

## **We've Come A Long Way Baby: UUs and the GLBT Movement**

Reverend Sharon K. Dittmar  
First Unitarian Church  
536 Linton Street  
Cincinnati, Ohio 45219  
513.281.4697  
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It has occurred to me that I have traces of homophobia, that is discrimination against people who are gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, or trans-gendered. When I first realized this ten years ago I shared it with a colleague and friend of mine, Ed, who was gay. He said, "Join the club. I am too." This had never occurred to me before, to be gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, or transgender (GLBT) and be homophobic? How could you fear and hate yourself? I told my friend I didn't understand, particularly because he was openly out, athletic, intelligent, handsome, well-dressed, with lots of friends.

He looked at me with such pity and said "Sharon, it's everywhere. How I am supposed to look. What I am supposed to do. Who I am supposed to date. How I am supposed to be a man. And every time I differ from the norm I struggle with my self-esteem. Am I worthy? Most GLBT people are terribly homophobic."

This was a shocking revelation to me, as was my own homophobia. Now I understand. A similar thing happens when I wonder if a man would be a better minister, or if a stay at home mother is a better mom, or when black people prefer light skin and fair eyes in themselves and others. You know all those undermining things we can believe. We believe there is a norm and we are not meeting it. We fear and hate ourselves. It is just impossible to be whole and live this way.

It's also impossible to live in silence. Our mission statement at First Church calls us to embrace one another regardless of race, age, gender, sexual orientation or physical ability. And yet this is not easy. I don't always embrace myself. You don't always embrace yourself. We don't always embrace one another.

In 1967 a UUA survey revealed that 80.2% of members believed that homosexuality should be discouraged by education. Only .1% of members believed that homosexuality should be encouraged. However, just two years later, in 1969, the first UU minister, the Reverend James L. Stoll, came out as gay. In 1971 the UUA published its comprehensive sexuality curriculum, "About Your Sexuality" (AYS) which positively presented homosexuality, bi-sexuality, and heterosexuality. This says to me that our association and leaders have been ahead of our lay members in acceptance of homosexuality. This is a pattern that continues even today.

Unitarian Universalists may have been conservative in 1967, but we were still more progressive and attuned to equal civil rights than other religions and institutional groups. By 1973 when the Office of Gay Affairs was established at the UUA, while the APA (American Psychiatric Association) was still saying that homosexuality was a diagnosable mental illness. In 1984 the General Assembly of the Association voted to affirm the practice of UU ministers performing services of union between same sex couples. It's a little hard to do any less when our first two principles read "1) the inherent worth and dignity of every person," and "2) justice, equity, and compassion in human

relations.” In 1996 the UUA Board of Trustees and General Assembly voted to support Same Gender Marriage.

With that said, our fourth and fifth principles read “4) A free and responsible search for truth and meaning,” and “5) The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large.” This means that no one here is forced to believe anything about theology, sexual orientation, or politics. We have the right to different opinions based on a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. This is disappointing to many people, those who support homosexuality and those who do not. Every sermon I preach on homosexuality guarantees these two responses from multiple congregants, “Why are you talking about this again.” and “Thank you for talking about this. We don’t hear enough about it.” And every time I think, “If I could only get these groups together to share what is on their hearts and minds.”

So this year I asked you for your thoughts and many of you responded, with very complex ideas and experiences. I asked you if our association had changed your thoughts about homosexuality, motivated you, made you want to act, made you agree or disagree, if you found or find yourself going with or against the grain.

One person wrote me that she used to support a “Don’t ask, don’t tell policy,” thinking that if GLBT people didn’t talk about their sexual identity the problems would go away. She wondered “Why don’t they just keep their sex lives to themselves.” That was until she had a conversation with a gay minister who shared what it was like work in the closet and wonder, “Have I been found out?” Will I lose my post?” Then she realized that discrimination exists and silence can be deadly.

Many of you expressed similar evolving sentiments. One member wrote

Our children expand our horizons. When our daughter had a service of commitment three years ago it took me awhile to be comfortable sharing this information with others. I feel my daughter and her partner should have all the other rights and privileges my other children can take for granted. She is a remarkable woman who I deeply love.

Another member wrote

At first I was against homosexual marriage believe it or not. I was at a park in Fresno a few years ago with my friend, a Republican and she said, “You know, I am for gay marriage.” I couldn’t believe it; she went on to explain that marriage is really a conservative value emphasizing monogamy and a cohesive family unit. “If they want to be in the trenches here with us, let them come!” From then on I did change my mind and am really for it.

This was one of my favorite stories about how dialogue and exploration leads to new discovery and new opinions.

Several of you touched on the issue of exploration in a different way, noting that there seems to be limited conversation, or limited acceptable conversation on this topic. One couple with a gay child writes

We are very much for the same rights and responsibilities being available to all on an equal basis; but the GLBT political correctness makes it very difficult supporting them at times . . . we have been asked to support gay marriage, which we believe should be available but whose insistent pursuit is a tactical mistake of huge proportions . . . Crucial rights are tangled up with the religious right in a war the GLBT's and their supporters were destined to lose.

I disagree with this comment, in that I think that the GLBT community in America will ultimately win the right to equal marriage, I just don't know if it will be in my lifetime. However, I thought that this couple perceived some subtleties that not everyone notices or is willing to discuss, that issues of homosexuality are caught in an ongoing and ascendant cultural war in America, and this makes the marketplace of conversation on homosexuality fraught with misunderstanding and excess. People have a bunker mentality. Either you are a progressive for homosexuality and civil rights or you are for family values and tradition and Christianity.

Issues surrounding homosexuality; gay marriage, gay adoption, Article XII, the new Ohio State amendment on marriage are marketed this way, and the marketing limits dialogue and exploration, exactly the things we need as a society to come to a better understanding of what is going on for individuals and society. I really appreciated the critical thinking of that Republican from Fresno who knows that marriage is tough and welcomes anyone who is willing to share the challenges. She has not been swayed by lurid descriptions of sexual preference, and instead focuses on what is of value to her and what she believes is of value to society, a couple as primary family unit. Sexual orientation is irrelevant. Love and commitment are relevant.

One member wrote, "I am in favor of supporting an open church and society that includes gays and lesbians and transgenders. I don't want to put so much emphasis on it or hear so much about it." Another member wrote

My concern is with an over-emphasis on these matters in our church. The GLBT movement is much larger than Unitarianism and has succeeded dramatically in academia, the arts, the media, and the popular culture. Our church seems to have embraced it uncritically.

At the end of this message this member shared that his attitudes are evolving and wondered if I knew of any good, balanced books on the subject.<sup>1</sup> I know that some of you cringed when you heard that quote and some of you were thinking, "I agree!" What I think is important is that we hear one another out before the labeling begins. Has First Church uncritically embraced the GLBT movement? If we are too afraid to civilly discuss it, maybe we have. Can't we be polite friends who agree to disagree and grow

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<sup>1</sup> For anyone looking for a good book on homosexual issues, I recommend *Come Out Fighting* by Chris Bull. The UUA website also has good information ([www.uua.org/obgltc](http://www.uua.org/obgltc)). I also suggest you go online and type in "Barry Goldwater Gay Grandson." Barry Goldwater had a gay grandson and he spent the end of his life as a vocal supporter of equal rights for gays in his usual, blunt fashion. He deplored the takeover of the Republican Party by conservative Christians and noted that they all thought he had become a "socialist" because of his stance on gay rights.

together without living in fear? You don't need to be like and I don't need to be like you, but we sure do need to learn together.

Because next to this statement we need to hear what another member wrote to me about experiencing Unitarian Universalism for the first time twenty years ago. She writes

It was the mid-1980's when I figured out I was lesbian. It's not something I wanted for myself. I was terrified. The company where I worked had just fired a nationally respected PhD manager who was gay. . . The incident left me paranoid. Fortunately I knew of the UUA's excellent track record on GLBT rights. I quickly found my way to the St. John's Interweave chapter. We held meetings in daylight for protection. At my first meeting, we took turns standing guard at the front window to observe any passing cars that might throw rocks at our parked vehicles in the front yard, as had occurred several times in the past. It was tense, and yet the UUA camaraderie was ever so welcoming and affirming.

This member also remember the first GLBT service held here at First Church by the Reverend Marilyn Sewell in the early 1990's. She added "You have no idea the difference that this strong support made to us for the rest of our lives. . . Thank you for your safe haven." Someone is terrified. A colleague was fired. She stands watch while at a meeting because people throw rocks at those coming to the meeting. One service held here has positively influenced her and her family for the rest of their lives? This is not just a congregational home but also a safe haven, a true sanctuary.

And another member shared with me some of her distressing experiences of homophobia in this congregation. She then added

I picked up UU World and read the letters to the editor from people denouncing gay marriage, especially the one about why are we (gay people) trying to be like hetero people by wanting real marriage when we're not like straight people at all . . . I don't know why I expect UUs to be above that kind of thinking. After all, UUs are human too. But when I listen to sermon after sermon and read report after report from Social Justice committees on fairness and acceptance, it just slaps me in the face because it just seems so two-faced sometimes. The thing I have trouble with, and not just with UUs, is the whole idea of "tolerance." I'm not someone to be tolerated; as if I'm not quite up to par and I'm not normal but let me be part of the group anyway . . . People are not something to be tolerated. That one really chokes my senses."

And then on the other hand, one member shared with me two separate situations where as an adult he was taken advantage of by gays and the situations he described were predatorial. He concluded by noting that there are heterosexual and homosexual predators, and anyone who has spent any time at bars would admit the truth to this. I know some of you cringed when you heard this, but if we disregard this member it would be the same as disregarding a woman who said she was sexually harassed. These situations are complex and you know what I hear in all of these statements, from the member who thinks we are being uncritical to the member who faced discrimination to the member who found safe haven - fear, hurt, anger, hope, and a need for sanctuary. I

think we can help one another with this by respectfully sharing an open dialogue and exploration.

One member wrote, “I don’t understand the threat represented by gay marriage. The gay couples I know about seem to stay together much longer than many marriage couples . . . Why should there be any governmental interest in the subject?” Another member noted that a Welcoming Congregation/Rainbow Sunday service is important because “persecution, fear, and hatred still abound.”

As proof of this, another member connected me to an article from a Fort Wayne, Indiana paper about a proposed bill that was news to me. The article noted that a recently proposed bill in the State of Indiana would have required people using assisted reproductive technology to be married. This would immediately disqualify gay, lesbian, single, and unmarried couples from using a fertility specialist to conceive children. In addition the bill proposed that a licensed state agency would have to collect and file information on every married couple considering fertility treatments so that their marriage and fitness could be assured – information on their education, employment, child care plans, hobbies, personality descriptions, and run a criminal history check for every couple using assisted reproductive technology.<sup>2</sup> Oh my goodness. Last week this bill was removed from consideration. But that it ever existed!

Think of this. Out there are legislators less concerned with how and why 15 year olds get pregnant and how they will parent than if adults want to pay to use a fertility specialist to have children. Posing once again under the smoke screen of family values, this bill was blatantly discriminatory towards those who don’t meet the “norm” of family life (although we know that the norm of family is quickly changing). The irony of course being that whether someone is gay, lesbian, single, or married is absolutely no predictor of how successfully they will parent. Yesterday’s *Enquirer* had a front-page story about a married, heterosexual father who killed his thirteen-year-old daughter because she stole a few items. Where was his parental assessment when his daughter needed it?

A few weeks ago our Social Justice committee discussed the possibility of dissolving our Welcoming Congregation Committee, which educates about and supports GLBT issues because there are not enough members on this task force here at First Church. In response a member wrote to me

The point I’d like our congregation to think about on Rainbow Sunday is the importance of not dissolving the Welcoming Congregation Committee. UUA was the first denomination In the United States to support gay rights (1973?) . . . Locally, there were so many Cincinnati UUs involved in the repeal of Article XII last year that the joke at campaign headquarters in Northside was that we could start holding Sunday services there. Meanwhile, anti-gay opposition is more organized and more stealthful and more funded than ever before. Now is not the time for First Church to dissolve its Welcoming Congregation committee . . . It is an affirmation to frightened people as I once was that we are a safe place, a nurturing place.

Consider the bill proposed in Indiana. Consider the 2004 Amendment to the Ohio Constitution, which states that only heterosexual marriages have rights under law. (These

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<sup>2</sup> [www.fortwayne.com/mld/journalgazette/12813691.html](http://www.fortwayne.com/mld/journalgazette/12813691.html) (October 4, 2005).

are indeed perilous times for married heterosexuals – thank you, Peter - but this amendment does nothing to address this problem). Anti-gay opposition is organized, stealthful, and funded. Same sex marriage is not about special rights it is about equal civil rights. No one is safe in a society where civil rights are arbitrarily drawn rather than equally measured. And, being entirely pragmatic, our country is only economically weakened when same sex couples don't have the same insurance and pension benefits as married couples. This actually destabilizes society, and costs us more as a whole. I agree that now is not the time for us to dissolve our Welcoming Congregation Committee.

Please, do not be angry with the Social Justice folks who are all doing great things. The issue is that they are already busy with significant projects for us and there are not enough volunteers for Welcoming Congregation projects, so will you consider volunteering to make a difference? Would you like to help us engage in dialogue and exploration on GLBT issues, which we obviously need and want? Would you like to help us learn more about gay marriage? Would you like to learn more? Would you like to help us understand how GLBT work is connected to our faith? If so, please contact Tommie, Linnea, Peter, Noelle, Ginger and make a difference.

I will tell you the truth, I have been struggling with the question of gay marriage for many reasons and I have questioned my own homophobia because of it. Yes, I gladly perform same sex services of union and have used the term marriage when joining same sex couples. But I have been concerned by the UUA's stand on gay marriage because it has not been well articulated. I also am frustrated by the success of all the movements (women's, GLBT, abortion rights) that have made us think that we as a society have greater civil rights while the gap between rich and poor grows (come to my sermon on November 13 to hear the rest).

I have felt confused because America is confused about marriage. Marriage is, I think, a Biblical concept in America – our ideas about it and who can be married are from the Bible, yet marriage is legally civil in America. The state marries people. I have a license from the state to marry people, but a non-clergy person could get a similar license. It's the state that marries people, not a church, although certain religions ignore this fact (if the priest fails to mail in your license you are not married).

Then I decided that this is just what the GLBT movement is going for, proving that in America the state marries people and the state in America is supposed to be non-discriminatory. The genius of this fight is that it challenges American to ask if they think marriage is religious or not, and then reminds Americans that we are not a theocracy. Whatever you privately think marriage is, publicly it belongs to the state, which should not be swayed by religious arguments or concerns since "Congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." I think this is the message of gay marriage now, only it hasn't been conveyed very well. Give it a generation. In the meantime, while fence sitting myself, I read the email about the Republican from Fresno and I knew in an instant she was right. Anyone who wants in the trenches of marriage is welcome. That's what it is about, strong family units, which takes love and commitment regardless of race, age, gender, sexual orientation, and physical ability. We all have a lot to learn. I hope First Church can be a place where we continue to talk, explore, and grow.