

generous spaciousness

Responding to Gay Christians
in the Church

WENDY VANDERWAL-GRITTER



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*For my treasures:
Nathan, Renate, and Arianna*

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Introduction

An Unpredictable Adventure

In a memorable preview for the movie *Doubt*, Meryl Streep playing Sister Aloysius declares to the priest she is accusing of inappropriate conduct with a male student, “No I don’t have proof, but I have my certainty!” For those who have seen the movie, this declaration is contrasted with the final poignant scene in the film when the indomitable nun breaks down and with tears confesses, “I have doubts. Oh, I have doubts!” Like the cracking and crumbling of the paradigms and systems inherited from modernity, Sister Aloysius dares in a moment of abject desperation to expose her authentic voice—a voice that acknowledges the limitations of certainty. In this final scene, we see a fragile new hope for Streep’s character to enter more deeply and intimately into relationship with the other nun she confides in and, even more significantly, with the God with whom she can be honest.

This book, too, has come from such a place of brokenness and hope. The breaking and deconstruction of not only rigid certainty but also the systems that created and sustained such certainty, is a journey that is both terrifying and exhilarating. Being the leader of a national organization with the legacy of promoting and defending a clear and certain position (which is not only the traditional position that says sexual intimacy is reserved for marriage between one man and one woman but also the evangelical ex-gay position that says freedom and change

are possible for the same-sex-attracted person), makes it particularly threatening to go to that honest and authentic place, where doubt and questions and uncertainty live, with an utterly childlike expectation that God will be with you in that place. But that is indeed the journey that God compelled me to take, albeit with much fear and trembling on my part. And it is a journey that has allowed me and the organization I lead to emerge as a place of generous spaciousness.

I became the director of a Canadian ministry called New Direction in the spring of 2002. I often say that I was naïve but willing. New Direction had been part of the Exodus network since the mid-eighties. Exodus¹ was an international group of like-minded ministries committed to the proclamation that freedom in Christ is available to those who experience same-sex attraction. For most of New Direction's history, the ministry had been a counseling center for Christians who were experiencing unwanted same-sex attraction, a facilitator of pastoral care for families with gay loved ones, and a point of consultation and referral for churches and pastors encountering people affected by homosexuality.

When I came to the ministry, I was a relatively recent seminary grad who'd spent the intervening years with my young children. I was itching to get into my first ministry position while mindful of juggling the demands of a young family. New Direction seemed like the perfect fit: It was part-time, I could work from home, and it was focused on an area of pastoral care that I was passionate about. Though some ministry colleagues surmised that I could potentially blacklist my ministry career by taking a leadership role in a ministry addressing such a controversial issue, I sensed God's call. I'd been reading Henry Blackaby's book, *Experiencing God*, around that time, and I very much felt that God was on the move, wanting to do something with New Direction, and that he was simply nudging me and asking me to join him in what he was intending to do. I suppose, looking back, there was a generous helping of reckless idealism in my discernment process. I have no doubt that God called me, but I now wonder if it had as much or more to do with what he wanted to do in me than with what I could do for the ministry.

The journey of serving God and his people in my role with New Direction over these years has been full of surprises. Many of those

surprises have been startlingly painful. I certainly didn't expect that I would be confronted with the need to unpack so many layers of my own assumptions—many of which I didn't even realize I had. It has been profoundly threatening at times and (most significant) deeply humbling. In the traditional constructs of liberal and conservative, I've been critiqued by those who thought I was too liberal and others who thought I was too conservative. I increasingly found myself drawn to move beyond the restrictions of labels, such as liberal/conservative, and to find a space within what theologian Hans Frei termed, "generous" orthodoxy.²

Part of my movement, admittedly, came with a weariness of living within the constrictions of what felt like nearly constant interrogation of the true extent of my orthodoxy. I began to long for a more spacious place. I can't count the number of times I was cornered by someone demanding to be assured that I did believe homosexuality to be a sin (once or twice the question instead was whether I supported the full inclusion of gay people into ordained ministry and sanctified marriages—with the same sort of cut-and-dried expectation). These orthodoxy tests came devoid of any interest in engaging in conversation, let alone relationship. My questioners reflected a system of black and white, right and wrong, that I came to realize was often motivated and driven by anxiety, anger, and pride rather than by anything that might resemble the fruit of the Spirit. Such questions, more often than not, had no relational connection to a person for whom the question might deeply matter. This kind of questioning often left me feeling objectified. The inquisitors weren't really interested in hearing how God was leading me in the complex realities I faced on a day-to-day basis; they didn't really care about what God was teaching me and the ways he was excavating my heart. What mattered to the questioners was that I verbalize a clear stance, which allowed them to give either a confident "thumbs up" or a "thumbs down" to my ministry.

Peter Rollins, an Irish philosopher/theologian, makes the helpful distinction between focusing on *what* you believe and the manner in which you live out *how* you believe it.³ In Rollins's estimation, much of the Western church, still living in the shadow of modernity, puts its emphasis on *what* we believe. Having lived and ministered in such

a system for a number of years, I am increasingly convinced that this focus can lead to compartmentalized lives. I've grown weary of triumphalistic warriors for truth—who know and believe all the “right” things but exude pride, self-centeredness, and a devaluing of anyone who disagrees with them. I would rather engage someone who might have some spotty theology but who oozes humility, kindness, generosity, and true and deep love for their enemies. And while this may sound a little too hippy-drippy, this isn't just about warm fuzzy feelings—this is about walking in the way of Jesus.

In addition to feeling stuck in the black-and-white certainty of the broader Christian community, I was also experiencing a sense of restriction with the ex-gay system.⁴ I remember when one of the leaders in the Exodus network had a brief appearance on *Dr. Phil*, a daytime television show that focuses on interpersonal and psychological issues. Also appearing was Justin Lee, executive director of the Gay Christian Network.⁵ The two had very little airtime, but in the few moments I witnessed, I was horrified by what I heard. In a nutshell the ex-gay leader proclaimed (not in these exact words but with this insinuation) that everyone could change their orientation and that if this didn't happen it was because the individual didn't try hard enough or have enough faith. After the show aired, on the Exodus leaders' discussion boards, I tentatively asked what others thought of the show. (I considered myself the new kid on the block and didn't want to start out too critically, so I thought it best to test the waters with an open-ended question.) To my utter surprise, no one, even the people I considered to be more moderate, offered any critique of the Exodus leader's comments. We all knew that though sexuality could be fluid, and we knew individuals who had experienced shifts in the direction and intensity of their attractions, there were clearly people who would experience same-sex attraction persistently and this was *not* due to a lack of faith or motivation. Yet even in this private and confidential discussion, no one spoke up and declared what we all knew to be true—radical reorientation at an attraction level is *not* the typical experience.

I found myself asking more questions and feeling the pinch of trying to function in what felt like a very closed and static system. Ex-gay

ministries began with the intention of offering a redemptive and caring response to Christians in conflict over their experience of same-sex attraction or for those experiencing dissatisfaction with the behavioral or relational choices they were making. But some thirty years after ex-gay ministries began, I was now an insider within the system, and I could feel myself becoming agitated and unsettled and unable to continue with “business as usual.” Alan Roxburgh⁶ describes this kind of experience as *liminality*, where “liminal” means an in-between or transitional state, and “liminality,” in this case, is that confusing and uncertain place of questioning established structures, hierarchies, and tradition. I felt that we had lost our center, gotten distracted, forgotten to put first things first. Our team at New Direction began to long to move forward by charting a distinct course—one that could embrace and build on good and true teaching from the past, while having the courage to step out with redemptive innovation.

I wasn’t the first or the only one to experience the tension such liminality fosters. Some Exodus leaders were quietly working within the system to renew and transform their particular corners of it. Some leaders chose to exit either to pursue different ministry opportunities that had nothing to do with homosexuality or to leave ministry altogether (in some cases with a good measure of health; in others broken, burned out, and bitter). Still other leaders made a dramatic shift in not only their praxis of ministry but also in their belief systems. These leaders garnered a certain notoriety within the ex-gay ministry field (that went unnoticed by the majority of the evangelical Christian community) and were quite simply disassociated, cut off, and disregarded as having no further usefulness or contribution to offer.

As I reflected on this, it felt as if the system of ex-gay ministry had an unhealthy level of control. This control was often presented as “guarding the truth,” but its defense of truth seemed more driven by fear and anxiety than by love. I became more acutely aware of the perpetuation of an “us and them” mentality or perhaps even more an “us *versus* them” mind-set. Some of these so-called enemies were people within the church; they were people who differed in theological, philosophical, and ethical positions but who also continued to name the name of Christ

and were, therefore, our brothers and sisters. This seemed completely inconsistent with Jesus's revolutionary motif of loving our enemies. It seemed that the ex-gay movement was spending the majority of its energy on what it was *against* and had forgotten what it was called to be *for*. This was a posture with which I was increasingly uncomfortable and dissatisfied.

Neal Plantinga writes, "The sobering fact is that reforms always need reforming. Rescuers need rescue. . . . Repentant sinners need to repent even of some dimensions of their repentance, such as their pride in the humility that has driven them to their knees."⁷ I didn't have a complete picture of what this reformation in evangelical ministry to gay people needed to look like or how it would be expressed, but that change was needed I had no doubt.

In January 2008, I was asked to give a keynote address at the Exodus leadership conference.⁸ With perhaps more tentativeness than the situation warranted, I took the opportunity to raise questions I was wrestling with and to offer initial ideas about how ex-gay ministry could engage a postmodern context. In particular, I spoke of three key distractions that I observed were creating the greatest barriers in our engagement with Christians of differing perspectives as well as with the broader gay community. These were the discussions and debates around *causation*, *orientation change*, and *political involvement*. I spoke to men and women I considered colleagues and friends, fellow laborers in Christ, many whose passion and commitment I deeply respected. When I had taken the role of Exodus regional representative for Canada a few years earlier, I had sensed that despite my questions and concerns, it was better to engage and serve from within than to stand and critique from without. And so my address was intended to encourage and challenge—with the goal that all of us would continue to move forward into the new ways God was asking us to function in ministry. Afterward, a good number of leaders were eager for more discussion. The president of Exodus, Alan Chambers, told me there was a lot more to unpack and that I would need to speak again.

But even as I prepared with my colleagues in mind, I was considering another audience. I had invested in coming to know this audience in

both the personal relationships God brought across my path and the internet world of blogs and social media. The make-up of this audience was not monolithic but had one thing in common—they took issue with ex-gay ministry. I have always considered that listening to one's critics is a crucial form of feedback for any leader. I wanted to understand what critics of ministries like New Direction thought and felt. I wanted to mine the truths that were being exposed by those who were often disregarded in ex-gay circles.

I found these critics to be a rich resource. Engaging with the thoughts of gay activists, with those who had experienced painful and soul-crushing experiences in ex-gay ministry, and with gay Christians who held different theological perspectives than I, was at times very challenging and threatening, stretching my need and capacity for discernment. But it was also significant and valuable for the ways it forced me to think and rethink.

As it turns out, I was very grateful to have had this kind of preparation because after we posted a podcast of my Exodus address, I was contacted by the editor of a website called Ex-Gay Watch (XGW), which is a watch-dog site dedicated to monitoring the ex-gay movement. In the past, I had been warned about them by other network leaders. This editor had listened to my address, followed my discussion with commenters on another blog by Christian psychologist Warren Throckmorton,⁹ and asked if I would be willing to write a guest post for their blog. Via email he said, "I think it is worth your time and effort to give people who visit XGW some hope that there are ministries that do get it (or at least understand where they don't), not that everyone will agree entirely (won't happen). . . . I'm asking this mostly on discernment; I sense God in what you say, and I know how powerful that can be. Please pray about this and don't make a snap decision. I know we do not see eye to eye on these things entirely, but let God deal with that."

Clearly, there was a climate of suspicion and mistrust between the Exodus network and a site like XGW, and I didn't consider myself at that time to be very savvy in this whole arena of engagement. I wondered if I would get in way over my head and what the fallout might be. But as I prayed and had others pray with me, we sensed God's opportunity in

all of this. So on February 25, 2008, my post on XGW went public.¹⁰ It begins with an introduction by David Roberts:

Recently we became aware of Wendy Gritter's keynote talk (mp3) at the Exodus leadership conference in January. Wendy is the executive director of an Exodus member ministry in Canada called New Direction. While it is what most here would describe as an ex-gay ministry, many things about it are unexpected. For one, you won't find them using that term, "ex-gay" or many others associated with an Exodus ministry. Whether this is for show, or a sincere attempt to be different, you are free to explore here.

Many of her suggestions echo our own pleas to ex-gay ministries over the years; stop political lobbying, stop emphasizing "change," genuinely respect . . . those who are comfortable with their sexual orientation (even though this may come from a personal understanding of Scripture which diverges from your own), recognize and remove the underlying tone which says that ex-ex-gays just didn't try hard enough, and on and on.

We thought Wendy might just be a breath of fresh Canadian air and asked her to write a guest post to spur on discussion. What might Exodus, or any ex-gay ministry, be like if they were to take these suggestions to heart? What does it mean that an ex-gay ministry which may just "get it" more than any so far, grew out of a country largely unfriendly to the kind of fundamentalism that often surrounds their US counterparts? How close does New Direction come to your idea of what a fair ex-gay ministry should be, if it is to be at all?

Wendy will be available to respond off and on in comments, so don't spare the hard questions. Her post follows:

Thank you for the invitation to write this piece. To be honest, my knees are knocking a bit.

I want to begin by saying I'm sorry. I'm sorry for the pain that some of those who follow this site have experienced from leaders like me and ministries like the one I lead. I'm sorry that some of you connected with this site who identify as Christian have had your faith questioned and judged. I'm sorry there is a felt need for a site like XGW. I'm sorry that it feels like legitimate concerns have not been listened to. I am sorry for the arrogance that can come across from leaders like me.

I suppose I'm not what some would assume to be your typical ex-gay leader. I'm not gay, not ex-gay, not ex-ex-gay.¹¹ Not male. Not Southern Baptist. Not Republican. Not even American. I'm a Gen X postmodern

whose perspectives are, depending on who you talk to, too liberal or too conservative, unorthodox or too orthodox, heretical or vibrantly Christ-centered.

The ministry I lead is over 20 years old. I've been at the helm for the last 6 years—although truth be told, the first 2 years I was just trying to get my head around what the heck God had called me to. It's been the wildest learning curve of my life.

I deeply believe that God's intention for sexual expression is the covenant of marriage between one man and one woman. God has also deeply convicted me of my own pride in assuming that I had a perfect pipeline to God, and everyone who disagreed with me was simply deceived by the enemy or putting their own wants and desires ahead of commitment to God. I have had the opportunity that many conservatives have not had—and that is to come to know people who have deeply and honestly sought God through prayer and Scripture and come to a different conclusion than I. Their faith was neither trivial nor superficial, and though there were points of disagreement, I respect their deep commitment to God. And so, I've come to a place where I'm grateful that God has humbled me and given me the opportunity to listen, learn and engage with those who come to different perspectives.

I don't think my job is to change the minds of all those who think differently than I do. As an eclectic Calvinist, I believe God is the one who convicts and reroutes us in our minds and hearts. My job is to walk in step with the Spirit and do my very best to do what he tells me to do. I find a lot of affinity in the words attributed to St. Francis, "Preach the gospel at all times. If necessary, use words." As I work and serve, I find more often than not that what the Spirit whispers for me to do is to simply focus on serving and loving those he brings across my path.

I do think there needs to be a safe place within the Christian community for those who experience same-gender attraction who have wrestled with Scripture and come to believe a traditional biblical sexual ethic. I believe we have a long way to go to eradicate hateful and homophobic environments and responses in the Christian community. We have a long way to go to demolish the pervasive hierarchy of sin. And we have a long way to go to counter-act the perpetual sense of shame that many experience due to the reality of their same-gender attraction.

I work toward the day when a follower of Jesus who experiences same-gender attraction can be honest and open about that reality and

receive support and encouragement in living a life that is pleasing to God. And I feel particularly called to do that within the conservative church.

I also feel called to speak to the conservative church about some of the ways I believe we have been distracted from the primary calling to support and encourage deeply devoted disciples of Jesus Christ.

1. We have been distracted by the politics around homosexuality. I do think there is a place for Christians to engage in the public arena. God calls his followers to be a blessing to all nations and to represent him by being the presence of *shalom* on the earth. Unfortunately, in many of the Christian political efforts regarding homosexuality there is little evidence of *shalom*. The result is that many who need to hear a gospel of good news perceive God's people to be hypocritical and unloving ("you say you love us—but you're fighting to prevent/take our rights"). This has perpetuated a sense of alienation that I believe grieves the heart of God.
2. We have been distracted by a focus on orientation change. The heart of Christian ministry was summed up by Jesus when he said, "Go, make disciples, teaching them to obey everything I've commanded you." The point of a ministry like the one I lead is to support and encourage disciples of Jesus in their journey to live out their sexuality in a manner that they believe is God-honoring. If in that process they experience a deeper ability to love their opposite gender spouse (if they were already married) or a greater capacity to engage an authentic romantic, sexual, marital relationship with someone of the opposite gender, that is a gift that can be gratefully received. But such gifts can't be predicted, they can't be guaranteed, they don't follow a set of instructions, or come after just the right combination of root identification and eradication. There is a sense of mystery that necessitates an attitude of humility, discussion of realistic expectations, and serenity. So at the end of the day, "change is possible" is not really the main point. Life in Christ is.
3. We have been distracted by the question of causation. While there is clearly a place for research on this topic, and those involved in ministry should have the integrity to stay abreast of current research, by and large the conclusions (or lack of

conclusion) on this matter are peripheral to the call of Christian ministry. Because there is currently such inconclusiveness on this question, conservative Christians would do well to humbly acknowledge this fact rather than being perceived as ill-informed, blinder-wearing, or agenda-promoting.

In light of some of these distractions, New Direction Ministries, under our current leadership, has laid out some distinctives for ministry:

1. We are pastorally-focused, not politically driven.
2. We are relationally-focused, not program driven.
3. We are discipleship-focused, not change driven.
4. We are partnership-focused, not empire driven.

Our Core Values are to be relational, respectful, relevant and redemptive.

I acknowledge that there have been people who have connected with our ministry who have left feeling hurt, confused and uncertain about how to go on with their lives having not experienced change. I wish I could pass the buck and say all of that happened before my time. Sexuality is incredibly complex. People are complex. Their stories, their experiences, and their journeys are unique. In the midst of this complex uniqueness, as ministers of the gospel we don't always get it right, we don't always discern appropriately. I hope that as a ministry, we are learning and growing and improving. I hope that we have created an environment that is open and safe regardless of what happens with someone's attractions. I know our staff are open to engage people where they're at. If people disengage from the ministry, which could happen for a multitude of different reasons, we hope that they would always feel they could return for a hot cup of coffee and be received with warmth, caring, and respect—regardless of where they might land on the ex-gay ~ ex-ex-gay continuum. When we can, we try to follow up with those who have left while respecting their privacy and right to be left alone as well. We believe God loves unconditionally and, though regularly faced with our own limitations, we seek to imitate him.

I see a lot of triumphalistic “name it, claim it” kind of stuff in the church, and it always makes me nervous. I don't particularly see evidence that the Christian journey should be about getting all the things we want—or even about our individual happiness. We see in Jesus Christ

someone who poured himself out for the world, and he calls his followers to imitate him. Frankly, Christians aren't very good at pouring ourselves out for others, especially for those who disagree with us. The world sees this—and it compromises our ability to share the love and life of God with our neighbors. At the risk of being misunderstood or called heretics, we want to engage, listen, and be the presence of Christ with those who hold differing perspectives. We want to hang out with all the folks that make church leaders nervous (and frankly want to be the kind of people who make church leaders nervous)—because we know that is who Jesus was and what Jesus did. We do this, in part, because there is more common ground than might be initially apparent. And I think there could be more understanding and respect.

I've been very encouraged by some of the conversations I've had over the years that were respectful, charitable, and gracious. For all the caricatures Christians may have of gay people, I have encountered a whole array of responses—some not so nice—but many kind and thoughtful. I'm very grateful to those who, though personally holding a gay affirmative perspective, have acknowledged a place and even a need for a ministry like New Direction. And in those conversations, you've earned the right to keep us sharp and on our toes. You've been an interesting accountability partner at times—and my hope is that I will continue to be open to hear any appropriate critique that is offered. Likewise, I hope that in my engagement and offering of input, I will also earn the right to speak—particularly with those who name the name of Jesus Christ. The perception of polarization and enmity between Christians of differing minds on sexual ethics is damaging to a unified Christian witness to an increasingly post-Christian, skeptical generation. I want to be part of doing something about that.

So, we seek to be a nuanced, moderate voice in this area of ministry. The attempt at introducing this level of nuance has, in part, been impacted by listening to the critique of people like those represented at XGW. The listening process has, at times, been difficult and frustrating. It can be discouraging to feel “lumped in” with others, despite real attempts to chart our own distinct course. It can be painful to reach an impasse and feel there is no way through. It is disappointing to be accused of being disingenuous in attempts at bridge-building.

But I'm grateful for this journey nonetheless. Because in the process, we have felt compelled to put “first things first” and recognize when

second place things were encroaching on an essential focus on Jesus Christ. One of the contributors to XGW at one point, somewhere, said something like, “The mission of ex-gay ministries should be to support those, who for religious reasons, seek to not be mastered by their experience of same-gender attraction.” I think that is pretty darn close to what I would suggest too.

I am deeply passionate about contributing to a climate where anyone questioning, struggling, or embracing an alternative¹² sexual identity can encounter the presence of Jesus Christ. My focus in this area of engagement is unapologetically Christ-centered. Some might say that by the very nature of holding a traditional sexual ethic, I contribute to the inaccessibility of the gospel for gay and lesbian people. I believe the power of the gospel is not thwarted by a call to radical discipleship. And my prayer is that as we, at New Direction, commit ourselves to loving, serving, and building bridges with same-gender attracted people, Jesus will be seen in and through us.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my heart for Christian ministry from a conservative perspective. I look forward to further conversation.¹³

What followed this post was a storm of comments, some positive and some incisively critical. And suddenly, I was in a whole new ballgame. Things I’d thought and prayed about were now in front of my face in very personal, yet very public, conversations. Near the beginning of his book *Generous Orthodoxy*, Brian McLaren identifies some key practices when engaging different perspectives; he encourages the

consistent practice of *humility, charity, courage* and *diligence: humility* that allows us to admit our past and current formulations may have been limited or distorted. *Charity* toward those of other traditions who may understand some things better than our group—even though we are more conscious of what we think we understand better. *Courage* to be faithful to the true path of our faith as we understand it even when it is unpopular, dangerous and difficult to do so. *Diligence* to seek again and again the true path of our faith whenever we feel we have lost our way, which seems to be pretty often.¹⁴

These were the practices that I tried to keep in front of me in this new territory. I prayed for much grace, that I would not get defensive, and

that I would say nothing that would misrepresent Jesus. I was so mindful of how public this conversation was and deliberately tried to redirect my responses again and again back to a central focus on the person and work of Christ.

These experiences marked pivotal moments of transition in this adventure God has me on. One of the earliest vision statements for New Direction, many years before I came into my role, was to be a “bridge between the gay community and the church.” But over the years, informed by the larger network and system of which it was a part, the ministry became inwardly focused—offering pastoral care for those within our ranks, those who agreed with our theology and absorbed our psychoanalytic theories about homosexuality. We were perceived as adopting a rather defensive posture, and despite very clear boundaries keeping us out of the political arena, we were expected to be on the front lines of standing against the onslaught of the “gay agenda.” Such a narrow and perceived-to-be adversarial stance failed to embody that original missional vision of being a bridge. But now God was opening new doors and providing a practical laboratory to bring together my restlessness, dreams, and learning, and I walked through those doors with sometimes tentative, sometimes bold steps.

I have become convinced that the polarization of the church over the issue of homosexuality has been to our impoverishment on multiple levels. I believe there are crucial things we need to learn from one another to most effectively reach, disciple, and live in community with our neighbors. I am both compelled and haunted by Jesus’s final prayer with his disciples as recorded in John 17:23, “May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.” I believe there are helpful models of difficult but rich conversations within the larger body of Christ that can help to give shape and form to a hopeful vision of fruitful common ground.

In the midst of this journey, I have been so grateful to encounter and connect with mutual pilgrims who could resonate with some of my restlessness and the seemingly crazy roller-coaster rides God calls us to. This book is for such souls. Those who love God with a deep

passion. Those who are gay or those who deeply love those who are gay, or experience same-sex attraction.¹⁵ Those who have wrestled with gut-level incongruities and persevered to search for a faith that is authentic and real. This is a book for those who find themselves caught up in the agony of uncertainty when so many of the Christians around them seem disaffected or simply closed to tension and questioning. This is a book for those who love the body of Christ (and by this I don't necessarily mean the institutional church but the call of our relational Triune God to know him in the context of relationship with other disciples of Christ) with an honest, sometimes critical but enduringly loyal, commitment. And this is a book for those who are deeply immersed in the mission of God to bless the world through his people. For those who have become disillusioned with the Christian faith and the church's response to gay people, this book is also for you, and I pray that you will find a reason to hope and reengage in these pages.

This is a book written with the church in mind, in particular, those congregations in which much diversity exists and for whom simplistic, black-and-white answers on these questions will not suffice. I see this book as a word in a transitional season. I believe these questions surrounding homosexuality are best engaged as part of a much bigger conversation about the expression of the Christian faith in our Western culture and global reality. I see it connected to the larger systemic questions around equity and diversity that touch so many aspects of our common life together. My hope is that many of the particular questions this book engages will cease to be such sources of anxiety and tension in the near future. However, as I look back over church history and see the pattern of turmoil in times of significant change, I am reminded of the many years leading up to, in the midst of, and in the aftermath of seasons of change. In light of that, my prayer is that this book will be of help to the church in this journey.

Certainly, my own journey is far from over. I'm not in the harbor, tied to the dock. I'm still out in the wind, navigating the waves and tides, in the thick of day-to-day conversation, engagement, and service. I fully expect God to continue calling me to deeper humility, charity, courage, and diligence.

While I am neither a theologian nor a psychologist (the kind of people who tend to write on this topic), I am a practitioner with over ten years of experience in focusing on this area of pastoral care and cultural engagement. I write as someone at the grassroots, listening for the whisper of the Spirit, seeking to be alert to the surge of life within various parts of the body, having engaged relationally with a diverse spectrum of individuals and communities. I'm not interested in joining the chorus of voices clamoring for this position or that perspective. This book is decidedly not about *the* right answer or solution for the church on the theological topic of homosexuality. It intentionally positions itself at a different starting point. It values the spiritual formation inherent in the experience of exploring intimate relationship with God and with each other as we wrestle through these difficult questions and challenges and face the inevitable differences that result. Its posture seeks to be one of openness that is inquisitive, personal, relational, and dependent on the Spirit. This book is about generous spaciousness.

Walter Brueggemann has said that what is needed in the body of Christ is an embodiment of the gospel that is “dramatic, artistic, capable of inviting persons to join another conversation, free of the reason of technique, unencumbered by ontologies that grow abstract, unembarrassed about concreteness.”¹⁶ Brueggemann is speaking here of the poetic voice, a voice that can speak beyond our entrenched systems, our arrogant certainties, and the veneer that covers our core anxieties and deepest fears. I envision such a voice to have a wildness and beauty that can touch the parchedness pervading our discussions around our gay brothers and sisters in the church. I pray for such a voice to permeate the pages of this book. I am hopeful for the ways God will resurrect fresh imagination and creativity through this project.

In my experience, the complexity surrounding matters of sexuality, the unique realities affecting each individual and situation, and the unknown factors and unanswerable questions necessitate a humble recognition of the inadequacy of our best attempts. Seeking a poetic voice, such as Brueggemann describes, is not a search for the definitive, final say on the matter. Rather, the poetic voice calls for a rediscovery

of wonder—the wonder that incarnates the welcoming, accepting, redeeming heart of God for all his creation.

I've read a lot of books covering the intersection of faith and homosexuality. Many of them proffered answers. Many of these answers were profoundly unsatisfactory as I encountered one unique individual after another. In light of this, I have tried to write in a manner that shares the insights and experiences gathered over my years of personal conversations and pastoral engagement. But I have avoided attempting to formulate a one-size-fits-all response. My hope is that this book will give you permission to confront the tensions and air the questions you should ask, and allow you to encounter a spacious place in which to continue to press into the heart of God. I believe that engaging in these areas will allow us to live out Jesus's summary of the law: to love the Lord our God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength, and to love our neighbor as ourselves.

Reevaluating Evangelical Ex-gay Ministry

I remember well the catch-22 conversation. It was in the context of my temporary job as an office worker just prior to going to seminary in 1995. I was earnest and idealistic and, looking back, had a heaping helping of naiveté. This job had long stretches of boredom when my coworker and I had plenty of opportunities for far-ranging conversations. She was a plucky single mom in a tough situation, trying to find a better life for herself and her young daughter. We didn't always see eye-to-eye, given her agnosticism and my evangelicalism, but I respected her intelligence and common sense and appreciated her kindness. One afternoon our conversation turned to the subject of our gay friends. I lamented the church's poor track record in welcoming gay people and expressed my desire to serve as an advocate for them in the church. At the time, I felt that I was quite open, quite generous in my attitudes and opinions. My coworker thought I was full of crap. "But you believe the Bible says homosexuality is sin, right?" she challenged. I stammered and stuttered through my response, trying to reiterate my true heart,

which I believed to be genuinely loving toward gay people. She wasn't having any of it. With candid bluntness she said, "They won't believe you care about them as long as you believe homosexuality is a sin. You can't have it both ways."

It was a question that would haunt me and tear at my heart. Could I not find a way to love gay people and continue to hold a traditional understanding of biblical teaching regarding homosexual behavior? This tension is what I often encounter as I speak with Christians. One pastor described getting to know a gay couple who daily went to the same local coffee shop he did. Over time, cordial greetings evolved into a sense of real relationship. At one point this couple, knowing he was a pastor, asked if he would perform a marriage ceremony for them. My pastor friend told them that it crucified him to have to say no. This demonstrates the depth of the tension one can feel. "I deeply love my gay friends—but I cannot violate what I believe the Bible teaches."

In the eighteen years since I had that conversation with my coworker, there has been rapid change within our culture at large and within the Western church in both its attitudes and engagement with gay people. In general, rapid and extensive cultural change "exhausts our physical, mental and spiritual resources by its sheer magnitude."¹ We live in uncertain times that have eroded people's sense of and ability to trust. Some consider this a skeptical and cynical generation. Competing philosophies, theologies, ecclesiologies, and epistemologies have shaken many of our faith communities. Gone are the days of monolithic congregations with general doctrinal consensus. Today, there is great diversity in perspective in the pews.

For some, the uncertainty that accompanies such change elicits a sense of loss and a longing to go back to simpler and more predictable times. This can manifest itself in dire warnings and denunciations of people who propose more progressive responses. For others, this is a time of adventure, dreaming new dreams and taking risks to step into new expressions of redemptive community. Some people feel the need to distance themselves from established institutions and traditions. People's responses to change can be stressful and unpredictable. But learning to listen to one another, engage in dialogue, and

discern together what the Holy Spirit is saying to a particular people, in a particular place, at a particular time is an effective incubator for spiritual formation and growth. The truth is we need one another. Iron sharpens iron. As we encounter the need to honor one another, submit to one another, and extend grace to one another, our capacity to love enlarges.

After a number of years leading an organization with an ex-gay focus, I became compelled to reassess the structure of our ministry. Its foundation and development were based on evangelicalism, Christian counseling, and a quarter century of entrenched enmity between the church and the perceived agenda of the gay community. We'll discuss each of these below.

The Journey of Evangelicalism

Evangelicalism can be understood as a movement within Christianity that has four key aspects: an emphasis on personal conversion and intimate relationship with Christ, living out the values of the gospel in one's daily life with a particular focus on sharing one's faith with others, a high regard for biblical authority, and a central focus on the death and resurrection of Jesus. This movement, from the beginning, crossed denominational lines and therefore celebrated unity with some degree of diversity. For the last few decades, evangelicals have been feeling the tremors of change, struggling through an identity crisis, with the desire to be both faithful and relevant.

Ex-gay ministry sprouted from this soil, and it internalized some of these tensions. On one hand, ex-gay ministries were seeking to be innovative and relevant in their engagement with a marginalized group, the gay community, that the church at large wanted nothing to do with. On the other hand, these ministries wanted to be a beacon for radical discipleship and a corrective to the perceived slide into moral relativism that seemed to be threatening evangelical churches.

Fighting for recognition, acceptance, and support within the larger ministry of the evangelical church, ex-gay leaders struggled to know how to present their pioneering but controversial work in a way that

would activate the imagination of their fellow evangelicals. If such activation happened, evangelicals could always be counted on to be passionate in their involvement.

This is mirrored in many ex-gay ministries. There is a lot of passion. Many of the leaders themselves have journeyed to make sense of their same-sex attraction and the commitments and values of their faith. They know how arduous the journey can be, and their evangelical faith compels them to help by serving and ministering to others just starting down the path. But there are times that such passion, and the lack of appropriate education and training, has the potential to harm.

I did a fair amount of teaching and speaking in my early years at New Direction. While I had finished my master of divinity degree, my educational training did very little to prepare me for the ex-gay environment I found myself in. I've always considered myself a pretty quick study, and so upon taking my position, I dug in with gusto. I read everything in the ministry's library, listened to recordings of seminars, and spent hours in conversation with staff and with ministry recipients. And I prayed. A lot. And then I hit the ground running. Determined to raise the profile of the ministry, to equip the church, to fulfill my call, and to serve well, I pursued opportunities anywhere that would have me. What I didn't realize then is that I was simply regurgitating what I had learned from the internal system of the ministry, with little to no exposure to informed critique. I simply assumed that everything I had learned was true. The information had been researched and compiled by knowledgeable and experienced ministry leaders, who loved God; so of course it must all be useful and accurate and helpful.

My intentions were good. I wanted, passionately wanted, the church to reach out to and minister effectively with gay people. I wanted to break through the complacency and apathy that grips so much of the church. I wanted to bring hope where there was discouragement. I wanted to be an advocate for gay people where there was judgment, anger, and fear. I wanted to convey the heart of my evangelical faith—that in Christ there is redemption, transformation, healing, and wholeness. And while these are things I continue to passionately desire, I have had to face the truth that I inadvertently taught theories about homosexuality that have since

proven to be deficient, and I promoted ministry interventions that had the capacity to cause much personal harm to the individual. Though not aware at the time, I have come to see that many ex-gay ministries inflated the claims of these theories and promoted personal testimonies to support their convictions that God would redeem gay people in the manner that fit their paradigms. Having learned from these mistakes, I now want to help the church do better.

One of the hallmarks of evangelicalism, and by extension ex-gay ministry, is the vigilance with which it guards its own internal content as both normative and binding. One could say that a lot of energy is spent on boundary maintenance—discerning who is inside and who is outside of the boundaries of shared commitments. This is in contrast to nonevangelical ministries that exhibit a more generous inclusiveness and that may have more fluid and flexible boundaries, understanding and accepting wider points of view while still sharing common values. However, in evangelicalism and in ex-gay ministry, anything that seemed to deviate from the commonly held beliefs and understandings about homosexuality and healing were considered invalid and potential deceptions from the enemy. To investigate or inquire beyond these commonly held assumptions was dangerous territory, where one would be vulnerable to error. And while there is diversity within the networks in the ex-gay movement, for the most part, the fundamental boundaries are clearly marked and maintained. Anyone who ventured beyond them was suspect.

Although there are very intelligent people within the ex-gay network, with some holding PhDs, I often sensed a general anti-intellectual flavor among the membership. In some conversations, I encountered a type of capitulation to the expert: “My pastor says . . . ,” or “Andy Comiskey² says . . . ,” or “Frank Worthen³ says . . . ,” or “Leanne Payne⁴ says” Such a mentality breeds an ironic blend of both a lack of confidence and arrogance. On one hand, the individual doesn’t feel adequate in his or her own ability to think and discern and have confidence in his or her own assessments. But on the other hand, the individual can possess a rigid arrogance, believing that the position and perspective of a specific expert is the only one that can be right.

Having grown up in a Reformed denomination, I was both attracted to and, at times, challenged by an evangelistic fervor that I'd not experienced growing up. There were aspects of evangelical faith and belief expressed in other denominational traditions that appealed to me; for example, I was grateful to be exposed to a deeper engagement with the Holy Spirit through the charismatic and Pentecostal traditions. As I have hit my midlife stride, I'm grateful to have had the opportunity to learn from many different expressions of the body of Christ, as well as embrace the rich gifts my own tradition has to offer. One of the gifts of my particular denomination is its commitment to intellectual rigor. And it was this aspect of my heritage that was a key contributor in motivating me to question, think, research, and explore how different systems and paradigms might impact the expression of Christian ministry and mission with gay people.

It's funny, though, how we can turn away from our own heritage when we've become immersed in a new system that maintains order and orthodoxy through fear and deferral to experts. For a number of years that is where I was in evangelicalism. I absorbed both the fear of compromise and the fear of being labeled as one who had compromised. After all, the stakes seemed so high: I didn't dare question the rock solid position on homosexuality held by ex-gay practitioners lest I be responsible for gay people going to hell, society breaking down completely, and angering and disappointing God.

Psychology and Christianity

In my early days with the ministry, a gentleman in my denomination sent me an article written by Lewis Smedes, who was a well-respected theologian in the Christian circles in which I'd grown up. The article was titled, "Like the Wideness of the Sea?" and refers to the lyrics of a hymn comparing God's great mercy to the wideness of the sea. The question mark Smedes added to the phrase was to provoke readers to ask themselves, "Does God's great mercy really extend to gay people?" In the article, Smedes compares the contemporary pastoral concerns regarding homosexuality with the church's response to those who had

divorced and remarried. He suggests that divorced people who have remarried and gay people in committed same-sex relationships are similar in five ways:

1. Both divorced [people who have] remarried and [gay] partners are seeking to fulfill a fundamental, God-implanted human need for a shared life of intimate, committed and exclusive love with one other human being.
2. Both are fulfilling their God-given human need in the only way available to them, not what the Creator originally intended for his children, but the only way they have.
3. Both are striving to do the one thing the Lord considered supremely important about all sexual relationships: they are living their sexual lives within their covenants with each other.
4. Both are trying to create the best lives they can within the limits of personal conditions they cannot change.
5. Both want to live as followers of Christ within the supportive embrace of the Church.

Smedes concludes, “Yes, it does seem to me that our embrace of divorced and remarried Christian people did indeed set a precedent for embracing Christian homosexuals who live together.”⁵

If I try, I can almost physically recall the anxiety I felt as I read the article. My thoughts raced, “Of course, Dr. Smedes—distinguished and respected ethicist and theologian—didn’t understand as I, an Exodus network leader, did that change was indeed possible. Of course, Dr. Smedes, despite his many years of teaching and pastoring, had simply become sentimental in his engagement with people. Obviously, he was putting his own misguided compassion ahead of reverence for the holiness of God.” Not long after reading the article, a friend and I lamented how Smedes had slipped down the slope of moral relativism. How arrogant I was. How unwilling, or perhaps unable, I was to name my own anxiety as being the biggest barrier to engage the thoughts presented in the article. There was too much at stake. Too much to lose. God *needed* me, I convinced myself, to be his gatekeeper, to be a watchman on the walls.

Despite some differences in theological perspectives within the ex-gay movement, this system I was a part of drew a very clear line in the sand regarding points directly related to homosexuality. For example, at that time Exodus International's doctrinal and policy statement read,

Exodus upholds heterosexuality as God's creative intent for humanity, and subsequently views homosexual expression as outside of God's will. Exodus cites homosexual tendencies as one of many disorders that beset fallen humanity. Choosing to resolve these tendencies through homosexual behavior, taking on a homosexual identity, and involvement in the homosexual lifestyle is considered destructive, as it distorts God's intent for the individual and is thus sinful. Instead, Christ offers a healing alternative to those with homosexual tendencies. Exodus upholds redemption for the homosexual person as the process whereby sin's power is broken, and the individual is freed to know and experience true identity as discovered in Christ and His Church. That process entails the freedom to grow into heterosexuality.⁶

Within evangelical circles throughout the late 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s, ex-gay ministry was the predominant ministry paradigm addressing homosexuality, and it prided itself on being both the guardian of orthodox belief about sexuality and the practical extension of redemptive ministry to those affected by homosexuality.

Many ex-gay ministries espouse a variety of psychoanalytic theories in the development of ministry interventions. The most notable example of this is their embrace of the work of Elizabeth Moberly, a British psychologist who wrote *Homosexuality: A New Christian Ethic* in 1983. She hypothesizes that same-sex attraction is caused by a disruption and sense of rejection, either real or perceived, in a child's relationship with his or her same-sex parent. This disruption and sense of rejection causes a deficit that Moberly posits leads to a reparative drive. At the onset of puberty, this reparative drive to find connection and affection with a significant other of the same sex becomes eroticized. Moberly suggests that the drive itself is not so different from the kind of bonding that heterosexuals experience in friendship and camaraderie. Her theory, therefore, suggests that to repair this need for same-sex love and

connection, those who experience same-sex attraction need to focus on building nonsexual intimate friendships with people of the same sex and work on strengthening their sense of gender security in order to diminish same-sex sexual attractions.

This particular theory, caricatured by the idea of the absent father and domineering mother, shaped evangelical ministry to gay people. Having listened to many people's firsthand experiences, I can tell you that many Christian individuals in such support groups felt they could identify with the kinds of experiences Moberly described. I think this sense of identification, combined with a longing to find some key to unlock the door to their presumed hidden heterosexual potential, was a big part of the ongoing energy in ex-gay circles for this theory. However, this theory has been heavily critiqued and disputed. Gay individuals who do not identify with the assumptions of this theory, those who had good relationships with their same-sex parent and same-sex peers, have been part of deconstructing the credibility of this model. For many gay people, their life experiences simply do not match Moberly's causal theory.

Many local practitioners, through pastoral ministry initiatives, such as support groups and one-on-one meetings, apply these theories in people's lives despite failing to hold basic credentials in psychology or therapeutic counseling.

Three evangelical psychologists who have made particularly significant contributions in their work with same-sex-attracted clients are Mark Yarhouse, Warren Throckmorton, and Janelle Hallman. It is interesting to note, however, that all three have taken moderate positions in distancing themselves from what is termed a reparative therapy model. Yarhouse and Throckmorton developed a "Sexual Identity Therapy Framework."⁷ One of the important contributions of this framework was demonstrating to colleagues in the American Psychological Association that some clients prioritize their religious identity over their sexual identity. In other words, honoring the values, goals, and autonomy of the client means to support the client in living consistently within their chosen religious identity. While Yarhouse,⁸ Throckmorton, and Hallman⁹ (who brings particular expertise in working with same-sex-attracted

women) continue to articulate a clear position that sexual intimacy is reserved for the marriage covenant between one man and one woman, they all seem to have evolved in their position on the ability to change sexual orientation.

Christian counseling may be helpful for those who are questioning or struggling with their sense of sexual identity or who have additionally experienced past trauma, such as abuse, dysfunctional family dynamics, or bullying and harassment. But it is critical that counseling be initiated and desired by the individual (and not just by the family or pastor). Future ministry initiatives with sexual minorities will be well served by putting Christian counseling and therapeutic practices within the proper perspective, as an additional resource and service for those who particularly request and require it.

A History of Enmity: The Church and the Gay “Agenda”

It is a common perception that the church hates gay people. This generalized, unqualified statement is not helpful. Its origin, however, arises from the manner in which the church, and in particular the evangelical church, has responded to public and civil matters of equity in relation to LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer) people. Patrick Chapman, in his book *Thou Shalt Not Love: What Evangelicals Really Say to Gays*, outlines a thorough history of the evangelical church’s message in public forums on gay issues. He says, “In evangelical circles it is referred to as the ‘gay agenda,’ seen by many evangelical leaders as a stealthy attempt by homosexuals to abolish Christian morality and undermine American society. . . . Therefore, many evangelical leaders encourage their followers to oppose homosexuals’ attempts to gain equality.”¹⁰

Chapman’s book was published in 2008, and one might argue that the pendulum has since swung toward gay marriage. In Canada, where gay marriage has been in place since 2005, civil rights for gay people are not typically a front and center issue. Some would argue that the more critical issue is freedom of speech for those who in good conscience seek to speak about their particular convictions against homosexual practice. But despite the movement toward a more gay-positive climate,

the residue of the evangelical community's protests and resistance to issues like gay marriage continues to negatively affect the perceptions and mind-sets of many.

New Direction policy has always been to avoid overt involvement in political matters. But in the past, we were associated with the actions of American organizations as they spoke publicly against overturning sodomy laws, against hate crimes legislation, and against gay marriage. The Christian witness never benefits when Christian organizations are known more for what they are against than what they are for. This is part of the history that makes reconciliation, bridge building, and nurturing generous spaciousness more challenging and complex.

My particular background gives me an insider perspective on the development of ex-gay ministry as the church's response to sexual minorities. However, ex-gay ministry was not the only response of the church. Below, I briefly introduce several long-standing, affirming ministries and organizations. After years of fighting for basic civil rights for gay people and for safe and welcoming places within the Christian community, many of these organizations are now contemplating what the next leg on their journey will be as the context around them continues to change.

The Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) denomination was founded by the Rev. Troy Perry in Los Angeles in 1968. The church was fully affirming of LGBT people and focused on social action generally and civil rights for gay people particularly. MCC is considered by many to have spearheaded the quest for marriage equality. The theological bent of MCC churches can be somewhat diverse, but many would consider them to be relatively conservative and evangelical. Often caricatured as the "gay church," some MCC congregations are in transition as affirming churches now exist in other denominations. Brent Hawkes, longtime MCC pastor in Toronto, beamed as he told me that the fastest growing demographic for their congregation is young heterosexual couples with children. (Today there are over 250 MCC churches in twenty-three countries.)

Evangelicals Concerned (EC) is "a national volunteer organization and fellowship of Christians concerned about addressing the integration

of Christian lifestyle and homosexuality.” Their goal is to “live lives of Christian love and discipleship while helping other evangelicals better understand homosexuality and gay people better understand the Gospel.”¹¹ EC was founded by Dr. Ralph Blair, a psychotherapist, in 1975. EC runs annual conferences as well as regional Bible studies and gatherings for mutual encouragement and support.

Soulforce, another affirming ministry organization, “is committed to freedom for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer people from religious and political oppression through relentless nonviolent resistance.”¹² Founded in 1998 by the Rev. Dr. Mel White, Soulforce was developed as a social justice and civil rights organization inspired by the principles of nonviolence as espoused by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Gandhi. Soulforce seeks dialogue with Christian organizations and churches through initiatives such as their Equality Ride (which seeks dialogue with Christian college campuses), American Family Outing (which seeks dialogue with megachurches), and Seven Straight Nights for Equal Rights (which allows straight allies to stand with them). When dialogue is denied, Soulforce conducts acts of non-violent resistance, such as vigils, sit-ins, protest rallies, and marches.

During my early time with ex-gay ministry, I absorbed the notion that these organizations and ministries were to be avoided. However, refusing to even review and reflect on their work with prayerful discernment meant that I missed the opportunity to be challenged and stretched by their sense of calling and mission.