

Something personal: Being a gay church leader

by [Craig S. Staller](#) in the [January 17, 2001](#) issue

The participants at the church retreat had been talking about their families, new grandkids, vacations and pending retirements. The facilitator had asked us to share something personal. I'd shared personal stuff in church groups before. But this time my heart sank and my shoulders slumped. I could feel a shroud of fear and disgrace coming over me. Share something personal? Why? How? What? With bishops in the room?

What could I share? Talking about my home with my life-partner, Doug, was not safe. Revealing my sexual orientation at that meeting, with my bishop present, would mean censure and the necessity of leaving the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's clergy roster.

The church's *Visions and Expectations* document for rostered church leaders was clear: you can be homosexual, just don't act on it. Remain celibate. "Practicing" homosexuals are not welcome in the rostered leadership.

Celibacy is not a gift the Holy Spirit gave to me, and I had been "practicing" with Doug for over eight years. With the support of family and close friends, we weathered his parents' shunning. We also had the support of many rural folk who were our neighbors, many of whom volunteered with us in a local service club.

In *Why Am I Afraid to Tell You Who I Am?*, a book on baptismal theology, John Powell says that we in the church say we believe that the almighty and loving God accepts all of us when we are baptized and adopted as God's children. Our task, then, is to grow into a place where hospitality and welcome are extended to all the baptized. I know that, in the past, the church also had a history of excommunicating or killing those who are different.

When my turn came to share something personal, I didn't talk about retirement and family vacations. I didn't circulate photos of grandchildren. I didn't talk about a

child's professional breakthrough.

And I didn't say anything about Doug's importance in my life. Nothing of my personal struggles with the denomination's statement about my sexual orientation. What I said was innocuous.

Feeling unable to talk about something so important in my life with people whose theology and faith emphasize welcome and hospitality made that day one of the saddest I've ever known. The sadness eventually led to depression.

My supervisor saw me circling my inner wagons. She knew I was in deep pain. "A small office with only three staff can't thrive when one of its members feels mortally wounded," she said. I seemed unable to focus on the work of the agency. Most frightening of all were the misgivings about whether to remain on the staff of a church agency.

Three choices emerged in this period: I could end the relationship with Doug and remain ordained. I could resign my ordination and remain in the relationship. Or I could continue to have my sexual orientation and professional life collide in ways that seemed to ensure clinical depression.

I decided to resign. Doug supported my decision, and I considered him to be one of God's tender mercies. The scariest part would be explaining my choice to my family and friends.

I told my bishop about Doug's and my relationship and removed myself from the ordained clergy roster. His response was pastoral and supportive. "You can remain in your present position, can't you?" he asked, with an inflection in his voice that implied he wanted me there. When I tendered my resignation as leader for a synod-wide training event, he responded, "What for? You're doing a great job!"

I walked away from our meeting feeling relief. A burden had been lifted—and in its place was a deep loss. Where did I fit into the church now, this place where I was called? Where was God in all of this?

I was now ex-clergy—neither ordained clergy nor layperson. When an ex-clergy is around, church folk always seem to whisper, "Why did he leave?" The implication is that we really don't fit in. Somehow we are an embarrassment.

I struggled to attend worship and sing in the choir at my home congregation. Change began when I attended an event led by the same person who led that first invitation to “share something personal.” His opening remarks were the same: “Let’s introduce ourselves and bring each other up to date on important happenings for our personal and professional lives.”

This time, unencumbered by ordination and *Visions and Expectations*, I shared something personal. I named Doug and talked about our relationships. I told participants that the church is denying itself able leaders when it uses sexual orientation alone as grounds for being banned from the ordained clergy roster. To my surprise, there was support and encouragement. They respected my integrity. Some shared in my mourning. They encouraged me to remain faithful.

My resigning my ordination led to several affirming developments:

- Doug and I now worship together at the same church.
- Some folks are so comfortable seeing us together that they confuse us and call one by the other’s name.
- We had our pictures taken together for the new church directory.
- Members of the parish welcome opportunities to visit our home to see Doug’s garden or share food.
- Our anniversary was listed in the parish newsletter and included in the prayers of the church as we pray for “all persons in relationships of love and commitment.” That first public acknowledgment brought our first anniversary cards. The recognition irritated one couple, who now choose to worship elsewhere. The more important response from an elderly conservative pillar of our church was “This issue will be a dead one for us in ten years, and we’ll wonder what all the fuss was about.”

Even with all of the affirmation, I sometimes feel that the church does not know what to do with me, and that I am suspect in many eyes. I know there will be faithful fellow members of the body of Christ who question my presence and disagree with my choices. Yet I also know that many respect my struggle and value my gifts.

I survive as a “practicing” homosexual in the church in spite of the church’s uncertainty and suspicion about where I belong as an ex-clergy who is gay. I remain faithful to the gospel because I trust that our baptismal theology is real: God’s grace comes to me before I can do anything in response. Share something personal? I just did.