

Quest for Balm in Gilead: Disclosure patterns of church-affiliated family members who have “come out” as lesbian or gay

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Abstract:

The researcher conducted a study between September 2005 and March 2006 that explored the disclosure experiences of church-affiliated relatives of lesbians and gays in their mainline church communities (Anglican, Lutheran, United Church, Presbyterian and United Methodist).

The central theme that emerged is called “Quest for Balm in Gilead” with four identified processes: “Wakefulness through Mirror and Faith”; “Anticipation through Mirror and Faith”; “Acceptance through Mirror and Faith”; and “Engagement through Mirror and Faith.” Participants reported a liberating and empowering experience, in which “a mirror” had been held up for them by others, as they began to recognize many beliefs, attitudes and behaviors they had previously exhibited themselves. They expressed that the process helped them to more clearly understand “who” they were as people of faith, as members of the body of Christ, and as human persons journeying alongside others, and to come to a place where they could focus on the peace and joy inherent in the Christian love and acceptance of others.

In examining the matrix for outcomes, it also became clear that participants viewed pastoral support to be inconsistent, uninformed by current research, and pastors to be less than willing to become engaged in the pastoral conversation around homosexuality.

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More than 30 years after homosexuality was removed from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual II (DSM-II) of the American Psychiatric Association (American Psychological Association, 1973, p. 1), and the work of the gay rights movement in advancing homosexuality as a legitimate sexual orientation, there are overwhelming reports that harassment and discrimination toward gays and lesbians (Garnets, Herek, 1993; Herek, 2004; Moon, 2000; Nolan & Nugua, 2005; Walters & Curran, 2000; Yip, 1997), making disclosing a challenge, including disclosure to family members and by family members. Because most individuals belong to families, this researcher sought

information on the disclosure patterns of family members that a family member is lesbian or gay, and found a paucity of information describing these experiences, especially pertaining to the personal experiences of mainline church-affiliated family members in telling others that their close relative (daughter, son, sister, brother, grand-child or other close relative) is lesbian or gay. This information was considered to be valuable in future planning, implementing and evaluating pastoral care for these families, in providing foundational information for educational curriculum for pastoral counsellors and clergy, and in the development of theory to further research in this area. Findings are of potential interest to pastoral counsellors, clergy, church lay leaders, and religious educators in stimulating dialogue allowing for more comprehensive and creative practice decisions, and providing an overall structure from which more effective pastoral support can develop.

Homosexuality, the family and the church

Gays and lesbians are disclosing or “coming out” at a much earlier age (Cloud, 2005), and disclosure is often a jolting and even shocking experience for family members, requiring time to adjust and support in the adjustment process (Saltzburg, 2004). This indicates that family members would benefit from support in dealing with this critical life event, and that church-affiliated families could potentially benefit from support in their churches, areas that have been recognized as healing places and caring communities (The World Council of Churches, 1990). However, reports indicate that there is a strong correlation between homophobia and religiosity (Holtzen, 1993), and that churches hold many relatively uninformed and uneducated attitudes about homosexuality (O’Brien, 1991; Yip, 1997). Additional reports indicate that many clergy do not declare a position on homosexuality or view homosexuality in a depersonalized manner (Olson and Cage, 2002), conflict exists between conservative and progressive factions of the church on the issue (Bernstein, 2003), homosexuality is considered by many to be socially constructed and non-compliant with Scripture (Greenberg, 1988), and often seen, not only as sin, but also a “different order of sin” (Switzer, 1996), Reparative Therapy is proposed by many as a “cure” (Nicolosi, 2005). Given that the prevalence of homosexuality to be as high as 10 % (Michael et al., 1994; Gonsiorek,

Sell & Weinrich, 1995), many church-affiliated individuals will indeed have family members who are homosexual, and could potentially benefit from a supportive relationship with clergy and other church members. Moreover, many gay people are reported to feel that they need the support of their organized religious community (Fairchild and Hayward, 1998), and want to maintain these existing ties.

Family support and church support

There is evidence that entire family systems require support in the coming out process because stigmatization and disapproval is often experienced from inside and outside the family. Serious problems are reportedly experienced by gays and lesbians as they disclose their sexual orientation to their families (Borhek, 1988; Walden and Magruder, 2000) and lack of support can keep lesbians and gays in “gender straightjackets”, a term used to accommodate themselves to a culture that expect and behave as if everyone is heterosexual (Jennings, 2003).

Because stigmatization is often experienced from inside and outside the family, the importance of support for the family system cannot be overemphasized in the disclosure process (Savin-Williams, 1989; Strommen, 1989). Homosexuals are often rejected and discriminated against by family members, and homosexual youth are commonly put out of their homes (Holtzen, 1993; Nolan & Nugua, 2005). Available support for family members is critical as homosexual youth are at risk for running away, alcohol and drug abuse, compulsory heterosexual promiscuity and the ultimate tragedy, suicide (Nolan and Nugua, 2005).

While most parents are reported to initially react negatively to the disclosure (Cramer and Roach, 1988), and while it is considered necessary for self-acceptance (Culbert, 1968), and self-renewal (Jourard and Jaffee, 1970), individuals and families are reported to progress through a grief process that ends with acceptance (Robinson, Walters, and Skeen, 1989). Many gays and lesbians disclose as a gradual process (Holtgraves, 1990; Petronio, 1991; Newman and Muzzonigro, 1993), over the three dimensions of time, depth and maturity (Tong, 1998) and negative reactions from family members lessen over time (Holtzen, 1993). Jourard (1964), one of the first to formally write about the process of disclosure, describes it as “the act of making yourself manifest,

showing yourself so that others can see you” (p.19), and the means by which one person willingly makes himself known to others (Jourard and Jaffe, 1970). It is a process with multiple dimensions (Wheeless, 1978; Wheeless, Zakahi & Chan, 1988), and multiple functions (Archer, 1987; Derlega & Grzelak, 1979; Miller & Read, 1987; Coupland, Coupland, Giles & Wieman, 1988), influencing interpersonal relationships and personal well being (Derlega & Berg, 1987; Jourard, 1964), relationships among people, and implies feelings of trust and safety vulnerability (Hotlgraves, 1990; Petronio, 1991).

Families experiencing homosexuality disclosure appear to go through a process called Perspective Transformation (Mezirow, 1991), a cognitive restructuring process that begins with a “disorienting dilemma” triggered by a life crisis or major life transition (Mezirow 1995) that does not fit with existing knowledge, attitudes and meaning within their present perspective, and a new perspective develops that selectively shapes and delimits expectations, perceptions, cognition, and feelings (Cranton, 1992; Mezirow, 1990, 1991, 1994, 1997; Taylor, 1998). Boyd and Myers (1988) add that that Perspective Transformation involves the grieving of old perceptions.

THE METHOD

Two characteristics were necessary for inclusion in the study: to have a close (daughter, son, grand-child, sibling, niece, nephew) family member who had come out as lesbian or gay and to have belonged to a mainline church community at the time or since the relative came out.

Participants were solicited through a variety of areas in Canada and the United States: Integrity groups (Integrity, 2006a; Integrity, 2006b), Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (P-Flag, 2006), a number self-selected, and e-mails were sent to 90 clergy in mainline churches in two countries asking them to distribute study information. A total 16 interviews were conducted with the following distribution: Roman Catholic (4), Anglicans (4), United Church (4), United Methodists (2), and Presbyterian (2). Although Bibby (2002), a Canadian researcher, includes Lutherans among mainline denominations, none were interviewed as none responded to the advertisements, and because the United Methodist Church (UMC) is reported by the Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA) (2000) to be the largest mainline protestant denomination in the

United States, this denomination was added to the study. Participants self-disclosed as family members of lesbians and gays: 11 were mothers, one was a father, one was a brother, one was a grandmother, one was a sister, and one was an aunt of the relative who came out. Three were under 35 years of age, 10 were between the ages of 35 and 50, and three were between the ages of 50 and 65.

One hundred questionnaires were electronically distributed as the quantitative section of the study, and 54 participant responses were received and analyzed: 38 (70 %) female; 16 male. Of female respondents, 2 were under the age of 35; 28 were between the ages of 35 and 50, and 8 were between the ages of 50 and 65. Of male respondents, one was under the age of 35; 12 were between the ages of 35 and 50, and 3 were between the ages of 50 and 65. Among the 54 respondents, the mean age was 38.5 for men and 39.9 for women. Of the 54 respondents, there were 31 mothers, five fathers, three grandparents, 11 siblings, and four maternal aunts of gay and lesbian individuals. Denominations represented were Roman Catholic (14); Anglican (14); United Church (14); Presbyterian (6) and United Methodist (6).

In the qualitative section, participant was asked the interview question, “Can you tell me about your experiences in telling or not telling those in your church community that your relative is lesbian or gay?”. All interviews were telephone tape-recorded, and analyzed using the grounded theory methodology originally described by Glaser and Strauss (1967), and utilizing the computer software program Qualitative Solutions and Research (QSR) Non-numerical Unstructured Data Indexing Searching and Theory Building (Rev.4) was utilized for an in-depth analysis. A 30-item questionnaire was developed from themes that emerged from the qualitative data, contained statements that reflected potential factors of the disclosure experience, and degree of agreement on a 5-point scale, and potential experiences in four areas: the level of comfort/discomfort felt with their congregations, clergy; the to be disclosed, and with themselves in their church communities. Participants did not take part in both sections, thus there were a total of 70 respondents in the study, and methods were compensatory, as the limitations of one offset by the strengths of the other (Madey, 1982). Findings from data were subsequently analyzed for themes of pastoral support using an Osgood co-occurrence matrix for structural analysis and semantic network (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Themes were

plotted along the horizontal axis of a matrix for critical attributes and a matrix of critical outcomes. In the first matrix, four factors were placed along the vertical axis: time orientation; adaptation; extra-personal orientation and intra-personal orientation. The decision to use these four factors was guided by the common direction participants took in responding to the interview question. Themes that appeared on the horizontal axis included the following: personal beliefs and values; beliefs rooted in theological traditions, current knowledge and attitudes and potential critical peaks in relationship development. When emerging vertical factors with emerging themes, and in examining the matrix for outcomes, it became clear that participants viewed pastoral support to be inconsistent, uninformed by current research, and pastors to be less than willing to become engaged in the pastoral conversation around homosexuality.

Quest for Balm in Gilead

Quest for Balm in Gilead, the core theme, was communicated under four processes described by participants, as is taken from an actual phrase used by one participant in describing her journey. The terms “faith community”, “congregation”, and “church community” are often used interchangeably to denote the physical structure and gathering of people within these structures to which these participants belonged and worshipped. The phrase “through mirror and faith” reflects experiences described of the tools utilized in finding balm: “mirror” refers to seeing the reactions of others that reminded them of their attitudes about gays and lesbians previous to their own personal experience. The word “faith” reflects descriptions of a loving, caring and accepting God that loves all people unconditionally and completely, and who does not focus on people’s sexual orientation as a criterion for love or acceptance. The term “homosexual family” is used to describe a family system that has at least one homosexual family member, and is perhaps being introduced for the first time in this new context to reaffirm the importance of family systems, and to more critically underline the need for support that exist in these families. As one cannot know the feelings and beliefs of another, whenever the author states “they felt” or “they believed”, these are statements based on participants’ experiences of their feelings and beliefs.

In the process of “Wakefulness through Mirror and Faith” a wakefulness (consciousness) was experienced about the current attitudes that exist toward homosexuality, even in the church community. Disclosure was gauged according to the openness of others, they felt “unbalanced”, and had not yet sorted out the depth of their own feelings. In “Anticipation through Mirror and Faith” they described a need and an expectancy of support and understanding in their church communities, on behalf of all homosexuals and their families. As these needs were incompletely met or completely unmet, they progressed to “Apathetic Acceptance through Mirror and Faith” a “going within”, experienced hopelessness and disempowerment, and “accepted” the reality of their disempowerment. “Engagement through Mirror and Faith” described an empowered acceptance of their new reality, and confidence and hope in this new reality. A change in perspective had taken place, they had left behind old assumptions, and transcended the place where they had been. This “leaving behind” was expressed as reaching a deeper understanding of the realities faced by their homosexual family member, the oppression experienced by homosexual people, and the attitudes and beliefs expressed by people in the church community. The author drew on the theory of Perspective Transformation developed by Mezirow (1978; 1991) in reflecting on data, and the critical reflection and changed their “meaning schemes” presented in the data.

Wakefulness Through Mirror and Faith/ Critical Examination of Beliefs

The stage of wakefulness reported by participants began when their relatives “came out” as being lesbian or gay, and resembled the disorienting dilemma described by Mezirow (1991) as characteristic of the beginning of Perspective Transformation. Learning that a close family member is lesbian or gay started participants on a critical examination of what they believed about homosexuality and why they believed what they did. Participants reported that they began to “see as if for the first time” the stigma surrounding homosexuality, and what Farley (1996), calls the power of unreasonable and self-perpetuating stereotypes about homosexuals. A state of wakefulness occurred, and as they were “hearing” offensive language that they recognized as “not new, it had been there previously”, but they had not “heard” it before in the same way as they were hearing it now.

Pain and confusion was experienced as they encountered discriminatory attitudes from their faith communities and lack of understanding and support from clergy. They reported disappointed and disillusionment with the church because they had expectations of the church as a receptive and caring place, which is consistent with the work of Rueda (1982). They reported frustration with themselves because they had often held similar stereotypical attitudes and engaged in similar biased behaviour against homosexual persons.

Although they perceived the discriminatory attitudes that are commonly imparted upon lesbians and gays, they continued to seek peace and solace from the church community, that same institution that they believed to be lacking in support and understanding. Despite the discrimination they perceived in their mainline church communities, they felt that “the church is the one place you should be able to go, no matter what” and reported the need of the support of these communities as they learned to live with their new reality of being the relative of a lesbian or gay family member. For the majority of participants, their need for support went unmet. This is consistent with the work of Fairchild and Hayward (1998) who found that gays, having grown up believing in a God that accepts you when no one else will, wanted to maintain their religious ties. God is still God, despite the interpretation others place on God. For participants, a similar situation appears to be true: God is still God, and they strongly believe in God’s love for them and God’s love for their homosexual family member.

Participants perceived negative attitudes toward lesbians and gays, and believed that their congregations were not accepting of homosexuality as a legitimate sexual orientation. These findings are consistent with the work of Switzer (1996), who spoke of the homophobia that exists in the church community because homosexuality is believed to be against the teachings of the Bible. Participants perceived that their church communities viewed homosexuality as wrong, perhaps even as a sin that is different from other sin. This supports the work of Switzer (1996) who concluded that many Christians believe that homosexuality is a “different order of sin” (p. 72), Holtzen (1993) who found that homophobia appears to be related to traditional sex-role stereotypes and religiosity, and Johnson, Brems and Alford-Keating (1997) who found a correlation between

religiosity and homophobia, and that high levels of religiosity are related to an individual's beliefs about the origins of homophobia.

It was not unusual for participants to report that others in their church communities indicated by language and behaviour that they did not see homosexuality as "normal" which supports Posner's (1992) reports that many churches continue to claim that gay and lesbian people suffer from a "disorder" which can be interpreted as a prejudicial label. In examining such remarks, Posner ponders why anyone would deliberately choose a lifestyle fraught with hostility and oppression.

Participants reported that many members of their congregations, including themselves, were ill informed or completely misinformed about homosexuality. They reported that their own personal misinformation led to varying levels of guilt and the fear that "they had done something wrong" in the raising and nurturing of family members. This supports the findings of O'Brien (1991) that negative attitudes about homosexuality are often based on scanty information gathered from folklore and the commercial media, as well as from a narrow and literal reading of Biblical texts. Participants had been socialized in these or similar church communities, yet they reported that they had not "thought much" about homosexual issues until they experienced it personally when a family member "came out" as lesbian or gay.

Participants perceived that clergy also experience confusion when it comes to homosexuality, which is consistent with the work of Olson and Cage (2002) who found that homosexuality is one of the most divisive issues within mainline Protestantism today. Participants reported that many clergy were non-committal, which resonates with the findings of Olson and Cage (2002) who found that clergy spoke in a pragmatic manner, and did not take personal stances on the issue of homosexuality.

Participants reported a belief that change around homosexuality in the church would be slow to develop. They also reported that they had heard condoning stories about Reparative Therapy. While the practice of Reparative Therapy is encouraged by some fundamentalist religious groups, it is not commonly associated with mainline Protestant churches (Nicolosi, 2005).

Participants reported that they found their faith and prayer lives to be a strong support. They reported attending church even when it meant being fearful of attending

alone, stepping down from valued church-related work in order to avoid the negative comments of others, and feeling anger at biased comments made by clergy. They reported feeling close to God and a belief that God loved their family member. Tan (2005), in speaking of homosexual individuals, and not their families, found that respondents espoused high levels of spiritual well-being, and that participants who identified with a formal religion and who attended religious services frequently espoused higher religious well-being than the non church-affiliated group.

Data obtained from questionnaires supported participant interviews, and indicated that family members experienced a high level of fear of disclosure to members of their church communities and perceived low levels of openness from members of the church community. Participants described a process where they progressed from wakefulness to anticipation.

Anticipation Through Mirror and Faith / Understanding that Others Share Beliefs

Participants reported that they wanted the attitudes in the church to change, and to become more favourable for their own homosexual family and others who are lesbian or gay. This is not surprising, considering the level of rejection and discrimination they reported and their perceptions of actual and potential discrimination. It is also not surprising, considering their new consciousness, that many reported hurt and confusion when learning of the family member's sexual orientation. This initial hurt and confusion supports Holtzen (1993) who described the process experienced by family members when they a family member discloses their homosexuality, and found that the degree of homophobia experienced by parents lessened with the length of time they were aware of their child's sexuality. In speaking of the coming out process for gay adolescents, Newman and Muzzonigro (1993) described the stages adolescents went through in coming to terms with their sexuality, and which include the emotions of confusion, denial, guilt, and shame; and finally acceptance.

Participants in this study also reported stages (or processes) in coming to terms with their relative's sexuality, albeit somewhat different from those described by Newman and Muzzonigro (1993). These church-affiliated family members reported that they adjusted to the knowledge of being a homosexual family in a relatively short period

of time. Newman and Muzzonigro reported that they found families with strong emphasis on traditional values (such as practicing religion) to be less accepting of homosexuality than families with low emphasis on traditional values. It is also interesting to note that, in the questionnaire data, 71 % reported high or very high levels of comfort with the knowledge that their family member is lesbian or gay, 16 % reported a medium level of comfort and only 19 % reported discomfort with the knowledge. Since data was not collected to measure the amount of time participants in either section of the study were aware of being homosexual families, the researcher cannot conclude if a discrepancy exists with the findings of Newman and Muzzonigro. Because many participants in this study were found through such support groups as Integrity and P-Flag, it is reasonable to assume that they had utilized these resources in reaching acceptance of their relative's sexual orientation.

Participants expressed vulnerability in disclosing, and reluctance to disclose information that they perceived as “too vulnerable” to those who did not appear “caring.” Disclosing, for them, would involve introducing their new reality to members of the church community, which is consistent with the findings of Jourard and Jaffe (1970) who described disclosure as the means by which one person willingly makes himself known to others, as well as with the findings of Holtgraves (1990), and those of Petronio (1991). It also supports the findings of Derlega and Berg (1987) who assert that disclosure impacts many areas of the person's life, including interpersonal relationships and personal well-being.

While all those who completed questionnaires reported that they had disclosed to clergy, only 37 % reported that they felt clergy to be supportive and understanding. Surprisingly, 61 % reported a perception that their clergyperson believes that homosexuality is reversible. What is most surprising about this report is that all participants belong to mainline Christian denominations. Because the risk of disclosure is associated with the intensity and importance of the information being disclosed, it is not surprising that study participants reported that they experienced difficulty in disclosing the information that a relative is lesbian or gay because of the degree of risk involved in the disclosure. Each participant reported a progression to the point where they could trust the people to whom they disclosed.

Apathetic Acceptance Through Mirror and Faith

Participants realized that acceptance of homosexuality as a “legitimate” sexual orientation by the church involves changes that are moving slowly, and an apathetic acceptance that this is “the way things are.” They reported that this realization was accompanied by feelings of powerlessness as well as a sense of “illegitimacy.” The reported feelings of participants are consistent with what Lyotard (1984) speaks of as legitimization, the process through which a “legislator” determines the validity and truth of a situation, and society decides what is right and true based on the “legitimate power” of those who make the statement about what is true. Feelings of powerlessness and illegitimacy were associated with the perception that the church communities did not validate their lesbian and gay family members as having a legitimate sexual orientation. In church communities in which conformity did not give way to diversity, the value system of the diverse group (the lesbian and gay individuals) became “illegitimate.” It was reported that for many in these church communities, sexual orientation was either right (heterosexual) or wrong (homosexual). This supports Hudak’s (2005) assertion that the binary categories of heterosexuality and homosexuality are congruent with right and wrong, and Fillingham (1993) who spoke of “power making” and decisions about what are perceived true and false depending on the perceived legitimacy (power) of those claiming to be legitimate and true. Only 58 % of respondents from the qualitative section reported reaching a comfort with themselves as members of the congregation.

Participants reported on the discrimination they believed was directed toward gays and lesbians by their church communities, and the barriers they perceive as existing against homosexuality in the church. There appears to be two distinct “sides” to the debate on homosexuality and the church, and participants reported on becoming more consciously “aware” of the “oppressed” side. Freire and Macedo (1996) maintained that the powerless and oppressed can become more critically conscious, and that consciousness can begin to transform the condition of powerlessness. Participants reported that, as they spent more time thinking about the lack of control they were experiencing, they began to see that they needed to make personal changes in how they

approached the issue, which is consistent with what Giroux (2001) calls the process of continually inventing and reinventing.

Participants reported a shift toward beginning to understand that they could be more assertive in helping themselves, in helping their gay and lesbian relatives, and in helping others in a similar situation. This is similar to what Freire and Shor (1987) calls “moving beyond being individualist, and using one’s freedom to help others to be free by transforming society” (p. 109). Participants described a process of moving from the state of accepting a situation of disempowerment, and moving to a process of engagement with issues.

Engagement Through Mirror and Faith / Utilizing the New Role

Participants reported that they began to experience hope that they could contribute to the improvement of their new reality. This supports Frankl (1959), who wrote that hope offers a promise of something better to come, and gives meaning to current life situations (p. 63). Participants reported that, initially, they felt disempowered, fearful about the future, sceptical of change, and somewhat bitter toward the church. They reported that, as their knowledge level grew and their attitudes began to change, they realized that they had not so long ago exhibited similar attitudes to those they now felt to be oppressive in the church community. They reported that they were no longer re-examining homosexuality from the perspective of outsiders, but rather in a new context as the family members of individuals who had “come out” as lesbian or gay. They reported that, as they examined their previous beliefs, their feelings about homosexuality changed, and for them homosexuality became more credible, more legitimate. They were no longer responding to previous values and needs (having no personal attachment to homosexuality) but had linked with values that had been previously foreign to them (they were now intimately connected with the issue). They reported that when they better understood the contexts of their previous and current beliefs and feelings, they were then able to modify their expectations of others, which is consistent with Mezirow (1978) who argued that people must make sense of their new experiences before they can examine their rationalizations. These family members reported that, because they had taken on a new identity (they were family member of a homosexual person) they now felt connected

with the families of other lesbians and gays, and were more aware of the issues affecting lesbian and gays and their families in the church. They also reported feeling closely affected by public and social reactions toward homosexuality such as those expressed through homophobic and heterosexist behaviour.

The terms of reference (contexts) upon which participants' prior assumptions were made had changed. Their consciousness had become raised by understanding the old context, by gaining information about a new context, by taking on a new point of view, and by beginning to think in a new way about the present context.

The learning reported by participants was rooted in their own subjective experiences and their subjective reframing (knowledge that they were now personally involved) and objective reframing (careful examination of the assumptions and beliefs of others, such as those in the church community that would or would not be considered "safe" enough to disclose to). Subjective reframing continued as participants worked through their own feelings and their responses to the attitudes of others.

They initially reported wakefulness and anticipation. They began to examine and understand their own feelings, to feel disconnected as they experienced this state of apathetic acceptance, and what they believed to be the reality of powerlessness and hopelessness surrounding the situation. Because of the powerlessness they reported, they were unable to disclose or disclosed selectively, reported a separation from the church "body" and feelings of being at odds with attitudes they perceived to be present in the church community. They viewed their previous attitudes through the attitudes and behaviours of others, and had developed a new perspective that was inconsistent with the predominate perspective they experienced around them.

The researcher draws heavily from Mezirow's theory of Perspective Transformation in explaining how the meaning structures that these adults had acquired over a lifetime became transformed when they experienced a situation where old meaning schemes no longer fit: what Mezirow (1991) refers to as a disorienting dilemma, and what Cranton (1992) refers to as a period of destabilization and disorientation. These "old" meaning structures were based on cultural experiences and contextual experiences that had influenced how they formerly understood and interpreted homosexuality, which is consistent with Taylor's (1998). Old meaning schemes influenced their reactions

toward homosexuality up until the time they learned that a relative is lesbian or gay, at which time they began to experience discomfort with old meaning schemes and how these meaning schemes understood homosexuality.

There is a considerable degree of discomfort experienced by families around the sexual orientation of their family member (Borhek, 1988; Holtzen, 1993), and while all may not experience a disorienting dilemma, most will experience a change in meaning schemes as they become accustomed to the disclosed information. Bearing in mind the social climate in which we live in North America in 2005, the degree of homophobia present in society (Green, 2005), and the pressures that lesbian and gay youth face on a daily basis (Cloud, 2005) it is reasonable to conclude that most families would not choose to have their member in circumstances where they will be subjected to discrimination and rejection on a regular basis and over long periods of time. Meaning scheme changed from “my son who is heterosexual” with images and dreams consistent with that meaning scheme, to “my son who is homosexual” and a “disorienting dilemma” occurred between the two meaning schemes as new information was processed and life transitions took place to accommodate the new information. This can be likened to what Mezirow (1995) calls a life crisis or major life transition (Mezirow 1995, p. 50). As they progressed toward engagement, participants changed their frames of reference, critically reflected on their old assumptions and beliefs, and consciously began to define their world in a new way, which involved a deep, structural shift in the basic premises of their thoughts, feelings, and actions. This shift of consciousness, reported by participants, irreversibly altered their way of viewing homosexuality as well as issues surrounding homosexuality and the church, how they understood their relationships with others in the church community, and how they understood their role as relatives of gays and lesbians in the world.

Strengths and Limitations

There was a discrepancy between the numbers of males and females studied, with more females than males, leading the researcher to question if results would be the similar if males and females were more equally represented, and to question why a higher number of females responded to the research advertisements. There was also a discrepancy in age

distribution, with low numbers of people under the age of 35 and over the age of 50 participated in both sections of the study. Comments made by participants about professional roles and responsibilities as well as use of language indicated that many were educated at the university level, and several held professional designations. The researcher was left wondering if there was a connection between education level and participant responses, if education influenced their decision to become part of the research study and if findings would have been different if there had been more variety in educational levels.

Only mainline denominations were represented, and data is limited to the attitudes and beliefs of participants from the Roman Catholic, Anglican, United Church, Methodist, and Presbyterian denominations. Participants in both sections of the study presented self-reports, and it is impossible to know how these were influenced by such factors as the passing of time and the intrusion of other life events.

While participants represented both Canada and the United States, the researcher did not collect data to determine if respondents lived in rural or urban settings, the size of the communities in which participants lived, or the network of supports perceived to be present in their personal and professional lives. In retrospect, the researcher feels that this information would be valuable in furthering understanding the process of disclosure in this population.

This study gathered data from family members of individuals who are lesbian and gay, and not the homosexual family members themselves. Additionally it did not gather information from other congregational members or from pastors, and any perceptions of these three groups reported in this study are perceptions of these others.

A major strength of this study was the depth to which experiences were reported and recorded, leading to discovery of meaning and understanding of participants' personal experiences. Another value of this study lies in its connection to the real world through the systematic analysis of data using the constant comparison process of grounded theory.

Recommendations and Implications of Research

Because of the percentages of homosexuality reported in the general population and because gays and lesbians are coming out at an earlier age (Cloud, 2005) most mainline

congregations are likely to have, at some time, family members of gays and lesbians who are looking for pastoral support in dealing with the changes that have taken place in the life of the family. Sensitive and timely pastoral care can decrease anxiety and provide supportive care for these individuals.

This research indicates that family members of lesbians and gays, in attempting to continue in their church communities, go through a number of processes: wakefulness, anticipation, apathetic acceptance and engagement. This researcher recommends additional research with family members to further investigate these processes and to address factors that were not addressed in this study such as time-lines, age of family members at the age of “coming out”, differences in the reactions of male and female relatives as well as age groups and self-reports collected at varying stages of these processes. Another relevant area of study would be the exploration of the stories of those family members who did not participate in this study and who have not experienced the process described therein. It would be both interesting and beneficial to know of the experiences of those family members that do not increase their awareness, or who leave their faith communities because of the reactions of others to their disclosure that a relative is lesbian or gay. A further line of research would be to more closely examine the experiences of family members going through the process called “wakefulness.” Many reported the feelings of despair they experienced, and it would be interesting to look at the vulnerability of this group, what professional services they find helpful, what services may cause further pain, and the levels of understanding they perceive from church-affiliated counsellors. Researchers following the themes that emerged in this study might find it useful to conduct the inquiry as a number of interviews as opposed to a single occurrence.

In developing the quantitative data collection tool, the researcher did not incorporate factor analysis (Gorsuch, 1983). Because the tool sought to analyze subjective perceptions, the researcher cautions those interested in furthering this study to do factor analysis and to make changes in the tool where necessary.

Additionally, further studies would benefit from the theory of Perspective Transformation which appears to occur as an unplanned and in-formal process experienced by participants. The Perspective Transformation process could be

incorporated into workshops and other teaching events to raise consciousness and prevent discrimination in church communities. Those teaching institutions that prepare ordained clergy for mainline churches might need to consider core curriculum to ensure inclusion of opportunities to critically explore diverse issues that they will be faced with in the church community.

Because offensive comments and stereotypical jokes are painful for homosexual families, clergy can be more intentionally aware of this and provide education and opportunities for consciousness raising with the ultimate potential outcome making the church community a more hospitable community for homosexual families as well as all who attend.

Some clergy may require guidance in developing skill sets essential in developing a strong helping relationship, and may need to examine their own beliefs and feelings about homosexuality and determine if they are indeed able to provide an unconditional relationship with homosexual families. They also need to be knowledgeable about resources, including support groups that already exist in their denominational structures.

It could also be helpful for clergy to attend continuing education activities in further develop their understanding of homosexuality. Not all clergy are pastoral counsellors, and it is important to be aware of the existence and benefits of pastoral counselling services in one's geographical area, and to develop a comfort level in referring individuals and families for such services when they believe they will benefit from such support. Considering the findings in this study, it is pivotal that clergy have some knowledge of the attitudes and beliefs of specific pastoral counsellors before referring homosexual families. Family members who experienced a lack of openness in their church communities might not appreciate a counselling session with a counsellor who advocates Reparative Therapy. Finally, clergy could consider identifying others in the congregation who might be interested and willing to attend educational activities, learn current information about homosexuality and what resources are available, and bring that information back to share with the congregation.

Summary

The voices in this report are those of family members finding their way through a new reality and surfacing as people who knew who they were and wanted to be as relatives of those who had “come out” as lesbian or gay. While participants report that they progressed through a painful experience, they also described a process that was liberating and empowering, and reported that “a mirror” had been held up for them by others as they began to recognize many beliefs, attitudes and behaviours they had previously exhibited themselves.

They reported that the process they experienced helped them to more clearly understand “who” they were as people of faith, as members of the body of Christ, who they were as human persons journeying alongside others, and to come to a place where they could focus on the peace and joy inherent in the Christian love and acceptance of others. The researcher believes that information elicited in this study could contribute to the provision of pastoral care in church communities and to the enhancement of the lives of homosexual families.

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