

Our Stories

Welcoming Voices

from

Belmont

United Methodist Church

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The Reconciling Ministry Team of Belmont United Methodist Church,
Nashville, Tenn.

Introduction

Stories play an important role in forming who we are, explaining where we come from and developing what we believe. Long before written word existed, people understood the power of the story. Jesus used the parable to teach and direct his disciples in the way of truth and love. Followers of Christ used the power of the story to influence the early church. As children, we sit at the knees of our elders and are influenced by their stories of life and are guided to form our own set of life rules. Some stories we are told are full of joy and laughter. Some share deeper and more personal messages. Stories are not always easy to tell.

For the past 40 years, the UMC Book of Discipline has stated that homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching. In that time, society has moved from considering homosexuality a 'lifestyle choice' to recognizing that sexual orientation is not a choice- no more than choosing one's eye color or race. No other group is singled out in the Discipline as being incompatible with Christian teaching. LGBT individuals continue to read the Methodist Church's official policy and conclude that they are not welcome to worship in our faith community. Because of this, Belmont's Reconciling Ministry Team feels that it is very important to adopt an explicit statement of welcome to LGBT individuals.

Many of us have never personally experienced the challenges faced by the LGBT community. Many of us have never had the opportunity to hear their stories. This book gives us an opportunity to travel that path with friends and family who face a daily struggle for acceptance and welcome.

We are invited to sit at the table and listen to stories we may never have heard before. Stories that have shaped and molded people and families within our midst. We are encouraged to read these stories with an open heart, knowing that much thought and effort went into every word written.

May God bless us on our journey,

Belmont Reconciling Ministry Team

A Word from Our Senior Pastor

We do not know all of the neighbors on our street even though we've lived in the same house for almost 14 years. I understand this is common in our culture. We aren't at home much. We don't have a front porch relationship with our neighborhood. People tend to be busy and keep to themselves. We do know our nearest neighbors and the people whose sons are friends with our son, the people we sit next to at the neighborhood pool in the summer or at high school soccer games.

I like to think that I know all the people who come to church with us; the people whom we pass in the hallways or who sit next to us in our well loved pew or share the same section in the choir. But after reading the stories in this book I realized that I need to spend more time with the people called Belmonsters. As I read these stories I felt as though I knew these friends in faith much better, I understood them better, and I grew to love them even more.

The stories in the book are a true gift to our faith community. They are open and honest. They are stories that describe personal self-discovery, honest confession, genuine fear, and painful exclusion. When people come to my office and pour out their deepest hurts and concerns to me, I often say, "Thank you for trusting me with your story." These stories are gifts entrusted to us.

As we read these stories, let us pray for those who risked a certain level of vulnerability to share them. As we read these stories, let us pray for ourselves because we read them at the risk of our own transformation. And may God continue to open our hearts and minds, enabling us to see each other as God sees us, as beloved children of God.

--Rev. Ken Edwards

“We still wait and hope”

On the front of the entrance to Belmont’s sanctuary, these words are carved:

*Here the Rich and Poor Meet Together;
The Lord is Maker of them All*

I first read them 40 years ago while doing laundry at the Village Cleaners. I was so impressed by the forward-thinking community of believers who proclaimed this in 1927. The next Sunday I walked between the beautiful stained glass windows and cast my lot with a people called Belmont.

As a recent graduate of Vanderbilt Divinity School, I expected to be a minister, but because I am gay, I was denied that possibility. But I and many others continued to hope. Forty years later, we still wait, and hope.

In 1972, I began working in the mental health field. Out of sadness, disappointment, lack of affirmation and reconciliation, I became an alcoholic. On bended knee at the communion table at Belmont, I prayed for 10 years and struggled with my sexuality, denial, acceptance, and to “manage my alcoholism.” I kept drinking, but I kept praying. Through this church God sent a great host of acts of love, mercy and prayers through saints like Arnell, Marlene, Phillip, Mary Jane, Linda, Richard, Mary Kaye, Louis, Neal, Jim, Cathy, Mila, Bill, Joe, David and countless others. By God’s grace, I was delivered from addiction on Dec. 27, 1982.

As it is carved by our forbearers in Christ on our building, let us take up our cross and follow Christ. Belmont opened our doors to African Americans in the 1950s, welcomed female leaders and ministers in the 1970s, and now have LGBT church leaders. Recently I was talking with a dear friend and leader in our church. She said it was time to become a reconciling community. I say it is past time, but not too late.

I believe in reconciliation because we meet here to celebrate and to build the Kingdom. I believe Belmont is a place where God’s work is alive. I pray that Belmont can truly proclaim publicly by word and deed the words carved over our sanctuary entrance.

– *Tom Summers*

“A way for me to formally protest”

I came to the United Methodist Church in my 30s after experiencing discrimination in other churches because of being female. I had seen as a young person how detrimental a church that squashed dreams of girls, teenagers, and young women could be. When I first came to Belmont I experienced a sense of peace – there was no conflict between who I was and who I could be – I was just as important as the men in the congregation.

In the 15 years since, I have had the opportunities to go on mission trips to Zimbabwe, Malawi, and Mexico. I have had the love of a church community as my husband and I went through the loss of the dream of adopting a child. I’ve had the support of a Covenant Disciple group, the growing sense of community in the life of my congregation. I was there when the language changed for our participation in communion – that EVERYONE can come to the table.

And then I realized that we (United Methodists) have intentionally excluded some of God’s children in our official church Discipline – that I belong to an organization that actively discriminates. Every month I give money to a church that excludes people based on their sexual orientation, and that ALL congregations of United Methodists exclude people from FULL participation in the ministries and sacraments of the church.

There are 13-year-olds United Methodists who are just now becoming aware of their gifts for ministry, and they are also becoming aware of their sexual selves. Some of them are also realizing that they are gay. As things stand now, it doesn’t matter what wonderful gifts they have to offer the rest of us, they will not be nurtured by our church.

The Reconciling Methodist Network recognizes the inherently unjust nature of this and is a way for me to formally protest the official stance of the United Methodist Church while continuing to be a member.

--Sharon Helton

“I understood the true importance of standing up for the rights of my friends”

When I was young, I remember making annual visits to the cemetery with my father to place flowers on the graves of grandparents and great-grandparents. My dad would also visit the grave of a childhood friend who’d died young. It wasn’t until I was older that I learned he had died of AIDS. Knowing that my father stuck by his friend – even in death – was a strong example for me to follow. I don’t think he knows how much that meant to me.

I’ve heard about how minds change when abstract stories become personal. For me, that person didn’t so much change my mind, but provided a catalyst to care more deeply about injustice. Since that time, I’ve witnessed a friend coming out to a less-than-supportive family. I’ve seen the very real struggle between self-realization and faith – from shame to acceptance. I have watched men fall in love with men; women fall in love with women. I have seen friends transform from stifled gray to full color as they learned to embrace every aspect of themselves.

Other friends have remained closeted – to keep jobs, family or just to stay under society’s radar. It wasn’t until I made meaningful friendships of my own with gay and lesbian men and women that I understood the true importance of standing up for the rights of my friends, especially those who cannot risk speaking out on their own.

I could make arguments about how I believe God’s command to love our neighbor supports full inclusion in the life of the church. I could point to John Wesley’s simple rules for reasoning. I could say that I don’t believe straight people have a monopoly on love, let alone God’s love. When it comes down to it, though, the greatest evidence I have for reconciling is the people I know. Some of the best friends I have are gay and lesbian men and women, not because they are gay, but because they are kind, caring, spiritual, loving individuals. It is with those friends in mind that I say: I am a reconciling United Methodist.

-- Lindsey Solomon

“I knew I was an outsider”

In 2006, when we asked my husband’s rabbi to co-officiate our wedding ceremony, he gave us a sad “no.” It simply went against his beliefs to perform a wedding for an interfaith couple who were not willing to commit to raising their children exclusively Jewish. His refusal set the tone for my relationship with my husband’s faith community.

Each time I entered the temple, despite welcoming smiles, hugs, and well wishes, I knew I was an outsider. It’s not that they weren’t welcoming and friendly – their doors were wide open! It’s not that they didn’t preach about social justice – their hearts were open! It’s not that they didn’t participate in interfaith organizations– their minds were open! It’s that I didn’t fit – their policy told me so. My being me was incompatible with Jewish teachings. But, God can move mountains.

Unbeknownst to us, my father-in-law went to talk to the Rabbi about his decision. He lovingly and methodically continued a dialogue with the Rabbi for years. He even spoke publicly on Rosh Hashanah, encouraging change. His voice joined with others and through discussion, prayer, and transformative experiences, change slowly occurred. Five years later, the rabbi performed his first interfaith wedding. Today, we are still invited, welcomed, loved, and included just as before, but when I walk through those doors, I don’t feel the need to hide who I am.

My experience of being an outsider has been much gentler than that of my LGBT brothers and sisters, but my experience helps me understand that it’s time to move a mountain. It’s not that we aren’t loving, welcoming, inviting or inclusive at Belmont. We are! And while it may seem obvious by our open hearts, minds and doors that all are welcome at 2008 Acklen Ave, our church discipline tells another story by stating explicitly that the LGBT community is incompatible with Christianity. We must, in our loving and methodical way, show radical love and hospitality by explicitly and publicly welcoming the LGBT community to Belmont. It’s time to change and know that God can move mountains.

--Ellen Haber

“When I was a child it was easy to make black-and-white statements”

I was born in Memphis and grew up in eastern Pennsylvania suburbs. As a child, I went to Baptist churches and Christian schools, so pretty much everyone I knew looked and thought like I did.

I never met one openly gay person until I left to attend a small liberal arts college in South Carolina. My college community was less conservative than anything I had experienced before – both the faculty and the student body. Although I was still conservative in my actions, I became more open-minded. Freshman year I became friends with all different kinds of people on my hall: atheists, Christians, Democrats, Republicans, “party animals,” -- and several openly gay students. Even though the world seemed to tell us that we were all so different, that we had no business being together, somehow we all became close friends. The labels society tried so hard to put on us seemed to disappear.

The following year I roomed with a friend from freshman year whom I’ll call Mike, a minister’s child from the local area. I had the feeling that Mike was gay, although he had never discussed it with me. Mike and I became very close friends, and we roomed together for two years. He came out to me and few others our senior year of college, and when he did I could sense his relief that we accepted him for who he was. Mike is now in graduate school, studying theology at the University of Chicago.

When I was a child it was easy to make black-and-white statements about gay people. As I have gotten older and befriended people like Mike, I realized that gay rights and equality are not merely topics for intellectual or theological debate, but real issues facing real people. I believe with all my heart that Mike deserves to be loved and accepted for who God made him to be. I think Belmont should be a reconciling church because I know that there are a lot of other Mikes right here in Nashville.

– *Jay Forsythe*

“How, then, can we not welcome other seekers?”

We are a congregation that aspires to mission, both beyond our shores and within our own neighborhoods. We try to remember to greet the strangers among us. We want to orient our visitors to our church and congregation, to invite them to return, to offer our mix of study and worship, and to eventually accept some in membership, joining them in pledging community in Christ.

Yet, it is not we who call people to faith.

It is not the people of Belmont who, alone, warm hearts, select souls, and inspire lives of faithfulness. At best, we – the church – may nurture, teach, guide, share, pray, and witness. We are a path toward faith and a conduit toward belief.

But, we alone do not call people to God.

It is not our sanctuary that is worshipped. We can't pretend to judge the merit of another's profession of faith or to weigh the sincerity of their soul. We ought to welcome all who would join with us on our path.

Our measure is our orientation toward God and our commitment to try, as best we can, to follow the teachings of our evolving understanding of faith. We follow the One who comfortably related with blatant sinners, who sought the most unlikely candidates as apostles of his Word, who accepted professions of belief from those rejected by popular reputation, and who saw merit in the despised.

How, then, can we not welcome other seekers?

Thus, we, firmly and in faith, support the open, welcoming acceptance into this congregation of those who would believe in Christ, and we do so without regard to their sexual orientation.

– Pam Auble and Mike Engle

“This position of the church pushes away many wonderful people, including our son”

I'd like to introduce you to our son. He grew up in the Methodist church serving as president of the UMYF, was an Eagle Scout, attended a Methodist college where he was active in his fraternity, selected for Phi Beta Kappa and was the outstanding graduate in his class. After working a year in banking, the college president asked that he return as Assistant to the President which he did for two years prior to earning an MBA. He then worked as a consultant before starting his own business. He has been president of several non-profits in Nashville, selected for Leadership Nashville, and opens his home frequently for fund-raising events. He is kind, generous, caring and a loving partner, father, son, brother, and uncle.

Our son is an outstanding young man who has a lot to offer a church, but not the United Methodist Church. You see, our son is gay. While our local church is welcoming, but not reconciling, the official position of the United Methodist Church according to the Book of Discipline and affirmed by the latest General Conference states that “The practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching.”

Our son was created in the image of God. His sexuality is no more a choice than that of his mother, father or sister. In the words of Bishop Melvin Talbert, “The derogatory language and restrictive laws in the Book of Discipline are immoral and unjust.” This position of the church pushes away many wonderful people, including our son. Following the General Conference in Tampa I was disappointed that the Discipline wasn't changed but more discouraged by the hurtful actions of fellow Methodists. When I told our son that I was considering leaving the church I so love, he said to stay and fight. I'm involved with Reconciling Ministries in the hope that one day our son will be as welcomed in the United Methodist Church as the rest of his family.

– Betty Jane Taylor

“I believe the songs I learned as a small child”

My earliest memory of church is singing “Jesus Loves Me.” Later we sang, “Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world”.

As an adult, I have lived in the love and grace of God as I was welcomed and cared for by members of seven different United Methodist churches in different parts of the country. I never wondered if I would be welcome in any United Methodist church. Long ago I had learned “Jesus Love Me” and I assumed the followers of Jesus would live out that promise. Always I was offered a place of community, learning and service.

More recently, I have become aware that some of my friends did not share my confidence that the followers of Jesus were prepared to welcome and love them. My LGBT friends have felt rejected and unwelcome, left outside the community of God’s love and grace that I expected and enjoyed in United Methodist churches.

I am a reconciling United Methodist because I believe the songs I learned as a small child. We still teach our littlest children that Jesus loves them and all the children of the world. All who wish to join us should be able to enter with confidence, expecting to find the love and grace of community, learning and service in a United Methodist Church.

– *Carol Brown*

“United Methodists and all Christians need the prodding of conscience that this movement provides”

My brother is gay. He’s also a retired college professor, past president of both his local church Methodist Youth Fellowship (MYF) and the UT Wesley Foundation, a talented musician who has played piano and organ in churches many times in the past, a caring person, a father, and best friends with a now-retired female UMC District Superintendent.

He doesn’t go to church anymore. I understand why he doesn’t – at least to the United Methodist Church. In his shoes, I probably wouldn’t go either. And when I think about it for a while, I sometimes wonder why I do still go. If I believed that the words of the *Discipline* were an accurate reflection of the views of most United Methodists, at least those in this city and country, I would have changed denominations a long time ago.

But I know, at least among the membership of my church, Belmont UMC, most believe that all God’s people are welcome at worship and for full and unquestioned participation in the life of the church. Whom one loves does not matter. With whom or how one engages in sex does not matter. It’s a personal, private part of adult life and simply not my concern.

The Reconciling Movement should not be necessary, but it appears that it is, and greatly needed. United Methodists and all Christians need the prodding of conscience that this movement provides. Those who would exclude homosexuals from the life of the church need to ask themselves what it is they fear and, yes, “what would Jesus do?” There can be only one answer to that question according to my understanding of Jesus’ message of love and acceptance. My brother feels rejected by his lifelong denomination and by extension most of Christendom. He *has* been rejected. It’s not a false assumption. How can this be what God expects of us? I support the Reconciling Movement and those people whom the UMC has very officially rejected. People of God and people of conscience should speak out with courage and kindness.

– Cathy Folk

“I long for them to feel safe in our church”

My mama grew up in South Georgia in the Baptist church. She went there from the time she was born until she left home for college. I was raised in Baptist churches in Atlanta and in the rural Georgia towns where both sets of my grandparents lived. Those churches taught that homosexuality was an abomination to God.

When I was 22, my mama came out to me. She had fallen in love with a woman. She had never been in love with a woman before, hadn't intended to fall in love with a woman, but here she was, deeply in love. They moved in together. They are still together, 20 years later, and still in love. My mama's partner grew up in Mississippi in a church that also taught that homosexuality was a sin.

These women love God. They pray to Jesus. They own every Bill Gaither video ever made, and they watch the videos in their home and sing songs like “Just as I am” over and over, just like they did in their childhood churches.

But despite their love of Jesus and gospel music, these women are scared of church. When I married at East End UMC in Nashville, I convinced them to sit together on the front row with the other parents. They were extremely nervous about what people might think or say. When they attended the baptisms of their grandchildren at Belmont UMC, they were uneasy. I tell them this is a church that accepts people like them, but they are uncertain. They know there is a way for a Methodist church to formally welcome people like them, and they know our church has not done so.

I long for my mother and her partner to feel safe in our church and in all churches. I long for them to pray, sing, and worship at Belmont with their grandchildren. I tell my children the truth. God loves their grandmothers just as they are and celebrates the love they share. I long to tell my children that our Church celebrates their grandmothers' love just as God does.

– *Katherine Dix Esquivel*

“What if one thing were changed in my biography?”

My first Bible was a hardback red Revised Standard Edition and it was presented to me when I was 6 years old at the Burlington Methodist Church in east Knoxville in 1964.

The day that I and the other 6 year olds of the church were given our Bibles, there a was a sprinkle of rain falling on us when I walked with my Mom and Dad and younger brother to the parking lot after church. In the back seat of our family Chevy Biscayne, I noticed that the small drops of rain had, where they had struck, faded the red ink on the page edges of my new Bible, creating little spots of lighter color.

Even today, most of a lifetime away from that Sunday morning in 1964, I still have that Bible at home, and when I see those faded spots and remember that day, it creates in me a powerful memory, a memory that symbolizes the love from my family and church that surrounded me.

The truth is this: I was born into a Methodist family, and even in the times of my life that I was not always there for the church, the (now) United Methodist Church was there for me.

But what if one thing were changed in my biography? What if I had been born gay? My memory of the love I felt on that day would be just as real, but the knowledge that the church was always there to support me would seem hollow.

It is distressing to me to think of all the people who were given Bibles and surrounded by the love of the church, and who grew up to feel that love taken away, simply because of who they are. I believe that nobody should experience that kind of pain from their church, and that’s why I’m a reconciling United Methodist.

--Wayne Wood

“We didn't feel safe fully sharing our relationship at Belmont until we had been here almost seven years”

More than a decade ago I brought my daughter Katie to Belmont. She was baptized and we became members.

But we were not here fully.

I didn't come alone that first time. I came with Doug Hagler. My partner. We have been in a committed relationship for 13 years. We committed to building a Christian family and raising Katie, along with Doug's kids, Sam, Ben and Ruth, in the church.

We chose Belmont because Henrietta, Doug's sister, was already here. But we knew we wouldn't be here fully. The year before coming to Belmont, Doug, who had been an ordained minister, had relinquished his ordination. Doug did this out of respect and love for the United Methodist Church and his belief in doing things the right way.

At Belmont we became involved in the beautiful routine of church life: music ministry, children's ministry, youth ministry, WNAB, Sundays morning worship, Sunday evening youth meetings. We seemed completely immersed in life at Belmont. But we were not, not fully.

We made so many friends, most we learned we could be open with about our relationship. Some we did not. Why didn't we? Fear. I was afraid my children would be bullied or chastised by other kids' well-meaning parents. We didn't feel safe fully sharing our relationship at Belmont until we had been here almost seven years.

So we built relationships and friendships but always held back. We held back because our church tells us we are incompatible with Christian teaching. A very active love from our church allowed us to be comfortable with who we are and we have a place here.

Doug and I are gay, but we are so much more in our daily lives: fathers, partners, teachers and friends. But being gay is why I am writing this, still afraid. But I am grateful that at Belmont, I am held up by friends, family, prayer and, most importantly, by faith.

A reconciling statement would have told us, before we walked in on the first day, "You are welcome, today, exactly where you are, as you are. Fully."

--Frank Moore

"A nurturing and loving family"

I have three children born to me. They are all adults now and I love them dearly, as did my husband, who is no longer living.

I have several dozen other adults that seem like my children. I have known them since they were born, and remember all sorts of stories about them from infancy up through their college years. Their parents are my closest friends, scattered around the country.

When one young woman invited us to a gathering to celebrate her loving relationship with another woman, we were happy to attend. That was twelve years ago. Now they have adopted an infant from Ethiopia and are raising him with love and care. He has had some health problems, and they fret over his diet. We get news of his activities with his friends in day care and his progress in talking.

To me, they are a nurturing and loving family, who should be welcomed in any church they choose to attend. I believe that my church, the United Methodist, should be one of those churches.

– Dorothy Anderson

“This church bulletin saved my life”

At the age of 16, I was seriously depressed. I had lost my father in the fall, my sister went through a divorce in the winter, and then in the spring, a person I considered very close betrayed me. All of that was in addition to the knowledge that I was gay and could not be that in my hometown of Possum Trot, Tennessee.

I was blessed to have a cousin who represented the area in Congress. When he gave me a chance to be a Congressional page, I jumped at it. I arrived at Page housing on a Sunday. I was adamant on going to church while in D.C. The closest Methodist church was Capitol Hill UMC, and on that first Sunday I walked in and was given a bulletin that said:

Capitol Hill UMC is called to the ministry of reconciliation. We embrace as a gift the diversity of our neighborhood and the world. We celebrate our human family's diversity of sexual orientation, gender identity, race, ethnicity, age, faith history, economic status, marital status, physical and mental ability, and education.

“Wait a minute! Does that say what I think it says? Sexual orientation? Welcome?”

I was shocked. God loves gay people? This truth had never occurred to me. I had kept my feelings inside because I lived in fear that I would go to hell. But these people say God can love anyone! I had prayed so hard for “this cup to pass from me.” I’d even considered suicide at one point.

Without question, this church bulletin saved my life. If someone had not told me that God could still love me, even though I was gay, there is no question I would have eventually ended my own life. Making the statement that ‘we celebrate everyone,’ saying that we love you no matter who you are, was such a profound idea to me.

Shouldn’t we, as Christians, strive to make all know that Christ loves them where they are? I do, and that is why I’m happy to say I am a Reconciling Methodist.

--Eric Patton

“Two gay United Methodist ministers taught me how to be a Christian”

Joe was my youth pastor in high school. He had recently finished his M. Div. at Perkins School of Theology and would become an ordained elder in the United Methodist Church. Joe taught me how to love my neighbor. He led us on a trip to Appalachia Service Project, a week that changed the way I understood poverty, justice and servanthood.

Oli was my minister in college at the Wesley Fellowship at Duke. Oli taught me that some of the neighbors I needed to love were in faraway places. Through Oli, I heard God’s call to a ministry with my brothers and sisters in strange and distant places like Honduras, Bolivia, and the Walltown neighborhood six blocks from Duke’s campus.

During that time, I did not know Joe and Oli were gay. All I knew was that they had God-given talents to administer the sacraments, preach the Good News, and make disciples of Jesus Christ. Without their ministry, I would not have met many of the saints in my life and would have missed out on opportunities I have had to see God at work in the lives of the poor.

Joe and Oli taught me to be a Christian by living lives of integrity, in service to God. I watched what they did, and tried to copy it. I did not learn to be a Christian because of a sudden burst of enlightenment or newfound self-awareness. I became a Christian by mimicking a set of practices that were demonstrated to me by people who knew better what they were doing – the same way one learns to lay brick or practice law.

Based on how I came to this place in my faith journey, I hope you will understand when I say I did not *choose* to become a reconciling United Methodist any more than Joe and Oli chose to be gay or I chose to be straight. If I am to live a truthful life I *must* be a reconciling United Methodist because two gay United Methodist ministers taught me how to be a Christian.

– *David Esquivel*

“We are brothers and sisters through our belief”

Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world.

Red and yellow, black and white

They are precious in his sight

Jesus loves the little children of the world

Hosi Jesu wa hi ranza, hi vanana vakwe hina. A van ntima, ni vo basa, a va tsukwa, vo kwalala, Wa hi ranza a vanana vontlelele.

These are very familiar words to many of us. They speak of love and acceptance, despite cultural and geographic differences. I sang these words as a child, in both English and Xitswa, the languages of my childhood. I had the privilege of being born and raised in Mozambique, a coastal country in South East Africa. My parents served as missionaries and worked there with the United Methodist church for 20 years. We lived in several mission communities during our time there, including one in which my brothers and I were the only non-African children. While I understood that I looked different, I felt the same underneath my skin and hair, in my heart and soul. I laughed, sang songs, played, cried, got in trouble, and did chores just like my friends.

During my teenage years, I attended a British boarding school in Swaziland. It was a very diverse community, with students from many nationalities and religions. I learned a lot from my Jewish, Muslim and Hindu friends, and my view that we (as young people) were more alike than different was strengthened. I understood that despite differences in skin color, language, social and religious customs, our human spirit gave us much more in common.

I am a reconciling United Methodist because I believe that we, the church community, need to accept and honor each other since we are brothers and sisters through our belief in God and Jesus Christ. God created human diversity in the world, but this diversity does not make one person ‘better’ than another. Each one of us is a child of God, and we are *all* loved and precious in God’s sight.

-- Lynne Collier

“I have not found any way in which their faith struggles were any better or worse than mine”

Throughout my life, I have been forced to consider beliefs and concepts that were new to me. Sometimes, my mind and heart have been changed. Changes have not been as sudden as the story in Acts of Peter’s vision of a sheet lowered from heaven saying it is fine for a good Jew to eat with Gentiles. I feel a kinship to that story regarding my support for our church affirming itself as welcoming LGBT persons.

When I was a child, the word *gay* meant happy. Homosexuality was not something I heard about. One morning in 1972, I received a call from a man who told me he had been arrested for sodomy. I didn’t even know what that meant. He explained that he had been in a sexual relationship with a man. I felt confusion rather than condemnation. My guess is that many persons are at that point in their response to Belmont’s discernment process. My solution then was to call a hospital chaplain that I knew and ask if he would talk to this young man.

Since then, I have met many gays and lesbians. I have not found any way in which their faith struggles were any better or worse than mine. I did not choose heterosexuality. I have learned that LGBT persons did not choose homosexuality. I cannot condemn anybody for something they had no choice in.

Once religious leaders “proved” from the Bible that the earth was the center of the universe. Slavery is not condemned in the Bible, yet I believe that it’s against Christian teaching. A few verses seem to claim that homosexuality is wrong. Through my understanding of the Bible, I look upon the LGBT folks in the same way as the persons condemned in biblical times because they had a skin disease called leprosy. I feel sympathy for the way LGBT persons are treated by many inside the church and in our culture.

Jesus welcomed those whom many in society shunned. I seek to be a welcoming follower of Jesus and I urge others to be welcoming also.

--Herb Mather

“Don’t we need an asterisk at the end of that motto?”

I support Reconciling Ministries because my study of the life of Jesus leads me to believe that he would support it. In all that he did, he taught that we should love one another.

During my years of teaching high school and college students, I had both students and colleagues who were gay and lesbian. Today I have friends who are tagged with those labels and they are people who have many talents and much to offer the world. My life is enriched by knowing them.

I do not believe that these individuals chose their sexual orientation any more than I think they chose the color of their eyes, but I have witnessed numerous examples of Christian people hurting them in many ways.

Am I the only Methodist who finds it ironic that our church claims to have Open Minds, Open Hearts, and Open Doors? Don’t we need an asterisk at the end of that motto indicating that our doors are open to everyone EXCEPT members of the gay community and the clergy people who are accepting of them?

We are told in John 13, “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another,” and in John 15, “This I command you, to love one another.”

My hope is that my church will choose love over hate, and inclusion rather than exclusion, as its guiding principles.

--Jean Gould

“The family of Belmont United Methodist Church is a wonderful mosaic”

My reasons for being a Reconciling Methodist focus on family: God’s human family, my own family and the Belmont family.

We join all creation in being a part of God’s world, all created out of love, all dependent on each other and made to live in harmony. Genesis 1:31 says, *“God saw everything he had made, and indeed, it was very good.”*

My wife, Starr, and I are the proud parents of two daughters. Beth, our lesbian daughter, lives in Brooklyn, N.Y., is a runner; she teaches autistic children within the New York City public school system and is an active member of the Church of the Holy Apostles – Episcopal Church, a reconciling congregation. Andrea, our heterosexual daughter, lives in Orlando, Fla., and works for the Walt Disney Company.

Beth came out to us in August 2005 after struggling since age 12 with her sexuality. In a letter to us shortly afterward, Beth wrote, *“...thank you for being so loving and accepting of me for being who I truly am. This is not a choice, it’s who I truly am and now my only choice is to be true to the person God created me to be.”*

The family of Belmont United Methodist Church is a wonderful mosaic of persons from countries through the world, all walks of life and professions, from neighborhoods across Middle Tennessee, different economic groupings and many sexual orientations all proudly calling themselves “Belmonters,” all seeking to be a part of God’s active creation living out a ministry for all of God’s children.

I have many LBGT friends and colleagues who are serving in many roles, including within churches. I appreciate each of these friends and colleagues and accept them fully as God’s children, living out who God has created them to be.

Through our discernment process I hope Belmonters will join me in open discussions about “our family at Belmont” as we celebrate God’s good creation and move toward becoming a Reconciling Congregation.

--James E. (Jim) Strickland

“We cannot afford to be silent”

I get a thrill each time a child is baptized at Belmont. As a congregation, we are asked to “surround this child with a community of love and forgiveness that they may grow in their trust of God.” The litany continues, but I linger on the words ‘support’ and ‘community of love.’ In that covenant, I promise to support each member of my church family with love. Do I always succeed? Probably not. But each time I speak those words I am reminded of my challenge to be an example of God’s love and acceptance to all within my reach.

If that child later discovers that he is gay, according to my denomination, I am then ‘given a bye’ on that child of God. God’s welcoming accepting spirit is for me, but not for him. I am allowed to renege on my promise to provide a community of love for him.

Wonderful people have been hurt by the church because of their sexual orientation. My friend Cheryl left divinity school and nearly lost herself in her attempt to come to terms with her sexuality. Our nephew Paul visited us in summers and enjoyed youth events with our sons Andrew and Michael. But when he attempted to join a UMC youth group in his hometown he was turned away. His presence made others uncomfortable. Cheryl and Paul are OK today, in spite of the United Methodist Church. But there are thousands out there who are NOT OK.

Every day, teenagers are bullied because of their sexual orientation. Every day, young gay or lesbian persons believe the insults hurled at them, and in desperation take their own lives. Where is the church?

We cannot afford to be silent. We need to be that voice that calls out to the hurting and frightened, “Come. God’s love and grace are here for you. And we, as a church, are here for you as well.” And, in so doing, we live out that vow we make to the children of God to love and support all in our midst.

--Mary Kaye Jordan

“I believe and hope it can be different”

I am a United Methodist because the church puts the focus on Grace. I have gravitated toward the open welcome table, and the emphasis on service to others, both of which demonstrate God's Grace in the church and community.

Sometimes being a part of a church community is a challenge, and after raising my daughter in a local United Methodist church, attending on Sunday, Wednesday, and special events, serving on committees and work projects, going on retreats and assisting in worship services, engaged in various ways within the church community, this relationship abruptly ended when as a young teenager in youth group my daughter expressed that she was gay.

After a youth group meeting, she was confronted by the youth pastor and other leaders, and was told it was not acceptable to be gay within the church. In one fell swoop, all I had invested in teaching my daughter about the faith was torn away. We were no longer welcome or safe in our church and there was no leadership in the church to guide us and others through this time. We felt wounded and abandoned.

Faith and worship remained important to our family, and I knew that this particular church experience did not represent the God of Grace.

Our family sought out a new church home. My daughter found a support group for GBLTQ youth that replaced Wednesday night youth activities. Our family found our way; Grace was with us.

I do not want another young person to face what our daughter experienced at such a formative and vulnerable time. I believe and hope it can be different.

I believe in the God of Grace, and that is why I am a reconciling United Methodist.

--Mary Beth Franklyn

“So, what are YOU doing about it, Daddy?”

Why am I a reconciling United Methodist? “Because the Bible tells me so.” Because of the life and lessons of Jesus Christ, which I find incompatible with anything other than loving your neighbor as yourself.

Another important question: why do anything about it? As has become our family’s tradition, we spent a recent MLK Day watching Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech and remembering his work. That evening as I finished reading a book about MLK to my daughter, she asked me whether our society still discriminated against people. I gave my eight-year-old an honest answer and described in particular the plight of our LGBT brothers and sisters.

The next question stung: “So, what are YOU doing about it, Daddy?” The honest answer was that my efforts fell woefully short of what Jesus commands us to do. And it made me ask whether I was the “moderate” described by King in *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*:

I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Councilor or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says, "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action"; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another mans freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro the wait for a "more convenient season."

Human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability; ... Time itself becomes an ally of the forces of stagnation. We must use time creatively, in the knowledge that the time is always ripe to do right. Now is the time....

Now is the time.

--Phillip Cramer

“What the church says and does can dramatically change people’s lives”

I grew up in Little Rock and was a child there when the Governor closed the high schools to prevent them from being integrated. My family was very active in a large downtown church. As the integration issue divided our community, the dearly loved pastor of our church preached a sermon about what Jesus would do, and announced that our church would be the first white, mainline, Protestant church in town to welcome all, including people of color to worship with us and join our church.

My family had to re-examine our racist heritage and adopt a welcoming attitude based on the teachings and actions of Jesus. I learned that what the church says and does can dramatically change people’s lives.

Years later during high school, one of my best friends was a boy whom I’ll here call Jake. We enjoyed playing tennis, going water skiing, playing board games, helping each other with homework, and just hanging out. After high school we went to different colleges, but we kept up with each other and stayed friends.

Jake never did date anyone, and though we saw each other infrequently, I was aware of a depression and sense of loneliness slowly invading his life, especially as his close friends got married and he remained alone.

It was only when Jake committed suicide that I realized that he was gay and unable to reach out to others for support.

It is my strong belief that Jake’s inability to accept himself as a gay man could have been changed into a strong sense of self-worth if he had only received the good news of Christ’s welcoming acceptance, and of the peace that comes with the message of grace. I pray that our church will change and become a place that insures that Gay, Lesbian, Bi-sexual and Transgender persons can be supported in authentically embracing themselves as God created them to be.

--Stephen Mallett

"I'm a Reconciling Methodist for one stupidly simple reason."

I did not become a Reconciling Methodist to reform a Church that seems to allow so much potential to waste away due to layers of dogma and bureaucratic red tape; though that is a part.

I did not become a Reconciling Methodist because of my homosexual friends and family members who are tired of having nowhere to go to feel welcome; though that is also a part.

I did not become a Reconciling Methodist because I was tired of the pain that my homosexual family and friends are put through when their "closest" friends, and even their own family members, shun them, pray over them to change, and refuse to acknowledge their existence; though that is another part.

I did not become a Reconciling Methodist so that the youth and young people of this world may have a safe place to be. So that in a society where they are not allowed to be open in schools, in peer groups, even in their own families, they might at least have one small glimpse of hope and acceptance to get them through; though that is yet another part.

I became a Reconciling Methodist for one stupidly simple reason: Love. I was brought up understanding that God's love is unconditional, that ultimately, Love is God. The purpose of the church is to spread God; to spread Love; to be examples of God/Love. I am a Reconciling Methodist because we are not doing that. To best illustrate God's unconditional Love, we must also love unconditionally. Anything less limits God; limits the church; and limits our ability to live and love together. Anything less fails God; fails the church; and fails my sisters and brothers. Love is why I must be a Reconciling Methodist.

--Andrew Jordan

“I vowed then that I would not ever again be afraid”

I arrived back in Nashville in September 1965, a newly minted young dentist, very concerned about others’ perception of me. I was afraid I would offend a patient or a prospective patient with some view or position. Consequently, I was silent about the civil rights struggle and any other controversial area of concern.

Many years later I was quite amazed to find myself at a rally protesting against capital punishment. I vowed then that I would not ever again be afraid to openly support a position I felt was important in human rights. Consequently, when I became aware of the Methodist Church’s position on sexuality it seemed like the right thing to do to place my voice, along with many others, to work to effect a change in these views.

Today, I am happy to say I support Belmont UMC becoming a church welcoming all God’s people. I pray that I will never be afraid again.

--Hugh Wright

“Everyone maintained the charade”

Before he left to study in Paris, Doyle took me to his favorite spot in Memphis – a park high on the bluffs overlooking the Mississippi. We dangled our legs over the edge, watched the river, making a memory to share while he was away. That day is the earliest recollection I have of my favorite uncle.

Doyle studied art in Paris several years, learning French, and meeting other young Americans in Paris. One in particular, John, was studying French literature at the Sorbonne. Soon, they were sharing an apartment and their lives together.

After Paris, Doyle and John moved to Birmingham. Having acquired considerable knowledge of European antiques, they opened a shop. John managed the shop; Doyle became a portrait painter and decorator. Of course,

their true relationship was not openly acknowledged. Family and friends frequently commented on the “eligible bachelors,” and asked when they would “settle down.” Each visited his family separately. Everyone maintained the charade.

This delicate equilibrium did not last. In his fifties, John had a midlife crisis. He moved out, bought a fancy car, and frequented nightclubs with younger men. He became depressed and drank excessively. Finally, one day he crawled under his rented house with a bottle of Secanol, a fifth of Scotch and a pistol. Mercifully, he did not need the pistol.

My uncle was devastated. For a while, he struggled to maintain the shop and his painting. Ultimately, he, too, began a destructive spiral into alcoholism. His friends began to pull away, and he fell victim to the exploitation of parasitic companions. In a few years, he died of liver cancer.

Doyle was denied the right openly to mourn the loss of his spouse. The family all but ignored John’s death. Had family, friends, church, and society responded to his pain and loss as a widower, Doyle may have rebounded and resumed a productive life.

For me, their story is a poignant and personal lesson about the savage destruction exclusion and intolerance leave in their wake. So I am a reconciling Methodist because I believe it is simply incompatible with Christian teaching not to be.

--Richard Fulk

“All your people are of sacred worth”

O God, you are the great I AM

And thus, created in your image, WE ARE.

Every child, every person, everywhere – WE ARE.

Every dream and holy longing – WE ARE.

Every human curve and contour, scar and wound – WE ARE.

Every step forward toward you, and every stumble backwards – WE ARE.

Every story we tell, every secret we hide, every hope we bear – WE ARE

because you are the great I AM and we, each one of us,
without exception or “if only,”

is created in your image

where love has no bounds,

no limits,

no exclusions,

because you, O God are the great I AM, the God of love,

and we, your people – all your people –

are of sacred worth simply because WE ARE.

All of this we know to be true in the name, spirit and living example
of the One we follow, Jesus the Christ. Amen

--Rev. Pam Hawkins

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For additional information about Belmont UMC and its Reconciling Ministry, contact us at reconciling@belmontumc.org or visit the church website: www.belmontumc.org.

Everyone is welcome unconditionally when we celebrate God's love at the corner of 21st and Acklen in Hillsboro Village in Nashville, TN.