

Edina Morningside Community Church
United Church of Christ
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Howard Bell - Prophetic Witness: Coming Out Story

My coming out story as a gay man is very much a story intertwined with my relationship with God and my spiritual nature – not all of which could be considered positive. I was taught at a very early age – to think and act in ways that would be pleasing to God and that followed the teachings of the Bible. When I look back – retrospectively - to the time that I went through puberty I remember having strong physical attractions to both boys and girls.

By the time I was dating in junior high and senior high, the cultural and religious expectations in favor of heterosexuality clearly dominated my emotional and physical experiences. I knew, intuitively - or through messages that were never explicitly spoken - that my physical attraction to boys was wrong in the eyes of society, in the eyes of my church, and most likely in the eyes of God. None of my feelings for boys were ever given expression to anyone else and not even consciously to myself. My homosexual feelings were fully repressed.

However, at the age of 17, I did have a somewhat sexual, physical experience with another boy my age. It actually occurred on an overnight stay on a youth mission trip. We were staying in homes of church members in another city. My new friend and I bonded quickly. For the first time in my life, I was able to let go of the prohibitions and explore my repressed homosexual feelings in a one-night relationship that felt safe, open and even spiritual. It was an experience that I could imagine, in today's cultural setting, might have led to my coming out as a young adult. Yet, since this was 1964, and I knew of no available avenues to explore this new reality, I fully repressed this experience. I told no one about it and continued on my presumed more appropriate and acceptable heterosexual journey.

I share these memories to help myself, and possibly those of you hearing or reading this story, to understand that when I chose to get married to a woman in 1972, everything in my conscious awareness said that I was a heterosexual male. My marriage was a tumultuous one from the day it began. Both my former wife and I were dissatisfied with each other in a number of ways. I do not want to share much about my marriage since it would be impossible for me to accurately share my ex-wife's side of the story.

However, we were committed by our wedding vows to try to make our marriage successful. We also both wanted to have children. Once we had begun a family – two sons, one adopted and one biological, and two daughters, one adopted and one biological (all within four years) - we were fully committed to staying in this largely unsatisfactory marriage “for the sake of the children.” For several years in the early 80's, my wife and I unsuccessfully explored several different counseling methods and counselors. However, after 14 years of marriage, we agreed to separate.

This separation was the permission I needed to finally begin to give expression to and to explore my attractions and deep emotional attachments to men. At the same time, however, I dated other women hoping that these same-sex attractions could be overcome by a more satisfying heterosexual relationship. These were most difficult and trying times, complicated by my feelings that these explorations were not consistent with my own moral and religious convictions. In 1985 I again turned to a counselor. God also played a role in this since the counselor I chose was not only a Licensed Marriage and Family Counselor, but was also an ordained minister.

This time the counseling was just by and for myself. I acknowledged my repressed feelings to myself and openly to my counselor for the first time. My counselor confirmed that I was likely bi-sexual and capable of a successful heterosexual relationship, but he was also non-judgmental if I were to choose a homosexual relationship. He fully supported my decision to proceed with a divorce. In January 1986 my divorce was completed.

Eight months after my divorce I met and fell in love with a man. This relationship seemed different than any other relationship I had ever had. I immediately came to a vital realization. My sexual preference was for a same-gender relationship. I was gay. I am gay. (The woman I was dating at the time was not pleased by my revelation to her that I was gay.) My counselor supported me in this understanding. I also came to believe that God supported me in this understanding.

I then asked my therapist to meet with my family and to assist me in coming out to them. My four children were between the ages of 10 and 14. I remember explicitly the rehearsed language I used. I said, *"I want you to understand that in the future if I am to find myself in a long-term committed relationship, it will likely be with a man rather than a woman."* Even with this careful preparation, my biological son's immediate response was to cry out with disdain these words, *"You mean you're gay!"*

There is so much more to tell after this initial coming out, but there is not time to share. I will share the experience of telling my father a few months later. He had two questions and one statement for me. The first was, "Have you tried hormones?" I told him that nothing about being gay had anything to do for me with feeling less masculine. The second question, "Do you think it was caused by my being distant from you when you were young?" I responded that I was not looking for blame. I was sharing this news as a celebration. The final statement was: "Your mother and I will love you no matter what." Other than him speaking for my mother, these sentiments were deeply appreciated.

I feel as though I come out in any new relationship nearly every day. However, I hope that it suffices to say, that my initial gay, loving relationship did not last. It did, however, prepare me for when I met Christopher Cook on June 16, 1990. We have been together ever since in the best relationship I could ever have dreamed. We were legally married on Oct 5, 2013, and have been together now for more than twenty-six years. I feel fully blessed by God in my life and in my relationships.