The Stories of Four Gay Students At Messiah College

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Messiah College is a Christian college of the liberal and applied arts and sciences. Our mission is to educate men and women toward maturity of intellect, character and Christian faith in preparation for lives of service, leadership and reconciliation in church and society.
The Stories of Four Gay Students At Messiah College

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Senior Seminar
April 3, 2004
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Each fall another set of gay students come to Messiah, each student feeling alone and isolated. Each spring another set of gay students graduate never knowing other students around them who also share their questions, fears or struggles.

-www.gayatmessiah.org

DEFINING THE PROBLEM

What does it mean to be gay at Messiah College? Messiah College actively tries to make the school a comfortable place for African Americans, Hispanics and Latinos, and international students in order to diversify our campus, but what about students of a sexual orientation minority, do they feel comfortable at Messiah? Why did these students choose a school against homosexual behavior? Do they struggle with dissonance in Bible classes? These are the questions I had going into this project. I started with thinking about what being a Messiah student means for me, and then pursued how that would make my experience different if my sexuality were different. I didn’t want to go in with presumptions and my own hypotheses on the topic since I would be conducting an ethnography, instead, my goal was start with a clean slate, allowing the students I observed to speak through their stories, what it is like to be gay at Messiah.

METHODOLOGY

Traditionally, an ethnography is a written description of a culture based on anthropological fieldwork after the anthropologist has lived with that group of people for a period of time in order to observe the culture in action. Ethnography can be simply defined as “the study of groups and people as they go about their everyday lives;” it is based on qualitative methods including detailed observations, unstructured interviews and
analysis of documents (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw). Today, many sociologists are conducting ethnographies and qualitative research as way to understand a group of people and their needs. Kathryn Edin, for example, conducted an ethnography of poor women in Philadelphia and their reasons for putting motherhood before marriage. For the purposes of my ethnographic fieldwork and my senior project, I have chosen the gay students at Messiah College as a subculture and, similar to an anthropologist, I have lived at Messiah, just as my informants, for three years.

You will probably notice that the nature of an ethnography does not leave much room for “complete” objectivity, but then again, there is little, if any, written work, in any field, that is completely objective or non-biased. All the information included in this ethnography is filtered through my eyes, therefore, my impressions. My biases will most likely come out through my gender, social status, individual background, religion, personality, and most importantly for this study, my sexual orientation. The description you read of student’s stories will be the unique product of my own observations. I encourage a fellow student, or student yet to study at Messiah, to explore this subject further and compare and contrast their findings with mine. It is very possible for two researchers to present the same culture in very different ways. This situation has occurred on several occasions, perhaps the most known situation was that of anthropologists Margaret Mead and Derek Freeman. Mead studied gender consciousness among Samoan women in Papua New Guinea for two years. She published her findings in “Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies” (1935) and contributed a theory separating biologically-based sex from socially constructed gender which was considered ground-breaking at the time. Her hypothesis, that adolescent behavior in the US was culturally
determined and not determined by biology was later challenged by Derek Freeman who conducted the same study in Samoan culture and found that American families and Samoan families both reflected “universal biological tendencies.” So who is right? One can argue that both are right or wrong and their findings could have been influenced by their own agendas and their biases. Hopefully this won’t be the only ethnography of gay students on Messiah’s campus. In the future, the students will be different, and the stories will be different, and perhaps similar trends and new theories that I may have missed.

The problem with ethnographic objectivity has led some anthropologists to conclude that unbiased research is impossible and that all ethnography is subjective. But again, I argue that any research is subject to bias. Although perfect objectivity may not be attainable, it can be approximated through honesty in reporting my research results.

If I had more than a semester to explore the topic of homosexuality at Messiah, I would have taken both qualitative and quantitative approaches on the subject. I would have liked to survey Messiah students, faculty, and staff on their views of Christianity and homosexuality. However, because I was limited in time, I chose a qualitative approach. I conducted a six-week ethnography of current gay students at Messiah. My goal was to talk to a number of students on numerous of occasion about their experiences.

My manual for the field, *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*, by Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, describes two distinct activities in conducting this kind of research: “First, the ethnographer enters into a social setting and gets to know the people involved in it...second, the ethnographer writes down in regular, systematic ways what she observes and learns while participating in the daily rounds of life of others.” I thought the first activity, being a participant observer, would be easy. I go to Messiah, so my informants
and I already share something in common. However, because the environment in which we reside is not the most friendly toward a gay lifestyle, two out of four of my informants were not comfortable with me observing them or making it known to anyone we were working together on something.

The biggest obstacle was getting people to talk. At first, everyone I contacted wanted nothing to do with the project. They either never responded to my emails or wrote back expressing no interest for fear of being ousted. A large part of the problem, again, was time. It takes a while to build a trust with a person to the point where he or she is willing to talk about a personal subject, so imagine trying to get a stranger to talk about his or her sexual orientation. The level of trust needed for this subject matter required an established friendship one developed over a period longer than a few weeks. I struggled with a decision to either 1) establish a relationship with my informants first and then ask to talk about their experiences as a gay student at Messiah, or 2) tell my informants of the ethnography from the very beginning and hope they would trust me without an established relationship. Because of the deceitful nature of the first choice and the need for professionalism in this study, I practiced the latter of the choices.

Slowly students began responding to my emails and were willing to be vulnerable for the sake of my project. I met with students one, two, or three times and we talked about a variety of topics. After the first interview with a student, I modified a great number of my questions because I felt I needed a different, less journalistic approach to the topic. I had to redefine the goal of my project and understand the difference between

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1“Outed,” “coming out,” or “out of the closet,” will be used frequently as a word a gay student uses for telling friends or family he or she is homosexual. When one is outed, it carries negative connotation being that it was probably against that person’s will.
a journalist and an ethnographer. A journalist is concerned with atypical, unusual, and earth-shattering news while an ethnographer is interested in typical, routine experiences. I started to look at the real world of a gay student as my social laboratory. I wasn’t sure what I would find or even what I was testing but I became much more interested in what everyday occurrences made up a gay student’s life at Messiah, rather than trying to dig up the dirt on people’s worst and/or best experiences which are probably rare. My micro sociological perspective was modeled after Erving Goffman’s symbolic interactionist perspective to describe “meaning in mundane interaction” (Barnhart, 1994) and ethnography, or understanding the meaning systems and procedures people use in doing what they do.

After talking to students questions arose from subjects they brought up which gave me further topics to pursue such as the Engle Center and the Director of Community Development at Messiah. Even my questions related to the Community Covenant were not in my interview schedule at the very beginning of the project; I later incorporated the Community Covenant questions into every interview because my first informant brought up the concern.

With four weeks of scattered fieldnotes I had no idea how to magically produce a logical and cohesive paper. For this, I turned back to the theory behind ethnography. My set-up became to first present the students’ stories as they are, with as little of my interpretation added as possible. This is considered an emic perspective, where the insider’s view of reality is the instrument for describing all situations or behaviors. Then in attempting to understand the students’ experiences I will apply a few theories which explain the etic, or outsider’s views and meanings.
THE PROBLEM WITH HYPOTHESES

Standard procedures for doing research at all levels is to formulate a research hypothesis based on theory and then test it through research activity. However, in an ethnography, the presence of a hypothesis may lead the researcher toward biased selection of data. The researcher may choose to ignore information he or she feels denies the hypothesis and instead emphasize information consistent with the hypothesis. This can happen in quantitative research as well. However, the nature of ethnographic fieldwork is different because the researcher starts with an inductive approach, where general principles are developed from specific observations instead of beginning with hypotheses and expectations. In ethnographic fieldwork, if the researcher has a hypothesis he or she is pursuing, the interview process may include leading questions that influence the character of the informant's answers. An ethnographer should go into the beginning stages of the fieldwork not knowing what to expect or what will surface from participant observation. To work within this framework, I had to explore the Gay At Messiah website daily for stories and profiles before I was able to come up with an interview schedule, or list of questions to ask each informant. Coming into the project, I had no knowledge of what it means to be gay at Messiah but, through literature searches and exploring the Gay At Messiah website in the beginning stages of my research, I was able to create a starting point with questions to ask gay students. Furthermore, during the interviews, I informed the students they could set the agenda and add whatever information they thought pertinent to the subject at hand. This way I left plenty of room for them to address the issues related to homosexuality they thought were important.
DATA

I explored three areas other than the gay students: I used the Gay At Messiah website as a resource for getting contacts and reading the students stories before interviewing them. I spoke to the Director of Community Development at Messiah in order to understand Messiah’s homosexual policy and it’s enforcement. And lastly, I spoke to a counselor in the Engle Center in order to ask questions raised by the gay students I interviewed.

Gay At Messiah

The website www.gayatmessiah.org has been a large literature source for my project. I visited the site nearly daily for the duration of this project looking for new articles and reading alumni and student’s stories. I registered at the site which allowed me to be on the email list. I received three emails about the annual picnic that anyone, gay or straight is welcome to attend and some other group events they organize for gay alumni, current students and staff at Messiah. There are four sections of the site that change on a daily basis and as people add their stories and eight permanent sections (reference taxonomy of Gay At Messiah site in Appendix A.1). The two changing sections I visited frequently are “Stories” and “News.” Everyday there were new articles from various nationwide papers on topics related to gay issues (reference taxonomy of Gay At Messiah site in Appendix A.1). The stories are where I retrieved almost all my starting points for contacting current gay students. There are only seven current gay students at Messiah, and it took a while, sometimes more than one attempt, to obtain their willingness to talk to me. Many of them expressed a great fear of being outed.
This website was created in the Summer of 2000 and posted in the Fall of 2000 by Angie Bolivar and Lloyd Bowman in order to create support for both gay and straight students, alumni, faculty or staff, and prospective students. After graduation, Angela saw a need for an alumni support group for gay students at Messiah. She spoke to a pastor who connected her with Lloyd Bowman. Together, Lloyd Bowman and Angela Bolivar developed a place where gay students “felt liberated to tell their stories” (2.27, Bolivar interview). Their four-step purpose is: to end invisibility, to end isolation and loneliness, to provide mutual support, and to make life more bearable. Each purpose has greater points describing the difficulties involved with being gay at Messiah and the ways the support from the site can help (reference Gay At Messiah Purpose in Appendix A.2). The year the site came out, quite a bit of controversy emerged from students and faculty. A professor recalls a large amount of vulgar language being used on the site from straight students responding to gay students’ profiles and stories: “there was a lot of very hateful language on there; it was hate speech” (2.27, Bolivar interview). Angela Bolivar commented on the hateful language that was posted on the site soon after it was created:

Some people really hate gay people. They stone them, kill them, harass them, etc. At our website, gayatmessiah.org, we used to have a discussion board for people to post their thoughts. We had the usual Bible thumpers praying for people or trying to encourage debate, which was fine, but we had many, many, many Messiah students (with Messiah emails) that would send hateful, violent, cursing messages. We eventually decided to remove the discussion board because it was so depressing. Some people told us to keep it up so that people could realize the hatred that many so-called Christians have for gays. It became too much.
Messiah's Homosexual Behavior Policy

Messiah's policy on homosexual behavior can be found in the Community Covenant and the Student Handbook (reference Appendix A.3 and A.4 for the Community Covenant and Student Handbook excerpts). The Community Covenant states that the community, students and employees, are to agree with the guidelines outlined in the Student Handbook and Personnel and Policies Manual: "...we are to avoid such sinful practices as drunkenness, stealing, dishonesty, profanity, occult practices, sexual intercourse outside of marriage, homosexual behavior, and sexually exploitative or abusive behavior" (Community Covenant, Messiah College). The Student Handbook specifically outlines its policy on homosexuality in the section titled "Sexuality and Relationships Policy." Any rule or policy the school would like to communicate in the handbook relating to homosexuality or any sexual relationship can be summed up in one sentence in this section: "The College affirms the goodness of sexuality and encourages students to live according to the guidelines set in Scripture for sexual behavior" (Student Handbook, 2003-2004, Messiah College). This statement may raise a lot of questions for the average student, especially one looking for clarity on Messiah's policy on sexual issues. What are the guidelines set in Scripture for sexual behavior? Don't we learn in Bible class that many parts of the Bible were relative to their culture? So what parts of the Bible relating to sexuality are cultural? Who at Messiah decides which scriptures we are going to accept as truth and which we are to question? The paragraph goes on to elaborate a little on what sexual behavior is inappropriate at Messiah: "neither sexual intercourse outside of marriage nor homosexual behavior is considered proper for Christians" (Student Handbook 2003-2004, Messiah College).
Even after the clarification on what kind of sexual behavior is inappropriate here at Messiah, a student may be confused about what exactly homosexual behavior is and the disciplinary procedures taken toward students who disregard the policy. All seven gay students I spoke to expressed concern for the ambiguity of the statement. Because the students were unsure of what the policy is, and some faculty, staff, and heterosexual students did not even know Messiah had a policy, I decided to speak to Doug Wood, the Director of Community Development, in order to get further clarification. I asked him to comment on if he thinks the statement is ambiguous and why they leave room for so many questions in regard to the policy:

The statement itself is not ambiguous - that is, we're pretty upfront that one (of many) of our community standards is that homosexual behavior is prohibited. But defining behavior leaves some room for discussion (which can be positive). This is consistent with one of the Covenant's principles which is that we're called to have open and honest dialog about 'working together responsibly and honestly in exploring and understanding the world around us.' Also, I think focusing on behavior can communicate a lack of care for the person(s) who is struggling and/or in pain. If I (or my colleagues) spend all our time and energy in 'fact finding' regarding homosexual behavior (i.e. asking questions about personal, intimate activity to prove it as matching a spelled-out behavior) that could come off as embarrassing, if not abusive, to the person we're addressing.

Recently, residence education has asked the school to spell out the policy because RDs, RAs, and ALCs have, more than before, had to deal with all different kinds of situations dealing with homosexuality. The Community Standards Committee, which has two students from SGA, will review the policy next year to see if the statement needs to be fleshed out with further clarification in the Student Handbook. Doug Wood would like to see all the rules removed from the Community Covenant and instead have it read more like an ethos. Instead, they would like to see all the rules in the Student Handbook instead
of delineated in the Community Covenant. Doug pointed out that near the end of the Community Covenant it reads, "we covenant together as a community of believer-scholars to pursue the challenge of living out this document." "It doesn't say 'we agree to be the perfect embodiment of the document,' see the difference?" (2.24, Wood interview).

Discipline taken against a homosexual student would be just like discipline for any other issue outlined in the Student Handbook. However, Doug Wood commented that there probably would not be a formal disciplinary procedure (i.e. Judicial Board hearing), "rather, it would be more of a one-on-one conversation(s) with the student to clarify community expectations and encourage the student not to engage in the behavior during their enrollment" (2.24, Wood interview).

A little while ago, a prospective student wrote Doug inquiring about the homosexual policy at Messiah. He responded with emailing the Community Covenant and section from the Student Handbook. He also elaborated with his own philosophy on how the subject should be handled on campus:

A homosexual student will often feel very isolated and 'rejected' in their life style decisions because of the position by the College on homosexuality. Also, if the student is open about his/her homosexuality, some other students may react negatively. This can further alienate him or her and lead to depression and other serious personal challenges. Frankly, students struggling with this issue are often hurting very deeply. Although Messiah is guided by Scripture in prohibiting homosexual behavior, the gospel is also very clear that we are to love our neighbors. A person's worth and dignity is far more important than any rule they may have broken. Supporting the student through the above-mentioned challenges while encouraging celibate behavior would be the goal of this one-on-one conversation(s).

Although it may seem like Doug's position on campus is to create and enforce rules that are controversial and maybe even oppressive, his attitude on the subject matter
is extremely heartfelt and sincere. He expresses a genuine concern for the overall student body and is very open to discussing the issues surrounding homosexuality on campus. This concern is illustrated in how he ends the email to the inquiring prospective student: “… you may be a current student, a prospective student, a reporter for a magazine or newspaper, a parent of a student, a pastor, a gay rights activist, etc. I don't need to know who you are. However, if you are a current student and you'd like to talk - I'm here if you need me, no strings attached” (2.24, Wood interview).

The Engle Center: Counseling Services

A rumor fluttering about among the gay students I interviewed, is that counseling at the Engle Center is required for gay students who are outed. With each student I talked to the subject came up in one way or another. Ironically, they have all heard this rumor, or a version of it, but none have actually gone to the Engle Center for counseling, via referral or self-initiation. So the more students brought it up, the more I itched to talk to someone in the Engle Center to find out if this rumor was fact or fiction. I met with a counselor who was able to answer a lot of my questions.

She began by explaining that her experience with gay students is very limited because in the many years she has been a counselor at Messiah she can count the gay students who have come to her on one hand. Of the students she has talked to, all of them but one were seeking to rid themselves of their homosexuality and the one was confused about where he or she was sexually.

The time came to ask the elephant-of-a-question I had wanted the answer to for weeks:
Josi: There is a rumor among most people I’ve talked to, well, I don’t know if it’s a rumor, that’s why I am asking you. Messiah’s policy is that, or maybe “procedure” is a better word, if and when a gay student comes out, to whoever, in the cases I have come across, the gay student has come out to Residence Education, an RA or an RD, that student must be referred to counseling services here at the Engle Center. What’s your knowledge of that? Is that a procedure?

Counselor: Well, I don’t know that as a policy or procedure in any kind of formal sense. I can imagine that might happen. Residence Educators and other people on campus are accustomed to referring to counseling at times if they feel a student is struggling with something, anything, that maybe they feel is beyond their knowledge base, expertise, or role. So I can imagine that happening. And that happens routinely with lots of different things and I am certainly not aware of any policy that if anyone talks about homosexuality in particularly, they must be referred.

So there is the infamous answer. Straight from the source, so that’s what happens in all cases, correct? Well, yes and no. Later, through some further investigation in my interview with Doug Wood, I learned that although the Engle Center discourages mandatory counseling because it “simply does not work,” there are some misunderstandings through the lines of communication and it has happened in the past that a homosexual student will be expected to go to the Engle Center for counseling.

According to Doug, the ideal is that no student will be sent to counseling for breaking Messiah’s policy on homosexuality, but it has happened in the past. Wood and his office are working on communicating to RD’s that they should ask that the student get a mentor, whether that is a faculty or staff member. Sometimes in the past, they have asked the student get a mentor or go to counseling, giving an option.

Both Wood and the counselor stressed that these procedures, or lack thereof, apply to students who break any policy in the Student Handbook or Community Covenant. A homosexual student would not be treated any differently:
Lets draw the analogy with someone who comes in and says they’re using drugs or they’re having sex with they’re boyfriend or girlfriend or, using alcohol...those activities violate community standards like homosexuality violates community standards. I would talk to them like anyone else. And some of what that means is that it stays here. It doesn’t go anywhere; anything talked about in here doesn’t go out. Like they’re not confronted then with their violation. Being in counseling doesn’t protect a student from facing the consequences of a violation of the community standards if that does go outside the counseling center, so I can’t promise them that, but I can promise that if anyone confronts them about the violation, whoever heard it, didn’t hear it from me.

- 2.22, Engle Center Counselor Interview

Students’ Stories

I contacted and spoke to seven gay students but will only be including four students’ stories because some of them were concerned with being outed and they thought it would be best if no one knew anything that could possibly identify them. When I speak generally of the gay students I spoke to, all seven are included. Names have been changed in all four stories to protect the gay students I interviewed.

Tori & Sarah

Tori was the first girl I contacted. I got her AOL screen name and IM’d her late one Tuesday evening. Very friendly and open to talking, she told me she is currently a senior at Messiah. Excited to start my project, I jumped into a story about my lesbian friend from high school, hoping she’d see I was genuine and safe to talk to. Just like any other friendship or relationship, whether acquaintance or best friend, she could not trust me at that point to hand over her life’s experiences on a silver platter. As our surface level conversation progressed, I was getting nervous that she would never want to meet with me to talk and no one would trust me enough to talk in person. My project would fail and I would not graduate. Then the slam of the door. She signed off in the middle of
our conversation. My hopes sunk as I scanned the conversation for anything I might have said that offended her and made her want to slam the ole’ IM door in my face.

I began looking for new modes of obtaining information from students, giving up hope that Tori would ever want to talk to me again. A day or two later the glorious sound of a squeaky opening door rang from my computer. And there in my buddy list was an open door next to Tori’s name. Immediately after her sign-on a message popped up on my computer:

My comp. needs a new fan.... so it just shuts down sometimes.... that’s why I got kicked off last time ... I felt so bad... my internet only got fixed this afternoon... I’m so sorry again...

“Excellent, she doesn’t hate me!” I thought.

Over the next two weeks she and I talked on numerous occasions. Now when she signed on I wasn’t thinking about my project, I was thinking, “I wonder how Tori is today.” Through IM conversations and reading her story on the Gay At Messiah website, I learned a lot about Tori’s background and how she came to find out she is gay and I also learned a little about her relationship with Sarah, her girlfriend.

There are very few current gay students who have a profile on the site gayatmessiah.org. The ones that do, express concern that they will be outed by posting their stories on the site, even with a fake name.

Tori was bold enough to post a lengthy story on the site about her past and how she got to where she is today. She claims her story isn’t all that exciting but as I read it for the first time I was captivated by the honesty in her sharing.

I was curious for a long time, but I was raised in a very strict family, and was told that I was possessed or doing wrong, so imagine what I was doing by being gay/bi! So I tried so hard to shove everything back, I
think this caused me to really be sexual towards guys, and did stuff I never should have done, but that is neither here nor there, but I had to prove to myself I could be straight. However, shortly before going to Messiah my life came apart, and while at Messiah freshman year, it was an uphill battle, to only get worse sophomore year.

Tori found comfort in a friend who was able to support her in her struggles including homosexuality and other emotional problems that were pushing her over the edge. Tori and Sarah were able to relate with similar abuse and neglect in their pasts. They grew so close they fell in love. To the heterosexual, this statement sounds and looks unnatural as if there is a grammar mistake present, but to Tori and other lesbians, falling in love with another woman is just like any sappy movie saga of a heterosexual couple. Tori and Sarah’s tale is complete with a breakup but happy ending of getting back together.

A while down the road, being torn between being in love with her, and hiding in secret and having no one to talk to, drove me to multiple suicide attempts, so I finally broke up with her. This caused a whole realm of problems between us, and shortly down the road we were back together, and have been since!

So although it may look like everything is fine now with Tori, she is still struggling with finding her support systems. Yes, she has a supportive girlfriend but how many heterosexual couples have only one person, their significant other, as a confidant? Tori faces a problem that challenges all the gay students I interviewed. There aren’t very many people they feel comfortable being out to. There aren’t many people who would accept them for being homosexual. And there aren’t many peers here at Messiah who can relate. It’s the old, “Am I the only person in the world dealing with this?” Support groups exist for breast cancer survivors, alcoholics, and yes, even gay people. The closest thing at Messiah is the website which is not even affiliated with the school. Although the site is
great for knowing there are other homosexual students and alumni who went through
similar situations are Messiah, it is a scary leap one must take to put an identifier out
there for anyone on campus to read. Again, the chance of being outed is one few gay
students want to take.

Family acts as a huge support for many students consumed by traumatic
psychological, physical, or emotional in their lives but of the 5 students I interviewed,
only one had what could be called family support.

I have no support whatsoever, if I were to tell my family, I would be
disowned. My mom suspected it at one point and told me if she found out
to be true, it would be tough love acting out, and my connections to the
family would be ended. I remember my friends' reactions, and then their
reactions when they found out Rosie O'Donnell was gay, and every time
things like that come up, they lose respect for the people, and lots of
bashing. So anyways, here I am trying to keep my sanity which somehow
I've managed to gain back. But the tension I feel from not being able to
talk to anyone about my feelings and my relationship with my girlfriend is
tearing me apart.

So where is Tori today? She still comes to classes everyday and studies with
students who know little about who she really is, but she finds comfort in going home
everyday to someone she can be open with. She and Sarah rent out a small apartment off
campus. Your first response may be one of judgment. Maybe it's our strict conservative
Christian backgrounds that say homosexuality and cohabitation are sins; that's two sins in
one semester, they're going to hell. But my conversations with Tori and Sarah told me
they were extremely limited. They both were going through some of the hardest times of
their lives, physically, psychologically, mentally, and emotionally. They acted as each
other's support. Sarah helped Tori through some major problems in her life and they fell
in love. Take out the dual she's, her's, and feminine names and their love story sounds
just like any other you’re used to hearing. The ending to their love story is not like one we are not used to hearing. They cannot marry so they chose what was available; living together and making it through each day at a time.

Tori’s last words:

So I guess I'm just really looking for people to talk to who understand what it is like. I know there are people at Messiah who are gay, but it doesn't feel like it.

Laura

Laura was not raised in a Christian home, so the struggles she faced differ from the other students I interviewed. The small town setting functions much like a conservative Christian church that many of the other gay students at Messiah came from. Laura grew up in a small town where people of other races or sexual preferences were looked at as deviant and abnormal.

As Laura began to have an attraction toward other females, she thought something was wrong with her. She observed comments her parents made toward other gay people on TV and tried everything in her power to change her feelings. She started dating men and attempted to force feelings that were foreign to her. Physical relationships with men, which went too far, became her outlet for dealing with homosexual feelings inside. She tried and tried to pursue men as a venue to “feel something different.” Like trying to fit a square peg into a round whole, the attempt at change did not work for Laura. Now she regrets the physical relationships she had with men, but she sees them as necessary in her journey toward being comfortable and happy with who she is. Realizing her relationships with men were like skating into a brick wall, she turned to another person who could
perhaps make her feel normal and loved, God. She started attending church and got
involved in various church activities.

Hearing that God loved me no matter what made a huge difference in my
life. But it wasn’t until I came to Messiah that I started to doubt who I was
again because I had never really known that the Bible said anything about
homosexuality. It was difficult to hear about it and then on top of that hear
people around me saying that it is a sin and that a person can’t truly be a
Christian if they are gay.

Is there such a thing as a gay Christian? I asked each of the four students this
question. Growing up, I had heard the argument that people who are gay are not really
Christians because they are living lifestyles of sin. I pursued this question further with
Laura and was surprised by her answer:

Josi:  What would you say to a person that says you can’t be a Christian
and a homosexual?

Laura: Um, what I usually say, because that is some thing I hear a lot, is
that....

Josi:  You’ve heard that from people before?

Laura: Yeah.

Josi:  They say that to you specifically or just in general?

Laura: I’ve had people say it to me, but not directly like that. Usually
what I say is, overall, if homosexuality is wrong then it’s a sin. Everybody
sins. I’m at a point in my life where I don’t completely follow that
lifestyle, but I can’t deny my homosexuality either. So it’s not that I’m
choosing to sin. There is a difference, if you’re choosing to sin, then
you’re obviously not living like a Christian should. I’m choosing to stay
away from it as much as possible and not practice it.

I was struck by Laura’s familiarity with this question. I thought about this for
days and days after our talk—should we be questioning each other’s Christianity on the
basis of sexuality? Laura needs a “usual” answer to back up her Christianity because she
is gay, and yet I wonder why no one ever says to me, “how can you be a liar and a Christian?”

Struggles with her faith continue as Laura faces challenges in classes and related to Messiah’s policy:

Josi:  What are your views on the homosexual policy here at Messiah?

Laura: It definitely was an obstacle in my faith. I struggle... being gay is... it makes me not normal in society’s terms, and I constantly struggle with that. And so when I read that in the Community Covenant, I’m like, “ok, so I’m not normal, and the school thinks it’s bad, ok, so...” It’s a constant struggle in my faith because it’s not like I chose to be like this. I definitely do not want to be an outcast in society; overall, that’s technically what it is.

Josi:  And in your Bible classes, does the subject come up at all?

Laura: Most of the time when that comes up I’ll ignore it because most of the people don’t know what they’re talking about. I mean, some people do, but for the most part, people are very narrow-minded and say ignorant things.

In learning Laura’s story, I felt guilty, responsible, and ashamed. When talking to other gay students I was often able to distance myself from the subject, but with Laura, I could relate. We all can relate. We grow up with abnormalities and feeling different than others at one moment or another. Sometimes it is for a short phase, and for others, like Laura, it can be an ever-present long-lasting feeling that grows like a cancer. What makes this more than a personal story is that as Messiah students, faculty and staff, we stripped her of God’s agape love exemplified through human beings. Our human flaws and judgments won the battle against our knowledge that love, regardless of controversy, is in order. You may say, “Well I don’t know Laura, and if I did I probably would not even know she was struggling with her sexuality because she has decided not to be out.” I have found that everyone struggles with something. Often I keep issues to myself because my
closest friends have their own problems, but in doing this, I realize there is no time that
my closest friends won't be dealing with something too. Just like you, someone around
you is most likely struggling with something difficult, too. I am not implying that
everyone at Messiah College is judgmental and ignorant of students different from
themselves; we all have room for improvement. I am sure we are not at a point where as a
community we need to hold back on the love and acceptance we show individuals.

Today Laura feels happy and content with who she is, but what a long journey it
has been for her getting to this place in her life. After coming to Messiah and feeling
confused and hurt about peers denying gay people as Christians, she found a friend who
she was able to open up to. Slowly she has been able to open up to most of her close
friends about being gay. She is not openly gay to anyone and everyone at school and she
is not out to her family. Coming out to her family could possibly be the hardest thing yet
in this journey. Laura doesn't claim to have all the answers about her homosexuality or
her faith, she is always “doing research, and meditating and praying, and just constantly
talking to people about it” in order to understand further what it means to be a gay
Christian at a small, private Liberal Arts college.

I still struggle with my faith in Christ when people start talking about the
subject in classes but I know that this is who I am and God loves me for
being me.

Laura on a solution for gay students at Messiah:

Josi: When you leave Messiah, what's your advice going to be to
students on campus who are gay?

Laura: Even right now, my advice to them would be that there needs to be
a support group that actually meets, or just a time for gay students to get
together and know who each other are. Because it's a lot easier when you
know there's other people on campus. Just to know they're here; they're
real. When you’re talking on the computer, it’s just like talking to anyone else anywhere in the world, they can be right next door to you or on the other side of the world. Talking on the computer is pointless I think for the most part. I think true support is when you actually know the person, who they are, and they can be there you and you them. That is an issue we have now. And there is a lot of talk about it but a lot of people are still not sure.

Josi: Do you think the confidentiality is an issue?

Laura: Yeah definitely.

Josi: Is there someone do you think that would step up to be a leader of something like that?

Laura: Well, I know there’s someone who’s trying.

Josi: Someone gay or straight?

Laura: I know the person who is trying is gay, but I also know some straight people who think this is something that needs to be done. They would come to the meetings too.

Josi: So you’re kinda talking about a gay-straight alliance?

Laura: Right.

Josi: Do you think they should be a mixed group or just a group for gay students?

Laura: Well, I think there needs to be both. If it was just gay people, then it would kinda function like a clique and that’s not what we need.

Mark

Here's the story of a man who has studied and worked at Messiah: he started out as a student and then was on staff for three years and now does not work full time for the school but does some work on the side for the theatre department.

Mark grew up with the common fear of adolescent gay boys and girls in conservative Christian homes: that he was committing the most heinous crime imaginable. We as Christians grow up learning that every sin is the same, there is no such
thing as a ranking of sins, but for some reason our minds unconsciously (if our minds can do things unconsciously) rank sins such as murder being the worst and lying or cheating on an exam being the least punishable. Homosexuality usually falls somewhere there in the middle.

Mark’s father was an ordained pastor and his parents were missionaries to Arizona where they ministered to Native Americans. Growing up in the Nazarene Church, a conservative and theologically fundamental denomination, he didn’t raise any questions or run into any problems with the topic of homosexuality until 12 or 13 when he began struggling with his sexuality. He prayed and pleaded with God asking for a “cure.”

This was, of course, back in the days before Will & Grace, and the only “gay” people that I knew about were Elton John and Liberace. I was terrified that if God didn’t “cure me” I’d be destined for a life of very uncomfortable rhinestone studded polyester jumpsuits and oversized diamond encrusted glasses!

Mark decided on Messiah College when college time rolled around, thinking it would be a safe choice—he was still looking for answers about his homosexuality. He spent most of his college years in the closet, scared of what consequences could arise from coming out. He began learning more and more about what the Bible says about homosexuality and he found comfort in knowing “that there were, in fact, Christians who didn’t hold the ‘go straight to hell do not pass go’ view of homosexuality.” However, coming out carried greater consequences than he could deal with at that time. He recalls the compromises he had to make living in the closet.

When I was a student, every year we had to sign the Community Covenant. For someone coming here that is struggling with homosexuality it’s kinda traumatic to sign your name to something that says homosexual behavior is prohibited. I think it’s funny that it isn’t anymore specific than
that, but if you look, it’s lumped in there with sinful practices such as drunkenness, stealing, dishonesty, profanity, occult practices, which is my favorite, and sexual intercourse outside of marriage. And the funny thing is that the homosexual behavior is the one that gets all the focus. You know there’s people going out and getting drunk every weekend, and there’s people stealing, there’s dishonesty, there’s people using profanity, I don’t know about occult practices (laughs), so it’s kinda an interesting thing to have down there on paper. Every time that I had to sign that, it was difficult.

Mark describes his junior year as difficult but life altering. He attended Temple at the Messiah Philly campus and met and befriended openly gay men and women. With the help of new found friendships and an ethics course, he chose the church and homosexuality as a research topic and drenched himself in the subject in order to understand the struggles he had for the past years of his life.

The following summer my life reached something of a crisis point. All of the reading, all of the people I’d been meeting, all of the theology I had been fed, all of the prayers that I had been saying and promises I’d been making, and consequently breaking, came colliding together. During what can only be described as the darkest period of my life, I was forced to come to terms once and for all with my sexuality and my faith. After many years of struggling to be “cured” I realized that that was probably not going to happen, and that I had one of two choices to make... I could either abandon the faith that I had been raised with from my childhood, turn my back on God, and pursue a “deviant lifestyle”, or I could attempt to reconcile my sexuality with my faith and re-examine my faith in the context of who I was becoming as a 20 something gay man.

That same summer he came out to his close friends from school and they lovingly accepted him. He breathed a sigh of relief and started the next semester with hopes of finally being able to throw away the double life and live openly at Messiah as a whole. His anticipation for the new semester quickly dissipated a few weeks later when news of Matthew Shepherd’s violent murder flashed news headlines. Terrified, he ran back into the closet. Mark had always considered Messiah a safe place, and he enjoyed his
experience there but he could not help the fear that being openly gay at this school would have unpleasant results. He lived by the don’t ask, don’t tell policy.

Upon graduation, Mark got a job at Messiah through the Theatre department and worked here for three years. He remained in the closet until the third year when he wrote an article for the Swinging Bridge, then, not as vocal about homosexuality as it is now, about attending Messiah and working for Messiah as a gay man. He received extremely supportive responses from the community and especially those he worked with. He really has nothing bad to say about the administration or staff he worked with at Messiah. He left the job after that school year so that he could pursue a career somewhere where his place of employment would be in support of a homosexual lifestyle.

I felt like a hypocrite for continuing to work in support of an organization where gay and lesbian students are not free to express themselves openly without fear of retribution or violence. Where they continue to be singled out by the campus community covenant which persist in listing “homosexual behavior” as a sinful practice which is to be avoided. As a result, I decided that I while I continue to be a strong supporter of the college and its programs, I could no longer justify being employed there and continue to perpetuate the environment which keeps gay and lesbian students and employees closeted.

Today Mark is living openly gay to everyone but his family. He says proximity is the reason for not coming out to his family; if he lived closer to them he would feel the need to tell them. I noticed through talking to him that a major point he wants people to understand about being gay is that it does not control your entire life or make you different than everyone else. Identical to someone’s heterosexuality, it is merely someone’s sexuality. It is not something that controls or defines him. Many straight people, especially Christians, see homosexuality as not only a sexual preference but a
lifestyle. All the students, Mark included, are not consumed by their sexuality and instead wish to be viewed as regular people.

Mark on the Bible and homosexuality:

I don’t think that there’s enough information, it’s not a black and white issue in the Bible as far as I interpret it. And you can make powerful arguments, and people do, on both sides of the issue. So, I don’t think it’s a thing that you can just go to page 27 and find the yes or no answer. It’s interesting that the portions of the Bible that it is mentioned it’s usually the only thing from that part that people focus on, the rest of the things are kinda pushed aside. I believe in the Old Testament when it’s mentioned, it’s mentioned with all different kinds of dietary laws and things we no longer follow, but we hold to that one thing and we write the rest of the things off as being culturally relevant at the time--they couldn’t do that for dietary reasons or, we’re not under the old law, we’re under grace. In the New Testament passages, it’s mentioned where it talks about women keeping silent in the church and keeping their heads covered but we have shifted as a culture away from that being an issue. So it’s interesting to me that the times that it’s mentioned, that the context that it’s mentioned in, it’s the only one of those things that we interpret as being black and white, the rest we’re ok with pushing aside.

On same-sex marriage:

It’s interesting that a lot of religious groups are against gay marriage. They say it will destroy the family; they’re the first ones to say that the homosexual population is so promiscuous, so non-committed, and that’s the reason that they give for being against same-sex marriage, when there’s actually not an established tradition of marriage like there is in the heterosexual lifestyle—it’s ironic. Personally, I think that it’s critical and I think that we’ll achieve it eventually. We’re talking about over a thousand rights that a person has just because of their ability to be married that a gay couple in a committed relationship can’t have or doesn’t have. I hope that the church can be, and someday will be, behind establishing that. It isn’t so much about being gay or straight but more about the rights a person is entitled to.

Advice to current and future gay students:

I think it’s the same thing as being part of any kind of community, but the faith aspect is what makes it so much more personal. The only way for people to experience change or to bring about change in a community like Messiah, is for people to be a part of the community, so the only way to bring about change is for gay students to get to know each other, and for
other students to get to know them, and realize that so much of life does
not revolve around sexuality. There are really great people that are gay;
there are really great people that are straight. And then from there... how
can we work together on our faith journey?

Dara

Dara is an energetic person whose personality gives off a lot of poetry. It is
exciting for me to write about my experiences with her because in the brief amount of
time we got to talk and hang out, I feel like she let me get to know her. She is open to
conversation while throwing jokes and random interjections at every break. When we
were talking, I had the impression her mind was racing a mile and a half a minute,
carefully choosing the words she wanted to say but also throwing in random thoughts.

Because I found such a unique talent in her writing, I have decided to paste most
of her story from her online profile right in so you can read her words exactly. I could
paraphrase and tell her story like I want to, but I find her words to be lyrical and honest.
My interpretation would skew the candor and perhaps bore you. Although, I will interrupt
periodically to add my observations and additions, clarifications, and elaborations she
made.

\n
First, I'm a girl. I like to form a picture of the person I'm reading about,
and I get annoyed if I can't tell their gender, so I'll just clear that up right
now: I'm a girl. Female. XX

My life story is pretty average...I grew up in white-bred suburbia; I have
one mother, one father (still married), two sisters and a cat. This story
doesn't have a moral (unless you find one I didn't think of). This is just my
life, as it pertains to my sexuality, in a rather large nutshell.

Dara pointed out that it was important for her to mention she grew up in an
average home because many have the misconception that homosexuals come from
abused backgrounds. She lived a pretty normal, average life and it should not be assumed
her sexuality is a product of trauma in her past. I noticed all through-out our
conversation, she thinks much like a psychologist and this shows in how she analyzes her
own life as well as others.

When I was little, 8 at the oldest, I was reading a People magazine I had
stolen from my mom (as I often did), and there was a section in the back
on swimsuits from different times and cultures. I was curious, interested,
and... something else that I couldn't quite understand. That is the first gay-
clue that I can remember, but I also remember that, at that time, it wasn't
an unusual feeling, so who knows when they started.

I had little incidents similar to that through most of my childhood, and
they were often accompanied by a very vague sense of "what am I feeling,
and why is it directed toward a woman?" Never, in a conscious sense,
though. It was more like an undirected, nebulous sort of confusion. It
never congealed into a conscious thought until I was about 12. I was lying
in bed, staring at the moon, and thinking "I think I might be bi, or gay, or
something." At that point I hadn't even had a real crush, and I was just
going on my vague feelings, so, for lack of decent evidence, I decided to
just wait for a little while and see what happened. Yes, I was actually
thinking in terms of "evidence" and the need for proper scientific
procedure before any important decision. I was also aware that what I was
doing was making a decision--not on whether or not to be gay, mind you,
but on which of several more-or-less arbitrary labels to wear. That's
probably why I was comfortable with the "wait and see" approach.

Dara seems concerned with labels, or lack thereof. Her concluding thoughts in our
interview impressed me and made me thinking even after our conversation about her
philosophy on the label gay in her life. It is evident she has thought it out extensively and
has rested at a conclusion perfect for her situation:

I use the term gay because people know it and it's more or less accurate.
But my sense is more... I am Dara, and I don't know what the word for
that is. I'm not entirely gay and not entirely female. I shudder at the word,
so I don't use it, but a lot of people use the word "queer" or "gender
queer" because I have the sense that I fall between a lot of lines. But I
don't feel defined by the word gay at all. I don't have a sense of identity
form the politics of it. I know who I am, and who I am involves liking women. I use convenient labels but I don’t drive any identity from them.

And now we continue with her story:

So, a few years go by, and "Amy" comes along (names have been changed to protect the unknowing) Amy was (and probably still is) sweet, playful, from what I could tell, fairly "pure minded," and absolutely adorable. She was in two of my classes, my sophomore year of high school, and we were friendly, if not really friends. Despite not knowing her all that well, I found myself being increasingly drawn to her. I wanted to be near her when she was around, and when she was with her friends I would watch for the chance to see her laugh, or even smile. My heart would jump if she walked by unexpectedly. I told myself that it was just recognition of a beautiful soul (anybody else try that one? yeah...I couldn't convince myself either). Then the dreams started...the ones where I couldn't figure out my gender...that was just weird. I remembered that conversation I had had with myself back when I was 12...I had waited long enough.

I came out to my friends a month or two later, and they took it rather well. The responses ranged from, "Well, I do think it's wrong, but I love you, and this doesn't change anything," to "You mean you like lesbian stuff? *shrug* OK."

I was about 16 then. That was also when I seriously thought about the moral side of the question.

My family is pretty liberal and most of my Christian friends are more conservative, so, while I didn't always believe it was OK to be gay, I always knew that there were Christians who did. That made it easier to question the popular Christian opinion. I had picked up the notion from my friends that the Bible condemns homosexuality, and that's what I went with for a little while (maybe a year or two). Then I started looking at what science said. See, I hold Science just below God. Science is His tool, and if you want to know what God is up to, look at Science. Geology will tell you how He made the Earth. Evolution, genetics and biology tell us how he made living things. Genetics, biology, evolution, neurology, psychology and a dash of random chance all mixed together...well that's how He made you. So, I check out what the various -ologists have to say on the subject, and most of them agree: sexual orientation is decided around the time of birth, and possibly before. Now why would God do that, and then condemn the person for it? It would be like condemning somebody for having cerebral palsy or brown hair. I didn't have an answer, but I wasn't comfortable saying that the Bible was wrong, so I took the Swiss approach: I was officially neutral.
That's about when I figured myself out. I didn't want to suddenly say, "Oh, well now that it applies to me, I think being gay is just fine," so I became overly skeptical of pro-gay writing. If I was going to come to the conclusion that it was ok to be gay, then I wanted it to be because I really believed it, not because it was convenient. I read about the original meanings of the classic "anti-gay" verses in Greek and Hebrew. I read about the Roman culture, and various cultures from the Old Testament. I read about medieval thoughts on sexuality (surprisingly relevant, because that's when Scripture was being translated and assembled into the Bible, and it's when a lot of our modern views of sexuality have their roots). I was resisting it...but I was convinced that homosexuality is part of God's plan for the world.

So, glad that's all settled! Time to go to college and get me some book-learnin'! Erm....how are my roommates going to handle this?

The first few weeks of my freshman year was one of the most emotionally intense periods of my life. You know how when you're nervous about something, the muscles in your chest tighten painfully? That became a way of life--so tight that, at first I would be almost doubled over in pain, and so often that after a while I hardly noticed.

I spent a week or two in an internal battle...on one side was the fear of what could happen if I came out. What if my roommate turned out to be really homophobic? They might cut me, or freak out and want nothing to do with me...or...or... I was most afraid of the things I couldn't think of. On the other side was the feeling that I was hiding from, and lying to, my friends. We had hit it off immediately, and grown pretty close over the first few weeks. I hated the feeling that I was lying to them.

Fear vs. pain: round 1 *ding*

Fear cracked eventually, pain won out, and, with nausea inducing amounts of adrenaline in my system, I told them both, individually, within a few days of each other. A few days later we actually talked about it. They were cool about it! One said later that she often just forgot I was gay. We grew closer with the mutual feeling of "Hey, she trusts me!" One roomie transferred this year, but the other is still kicking around, and we hang out often.

This brings us to last summer. When I got home I realized how much I had walked on eggshells while I was here: part of it was having to check everything I said and thought, to make sure I wasn't going to freak anybody out, but mostly just having to think about it all the time. There are a lot of people who think that my existence is an affront to God, that I'm "to'evah:" unclean...an abomination. I can forget about that at home,
but this is the type of place where people like that are going to congregate...that makes it harder to forget about. I started seriously thinking about transferring to a state school closer to home, and came to Messiah with the thought "this will be my last year, unless I find a *really* good reason to stay." Still, I felt like I was running away from the problem. I rarely pray pleadingly, but I did just before I came here. I asked God to tell me where he wanted me, and, in hind-sight, I guess it was a little pretentious to tell Him that I had more-or-less made up my mind, so if he wanted me here, he would need to conk me over the head. He did. Almost as soon as I got here, almost everything I saw, every quote I heard, every Bible verse I found taped to a wall screamed to me. "Stay!" they were saying, "you can see a problem here, so try to fix it!" It was the same message I had gotten last year, and I was afraid of it then too.

I suppose, as I can't predict the future, now would be a good place to end my history.

Dara is still here at Messiah feeling quite confident in the work God has called her to do. She is working toward awareness here on campus of what it is like to be gay, or just generally, different at Messiah. She wants to bring into light the other perspective and get people thinking a little differently than they did in high school. She is a strong believer in education working it's magic in making people more open-minded and willing to intelligently discuss issues we may not feel comfortable with at first. She wrote an editorial for the Swinging Bridge last semester on gay marriage which may have influenced the two articles in the opinions sections this past February. First, John Gleim wrote on same-sex marriage from a Christian viewpoint we don't hear very often: "As far as the Christian standpoint is concerned, we ought to be very careful in responding to Christian leaders who condemn progress toward gay rights, which is really just a campaign for civil rights for all people" (Gleim, Swinging Bridge). The next week a response to the first article was written by A.J. Nolte with a response to the three main points in Gleim's article and a generally more traditional Christian look at gay marriage: "I am not so much against gay marriage as I am supportive of traditional marriage"
(Nolte, Swinging Bridge) (reference Gleim and Nolte Swinging Bridge articles in Appendix A.5 & A.6).

The important thing is people are talking. Dara worked with the Campus Ministries office and some faculty in planning an alternate chapel on the subject. Conversation creates education and understanding. Without conversation we never would have had the civil rights movement or women’s suffrage. At a smaller scale, without healthy conversation and debate at Messiah, we probably would not have school dances or alternate chapels today.

THEORETICAL ANALYSIS

In speaking to seven gay students at Messiah, four of their stories included here, I am convinced being gay at this school makes one’s overall experience different than that of a heterosexual student. Yes, everyone has different college experiences, but the experience of a gay student at a small private Christian college is challenging and forces the student to make decisions he or she normally would not have to make at a larger, secular school. When interviewing the students, I asked then to describe an average day; none could explain anything being notably different than that of a heterosexual student. Day to day homosexual students live just like heterosexual students, they attend classes, eat breakfast (sometimes), lunch, and dinner, and hang out with friends, etc. However, because they must endure the burden of living two lives, a private gay life, and public straight life, or because they have few friends who accept them understand what it is like to be gay here, they may graduate and remember their college years a time of isolation and not being accepted.
I will explore the reasons why gay students’ experiences are different than straight students at Messiah. In conjunction with these reasons are several commonalities I recognized in the four stories. After I talked to seven students in a 6-week period, I felt extremely overwhelmed and helpless. You also may feel the same as I, it may be difficult to find commonalities or meaning in four unique stories as one, but in applying etic analysis, an outsider’s perspective, I was able to come up with two main themes. All the students expressed feelings of dissonance between the institution’s policy and stance on homosexuality and their personal beliefs. This dissonance led to feelings of isolation, loneliness and rejection. The second issue, common to all the students, was that of coming out. The numbers varied, some were out to many, others out to only a few, but the commonality is that they all struggled with knowing when and who to come out to.

**Cognitive Dissonance**

Gay students at Messiah have to deal with the knowledge that the school is not in support of a homosexual lifestyle. In some Bible classes or other classes they learn the interpretation that the Bible calls homosexuality a sin. What they hear in classes, in social circles, and from the school as a whole does not mesh with what they feel inside. This may cause cognitive dissonance, discord between behavior and belief, a theory developed by Leon Festinger (1957) which explains that humans have a natural desire for consistency in their lives, thus the tension of dissonance urges them to find a way to justify or change their feelings or beliefs. Festinger suggests three possible strategies for reducing dissonance: change the behavior that creates the dissonance, add new cognitions to reduce the dissonance, or change the social environment that reinforces the dissonance.
Cognitive dissonance not only causes psychological discomforts, but also physiological stress. Richard Troiden (1989) describes the second state of gay/lesbian identity development as “identity confusion,” where cognitive dissonance may be present leading to a “sense of isolation that includes (a) feeling alone in every social situation; (b) feeling there is no one to talk to; (c) feeling the need to emotionally distance oneself from others; (d) fearing that same-sex friendships may be misinterpreted; and (e) feeling hopeless about the future” (Ryan and Futterman 1998). All these characteristics are present in the four students’ stories. They all feel like there are few people at Messiah who will support, accept, or understand them. These feelings may be true of any homosexual student at any college, but the dissonance would be on larger at a Christian college because the students have to deal with dissonance not only related to social factors, but also their faith. At Messiah, homosexual students are encouraged, either by latent or manifest means, to suppress homosexual behavior. It is important that I stress behavior; Messiah does not outwardly reject the condition of homosexuality, but rather the behavior. Gay Messiah students may feel two kinds of dissonance. One situation may be that they are certain they are gay but are forced to suppress their feelings through social norms and policy so in turn they may act heterosexual, thus resulting in cognitive dissonance. Another way the student may experience dissonance is in that individual’s own faith journey. In learning the view that homosexuality is a sin, students may believe they are homosexual but then find it contradicts with their faith. When a person feels discomfort, guilt, or doubt in relation to dissonance, he or she will most likely pursue a belief change.

**Coping Methods**
Gay students may adopt various coping strategies in order to deal with dissonance: trying to pass as straight; rationalizing that same-sex attractions are only a phase; avoiding situations that may confirm sexual identity; denying same-sex attractions; trying to change sexual orientation through heterosexual dating or sexual activities; and using drugs and alcohol (Ryan and Futterman 1998). Again most of these strategies were mentioned by the four students I interviewed. Laura dated men and denied her sexual attraction to women when she began struggling with feelings of homosexuality. Tori mentioned that she wrote off her homosexual behavior as just a phase and tried to suppress the feelings, later finding them coming up over and over again.

In a study on Christian lesbians, Kimberley Mahaffy found that in regard to a remedy to cognitive dissonance, over half of her respondents changed their beliefs rather than “leave the church or live with the tension” (Mahaffy). These changes are very similar to what gay Messiah students expressed allowed them to both be a homosexual and a Christian. “Such changes were facilitated by reading about other gay Christians' experiences, meeting other gay Christians, participating in therapy, recognizing that spirituality and religion are separate entities, and disregarding the portions of Scripture that are condemning while affirming beliefs and traditions that embrace homosexuals” (Mahaffy).

Coming out

Why are the gay students I spoke to fearful of coming out? Six out of the seven students choose, or while attending here, chose not to be out to the college, only a few
select friends, and the one who considers herself out to most at Messiah, still expressed some concern with her name being attached to her story for this ethnography. Two of the seven I spoke to and observed did not feel comfortable with me including their stories in this project because even without pseudonyms, they felt there was too much risk involved in their stories being public information. I found it interesting that all the students expressed frustration with having to live in the closet, explaining it “felt compromising and suppressive” but saw coming “out” having greater consequences than keeping one’s sexuality to oneself.

Aside from the individual’s reasons for not coming out to Messiah, there are two main reasons I see for gay students deciding to not come out: 1) Messiah’s policy and the fear of consequences from the school and 2) the social stigma connected with being gay on a Christian campus.

Many students expressed a fear of coming out to the Messiah campus as a whole because the institution has set rules on homosexual behavior. Many are nervous about the non-stated or written “rule” that homosexual students are asked to go to counseling if outed intentionally or unintentionally. The students had many questions about the Engle Center or school’s procedures as a whole for a student openly gay on campus. Perhaps they will now have more understanding and clarification on the way the school at least intends to treat homosexual students, both in the Engle Center’s counseling services and the Community Development office.

There is a lot of heavy baggage one must carry associated with being gay. Just like being any other minority, being gay involves facing feelings of inferiority daily such as the heterosexual-friendly language our society uses or other larger issues such as not
being allowed to marry. Quite similar to how language and the written word were constructed before gender-inclusive language, there is "a presumption of heterosexuality which is encoded in language, in institutional practices and the encounters of everyday life" (Epstein & Johnson, 1994). Gay men and lesbians are subject to a range of injustices and disadvantages as a whole and whereas the members of other social minority groups have their families, schools, churches, and other cultural organizations to serve as a buffer against hostility and humiliation in the larger society—and to provide the framework for building a positive sense of self—lesbian and gay youth often have to manage the stigma of being homosexual without such supports (Ryan and Futterman 1998). Another difference between being of a racial minority or gender minority and a sexual minority is that a sexual minority can often hide his or her status but then this leads to many feelings of isolation and inner conflict which I discussed in the previous section. When a homosexual comes out a social stigma, “a mark of discredit or unworthiness” is attached to that person (Lundy & Warme, ). Along with the stigma comes social distance, or a “lack of closeness in social interaction” (Lundy & Warme,). People with a social stigma may in turn have a difficult time getting a job or a place to live. This may seem like something that would happen only to a gay student coming out in the larger society, not at Messiah. But there would be a large chance of a social stigma applied to a gay student at Messiah where feelings against homosexuality may be stronger because of some religious defenses.

So who does come out, whether to a small number of students or the larger campus as a whole? Six of the seven students I interviewed were women, giving me a curiosity as to why there are more gay women at Messiah than men. Is that the case, are
there really more lesbians than gay men at Messiah? Perhaps. According to the document titled “Messiah at a Glance,” 37% of our student body is male, while 63% are female, so maybe the disproportion of males to females accounts for the imbalance in the number of gay men and women willing to talk about their experiences. It is also interesting to note that one man who talked about his experiences as a student at Messiah, Mark, is an alumnus and has been out for a long time, so he has nothing to lose in talking about his homosexuality.

There may also be greater reasons for this interesting discord in the numbers of gay men and women at Messiah. Many psychologists, social psychologists, and sociologists have explored the topic of homophobia and have found more men to be homophobic than women. Homophobia refers to fear and hatred of homosexuals and to anti-homosexual beliefs and prejudices. It is generally more acceptable for women to be more masculine than it is for men to be more feminine and labels of femininity and masculinity, or lack thereof are connected to being homosexual in our society. In Gregory M. Herek’s “On Heterosexual Masculinity” he discusses homophobia in men, how they are more prone to it than women, and why. Males are more homophobic in their emotional reactions to homosexuality, and homophobia is also correlated with traditional views of gender and family roles (Herek, 1986). Herek has also found homophobia directly related to masculinity. The definition of maleness and/or masculinity is essentially heterosexual and defined against or in opposition to homosexuality, as well as femininity. Homophobia is a constitutive part of heterosexual masculinities, and this involves the expulsion or denial of homoerotic desire (Epstein & Johnson, 1994).
Growing up, men are continually faced with the threat of being called a “pansy,” “wimp,” “sissy” or other belittling terms for feminine-like behavior. The face the continuous challenge of proving that they are not gay; boys and men are kept in line by homophobia. Homophobia not only affects homosexual men but all men because it leads men to limit their loving and close friendships with each other.

Because of these theories on homophobia, I propose that we are not lacking gay men at Messiah, rather those that are students here choose not to come out because there are many more repercussions involved with a man coming out to a group of his friends than a woman coming out to her friends. According to one gay woman I interviewed, when she came out to her friends, some started acting physically different around her, like pulling away when she touched them, but eventually that faded. My guess is that a man would have a much harder with his physical relationship with his male friends after coming out. Every high five, handshake, or pat on the back would be interpreted as more than just a friendly gesture. These factors are enough to cause gay men on campus to stay in the closet and perhaps contribute to the lack of male involvement in my project.

CONCLUSION

What next? In learning four people’s stories about their experiences, real and sometimes mundane, but other times heartbreaking, should we be compelled to do anything? Messiah College is always in the process of change. Someday the homosexual policy may be changed or worded differently. I am unsure at this time which way the policy would go, more lenient or less lenient on homosexual behavior but my best guess is that in the far future, it could only get more lenient. If we look at our history and the
trend in policy, either loosening or restricting the student body behavior, I think anyone could see that overall it has loosened. However, is homosexuality a non-negotiable for a Christian college? Some may feel policies on homosexual behavior are not and should not be influenced by time. What seems to be the greater more relevant question, is will there be more research on what the Biblical text says about homosexuality? If scholars continually disagree on what the Bible says is culturally relevant and what is not, then we may continually disagree in the Christian community about what is right and wrong when it comes to creating rules.

Regardless of the homosexual policy here at Messiah, a gay student may feel the policy does not matter because abstaining from homosexual behavior is not the issue. The issue is more the atmosphere at Messiah toward gay students. Gay students have expressed interest in students that can talk to who are supportive of them and the being behind that effort. It is my observation that they have had enough of compromising themselves and hiding behind a controversial website. The need for support, whether in college, out of college, man or woman, gay or straight, is universal. Without it we are lost and can develop serious emotional trauma and developmental delays. I am not implying that the homosexual students are without any support but they are constantly fighting a force which says “you are not sinning, you are wrong, you are unlike everyone else in the world, etc;” that opposition would be enough to make anyone want to deny their innermost beings.

Throughout the process of this project I thought often about what my new thoughts and feelings will be on the topic of homosexuality. And although I find it
necessary to only present the four students’ stories without preaching my own tale, I will share one conclusion I have found true and perhaps non-arguable by both sides of the debate. Is homosexuality a sin? I don’t know, and I am fine with not knowing and letting God place judgment. But if it is or is not, our actions are required to be the same. We as a Christian community have a responsibility to love Tori, Laura, Mark, and Dara and all gay men and women. And no, I don’t mean, “love the sinner, hate the sin,” I actually mean love everyone. Is there anyone who has never or will never sin? According to Christian theology, there is only one answer to that question. In stating the phrase “love the sinner, hate the sin,” we are choosing to overlook two latent sins, pride and self-righteousness. If homosexuality is not a sin, then we are burdening a massive group of people a grave injustice. We have been a part of oppressing many groups of people in the past and present, Native Americans, women, and African Americans; I hope when we consider what rights we should give homosexuals, we remember mistakes we have already made.

Most students at Messiah don’t know a single homosexual student so it may be easy to think there is nothing we can do to make gay students feel comfortable and part of the Messiah College community, but we all should be striving to offer a safe and welcoming campus to all students whether we know everyone’s situation or not. Let’s revisit the idea of cognitive dissonance. Right now you may be feeling some dissonance because you have just learned the stories of four normal students who sometimes face difficult times in their lives because of their sexual preferences. The dissonance may stem from the opinions you heard from your parents growing up at as a child, or the views on homosexuality you learned in the church. As you learn more about homosexuality and as
you hopefully make gay friends or meet gay peers, you may start to question what you have learned from others. You may have to adjust your beliefs in order to reduce the dissonance or you may decide to change the social environment that reinforces the dissonance. If Tori, Laura, Mark and Dara have left you with any desire to know more about their stories or questions about what it is like to be gay at Messiah, please visit the Gay at Messiah website and become part of the much needed support network for homosexual students at Messiah College.
References


interviews


Appendix A
# Appendix A.1

## Taxonomy of Gay At Messiah Website

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Changing Content</th>
<th>Daily News Sources</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bush's marriage amendment</td>
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<td>opposition to gay marriage</td>
</tr>
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</table>

From pages of stories:

- former faculty or staff: 2
- current faculty or staff: 1
- alumni: 44
- current students: 7

1. out
1. left Messiah but coming back
3. not out at Messiah
2. straight students support

Highlighted:

- quotations
- events

Permanent Content:

- my site
- login
- join
- about you
- FAQ
- local churches
  - Harrisburg area
  - Philly area
- online resources
- hotlines
  - National hotline
  - suicide
  - G&L of Harrisburg
- apologia
  - 8 former students
- online resources
- about site
About This Site

If you are gay, think you might be gay, or care for someone who is, and you are or were ...

- a student
- an alumnus
- a faculty or staff member
- or a prospective student

of Messiah College. This site is for you.

Purpose ...

to end invisibility.
Each fall another set of gay students come to Messiah, each student feeling alone and isolated. Each spring another set of gay students graduate never knowing other students around them who also share their questions, fears or struggles. Being openly frank about one's sexuality, even in a casual way, feels dangerous at Messiah College. There is risk of punishment by the college and fear of harm or shunning by one's peers. Uncensored by the powers-that-be within the college, we hope that this Web site can provided a context in which we can share our lives and our concerns.

to end isolation and loneliness.
Our invisibility leaves us bereft of support by one another. Because of fear we are alone without others who share our concerns in a loving way with no pre-set agenda as to how we should choose to live our lives.

to provide mutual support.
No one should have to deal with being gay in isolation without the support of others. Knowing that we do not have the resources to provide professional counseling or other types of services, we hope that our common experience, wisdom and care can provide emotional and spiritual support to one another.

to make life more bearable,
and to the extent possible, more tolerable for people who find themselves struggling with the issue of being gay or who declare themselves to be gay at Messiah College.
Principles ...

Since we are related to Messiah College in one way or another, most likely all of us are or have been on a spiritual, Christian journey of some kind. However, it should not be assumed that we all share the same faith or theology at this point in time. Many of us feel harmed and alienated from Christianity in general and the institutional church in particular. However, we do share a common identity of wondering, being, having been or knowing someone gay at Messiah.

Interactions with one another are expected to be carried out with respect and an acceptance of our common humanity and our God-given dignity. Diversity of beliefs and opinions and even the conflict that can result are expected and encouraged. We expect anyone entering such a dialog to be thoughtful and respectful of others. We encourage people to share from their personal experience rather than telling others what their experience should be. We encourage people to question rather than to tell. Abusive language, "Bible thumping," (repeated quotations of scripture without any additional, substantive content) or "flaming" will not be tolerated.
Appendix A.3

The Community Covenant of Messiah College

All of Life Under the Lordship of Christ

In the motto, "Christ Preeminent," the Messiah College community affirms that life draws meaning from submission to Christ and service to others. Our philosophy statement affirms the triune God as the creator of all that is, the source of all truth. As beings created in the image of God, we have special responsibilities and challenges. In our community of believer-scholars we affirm the interrelatedness of what we believe, the way we live, and the way we learn. Our search for truth and commitment to Christ connect us not only to each other but also to God's creation and God's people throughout history.

Within this community, it is not easy to find the right balance of challenge and support for each individual. Personal freedom and community obligation sometimes seem to be in tension as individuals work to integrate belief and behavior. This growth producing process benefits from the dynamics of a diverse but concerned community, as well as the sense that the lordship of Christ and a commitment to being part of the body of Christ are key values to guide us.

With the task before us of searching for truth and promoting personal growth, we join together in the hope of achieving more together than we could separately. We agree to pursue the obligations and challenges of community membership with integrity, respecting our institutional heritage, and practicing biblical accountability.

Our submission to the lordship of Christ has many implications. Some of the primary implications can be seen in terms of benefits and responsibilities based on our relationship to God, to his creation, and to the group of people who constitute the Messiah College community.

The benefits and responsibilities of living under the lordship of Christ focus first on our relationship to God. We affirm that there is but one true God and that his Word is our guide for faith and life. Because of the importance of knowing God and his Word, we affirm the importance of the spiritual disciplines in corporate and individual life. Prayer, Bible study, meditation, fellowship, and group worship should be regular activities in the believer's life. Because God is a faithful keeper of covenants, we affirm the importance of fidelity and covenant keeping in our relationship with God and in our relationships with each other.

Scripture guides us in knowing how to live out the impact of God's grace in our lives. We are to honor and revere him in the way that we worship, serve, and enjoy him. As teachers and learners we see our activities as acts of service and honor to him. Because of the love which he initiates by grace, we respond in love to him and to those he has created. His love gives us a sense of meaning and intrinsic worth that goes beyond any earned value or identity.

The benefits and responsibilities of living under the lordship of Christ focus also on our relationship to God's creation. As people created in God's image we are to follow Christ's example in preaching the good news to the poor, binding the brokenhearted, proclaiming freedom to the captives, and restoring sight to the blind. As those committed to living out the teachings of Scripture, we are to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly. We are to bring peace and unity where there is conflict and discrimination. We are to respect people and to value life above material wealth. Because we see people as having intrinsic worth, we avoid gossip, manipulative behavior, and sexist or racist attitudes or behaviors, stressing instead integrity, commitment, and compassion in relationships with other.

This respect for creation also shows itself in our treatment of natural resources. As stewards we are to
be faithful in preserving the environment and in maintaining the balances within the creation order. We are to use our intellect and creativity to preserve and enhance the creation, using its resources prudently in light of the uncertain limits to history and life as we know it.

The benefits and responsibilities of living under the lordship of Christ focus also on our relationship to the group of people who constitute the Messiah College community. We recognize that significant diversity exists within our community, bringing a richness that results from varying ability levels, backgrounds, and interests. That individual diversity, however, must come within the bounds by which the community defines itself. Individuals who join the community must also be willing to live with integrity within those boundaries if the community is to function. While acknowledging the difficulty of applying general principles to specific behaviors and contexts, we agree to the following guidelines as applied to students in the Student Handbook and to employees in the Personnel and Policies Manual:

1. As a community we commit ourselves to academic integrity and excellence in a cooperative, rather than a competitive environment. We strive to work together responsibly and honestly in exploring and understanding the world around us, searching for truth within all academic areas.
2. As a community we commit ourselves to expressing Christian values in responsible decisions and actions. While not all Christians agree about the application of Christian values to specific situations, we expect honesty in dialoguing about and applying Christian values to things such as the use of language, leisure time and entertainment options, observance of the Lord’s Day, and personal appearance.
3. As a community we commit ourselves to balancing personal freedom with concern for the moral standards of others. In addition, rules are designed to promote a campus atmosphere that is most conducive to personal well-being, corporate service, and the achievement of the College’s distinctives, goals, and educational objectives. Prohibitions about the use of alcoholic beverages, tobacco products, and the abuse or unauthorized use of prescription or nonprescription drugs relate most clearly to concerns about personal well-being and the Scriptural mandate to care for our bodies. Gambling is prohibited because we want to be wise stewards of the resources entrusted to us by God.
4. As a community we believe that certain scriptural teachings apply to us as they have to all people in all cultures. Our lives are to be characterized by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. We are to use our gifts in doing such things as serving, teaching, encouraging, giving, leading, and showing mercy. In contrast, we are to avoid such sinful practices as drunkenness, stealing, dishonesty, profanity, occult practices, sexual intercourse outside of marriage, homosexual behavior, and sexually exploitative or abusive behavior. Although wrong attitudes such as greed, jealousy, pride, lust, prejudice, and factiousness are harder to detect than wrong behaviors, both are prohibited as sinful and destructive of community life and of the body of Christ.

With this understanding of our benefits and responsibilities as members of the Messiah College Community, we covenant together as a community of believer-scholars to pursue the challenge of living out this document. We commit ourselves to pursuing the distinctives, goals, and educational objectives of the College. We commit ourselves to seeking increased understanding of the Christian faith and applying that faith to specific academic disciplines and world problems. We commit ourselves to encouraging growth in others by living as examples, applying our faith to personal lifestyle issues, confronting inappropriate attitudes or behaviors directly, and affirming the evidence of God’s work in others. We will strive to use our talents and time, both in and out of class, for the benefit of the community and the glory of God, working together to bring all of life under the lordship of Christ.
Appendix A.4

Messiah College Student Handbook 2003-2004

Excerpt taken from “Sexuality and Relationships Policy”
For full handbook: http://www.messiah.edu/handbook/resources/0304hb.pdf

God created sexuality. Certain sexual drives and characteristics are part of God’s plan to help individuals see their need for other people and to help them enjoy life. In giving us this gift, however, God also gave us the freedom to abuse it. In this area, as in others, we have choices to make. The College affirms the goodness of sexuality and encourages students to live according to the guidelines set in Scripture for sexual behavior. All members of the community need each other. People need friends and colleagues who are men and friends and colleagues who are women. Personal friendships should not be limited to just one half of humanity. Certain traits should characterize all male-female relationships. Honesty, open communication, mutual edification, and humor are helpful. The physical side of relationships is important.
All people have affection needs and touch needs that are met through relationships with others. While healthy brother-sister touch patterns are appropriate for most heterosexual friendships, more intimate physical contact may be appropriate in more committed, exclusive relationships. Deciding what is appropriate should be a process involving discussion, reason, and input from friends outside the relationship, in addition to consideration of biblical guidelines. While Christians disagree about the parameters of appropriate physical intimacy, the College supports the position that neither sexual intercourse outside of marriage nor homosexual behavior is considered proper for Christians. Students who are victims of abused sexuality are encouraged to seek help from a counselor or other appropriate person. If someone at the College has been the abuser, the College would like your assistance in dealing appropriately with that person.
Appendix A.5

Swinging Bridge Article

February 20, 2004

http://www.messiah.edu/org/swbridge/archive/20Feb04.pdf

Same-sex marriage: A Christian viewpoint
John Gleim, Staff Writer

For those who are unaware, on February 3, just two weeks ago, the Massachusetts Supreme Court declared the state’s ban on same-sex marriages “unconstitutional,” giving state lawmakers six months to draft and pass legislation reflecting their decision. This past Thursday, San Francisco mayor Gavin Newson ordered that marriage licenses be issued for gay and lesbian couples within his jurisdiction, and more than one hundred couples have been married in the city since. Response from the Christian right has been swift and decisive. The Family Research Council condemned the Massachusetts court’s ruling, commenting that it constituted “a clear case of the courts overruling the majority opinion of the people.” In San Francisco, both the Campaign for California Families and the Alliance Defense Fund (among many others) voiced their displeasure at the mayor’s actions—the latter went so far as to file for a restraining order against the city of San Francisco, which was rejected on technical grounds.

The general atmosphere at Messiah College, which is sheltered from any real debate on this topic since most of us don’t know any openly gay students on campus, provides a safe haven of sorts for viewpoints and attitudes in sync with the Alliance Defense Fund and other groups determined to deny the civil right of marriage to American homosexuals. I am convinced, however, that these attitudes are the result of misunderstandings about the real implications of debate on this issue. There are two principal confusions I would like to help resolve. The first is the faulty notion that the Supreme Court ought to be making its rulings in accordance with the will of the American people. The second is the even more erroneous belief that granting homosexuals the right to marry somehow constitutes an attack on Christianity in general.

Focus on the Family, which is responsible for radio broadcasts, publications and a website, all of which collectively reach and influence thousands of Christians, proudly proclaims its commitment to stopping “judicial tyranny,” and
the work of “activist judges” bent on ignoring “the will of the people.” Roughly translated, this means that as a conservative organization, Focus on the Family is generally opposed to any judicial decision which diminishes the conservative influence on American culture. So, in responding to rulings which violate their Christian sensibilities, they are more than willing to throw around terms like “tyranny,” and “oligarchy,” hoping to scare the public into thinking the courts are some how out of control, doing something actually wrong. The fact of the matter is, the entire purpose of having an independent judiciary is so that judges can make the right decisions, even when they’re unpopular with the people and their representatives. If the courts were to base their decisions on popular opinion, instead of on what the Constitution allows, then minority groups would always find themselves being suppressed by the majority.

In the case of same-sex marriage, the courts are simply protecting the homosexual community from the sentiments of a large, conservative, vaguely Christian majority. Regardless of anyone’s beliefs about the morality of homosexuality from a Christian standpoint, it ought to be clear: denying a group the right of full participation in society is nothing but plain, old-fashioned discrimination.

As far as the Christian standpoint is concerned, we ought to be very careful in responding to Christian leaders who condemn progress toward gay rights, which is really just a campaign for civil rights for all people. The idea that allowing homosexuals to marry will somehow degrade the fabric of the American family seems to ignore the fact that the fabric of the American family is already disintegrating quite nicely on its own. It’s hard to stomach the notion that allowing two people who love each other to marry is going to lead to the destruction of all western society, when in the next moment we can find ourselves eating up the latest “entertainment” news about overnight celebrity marriages. Prohibiting gay marriage isn’t stopping the trend toward immorality in our society, and it certainly isn’t stopping homosexuals from being in committed, loving relationships, and oftentimes raising (perfectly well-adjusted) children—what it is doing is preventing those children and partners from receiving federal benefits and aid, such as social security.

One final word.

Our faith heritage contains two parallel stories: that of Christians who have fought bravely for human and civil rights, even when doing so was unpopular, and that of Christians who have consistently appealed to the status quo and
attempted to use their faith and scripture to continue to discriminate against groups unlike their own. Each of us, in considering these issues, ought to remember just that, because if the course of human history has shown us any-thing, it is that that humanity’s call for justice will not be silenced.
Appendix A.6

Swinging Bridge Article

February 27, 2004
http://www.messiah.edu/org/swbridge/archive/27Feb04.pdf

Same-sex marriage: A different Christian viewpoint

A.J. Nolte, Staff Writer

As a life-long member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, debates over any and all aspects of the concept of homosexuality are not new to me, nor are the arguments put forward in last week’s article on same-sex marriage. The author has essentially three premises, which are common to most proponents of the so-called “homosexual agenda” and to the American left in general. These three premises—the acceptability of judicial activism, the benign nature of homosexual marriage vis-à-vis traditional marriage and a firm belief that homosexual marriage is inherently a “civil rights issue”—each contains some serious flaws, as does the underlying message that to oppose gay marriage is to oppose gay people. It is my hope to briefly address each of these points.

Let me begin with the question of “judicial tyranny.” Last week’s article asserted that when conservatives oppose judicial tyranny, they oppose the court ruling against “the will of the people.” Certainly there is some erroneous conservative rhetoric to this effect floating around, but it is not an accurate reflection of the conservative opposition to judicial tyranny. As you are doubtless all aware, our government (both state and national) has three branches. The legislative branch makes laws, the executive branch enforces laws and the judicial branch at the highest levels ensures that these laws are in accordance with the constitution of either the state or the United States. When a court goes beyond interpretation to actually create a new law, they have usurped the prerogative of the legislature. This is judicial tyranny. The difference between legitimate interpretation and judicial tyranny may be illustrated by two examples. The court decision in Brown v. Board of Education which says that separate is inherently unequal, and therefore unconstitutional with regard to education, is not judicial tyranny, since Brown was merely applying an already
existing constitutional amendment (namely the fourteenth). The Massachusetts court’s decision regarding same-sex marriage is judicial tyranny because it has usurped the prerogative of the legislature without due warrant. I seriously doubt whether John Adams, when drafting the constitution of Massachusetts, had any intention of explicitly or implicitly mandating homosexual marriage. Such a mandate must now come from the legislature, if it is to come at all.

The second point worth addressing is that of homosexual versus traditional marriage. Here, I think, a distinction must be made between homosexual marriage and civil unions. A homosexual marriage would, in my view, further undermine the already crumbling institution of traditional marriage (incidentally, many conservatives, myself included, are as outraged by the rampant divorce and Hollywood’s cheapening of marriage which we find around us as we are concerned about the possible repercussions of gay marriage). Marriage is a sacred and divinely-ordained institution whose roots run back to Genesis and extend throughout both Old and New Testaments. It is an institution to which all the major monotheistic religions (and many non-monotheistic faiths for that matter) have subscribed for centuries. In its decision in Lawrence v. Texas, the Supreme Court sited international law to overturn the Texas sodomy law. If we are to accept the court’s claim that laws other than the constitution are admissible (which never should have been done in the first place), there is no excuse for denying the historic laws regarding marriage that run back to the Jewish roots of our western civilization. And as Christians, can we ignore 2,000 years of lock-step support for this traditional concept, despite all other divisions? Given this, how can enshrining another form of marriage, no matter how benign it may seem to our “enlightened” and “tolerant” western sensibilities, not weaken the traditional understanding of marriage? Add to this the fact that in Canada, where gay marriage has largely been legalized, the New York Times reports that there has been no mad rush to the altar by homosexual couples. Is it any wonder that many defenders of traditional marriage are left scratching their heads? If this is a matter of equality under the law, why are more homosexual couples not hurrying to take advantage of it? If it is not about equality, what else can it be?

We come now to civil rights, in respect to marriage. What rights does marriage imply? Certainly, not the right to sexuality, since the constitution of the
United States is happily neutral on this subject, essentially taking no position at all. Removing sexuality from the question of civil rights simplifies things immensely. Marriage provides one the right to cohabit, leave spousal benefits to one another, have full access to one’s beloved in a hospital, help plan the funeral, etc. What is so special about these rights that marriage is required for them? Why indeed will not a civil union suffice? In fact, since civil unions may be seen to imply sexuality, thus discriminating against couples living together non-sexually (for a hypothetical example, a handicapped adult and a friend or caretaker who is intimate in a non-sexual manner), why not create an institution of domestic partnerships? This institution could convey all the basic civil and economic rights enumerated above, without necessarily downgrading the concept of marriage by opening it to a homosexual community which doesn’t really seem to want it, if the Canadian example is truly normative.

The final point is a broader one. There was a certain tone in the previous article which suggested that those who oppose gay marriage or homosexual practice are opposed to homosexuals. As the basic Christian teaching of “love the sinner, hate the sin” would indicate, this is not at all the case. Homosexuals are quite clearly made in the image of God, as are all human beings. As such, they are entitled to be treated with dignity; anything short of this is disgraceful to the image of God, which they bear. Indeed, I am not so much against gay marriage as I am supportive of traditional marriage. It is support of this Christian and secular institution, not any form of homophobia, which should motivate Christians to oppose the actions of the Massachusetts Supreme Court and the mayor of San Francisco.