



Listen to
Their Hope:

Hear
Their Faith

Written by Kari Aanestad
For
The Joint Synod Committee for Inclusivity
Minneapolis and St. Paul Area Synods

Comments by
Bishop Peter Rogness & Bishop Craig Johnson

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
Cover photography and design by Diane Nelson

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The Joint Synod Committee for Inclusivity is a Committee of the Minneapolis and Saint Paul-Area Synods that has been helping to extend the Church's welcome for over twenty years. Trusting the reconciling grace of Christ, who has overcome all divisions, we provide support and opportunities for growth in faith and understanding to persons of all sexual orientations and gender identities, their families and friends, and to the Church and its members. Programs have included Caring Family and Friends, Walking the Talk of Welcome, a workshop on "What Is God Doing with Marriage?" and annual scholarships. We are pleased to publish these stories of what God is already doing in our midst through the lives of lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and transgendered (LGBT) people.

Joint Synod Committee for Inclusivity
Minneapolis and St. Paul Area Synods

Glenn Choquette, Chair
Rev. Loren Halvorson
Ruth Halvorson
Marjorie Johnson
Rev. Morris Johnson

Carolyn Kienbaum
Lee Anne Lack
Rev. Jen Nagel
Rev. Glen Wheeler

Contents

Introduction	4
Preface.	5
Foreword.	6
Wounded Healer: Glen.	7
Adopted Family of God: Cindy & Bev	11
Letting Our Lights Shine: Christopher & Karl	15
Out as a Family: Rob & Laura's Journey.	19
Taken from Me: Michelle	23
Being Who We Were Made to Be: John & Keith	27
Reaching Out: Tina	31
Tired of Being the Exception: John, Kyle, & Family.	35
In the Center of God's Grace: Jodi & Rochelle.	39
Just Like Them: Randy & David	45

Introduction

The statement on human sexuality has stirred a church-wide discussion of what the church “ought” to do. Our committee has followed this discussion for many years, and has thought that a more helpful approach would be to ask what is “already happening” in the lives of Evangelical Lutheran Church America (ELCA) members who are dealing directly with these issues in their own families. We believe that the Gospel is more compelling in the indicative mode than in the imperative mode.

There are signs today that the ELCA is being drawn into the future by its families — unauthorized scouts who have already dealt with the issues of human sexuality in their own micro worlds. Their stories are signs that the Spirit has been working in our midst, often undetected-signs that the future has already happened. They are the “two or three gathered together” through whom God’s kingdom grows, not by majority vote, but through the embryo of hope, the small seeds in the earth, the salt, the leaven. They work quietly, undetected by the press.

It is with a spirit of hope and gratitude that the Inclusivity Committee offers this booklet to all members and clergy of the ELCA. The stories presented in this booklet represent the journeys of LGBT folk, their parents, and non-gay persons, all members of the two Twin Cities synods that our committee serves. They represent a much larger collection of narratives that one can find in every congregation, many of which have never been told. We share these stories with you as evidence of what might be called “realized ecclesiology”, the future already happening through a God who draws us into the future — a God that invites us to pursue our hopes rather than our fears.

These stories portray the joy, the pain, the struggle of loving, committed individuals who love their church, but do not always feel welcomed or affirmed in who they are. We believe that God loves every person and that each person bears the image of God. We believe every person is unique, with gifts and potential that can enrich us all, contributing to the common good. We further believe that every human being is entitled to respect, dignity and access to all the privileges and responsibilities to develop their gifts to the fullest.

Many people of God ask the question, “Is God behind us?” We believe the more compelling question is, “Is God ahead of us, inviting us to follow?”

Preface

Like the society we are part of, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has been for years engaged in a sometimes painful quest for understanding. For centuries, the life stories of persons who find themselves drawn into loving relationships with partners of the same gender have been the stuff of taboo, whispers, and stereotype. Only in recent years have the stories entered the mainstream.

As this has happened, the church and the culture have been drawn into more public conversation about what to make of it all. The culture debates whether it tears at society's fabric to acknowledge and support such same-gender relationships. The church struggles to understand it in light of historic teachings arising from scripture and tradition.

Because sexuality is such a powerful part of people's lives, this struggle has become volatile, shrill, and often judgmental. Politicians, communities, and families are divided.

The church has an opportunity to step back from the division and hysteria, because we have a different foundation from which to engage. We can choose to bring light rather than heat to these tension-producing matters. The church's life doesn't depend on the rightness of our judgments, but on our faith in a creating, loving, sustaining God — a God who simply calls us to first love God, and then to love each other. People matter. All people.

In this book you will be immersed in this invitation to step back from the hysteria and the debate and meet some people. Hear their stories. Understand their journey. Listen to their hopes and struggles and values — and in the midst of it all, hear their faith.

Throughout history the people of God have been at our finest when we, like Jesus, have been caring for the hurts of the world. We have been at our worst when we have mounted platforms of self-righteousness and made judgmental pronouncements that, ultimately, are best left to God and humble human reflection.

So receive this collection of stories as a gift, an invitation to step away from the high decibel level of debate and listen to the stories of faithful people who seek to walk with God, and with each other.

Peter Rogness
Bishop, Saint Paul Area Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Foreword

It is always of utmost importance for us to hear the stories of the Baptized that live among us and have also suffered among us. I commend these stories to you as heartfelt glimpses into lives and emotions that may be hidden from us.

Craig E. Johnson
Bishop, Minneapolis Area Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

WOUNDED HEALER

Glen

Standing at nearly 6'5", Glen Wheeler is a gentle giant, but not simply because of his height. As an ordained Lutheran pastor for more than forty years, Glen continues to lead publicly even in retirement. As we walk toward an empty room on campus at Luther Seminary for our interview, he knows and greets nearly every person we pass. They respond to him with warmth and, having seen him, seem happier. We find our room and begin talking.

"I grew up in the oil fields of north-western Montana," Glen said. "My family had homesteaded in the Valier/Birch Creek area in 1912 after arriving from Canada in a covered wagon. The first nine years of my life I lived out in the oil field in very sub-standard housing."

"When I was seven, the Presbyterians picked me up in a school bus and took a few of us to Vacation Bible School held on the dance floor of the Santa Rita Tavern. They also took me to Bible camp at Lake Five near Kalispell, Montana. Growing up, I didn't have any consistent experience with church or Bible school. I liked a girl that I followed to Sunday school every now and then, but nothing consistent.

Glen's family didn't belong to a church. His grandfather felt the Bible advocated slavery. So Glen's grandfather remained an agnostic throughout his life.

"My sister, who was ten years older than me, became a Christian during military service. She always wanted us to say grace before a meal or go to church on Sundays, but we always went trout fishing instead. Trout fishing was my first religion."

When Glen reached high school, however, he became anxious about his own salvation. He started to become curious about religion and wanted to explore his own faith. At this same time he noticed his friends were involved with alcohol abuse and sexual promiscuity. In response to his peers, he had to decide who he was and if he was going to join in destructive habits. "I decided I wasn't going to, but I needed some reasons not to."

He began reading scripture to look for moral guidance, but instead he found much more: a calling to Christian faith and ordained ministry. "I read Romans 10, where it says, 'If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart Christ was raised from the dead, you shall be saved.' That scripture captured me. So there I was: a believing Christian who had no faith community."

He was not going to be without a community for very long. "When I was a senior in high school, I took a speech class. I looked at all of my classmates and friends who were having moral struggles. I decided to give a speech on the value of reading the Bible

and almost chickened out. After I gave the speech, two Lutheran boys, whom I had previously teased for wearing white dresses to light the candles at church, told their pastor about my speech, and they invited me to a Valentine's party at the church. That was my first entry into Christian worship. I started going to worship that spring."

Glen went to Concordia College in the fall and was baptized at Christmas time of that year. "I had officially made it into the Lutheran church five days before I became 18 years old." Throughout college he continued to develop his faith and explore his call to ministry.

As an outsider to the Lutheran faith, Glen entered seminary with an open mind. During his first two years he took a course on urban ministry, which inspired him to serve in an urban setting for his internship. The academic year of 1964–65, Glen interned at a church in Detroit, Michigan. At the height of the civil rights movement, Glen found himself in a church primarily composed of young, gang-affiliated black teenagers and their families. He had quite an internship experience. "One Sunday the senior pastor left to take part in the civil rights march in Selma, Alabama. He left for the march and told me I had to stay home and take care of the congregation."

There was certainly a lot to take care of. To compound the intensity of the church's urban setting during a social movement, Glen became aware that his prophetic senior pastor was a gay man. There were also young adults in the congregation who were beginning to understand themselves as gay.

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"We had a bright teenager in our congregation who was very close to his mom, and the kids teased him about it. He was beginning to understand himself as a gay man. He eventually went to the Juilliard School of Music and is serving the church today as a wonderful church musician. But in watching this man and others struggling with similar issues I began to realize that ministry happens not when you think about what people 'should be' or 'ought to be,' but when people are 'who they really are.'"

After internship and the completion of seminary, Glen was ordained and called to urban ministry in Milwaukee for 8 years. Then, following a year with the Ecumenical Institute in Newark, New Jersey, Glen was called to a congregation in Iowa, where he served for almost 20 years. "Four years into that call, I became a divorced Lutheran

pastor and a single parent of three little kids. When my wife left that marriage, I soon discovered that if I was going to continue in that ministry, the only thing I had going for me was the grace of God. I didn't see any other reason to be there as their pastor or to continue in ministry. For four years, I had served the congregation as a teacher of theology through adult education, and my approach to theology was pretty cerebral. As soon as I became a divorced pastor, I began to see that the congregation wanted a wounded-healer ministry from me. They were also wounded. They saw me as someone more approachable now, someone different than the theologian, preacher, or teacher. That was one of the beginnings of change for me in the focus of my ministry. Three years after the divorce, I remarried, and my wife and I raised six teenagers together."

Later in that same period, the Lutheran church was faced with a dilemma of how it should respond to people who were diagnosed with HIV/AIDS. Glen received his answer. "I can still remember where I was driving on a road in Iowa when I heard on the radio Mother Teresa's response to the question, 'How should the church respond to victims of HIV/AIDS?' She just said, 'The people who are dying need to know the unconditional love of God and that we love them also.' She was so clear about the church's role — at a time when many of us were still trying to figure that out."

Glen discovered that his ministry had taken the focus of helping others learn of God's unconditional love and also encouraging others to love one another unconditionally.

Soon after he'd heard Mother Teresa's words, his Iowa congregation chose to celebrate the lives of two members who lost their lives to AIDS. "It was a hard time for our church, but it was good to see us begin to make the transition to celebrating the lives of all of our members."

Glen's challenge to help others know the unconditional love of God continued. In 1994 Glen took a call to a Minneapolis church as a solo pastor. He quickly felt overwhelmed. The church decided to provide a part-time visitation pastor to help serve the seniors. "After interviewing multiple candidates, we found someone whom we thought was the perfect candidate. At the end of this pastor's interview, however, the candidate said, 'Oh, by the way, I'm gay. Is that a problem?'"

Glen said he didn't believe it was a problem, but he needed to consult the Administrative Board. They were not 'calling' a pastor, but were offering a contract for a part-time position. All of the Administrative Board agreed that having a gay pastor was not a problem, but they couldn't offer the contract yet because one member was absent. When Glen contacted that board member and told him about the situation, his response was, "It's not a problem to me." The pastor was offered a contract and was later extended a call as part of the ministry team, where he served for nine years until his retirement.

"We later learned that this final board member and his wife had a daughter who was in a same-gender committed relationship and was expecting twins. Fortunately, our congregation had completed the process

of becoming a Reconciling in Christ (RIC) congregation before the twins were born.

"The board member and his wife, who was the president of the congregation, were able to share with the other elected leaders the joy of becoming grandparents," Glen said. "It was interesting that all of us took the risk of calling a pastor who is gay without knowing how others would react or who might be in each other's families. It demonstrates that we don't know who is sitting in our congregations — who has gay family members or not."

Glen started as an outsider to the Christian faith and community and has become a powerful advocate for Lutheran congregations to become Reconciling in Christ congregations. His ministry, which first focused on racial social justice, has now led him to be an advocate for welcoming gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people and their families to our communion tables as members of the Body of Christ. "Our identity in Christ comes to us through the gift of our baptism and not through our gender identity or sexual orientation.

"Young gay and lesbian Christians in my congregation in Iowa took the risk of trusting me as their pastor when they began to come out of the closet. The trust of those young Christians coming out to their families, to their church, and to me has motivated me to do all I can to make sure they will be welcomed as members of the Body of Christ. The promises we made to them in baptism require it."

"I don't think I chose this role — I think it came to me through ministry. Once you get past the moralism that leads to people feeling like 'I should feel this way' or 'Other people shouldn't do this' — once you get past the 'shouldas' and 'oughtas' — then I think the grace of God has a chance to enter in and transform us and take over.

"Christ is present here in our lives and in our ministry, and the only thing any of us has is the unconditional grace of God. If we think we've got something different or that some are bigger sinners than others, then we've got theological baloney." ☘

ADOPTED FAMILY OF GOD

Cindy & Bev

Cindy answered the door wearing an oversized sweatshirt and blue gym shorts. Her right knee sported a bandage from an injury sustained during a game of balloon volleyball with her 6½-year-old son, Josh. Her partner, Bev, bounded up the stairs skipping every other step, as if to run away from the business proposals she was editing in the basement. She shook my hand, picked up Josh by the waist, and the two returned downstairs. Cindy and I sat on the overstuffed, tan leather sectional in the living room.

At five months of age Cindy was adopted through Lutheran Social Services. Her two loving parents raised her in a Minneapolis suburb and attended their Lutheran church regularly. Cindy, Bev and Josh attend that same church to this day.

According to Cindy, she got married when she was too young, and the marriage didn't last for long. She had a difficult time understanding what she wanted to do and who she was. In her free time she enjoyed sports and has been involved in various athletic activities her entire life. To fuel her athleticism, Cindy joined a local softball team where years later she met her partner of 15 years, Bev. "Fifteen years give or take a few days," Bev shouted from the basement.

"I remember the first time I realized that I had feelings for a woman," Cindy said.

"She was a friend, and I realized it one night when we were all out dancing. It wasn't until the next morning that I realized how comfortable I felt in that environment and how strong my feelings were for that type of a relationship. I was confused and had this questioning feeling of: Who am I?"

The circumstances in which Cindy came out to her parents were not what she had planned. Some twenty years ago her cousin hosted a Christmas party. At the end of the party, her cousin accused Cindy in front of everyone of being involved with her boyfriend earlier in the night. Cindy was shocked. Her cousin refused to believe Cindy's innocence and proceeded to tell all of the extended family.

When Cindy finally decided to "come out" she knew she had to tell her mother the full truth and felt she needed to do it right away. Her mother came to have lunch with Cindy at work. "I was so nervous and I only had a 30-minute lunch. Right after we sat down at a table, a friend of ours came over and proceeded to tell us every detail of the doctor's appointment she'd just had. I watched the minutes tick by." With two minutes left in their lunch, Cindy finally got to tell her mom, "I don't do boyfriends. I'm a lesbian."

After being together for over 10 years, Cindy and Bev decided to adopt a child from

Russia. They weren't able to go through Lutheran Social Services or a Catholic organization because the two agencies do not facilitate adoptions for same-gender couples. "It's so important to have an agency that supports our relationship, because adopting is such a life-changing process," Cindy said. "You really need that systemic support."

When their son Josh successfully arrived in the States, he was immediately welcomed into Cindy and Bev's church. Josh was baptized, and soon after, a group of women held a book shower for the new family where Josh received many new books.

Josh is currently a kindergartener at a local public school and spent four years at the Early Childhood Center at their church. The director and all the staff of the center were very supportive and Josh thrived there. Cindy and Bev were able to be open with their life style and the other families were accepting. One day when Cindy picked up Josh from school, some of the children crowded around her and asked who she was. She told them she was Josh's mom, to which the children responded, "You can't be. Josh already has a mom — Bev."

Cindy said to them, "Well, some kids have a mom and a dad, others have two moms, others have two dads, and some kids have only one parent." According to Cindy, the kids thought about it for two seconds, shrugged, then kept on playing. "It didn't even faze them."

Josh, upon hearing his name, came running up the stairs, jumped over the back of the couch. His body fell limp onto Cindy's lap. They begin speaking a secret language

of gurgling sounds and giggles. "Did you tell your friend that you have two mommies yesterday?" Cindy asked Josh.

Josh dove into a pile of pillows next to her, peeked his head out and said, "Uh-huh."

"What did your friend think of that?"

"Nothing."

"Our church never became a Reconciling in Christ (RIC) church," Cindy said, "but Bev and I are very out at the church and I feel like we have good support there now. We believe Bev's election as current treasurer for the congregation symbolizes a majority of support. However, sometimes I wonder if our church is really accepting, or if we are simply supporting a 'Don't ask, don't tell' culture."

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Cindy's questioning of her church's openness has legitimate roots. Many years ago the congregation started to discuss becoming an RIC church. A handful of members were so upset that the church was even considering writing a statement of welcome that

they left to attend a more conservative Lutheran megachurch in a neighboring suburb. "I understand people's fears. They back off because they don't know how to deal with a same-gender couple," Cindy said. "It's just so painful for me sometimes. I guess I've always treated homosexuality like it's a non-issue because it is to me. I'm starting to realize that it is in fact an issue for some people, and that makes it not a non-issue."

On one night in particular, some of the members and church leaders were discussing the possibility of becoming an RIC church. All of the pastors were there, along with the president of the congregation. Cindy noticed one of the pastors hadn't been talking so she asked him what he thought. She asked him, "If you were in this beautiful building with a roaring fire, hot coffee, and all of these people were in there together, and then you saw me walking down the street without a coat in 40-degree-below weather, would you invite me in?" His response was, "It would depend on what the congregation said."

"I just kind of lost it. I got teary and said, 'I can't believe that after spending all of my life in this church — being both baptized and confirmed here — that I'm asking you at this point to accept me as a child of God.' It was pretty tough."

Even though the church never officially became an RIC congregation, the community slowly became more accepting of LGBT people. One pastor held a four-week session on homosexuality at the church in hopes of not necessarily changing minds but of broadening perspectives. He hung up five different posters. Each poster had a statement that

expressed a different attitude toward homosexuality such as "I have a lot of homosexual friends," "I know a few homosexuals," "I don't know any homosexuals," and "The idea makes me uncomfortable."

At the beginning of the session the pastor asked the participants to read the posters and silently consider which one they identified with the most. He then began to discuss the biological and sociological complexities of human sexuality. At the end of his presentation, he asked participants to read the signs silently and think about whether or not they identified with a different sign. Cindy said, "It was a very gentle, subtle way of beginning to talk about things."

Cindy has been able to take part in a few trips to Tanzania with her church. During her first trip there, the group almost immediately faced the same issue that had previously caused some members to leave their church. "One of the first things a Tanzanian person said to us when we arrived was, 'We hear you have a problem with homosexuality in your country.' No one knew what to say or how to respond."

"I have a strong spiritual connection and a love amongst my friends in Tanzania that I have not been able to feel anywhere else. Those people are my brothers and sisters, yet they don't know I'm gay. I don't like that they don't know, but I have not been able to figure out whether or how to talk to them about that yet."

Cindy learned from an early age that family is what you make it. As an adopted child she found unconditional parental love from two wonderful people. As a mother of

an adopted son, she is now able to share that love with him. Cindy only hopes that the Lutheran church can continue to adopt all of God's children into the family. 🍀

LETTING OUR LIGHTS SHINE

Christopher & Karl

Karl Starr and Christopher Haug, partners for over 15 years, greeted me together at the front door and welcomed me into their comfortable living room. An upright piano stood against the south wall, surrounded by a pumpkin suede couch and dark wooden chairs. An Evangelical Lutheran Worship hymnal was propped up in the center of the piano, surrounded by dozens of framed family pictures. Dark wooden shelves housing healthy green plants lined the walls of their dining room. As their surroundings suggested, their stories soon showed that the Lutheran Church and music are important to both of these men.

"We always have done more than sit in the pew," Karl said. "Church isn't just worship for us; it's also community," Christopher added.

Christopher was raised in the Lutheran Church of America and was active until a period in college, when he pulled away. Surprisingly, he became involved in the church again after he came out as a gay man. He joined a Saint Paul church where he regularly attended and was actively involved there until he met Karl.

Karl is also a lifelong Lutheran. He was baptized at one month old on Reformation Sunday in 1956 and has been a part of the Lutheran church ever since. "There was a three-week period when I didn't go to church

during college at Saint Olaf," Karl said. "That was my rebellious phase." After graduating from Saint Olaf, he found a new church community in the Twin Cities by September.

The two men met in the Twin Cities Gay Men's Chorus after having both recently ended relationships. The timing of their meeting was more than serendipitous. They were born three months apart and grew up a mile-and-a-half apart on the same South Minneapolis street. They both moved to different states during their teen years and returned to the Twin Cities area for college, attending private Lutheran schools. After graduating, they both worked for insurance companies for a time, yet they never met until they were 34 years old. "It seems like the Holy Spirit kept us apart until we were ready for each other," Karl said.

After attending Christopher's church for two years, Christopher and Karl began attending a Lutheran church in downtown Minneapolis, chiefly because Karl's mom was a member there and could not drive anymore. Karl took her keys and promised to get her to church every Sunday.

Both men have been significant members of their faith communities throughout their adult lives. Karl's involvement in church leadership stems from a lifelong calling to serve the Lutheran church, which he has had to fulfill in creative ways. "The only job I've ever

aspired to is that of a Lutheran pastor,” he said, “but I realized during my college years that the Lutheran church’s expectations around sexual behavioral norms didn’t square well with me because I knew I was gay.

“I don’t know how I could have lived with the tension of either being celibate or being closeted and deceptive — I don’t think I could do either. I consider myself fortunate to have figured that out early on and made the decision to live out my faith as an active lay person.” He has been able to do so by being involved in Twin Cities Lutheran churches for nearly 30 years.

Karl attended one church for 27 years, and during that time he was a Sunday school teacher, a confirmation teacher, a Sunday school superintendent, the church council secretary, the congregation’s treasurer, vice president and president, the stewardship director and the education director. He also helped lead several capital campaigns, call committees and a campaign to make the church handicap-accessible.

Karl was especially proud of the success of that campaign. “When I was in my early 30s, I thought that if we were serious about the church being a house of God for all people, then we needed to make it a house in which all people could come, get inside and have their basic needs met while they were there,” he said. “It took a lot of study, work, and persuading, but eventually our congregation of 500 people raised a quarter of a million dollars for the renovations.

“We bought a run-down house next door to the church, tore it down, and turned it into a handicap-parking lot. We added a

grade-level entrance with an elevator that could go up or down. Both able-bodied and disabled-bodied people went in and out of the same door.”

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Christopher is also serving the church as a team member of the environmental planning committee. He helps decorate the vaulted space each liturgical season and holiday.

Karl’s most recent project for his church is to promote hospitality within the community. “Our church is a really warm and caring place once you crack the surface,” Karl said. “We’re just typical Scandinavian reserved. The longtime members, sweet as they are, are old Norwegian Lutherans. We can’t seem to break out of that reservation and overtly welcome guests.”

Members of their new church have shown their appreciation for Karl and Christopher. “We are with Karl’s mother every Sunday in church, making sure she gets to the front of the church to receive communion. We’re just doing the things you do for your family, and people compliment and praise us for it. They see that Karl and I are a couple, but any

problems with that seem irrelevant because we're doing all of these other things that impact people's perceptions."

"Of course, that's not why we're doing all of that for our family," Karl said. "We're doing it because it's the right thing. It's neat to see how when you do the right thing by being committed, responsible and loyal, you see how it affects other people."

Karl and Christopher have set an example of what commitment can look like, and they certainly have changed hearts and minds. When they held their blessing ceremony at their Saint Paul Lutheran church, both of their pastors participated. Years earlier, Karl's pastor had shared with him that Karl was the first openly gay man he had ever known and with whom he had openly interacted. "In the course of less than 10 years, my pastor went from the point of my being the first person he knew was gay to presiding at my union ceremony — that's a lot of growth for him," Karl commented.

Christopher commented that his niece is also inspired by his relationship with Karl. "Whenever people say that it is impossible to stay happily married, she just points to us. We're not deliberately trying to be an example of a good relationship. We're just so darn happy together, and we let that show."

When asked whether they'd ever faced conflict as outspoken leaders and openly gay men in a Lutheran community, Karl responded, "There are moments when I could conceive of walking away from it all. But then there are people like our pastor and my mom's friends in church who think the most of us and are working to make sure we're included."

"There are lots of reasons to give up," Christopher added, "but we get lots of encouragement and reinforcement too."

"I'm just getting tired of the never-ending debate in the national church regarding the ordination of gay clergy," Karl said. "All of the announcements, committees, declarations, and studies are exhausting. How much more can they study us?"

"Gay people are already in leadership and service positions in every direction you can think of," Christopher said. "Hetero folks are starting to see that and realize that gay people are also fellow redeemed children of God with gifts who also feel called to apply those gifts to service."

"In spite of the frustrations, there is value for people like Christopher and me to be involved in the mainstream Lutheran church and to let our lights shine." ☘

OUT AS A FAMILY

Rob & Laura's Journey

When I knocked, a woman with striking white hair answered the door. Her husband, who suffers from Parkinson's disease and is confined to a wheelchair, greeted me warmly from his seat in the sunroom where we met. Rob and Laura are in their mid sixties and are parents to two daughters, one of whom is lesbian.

Rob and Laura have been active members and leaders in their congregation for 40 years, and have also been active at the national level in the ELCA. When their daughter told them she was gay, they were not sure how their church would react, since they had seen the division in the church over this issue. They feared ostracism, rejection and judgment. However, as a result of good pastoral care and the openness of their Reconciling in Christ (RIC) congregation, Rob and Laura's family was warmly received.

Their daughter Sally and her partner are public educators, who lead busy lives raising a family, and do not dwell on their sexual orientation, although they are out and open. To protect the privacy of Sally and her partner, Rob and Laura have chosen to remain anonymous.

Sally went to graduate school in psychology. "She came out to herself in graduate school and finished sorting out her definition of herself," Laura said. Sally had met her future life partner in graduate school.

"When she finished grad school, Sally told us she was gay and that she and her partner had made the decision to live together."

The coming-out process is a journey for both the LGBT people and their families. "At first Sally didn't want us to come out so we kept it to ourselves," Laura said. "After a while it began to feel 'like an elephant was sitting with us in the room' when we were among our friends. We needed more honesty in our lives."

Rob and Laura first told their pastors about their daughter. "They were open and wonderful," Laura said. "We were able to come out, and that was very healing for us. They suggested we attend a monthly support group called Caring Families and Friends. We attended for quite some time and learned that many fine persons and their families were traveling the same road as us. We heard their stories and learned to tell ours."

While Rob and Laura attended the support group, their own Minneapolis church started to take the steps to become an RIC congregation. Soon after beginning the process, the church issued a statement of welcome to persons of all sexual orientations and gender identities, which was a great relief for Laura and Rob.

After receiving support and encouragement from their faith community, Rob and Laura began talking to their friends. "It took

us awhile to come out but when we did, you can't even imagine the reaction we received," Laura said. "We learned that some of our closest friends were going through exactly the same thing."

I fear the church risks becoming dysfunctional or possibly irrelevant if it is unable to come to terms with accepting all of God's children.

"Our friends from Phoenix came one weekend, and we shared with them that our daughter is gay. After hearing this, the woman left the room in tears. She eventually came back and told us her daughter is also gay, but they hadn't been able to be open with anyone about it."

Laura learned her friend had spoken to her pastor at a large Lutheran church in Phoenix about her adult daughter's sexual orientation and her committed same-gender relationship. The pastor told her that homosexuality is wrong and also that as a mother, she had probably caused her daughter to be gay.

"People need to be who they are," Laura said. "Our friends did not receive the same respect and support that we received in our journey of coming out as a family. I fear the church risks becoming dysfunctional or possibly irrelevant if it is unable to come to terms with accepting all of God's children."

After nine years of being together, establishing their careers and owning a home together, Rob and Laura's daughter Sally and her partner began discussing the idea of having children. They attended counseling sessions at Rainbow Families, a community based non-profit organization that provides services for LGBT families and is a part of the national organization, Family Equality Council. The counseling sessions specifically seek to prepare gay partners for becoming parents.

Following the counseling, the two began working with a reproductive health clinic. The first attempt failed, but the second time worked and Sally became pregnant. "After three months into the pregnancy our daughter and her partner began announcing it to family and friends," Laura said. "Baby showers were given and we were able to be open and receive congratulations, especially when the twin granddaughters were born." Their birth was announced in Rob and Laura's church newsletter just like that of any other grandchildren.

Sally and her partner also found a Saint Paul Lutheran church with an openly gay pastor and a diverse, welcoming environment. They both joined, and Sally's partner was baptized and confirmed as an adult. The twins were baptized there in a worship service with many of Rob and Laura's extended family present. "It was all pretty exciting," Laura said.

When the twins became two years old, Sally's partner legally adopted them. Now they have two parents: a birth mom and an adopted mom.

Sally and her family live an hour from the Twin Cities and cannot attend the Saint Paul church regularly. They have tried to find a church in their community that is as welcoming, but have not yet been able to. They do attend a local Lutheran church with several thousand members where right now they feel it's best to stay pretty anonymous, which saddens both Rob and Laura.

Rob and Laura have been anything but anonymous in their church. "When our church asked me to be the president of the congregation, I felt OK accepting the position because the congregation had specifically taken steps to become a welcoming RIC church. I had an open, honest relationship with our pastors," Laura said. "They knew all about our daughter, and my leadership wasn't a problem for them."

Even though Laura and Rob's church became RIC a few years ago and issued a statement of welcome to LGBT people and their families, the church has not yet been able to agree to ordain a highly qualified youth and family minister who has been on staff for the past several years and who is in a same-gender relationship. "The issue of ordaining her came up three years ago, but some

members were very troubled and bothered about the issue, and it has yet to be brought to a congregational vote," Laura said.

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officially ordain her.*

"It has been difficult to this day, and the issue is still unresolved and troubling. Some members say they don't want to go against the ELCA church policies and teachings; others say our church doesn't have enough money to call and ordain another minister. Whatever the reasons, some members seem to be using excuses not to move forward."

"It just breaks my heart to see someone so qualified and ready for a call but we can't officially ordain her," Laura says. "Our journey of coming out has taught us that the path to wholeness is through acceptance and understanding." 🌻

TAKEN FROM ME

Michelle

Michelle Morse's gray angora sweater seems to match her soft, yet articulate voice. Now 27 years old, she has spent most of her life internalizing the views of a society that continually suggests and sometimes even proclaims that there is something wrong with her. Even more painful, she now feels unsafe in the Lutheran Church. "I used to feel centered, peaceful, and trusting," Michelle said. "Now I feel as if that has been taken from me."

Michelle grew up attending a Lutheran church in Shoreview, a St. Paul suburb. Her family was and still is intimately connected to this church; her father was confirmed there and her mother has worked there for the past 10 years as a financial secretary. Michelle was also baptized and confirmed there. In high school she taught Sunday-school music and confirmation. She even received a leadership award from the congregation.

At Augsburg College, Michelle received both a performing arts scholarship for orchestra and a Lutheran leadership scholarship. While there, she majored in religion and was active in Fellowship of Christian Athletes and campus ministry.

Her first year out of college, she became a youth director at a North Minneapolis Lutheran church and stayed there for two years. On her last Sunday as youth director, Michelle met her partner Lauren in an

unexpected way — through the sermon at the early service. Michelle said, "It felt very divinely orchestrated." Michelle helped out with the hip-hop service, so she normally didn't attend the early service. This Sunday, however, she was asked at the last minute to lead a Bible study before the traditional service.

Michelle led the Bible study and rushed into the traditional service, sitting down right as the pastor began delivering his sermon. The pastor started talking about a woman who felt called to go to seminary but was questioning the call, especially because she is gay. "I kept thinking the pastor was talking about me, because I was considering seminary at the time," Michelle said. "Then he said the woman was about to move to New York, and I was shocked. I realized that he wasn't talking about me, but that he was talking about Lauren. I'd seen her in church, but had no idea she was gay."

Michelle wasn't only shocked because of Lauren's sexual orientation; a part of her shock was her internal knowledge that her life was about to change. "I always envisioned meeting my partner through the church and I remember thinking while listening to that sermon, 'Is this that moment?' I had an immediate recognition of something I had always been hoping for."

I ended up e-mailing Lauren to tell her I was struggling with some of the same things she was. We began e-mailing back and forth, and our relationship grew that way for eight months.”

Three years later, the two have set a potential wedding date. Even though they are both excited to share their lives, they talk about it differently with other people. “If Lauren were here she’d say without hesitation, ‘We are about to be engaged; we are getting married May 15. It’s Michelle’s responsibility to propose, and she knows it.’

“I just can’t do that. I’m so afraid of what people will think. I know they’re going to be thinking, ‘Oh, they’re being ridiculous. They’re getting “fake” married.’ They can’t take us seriously — and there’s even a part of me that can’t take us seriously because we’re so challenged in the world. I’m so tired of fighting for something I shouldn’t have to fight for. I’m so tired of having to constantly explain and defend myself.”

Ironically, Michelle has worked part time as a wedding videographer for the past four years. “Coincidentally, all of the people whom I employ for this work are gay. None of us can actually get married.”

Michelle and Lauren have more than legal obstacles and the judgment of others complicating their relationship. Lauren is a recent graduate of Luther Seminary. She received a Master of Arts degree, but her candidacy for ministry was postponed. She informed her candidacy committee that she was in a same-gender relationship, which prohibits her from being consecrated as a diaconal minister in the ELCA. “Lauren has

run into some problems with her candidacy. She’s not denied but she’s not approved.”

While Lauren has found a way to be herself in spite of others’ opinions about her, Michelle has not been able to brush off her critics as easily. This difference has become a sore spot in their relationship. “Lauren’s very bold. When I go into a situation I think of every possible outcome. Lauren, on the other hand, will go into a situation and introduce me as her girlfriend at least three separate times until people get it. I just can’t do that.”

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Lauren has a few seminary friends who have not been able to get past her sexuality. “Lauren shrugs and is friends with them anyway,” Michelle said. “It’s hard because I want to be a part of her life, but it’s difficult for me to be around those friends. I don’t like being around people who think there’s something wrong with me.”

Michelle and Lauren pose an interesting balance for each other. Lauren didn't grow up in the church but was always fascinated by it. She wasn't confirmed until college and didn't come out until after college. She did two years of volunteer work and then attended Luther Seminary.

Michelle, on the other hand, was baptized in the church, confirmed in the church, and completely brought up in the church. She grew up internalizing the church's negative responses to varying expressions of human sexuality. In college, Michelle was very outspoken and tireless in her efforts to help educate church leaders and members. She was a part of a Lutherans Concerned committee, sat on panels, talked, and told stories to help educate people about the complexities of sexual identity.

After years of working for change and not seeing enough happen, Michelle's energy is drained. "I got disillusioned by fighting the fight. Lauren has a drive that I've lost. She wishes I was sitting next to her on Sunday mornings, but I can't fight for a change within a church in which I don't feel safe and valued."

"It's really hard because I don't connect with the gay community either . . . I think my sexuality is so much bigger than 'gay' or 'straight.' I know a lot of people say that's just a phase, but it's been seven years and I still don't sit well with the labels. I've been given a label, and the church has questioned me. So I started questioning the church, and once I started questioning one thing about the church, I began to question many things in the church."

All the questioning has led Michelle to a loss of faith and trust in the Lutheran church. Losing trust in something that was so intimately a part of her identity for her entire life has left her feeling unbalanced. "Spiritual trust is a very intimate thing; without it, we feel uncentered. I fear critics would say I'm feeling uncentered because of my relationship with Lauren; if I just give up my relationship I'll go back to being centered. I can't do that. It doesn't make any sense; it just doesn't seem like living fully. If God is a God of relationships, why would giving up my relationship be the answer?"

"Living in a world that tells me there's something wrong with me has driven me to impress others. I work so hard to make sure people like me and are impressed, so that when they do find out that I'm in a same-gender relationship, they will still like me. It wears me out. I constantly censor my language surrounding my relationship with Lauren. I intentionally avoid conversations that might lead to questions about my personal life and I conveniently leave her out when I am retelling a story about something we did together. 'We did' suddenly becomes 'I did,' etc. It's exhausting.

"I sometimes wonder 'if I'm this capable when I am putting so much energy into watching what I say, what could I do if I could be myself?' That's tragic. I want to live my life according to the best model of possible goodness, and I'm trying to do that. It stresses me out that this is the only life I have to live, and it might be like this for the rest of my life."

In hopes of reclaiming her faith, Michelle recently bought a notebook and titled it her “creed book.” She writes down everything she believes in an attempt to find her spiritual center again. So far she has not been able to reclaim her spiritual trust in the church or find spiritual nourishment.

Michelle hopes one day she can return to the church or at least rebuild the spiritual trust of which she feels she has been robbed. “It’s just very difficult for me now to attend, support, and feel comfortable in a place that

questions what my role in it is. Yeah, the Church is making progress, but it is still not sure what my role is, or if my relationship should be recognized or my partner should be a leader.” 🐼

Editor’s note: Before their story went to press, Lauren and Michelle emailed some news that they are happy to share. They have gotten engaged, and are planning a spring 2010 wedding.

BEING WHO WE WERE MADE TO BE

John & Keith

Keith Johnson is a phenomenal artist in his early 30s whose illustrations of favorite book and movie characters arguably surpass the work of their original creators. He grew up in a conservative household and attended a moderate Baptist church. Equipped with movie-theater-style seating, stage lighting, and music and drama teams, the church satisfied Keith's need for the arts and creative expressions of his faith.

"I was on the stage every Sunday in some fashion. I'm a very faithful person. I'm also a theatrical person and I'm gay; imagine that!" Keith said and laughed.

In high school Keith began to explore his sexual identity and soon came out to his parents and his sister. His mother requested that Keith talk to one of the pastors and to a psychologist. Keith agreed.

"I went to talk to this pastor, who was really nice. He was a little bit more open than I had expected him to be. He told me he thought being gay was a sin, but he was willing to see that I was on a journey and acknowledge that maybe for a while I needed to be gay."

After talking to this pastor, Keith began to see a psychologist, whom Keith refers to as "Dr. Will." In the first session with Dr. Will, Keith revealed he was gay. Dr. Will told him that he did not see a problem with that and then asked Keith what he wanted to achieve in their sessions together.

Keith replied, "I want to find the Keith that God made me to be — whether that Keith is gay or not, so be it. I just want to find the person I'm supposed to be."

Keith continued seeing Dr. Will for a while. "I really think Dr. Will helped me become a lot more confident. One of the things he taught me was to not take responsibility for other people's feelings. I'd be sitting there thinking, 'I can't be gay because it hurts my family so much.' I learned to respond to that idea by saying, 'So, fine! Don't be gay, and your family is happy — but what are you?'"

Keith's parents funded these therapy sessions for a while. His mother hoped the sessions were going to help her son realize he was not gay. At one point his mother even said to both Keith and Dr. Will, "I just feel God is telling me that Will is going to be the one to help you."

She continued to believe Dr. Will was helping her son until she came to one of his sessions at the request of Dr. Will. At this meeting Dr. Will told her that he didn't think homosexuality was a sin. Keith's parents eventually "pulled the funding. Even when God is talking to them," Keith said, "if it's not what they want to hear, then it's not from God anymore."

In response to the parents' decision, Dr. Will allowed Keith to continue seeing him for a while at no cost. Eventually, instead of charging the regular \$70 for a session, he

charged only what Keith himself earned in an hour, \$14.50.

"I don't want to villainize my parents. It sounds like it could be one of those stereotypical stories where I'm gay and my family cast me out and had nothing to do with me. It's not like that at all . . . They're just trying to put God first. I believe God celebrates them for putting Him first. I believe God's up in heaven saying, 'Wow, they love me so much that they'd put me before their own child.' I think that's terrific and I will always celebrate them for that because I don't want their love for me to get in the way of their love for God."

"With that being said, however, even though I believe their hearts are in the right place, I think that if Jesus were here today he'd be doing some radical things they wouldn't want to know about. They wouldn't want to know him or have anything to do with him. He would just freak them out, and I think that's sad.

"I don't think my parents are even open to the notion that they could be wrong, and because of that, they've got shields up that just won't let anything in. It's a difficult struggle because I try to be humble myself and say I don't have all of the answers. I find myself often telling them that I'm doing the best I can. When I know better, I'll do better."

Keith eventually had to leave his beloved home church. Knowing where his church stood on the issue of homosexuality made his coming out even more difficult. "I wasn't forced out of the church by any means. I left of my own accord, but only because I

knew down the line I wouldn't be allowed to participate in the same way any more. They'd claim they weren't going to reject me, but if you're living a life of sin, according to them, you can't participate in church. I didn't think my voice was strong enough to change them. So I stepped away, and it was incredibly difficult.

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them — it's the people.*

"When I first came out, I joined a gay chat room online so I could have a community to talk about some of these issues. I remember one time I mentioned to a few people that I was a Christian. Almost unanimously they responded 'I believe in God but I don't believe in organized religions.' That's a very common thing among gay people because it's not God that has rejected them — it's the people."

Around the time Keith left his church, he met his partner, John Nickolaus. "One of the things that endeared John to me was that he had a heart for God and that he was

a Christian.” John grew up in a Methodist church having never heard anything about homosexuality either way. It wasn’t until he was in his late 20s that someone asked him how he could worship a God that hates him.

“Growing up, I had no clue that I was supposed to be disliked and ‘an abomination’ in God’s eyes. It didn’t dawn on me that people actually do believe this, would justify it using their own interpretations of Scripture, and base entire religions on it,” John said. “They make this ‘sin’ the most horrible thing in the entire world. You could murder your entire family and still have a better chance of going to heaven than the homosexual living down the street.”

John’s encounter with this theology did not dissuade him from attending church. When Keith and John officially became a couple, one of the first things they decided to do together was find a church. John said, “We were going to go find a church, we were going to do it together, and we were going to make it a priority in our relationship. We looked at a bunch of churches, many that were inclusive and open, but that was almost a problem. They were almost too much about the gay thing. They were only playing church — but they were really about being gay. It was like ‘Gay! Gay! Gay! Oh yeah, and Jesus.’”

“We tried Episcopal,” John continued. “We didn’t try Catholic because we knew where that would get us. We tried Presbyterian, Lutheran, and Lutheran was the most common and open. We had to filter through a few Lutheran churches. We eventually found one we liked and began attending the

new members’ classes together. We were the only gay couple in those classes.”

John and Keith decided they wanted to commit to each other before God, their friends, and family. A few years previous to John and Keith’s commitment ceremony, their church had decided to perform blessings in response to three gay couples who had requested them in the same week. “They all looked at it as a sign from God,” John said. “They had never even had to consider blessings before as an issue. It’s not like they were against it — it just had never been addressed. So they researched it, formed committees, and it went on for over a year because they were taking it very seriously. By that time the couples had already moved on.

“But it was an emotional moment for many in the room when the congregation voted unanimously to allow same-gender blessings. And it was a year after that that we were the first couple for whom they performed a blessing.”

“They treated us exactly as they would a heterosexual couple. They made us take the same tests, which was hilarious. Those tests are specific to heterosexual couples so one of us had to be the woman and the other had to be the man. We’d get questions like ‘Should the man be the head of the household?’ ‘Should the woman be the child-bearer?’ and so on. We were sitting there in the conference room laughing and saying, ‘What’d you put for number five?’”

“We had to go through the counseling sessions just like a heterosexual couple would have to do. They did what they could to honor

us. As much as we would like to have it legalized so that we can get the benefits, the most important thing for us was that we did it in front of God, for God, and with our friends and my family there. To us, we're married; to them, we're married. That's what's important. They acknowledge us as a couple and not as the two homos in the third pew."

"We don't want any special treatment," John said. "We just want to be included and accepted like everybody else in the church, rather than being made to feel special. We want to love and worship God in ways we were created to do and by being who we were made to be." 🍷

REACHING OUT

Tina

Tina Fahnestock is a slender woman with a runner's body. Her sandy gray hair is cut in a short, pixie style. The bright pink walls and tablecloth in her living room match her pink turtleneck, Norwegian sweater, and rimmed glasses. She brings me into the kitchen to show me her backyard. A tall, pruned tree stands in the back corner and a large ornament reading "GIGGLE" in vertical, metal letters hangs from one of its branches. "We keep that tree lit up with lights all year round," Tina says, "and my husband keeps it really pruned in honor of Jon because he was so tall and slim. That's the tree Jon gave our son Erik when he was baptized."

In 1992 Tina lost her 39-year-old brother, Jon, to HIV. Ever since that loss Tina and her entire family have continued to live out their faith by walking alongside those who have experienced pain, loss, rejection, and hardship. "Jon has been our family's legacy," Tina said. "He was an early martyr for the cause."

Jon contracted HIV around 1983. Even though he didn't show physical symptoms until 1990, his health quickly degraded and he died within 18 months. Jon's death was hard on the family, but not necessarily for obvious reasons.

"My other brother was a pastor in Montana, and on Palm Sunday in 1992 he stood in front of his congregation and said, 'I have to go — my brother is dying, and he is

dying of AIDS,'" Tina said. Tina remarked that Montana had a sort of "macho cowboy" culture. Her brother was worried that by acknowledging he had a gay brother, he could face negative repercussions from his church community.

"Yet he had so many families come out and support him, and their support was a huge turning point in his ministry. He had so many cowboys come to him and say, 'I have a brother' or 'I had a friend who is gay.' After that he knew the only way to be was open."

After making the announcement to his church about Jon, Tina's brother and family drove home to Minnesota for Easter. "On Easter evening my brother Jon started having a seizure and he never came back. Three days later he died, and we buried him in Winona, his home town. We had a funeral at his church that he helped to organize for LGBT folks here in Minneapolis."

Painfully aware of the anti-gay demonstrations that had been plaguing funerals of HIV/AIDS victims in the early 1990s, Tina's entire family worried that Jon's funeral could be targeted. "When my brother died, I was so afraid for my mom that the funeral would be protested," Tina said. "We sat my mom down and said, 'We hope there won't be any hateful demonstrators, but if there are, we'll be here to hold your hand.'"

Fortunately, Jon's funeral was not protested. In fact, Tina's family experienced quite the opposite of hate: "The outpouring of love and support from Jon's community and all of our family's communities was unbelievable . . . so I can say there was grace there."

Why aren't we allowing [same-gender] blessings? We bless boats, we bless yards, we bless animals, but why don't we bless people?

"He was a proud gay man, and he loved his church, and he was a faithful follower of Jesus. He was a giant in that. His faith was so incredible," Tina said. "As a result I've done a lot in standing for the LGBT population as a straight parent, as a sister, and as a daughter. I believe that the LGBT population continues to struggle because we reject them. We reject them at schools, at church fellowships, at workout clubs, at work and family functions. How can we turn away people who are followers of Jesus? I continue to struggle with that. So in honor of Jon's legacy my family really, really, really fights for including all of God's children."

Jon had definitely experienced rejection. When he began showing early symptoms of HIV, he was fired from his job as an art teacher in a public high school.

While Jon lost the battles against the school authorities and HIV, his sister

continues to fight in honor of his legacy every day. One way in which Tina honors Jon is in her work. Fittingly, Tina serves as a speech therapist for three schools in the Twin Cities area. Both literally and figuratively, she helps give a voice to the voiceless in her work.

"I'm in communities where kids are so incredibly vulnerable — not only to the gang issues but also to drugs and hardness because they're at poverty levels and their families have all experienced hardships. So that's where I see my faith. I see how I can help make others' lives a little more comfortable. I think it's important to feel good about yourself."

Tina's advocacy for struggling and rejected people extends beyond her work and into her fulfillment of lay leadership roles in her church. When her church first considered becoming a Reconciling in Christ (RIC) church, a program that publicly recognizes churches who openly welcome gay and lesbian believers, Tina said, "My family was at every function for two solid years. Whenever there was a gathering of people we went to stand in support and to say, 'We won't lose members — we'll gain because we're reaching out.'" The vote passed unanimously, and the church became RIC.

"The following year we started asking, 'Why aren't we allowing blessings? We bless boats, we bless yards, we bless animals, but why don't we bless people?'"

The church voted on whether to allow the ministry staff to perform same-sex blessings, and only ten people either abstained from voting or voted "No." So the church began allowing the staff to perform same-sex

blessings. Some people left the church, but, according to Tina, “All the people who left the church have since come back.”

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Tina's prediction that the church would gain members instead of lose them came true. “I can't tell you how many people drive by our church and see our sign that says we're an RIC congregation, and say they want to worship at our church. I just got a call from a school group yesterday who wants to host a large spaghetti dinner there. They said the school has a number of gay families that don't go to church, but they find our church welcoming.”

“Our church is really prospering and serving with the purpose of loving, caring, and healing. And that's my job right there. We must constantly be asking ourselves, ‘Who should I serve? What can I offer? How do I open up?’”

Tina does not judge whether others are answering those questions correctly. Instead, she wants to provide “a welcoming, loving community for kids, for people who are of color, for people who are sick, for people who are homosexual, for people who need a refuge. That's what I think our church is about. That's where Jesus walked.”

Tina's efforts to welcome those who have experienced pain and hardship have been an inspiring success. Within both her church and her family, she has brought healing to places where traditionally there was pain, unity where there was division, and love where there was hate. As a good leader, she herself not only does good work, but she also encourages others to do the same.

In respect to the debate about homosexuality in the church, Tina said, “There are times in life when we all have to forgive and, oh boy, I have had to work through a lot of that. I'm trying to hear the different sides of the lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender issue, but it's all based in fear. The only way to move beyond that fear is to reach your hand out. If you put your hand out, the fear won't necessarily subside, but you'll be able to share the journey with someone who needs you. So that's my family's story in loving legacy of my brother Jon, whom I deeply miss.” 🌹

TIRED OF BEING THE EXCEPTION

John, Kyle, & Family

Kyle Hanson answered the door dressed in light jeans and a tan, button-up shirt. His partner, John Stumme, stood up holding their two-year-old daughter, Sofie, and walked toward me. Sofie insisted on wearing a light pink swimming suit over her polka-dotted turtleneck and green pants. Looking at her light blond hair, large blue eyes, and rosy red cheeks, there's no denying she's cute.

She is introduced to me. "Kari," she repeated back. "Snowman!" she exclaimed, offering me a stuffed snowman. "Kari and snowman," she began singing while dancing around the living room. I sat down and their dog JD jumped up onto the footstool of the chair in which I sat. "So," I began, "what's your story?"

John started to speak, but only barely. His hands and voice shaking, he was full of emotion. "I can't really talk about this without getting upset," he said. "It's just too personal for me when it's an issue of the church.

"I grew up in the Lutheran church. Both of my parents and my sister are Lutheran pastors. My dad also worked many years with the former American Lutheran Church Headquarters and in several academic settings. My mom was ordained later in her life and now serves a multicultural parish in North Minneapolis."

"Being a Lutheran is, sometimes unfortunately, an inextricable part of who I am," John continued. "There have been times when I've wanted to walk away from anything Lutheran because I'm tired of the whole debate [about homosexuality in the church], I'm tired of being debated, but I can't just walk away. Lutheranism really is an integral part of who I was as a boy growing up and who I am now."

John said he "always felt different from other boys" but did not question his sexual identity until college. He got married shortly after graduating from college and said, "I didn't have the courage and didn't expect to find the support I would need to come out at that time." He and his wife Mona had three sons together and were married for almost 13 years when they both realized they needed to end their marriage relationship. "Mona knew I had always been questioning my sexual identity. To some extent she always knew she had married a gay man."

John met Kyle about seven years after his coming out and divorce. Kyle was singing in a cabaret in Saint Paul one very hot July evening. While on stage Kyle joked, "It's so hot out; I'll go home with anyone who has air conditioning."

After the show John approached Kyle to thank him for his music and said, "Oh by the

way, I have air conditioning.” They laughed, clicked instantly and began seeing each other. “I really knew we were perfect for each other when I was at John’s house for the first time,” Kyle said “and I saw the Lutheran magazine sitting on his counter.” They’ve been together seven years this July.

*I didn’t feel welcomed or respected.
If the church that I loved so much
didn’t respect who I was, how on
earth could I respect the church?*

As is it for John, Lutheranism is also a core part of who Kyle is. “I grew up in rural Minnesota — Willmar to be exact. My entire family was a part of the Lutheran church. For us, the church wasn’t just a place for Sunday activities; it was our social life too. We even got out of school on Wednesdays to go to church.”

Kyle moved to South Dakota to attend Augustana College and began grappling with his sexual identity. He received some support from a few professors and a small group on campus, but his coming out experience was mostly a painful one. Immediately after graduating from college Kyle became a youth pastor in the Twin Cities and helped lead contemporary worship services. During that year he finally talked to his friends, family and staff about being gay.

After coming out to his church, the staff gave him two options: he could either leave his position as youth pastor or he could tell the congregation on Sunday and let them decide. “I had just come out to my friends and family and, well, myself,” Kyle said. “There was no way I was going to stand up in front of all of those people on a Sunday morning and come out.”

Kyle decided to leave his position, but continued playing piano for the congregation. “It was a very painful experience because I was very involved in the lives of some of those kids, and they were really confused that I had to leave, but I couldn’t be honest with them as to why. They would see me playing piano every Sunday and wonder why I wasn’t doing my other jobs. I just think it’s sad that church staff were comfortable with me as a pianist but not comfortable with me as a leader.”

Kyle quit going to church for quite some time after that. “I didn’t feel welcomed or respected. If the church that I loved so much didn’t respect who I was, how on earth could I respect the church?”

Soon after leaving the Lutheran church Kyle moved to California and began worshipping at an Episcopal church. “It was actually quite a painful experience to start worshipping again. I would often cry during worship. The Episcopal church left many times for silent prayer during the service. I was able to sort of make peace and find a way to reconnect with God during those times.”

He eventually returned to Minnesota and after learning of his return, the church that had previously asked him to leave, asked

him back to be music leader. For the past seven years John and Kyle have been active in John's mom's church in North Minneapolis, which has a large Hmong community. Kyle is the music director, and John ran a Saturday program for Hmong children there for many years.

"Snowman!" Sofie shouted. She ran toward me and again offered her stuffed snowman. Sofie came into John and Kyle's lives two years ago when they decided to adopt through Lutheran Social Services (LSS). They met for an initial interview and were told they might have to wait longer than most couples because they were "different." In September of 2007 they wrote a four-page profile and submitted it to a database filled with about 50 other profiles of hopeful parents.

The next month LSS contacted them about a pregnant couple who had read their profile and wanted to interview John and Kyle, along with two other straight couples. Soon after the meeting LSS called John and Kyle to tell them the couple had chosen them to be the parents of their baby. By November, Sofie was born. "We were told it could take years, and then within two months we had our daughter," Kyle said.

In addition to Sofie, John's 16-year-old son, Gabe, lives with them in their beautifully renovated Minneapolis home. Mid-interview, Gabe came down the stairs and introduced himself to me. His thin frame and kind blue eyes resembled John's. Gabe started a Gay-Straight Alliance at his middle school when he was only in 7th grade. "Hey Dad," Gabe

said, "I just found out the alliance I started is still going on at that school."

John smiled and said, "The only time Gabe ever got into a fight was when someone teased him for having a gay dad."

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It really meant a lot to us

John and Kyle, along with their families, flew out to California to get married this past October. John has six Lutheran pastors in his immediate family alone, four of whom were present at the wedding. "In fact, my mom performed our wedding ceremony," John said. "Our wedding day was incredible. The ceremony was held on a beautiful vista overlooking the bay and Golden Gate Bridge. It was so sad, however, to see many other couples being married at city hall, without family surrounding them to share their special day.

"We received all sorts of wedding cards," John said. "We even received one with a man and a woman's hands intertwined on the cover."

"What's even funnier than the cards is we actually can't legally get divorced," Kyle

said, looked at John and laughed. “The state of Minnesota doesn’t recognize that we’re married, and the state of California won’t divorce us unless one of us is a legal resident there.”

After the trip to California John and Kyle held a blessing service and celebration at their church in Minneapolis, which was followed by a potluck put on by their friends and many of the older church women. “It was really powerful to have people affirming who we are as a couple in a church setting, all singing hymns together. It really meant a lot to us,” Kyle said. “We were simply celebrating the love and commitment between two people.”

When the newly married couple returned home from California, they found a giant banner on their door reading “Just Married! John and Kyle, husband and husband.” It was hand-painted and decorated by their neighbors and neighbor’s children.

John reached for a photo album to show me a picture of the banner. He flipped through other pictures from their wedding day. One picture showed John and Kyle holding hands. Standing behind John is a row of family members, three of whom are wearing clerical collars. In the picture below it Kyle is placing a wedding ring on John’s finger. Both men are crying.

Despite the love and support they receive from their Lutheran families and communities, John and Kyle struggle with the greater Lutheran church’s hesitancy to accept and recognize them.

Kyle works in a building in downtown Saint Paul that houses the offices of a Christian church. “The church has this new advertising campaign. They’ve made all of these giant banners where in one corner is a picture of children, another corner is a picture of people of all ethnicities, another picture is a nun with children, and the final picture is a gorgeous mom, dad, and baby. In the center it says ‘We’re all one body.’ There’s about ten of these lining the hallway of our shared building. I walk past them every day. Each time I chuckle to myself and think, ‘We’re not all one body because there’s not a picture of me and my family up there.’”

“The church likes to say ‘We’re all a part of the same body, except for you.’ I’m tired of being the exception,” John said. “We have been used by many groups to divide, drive wedges, and scare people, and I’m emotionally drained.”

“Even despite the movement of individual churches toward being welcoming, the past eight years it has been very painful to be a part of the Lutheran church,” Kyle said.

“Both John and I attend these debate forums they have at synod assemblies. We listen to some people talk using terminology such as ‘the gay lifestyle’ and ‘those gays’ and ‘them’ without knowing we’re sitting in the room right with them. They talk like they’re authorities when they have no clue about our lives or our relationships. We work our butts off, take care of our family, go to church, knit, and fall asleep before the ten o’clock news is on. That’s the gay lifestyle.” ☘

IN THE CENTER OF GOD'S GRACE

Jodi & Rochelle

Linus and Lucy, two beagles, greeted me at the front door. Jodi introduced her dogs and herself, and Rochelle joined us. An acorn-colored wall framed the red suede couch they sat on, and I noticed exotic percussion instruments from various countries resting on floor speakers. A muted French horn on public radio played in the background. One thing was almost immediately apparent: They are both musicians.

Jodi is a professional church musician and has been for most of her life. She was born and baptized in a Lutheran church in Rockford, Illinois. "I was a good, church-music kid," Jodi said. "I started leading church music at a very young age and never really stopped. I loved God, and I loved to sing, and something about those two things together exponentially increased meaningfulness for me."

"I think that the seeds of music and of love, planted in me early, were both expected to bear fruit," Jodi said. "Both are needed for me to be the person God wants me to be, and to deny either of them is to live half a life and to ill-serve my call."

Jodi's love of music was tempered by perfectionism. "I'm the elder of two daughters, and as such am the classic people-pleasing overachiever. I wanted to do everything just right as a kid," she said.

She became conflicted when she started having crushes on girls at school because it didn't necessarily match what she had been taught. "I started to suspect there was something different about me, but back in the Jurassic period I didn't have the language to talk about it."

After working several years as a corporate trainer, Jodi eventually decided she needed to do something more meaningful. "I was a good Lutheran young woman who wanted to leave the world better than I found it." Her life changed when a friend brought her to hear the National Lutheran Choir in concert. "I don't think I breathed for the entire first half of the concert . . . later, through singing in that wonderful, professional choir, I came in touch again with the seeds of music God had planted in me. Inspired by the experience, I entered Luther Seminary's Master of Sacred Music (MSM) program."

Entering seminary posed a dilemma for Jodi. She knew her sexuality wasn't exactly celebrated at her new school, but she couldn't suppress her calling to the program. "I had decided that being single could be just fine — God had work for me, and what could possibly be as important? Like many well-intentioned people before and after me, I took refuge from myself in the idea of a life of service. Celibacy didn't seem like much of

a price to pay for sanctity,” Jodi said, “except for one thing — God had a different idea.

“Despite my happiness in my seminary work, I still had such a longing for love. Whenever those feelings surfaced, I tried to change them, to channel them into my work or friendships or volunteer projects . . . entering seminary was, in a way, the ultimate expression of my desire to hide from myself. Except seminary has a way of making you extraordinarily honest with yourself — you can’t hide.”

Jodi continued to struggle with her calling to ministry and her sexuality. She eventually came out to John, a fellow MSM student. She told him one day at lunch that she was gay. He said, “Oh honey, I knew.” Jodi, a little surprised, asked, “How?” John said, “Your shoes.”

Jodi remained single for a while, but by the end of her first year in the program, she found love. “Love came to me in the form of a National Lutheran Choir friend, Rochelle. She had also been to grad school and took it upon herself to cheer me on and help me through the initial stresses of school,” Jodi said. “As much as we had in common, we were also very different in our worldviews. I was a hopeful, liberal progressive, and she a pragmatic, conservative Biblical literalist. I was intrigued; before too much time passed, I was sure we were meant for each other.”

The giddiness of early love was quickly overshadowed with Jodi’s fears and frustrations. “I felt as if I had lost God because I had received two callings, equal in strength, that were entirely incompatible. This seemed like a cruel curveball from the infinitely loving

God I thought I knew. It was an untenable situation. Did I really have to choose between spending my life with this wonderful woman and doing the work I’d been given?”

Jesus called the woman ‘daughter’

*. . . I realized right then that I was
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anymore — I am still God’s kid,
and that maybe this sexuality
stuff isn’t as important as that.*

In chapel one day she became very angry with God because of her vocational and relationship issues. They seemed to have become mutually exclusive. The passage for the day was the story about a woman with a long-term hemorrhage, which made her ritually unclean, an impoverished outcast from her community. “Jesus called the woman ‘daughter’ . . . I realized right then that I was not simply a spectator of the Bible anymore — I am still God’s kid, and that maybe this sexuality stuff isn’t as important as that.

“It’s difficult enough to follow a vocation, but it’s especially hard to do so in a community that doesn’t fully embrace you for who you are. It takes intestinal fortitude.”

Rochelle went through a similar crisis after realizing she was in love with Jodi. Rochelle’s father was a Missouri Synod pastor,

and his fundamentalist theology deeply influenced Rochelle's sense of self. "I grew up knowing it wasn't OK to ask questions that were controversial," Rochelle said. "From age three I knew the 'right' words to explain to anyone what it meant to be a Christian, even if I didn't know what some of those words really meant or that I always believed my own story. I just hoped everyone else would."

She grew up in one parish for most of her life and was used to having a big reputation in a small town. She knew that anything she did could potentially reflect on her family and her father's ministry. "My brothers, sisters, and I did what we were supposed to do; we didn't really have the bad reputation of pastors' kids."

After graduating from college, Rochelle got her master's degree in statistics and then had a vocational crisis. She decided to do missionary work in Papua New Guinea, through a non-profit Lutheran organization. Midway through her service there, she discovered she was very uncomfortable sharing her faith. "I kept on having to tell it to other people even if I didn't believe it, and I began to really struggle."

Her faith struggles in a foreign country led her to a dark place. "I don't know if my depression is a part of this story, but it's a part of me," Rochelle said. "I told my family I was struggling with depression and was seeing a counselor, and their first reaction was, 'I hope you're seeing a Christian counselor.' It seemed to me that their concern was less focused on my depression itself, than that I seek the 'right' kind of care."

Rochelle eventually moved to the Twin Cities and became involved in music and the arts, including the National Lutheran Choir, where she met Jodi. The two were instantly good friends and spent a lot of time together. Rochelle didn't quite understand what was happening at first. "Being gay was something I never thought about," Rochelle said. "Jodi and I joke that we dated for three months before I realized that we were dating."

After realizing they were in love, they decided to let their relationship grow. Knowing that this information would be a substantial challenge for her very conservative family, Rochelle waited until she and Jodi had been together for six years to tell her first family member, a sister. "That didn't go well," said Rochelle. It was another two years before she told her parents. "It was very painful," Jodi said, "for both of us. Before Rochelle's parents knew we were more than roommates, I could sit and talk liturgy with her dad for hours. We all got along famously until we told them the full truth."

Rochelle started crying and gently stroked Linus, who sat on the couch next to her. Jodi lightly laid her hand on top of Rochelle's. Jodi paused for a brief moment then said, "It seems that Rochelle's parents think they have a choice between only two options: God or their daughter. As a result, Rochelle actually does have only two options: her family of origin or the family she has built. I just can't imagine that God would want that."

"They have constructed a theology in which anything that doesn't fit that picture

isn't acknowledged," Jodi said. "If I were a guy, I think I'd be their dream for marrying their daughter, but as I am a woman, I don't fit in the picture of their theology. I recognize that it's a lot to ask of them, that it challenges their theology in a deep way, but they've known the full truth for three years now and there's been no movement at all. Rochelle is still in hopeful conversation with her family, but every overture I've made has been either ignored or rebuffed.

"It's hard to figure out how to act in a loving way here," Jodi continued, "how to support my wife, keep my integrity and still remain open to a relationship that thus far has offered no hope of growth or understanding or even acknowledgement. I want to believe that love can win over fear here."

"A part of it is they're concerned about their image," Rochelle said. "They have big reputations in a small town. When my mother first found out about Jodi and me, she said to me, 'Think of the congregation members who supported your ministry in Papua New Guinea. They'd be so hurt by this.'" Again, Rochelle felt that her parents' first concern was for something other than her well-being.

The rejection and judgment of Rochelle's parents is difficult, but the knowledge that Rochelle and Jodi aren't legally bound to one another is almost unbearable. They have tried to get as many legal protections as possible because Jodi fears that if anything were to happen to Rochelle, Rochelle's family would shut out Jodi in an instant. "That's frightening and painful," Jodi said.

Fortunately, Jodi's parents and extended family have quite a different attitude than Rochelle's. "Honestly, it was more of a problem for my family that I didn't drink coffee than that I was a lesbian," Jodi said and grinned. "Coffee is a serious thing to Scandinavian Lutherans." Jodi recalled her mom defending those who were "outside of the circle" since Jodi could remember, and Jodi's parents continue to fight for the rights of their daughter, as do her aunts, uncles, and cousins. "Luckily my beautiful partner is a full member of my Lutheran family, and I am thankful."

Jodi's friends were not too fazed by her sexuality either. "It was weirder for my friends that I was so involved in church than that I was gay. The secular world (particularly some of my LGBT friends who have been hurt by the church) finds me weird because I'm in church, but the church finds me weird because I'm gay. I'm fine with being in the church and being gay; but it'd just be nice to be recognized as more than those two things."

A year ago last October, Jodi and Rochelle got married in the company of 175 loved ones. Only one immediate family member from Rochelle's side came, and, according to Rochelle, "he seemed very unhappy being there." Despite the absence of most of Rochelle's family of origin, the pews of the Minneapolis church were brimming. Jodi currently directs a 30-member choir at a Minneapolis church, and every single member was present to sing at the wedding, along with many other members of that church community. "They threw us a wild

wedding shower that even had live chickens,” Jodi said, “but that’s a whole other story.”

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“It was an absolutely beautiful experience,” she said. “It shaped the way I see family. Before the wedding we were committed. We bought rings and made lifelong promises to one another, but there was something about that public promise — in front of loved ones and God — there’s something about that

experience that changes you. The vow is sanctified in a richer way, and the community promises to help us carry it out.” They received a standing ovation.

“Over the past 12 years I’ve been with Rochelle,” she continued, “I’ve learned that marriage is a kind of vocation too — my ministry wouldn’t be the same if I hadn’t married her. While being married I’ve learned that I can screw up and still be loved; that is a model of God’s grace. We learn how to be more fully God’s children by loving each other. I’m a child of God. Everything about my life is committed to loving God with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to loving my neighbor as myself.

“My relationship with my partner has taught me much about how to do that. She calls me to be my best and bravest self. By living with her and loving her, I’m blessed and challenged, convicted and forgiven, but most of all, I’m loved. I’m happy and feel set down in the center of God’s love and grace.” 🍷

JUST LIKE THEM

Randy & David

Randy and David sit in their living room, with its butternut-squash walls and warm wooden floors. Their older dog, William, falls asleep at my feet to the rhythm of the ticking clock that rests on the mantelpiece behind me. David's blond hair and light-blue eyes contrast with Randy's own dark eyes and hair. Their two sons, Mitchell (16) and Matthew (13), huddle over each other in the adjacent room, building something out of paper. Their daughter, McKenna (8), cries softly because of her difficult spelling homework. David quietly soothes her and begins the interview.

"We go to church because we're there to worship God," David said. "We're followers of Christ. We're not there to be the followers of the rainbow flag. But at the same time, we don't want to be discriminated against for who we are. We're kind of caught in the middle there. Luckily our church accepts us as part of the family. We are just members of the congregation."

The church has been an important part of Randy and David's lives. They were both raised in small, Midwestern towns in which Lutheranism was not only a theological foundation of their families, but also a cultural identity.

"I was raised in a small town in the middle of 'Nowhere, North Dakota,'" Randy said. "In the area I'm from you were either

Catholic or Lutheran, and that was all there was to it."

Growing up, Randy was deeply involved in his church community: He was a part of Luther League, went to Sunday school, taught Sunday school, and attended church regularly. After graduating from high school, however, his involvement in the church dwindled.

While in his mid 30s, Randy decided to adopt a child. "Adopting was what brought me back to the church; I wanted to raise my son in the tradition that I had been raised in, which was ELC Lutheran," Randy said.

He was one of the first single males to ever adopt within the Russian court system. What also made the adoption nearly impossible was that the boy whom Randy wished to adopt was considered too old for adoption. Despite the odds, in 1997 Randy successfully brought 4 ½ year old Mitchell to his new home in the United States.

Even though the first adoption was difficult, Randy's family was not yet complete; and in the end of 1998, he began the process of a second adoption. He received a referral in December and traveled to Yekatrinnburg, Russia, on the western edge of Siberia. "In March of 1999, we brought Matthew back. That's about the same time David came into our lives."

David is from a Minnesota town of 3,000. "I was raised Missouri Synod Lutheran,"

David said then paused and laughed. “My parents’ house sat between two Lutheran churches: literally we had the Missouri Synod church across the street on one side and we had the ELCA church on the other side.”

David also distanced himself from religion after moving away from home after high school. It wasn’t until he joined the Air Force that he reconnected with his faith. After the Air Force, David lived in Colorado Springs for a while and became active in the ELCA church during that time. After about 15 years, he decided to move back to Minnesota where he met Randy in 1998.

They had a holy union in 2001, but kept it very small and private. “We didn’t say anything to anyone in the church about it — the pastor knew about it, two friends knew about it, and then of course the kids knew about it. That’s it,” David said. “The reason was, we didn’t want to get our pastor into trouble, to cause any dissension in the church, or to become a spectacle.”

David continued, “I attended several holy unions when I was in Colorado Springs. No matter how much seriousness or gravity was put on the ceremony, inevitably some of the people attending viewed it as a mock wedding. Randy and I didn’t want to have any of that because that was never our intention. We wanted the ceremony and we wanted it to be in church. Whether the law recognizes it or not isn’t nearly as important as affirming our commitment before God, which we did.”

It didn’t take much time for Randy, David, and the two boys to become a family, and their church became central to their

shared lives. The four attended a church near their Minneapolis home for many years until its recent closure. During the time of their membership, both Randy and David served in various leadership roles and, most important, “we were active in almost all the potlucks and bake sales,” Randy said.

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While teaching Sunday school, David received some drawings from two little girls who were in Matthew’s class. “Dealing with those two was so different than with boys,” David said. He then began to think about adopting a girl.

“In the summer of 2001 we did a lot of soul-searching and praying and decided to adopt a girl,” Randy said.

Randy began the adoption process as a single parent, knowing that if David were legally involved, the adoption would be impossible.

"We initially tried to adopt from Ukraine, but that opportunity came and went. Then we had what looked like a much more successful adoption from Russia. It took about 6-9 months to get things ready, jump through the hoops, get the paperwork in place and get the money. Randy was in court finalizing the adoption when the judge told him the child had siblings ranging in age up to 10 years old." In order to adopt the young girl, the judge told Randy that he would have to adopt all four children.

After much discussion Randy and David decided they couldn't take all of the children. Their church grieved with Randy and David at the devastation of these two failed adoption attempts. "All of our friends at church had been praying, and it was mentioned almost weekly in church where we stood, so when this adoption fell through it was devastating to the entire church. Everybody mourned with us," David said.

David quickly began to lose hope in adopting a girl. "Everybody, including me, underestimated Randy's resolve, but the Russian government didn't stand a chance against Randy," David said.

"Sure enough another opportunity came up and Randy was just as dogged and determined as he was with the first. I was very apprehensive. I did not believe that this adoption would go through for sure until they were on the ground in the United States. But sure enough Randy emailed me from Russia, and a couple days later the boys and I met Randy and McKenna in the airport."

"The next Sunday we went to church. At this particular church it was standard

practice for people to have spontaneous announcements at the end of worship. So I went up there at the end and announced that she was here. After the first adoption had failed, we decided not to tell anyone about this attempt because failure is so painful. But when we were able to introduce McKenna to our church, everybody was so excited and surprised."

McKenna was the final addition to the now completed family. She was embraced not only by her new parents and brothers, but also by her new church family. "Some of the older, more conservative members absolutely adore our family, especially McKenna," David said.

"We like to think that we're the kind of family that has nothing to prove. I'll admit that we've never marched in a parade. We're certainly not active in any gay community; frankly, we're too busy. We're busy helping with homework, driving to soccer games, and working. We hope that we set just a regular example for people. Randy and I consider sexual orientation to be a non-issue: we are who we are; we are a family."

Randy added, "We never introduce ourselves as a gay family. We introduce ourselves as 'This is Randy, this is David, and these are our three kids. Now what can we do?'"

In spite of the fact that Randy, David, and their three kids have been a family for over ten years, they still face many social and legal challenges. David said, "Randy and I are not out to define marriage, which is a traditional term. I'm not as concerned with people calling us married as for me to be able to claim Randy as my partner."

"But what really concerns me are the legal protections. If something happens to Randy or the kids, I have no say in their medical care. Legally I can't visit them in the Intensive Care Unit. It's pretty hard that, being the kids' father, I can tell them when to take a shower or do their homework or go to bed or ground them, but I can't put them on my insurance at work."

"This system needs reform," Randy said. "It can be reformed by doing exactly what we're doing: by being involved in our church, involved in our schools, and being like everybody else."

David added, "Don't get me wrong — we're not going to condemn anybody who marches in a parade. In fact, we need people like that, absolutely. We need the people who are vocal politically. We need the people who are more visible to the general population, absolutely. There does need to be that visible, active presence — something to draw attention to the issues. But this is our role. Our role might not be to be out there carrying a banner necessarily, but I know the way we live speaks volumes to our friends and family and neighbors who find us to be 'just like them.'

"We did go to a couple of gay-friendly churches once, but there worship became political. The reason why we didn't join those churches is because the whole sermons had to do with homosexuality. Their motto

seemed to be, 'We're so inclusive that let's put up neon lights.'

*Even in spite of the fact that the
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"That's why we came back to the Lutheran Church, having initially left because they voted to not ordain homosexuals. Even in spite of the fact that the ELCA at large wouldn't allow us the same rights that the other members have, our church accepted us as part of the family."

And so David, Randy, Mitchell, Matthew, and McKenna continue to live as a stable family and members of the Lutheran Church. Their lives are governed by their faith, commitment to each other, and love for one another. Hopeful that their example will inspire others to reevaluate preconceived notions about various sexual orientations, David says, "We are just members of the congregation. We're just Randy and David." 🌹