

Acceptance and approval

By [Martha Spong](#)

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Yesterday I was reading about [Matthew Vines](#), author of *God and the Gay Christian*, and his continuing effort to be in dialogue with evangelical Christian leaders about the acceptance of LGBTQ people in the church. He was invited to a conversation with Caleb Kaltenbach, an evangelical pastor whose parents split up because they were both gay. Kaltenbach has tried to find scriptural support for being OK with gay people generally, especially since that group includes his parents.

*As a child, Mr. Kaltenbach attended a gay rights march with his mother, and he recalls protesters yelling that God condemned the marchers and throwing urine on them. (His book, Messy Grace, part memoir and part advice for pastors on ministering to gays, will be published this year.) He says evangelicals should welcome gay people with “acceptance, but not approval.” **Openly gay couples attend his church, he said, but are not allowed to serve on the leadership board.** ([From the New York Times](#))*

My bold there. I don't understand why, in a world where there are so many, many, many churches in flavors both denominational and non-, a gay couple would freely choose a church where leadership is forbidden to them due to their relationship status. I wonder about the hurt feelings sustained when they have been around long enough to want to get more involved and discover they are not *that* welcome. In a world where even [Tony Campolo](#) is now encouraging churches to embrace and accept gay couples, I hope they know there are other choices.

It's possible that queer couples who go to a church where they are not received as full members, where they are not allowed to serve in leadership roles, where their status as baptized members of the body of Christ is somehow “less than,” feel they are on a mission from God. I know I sometimes feel that way, living in South Central Pennsylvania, which is not exactly the most progressive corner of the globe. There are days when it feels like my entire calling to this place is to be an ordinary queer

on behalf of Jesus Christ, whether as the interim pastor of a United Church of Christ congregation a few towns over or as the wife of the female senior pastor at the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) congregation across the street. Every time I answer the door at the manse as her wife, I am representing. Every time I share a family anecdote in a sermon, I am representing. Every time I get home from church first and walk our puppy, and the Presbyterians stop over to pet him before they go home, I am representing.

Some days it feels so ordinary to be there in a church-owned house with my wife and our children that the only thing I stress about is whether the puppy will chew on something that belongs to the church rather than to us. Other days, it feels like I finally know what cross I was always intended to bear, a cross engraved with the words “Queer Christian.” It’s not a death sentence; rather it is a holy burden, and the work of my life, to be queer and faithful.

He says evangelicals should welcome gay people with “acceptance, but not approval.”

This sentence weighs on me. It’s essentially the opposite of the UCC’s category for welcoming churches, “Open and Affirming.” Despite my continuing concerns about whether my family is fully safe, much less accepted, here in South Central Pennsylvania, on the whole we have received an amazing and affirming reception in our churches. This is particularly true at my wife’s church, where she continues to do fruitful ministry, and I do a lot of the things any pastor’s wife might as a volunteer leader: I lead a women’s Bible Study, and I serve on the fellowship committee, and this morning I stood witness at a wedding.

I don’t know the experience or the point of view of the gay couples who attend churches like Kaltenbach’s. I do know the feeling of doing what you believe God calls you to do. I also know the experience of being rejected or, worse, ignored by people who will not meet my gaze because they cannot quite get to acceptance, much less to approval. My hope for the couples who bravely return to church each week is twofold. First, may they know that there are plenty of churches, more all the time, where they and their gifts for leadership and service would be most welcome. Second, if they are choosing to work through it in response to a call from God, may the change of hearts happening in the world reach the places where they are now, and may they be able to see the change and know they were part of it. Perhaps this

is the work of their life, too, to be queer and faithful, accepted and approved by God.

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