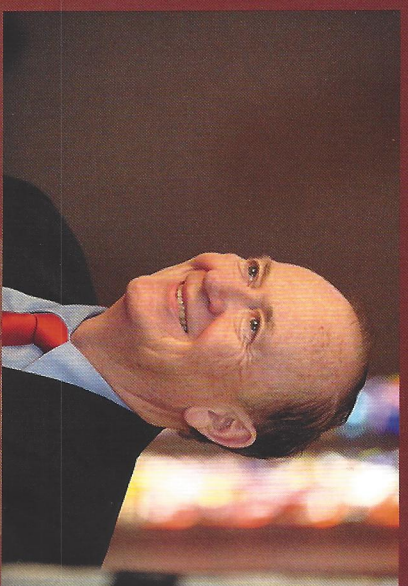


and society, and then make exceptions for LGBTQ persons. The church has tried in the past to justify discrimination against women and African-Americans, based on the Bible and tradition. Prejudice always crumbles, against the persuasive power of the Holy Spirit who leads the church to new understandings of God's inclusive love in Jesus Christ.

Fourth, let us proclaim that homophobia, not homosexuality, is a life-style choice. We do not choose our sexual orientation, but we do choose whether we are going to be accepting, kind, generous, caring, etc. Efforts to change a person's sexual orientation are harmful and almost always unsuccessful. Personally, I agree with the late United Methodist bishop, Melvin Wheatley, who declared over 30 years ago:

"Homosexuality, quite like heterosexuality, is neither a virtue nor an accomplishment. It is a mysterious gift of God's grace communicated through an exceedingly complex set of chemical, biological, chromosomal, hormonal, environmental, developmental factors totally outside my homosexual friend's control. His or her homosexuality is a gift — neither a virtue nor a sin. What she/he does with their homosexuality, however, is their personal, moral and spiritual responsibility. Their behavior as a homosexual may therefore be very sinful: brutal, exploitative, selfish, promiscuous, superficial. Their behavior on the other hand, may be beautiful: tender, considerate, loyal, other-centered, profound."

Fifth, let us refocus the church's attention on the spiritual, not the sexual, orientation of our members and leaders. Same-sex, age-appropriate, mutually consenting relationships are not "incompatible with Christian teaching". Lives lacking love of God, neighbor and self are. People want to know whether their pastors really love Jesus and the congregations they serve. The sexual orientation of a Christian is not important, but rather a life based on honesty, integrity, fidelity, and compassion is, along with a commitment "to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8).



Donald E. Messer

Donald E. Messer is Executive Director of the Center for Health and Hope, Centennial, Colorado. He is President Emeritus and Henry White Warren Professor Emeritus of Practical Theology of The Iliff School of Theology. Messer is the author of 16 books, including *Breaking the Conspiracy of Silence: Christian Churches & the Global AIDS Crisis* (2004) and *Celebrating God's Love: Living Into Christian Unity and Interreligious Relationships* (2015).

This essay was first published by the United Methodist Board of Church and Society, Nov. 17, 2011, as "Stigma, Human Rights and the Struggle Against AIDS."



UMARC - United Methodist Association
of Retired Clergy

Check out Facebook or UMARC website:

<http://www.umarc.org>

Sex and the Church



Donald E. Messer

"Every Christmas I have to decide whether to commit suicide or not," declared Joshua, a young, gay Christian man at a conference I was attending in India. A chill went down my spine, and my heart began to break. Why would anyone want to die at Christmas, a time of love, gift-giving, family celebrations and church festivals? Christmas is the best time of the year, except if you are rejected by your family and your church and those persons you most treasure in the world.

If you are a gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, or queer (LGBTQ) Christian in this world, then you know that what the church proclaims about love is limited and not unconditional. You know that the church's preaching about loving and accepting all of God's children is actually restricted to heterosexuals and celibates.

You know that your baptism, genuine as it may be in the eyes of God, is treated like a fraudulent document by many persons claiming to be Christian, particularly those who dare to accept ordination or get elected bishops. You know that your church teaches non-discrimination in society, but practices discrimination in the church, keeping you from assuming leadership because of your identity as a LGBTQ person.

Why don't Christians help us?

You can't even trust that your fellow Christians will protect your human rights or provide you safe space. My wife and I won't soon forget two brave young Christian gay men we met in Nairobi, Kenya. The young men, Peter and Paul, still had wounds on their faces where they had been beaten by mobs. Yet they continued to speak out for justice and human rights. Peter's question still haunts me, "Why don't Christians help us?"

In Sri Lanka, I met Prissy, a Christian woman who told me how she and her husband had to flee from their village when people found out they were both HIV-positive. Their house was burned down. Prissy's husband has died, but she has organized a network of HIV positive women in Sri Lanka. She told me, "I don't want this to ever happen again to my children or anyone else."

Joshua, Peter, Paul, and Prissy all have experienced the pain of stigma, discrimination, and even violence because other Christians have devalued them or persecuted them or remained silent in the face of

injustice and bigotry. Prejudice and exclusion contribute to despair, disease and death.

Repent of Homophobia

If the church is to be the church of Jesus Christ it must repent of its homophobic ways and become an inclusive community of love and justice. If the church is to be a positive force in creating an AIDS-free world, it must become truly committed to eradicating stigma and championing human rights for all God's people. This remains a major challenge to United Methodists and other people of faith around the world because of our difficulty in dealing with issues of sexuality and sexual health.

Same-sex relationships are criminalized in 77 countries in the world. LGBTQ persons are regularly harassed, violently attacked and suffer many different forms of discrimination. Throughout the world, in country after country — most notably for the first time in Africa — courageous men and women are speaking out against this stigma and discrimination. Too often, however, church people remain silent, or worse yet, condone violent acts, criminalization and discrimination.

In the United States, same-sex relationships are no longer criminalized, but many forms of bias remain rampant. The United Methodist Church's profession of human rights remains incomplete, hollow and unconvincing as long as we champion the practice of stigmatization and discrimination against LGBTQ persons within our denomination and society.

The United Methodist Social Principles

Officially, United Methodist Social Principles declare: "All persons, regardless of age, gender, marital status, or sexual orientation, are entitled to have their human and civil rights ensured and to be protected against violence." (¶1161F, *Book of Discipline*).

All people are God's children deserving the protection of their human and civil rights.

In the United Methodist *Book of Resolutions*, we acknowledge that "a portion of the world's population is lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT)." We deplore discrimination and persecution, proclaiming "that all people are God's children deserving the protection of their human and civil rights." (¶12046, "Rights of All Persons")

30/30/30 and the Church

The HIV & AIDS pandemic emerged in the world over 30 years ago. Over 30 million persons have died, and more than 30 million are infected. Almost half are women. Yet most pastors and churches won't spend even 30 minutes dealing with what the United Nations once called "an unprecedented human catastrophe."

In the United States, 1.2 million persons are infected, but almost 25% do not know it. Almost 50% of all HIV positive people in the United States are African-American. Every 9½ minutes someone new is infected in the United States.

The vision of the National HIV & AIDS strategy plan for the United States foresees that: "The United States will become a place where new HIV infections are rare, and when they do occur, every person, regardless of age, gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity or socio-economic circumstance, will have unfettered access to high quality, life-extending care, free from stigma and discrimination."

5 Step Challenge

To achieve that goal I would challenge my fellow Christians to take five major spiritual steps in our ethical and justice journeys.

First, let us break the silence about sex, stigma, human rights and the struggle against AIDS. Let us create safe places in our churches and communities where persons can openly discuss these issues without fear of recrimination, without bullying or bigotry.

Second, let us promote anti-stigma programs as central to the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ. He engaged in healing persons with all types of medical problems. Perhaps some were sexually transmitted.

But never once in the Scriptures do we hear a word of stigma or condemnation. Christ's ministry with and to the lepers remains a model of courage and compassion for all of us engaged in HIV ministries.

Third, let us not fear to identify and name bigotry whenever policies deny human rights or promote stigma and discrimination. We cannot pretend that we champion the rights of all human beings in church