010 general conference, Elder Boyd K. Packer remarked that some say they are born with homosexual tendencies that they could not change, and then he taught that God would never do that to someone. I was stunned at his statement. When his talk was printed in the *Ensign* magazine, it was noticeably changed to delete those words. Sadly, though, I saw my sister-in-law repeat those very words to her son.

In 2011, a new group called Understanding Same-Gender Attraction (USGA) began at BYU. USGA's 2012 video "It Gets Better" received a lot of attention, both inside and outside the Church. I cried when I viewed that video. I felt hope and relief that enough change had occurred since my college days that BYU students could belong to such a group and not face expulsion.

2012 was a busy year in the church for LGBTQ visibility. I was an assistant scoutmaster at church when the Boy Scouts decided to allow gay young men to participate. In 2012, Mormons Building Bridges was formed and marched in Salt Lake City's Pride Parade. Another significant event was the LDS Church published the website *Mormons and Gays*, which included videos by queer members. Nothing like USGA or Mormons Building Bridges was available where I was, but I celebrated these developments. This was a movement about me, and I embraced these changes by vowing to be honest with others. Coming out to everyone was still too hard (I would later be diagnosed with a social anxiety disorder), but I resolved that if someone asked why I was not married, they would get the truth.

In 2013 I was called to be in the stake Young Men presidency. Several parents spoke with me about their gay or lesbian child. The LDS Church and their family have been the two most important things in the lives of these parents, and they were upset that their child could not have both. I sympathized and told them that I also thought it was unfair, but that there were signs of hope since it felt like the Church was progressing. For as long as their child comes to church, I told them, they would have a safe space next to me and other members who would also be willing to walk that tough road with them.

I got a very clear spiritual message in 2014 that one day I would be the stake Young Men president, but that I was an unusual choice and would only serve a short time. I knew what made me an unusual choice, and I started thinking of what I would do differently if I were in charge.

In 2015 I became the stake Young Men president and hit the ground running, implementing the plans I'd made. Later that year, Elder

Christofferson of the Quorum of the Twelve said it was okay for individual members to support gay marriage on social media as long as they did not attack the Church. Several members noticed and commented on my support of gay marriage.

Some of the most sacred moments I had as the stake Young Men president are one-on-one conversations with youth who would tell me of their struggles. If a teen tells me about being gay and the journey they have been on, I share that I am gay, and we have a frank conversation about hard choices. The best comment I received after I told one youth that I am gay was, "I could kind of tell." I was glad he could because it is part of who I am.

In 2015 the US Supreme Court legalized same-sex marriage in all fifty states. The stake president asked me to accompany him to three wards where he read a statement from top Church leadership reacting to this court ruling. Many members voiced negative comments about gay people, not knowing they were speaking about someone like me. While I knew that most Church members were not in favor of gay marriage, the depth and breadth of the fear and bigotry being expressed surprised me. Out of the three wards I attended that day, only one person spoke of his support for gays and lesbians, noting what a difficult life they were asked to live in our Church, and most Church members would not have the faith to live as our gay siblings are asked to do.

I went home that day wondering if I should quit the Church as it seemed no one wanted me here. I fought for so long to stay, and now I was seriously considering ending this relationship. But I thought about how God wanted me to be in this calling and how meaningful I found serving, so I decided to stay.

Given its spectacular loss at trying to prevent the legalization of gay marriage, the Church seemed cautious about getting involved again politically to oppose gay rights. Elder Christofferson spoke about his parents' insistence that his gay brother not be excluded from their family. It felt to me that space for gay members was opening up, and I

felt hope that future changes in Church policies and teachings would be coming.

This era of good feelings was very short lived. In November 2015, the LDS Church updated its handbook for leaders to say a disciplinary hearing must be held for anyone in a same-sex marriage and that children of same-sex couples are not allowed to be baptized. It felt like a punch in the gut. In response to the negative reactions being expressed, the Church rushed out a video to explain that they viewed this as a policy of love. Reports of resignations and suicides followed.

To me, this policy seemed like a response to the conversations taking place among members about possible future changes and accommodations. This policy, I thought, was a way to snap the members back into line. My stake president met with me and the stake Young Women president to talk about this new policy and how there was a lot of opposition to it. He told us that we needed to be strong and support Church leaders. I was silently sitting there seething, my hands balled up into fists, angry at being told to support this policy without having an opportunity to express my thoughts of how this violated the Articles of Faith because it punishes children for the sins of their parents. The stake Young Women president said that she was fully on board and that the stake president didn't need to worry. With that said, the meeting ended.

I went home and poured my anger out to God. Why did He let me stay in this church? Sometimes I got such clear answers from Him. In all these years, why had He not given me a message to get out? Unexpectedly, I received the answer that it was fine to leave this church—but if I was willing to stay there would be a special work to do. I was not done being mad, so I said that I can't weigh an undefined "special work" against the massive sacrifices required to stay in this church. I got the answer that if I stayed, I would be able to help leaders better understand, I would have opportunities to speak to the youth of my stake, I would help LGBTQ members learn to love themselves, and I would get to share my story.

I was ready to leave and felt God gave permission for me to do so, but I couldn't stop thinking about this special work. Nowhere in that answer was it said the Church would change, but I knew that when people get to know queer people it changes their hearts, and this can eventually lead to change. I decided to accept the invitation to stay and be part of this work. A few days later, the stake president issued a new calling to me, that of stake executive secretary.

Although I was no longer the stake Young Men president, I was still asked to help with stake youth activities and even speak at a few firesides. When general authorities would visit my stake and speak in stake conference, they would meet with the stake presidency, including me, the gay man serving as secretary, and some even invited me to visit with them when I traveled to Utah. I have a small blog where I wrote about my life and feelings as a queer Latter-day Saint, and the post I wrote about the first Seventy I met and his kind response to me went viral. This led to thousands of messages from queer Latter-day Saints. Several times I have been invited to be a guest on podcasts to share my journey. It has been ten years and I continue to participate in the special mission offered to me.

I know that God loves queer people and wants us to have loving relationships. I disagree with some Church teachings and yet consider myself a good member. I talk with top leaders about not being allowed to complete the covenant path. There is no vision of what heaven can be like for me or what my purpose in life should be, at least not according to the Church's version of the plan of salvation.

It has been a messy decade as queer Saints came out of the closet and their families and friends had to reconcile this person they love with the things they were taught. Collectively, our stories have changed the hearts and minds of Church members—and are still changing them. This has resulted in general authorities of the church constantly being challenged about the teachings and policies about LGBTQ people, and over the years they have softened how they speak about gay people.

Unfortunately, this softening does not apply to individuals who are transgender, nonbinary, or genderqueer, as shown in the 2024 *General Handbook* changes. In a few years we will look back at these policies as a mistake and recognize that as a church we have hurt some of our most vulnerable members. Our church is a place of oppression instead of a space of inclusion and refuge from the political and cultural wars being fought against them. It is the November 2015 policy and its dramatic reversal in 2019 that gives me the hope that similar changes will happen to the 2024 policies.

The Church used to define how I viewed and understood myself and my orientation. In time, my queer orientation changed how I view my church. I think this is a transition that is common among queer believers. My belief in Jesus's declaration that love is the most important commandment informs how I view the policies and teachings by Church leaders regarding queer people. I am created in the image of God, as are all my queer siblings, and we deserve grace and dignity, which too often has been lacking.

Love is the answer. Love is the key. Love is the filter to discern God's will for us. I pray that all of us, myself included, continue to grow in our commitment to love as the Savior loves and to remove obstacles keeping people from His love.

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DAVID DOYLE {masterdoyle@gmail.com} lives in Florida and works at a university, supporting research and academic projects. In 2017, a blog post he wrote about his experience as a gay man of faith unexpectedly went viral, shifting his journey from quiet privacy to public storytelling. David has become a thoughtful and compassionate voice in conversations about queerness and spirituality—sharing his reflections through essays, podcast appearances, and his own blog (<https://www.tumblr.com/nerdygaymormon>). He also volunteers with several non-profits that affirm queer people of faith, offering encouragement to others walking their own paths of belief and identity.