

his mother married another Nazarene pastor.

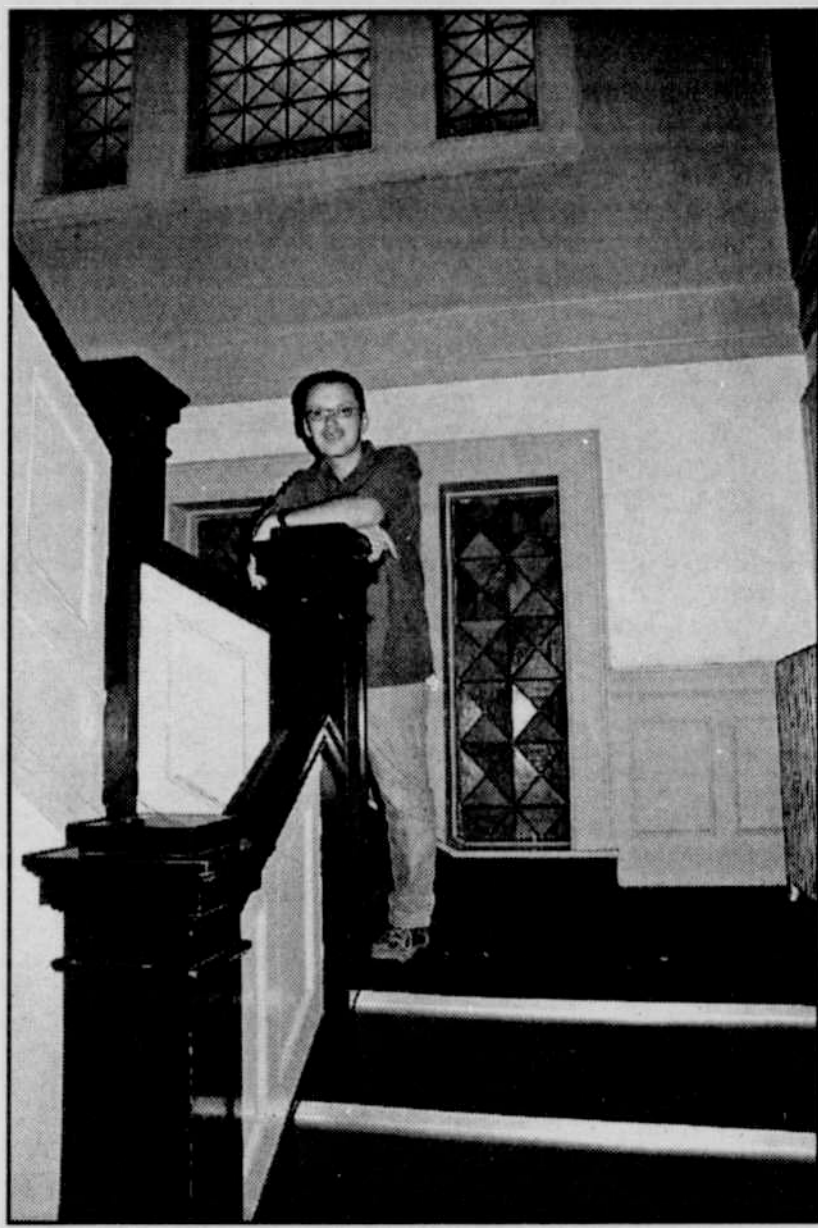
His family and his church were vigilant in keeping Sandstrom from being exposed to corrupting influences. He wasn't allowed to dance or go to movies. But a piece of literature the church itself put into his hands started him on the path that led him to leave the denomination and embrace his gayness.

By the time he was in high school Sandstrom was experiencing unmistakable attractions for other men. He did everything he could not to let his parents and his church down. He was popular, he had lots of friends, he dated girls, he was involved in student government. But those gay feelings wouldn't go away.

He fully accepted his church's teachings that those feelings were evil and that he had to struggle against them. But then the Moral Majority began its crusade against homosexuals and abortionists. A chapter was formed in his church, and the organization's newsletter routinely was included in the Sunday order of service.

Now Sandstrom was reading every week that gay men and lesbians were the enemy. He was urged to join the war against "them." But he couldn't shake the feeling that he was one of "them." And yet he was not evil, he was not the enemy of God, he had no desire to bring about the collapse of western civilization. It would take him many more years before he could come out and fully accept who he was, but those Moral Majority newsletters sowed the first doubts that the church and its allies were the sole possessors of the truth.

That seems to be the crucial issue, especially for people who grow up immersed in an all-encompassing church community—recognizing that the church might not have a corner on the truth.



Verlin Byers learned to take God out of the box he had put Him in

Verlin Byers came to that recognition in a particularly poignant way that actually didn't involve his gayness.

While he was in Brazil working with the Mennonites, a particularly bad drought struck the region where he was stationed. There was widespread suffering. People were starving. Families split up as men left the area to seek work in the larger cities. Many people turned to God for comfort, and the church offered them relief, both spiritual and, when possible, material.

But this was in Brazil, and most of the faithful were Catholics. Byers was still a member of a denomination that regards Catholicism as idolatrous and heretical. Yet he could see the community's faith in action, how deep and

how genuine it was.

"I could no longer believe in a God who would damn them to hell for not believing in the right way," he says. The experience "took God out of the box I had put Him in. My view of Him was totally obliterated and transformed."

Obviously something like that is what has to happen to people who are immersed in homophobic churches but who discover they are gay or lesbian. Once they get over trying to change themselves to conform to their religion, they must find a way to change their religion to conform to who they are.

Many people come to recognize a difference between religion and spirituality. Duffy puts it this way: "Religion is how you practice your spirituality." Realizing the difference, people can remain true to their spiritual nature while searching for a religious practice that affirms them.

Some find religious homes in different denominations. Byers is a member of a United Church of Christ congregation as well as a participant in the Anawim Community.



Some remain engaged with their original churches but work for change from within. Steve Martino is chair of St. Philip Neri Catholic Church's Gay and Lesbian Outreach Commission. He is an openly gay man who has been living with his partner for two years. He is also an ordained priest, although he is on an extended leave of absence from his archdiocese.

He is used to people registering surprise when he comes out as a priest and when he notes that the commission is more than a social club for gay and lesbian Catholics. It celebrates a Mass for its members and friends every Friday evening.

He says it's a mistake to equate the church with the Vatican. Certainly the governing bureaucracy is very powerful and very conservative, but it is not the church. He takes the commission's continued existence and growing

acceptance as evidence that change from within is possible.

Some gay men and lesbians find homes in newer denominations that have sprung up to serve their spiritual needs. Metropolitan Community Church has served the gay and lesbian community nationwide for many years and has congregations in Portland, Salem and Vancouver, Wash.

Another alternative is the Portland Center for Spiritual Growth, formerly the God Connection, led by the Revs. Casey and Berdell Moffett-Chaney, a lesbian couple. Casey Moffett-Chaney describes it as a New Thought church with a congregation that is about 75 percent gay and lesbian.

There are many options. The pain that accompanies coming out into a homophobic church is real and powerful. But many people

Steve Martino is chair of St. Philip Neri Catholic Church's Gay and Lesbian Outreach Commission. He is an openly gay man who has been living with his partner for two years.

who have experienced that pain have come to see it as a source of strength and insight.

The deeply personal dramas this pain drives can become tragedies if people allow themselves to be beaten down, if they attempt to be whole by amputating part of their being. Happily, an increasing number of organizations and counselors can help those who need to find new ways of being.

And just as happily, individuals who have walked these sometimes tortured paths are willing to share their stories. We all owe them our thanks. □

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## ADVICE FOR THE CONFLICTED

Dale Rhodes of the Interfaith Spiritual Center has offered guidance to many people who find themselves caught between inner feelings of same-sex attraction and outer religious teachings condemning homosexuality. He offers advice for people who are conflicted:

- 1 Find your own source of truth. Trust your own intuitions.
- 2 Don't assume that going to just any clergy member is safe.
- 3 Talk with someone who is both spiritual and openly gay or lesbian.

The first suggestion is undoubtedly the hardest for those who are caught up in conservative religious denominations, which typically claim to have access to the only truth. Many such groups actively demonize anything that contradicts their teachings. But all of the clergy I spoke with emphasized the need to listen to the inner voice.

The Rev. Casey Moffett-Chaney of the Portland Center for Spiritual Growth says: "God communicates through our hearts, not through our minds. God wants us to be happy. If your religion is making you miserable, you have to find another religion."

Steve Martino of St. Philip Neri Catholic Church's Gay and Lesbian Outreach Commission says: "You must listen to



your prayer life. What is God telling you? The ultimate decision about what is or isn't sinful is not church teachings or Scripture. It's ultimately up to you, your conscience and God."

Item two is important because even though clergy members might have a genuine desire to help, their view might be distorted by the teachings of their denomination.

The third item on the list is also crucially important,

because a sense of isolation easily can lead to despair. Finding spiritual people within the gay and lesbian community is not hard nowadays, Rhodes notes. *Just Out* lists 39 spiritually oriented groups in its Outreach section; all of these organizations have requested a listing in the paper, so a hearty welcome is ensured.

Also, gay men and lesbians from all sorts of religious denominations, homophobic and not so homophobic, have formed groups for mutual support. Affirmation ([www.affirmation.org](http://www.affirmation.org)) serves the Mormon community; Integrity ([www.integrityusa.org](http://www.integrityusa.org)) serves Episcopalians; and Dignity ([www.dignityusa.org](http://www.dignityusa.org)) serves Catholics.

Rhodes recommends these books:

- *ReCreations: Religion and Spirituality in the Lives of Queer People* (Edited by Catherine Lake; Queer Press, 1999).
- *Coming Out Spiritually: The Next Step* (by Christian de la Huerta; Tarcher/Penguin, 1999).
- *Wrestling with the Angel: Faith and Religion in the Lives of Gay Men* (Edited by Brian Bouldry; Riverhead Books, 1995).

Rhodes also recommends some Internet sites:

- Queer Spirituality: [www.qspirit.org](http://www.qspirit.org).
- Portland Community of Welcoming Congregations: [3dwave.com/~patricko](http://3dwave.com/~patricko).
- Interfaith Spiritual Center: [www.spiritone.com/~isc](http://www.spiritone.com/~isc).