

[I'm] a Presbyterian clergy person, and we believe that God has formed, is forming and will continue to form and reform the church. Yes, we believe there is the authority of Scripture in all that we do, but we also read it as a community. We don't bow down to Scripture. We don't worship Scripture. We worship God in Christ. And we worship a God who is continuing to create, to form, to do amazingly new and different things.

Take women in leadership roles, for example. It was the surrounding society that was really more encouraging of women in roles of leadership than it was the church. The church was one of the last to come along and say women can be one of the elders in a church or one of the pastors of a church. Why do we make those changes? It goes back to this. If you read the Bible one way on these issues, then don't you have to read it all this way?

TK: Opponents of reparative or conversion therapy say that it hurts families and faith communities by causing unnecessary misunderstanding, isolation and separation.

MH: This is a typical politically correct response that has been fed to the masses by the gay community. The very man, Dr. [Robert L.] Spitzer, that was the hero of the gay community in 1973 for fighting to get homosexuality taken out of [standard diagnostic criteria for mental disorders] has now come back and done a study showing that change is possible for those that seek it. Why are we not hearing about this? The gay community has now silenced him and marginalized his view. Why? Science or politics?

Author's note: Jack Drescher, chairman of the American Psychiatric Association's Committee on GLB Concerns, dismisses the study. He asserts Spitzer's survey is flawed statistically and methodologically. Only 200 respondents, referred by ex-gay groups, were interviewed by telephone without follow-up and without addressing the harm such a conversion might impose.

When contacted by *Just Out* about his study, Spitzer offered the following statement: "As I have indicated on several occasions, I personally support full civil rights for gays, gays in the military, gay adoption and the recognition of gay civil union. All of these are antithetical to the approach taken by Focus on the Family. My study dealt with a very select sample of individuals who were not coerced into some kind of therapy to change their sexual orientation. Clearly the results of my study in no way justify pressuring gays to seek such therapy nor does it assume that all gays would be better off if they changed."

BWM: The greatest damage lies in trying to place the radical and wonderful varieties of who we were created to be into a predefined box. One of the most common sins to commit is to try to box in God by saying, "Well, you have to love so-and-so, but you can't love such-and-such." When we make these kinds of moves, asserting our limited imagination and creativity on God the creator, isn't that to get the relationship between God and humankind backward?

TK: Can you describe your own experience and how you've changed?

MH: I now understand that I had sexualized my unmet homo-emotional needs that were not met through a positive relationship with my father or other men as I grew up. Realizing this has allowed me to understand where the sexual drive found its genesis, and therefore it has now lost its power.

I'd love to say that I came out of homosexuality because of some religious experience, but that wasn't the case. I walked out of homosexuality because I was sick and tired of what the gay community had to offer me. Relationship after

relationship for 12 years looking for Mr. Right, wanting to settle down, buy a home, have kids, adopt, do all that.

But I was never enough for another person, and nobody else was ever enough for me. There was always somebody on the other side that was better than the person I was with.

I had to look myself in the mirror and realize I'm going to be a 50-year-old troll. When you're young and attractive and 26 and built like a brick house, you're valuable to the community, but let's turn the lights on at 2 in the morning and see who's left sitting at J.R.'s. It's not the cute young 26-year-olds; it's the 40-, 50-, 60-year-old men with guts and no hair.

I got out of the now and looked at what my life would be when I was 40 if I continued in homosexuality. And I looked at what my life

could possibly be at 40 if I left homosexuality. The latter was much more inviting.

BWM: His experience being a gay man is so different than my experience as a gay man. For me, there really was a sense that I had made my life extraordinarily cumbersome and complex by living "in the closet," by hiding, living untruthfully and unfaithfully, failing to embrace the person God created me to be. Now that I'm more "out," I don't have to fight so many of the battles or use up so much of the energy I was using just to pretend that I wasn't something when I really was.

Like so many others, I kept on praying to God to change me. I grew up in a church in which being gay, lesbian, bi or trans was not appropriate. It was not allowed. But when you stop telling God what God should do and start

listening to God, you hear God say, "I love you, and I made you who you are, and my love is always there, trust me."

I had bought into a lot of the cultural construction of American society up until the age of 40. I am a father of two amazing kids, I was married, I had a house, a mortgage, two cars, cats and on the way for tenure at a modern major research university. I had it all, but I was so unhappy and knew deep inside I was living a lie, that I was not being truthful.

When I read Psalm 139, I kept bumping into the passage "God knew us as God was knitting us in our mother's womb." God was there—there was no way to escape it. So the realization for me was, who was I fooling? If I

Continued on Page 28

I will survive

Ex-ex-gay man keeps the faith while struggling with his spiritual identity

by Jim Radosta

Norman Birthmark, like most "ex-gay" ministry survivors, came away from the experience without a cure for his homosexuality. What he did find, however, was a remedy for his internal struggle with faith.

At age 19 he was referred to Portland Fellowship by a campus ministry at Oregon State University. He was led to believe it was a professional counseling service for conservative Christians conflicted about their sexuality.

Two years and about \$700 later, he escaped and began to rebuild his spiritual identity. Now 27, he's accepted his sexual orientation and attends the predominantly gay Metropolitan Community Church of Portland.

Here is his story, in his own words:

...

I was just a nervous wreck. I was so desperate to meet anyone, especially a Christian, who I would be able to relate to. So it was a good experience in terms of meeting other people who were in the same kind of situation.

When we got to the "101 Counseling" sessions, that's where I started having a lot of questions and doubts about, "Is this really going to work?" What made me feel worse was that it involved going through and identifying all of the supposed "deficiencies" I had.

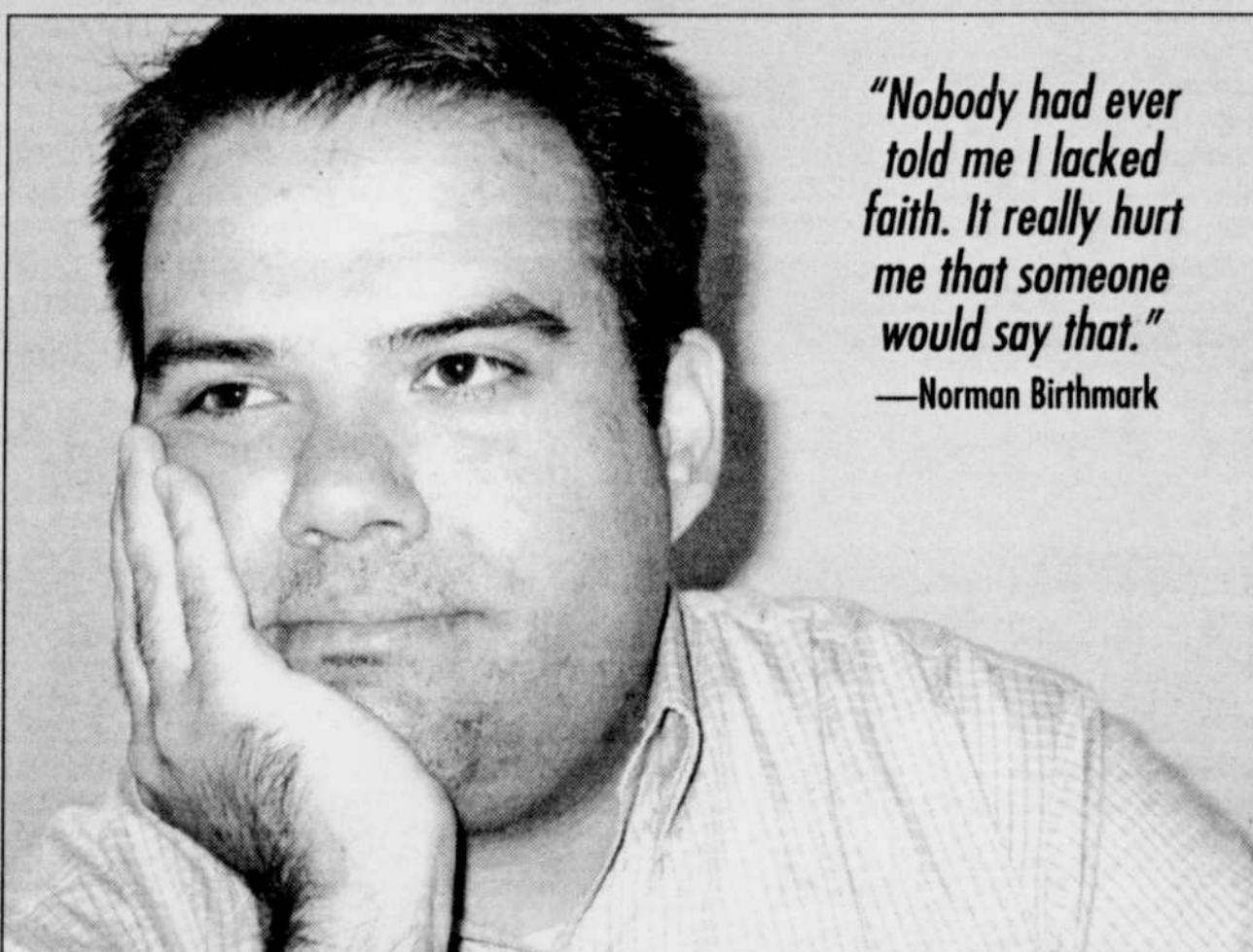
That's when they started telling me: "You came from a broken home; that's something in your background that's causing you not to be healthy. You're not developed fully into a man."

That had never even come into my mind. That wasn't the identity I had for myself.

And yet after two years of going through all that—after talking about all your "failings"—you start taking on the identity: "Well, I'm just a guy from a broken home. I'm insecure with my masculinity. I don't have strong enough faith to succeed."

I was raised by my mom primarily. I was conflicted because I didn't feel like I had a bad home. I was really proud of the way my mom raised me, and I thought I was fine.

There were very strict rules—you couldn't meet anyone outside of the group. There were a lot of issues about boundaries. They didn't want people to become dependent on each other, so they really discouraged people from forming close friendships.



"Nobody had ever told me I lacked faith. It really hurt me that someone would say that."
—Norman Birthmark

PHOTO BY MARY DAVIS

There were rules about hugging. You had to hug—they called it an A-frame hug—so your hips wouldn't touch.

One of the things they had you do was go through your home and clean out anything that was remotely gay. For me, I wasn't out, so the only thing I had was a Melissa Etheridge CD. [Laughs] So I had to throw that out. It was kind of bizarre.

And, of course, you had to get rid of all the porn. That was kind of a no-brainer.

My objective was to build a close relationship to God and challenge myself to be a better Christian. But toward the end of the two years what I realized was that my entire spiritual life became entangled in trying not to be gay. My whole identity of who I was to God was dependent on whether I was making progress toward "healing" my homosexuality and becoming more heterosexual.

I scheduled an individual counseling session with one of the leaders there, and I told him that I was having doubts, that this wasn't working, that I was becoming very disillusioned. He turned around and told me: "I really have doubts about your faith. You're not very enthusiastic."

Nobody had ever told me I lacked faith. It really hurt me that someone would say that.

For like a year after that I took time off from church and stayed away. I read a lot of books and was rethinking what Christianity was to me and why it was important.

Today I'm more skeptical. But at the same time, though, I think I do have an idea what is important to me about God and Christianity and what Jesus' message really was about. So I'm more secure in my spiritual identity in terms of being able to say what things I do believe and what things I have doubts about.

That's a lot different from when I first started going to "ex-gay" ministries, when it was much more based in Christian fundamentalism: These are the principles of the faith, and there's no discussion. Now I'm more willing to acknowledge that there are things I don't know and there are things I don't think the Bible knows.

During the two years there, what I tended to notice was the people who were really the most outspoken in terms of how "well" it was going—those who were the people who, in the end, tended to have the biggest falls, who may not have been completely honest. In the end, I don't know of anyone who's been terribly successful at the program. **■**