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PROPHETS AND PREFERENCE: CONSTRUCTING AND  
MAINTAINING A HOMOSEXUAL IDENTITY  
IN THE MORMON CHURCH

by

Richard D. Phillips

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in

Sociology

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Rick Phillips

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## ABSTRACT

Prophets and Preference: Constructing and Maintaining a  
Homosexual Identity in the Mormon Church

by

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Major Professor: Dr. Richley H. Crapo  
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This thesis is a descriptive ethnography of homosexuals and homosexuality in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or Mormon church. The study employs the labeling perspective in sociology and uses gay Mormons to examine how an individual constructs and maintains a homosexual identity in an environment where such an orientation is stigmatized and devalued. Qualitative interviews and documentary analysis are the chief methodological tools for this study.

The contradictions between a homosexual lifestyle and Mormon theology are outlined, and a history of Mormon church policy concerning homosexual members from 1959 to the present is presented. The study finds that many homosexual Mormons have great difficulty balancing their religious beliefs and their homosexuality. These difficulties are exacerbated by several unique theological precepts of Mormonism, and by a social climate that is generally hostile or indifferent to gay people and gay rights issues. A great deal of variation between younger informants and older informants to the study was discovered with regard to the depth of these difficulties, with older informants reporting more serious problems managing their sexual preference and Mormon church membership than younger informants.

It was found that some gay Mormons choose to live celibate lives, attempt to change their sexual orientation, or marry heterosexually in order to maintain favor with the Mormon church. Others in the study strive to reform the Mormon church and seek to have gay relationships sanctioned within Mormonism.



The ramifications of these identity management strategies for the individuals employing them and for the church are analyzed. The consequences of challenging Mormon ecclesiastical authority and the impact such a challenge has on the lives of gay Mormons choosing this adaptive strategy is also discussed. The future of gay rights within Mormonism as well as in American society at large is treated.

(172 pages)

## **Chapter I**

### **Introduction**

This thesis is a descriptive ethnography of homosexuals and homosexuality in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—or Mormon church. Homosexuality within Mormonism is interesting to the sociologist because the LDS church (as it is commonly abbreviated) like many conservative, fundamentalist religions in this country, demands a high degree of conformity and obedience from its members. And, like most conservative Christian sects, the Mormon church regards homosexuality as abnormal and views homosexual sexual relations as sinful. Sociologists have long observed that individual religious beliefs represent core values which are highly significant in constructing one's world view (see Berger 1969), yet also acknowledge that sexual identity, or one's sexual preference similarly becomes a fundamental facet in the self concept of social actors (Crooks and Baur 1993). Thus, the homosexual Mormon is caught between two conflicting statuses, both of which are often highly salient to the individual. On the one hand, the person is sexually attracted to members of his or her same sex, and, on the other, the person can possess strong religious beliefs and deep spiritual convictions that make it difficult for him or her to leave the church. This thesis attempts to use the principles of sociological analysis to uncover how people who hold these two incongruent statuses struggle to reconcile the contradictions in their lives. It also examines how the church's stand on the issue of homosexuality has evolved through contact with its gay members and through interfacing with society at large. First, however, it is necessary to outline the nature of sociology's relationship with the study of homosexuality, and present some key theoretical concepts that will inform our analysis.

### **Sociology and Homosexuality**

For most of the history of sociology, the discipline has regarded homosexuality as social pathology. Deviation from "consensual" sexual norms, it was asserted, was a social sickness, and those who would engage in sexual practices abhorred by the majority of

society's members were seen as deviants: offenders of the normative order, unable to internalize shared mores. Homosexuals were in violation of the rules and standards that ensured the smooth, proper functioning of the social system. Because the large majority of the constituents of American and European societies were heterosexual, a *prima facie* case was made for heterosexuality as normal, and by implication, homosexuality as abnormal and undesirable. Unfortunately, this "case" is a *non sequitur*.

Philosophers who have observed the social world have long recognized the temptation to equate what *is* with what *ought* to be. Many, especially those examining their own culture, have erroneously concluded that because people often seem to be successful in organizing themselves in certain ways, or in attaining certain social goals, that that organization is necessarily good or right, and those goals are noble and virtuous (Miller 1984). It was Hume, however, who first demonstrated that an *is* does not infer an *ought*, noting, in essence that, "depending on how far you push the equation *ought=is*, it would justify the most heinous and bizarre acts" (Miller 1984, p. 387). Known to philosophy as the *Naturalistic Fallacy*, the mistake of equating *is* with *ought* has been especially manifest in the social sciences. Throughout the history of social science, practitioners have observed the typical, inferred that the typical is "normal," and further concluded that what is "normal" is good. Meyers explains:

A seductive error for those who work in the social sciences is sliding from a description of *what is* into a prescription of what ought to be. Philosophers call this the naturalistic fallacy. The gulf between 'is' and 'ought,' between scientific description and ethical prescription, remains as wide today as when philosopher David Hume pointed it out 200 years ago. No survey of human behavior—say of sexual practices—logically dictates what is 'right' behavior. If most people do it, that does not make it right. There is no way we can move from objective statements of fact to prescriptive statements of what ought to be without injecting our values. . . . In such ways, both obvious and subtle, social [scientists'] personal values influence their work. (Meyers 1993, p. 11 emphasis in original)

Unfortunately, with regard to the study of deviance, sociologists have been slow learners. What Hume recognized in the 1760s did not dawn upon most sociologists until the 1960s. The reason for this is likely to be found in the peculiar relationship that sociology

has with society. While sociology purports to be the explicator of the social sphere, it is also inextricably tied to the socio-cultural milieu in which it operates. Kuhn (1962) has demonstrated that the prevailing intellectual climate of the day shapes scientific inquiry, and even circumscribes the questions that scientists can ask—sociologists included. Thus, it is a paradox (and perhaps an embarrassment) that the forces of society hid the *subjective* nature of social norms from the very “science” of society. Sociology, then, was so immersed in its social order that many of the processes of that order remained hidden from even the most brilliant minds in the discipline.

Well after W.W.II, mainstream sociology, along with the rest of the social sciences, still regarded homosexuality as social pathology. Parsonian functionalism was enjoying its heyday, and functional sociology and British social anthropology, with their emphasis on consensual norms, branded homosexuals as perverts and deviants. The definitive and most famous statement of this assertion was Laud Humphrey's *Tea Room Trade*—famous more for its questionable methodology than its conclusions. Humphreys observed male homosexuals in illicit sexual acts at public restrooms and other “pick-up” points frequented by these men. He then surreptitiously obtained the license plate numbers on their cars and later tracked them down and visited them in their homes, *in cognitio*, to interview them. Humphrey's most striking finding: that aside from their sexual perversion, these deviants were just like any other citizen. In a chapter entitled “The People Next Door” Humphreys writes:

For the man who lives next door, the tearoom participant is just another neighbor—and probably a very good one at that. He may make a little more money than the next man and work a little harder for it. It is likely that he will drive a nicer car and maintain a neater yard than do other neighbors in the block. Maybe, like some tearoom regulars, he will work with Boy Scouts in the evening and spend much of his weekend at church. It may be more surprising for the outsider to discover that most of these men are married. (Humphreys 1975, p. 105)

Since it was taken for granted among sociologists that homosexuality is deviance, we should not be surprised that it did not even occur to Humphreys that perhaps these were ordinary men burdened with unusual circumstances. He did not suggest that these

men might be normal, but for the fact that society had labeled their method of sexual expression as perversion. And at no time in his work did Humphreys even contemplate the notion that perhaps the *situation* was problematic, rather than the men who found themselves in it. Instead, Humphreys saw these men as deviants by nature, feigning normalcy in their “off time.”

It is ironic that Humphreys’ work is the most famous statement of homosexuality as social pathology, for it is also the swan song of this perspective. While Humphreys was doing his fieldwork in the mid 1960s, the nature of sociological theorizing was to take a profound shift, with significant ramifications for the way sociologists view homosexuality. To see why this shift took place, it is once again necessary to look to the social milieu.

The 1960s were an intense time for the United States politically. As various oppressed groups, African-Americans and women, for example, began to vigorously challenge the “accepted,” “consensual” social order, sociologists were shaken from their slumber. The notion of social conflict, hegemony and the competition between interest groups for scarce resources in society—ideas with a long history in the discipline—began to replace “function” in sociological theories as the prime mover in shaping the social order. Sociologists began to realize that deviance was, in actuality, a subjective phenomenon, and that what is defined as deviance is so named by the powerful, in their own self-serving interests. The emphasis began to shift from examining deviants themselves to examining how things become seen and *labeled* as deviant. Situations and social contexts joined people as the unit of analysis in studies of deviant behavior. For the first time, homosexuality was analyzed as a label, a category of deviance that is neither right nor wrong. By the time the 1960s were over, the “labeling perspective” was one of the most influential theoretical orientations in sociology, dominating the sociology of deviance.

### **Labeling Perspective: The Ownership of Deviance**

Given its name by one of its most prominent proponents, Howard Becker, the labeling perspective, or labeling “theory,” achieved prominence in the late 1960s—a time of normative upheaval in the United States. First and foremost, the perspective is a critique of

the functionalist explanation of social deviance and the functionalist practice of viewing deviance as an *objective* disorder. Labeling theorists depart from functionalists in that they are just as concerned with the people who *make* the rules as with the people who *break* the rules—or with the rules themselves, for that matter. Becker writes:

It is an interesting fact that most scientific research and speculation on deviance concerns itself with people who break rules rather than with those who make and enforce them. If we are to achieve a full understanding of deviant behavior, we must get these two possible foci of inquiry into balance. (Becker 1963, p. 163)

Becker points out that functional analysis begs the interesting sociological question: Why this set of norms and not some other?

[The traditional view in sociology] defines deviance as the infraction of some agreed upon rule. It then goes on to ask who breaks rules, and to search for the factors in their personalities and life situations that might account for the infractions. This assumes that those who have broken a rule constitute a homogeneous category, because they have committed the same deviant act.

Such an assumption seems to me to ignore the central fact about deviance: it is created by society. (Becker 1963, p. 8)

Labeling theorists like Becker propose that categories of deviance are subjective phenomena. They assert that defining something as deviant is the result of enterprise, that powerful persons and interest groups attempt to make certain rules and define those who break those rules as deviants in order to further their own political and social aims, to protect their power, extend their influence and to enhance their prestige. Deviance, according to Becker (1963, p. 162), is “Publicly labeled wrongdoing.” Before a particular status or behavior can be viewed by society as deviant, and before there can be “deviants” labeled as a result of engaging in this behavior or holding this status, someone, or some group, must have constructed rules which have become legitimated—through consensus, force, or otherwise—which define the behavior in question as deviant (Becker 1963).

Becker calls those who attempt to define new categories of deviance and label new social problems “Moral entrepreneurs.” Moral entrepreneurs are kept in business by their vested interests and values. Since the issues they attempt to define and label usually have

some salience for members of society, these moral crusaders typically have other groups that serve as allies and are also usually opposed by other moral entrepreneurs. As McCaghy explains, "Conflict arises and continues over [unequally distributed scarce] resources—which include the power to decide what is moral" (McCaghy 1985, p. 101). Thus, the essence of the labeling perspective is succinctly summarized by Becker when he writes, "The deviant is one to whom that label has been successfully applied; deviant behavior is behavior that people so label" (Becker 1963, p. 9).

### **Moral Entrepreneurs**

One need only open a newspaper and turn on the television in the United States today to see the lengths to which moral entrepreneurs will go to to establish their definition of homosexuality as the legitimate one. On the one hand, conservative political and religious groups seek to convince the public that homosexuality is unnatural, sinful and a threat to domestic security (Ammerman 1990, Hunter 1983, Jorstad 1990). Attempts to impose this definition of homosexuality have reached the highest echelons of power in this nation, as evidenced by the anti-gay rhetoric at the 1992 Republican National Convention (Clift 1992).

While religious groups in this camp argue with vigor that homosexuality is a sin that is condemned by the Bible, their secular counterparts complain that the acceptance of homosexuality would increase the spread of AIDS, allow homosexuals to recruit children into homosexual lifestyles, and erode the power and morale of the United States military (Hyde 1990). These moral entrepreneurs see those concerned with "gay rights" as individuals in search of "special rights" and do not believe that minority status should be conferred upon a group organized around sexual orientation.

The majority of Americans seem to agree with this definition of homosexuality, and have subsequently labeled homosexuals according to the prescriptions of this definition. Fajer (1992), for instance, writes that gay men and their relationships are stereotyped as being overly sexual, devoid of love, and incapable of becoming long-term unions. Further,

he notes that the public does not feel that gay issues are worthy of public discourse. Others report that many believe that someone with a gay friend has gay tendencies, implying that one cannot see a gay person socially or like a gay person unless one is gay oneself (Siegelman et. al. 1990).

In addition, the violence against gay people in this country is ample evidence that the definition of homosexuality as unnatural and undesirable has struck a resonant chord with many members of the American public. D'augelli (1990) finds that the expectation of being assaulted for being gay among male homosexuals in this country is high. In addition, 42% of those surveyed in his study admit to concealing their sexual identity in order to escape physical battering. Berril (1990) writes that the AIDS scare has fueled crimes of violence against homosexuals, and others (Erllich 1990, Harry 1990) note that violence against gays is on the rise.

But like any divisive issue, there is more than one interest group with a proposed definition of the phenomenon at hand. The gay rights movement also qualifies as a moral entrepreneur and has been very active in asserting *its* definition of homosexuality. Calling homosexuality an "alternate lifestyle," gay activists and those allied groups sympathetic to the gay cause have proposed that, for the most part, homosexuals are normal, law abiding citizens who are capable of loving, long term relationships and who can be trusted in their jobs and as parents just like heterosexuals. They urge tolerance of gays and push legislators to enact laws that prohibit discrimination against men and women on the basis of sexual orientation. Presently, the gay rights movement wields considerable political power in the United States.

The primary evidence used by the moral entrepreneurs in this camp for asserting that homosexuality is another, acceptable lifestyle are numerous studies in the fields of psychiatry and psychology demonstrating that homosexuality cannot be changed through therapy, that homosexuality has a biological component (or at least is not chosen), and that homosexuals are not more poorly adjusted mentally than their heterosexual counterparts.

The amassed literature to substantiate these claims is impressive. As early as the 1950s, Evelyn Hooker (1957) demonstrated that even skilled psychiatrists could not tell a



homosexual from a heterosexual based solely on a psychiatric profile—something that did not bode especially well for a discipline that, at that time, characterized homosexuality as a mental disorder and the result of a disturbed upbringing. Hooker's research was followed by a mountain of other studies that seemed to conclude that homosexuals did not suffer more mental health problems than their heterosexual counterparts, and that homosexuality could no longer be characterized as a mental disorder (Bell, Weinberd and Hammersmith 1981; Marmor 1980; Moran and Rothblum 1991; Siegelman 1987) .

Armed with this research, the gay rights movement lobbied the American Psychiatric Association (a third moral entrepreneur with *its* vested interests and labeled categories of deviance<sup>1</sup>) to remove homosexuality from among the mental disorders listed in the third edition of its *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM III-R 1987). After bitter and acrimonious debate, the APA finally agreed to remove homosexuality from the DSM III-R in 1974. This constitutes a major victory for the gay rights movement and an act of skillful moral entrepreneurship. Cockerham also characterizes the battle as a vindication of labeling theory when he writes:

The more powerful a group is able to become in support of normative conditions, the more likely that it will escape being defined as deviant. Or in some cases, being powerful outside the normative system will allow a deviant group to escape some of the sanctions imposed by the wider society. In 1974, for instance, the strong political pressure exerted by organized groups of homosexuals influenced the American Psychiatric Association to remove homosexuality from its diagnostic categories of mental illness. In discussing this, Elliot Krause says, 'What shows the social nature of the definition is that any definition which can be lobbied against politically can hardly be considered an illness in the narrow sense.' (Cockerham 1981, p. 39)

Since 1974, the gay rights movement has posted other impressive gains. But with each new step forward, the backlash from moral crusaders in the conservative camp grows more insistent. Presently, American society is embroiled in an all out war for the privilege to label homosexuality, with both combatants vigorously trading frequent and telling blows in the public arena. Gusfield observes:

Some groups are capable of mobilizing to bring about change or to resist

controlling definitions. The gay rights movement is perhaps the most salient example of how the ability to mobilize has enabled a subject group to transform its status. During this century, homosexuals have been thought of as sinful and sick, objects of condemnation or medical benevolence. What the gay rights movement did was to resist the public designation of deviance, or abnormality, by attacking the assumed norms and denying that homosexuality constituted a social problem. . . . What had been an uncontested meaning has been transformed into a political contest. (Gusfield 1989, p. 437-438)

The political maelstrom surrounding the definition of homosexuality shows no sign of abating. Considering the powerful emotions on both sides, it seems increasingly likely that the present stalemate and war of words will persist for the foreseeable future. This ideological standoff creates an interesting situation in the United States. The present state of moral pluralism in America creates a buyers market for citizens, who are free to choose, within the limits of their socialization, which definition of homosexuality they find more convincing. This has interesting ramifications for homosexuals themselves, as they too are able to ally themselves with the particular label that they, themselves, must bear.

### **Labeling and the Individual**

The processes of moral entrepreneurs is only one component of the labeling perspective. Aside from the machinations of interest groups at the social structural level, individual actors in the social system are affected by the process of labeling. Thus, not only are perceived problems and behaviors labeled, but individuals who partake in those behaviors or who occupy labeled statuses are similarly labeled themselves.

The consequences of bearing a label, particularly a stigmatized label, has been recognized for some time in sociology. Tannenbaum (1938), in his book *Crime and Community*, notes that when one is labeled, his or her behavior is often circumscribed by the label. This is particularly the case with a conspicuous or visible label, but most labels, even if they are not overtly obvious, have certain external cues that tip off "normal" people that they are in the presence of a deviant. Thus, Rubington and Weinberg note that "The definition of a person or situation as socially problematic or deviant may lead to a reordering of human relations in a way that promotes further 'deviance.' This may actually

enhance the deviant role" (Rubington and Weinberg 1989, p. 189).

The grandfather of the labeling perspective, Edwin Lemert, argues, in a book curiously titled *Social Pathology*, that at first deviants resist the labels that are applied, or perhaps misapplied to them. Nevertheless, in spite of their efforts to reject the label and the accompanying stigma that now characterizes them, "deviants" often find that because their opportunities in the social sphere are circumscribed by others who react to them only in regard to their label, they are forced into stereotypical behavior (Lemert 1951). The classic example of this is the boy who has been labeled delinquent. When other parents in the neighborhood forbid their children to play with such a boy because of his label, he is forced to associate with others who bear the same social stigma. It is no surprise to labeling theorists, then, that delinquent behavior persists in such an instance.

After a while, the individual laboring under a stigmatized label begins to become resigned to the permanence of the label. Elements of the label become incorporated into the deviant's personality, and he or she begins to see him or herself in terms of the label just as others do (Lemert 1951). Goffman writes that "Given that the stigmatized individual in our society acquires identity standards which he applies to himself in spite of failing to conform to them, it is inevitable that he will feel some ambivalence about his own self" (Goffman 1963, p.106). And, finally, the label becomes internalized by the social actor (Lemert 1951).

Bearing a negative label can often become the most salient status an individual possesses. Often, the deviant's life is completely rearranged and his or her social interactions almost totally redefined by the role expectations of the label. Becker calls such labels "master statuses" and points out, "Some statuses, in our society as in others, override all other statuses and have a certain priority. . . . The status of deviant (depending on the kind of deviance) is this kind of master status" (Becker 1963, p. 33). Such a master status can be as integral to a person's identity as gender, race or national origin. Lessa and Voigt observe:

In all societies, labeling as deviant is a way of assigning moral inferiority. The deviant is tagged with an 'essentializing label.' It is as though the person had

no other identity—to be labeled as deviant means to become someone whose entire personality can be reduced to one word. This sociological shorthand dehumanizes so-called deviants and separates them from the rest of the group. Rather than describing a young person with a number of characteristics, such as, ‘young, born in a large city, baptized a Catholic, attends high school,’ society forgoes such details in favor of the essentializing label: ‘a homosexual’ or ‘a delinquent.’ (Thorton and Voigt 1992, p. 186)

Homosexuality is such a master status. This does not, of course, mean that the process of labeling causes homosexuality,<sup>2</sup> but rather that once the label of homosexual has been successfully applied, the social interactions of homosexual people revolve around that “essentializing label.”

We have outlined two major labels given to homosexuals and their lifestyles by moral entrepreneurs in America. While structural variables and the forces of socialization seem to be strongly related to which major definition members of United States society are likely to subscribe to (see Kurdek 1988; Stark 1991), it is likely that the prominence and high visibility of both camps provide ample opportunity for many individuals to choose which definition best suits them and their circumstances. This is also true for homosexuals themselves. A general tenet of labeling theory, outlined above, is the notion that a labeled person will internalize a label. Homosexuals, it is asserted, tempered by their socialization and structural conditions, may ally themselves with whichever label seems to profit them most. It is not surprising that most seem to prefer the label offered by the gay rights movement and other groups sympathetic to gays.

In spite of this, gays often find themselves in occupations or other social situations where normative conditions strongly favor the other, “conservative” view of same sex relationships. When this happens, there is often conflict between the two statuses. Such conflict can place a strain on one’s identity. Woodman (1989) points out that managing a homosexual identity is often difficult for college students because the expectation of heterosexual behavior is strong among young people of this age. Almaguer (1991) further points out that Hispanics often have a difficult time harmonizing the expectations for gender role behavior that accompany the notion of Latin “machismo” with a homosexual orientation.

In the occupational sphere, the problems facing gays in the United States military are well known and widely publicized. Current stereotypes of gays as effeminate run counter to the macho "right stuff" mentality that pervades the armed forces (Hyde 1990). In addition, Lienen (1992) has discovered that gay policemen also have difficulty dealing with contradictions in the gender role expectations that accompany being a police officer and those that accompany being a homosexual.

### **Homosexuals in Christian Churches**

Managing one's homosexuality is especially difficult for members of Christian churches. Certain Christian religious groups are among the most vocal supporters of a conservative definition of homosexuality. Those who wish to remain involved and active in Christianity, but are wary of the conservative Christian label often frequent churches that cater especially to gays, like the Metropolitan Community Church (Hyde 1990; Thumma 1991). In addition, an effort to forestall persistent losses in membership on the part of certain mainline Protestant churches has led to a tempering of the conservative definition of homosexuality which has allowed gays to enjoy the limited fellowship of certain Christian denominations (Hyde 1990; Roof and McKinney 1987). Thus, although some must negotiate difficult identity conflicts, those who choose to reject the notion that their homosexuality is a deviant status are usually able to find support for their lifestyle among certain liberal Christian churches.

Some gays, however, have internalized the notion of homosexuality as sinful and deviant. Although many are well aware of the claims and arguments of the gay rights movement, these gays continue to cling to the notion that homosexuality is a perversion and that a homosexual lifestyle is an abomination before God. Most who see themselves this way do so because of their strong affiliation with fundamentalist, conservative religious groups.

This strange fact, of course, begs the questions: why would anyone want to be labeled as a sinful deviant? Why would someone choose to continue affiliation with a

conservative religion when other, more accepting groups are available for religious gays? The answer is that conservative religious groups are extremely powerful moral entrepreneurs, and are extremely effective at making their labels stick—both structurally and individually.

### **Religions as Moral Entrepreneurs**

As was mentioned earlier, moral entrepreneurs want the ownership of certain categories of deviance and desire to control the rules that govern what behavior constitutes deviance. Religions have always been especially active as moral entrepreneurs, and have been the leaders in such moral crusades in America as the fight against (and for) slavery, the abortion debate, and the temperance movement (Gusfield 1963; Mizell 1992; Renzetti and Curran 1989). Usually religious groups do not engage in activism to be vindictive or flex their political muscle *per se*, but rather speak out because of their strong belief that their way is the best course of action for society. Becker states:

Many moral crusaders have strong humanitarian overtones. The crusader is not only interested in seeing to it that other people do what he thinks is right. He believes that if they do what is right it will be good for them. Or he may feel that his reform will prevent certain kinds of exploitation of one person by another. (Becker 1963, p. 148)

Religions have always owned sexual behavior in this country (Foster 1974), and legal prohibitions against homosexuality have tended to mirror those prescribed in the Bible (Katz 1992).

Religious movements have been especially good at forcefully applying labels because their edicts are legitimated by the force and power of God. Thus, no appeal to logic that can be countered by a cogent argument is offered by those who use the Bible to define proper sexual conduct. Rather, appeals to the “sacred” are used to convince the faithful that church edicts reflect divine will. Berger points out: “Religion legitimates so effectively because it relates the precarious reality constructions of empirical societies with ultimate reality” (Berger 1969, p. 32).

Religious moral entrepreneurs, according to Berger, are able to conceal the fact that they are mere social movements and are rooted in the subjective social order better than other organizations because of their claims to represent the sacred. Because of this, followers are more likely to internalize the labels that religious groups present.

Let the institutional order be so interpreted as to hide, as much as possible, its constructed character. Let that which has been stamped out of the ground *ex nihilo* appear as the manifestation of something that has been existent from the beginning of time, or at least from the beginning of this group. Let the people forget that this order was established by men and continues to be dependent upon the consent of men. Let them believe that, in acting out the institutional programs that have been imposed upon them, they are but realizing the deepest aspirations of their own being and putting themselves in harmony with the fundamental order of the universe. In sum: Set religious legitimations. (Berger 1969, p. 33)

Conservative religions are also able to exact great conformity upon their members by placing strict limitations on their behavior and heavy demands on their time. While great demands exact a heavy price from followers, such demands also provide great rewards in the form of shared norms, a sense of belonging and community, and a sense that one is working toward a common social goal. A number of sociologists have commented that such powerful themes as these constitute a prescription for acquiescence, and adherents to conservative, fundamentalist sects in this country report high levels of religious conviction and devotion (Ammerman 1988; Cochran 1990; Lawrence 1989; Roof and McKinney 1987). Thus, for gays with membership in a fundamentalist sect, their religion often becomes one “master status” and their homosexuality constitutes another, incompatible one. Such status conflict can often be intense and difficult to manage. Status conflict of this nature is the subject of the remainder of this thesis.

### **The Mormon Church as Moral Entrepreneur**

This thesis presents a study of how one conservative religious group—The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—labels homosexuality and how homosexual members of this church are managed within it. It is informed by the general tenets of the labeling

perspective in sociology and seeks to outline the way the church as a moral entrepreneur advances and governs its definition of homosexuality as deviance. It charts the reluctant compromises evident in the evolution of the church's policy on managing homosexual members as the organization tries to combat and fend off the gains posted by competing moral entrepreneurs in the gay rights movement.

In addition to examining the church as a sociological entity, this thesis also examines the lives of gay Mormons themselves. It offers answers to such questions as: How do gay Mormons acquire and internalize their deviant label in the church? How do they manage the stigmatized label once it is acquired? And, how do those who cannot accept the church's definition of homosexuality still cling to both of their "master statuses" of Mormon church member and homosexual?

For the purposes of this study, we can best address these questions by decomposing the church's label of homosexuality into two fairly distinct broad elements: (1) an actual definition of homosexuality, which regards homosexuals as flawed and abnormal, and (2) a set of church-prescribed, appropriate behaviors for homosexuals within the church which include: changing (or attempting to change) sexual orientation from homosexual to heterosexual, marrying heterosexually to "cure" homosexuality, and living a celibate lifestyle without sexual expression of any kind, including masturbation.

This creates a four-part typology of gay Mormons based on whether or not they have internalized the church's definition of homosexuality, and how closely they live their lives by the church's behavioral standards. (A graphic display of this typology is presented in Table 1, page 16.) After introducing the history of the Mormon church's theological and social stance on the topic of homosexuality in chapters two and three, chapter four of this work examines how one assumes a gay identity within Mormonism, including encounters with ecclesiastical leaders and the experience of "coming out." Chapter five deals with those who have chosen to accept the church definition of homosexuality as abnormal—both those who are living church behavioral standards and those who are not, and outlines the demographic and structural variables that are correlated with this identity management strategy. And, finally, chapter six details the experiences of those who still



<b>Table One: Identity Management Strategies of Homosexual Mormons</b>		
Strategy for Identity Management	Attitude toward Church Definition of Homosexuality	Acceptance of Church Prescribed Behavior for Homosexuals
Living a celibate lifestyle, Marrying heterosexually, Changing orientation ( <i>Chapter Five</i> )	Accepts	Accepts
Resigning oneself to church condemnation ( <i>Chapter Five</i> )	Accepts	Rejects
Seeking reform of church policy while still accepting church behavioral standards ( <i>Chapter Six</i> )	Rejects	Accepts
Seeking reform of church policy while rejecting church behavioral standards ( <i>Chapter Six</i> )	Rejects	Rejects

desire to occupy their master status as members of the Mormon church, but who nevertheless reject the church's definition of homosexuality as sinful and flawed.

### **Methodology**

Before proceeding with our analysis, it is necessary to comment on how this study was done. Reliable data on Mormon homosexuals is difficult to come by. There is no sampling frame available for more traditional methods of sociological research, and there is very little in the way of sociological literature that can serve as a guide for developing research questions. For these reasons, this study is an exploratory study, describing a group of people who have never been approached sociologically.

Like many field studies in deviance, this study began when the author became aware of a "deviant" social group worthy of ethnographic analysis. In the course of my ongoing inquiry into the sociology of Mormonism, I came across an item in a journal for Mormon scholarship announcing the existence of a support group for gay Mormons. I was intrigued, recognizing immediately from my own conservative Mormon upbringing the contradictions inherent in being Mormon and being gay. One day, in late 1990, I brought this news item to the attention of several gay friends who were active in the campus gay rights movement at a large northern Utah university. To my surprise, they were familiar

with the group, and one of them had even been to a meeting of the support group in Salt Lake City. They also revealed that several members of the campus Gay and Lesbian Alliance were still active<sup>3</sup> members of the LDS church. Ever the curious sociologist, I asked if arrangements could be made for me to meet these men. Phone calls were made and, to my delight, I was introduced the next day to three men who were gay, LDS, and very religious. During the course of an informal conversation, I inquired as to how they reconciled their sexual preference with their religious affiliation. I was astounded by their answers, and even more amazed by their stories of how they became aware of their homosexuality, and how Mormon ecclesiastical authorities had dealt with them when their preference became known within the church. Shortly after these initial interviews, I decided to make an ethnography of Mormon homosexuals the topic of my master's thesis, and this study was born.

Using these men as key informants, I used a snowball sample to find other gay Mormons. I also joined the gay Mormon support group and began attending their monthly meetings and reading the literature they produced. I interviewed the leaders of several chapters of this group, and in each instance asked the individual being interviewed to refer me to other gay Mormons who would be willing to participate in the study.

In addition to the information unearthed by my informants, I learned of the existence of a "gay underground" at church owned Brigham Young University, and spent a week living with and interviewing these men and their friends. I also attended community gay rights functions, the meetings of campus gay groups on other local college campuses, and many other gathering points where interesting informants were likely to be found. Sometimes I was nosy, but more often than not the gay Mormons I encountered were eager to be part of a sociological study and usually had more to say than I had time to hear.

At about the time I had determined that my study was done and the data were ready to analyze in the summer of 1991, I began to become intrigued with the stories of gay Mormons who were married, those who lived celibate, and those who lived under the burden of believing that they were condemned by the church. Up until now, I had only

encountered men who were more or less out of the closet, I had yet to meet those that accepted the church's definition of homosexuality as sinful and flawed. I began to hunt for these individuals in earnest. They proved to be very difficult to find and rather reluctant to submit to interviews. My search for these men took me to numerous gay bars and gay "pick-up points," to conferences for people desiring to "change" sexual orientation, and to numerous LDS single adult social functions throughout Utah.

This time, interviews progressed according to what Denzin (1989) calls the "non-schedule standardized interview"—an extremely flexible interview design that is geared to get certain information from every respondent, but allows the researcher considerable latitude to explore topics of interest. I asked respondents about their level of religiosity, their family's religiosity, and whether or not they had served an LDS mission. I asked them their "coming out" experiences, how they managed the contradictions between being gay and LDS theology, whether they had ever been suicidal and whether they were politically liberal or conservative. Where appropriate, these subjects were explored in considerable depth.

Most informants were asked for their permission to have our conversations tape recorded on a microcassette recorder. I found however, that the recorder inhibited many of the informants, so some interviews were reconstructed from ethnographic notes after the interview session. A few informants who lived in distant locales or who were shy about revealing their identity were interviewed over the telephone.

A total of 71 complete interviews were obtained for the study. Care was taken to ensure that all gay Mormon lifestyles outlined in this thesis were about equally represented, even though the temptation to interview many more of the easy to find "out of the closet" types was hard to resist.

The earliest research design for this study provided for lesbian Mormon women to be interviewed as well as gay men. A few were discovered and were interviewed, but it became apparent that their experiences and the church's interaction with them was very, very different than that of gay men. In addition, lesbian women with high religiosity and commitment to the church were very reluctant to submit to interviews. Given that the

study was financed from my own limited resources and needed to be completed within a certain time frame, I decided with some regret to limit the analysis to gay males in the church.

For clarification and insight, I also interviewed several counselors at LDS Social services and a number of bishops and ex-bishops. These men provided excellent balance and helped me understand the church's rationale for its policies. Some were concerned that I was writing an anti-Mormon book, but agreed to chat with me when I assured them that I would try to be fair to the church. Some consented to be interviewed only after reading early drafts of chapters two and three. Others declined to be interviewed after perusing the same chapters. Lastly, I spoke to a number of the parents and siblings of my informants to get a feel for how a family member's homosexuality impacts on a devout Mormon family.

In addition to the interviews, a content analysis was performed on all written material dealing with Mormonism and homosexuality. Although some material may have eluded me, it is safe to assert that the vast majority of everything ever written on the subject was within the scope of the content analysis. I examined newsletters and numerous pamphlets and tracts from various gay Mormon support groups, LDS church official publications, LDS General Conference reports, inspirational works by Mormon authorities, journals of Mormon scholarship and culture, and articles and books by LDS mental health clinicians who addressed the subject. I also analyzed scores of letters I received from gay Mormons in various parts of the country.

### **Reliability and Validity**

Venturing onto sociological *terra incognita* is an exciting enterprise, but poses considerable problems for ensuring reliability and validity. The most problematic issue to address, of course, is the sample. Obviously, one has no way of knowing how representative of gay Mormons as a whole the selected sample is. For this reason, generalizations and categorizations made from the interviews and documentary analysis must be treated as

anecdotal observations. Nevertheless, the researcher took pains to ensure that the data were consistent, and that gay Mormons from all points of view (as presented in figure 1) were sampled fairly equally.

In addition, techniques for triangulation discussed by Fielding and Fielding (1990) were employed to ensure reliability. Data from the content analysis were checked against the interviews for consistency. Contradictions between the data sources are noted in the footnotes, but overall the agreement between all sources of data, particularly with regard to the way the official church deals with homosexual members, was surprisingly high. In addition, several of the identity management strategies, particularly those outlined in chapter five, revealed a very high degree of homogeneity among informants.

One further, albeit controversial, methodological safeguard I afforded myself was the use of the Weberian concept of *verstehen*. Theodorson and Theodorson (1969, p. 460; cf. Gerth and Mills 1947) define the method of *verstehen* analysis as:

The use of personal knowledge and insight gained in social interaction and through role taking as a tool in the understanding of the social behavior of others. An observer of social interaction is capable of inferring the participants' definition of the situation (their understanding of and expectations in a situation) through his knowledge of how he would define the situation. . . . The success of the method of *verstehen* depends on the observer's understanding of the culture and social norms within which the behavior being observed occurs.

I claim the appropriate use of *verstehen* in this study by virtue of my 27 year affiliation with the LDS church and typical rigorous upbringing and indoctrination in the unique culture and theology of Mormonism which, in many cases, provided the kind of insight and understanding of the definition of the situation that would certainly be lost on a researcher unfamiliar with the Mormon world view.

One final methodological note is warranted: the author's research is ongoing, and as this thesis was in final preparation a new and significant booklet was published by a gay Mormon support group on the subject of harmonizing homosexuality and Mormonism. It has not yet been received, but may included in later revisions of this document.

### Notes to Chapter I

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Szasz (1970, 1974).

<sup>2</sup> Some labeling theorists, however, have asserted exactly this. See Hyde (1990).

<sup>3</sup> The term "active" has a specific idiomatic meaning among Mormons. An "active" Mormon is one who attends church frequently, participates in Mormon church rituals, and professes high levels of belief in Mormon doctrine.

annihilated by God because of their licentiousness. The apostle Paul, writing to the fledgling Christian church in Rome, is believed by many Christians pastors to have identified male homosexuality as the principle sin of Sodom and Gomorrah, and the primary reason why God chose to utterly destroy the cities:

Wherefore God also gave them up to uncleanness through the lusts of their own hearts, to dishonor their own bodies between themselves . . . For this cause God gave them up unto vile affections: for even their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature: And likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust one toward another; men with men working that which is unseemly, and receiving in themselves that recompense of their error which was meet. (Romans 1:24, 26-27)

While the efficacy and accuracy of the traditional interpretation of these scriptural verses remains in question (Lach 1989), Greenberg and Bystry (1982) note that these texts, and several others like them, have nevertheless been used throughout history by clergy and exegetes to legitimize the Christian attitude toward homosexual behavior. They further note that the more fundamentalist and strictly literal a given religion's interpretation of the Bible, the stronger the condemnation of homosexuality within that organization. In addition, a host of researchers have forcefully demonstrated that religiosity is a highly significant variable in predicting homophobia among Christian church members in the United States (Britton 1990; Herek 1987; Poirier 1988; Rudolph 1990).

### **Homosexuality and American Christianity**

Christian attitudes like those presented above, though centuries old and firmly entrenched, have recently come under heavy fire in the United States. Heartened by the strides toward equality made by African Americans and others in the 1960s, participants in the developing gay rights movement—further spurred by regional gains in legislation aimed at ending employment and housing discrimination against gays in the 1970s—turned their attention to institutionalized homophobia in the churches (Harris 1981). For the first time in America, many gay church goers were beginning to emerge “from the closet” and demand

acceptance both of themselves and their lifestyle from the Christian churches.

Support for their cause has been slow and modest, but some advances have been made. The birth and growth of the nationally prominent Metropolitan Community Church, which openly embraces gay members, is but one of the many Christian support groups which has emerged to pastor the large Christian gay community (Hargrove 1989).

In 1972, the United Methodist Church accepted a declaration that "Extend[ed] to all persons, including those of homosexual orientation, the redemptive life of the church community" (Rosten 1975, p. 541). But, far from completely supporting gays and their lifestyle, this same church in 1988 voted against the ordination of "self-avowed" gays to the Methodist clergy (Renzetti and Curran 1989, p. 274).

The recent well-publicized case of the Episcopal Bishop of Newark, the Right Reverend John Shelby Spong, is typical of the type of change being wrought within mainline Protestant churches. Spong, in 1988, began to openly advocate the admission and ordination of gays and lesbians to the Episcopal clergy (Spong 1988). Although Spong's crusade and the cause of gay clergy may be just a bit ahead of its time, the Episcopal church is among the most liberal in terms of its attitude toward gays, even supporting and welcoming homosexual cohabiting couples on the same terms as their heterosexual counterparts (Renzetti and Curran 1989). This and other changes have prompted many sociologists of religion to admit that "attitudes may be softening," and the move of homosexuals into the mainstream of most mainline Protestant denominations is inevitable (*The Wall Street Journal*. Feb. 20, 1991, p.1).

Still, homophobia is abundantly manifest in United States society, and many more traditional and conservative churches are adamantly resisting the tide of tolerance that is slowly rising over the traditional prohibitions of old-guard Protestantism. The fundamentalist revitalization of the 1980s, fueled in part by the AIDS scare, brought with it a renewed and vigorous attack on homosexuals from the Christian right (Hargrove 1989; Hunter 1983; Jorstad 1990). Claiming to go "back to the Bible," and subscribing for the most part to the doctrines of Biblical infallibility and the universal applicability and literal interpretation of scripture, members of these churches are strident and vociferous in their denunciation of



homosexuals (Marsden 1990). Sociologist James Davison Hunter writes:

Especially offensive to Evangelicals is homosexuality. Acknowledging the deinstitutionalization of prohibitions against homosexual activity, one writer lamented, 'We have also seen a change in America in our attitudes and laws towards homosexuals. It's very fashionable to dismiss this growing problem by saying 'Well, they're just a little different from us,' or 'It's just a sickness, like tuberculosis, or something.' However, God said that it's not a sickness, it's a sin'. (Hunter 1983, p. 104-105)

Hargrove (1989) reports that conservative religious groups have been instrumental in the fight against gay rights and legislation protecting gays, and Jorstad notes that famous fundamentalist televangelists like Jerry Fallwell and Pat Robertson label " . . . the gay movement as the greatest possible threat to domestic stability in the nation's history" (Jorstad 1990, p. 141). The Roman Catholic church adds its concerns to Evangelical voices, calling homosexuality an "objective disorder" (Williams 1987).

Thus, in spite of the modest gains discussed earlier, Chalfant, Beckley and Palmer, (1987) using data gathered by the National Opinion Research Center, demonstrate that homosexuality is viewed by the vast majority of Christian church goers as "Always wrong" (See Table 2).

<b>Religious Affiliation</b>	<b>Always Wrong</b>	<b>Almost Always Wrong</b>	<b>Sometimes Wrong</b>	<b>Not Wrong</b>
Catholic	69.1	7.1	8.6	15.1
Baptist	82.6	3.8	4.3	9.3
Methodist	79.1	5.9	5.1	9.8
Lutheran	75.1	5.9	7.3	11.7
Presbyterian	68.7	6.5	8.0	16.8
Episcopal	53.2	11.1	14.2	21.6
No Affiliation	70.8	4.6	7.7	16.9

### Mormonism and Homosexuality

One religious organization that has given very little ground in its rejection of homosexuality is the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, commonly called the Mormon or LDS church. Since it was founded in New York in 1830, Mormon church leaders have been relatively silent on the issue of homosexuality. Discussions of the subject appear very infrequently in the speeches of Mormon leaders throughout the 19th and first half of the 20th centuries, and those that are extant are mostly just commentary on the scriptural verses presented above. But, since the gay rights movement emerged from the "closet" in the late 1960s, Mormon apostles and prophets<sup>3</sup> have begun an infrequent, but consistent and unequivocal denunciation of homosexuality in official church printed matter and from the pulpit. Since the Stonewall riots of 1969, which vaulted the nascent gay rights movement to national prominence, LDS clergymen have condemned gay people and their lifestyle in no uncertain terms, calling homosexual behavior a "sexual perversion" and an "abuse of the sacred power to create [life]" (*Ensign* Nov. 1982, p. 4; *Ensign*, Nov. 1986, p. 46). In the semiannual general conferences of the LDS church from about 1970 to the present, homosexuality has been mentioned with ever increasing frequency, and in every case it has been denounced and decried with the strongest of language. In one of the church's official statements regarding homosexuality, the First Presidency<sup>4</sup> states:

Homosexuality is a sin in the same degree as adultery and fornication. [It] runs counter to the divine objectives and the intended destiny of mankind. Some claim homosexuality to be incurable, therefore they seek to be considered a legitimate minority group protected by the law. We should not be deceived by these false rationalizations. We must never lose our perspective amidst the world's clamor to justify and normalize immorality. (*Homosexuality* 1981 [LDS Church publication])

These sentiments are expressed rather more strongly from the pulpit, and individual apostles have compared the seriousness of homosexuality with murder (*Ensign* May 1980, p. 6), and have implied that the acceptance of homosexuality was the reason for the downfall not just of the Biblical cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, but of the empires of Greece and Rome as well (*Ensign* Nov. 1977, p. 73). Spencer W. Kimball, twelfth prophet

of the church called homosexuality “repugnant,” “wretched wickedness,” “degenerate,” “unnatural” and “ugliness” in a book that has become a bestseller in Mormon bookstores (Kimball 1969). And apostle Bruce R. McConkie stated that because “homosexual abominations are fast becoming the norm of life among the wicked and ungodly,” the world will soon be as evil as it was in the days of Noah (*Ensign* Nov. 1980, p. 50). Similarly, the LDS *Church News*—official newspaper of the Mormon church—asked:

. . . On what basis do the adherents to this practice [homosexuality] demand special privilege? Who are they that they should parade their debauchery and call it clean? They even form their own churches and profess to worship the very God who denounces their behavior—and they do not repent. They form their own political groups and seek to compel the public to respect them. Do other violators of the law of God receive special consideration? Do the robbers, the thieves, the adulterers? (*Church News*, Dec. 16 1978, p. 16)

Studies support the fact that the words of these leaders have not fallen on deaf ears. Mormons are among the most intolerant of American religious groups with regard to accepting gays and their lifestyle (Vernon 1980). Vernon (1980) has shown that when rating the sinfulness of various practices such as lying or theft on a scale of 1 to 10, a full 92% of Mormon college students rate homosexuality as a 10, or “extremely wrong”—only adultery and murder fared worse. When Wilford E. Smith (1977) asked a similar sample to rank a list of sins according to their seriousness, homosexuality was ranked number one, regardless of the respondent’s gender, and regardless of whether or not the respondent attended church frequently or infrequently.

To be sure, however, there are members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints who are gay. And, not surprisingly, these pronouncements have become a vexing problem for these believers. As they see gays in the larger society push for societal acceptance and antidiscrimination legislation, gay Mormons are faced with the knowledge that their church simply does not see rights for gay people as a civil rights issue. As they see the emergence of tolerance in mainline denominations and the rise of Protestant organizations specifically geared to meet the spiritual needs of gay Christians, they are faced with the precariousness of their spiritual plight.

Of course, difficulty harmonizing a homosexual orientation with one's religion is not unique to Mormons. Thumma's (1991) ethnography of a conservative, gay evangelical group shows that most of those coming to the group were in the midst of an "identity crisis." Thumma cites two new members who were forced to confront the disparity:

'I will not and cannot disregard my faith (nor my sexual orientation). I often find myself compromising my beliefs. The Lord is disappointed with me.' Another writer stated, 'I have abstained from sexual involvement with others for three years because of my fear of breaking God's law. I miss the close fellowship of a lover, but I'm scared that I will go to hell if I do. I'm so lonely' (Thumma 1991, p. 338).

Thumma notes that while most gay Evangelicals came to the group embroiled in identity conflict, the fellowship of other gay conservative Christians was successful in assuaging the mental anguish associated with the dissonance (Thumma 1991). Thus, while their conflict was a difficult ordeal, by changing congregations (or, at most, Christian denominations), they were able to find a body of believers that met their spiritual needs—accepting them as homosexuals *and* Christians.

This route is not as easily taken by the Mormon homosexual. Unlike most other Protestant churches in the United States, Mormons believe that there is no salvation, in the Christian sense, outside of the Mormon church. Moreover, the doctrine of the LDS church is sufficiently distinct as to be mostly incompatible with the teachings of American Protestantism<sup>5</sup>. Most believing Mormon gays would find themselves on unfamiliar turf should they seek spiritual nurturance from another, accepting Protestant congregation or sect.

### **Mormon Doctrine and Homosexuality**

To exacerbate this situation, one of the key tenets of the LDS church is that the original, true gospel of Jesus Christ was corrupted and twisted by Protestant reformers and religious leaders since the writing of the New Testament. Because of this, God's priesthood, which, according to Mormonism, is the power to act in His name, was taken from the

**Table 3—Comparison of Mormonism with Two Protestant Denominations on the Question of Exclusive Access to Spiritual Truth**

Episcopalian	Lutheran	Mormon
<p><b>Q. Do Episcopalians believe that theirs is the only true faith?</b></p>	<p><b>Q. Do Lutherans believe theirs is the only true religion?</b></p>	<p>I asked [God] which of all the sects was right . . . and which I should join. I was answered that I must join none of them, for they were all wrong; and the Personage that addressed me said that all their creeds were an abomination in His sight; that those professors were all corrupt; that: "They draw near to me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me . . ." (Joseph Smith History 1:18-19).</p>
<p>A. No. We hold that all who are baptized (whether by Episcopalian or other rites . . .) are members of the church of Christ. . . . Of that one Church, Episcopalians believe they are a part; they have never claimed they are the <i>only</i> part (Rosten 1975, 98. [Emphasis in original]).</p>	<p>A. Yes, but they don't believe they are the only ones who have it. There are true Christian believers in a vast majority of the churches, perhaps in all (Rosten 1975, 165).</p>	

planet; with it went the true religion. The founder of Mormonism, Joseph Smith, claimed to have received and restored this lost power to the earth in a vision in 1829 (*Doctrine & Covenants* 13). Thus, for members of the LDS church, only baptisms, ordinations and other ceremonies performed under the auspices of priesthood power (i.e. performed in the Mormon church) are recognized by God<sup>6</sup>. So, while a gay Christian can find salvation in another, more tolerant church, Mormons believe that theirs is the *only* true church—no other alternative religious group is sanctioned by God. Indeed, quite the contrary seems to be the case; the *Book of Mormon* states that:

There are save two churches only; the one is the church of the Lamb of God, and the other is the church of the devil; wherefore, whoso belongeth not to the church of the Lamb of God belongeth to that great church, which is the mother of abominations; and she is the whore of all the earth. (1 Nephi 14:10)

A comparison of the traditional position of Mormonism with that of two mainline Christian denominations on this issue, presented in Table 3 above, brings this distinction into sharper focus.<sup>7</sup> In addition, the Mormon temple ceremony depicts a Christian clergyman as unwitting worker in the employ of Satan (Tanner and Tanner 1987).

While it is true that such caustic denunciations of other churches have been tamed in the speeches of Mormon church authorities over the last two decades, the doctrine of exclusive access to the true ordinances of Jesus Christ's gospel for members of the church

remains intact and unchanged (McConkie 1966<sup>8</sup>). Tanner and Tanner note that “Although present-day leaders of the Mormon church are becoming more subtle in their attacks on other churches, they still teach that the Mormon church is the only true church and that all others are in a state of apostasy” (Tanner and Tanner 1987, p. 3).

From the foregoing it is easy to see that the LDS homosexual is in a peculiar predicament. S/he can neither find solace in his/her religion, nor can s/he easily seek to fulfill spiritual needs from another sect. But there are other factors that further marginalize the gay member of the Mormon church.

Members’ commitment to Mormonism is heightened by the importance the church places on individual religious experiences. Such experiences are defined by Mormon leaders as sure evidence that the LDS church is the true faith. These religious experiences are highly salient to Mormons, and are reaffirmed in monthly congregational meetings where members disclose to one another their strong belief, or “testimony” that theirs is the only true church. Youth in the church are encouraged to “gain a testimony” through a regimen of fasting, prayer, and adherence to the commandments (Shepherd and Shepherd 1984). The practice of seeking a supernatural encounter is modeled after the experience of Joseph Smith, who, upon praying to God to ask which of all the Christian sects was true, received a vision of God and Jesus Christ (Backman 1980). Members are also told to ask God about the truthfulness of the *Book of Mormon*, and in the final chapter of that book, readers are admonished upon reading the work to:

. . . ask God the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true; and if ye shall ask with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ, he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost. (Moroni 10:4)

The experience received from this exhortation is fairly standard among Mormons. Most describe a “burning in the bosom” or a warm feeling telling them that the book is true (Gottlieb and Wiley 1984; O’Dea 1957; Shepherd and Shepherd 1984). Often the experience is highly emotional and personal, and Mormons recounting the experience often become tearful in the telling. Not every LDS member who reads and prays about the

*Book of Mormon* reports such an experience, but the occurrence is common in the church, and for those who have had the experience, it is more often than not highly salient. The social interpretation of this event is quite fixed in the church, and is very resistant to change. One gay Mormon who reported the religious experience in the typical manner stated:

I can't deny my testimony. I know the church is true like I know I'm standing here. I know that the *Book of Mormon* is true with all my heart. Nothing can convince me that this is not the gospel of Jesus Christ. But I also know that I am gay. I don't know what to do about that. I don't know what I can do about that.

Finally, Mormons also have unique beliefs about the nature and function of marriage that further set them apart from other Christian sects and worsen the situation for gay members. According to the LDS faith, there are two kinds of marriage. "Temporal" marriages are those marriages which are performed by the power of the state, or under the auspices of clergy people from various faiths. These marriages, the church teaches, are legally binding, and the expression of sexuality within these unions is appropriate and expected. However, temporal marriages are, as the words of the familiar ceremony suggest, "'til death do us part."

Eternal marriage, the preferred counterpart to temporal marriage, is not only legally recognized by the state, but is also sanctioned by God. Eternal marriage can only be performed by the power of the Mormon priesthood, and can only be transacted in special temples set aside for this purpose. According to Mormon belief, eternal marriage, or "temple marriage," creates a union between husband and wife that remains effectual not only in this world, but in the hereafter as well (McConkie 1966). Entrance into the temple where such marriages are performed is strictly limited to members of the church who are screened by their bishops and stake presidents<sup>9</sup> to ensure orthodoxy.

But such marriages are more than just eternal relationships. According to LDS theology, being married is actually essential for complete salvation. Mormons teach that "neither is the man without the woman, neither the woman without the man, in the Lord" (1 Corinthians 11:11). Church doctrine states that temple marriage is a *sine-qua-non* for

entrance into the highest degree of heaven<sup>10</sup>—a place where people are allowed to become gods and create worlds of their own, in much the same capacity as the Creator of this earth. This process of world building involves creating “spirit children” who will inhabit these worlds, and thus a marriage is necessary for the inhabitants of this “Celestial Kingdom<sup>11</sup>”. The doctrine of marriage and its centrality to Mormon theology was spelled out by Joseph Smith in 1843. The prophet wrote:

Therefore, if a man marry him a wife in the world, and he marry her not by me nor by my word, and he covenant with her so long as he is in the world and she with him, their covenant and marriage are not of force when they are dead. . . . Therefore, when they are out of the world they neither marry nor are given in marriage; but are appointed angels in heaven, which angels are ministering servants, to minister for those who are worthy of a far more, and an exceeding, and an eternal weight of glory. For these angels did not abide by my law; therefore they cannot be enlarged, but remain separately and singly, without exaltation. . . . (Doctrine and Covenants 132:15-16)

Writing of those who are married for “time and all eternity,” the prophet revealed that, should they remain faithful, “Then shall they be gods, because they have no end; therefore shall they be from everlasting to everlasting . . . they [shall] be gods, because they have all power, and the angels are subject unto them” (*Doctrine & Covenants* 132:20).

Thus, those who are faithful but do not have the benefit of temple marriage will act as servants to those who do. Only heterosexual marriages are sanctioned in the temple, and great emphasis is placed on marriage in the LDS church. Single men and women, as they approach their later twenties, experience increasing pressure from family and church leaders to find a spouse and continue their push toward exaltation (Johnson 1983; Raynes and Parsons 1983).

This doctrine of marriage, more than anything else, seems to marginalize gay members of the church, and many for whom leaving the church is not an option have resigned themselves to a lesser degree of glory in Mormon heaven. One exchange between the researcher and a gay college student, recently returned from an LDS mission<sup>12</sup>, typifies the depth of this resignation:

**Researcher:** So then, what about eternal progression<sup>13</sup>?



**Informant:** What about it?

**Researcher:** Well, how do you see yourself fitting in?

**Informant:** Well, the D & C<sup>14</sup> says that we'll be ministering angels if we aren't married, but I think that will be okay, you know, I'll be a ministering angel. I think that is kind of what the Holy Ghost does, you know, kind of a messenger for the gods type of thing.

**Researcher:** So maybe you can't be like God the Father, but you can be like the Holy Ghost?

**Informant:** Yeah. Something like that.

**Researcher:** So do you think that the Holy Ghost might be gay?

**Informant:** No.

Mormon marriages are also expected to be fruitful, not just in the afterlife, but on this earth as well. Large families are idealized in the church, and having many children is seen as a badge of orthodoxy and faithfulness in the religion (Gottlieb and Wiley 1984; Heaton 1987; Shepherd and Shepherd 1984; Warenski 1980). Mormon women are encouraged not to enter, or, if possible, drop out of the labor force so that their presence in the home can facilitate the care of a large family (Adams 1986; Terry, Slaughter-Griffin and Terry 1980). The use of artificial birth control is discouraged, and performing or having an abortion is an excommunicable offense (Rosten 1975).

Mormon preference for large families is predicated on the belief that people live as spirits in heaven before they take on a body and come to earth. Obtaining a body is necessary for exaltation, and so it behooves Mormon couples to provide the opportunity to come to earth for as many of God's spirit children as is possible (Shepherd and Shepherd 1984). As one observer, writing to the editor of a journal for Mormon scholarship commented, "The infertility of homosexual relationships strikes at the very heart of Mormon sexual ethics" (Dialogue 20(1):10). The Mormon apostle, and later church president, Spencer W. Kimball epitomized these sentiments when he wrote:

Of the adverse social effects of homosexuality, none is more significant than the effect on marriage and home. The normal, God-given sexual relationship is the procreative act between man and woman in honorable marriage. . . . The institution of marriage is further elevated in the 132nd section of the Doctrine and Covenants, wherein the Lord makes clear that only through the eternal union of man and woman can they achieve eternal life<sup>15</sup>. As an example, he says that the wife is given to the man 'to multiply and replenish the earth . . .' In this context, where stands the perversion of homosexuality? Clearly it is hostile to God's purpose in that it negates his first and great

## Chapter II

### Mormon Theology and Homosexuality

Restrictions on the expression of sexuality traditionally espoused by Christian churches in the United States find their provenance in the venerable Law of Moses, a comprehensive code of conduct for the ancient Hebrew people. The law, as outlined in the book of Leviticus, one of the books of the Hebrew Pentateuch, prohibits certain sexual practices such as rape, adultery, bestiality, incest, and others (Leviticus 20:10-21). Not the least among these injunctions is one widely interpreted as a prohibition against male homosexuality. Male homosexual relations are called an "abomination" by God (Leviticus 18:22) and, according to the law, are a capital offense. Indeed, God warns the Hebrews that: "If a man also lie with mankind, as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination: they shall surely be put to death; their blood shall be upon them<sup>1</sup>" (Leviticus 20:13).

The idea of male homosexuality as a grave sin has also become part of the exegetic tradition in the theological interpretation of the exclusively Christian scriptures as well. Although references to male homosexual behavior in the New Testament are rather infrequent, they are nevertheless unequivocal and scathing in their denunciation of the practice when they do appear. The apostle Paul, for example, writing to the nascent church at Corinth, explicitly states that homosexuals and the "effeminate<sup>2</sup>" will not be allowed into the kingdom of God (I Corinthians 6:9).

In addition to a belief that male homosexuality is intrinsically sinful, Christian churches have been largely intolerant of such relationships because of their conviction that homosexuality is to society what cancer is to the body—if left unchecked it will grow, spread, and mutate. Homosexuality must be excised, not just eschewed they reason, because the presence of homosexuality in society is a sign of cultural degeneration and gross moral decay (Jorstad 1990). This belief is undoubtedly taken from the story of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah found in the book of Genesis (Genesis 19). These cities—which serve as the archetype of a sinful society to the Christian world—were

commandment to 'multiply and replenish the earth.' If the abominable practice became universal it would depopulate the earth in a single generation. It would nullify God's great program for his spirit children in that it would leave countless unembodied spirits in the heavenly world without the chance for the opportunities of mortality. (Kimball 1969, p. 80-81)

In sum, it would seem that the LDS church places seemingly insurmountable theological hurdles in the path of its homosexual members, while at the same time stressing personal religious experience which makes it almost impossible for them to leave the organization. One gay Mormon sums it up thusly:

I feel great pain that the church I love so much and have devoted my life to offers me only no-win options. If I remain single, I will be discriminated against, as positions of significant responsibility and leadership are filled by married men. I will be hounded relentlessly to get married, and—according to Mormon myth—I will be denied exaltation and condemned to spend eternity serving my married brothers as a ministering angel, whatever that is. If I marry, I run the risk of making myself and at least one other person miserable for many years, with the almost certain risk of divorce. I also have the option of living with a male companion and either leaving the church because of guilt, or being forced out by excommunication. At the moment, I am having difficulty deciding which of these options I want most. (Dialogue 23(4):5)

Another writer also recognizes this theological quagmire, but admits that leaving the church is, for others he has known as well as for himself, much harder than it may appear:

Having been raised a Mormon, it is impossible to ever separate oneself emotionally from the church. For many, it remains an irresolvable antagonism in their lives. My non-Mormon homosexual friends have often observed that breaking from their hostile church was one of the more positive things they had done, but the Mormon homosexuals they have known remain inextricably tangled with the church. When they realize the extreme position the church takes, they are incredulous that I would continue to be active. Their religious background does not give them adequate perspective of the profound effect which being raised a Mormon has on the lives of its members. . . . Being a Mormon and homosexual brings the dilemma into even sharper focus. The 'shadow of the creed' with its strong family tradition, sexual purity, and doctrine of celestial marriage is indelibly impressed upon the young man's character. Few religions and even cultures value and practice fellowship to the degree experienced by Mormons. It is commonly observed that being Mormon is a complete way of life. (Jenkins 1978, p. 47)

Because of this "complete way of life," it is not uncommon for gay Mormons, at one time or another, to seek help from ecclesiastical leaders, hoping for understanding and assistance in coming to grips with the contradictions inherent in the incongruous interplay of sexual orientation and LDS religious belief. For this reason, the church has been forced to develop institutionalized policies for bishops and stake presidents for dealing with those who come to their leaders confessing what the church calls "homosexual problems".

## Notes to Chapter II

<sup>1</sup> All quotations from scripture are from the King James Version of the Bible.

<sup>2</sup> Two Greek words are used to convey Paul's feelings about male homosexuality in these verses. The first, μαλακοι (pronounced malakoi) connotes softness, passivity and femininity. The second, αρσενοκοιται (pronounced arsenokoitai) is a vulgar term and literally means, as is evident from the etymology, "one who engages in anal sex" (Bruce 1971). Bruce and other commentators note that the words used together refer to both the "passive" and "active" role in male homosexual intercourse (Barclay 1975; Buttrick et.al. 1980; Grosheide 1983; Morris 1983).

<sup>3</sup> The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is governed by a body of clergymen known as the General Authorities. Of these authorities, the apostles and the living prophet are the highest in authority and power. Typically, there are 12 apostles, modeled after the organization of Jesus' ministry as presented in the New Testament.

<sup>4</sup> The First Presidency of the LDS Church is composed of the Mormon prophet, or president, and his counselors who are also apostles. The First Presidency is Mormonism's court of highest appeal, and declarations from this governing body are considered "official" and are binding on the membership of the church.

<sup>5</sup> For instance, Mormons believe that God has a body of flesh and bone, while Protestants believe that God is spirit. Mormons do not accept the doctrine of the trinity, while it is a pillar of Protestantism. Mormons believe in the *Book of Mormon*, a volume of scripture unique to Mormonism and its offshoots which Mormons regard as more authoritative than the Bible. Protestant churches do not accept the *Book of Mormon* as scripture.

<sup>6</sup> Many Mormons actually have in their possession a card called a "line of authority" which is a priesthood pedigree showing who gave them the priesthood and on what date, who gave that person the priesthood and on what date, and so on back to Joseph Smith. The purpose of this is to ensure that the power to act in God's name has been properly passed from authoritative source to authorized recipient. Ordaining a member of the church to the priesthood without proper authorization is an excommunicable offense.

<sup>7</sup> The Episcopalian position is taken from W. Norman Pittenger, examining chaplain in the Diocese of New Jersey, and past president of the American Theological Society. The Lutheran position is the work of Dr. G. Elson Ruff, past president of the National Lutheran Editors Association. The Mormon position is taken from the canonical *Joseph Smith History* contained in the *Pearl of Great Price*, a book of Mormon scripture.

<sup>8</sup> The nebulous, phenomenological nature of Mormon doctrine makes it almost impossible to quote a definitive, authoritative church source on Mormon belief. Crapo (1987) has shown that LDS doctrine is often contextual and amorphous. Mormon apostle, apologist and theologian Bruce R. McConkie, however, is the twentieth century's most cited LDS general authority. His *magnum opus*, *Mormon Doctrine*, is an exhaustive encyclopedia of Mormon beliefs and is perhaps the classic exegesis of Mormon doctrine. Few Mormons would disagree that McConkie's explications of LDS belief are "official doctrine." Even though a systematic theology of Mormon dogma does not exist.

<sup>9</sup> Local congregations in the LDS church, called “wards” are presided over by ecclesiastical leaders called bishops. These are lay clergy who are called from the congregation for a term of service usually lasting about two to five years. Usually three or four wards share an LDS meeting house, and these groups of wards are called “stakes,” and are governed by a “stake president.” “Stakes” are named after a verse in the book of Isaiah, which states that God’s tabernacle, a tent, is held to the earth by various tent “stakes,” which will hold fast throughout calamity (Isaiah 33:20).

<sup>10</sup> Mormons believe that heaven is divided into three distinct kingdoms, the highest, or most glorious of these is the “celestial kingdom,” followed by the “terrestrial kingdom” and the “telestial kingdom” (See I Corinthians 15:40-41). The celestial kingdom is further divided into three degrees, the highest of which is known as “exaltation,” the heaven where Mormon men and women, married in the temple, may become gods (*Doctrine and Covenants* 131:1-2). Exaltation is the goal of members of the LDS church, and is considered by them to be true salvation.

<sup>11</sup> The spirits of the human beings who inhabit this earth, it is believed, were created through a sexual union between God and his wife (Tanner and Tanner 1987). Likewise, Mormons who progress to the highest degree of the celestial kingdom will create their spirit children through a similar sexual union. Thus, only through marriage can the Mormon goal of becoming like God be achieved, since no sexual union can be countenanced outside of marriage (Richards 1950).

<sup>12</sup> At age 19, Mormon men are expected to serve for two years proselytizing full time to win converts to the church. These proselytizing excursions are called “missions.” Typically, the young man is called to serve in an area far from his home. Women are also allowed to serve on missions, but they embark on their service at age 21, and their participation in missionary service is voluntary, not commanded (Gottlieb and Wiley 1984).

<sup>13</sup> The march toward exaltation is known as “eternal progression.” Eternal progression involves several set steps: baptism, being confirmed a member of the church, obtaining the priesthood, and so forth. The last step of eternal progression, besides remaining faithful, is a temple marriage.

<sup>14</sup> “D & C” is commonly used in Mormon circles as a short form of “*Doctrine and Covenants*,” a book of Joseph Smith’s revelations regarded as scripture by the members of the LDS church.

<sup>15</sup> Although, according to Mormon theology, all human beings will live eternally beyond death, the term “eternal life” has become synonymous in Mormon culture with “exaltation.”

## Chapter III

### LDS Church Policy and Homosexuality

Until the last half of the twentieth century, the LDS church saw no need to directly address the issue of homosexuality. Only when the first stirrings of what was to become the gay rights movement began to emerge and challenge traditional societal assumptions about sexual orientation did the church begin to respond with policies, actions and rhetoric directed toward both gays in the church and the issue of gay rights in the larger society.

The church's first efforts to deal with the issue began in 1959 when Mormon apostles Mark E. Petersen and Spencer W. Kimball were placed in charge of developing and administering policy on sexual matters as they pertain to the worthiness of church members. Regarding homosexuality, the substance of the policy was clear and straightforward—those who had engaged in homosexual behavior were almost always summarily excommunicated; those who had not had homosexual encounters but were nevertheless inclined to do so were prescribed a regimen of prayer and fasting and were given an opportunity to allow God to change them through faith and obedience. Those who were not “changed” were likewise cut off from the fellowship of the church (Kimball and Kimball 1977; Schow, Schow and Raynes 1991).

Apostle Kimball, a decade later, published his work, *The Miracle of Forgiveness*, a well-known and frequently cited Mormon classic that deals extensively with the subject of sexual immorality. Schow, Schow and Raynes correctly note that by the time this work was published, Kimball “had formulated ideas about homosexuality which have dominated church policy since that time” (Schow, *et. al.*, p. xxv).

Kimball's disdain for homosexuality is abundantly manifest in a chapter called “Crime Against Nature.” In this section of his book, Kimball calls homosexuality “an ugly sin, repugnant to those who find no temptation in it” (Kimball 1969 p. 77). Throughout, it is taken for granted that homosexuality is a matter of personal choice, a sinful practice, and one that can be cured. He notes:

After consideration of the evil aspects, the ugliness and prevalence of the

evil of homosexuality, the glorious thing to remember is that it is curable and forgivable. . . . Certainly it can be overcome, for there are numerous happy people who were once involved in its clutches and who have since completely transformed their lives. Therefore to those who say that this practice or any other evil is incurable, I respond: "How can you say the door cannot be opened until your knuckles are bloody, till your head is bruised, till your muscles are sore? It can be done." (Kimball 1969, p.79)

Kimball states that homosexuality is a level of perversion reached only after one has indulged in "gateway" sexual sins. Early in the chapter he identifies masturbation as a cause of homosexuality. The apostle writes:

Sin in sex practices tends to have a 'snowballing' effect. As the restraints fall away, Satan incites the carnal man<sup>1</sup> to ever-deepening degeneracy in his search for excitement until in many instances he is lost to any former considerations of decency. Thus it is that through the ages, perhaps as an extension of homosexual practices, men and women have sunk even to seeking sexual satisfactions with animals. (Kimball 1969, p. 78)

*The Miracle of Forgiveness* solidified and codified the church's position on homosexuality: that it is sin, it is behavior that is learned and chosen, and it is an inclination that can be changed. When the church developed a guidebook for bishops on how to counsel gay members, Kimball's formulations provided the underpinnings for the instruction. The handbook, entitled simply *Homosexuality*, states that same sex orientation

. . . is of grave concern to the Church because:

1. It violates the Lord's eternal plan for man's progress by perverting the proper use of procreative powers and loving relationships.
2. It deprives God's children of the happiness and fulfillment possible only in family life.
3. It debases and demeans those involved.
4. It is as sinful as heterosexual adultery and fornication.
5. It may involve violent or criminal behavior. (*Homosexuality* 1981, p. 1)

The booklet, however, goes beyond Kimball's declarations by asserting that not only homosexual behavior, but homosexual thoughts and fantasies are to be categorized under the label of homosexuality. According to the manual, homosexuality "may include thoughts or emotional attractions without outward sexual behavior" (*Homosexuality* 1981, p. 1). The booklet states that the development of homosexuality is associated with a disturbed family



background, poor relationships with peers, a domineering mother, a passive father and masturbation<sup>2</sup> (*Homosexuality* 1981, 2).

A belief in the learned nature of homosexuality is vital to Mormonism because of theological constructs which state that humans existed in a pristine state with God before coming to earth (D & C 93:29; Moses 3:5; Abraham 3:22-28<sup>3</sup>; Richards 1950). Life on this planet, the church teaches, is a test that determines who can remain faithful and return to God's presence (McConkie 1966). No one, it is believed, is foreordained to evil<sup>4</sup> or given evil predispositions<sup>5</sup> (McConkie 1966). For members of the church

To believe that immoral behavior is inborn or hereditary is to deny that men have agency to choose between sin and righteousness. The Lord has given men the freedom to make moral choices, and this agency is the cornerstone of his plan for exaltation. He has revealed that the ultimate goal for men is eternal life. It is inconceivable that—as some involved in homosexual behavior claim—he would permit some of his children to be born with desires and inclination which would require behavior contrary to the eternal plan (*Homosexuality* 1981, p. 2).

Changing the gay Latter-day Saint's sexual orientation is the explicit purpose of the church handbook, and bishops are told that "Modern day prophets have clearly promised that homosexuality can be changed. You should convey this positive attitude [to the gay Mormon] because it encourages change" (*Homosexuality* 1981, p. 3). The regimen of change involves, in addition to fasting and prayer, "Encouraging the gay member to begin heterosexual dating and gradually increase the frequency of that dating, even if the person has to force himself to participate in such activities" (*Homosexuality* 1981, p. 6).

Heterosexual marriage is the implied resolution of this dating, and many gay Mormon men report that they were strongly urged to seek marriage by bishops and other church leaders<sup>6</sup>. The tacit assumption behind these urgings is that once a person begins a heterosexual relationship in earnest, "nature will take over." One LDS gay commentator reasoned that

Many people are convinced that the homosexual is simply afraid of having sex with a girl and that he only needs to try and discover how much he likes it to get over his fears. Some church authorities have encouraged the young man along this line, urging him to just go ahead and get married and that he

will get to like having sex with his wife. Does such a charade warrant invoking the vows of eternal marriage? I have talked with the women who have been on the receiving end of this emotional duplicity. For many, their lives have been irreparably damaged. (Jenkins 1978, p. 15)

Those in counseling are also asked to choose a man in the church whom “he admires and respects, and [is told to] emulate [this person’s] behavior and characteristics” (*Homosexuality* 1981, p. 6). Further, bishops are told that “self masturbation is almost universal among those who engage in homosexual behavior” and that the elimination of this practice is essential if the member is to successfully change his orientation (*Homosexuality* 1981, p. 6). Those who are unable or unwilling to change are excommunicated. The booklet closes with various testimonials from those who have supposedly changed their orientation through this method. One such individual writes:

I became deeply involved but I have been totally cured. Over a long period with some success and occasional slips, I have finally become the master. My so-called friends tried to convince me it could not be done, but I know now it can. (*Homosexuality* 1981, p. 9)

### **Homosexuality and the Mormon Mental Health Community**

In an attempt to further aid Mormon gays in changing, not only faith in God but the acumen of LDS psychologists and mental health clinicians was employed to change the orientation of homosexual Mormons. Long after the American Psychiatric Association’s 1973 action removing homosexuality from the DSM as a mental disorder, church owned Brigham Young University developed “aversion therapy” programs using shock therapy as negative reinforcement in an attempt to alter and suppress homosexual thoughts and feelings. Subjects in these studies were shown pictures of men in sexual poses and were delivered mild but painful electric shocks if these pictures produced sexual arousal. Others were asked to induce vomiting by sticking their fingers down their throat while thinking of their lover<sup>7</sup>. (Schow, et. al. p. xxvii). At least one Ph.D. dissertation was produced detailing the results of these studies (McBride 1976).

Those who claim to have successfully changed their sexual orientation through heterosexual dating, prayer, fasting or “aversion therapy” are few and far between.

Furthermore, the failure of these programs has not been from lack of trying on the part of the gay Mormons involved. Indeed, one LDS bishop, speaking to his congregation in Los Angeles remarked:

My own anecdotal experience is that not only would most Latter-day Saint homosexuals change their orientation if they could; but many, perhaps most, have tried desperately, sometimes over a sustained period of years, to do exactly that. . . . In my experience, homosexuality is one of the major problems facing the church today. (*Affinity* 13(10):7)

Realizing the depth of this “major problem,” a new battery of secularly educated Mormon psychologists and mental health clinicians gradually began to speak out in LDS journals and conferences, pushing the church for a new stance on homosexuality—a realistic stance that did not demand a change in sexual orientation from homosexual members.

One such authority is LDS clinical sociologist Carlford Broderick, director of the marriage and family therapy program at USC. In a book published by church owned Deseret Book Company, Broderick admits that homosexual orientation can only be redirected toward heterosexuality through “a series of miracles” (Broderick 1986, p. 80).

Victor L. Brown Jr., a Mormon psychologist, states that while change is and ought to be the goal of gay Mormons, a new definition of “change” needs to be emphasized. Brown states that while one cannot change orientation, one can realize “a kind, humane, overall enjoyment of warmth and affection with both men and women, without erotic undertones” (Brown 1985, p. 13). Lastly, LDS psychiatrist Jan Stout, writing in a popular journal for Mormon scholarship, states flatly that it is his opinion that homosexuality is not a learned phenomenon. He also notes that rather than seeing success in changing orientation among gay Mormons: “[His] clinical experience has indicated that the majority of Mormon homosexuals eventually drift away from their faith, live tenuously in the closet, or react with angry disillusionment” (Stout 1987, p. 39).

Not surprisingly, many gay Mormons, apprised of the words of these clinicians and emotionally, mentally and spiritually brutalized by their own encounters with bishops and stake presidents, became disgruntled with the Mormon church’s brand of therapy. As a

result, many began to think and write about taking matters into their own hands. One homosexual church member writes:

At present, to be Mormon and homosexual requires considerable compromise of either self identity or religious principles, this ever-present dichotomy creates inevitable conflicts. The extent to which to Latter-day Saint belief system is accepted or tolerated by Mormon homosexuals is ultimately their own decision. However, if Mormon gays and lesbians are ever to gain greater control over their lives, they must do so by empowering themselves. . . . No longer powerless, the new Mormon gay and lesbian—those who have taken the charge to shepherd their own destinies—have begun to establish a base for change in public opinion within the church. (Cheever 1985, p. 16)

This notion of empowerment became the driving force behind a new move afoot by gay Mormons themselves to press the LDS church for acceptance. At the risk—and often expense—of their church membership, some gay Mormons began emerge from the closet and look to within their own community for help in resolving the contradictions between their sexual preference and spiritual needs.

### **The Gay Rights Movement Within Mormonism**

Since 1978, Mormon gays have formed organizations and support groups to help ease the stress associated with being LDS and being gay. The most ambitious and successful of these efforts is “Affirmation,” an independent organization formed in early 1978 by gay and lesbian Mormons to specifically address the spiritual and psychological needs of those attempting to harmonize the doctrine of their church and their sexual preference. Affirmation is organized into regional chapters which meet monthly or more to discuss relevant issues and to provide the opportunity for gay Mormons to meet one another. The group also publishes a monthly newsletter. The charter of Affirmation asserts that “homosexuality and homosexual relations can be consistent with and supported by the gospel of Jesus Christ” (Affirmation Charter 1990). The document further states that the manifest purpose of Affirmation is to “work for the understanding and acceptance of gays and lesbians as full, equal and worthy persons within the Church of Jesus Christ of

Latter-day Saints” and to “Provide support for people experiencing difficulty reconciling their sexual orientation with traditional Mormon beliefs and other belief systems about homosexuality” (Affirmation Charter 1990). At the time of this writing, Affirmation has 15 chapters, including chapters on both coasts, Hawaii and the United Kingdom.

Despite the explicit statement of purpose contained in the charter, individual members of Affirmation range in opinion from those wanting assistance and support in their attempt to change their orientation or live celibate lives to those who believe that gays should be given the right to marry in LDS temples and thus have their sexual relations sanctioned by the church. A significant number of members also openly defy the LDS authority structure, claiming that the church, once true, has fallen into apostasy. Evidence for this apostasy is the church’s institutionalized homophobia—something, they reason, that God would never countenance. Affirmation members who fall into this category have typically requested excommunication, (a request the church immediately honors) but nevertheless profess to have “testimonies” of the *Book of Mormon* and/or the divine mission of Joseph Smith. Most say that they would return to the fellowship of the church if homosexual relationships were officially countenanced.

Some of those in this latter category, convinced that the church would never change its stand on homosexuality, attempted to form their own church in 1985. On August 28 of that year, Antonio Feliz, a former Mormon bishop, organized The Restoration Church of Jesus Christ. This tiny offshoot of the LDS church accepts the *Book of Mormon*, the divine mission of Joseph Smith and temple marriage, but differs from the church in that its constituency is almost exclusively gay. Feliz’ church began to actively proselyte among the gay community, and became known among those familiar with it as “The gay Mormon church.” At present, the organization is all but defunct (*Sunstone* 10(3):43-44).

There have been other attempts outside the church to meet the spiritual and social needs of gay Mormons as well, and as gays and lesbians in other churches began to make strides in the eighties, new groups of LDS gays began to take courage and speak out. For example, there exists a gay BYU alumni association. *The Student Review*, BYU’s unofficial student weekly paper recently devoted a special issue to gays and lesbians at Brigham

Young University. The headline of the issue proclaimed in bold type: "Focusing on Homosexuality at Brigham Young University." The presence of gays at BYU is particularly troublesome for the church, since, as one observer put it, "For many Mormons BYU is their city on a hill and the very juxtaposition of 'gay' and 'BYU' in [a headline] is an uncomfortable reality" (*Affinity* 13(3):3) Nevertheless, this researcher was invited to visit and interview members of the gay underground at BYU, and discovered that at least one organized support group exists to help those at the university cope.

Other organizations include HELP (Homosexual Education for Latter-day Saint Parents), a support group for the parents of Mormon gays, and a gay returned missionary association. A new publication purporting to meet the needs of gay and lesbian Mormons, dubbed *New Horizons* launched its premier issue in 1991 (*Sunstone* 15(5):59). And, in addition, the Gay and Lesbian Alliance (GLA) on the predominantly Mormon campuses of Utah State University and the University of Utah have a disproportionate share of Latter-day Saints and ex-Latter-day Saints swelling their ranks.

Most recently, members of a Utah chapter of the national militant gay rights group "Queer Nation" have begun picketing at Salt Lake City's Temple Square during the semiannual general conferences of the LDS church (See *Salt Lake Tribune*, Sunday April 7, 1991). Carrying signs reading, "Every 10th Saint is Queer" these protesters hand out leaflets and chant slogans at the gates of Mormondom's most visible symbol. Mormon representatives from Queer Nation stated that their protest was to raise visibility for their cause, which is to bring about complete acceptance of both gays and monogamous homosexual relationships within the church.

Several other groups exist, and several more have come and gone over the past decade. Most, however, have been short lived, and those that exist now are almost all in decline. For example, Affirmation, the oldest and largest organization for gay Mormons had about 400 members in 1985. That number has shrunk to only 275 members in 1992. Many chapters are now floundering, and several are teetering on the brink of extinction. It is estimated that 40% of those joining the organization choose not to renew their membership for a second year, and the group raised less than \$5000 in fiscal 1991. Affirmation has

also been wracked with internal dissension concerning the mission of the group, and questions about what kinds of ties and communication it should have with the LDS church (*Affinity* 14(5):3).

The chief reason for the failure of most of these groups is the unique theology and structure of the Mormon church detailed above. Most who move outside the church for advice and counsel are either in the process of leaving the church, or become disillusioned with support groups that are not sanctioned by church and priesthood approval. Several leaders of Affirmation point out, as evidence of this assertion, that the Salt Lake City chapter of Affirmation is one of the least effective and most beset with internal strife of any of the 15 chapters—in spite of the large numbers of gay Mormons in the area. According to one member of Affirmation’s board of directors,

The Utah chapter is just too close [geographically] to the church[’s headquarters]. If you really want to see where Affirmation is helping out, you need to come [to California]. The influence of the church is just too powerful for any meaningful dialogue out there [in Utah]. They are either too bitter or too wound up in the official church to do any good.

When asked about the numerous support groups for gay and lesbian Mormons that have come and gone over the years, one counselor at a Utah LDS Social Services center with an MSW from church owned Brigham Young University, expressed these sentiments:

**Informant:** It seems like every week a new organization for gay or lesbian Mormons emerges. They spring up, talk about what the church needs to do, print up a newsletter, and then fizzle out. They’re never around for more than a few months.

**Researcher:** Why do you suppose they fizzle out?

**Informant:** Why do you suppose?

**Researcher:** I’m asking you.

**Informant:** Because—and I’m not going to mince words here—they are kicking against the pricks<sup>8</sup>. They’re not happy. They need to realize that wickedness never was happiness<sup>9</sup> and get with the program. They don’t need a lot of organizations and support groups telling them how to reconcile being gay and being LDS. They need to stop being lazy, get down on their knees and repent. Period.

Regardless of the reasons for the instability of these organizations, the fact remains

that, in all, the vast majority of gay Mormons do not seek out help and support from them (See Cheever 1985). Indeed, in a church with over 8 million members, there must be many thousands of homosexual Saints—certainly far, far more than in all of the organizations designed to pastor them combined. Indeed, it would certainly be safe to say, based on the interviews from this study, that the huge majority of homosexual Latter-day Saints who remain active in the church, are, by the standards of most of their gay counterparts in the society at large, “in the closet.” Most who have come out are known only to counselors and clergy. One writer, speaking of the shortcomings of Affirmation in reaching gay church members, typifies these sentiments:

As an organization we have focused our attention on those who have come to us seeking refuge from silence, alienation and fear. What we haven't realized is that those who have fled are often stronger than those who have stayed behind. (Affinity 16(5):4)

Nevertheless, an increasingly vocal gay minority represented by these groups began, as the 1980s progressed, to stir the church to action. Embarrassed by conflict and protest at Temple Square and increasingly concerned about public knowledge of its failed policy of turning gay people straight, the church began to open its eyes and ears to the voices of the left-leaning LDS clinical community and the gay people burdened under the yoke of the church's policies.

In the mid 1980s, in response to a growing awareness that its current treatment and counseling programs dealing with homosexuals were largely unsuccessful, the church turned to its department of social services, a unit staffed by “temple worthy” members trained in the behavioral sciences, for answers on how to deal with its gay members. (The church had earlier turned such things as serious marital problems and emotional and mental disorders away from local bishops and over to social services.) The result of this change in administrative strategy was a substantial change in the way the official Mormon church deals with homosexual members. Most of the informants for this study who have been active in the church for some time report that the church has, in recent years, become more kind, comforting and realistic in helping gay members cope with their



sexuality.

A review of church policy and action shows that this is indeed the case not only for the issue of homosexuality but for many other sexual matters in the church as well. For instance, in October of 1982, the First Presidency of the church rescinded an order that instructed bishops to deny temple recommends to couples who practiced oral sex (*Affinity* 14(1):8). In 1980, the bishop's general handbook stated that church members who submit to transsexual operations are to be excommunicated. In 1983, that language was changed to read that a change in a church member's sex "ordinarily" justifies excommunication (*Affinity* 14(1):8). This same sort of "liberalizing" benefits the gay Latter-day Saint as well.

As far as the gay Mormon is concerned, those who appear to be making an earnest effort to live within the church's guidelines are rarely excommunicated in today's church. Some members of this study have been in ongoing counseling with their ecclesiastical leaders and LDS social workers for periods of three or more years, and despite frequent "slip-ups," have managed to keep their membership more or less intact. Ordinarily, only those gay members who are defiant, unrepentant, or who specifically ask to have their membership removed are in real danger of a church membership court. A majority of respondents to this study report that those who "appear penitent" before their bishops and stake presidents will almost always be given another chance to repent, provided these "appearances" occur with decreasing frequency. There are exceptions to this general rule, however.

More importantly than not removing gay members from its constituency, the church has also "looked the other way" at efforts to counsel and pastor gay members by certain bishops and other church leaders. The most ambitious attempt to meet the spiritual needs of gay Mormons from within the church was administered by bishop Stan Roberts, who served as bishop of the San Francisco single adult ward from 1984 to 1989. When Roberts, a retired businessman, assumed his calling in 1984, he was amazed to discover that over 20% of his male parishioners were gay (Roberts 1990). Roberts, faced with the collapse of his congregation, reasoned that *being* homosexual was not a sin, but that homosexual *behavior* was, in fact, sinful. He concluded that as long as his ward members

agreed not to engage in same-sex sexual encounters, they could not only attend church without fear of excommunication, but could hold the priesthood and certain positions in the lay clergy as well (Roberts 1990). When asked if he ever countenanced homosexual behavior or knowingly allowed sexually active gay men to receive priesthood callings, Roberts responded:

Not to my knowledge. Of course, I could have been deceived. But I got to know them fairly well. If somebody had a lover or they were sleeping with somebody I didn't give them a calling. I think in the eyes of the church anybody who says that they are homosexual is an "active" homosexual—sexually—but that's not the case. . . . I've had a lot of gays ask me if they could move their membership to the ward, meaning, 'Will you allow me to have my lover?' I replied that it's not a matter of me allowing you to do anything. I'm an administrator in the gospel, and these are my perimeters. I asked them, 'How would it be if I allowed unmarried heterosexuals to live together?' They responded that it's not equal since heterosexuals have the opportunity to get married. That's an issue that's unresolvable for me . . . I deal with what I have to deal with . . . I can't change the commandments and I still have to go by the handbook. I need to be tempered by the Spirit, but I have never been willing to say, 'It's all right if you have that kind of relationship'. (Roberts 1990, p. 15)

Still, even for those who were openly involved in gay relationships, Roberts did not convene church courts, although he regarded such behavior as sinful and unacceptable. Roberts notes that

If people were blatant in their sexuality and were unwilling to repent, I would talk to them any time they wanted to. But if, month after month, they were unwilling to do everything that I asked them to do, then I would say, . . . 'How would you feel about not taking the sacrament?'<sup>10</sup> . . . In high council meeting we talked about kicking them out of the church. We got in a discussion about what's the most grievous sin. It was interesting, they were willing to grade everything—this is the most serious, then this is next, and so on. The Savior says that the least degree of sinners aren't acceptable in God's kingdom. And that's why Jesus died for our sins. So which sin is most grievous? It's the *least* degree of sin that is going to keep me out of the kingdom until I'm willing to repent of it. That's the mentality we need to give to people, that we're all sinners. (Roberts 1990, p. 15, emphasis in original)

Shortly after he began serving as bishop, Roberts began to receive calls from LDS social services asking his opinion on matters concerning homosexuality. One member of the ward, a gay man in his thirties told this researcher that

Social services was using him [Roberts] as kind of an experiment. They were sort of looking at how things were going to see how it might influence church policy. It was safe for them. A ward in S. F. [San Francisco] is a pretty safe place to have a bunch of [gay people] meeting. It was far enough out of Utah that they could scrutinize without being outwardly supportive. It was subtle.

Eventually, social services approached Roberts about leading a gay support group composed of members of the ward. With the permission of the stake president, the group was expanded to include gay men throughout the Bay area. The group met at Roberts' house on Saturdays and discussed issues relating to homosexuality and the church. A newsletter, entitled the *FLaMiNGO News* (an acronym for "Friends, Lovers and Mormons in a Nameless Gay Organization") filled with the proceedings of the meetings and other items was published, and persisted even after the group disbanded (*Affinity* 13(7):4).

While he was not at all censured or impeded by the church, Roberts' experiment was nevertheless modest in scope and did not endure long. Only four months after the formation of the study group, Roberts was released from his calling as bishop of the San Francisco singles ward. (In spite of persistent rumors to the contrary, the release was at Roberts' request and was not disciplinary in nature [*Affinity* 13(9):5; Roberts 1990].) Furthermore, only seventeen or eighteen men ever participated in the group.

In spite of their meager numbers and short-lived association, the impact of this study group has been immense on those at LDS social services who work with homosexuals. Roberts' tolerance of "non-practicing" gays in his ward represents a major shift in the way the official church perceives its gay members. Other "experimental" groups, under the watchful eye of social services, were soon to follow. Ward support groups for gays emerged in Seattle, and a sign in the foyer of one San Diego ward announces the time and place of the next meeting for the gay discussion group, headed by a member of the bishopric<sup>11</sup> (*Affinity* 13(7):2). One by one, the feelings expressed in these groups began to drive home to church leaders and LDS social services clinicians the notion that homosexuality is not amenable to change, and that traditional theological notions about the cause and "treatment" of same sex orientation are untenable, at best.

This new enlightenment did not escape the eyes of liberal Mormons and the LDS intellegensia, who turned gay rights in the church into their own cause célèbre. A “letter to the editor” war between the “orthodox” and the “reformed” in the church with regard to the gay question commenced in 1990 in the two journals for Mormon scholarship, *Dialogue* and *Sunstone*, both staples on the coffee tables of educated Mormons. Just what role gays could play in the church, whether homosexual *thoughts* are sinful or just *behaviors*, and the theological implications of being gay all played themselves out in these unofficial, but influential publications. For example, in one issue of *Sunstone*, the following letters appeared:

When [the author of an article in last month’s *Sunstone*] speaks of repenting of homosexual behavior, I find his argument compelling. When he speaks of repenting of homosexuality, I find his argument ridiculous. Homosexuals can no more ‘repent’ of their homosexuality than I can of my heterosexuality, but we can both refrain from sexual relations and other behaviors that have been proscribed by a faith we subscribe to. (*Sunstone* 14(3):2)

Only a perverse God would create deep, permanent desire in certain human hearts and then deprive them of and real hope of fulfillment. Let us hope that when Christ comes a second time, we are not surprised to find gays and lesbians entering the Kingdom before we do. (*Sunstone* 14(3):2-3)

In time, a consensus began to emerge which favored the position advanced by Roberts: that *being* gay is not a sin, but *acting* gay is. Eugene England, a professor of English at BYU and an author and poet of no small distinction in Mormon circles summed up this new sentiment by writing:

The longer I live the more I’m convinced that every human being has at least one cross to bear that he did not ‘choose,’ and though some, perhaps most, such crosses are not as difficult to bear as homosexuality, some are *more* difficult: Because of accidents, physical appearance, or handicaps many more than 10 percent of humans in our culture are unable to enjoy normal sexual expression and marriage and have to settle for a life devoid of sexual intimacy, even affection. Are they to be excused from any ‘charge of sin’ if they pursue sexual expression in forbidden or destructive ways, say with prostitutes? (*Dialogue* 20(3):7 [Emphasis in original])

LDS church leaders and clinicians at social services agreed, and a new handbook

for ecclesiastical leaders on homosexuality, to update their venerable 1981 release, was distributed by the church. In this 1992 pamphlet, the First Presidency states that a “single standard of morality” exists in the church: “abstinence outside of lawful marriage and fidelity within marriage.” Any other sexual contact, be it heterosexual or homosexual, is sinful. Thoughts and feelings, however, are considered to be qualitatively different from overt behaviors. Minimally, the realistic goal for any person—gay, straight, or in between—according to this new philosophy is to control and master one’s *behavior*. Those who are able to do this may then be able to work on thought and feelings. (*Understanding and Helping Those Who Have Homosexual Problems* 1992, LDS church publication. [Hereafter referred to as ‘*Understanding*.’]) For the gay person, this means that as long as he (or, presumably, she) maintains a celibate lifestyle, he or she can be a member of the church in good standing. For men, this means that they are able to hold priesthood positions, serve missions, and take the sacrament—same sex attractions notwithstanding—as long as they refrain from sexual activity. This is a radical departure from earlier statements which characterized thoughts, feelings and attitudes as sinful. It is also a change from the earlier handbook which demanded a change in orientation and the development of heterosexual thoughts and appropriate heterosexual behavior. The depth of these changes are illustrated in a side by side comparison in table four, page 52.

Many LDS gays have accepted this compromise given them by the church, and see the opportunity to live under the “single standard of morality” as a chance to nurture their spirituality within the religious organization they believe to be true. The church has responded in kind, by playing down its doctrine of “ministering angel” status for those who die faithful but single, to a new “doctrine” of “endure to the end, and the Lord will take care of things.” Counselors at social services now tell their gay clients that if they live a faithful, celibate life, the Lord will see to it that they will have exaltation. Whether this means that they will be celibate in heaven or whether it means that, when Christ returns, those that are gay will become “straight” and hence marriageable is not completely clear, but from the context of *Understanding*, the latter of these two is more likely the case. In spite of this ambiguity, one respondent to this study assessed the significance of the

**Table 4—Comparison of Changes in LDS Church Policy Toward Homosexual Members**

<i>Homosexuality, 1981</i>	<i>Understanding, 1992</i>
Homosexuality is erotic physical contact or attractions between members of the same sex, including erotic same sex fantasy. It may include thoughts or emotional attractions without outward sexual behavior . . . (p. 1)	There is a distinction between immoral thoughts and feelings and participating in either immoral heterosexual or any homosexual behavior (p. 1)
Encourage the member to be in appropriate situations with members of the opposite sex, even if he has to force himself. If he is single, he might attend activities for singles with increasing frequency . . . Encourage him (if single) to begin dating and gradually increase its frequency. (p. 6)	Marriage should not be viewed as a way to resolve homosexual problems. The lives of others should not be damaged by entering a marriage where such concerns exist. Encouraging members to cultivate heterosexual feelings as a way to resolve homosexual problems generally leads to frustration and discouragement. (p.4)

church's change of heart thusly:

Before, I always believed that I could never be saved. Now I think that things will be all right. If I can keep from backsliding I'll be okay. I believe that the Lord will take care of it during the millennium. At least I can go to church and be who I am.

Another, equally accepting of this compromise writes:

As a gay Latter-day Saint I accept the responsibility to represent both of my communities honorably (as do many others). My temple recommend<sup>12</sup> is valid. While it is no magic qualifier, it means to me that I can answer with an unqualified 'yes' to the question, 'Are you morally clean?' And only my priesthood leader can ask that question. (Sunstone 14(3):4)

The acceptance of gays who commit to a celibate lifestyle and the new "single standard of morality" is the most significant change in the history of the Mormon church's policy on homosexuality. The publication of the new handbook drew sufficient attention from the press and public to warrant the appearance of one of the directors of LDS Social Services, Herald Brown, on a popular Salt Lake City call in television talk-show to explain the new policy (*Take Two*, June 7, 1992). Brown's response to the very first question was an explanation of the new "single standard" and an assurance that this standard does not discriminate against homosexuals.

**Talk Show Host:** Some homosexuals would say that you are harming them, that this teaching teaches them that they are second class citizens, that their feelings of love and sex are inferior to other people's feelings of love and sex, that they are sinful, and that that will end up harming people. Is that so?

**Herald Brown:** I can understand that people do feel that way, but I think homosexuality is best understood within the context of a larger issue of a standard of morality within the church, and that standard is abstinence before marriage and fidelity within marriage. And that's the same standard for every individual within the church.

**Talk Show Host:** Okay, so you're not picking on homosexuals, you say. You say everyone, no matter what his or her sexual orientation should only have sex in marriage.

**Herald Brown:** That is correct. That is correct. And that is the same standard for all. It is the standard for old, young, single, married, everyone.

**Talk Show Host:** Some homosexuals would say I've had the same partner for ten years, and we'd get married tomorrow if you'd let us. Why can't we live in monogamy . . . Why won't the church let us live as normal people.

**Herald Brown:** The church just does not recognize homosexual marriage.

**Talk Show Host:** And you believe homosexuality is sin?

**Herald Brown:** The same as heterosexual activity outside of marriage. The same standard (*Take Two*. June 7, 1992).

At first glance, this notion of a "single standard of morality" seems to be a consistent, firm, policy of the church that does not single out the activity of gay members. But, when pressed later by a caller in the same talk show, Brown was forced to admit that the notion of "one standard" is more rationalization than an actual policy construct.

**Caller:** You speak of a standard of morality in the church in which all members, whether heterosexual or homosexual are required to live by. My question is, is the act of holding hands or an affectionate kiss any more grave than that of a heterosexual couple would be?

**Herald Brown:** [Pause] You're talking—you're, uh—one more time, please?

**Talk Show Host:** [Breaking in] You say the standard is the same. Now, in fact, the church does not frown too much if you kiss your girlfriend. Does it frown if the guy kisses his boyfriend. Is it the same as kissing your girlfriend given that there is a single standard of morality.

**Herald Brown:** Well, I think that would be the beginning of a homosexual act, it may not be the ultimate homosexual act, but it's the beginnings of it. So, yes it would be seen differently from a young man and woman kissing each other.

**Talk Show Host:** So it isn't quite the same then. It isn't quite one standard of morality. Its okay for a young man and woman to kiss, but its not okay for a young man and man to kiss.

**Herald Brown:** At that point in time that is the beginning of homosexual behavior.

**Talk Show Host:** Yeah, but the other is the beginning of heterosexual behavior.

**Herald Brown:** That's correct. But that leads to something that is acceptable in the church. . . .

**Caller:** I'd say he [the caller] scored a point. It isn't one standard. Kissing your girlfriend is okay, kissing your boyfriend is not okay, assuming you're a man.

**Herald Brown:** If you'd like to present it in that fashion, you could grant that. (*Take Two*, June 7, 1992)

Thus, in spite of the church's new relaxed attitude concerning excommunication courts and thoughts and desires, many gay members, liberal Mormons, and observers outside the church assert that the real change in the church's policy has been one of temperament, not one of substance. Evidence for this assertion comes from the fact that the church is still very hesitant to entertain any notion that there may be biological or other ineluctable causes for homosexuality. Also evident is that while the church does not *force* its homosexual members to change their orientation, it nevertheless believes that such a change is at least possible for many, if not most.

**Talk Show Host:** You don't believe homosexuals were born that way, is that right?

**Herald Brown:** That's correct. Because of the individuals we have seen [...] who have been able to eliminate homosexual thoughts, feelings and behavior—as evidence that it can be done we've watched them do it.

. . .

**Talk Show Host:** Okay now you have a Masters in Social Work, and your not a professional counselor for homosexuals or a researcher, but I take it you have looked at some of the research in compiling this book. . . . You say homosexuals can change?

**Herald Brown:** Yes, and again I think the best evidence that we can see are those individuals who are able to make those changes. I think its important, however, to define change, because in the past I think we have, some people have used, for example, the word cure which I certainly think is a very inappropriate term. But when we talk about homosexuality, defining that in the booklet as sexual or erotic thoughts,



feelings and behavior toward someone of the same sex. And we certainly believe that individuals can stop that behavior, we believe that they can control those thoughts and begin to understand those feelings.

...

**Talk Show Host:** It seems to imply that— you say some can—that seems to me some can't. So I guess this booklet envisions a class of people who have homosexual feelings, don't have heterosexual feelings, and while they can refrain from homosexual feelings and thoughts, they probably will never get married and will never live the ordinary LDS life.

**Herald Brown:** I think that's possible. (*Take Two*, June 7, 1992)

Certainly, informants for this study have nearly unanimously stated that their initial counseling experiences with LDS social services have involved, as one stated, "making a go at playing it straight." Only after consistent failure in these concerted attempts does the gay client begin to hear talk of living and coping with his or her preference.

There is also significant evidence that LDS social services has been courting other programs, particularly those sponsored by evangelical Christian organizations, that prescribe methods for changing sexual orientation. One such program is detailed in a book called *Desires in Conflict*, written by Joe Dallas, the president of an "ex-gay" fundamentalist ministry called Exodus International. Another is a volume entitled, *You Don't Have to be Gay*. The distribution of these books points to the seriousness of the LDS church's commitment to changing the orientation of its gay members, since the evangelical Protestant philosophy that pervades their pages is, as was mentioned earlier, incongruent with Mormon theological constructs.

Further, LDS social services officials have expressed an interest in the Evergreen Foundation, a nonprofit group for "recovered" LDS gay men and lesbians operating in Utah. In spite of specific denials in the spring of 1990 by Alan Gundry, who was placed in charge of "homosexuality and related concerns" at LDS social services, that the church in any way endorsed "reparative therapy" for gays, LDS social services workers were among the contributors in the Evergreen Foundation's two-day conference in Salt Lake City (*Affinity* 13(9):5; *Affinity* 13(10):1). The theme and title of this conference was: "You Don't Have to be Gay: Developing a Healthy Male Identity." One observer noted that:

Although the conference was billed for only those who want to change, it seemed hopeless for this conference to try and transcend the inherent message that all gay persons should change to the better (heterosexual) life. Being gay was viewed as unnatural by God and was therefore presented as sin. . . . One clear message from all participants was that it was a tremendous struggle to like yourself as gay within Mormonism. Challengers of the conference felt it was an impossible task to like yourself until you had quit trying to change yourself. Proponents felt you would like yourself when you were more congruent with your Creator's intentions . . . . (Sunstone 14(3):62)

Lastly, the newsletter for the Association of Mormon Counselors and Psychotherapists (AMCAP) carried an article in late 1992 on a new "therapy technique" that can "help LDS gays become heterosexual" (*Affinity* 14(11):10).

So, while the church has responded outwardly to the dilemma of gay members with counseling programs and professional clinicians, inwardly the church seems loathe to abandon the earlier edicts and opinions of prophets, apostles, and general authorities that state, without equivocation, that homosexuality is pathological and can (and should) be changed. The Mormon homosexual who chooses to attempt to assuage the dissonance over his or her two incongruent identities through ecclesiastical and Mormon institutional channels is not likely to miss the fundamentalist undertow that hides, not to subtly, beneath the new current of tolerance.

### Notes to Chapter III

<sup>1</sup> The use of masculine pronouns where both genders may be implied is fairly standard among the LDS authors cited for this study. The reader (like the researcher) will have to rely on context to determine the exact meaning intended by the source in this, and other quotes throughout this thesis.

<sup>2</sup> Such views, of course, are not unique to Mormonism and were rather influential among psychoanalysts in the 1950s (see Katz 1992).

<sup>3</sup> The books of Moses and Abraham, cited here, are books of Mormon scripture contained in a volume called the Pearl of Great Price. These works, it is believed by Mormons, were given through divine revelation to the founder of Mormonism, Joseph Smith.

<sup>4</sup> A common LDS proof text, used to support Mormon claims that humans cannot be tempted beyond their ability to resist temptation is found in First Corinthians 10:13. In this verse Paul assures the Christians at Corinth that with every temptation, God provides a way to escape that temptation. Further, Nephi in the declares that "I know that the Lord giveth no commandments unto the children of men, save he shall prepare a way for them that they may accomplish the thing which he commandeth them." (1 Nephi 3:7)

<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Mormons even reject the notion of original sin (Articles of Faith 2 [a section in the Pearl of Great Price]; McConkie 1966).

<sup>6</sup> A thorough discussion of this phenomenon is detailed in chapter 5.

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of the church and aversion therapy, see chapter 4.

<sup>8</sup> "Kicking against the pricks" is a Mormon idiom meaning to struggle against righteousness: "Behold, ere he is aware, he is left unto himself, to kick against the pricks, to persecute the saints, and to fight against God" (Doctrine & Covenants 121:38). The term is originally taken from the New Testament (Acts 9:5). No double entedre was intended by the informant.

<sup>9</sup> A reference to the Book of Mormon: "Do not suppose, because it has been spoken concerning restoration, that ye shall be restored from sin to happiness. Behold, I say unto you, wickedness never was happiness" (Alma 41:10).

<sup>10</sup> The LDS sacrament is a weekly rite, wherein bread and water is served to represent the body and blood of Christ. This ritual is performed to remind the partaker of the commitments s/he made at the time of baptism. It is common for a bishop to withhold the blessings of the sacrament for those who are deemed unworthy or who are in the process of repenting for grievous sins.

<sup>11</sup> A Mormon bishop and his two "counselors" constitute what is called the ward "bishopric."

<sup>12</sup> Entrance to the temple requires a "temple recommend." One can obtain such a document only through strict adherence to the principles of the Church of Jesus Christ of

Latter-day Saints, and by being found worthy to enter the temple by successfully passing a searching "interview" with one's bishop.

## Chapter IV

### **"Coming Out" Within Mormonism**

Most gay Latter-day Saints, at the time in their lives when they begin to define themselves as such, do not know that their church has been constructing and reforming its position on homosexual members for over 30 years. Indeed most, when they first perceive that they are somehow "different," do not know that the church has institutionalized methods of dealing with gays at all. They know only that their church views homosexual behavior as a grievous sin, and that they are confused, burdened with guilt, and afraid that their salvation is in jeopardy.

#### **Homosexuality and Mormon Norms of Sexual Purity**

While the psychological turmoil that accompanies becoming aware of one's homosexuality in American culture is hardly unique to Mormons,<sup>1</sup> certain elements of Mormon culture seem to exacerbate this anxiety and deter gay Latter-day Saints from telling others about their sexual preference. Wells and Kline (1987) point out that gay men and women are most anxious about "coming out" because of fear of rejection and stigma. They note that young gay people who are just coming to grips with their orientation are very selective about who they approach concerning the subject, and usually elicit another's views on homosexuality before "coming out" to them. Young Mormons, of course, know exactly what the position of respected and authoritative significant others is on the subject of homosexuality, and are well aware of the stigma attached to gay people in the church (See chapter 2).

To add to this dilemma, the church's great efforts to ensure the sexual purity of its youth further compounds the fear and trepidation that young gay Mormons already feel about their orientation with guilt and shame. Upholding the church's standards of sexual morality, as defined by Mormon authorities and scripture, is perhaps the most emphasized and frequent message of church officials to the youth and single people of the church. Throughout the course of the year, young Mormons hear a number of Sunday school

lessons on the dangers of necking and petting. Young girls in the church are warned that worthy men will not want to marry them if they are not virgins, and young boys are cautioned that masturbation is an evil practice that can lead to more serious sexual sin if left unchecked.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to normal Sunday church meetings, young people who are active in the Mormon church also attend many other youth functions where the importance of sexual purity is regularly stressed. Even ward youth outings such as camping trips, common especially in the summer months, rarely end without an inspirational meeting wherein the youth are admonished to curtail their sexual behavior and reign in their lustful thoughts. The epitome of church attempts to deter youth from sexual indiscretion are church "standards nights." These meetings are held every six months and are highly emotionally charged. This researcher remembers sitting through many such meetings as a boy while youth leaders, often moved to tears, enumerated the blessings that they had received by living the Lord's "law of chastity."

As the meetings associated with "standards night" come to a close, Mormon youth are given a handbook of church standards, covering the church's position on everything from rock music to what activities are appropriate on Sunday. Regarding homosexuality, this handbook is explicit:

Homosexual and lesbian activities are sinful and an abomination to the Lord. . . . Unnatural affections including those toward persons of the same gender are counter to God's eternal plan for his children. Whether directed toward those of the same or opposite gender, lustful feelings and desires may lead to more serious sins. All Latter-day Saints must learn to control and discipline themselves. (*For the Strength of Youth*, p. 15)

Young Mormons are informed of church standards from other media as well. Along with meetings and gatherings for youth, the Mormon church also fosters a cottage industry of inspirational books and instructional cassette tapes for young LDS people. Such books are widely available from booksellers, especially in Utah, and not a few of these deal with the subject of sexual immorality. One book, written for teenage Mormons and a widely read best seller among church members states that

The unholy transgression of homosexuality is either rapidly growing, or tolerance is giving it wider publicity. If one has such desires and tendencies, he overcomes them the same as if he had the urge toward petting or fornication or adultery. The Lord condemns and forbids this practice with a vigor equal to his condemnation of adultery and other such sexual acts. And the church will excommunicate as readily any unrepentant addict. (Kimball 1981, p. 10)

Thus, it is no accident that the content of most church addresses to those who are just starting to identify the awakenings of their sexuality—whether heterosexual or homosexual—deals with appropriately managing these new found urges. And, in this context, young people in the church learn very early on how the church feels about homosexuality. Not surprisingly, for many of the informants in this study, the process of becoming aware of their homosexuality was a very difficult time, characterized by confusion and isolation. One informant pointed out that:

There was literally no one to talk to about it. There was nothing I could say. I had never been with a man, but I knew that when I had wet dreams and stuff, all my dreams were about guys. I was going to church and living the commandments, so I couldn't figure out how this could be. I once asked my seminary teacher<sup>3</sup> if I was accountable for the things in my dreams. He figured that they were just ordinary sex dreams I guess, because he told me no. [He said that] the Lord was preparing my body for procreation after I got married. I couldn't go any further and tell him about the details of my dreams. I didn't know if I was sinning or not, but it sure felt like I was.

Another gay Mormon writes:

Growing up gay and Mormon is many times a very lonely experience. Tonight, in cities and towns across the country, there are gay and lesbian Mormons who are crying out to themselves and to God, asking, "Why am I like this?" They think they are unique—the only ones who have these feelings. (*Affinity* 14(11):2).

For most gay boys in the church, the isolation associated with being gay is almost always accompanied by guilt and shame over their thoughts and feelings. Most of the men that served as informants to this study revealed that the anguish they felt over their sexual awakening began long before any overt homosexual experience. They had been effectively taught by the church that unclean thoughts were sins in and of themselves—and these

teachings, in most instances, had been successfully internalized. Most feared for their salvation not because they had had illicit homosexual relations, but because they thought or dreamed about such relations. Some informants went to great lengths to attempt to suppress their emerging sexual orientation:

I had an elaborate scheme developed to keep me from thinking about [sex with men]. I remembered a talk by an apostle that said that our minds are a stage and our thoughts are actors on the stage and that evil players are always trying to take the stage and entertain us. So when they are about to take the stage, you should have the words to a hymn or a favorite scripture memorized to chase them away.<sup>4</sup> I had the words to Ether 12:27<sup>5</sup> memorized. It would chase away the evil characters all right, but I had no idea how persistent they were. My weakness never became a strength, I could never stop thinking about men. It was sheer hell.

Others in the study reported that in order to avoid homosexual thoughts they immersed themselves in their homework or job (c.f. Anonymous 1986). Still others steadily increased their participation in church activities and individual study within the church. One man recalled that he began a regimen of prayer and fasting,<sup>6</sup> denying himself food every Sunday "for a whole month of Sundays." Another recounts that

I began an agonizing and relentless effort to change. I obeyed all the counsel of the church explicitly and faithfully. No one could have been more determined or confident. It was an absolute desire. Prayer, fasting and faithful allegiance to the church were to the spirit and the letter. I developed stomach ulcers as a result and came close to bleeding to death several times before doctors could get the hemorrhaging stopped. (Jenkins 1978)

Wayne Schow, a Mormon whose son died of AIDS in 1986, writes that:

[My son] told us he had prayed fervently over a long period that God would help him to reorient his sexual feelings, and in return he promised God extraordinary devotion. His personal journals from this period reveal a religious youth caught up in seminary instruction, who concluded from all the implicit messages of home, church and society, that he was flawed and sinful—cursed, as it seemed to him—in spite of his wish to be otherwise. (Schow 1990, p. 9)

While most of the study's informants who were active in the LDS church when they began to understand their preference reported that they felt a great amount of guilt



associated with their homosexual thoughts alone, many stated that when these thoughts and fantasies were accompanied by masturbation, their shame and guilt became debilitating.

Masturbation is a concern to the LDS church, and not a few talks by church authorities to the young men of the church include references to masturbation. The author, like any other Mormon boy active in his church, remembers chapels and church classrooms filled with nervous and fidgety young boys listening with concern as they were told such things as: "Anyone fettered by this weakness [masturbation] should abandon the habit before he goes on a mission or receives the holy priesthood or goes in the temple for his blessings" (Kimball 1981, p.10). Spencer W. Kimball, twelfth prophet of the Mormon church wrote:

Sometimes masturbation is the introduction to the more serious sin of exhibitionism and the gross sin of homosexuality. We would avoid mentioning these unholy terms and these reprehensible practices were it not for the fact that we have a responsibility to the youth of Zion. . . . (Kimball 1981, p.10)

Several informants in the study reported that they believed that their inability to control masturbation was, in fact, the cause of their homosexuality. While some were more or less successful in their attempts to eliminate or at least drastically reduce the frequency of masturbation, most admitted that they would inevitably "slip up," no matter how fervent and dedicated their commitment to quit. One man recounted that "I was terrified, because I had promised God that he could send me to hell if I ever did it [masturbated] again."

Common among informants were self-inflicted mental or physical punishments for masturbating. Most prevalent among these punishments were periods of fasting. Some, however, assigned themselves a more unique penance. Jenkins (1978, p. 14) reports that a young man "recently told me how, as a teenager he had tried drinking hot mustard to destroy his homosexual urges." He further notes that "many kinds of self-punishment have been attempted, from drinking raw eggs to burning oneself" (Jenkins 1978, p. 14). Carl, a student at a Utah university also admitted that he punished himself for masturbating while

thinking about men:

**Informant:** I would try and resist, but after a while it would be impossible.

After a week or so I would always give in.

**Researcher:** Would you think about men while you masturbated?

**Informant:** Always. And when I was done I would be filled with self-loathing. My mind would change 180 degrees just like that [snaps fingers].

**Researcher:** How long did this go on?

**Informant:** A year. I would always end up giving in when I went to the bathroom because I shared a bedroom with my little brother. There were so many kids in my house that the only time you could be alone was in the bathroom. I would . . . [pause] I would feel so bad that I would punish myself. I would wash my hands in the foul water after I had used the toilet. You know, to show God that I felt dirtier than shit. That happened over and over again. I usually felt okay after. For the first little while I felt that my punishment was enough, but when I couldn't stop altogether I began to think that maybe I should kill myself.

Suicidal thoughts among informants were reported to the researcher with alarming frequency. Virtually all of the men in the study reported suicidal thoughts, particularly at the time they were becoming aware of their sexuality, and several admitted to an attempt. The reason for the prevalence of suicidal thinking among these men seemed, in every case, to be closely associated with the LDS church's unique doctrine of repentance. The church teaches that part of the process of repenting for wrongdoing is never committing the sinful act again. Repentance, it is believed, includes forsaking and abandoning the sin altogether. The *Doctrine and Covenants*, a book of Mormon scripture, states that: "By this shall ye know if a man repenteth of his sins—behold, he will confess them and forsake them" (*Doctrine and Covenants* 58:43). Kimball further notes that "The discontinuance must be a permanent one. True repentance does not permit repetition" (Kimball 1981, p. 14). Several informants mentioned, in light of this, that it was not individual acts of masturbation or particular instances of homosexual fantasizing that led to their suicidal feelings, but rather the combined weight of many such instances, incompletely repented of, bearing down on them. The notion that this "cumulative burden of sin," as one gay Mormon put it, was of such gravity that its seriousness was equated with the taking of one's own life was a recurrent theme among those studied.

Part of repentance is never doing it again. So while I felt okay for a time, when I could see that my efforts were doing no good, then I felt as though all my past sins were on me together. I felt like I was filling the hole I had dug for myself with a spoon, while Satan was digging me deeper with a backhoe! I thought a lot about killing myself.

I never stopped struggling, but I was so emotionally lacerated . . . that I deeply wanted to die. I thought about it so often. I had felt that repressing my homosexual feelings was becoming increasingly impossible and that suicide would be less of a sin than acting out these feelings. (Schow, *et. al.* 1991, p. 109)

I thought each time I repented that I would never do it [masturbate while fantasizing about men] again. I was so sure. I was crushed and broken each time I gave in. It is kind of like having bills that exceed your income. You get deeper and deeper in. When the time comes to pay the piper, you either declare bankruptcy, or kill yourself. Neither option is a winner.

I felt so guilty that I sometimes contemplated suicide, because I couldn't stop. No matter how hard I tried. Not that I would ever do it with a man, I knew I could resist that temptation, but that I could not stop myself from thinking about men or having images of men appear before me when I was by myself. . . . I [would try to] avoid masturbation as long as I could, but after about three or four months or so I would always break down. Sometimes it wasn't that way at all, though. Sometimes I didn't have any choice at all. Sometimes it was like idle moments when [thoughts about] sex creep into your head like any other person, or when I was asleep. I would dream about men. So I figured I would be in the lower kingdom anyway, whether I killed myself or continued with these thoughts. That's why I contemplated suicide. I just said to myself, 'Either I go the bishop and confess, or I kill myself and settle for the lower heaven.'

The need to confess one's sins to the bishop (analogous to "declaring spiritual bankruptcy" in this instance), is usually the act which brings a member's homosexuality to the attention of the church. Almost unanimous among the informants who admitted their sexual preference to the bishop is the recollection that they sought out their church leaders because of guilt and shame over their thoughts and actions. The implicit driving force behind this guilt and shame was an urgent desire to change their sexual orientation and their belief that the church and its inspired ecclesiastical leaders was their last, best hope.

Typically, the ward bishop becomes alerted to a member's sexual orientation in one of two ways. First, the bishop may become aware of a young man's homosexuality during the course of regular priesthood interviews. It is the practice of the church to conduct

bishop's interviews with the young men of the church at six-month intervals beginning when these men are first ordained to the priesthood,<sup>7</sup> about age 12. These interviews are held to ensure the personal worthiness of the youth of the church, and questions about sexual purity—particularly masturbation—are almost always a part of such interviews. When asked, many boys admit to masturbation, and probing by the bishop in this area can often lead the interviewee to confess to homosexual inclinations as well.

Although lying to the bishop is commonplace, such prevarication is seen as a serious sin, and sooner or later the guilt from this continued transgression, coupled with the guilt and shame from homosexual thoughts, feelings and masturbation, will impel the young priesthood holder to confess. Moreover, Mormon youth folklore is replete with stories wherein the Holy Ghost whispers to the inspired bishop that a person is lying during a priesthood interview. Indeed, many young Mormons harbor a fear that the bishop will know if they are not telling the truth. The structure of the ward, and the frequency and intensity of the interaction between ward youth leaders, parents and other youth in the ward often contributes to the belief among young people that bishops are inspired, since, because of these social networks, bishops are often privy to a great deal of information that young people may not know they possess.

More often, however, informants stated that they sought out the bishop to confess their sins in the hope that this step would at last allow them to forsake their sins successfully. This was especially the case among those who had had a homosexual encounter of some sort, since the church teaches that certain serious sins cannot be forgiven until they are confessed to ecclesiastical leaders:

Certain sins are of such gravity that they can put your membership in the church and your eternal life at risk. Sexual sins are among those of such seriousness. . . . Full repentance of some sins requires that we not only confess and resolve them with the Lord but that we also do so with the church. The bishop and stake president have been appointed by revelation to serve as judges in these cases. Only the Lord can forgive sins, but these priesthood leaders can assist the transgressor in the process of repentance. (*For the Strength of Youth* p. 18)

Those who approached their bishops intending to confess did so with considerable

fear. Most reported that they fully believed that they would be excommunicated when they admitted to their homosexuality—whether or not they had participated in homosexual acts. The process of excommunication<sup>8</sup> is administered through a church court, and being excommunicated carries with it extreme stigma among Mormons. In spite of this, many informants approached their bishops shortly after they realized that they were gay, and that they could not alleviate the problem through their own efforts.

Some informants, however, stated that during their early and mid teenage years—the time when bishop’s interviews occur with greatest frequency and intensity—they were unaware that they were homosexual. Said one, “I could tell that there was something different about me, but I just couldn’t put a finger on what that difference was. I was just confused about my sexuality, but I didn’t know I was gay.” Others echoed these sentiments closely, saying that they never felt the need to lie to ecclesiastical leaders nor seek them out to repent because although they sensed, as one put it, that “something was awry,” they were as yet unaware that they were gay.

This confusion, reported by a number of men in the study, is consistent with literature that states that discovering one’s homosexuality and assuming a homosexual identity does not happen over night, but is a social process. Troiden (1988) writes that the “ideal type” of this identity assumption process involves four distinct steps: (1) sensitization, or the beginning of sexual awareness that is concomitant with puberty; (2) identity confusion, or the realization that one is “different;” (3) identity assumption, wherein that difference is understood as homosexuality; and (4) commitment, the stage where a homosexual identity becomes permanently incorporated into the individual’s world view. Going through this process can take some time, and Kuntz (1990) points out that the “average male homosexual does not identify himself as ‘gay’ until the ages of nineteen to twenty-one” (Kuntz 1990, *cf.* Troiden and Goode 1980). Trevor, a graduate student in the behavioral sciences at BYU, discussed with the researcher why it took him until age twenty to discover his homosexuality:<sup>9</sup>

When young people of heterosexual preference start to feel their sexual

awakenings they have pre-made roles to step into. Heterosexual gender roles. You know, dating and stuff. In the [Mormon] church those roles are especially well defined. Not the gay person, especially not the gay Mormon. Some of them do what I did, they step falteringly into the straight roles, always wondering why they don't quite fit. That's the way I was. It didn't make sense to me until my mission. Then it slapped me in the face. I think if gay Mormons don't know they are gay there is no mistaking it if they serve a mission.

### **Homosexuality and Missionary Service**

If Kuntz' figures are accurate, and Trevor's experience commonplace among homosexual Latter-day Saints, the ramifications for a great many gay Mormons are profound, since from exactly age nineteen to age twenty-one LDS men<sup>10</sup> are commanded to serve a Mormon mission—a two year period of church service wherein those called as missionaries attempt to win converts to Mormonism. Young men in the Mormon church begin preparing as boys to serve their missions by memorizing scriptures and learning songs that glorify missionary life (Allen and Leonard 1976). The mission call usually takes the young person thousands of miles from home, and often involves learning a foreign language.

The mission experience is highly structured and regimented, exemplifying all of the characteristics of a "total institution" as defined by Goffman (1961). Rules govern virtually every aspect of missionary life, such as when to get up in the morning, what color of shirt to wear, how long one can visit with church members, when and how often one can use the telephone to call home, when and under what circumstances a missionary can drive an automobile, and so forth. (*Missionary Handbook* 1973). For the purposes of this study, the most interesting set of mission rules are those regulating missionary companionships.

Missionaries live together in designated proselyting areas with their assigned companions. Throughout the course of the mission, a missionary, or "elder," as they are called, will typically have several areas of service and seven or eight different companions. While serving as a missionary, it is strictly against mission rules to leave the presence of one's companion, with rare exception.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, missionaries may not leave their companion's sight, except to use the bathroom. In instances where a companionship

resides in a two bedroom apartment, mission rules require that they share a single bedroom.

Companionships often evolve into very strong, stalwart friendships, often out of necessity, and this close, intimate contact with other males was cited as a major frustration by informants to this study who had filled a mission. This same close association also forced many who were not fully aware of their homosexuality into the realization that they were, in fact, gay.

My trainer<sup>12</sup> was the most magnificent person I had ever met. He had an irresistible personality. At first I was filled with hope and peace because he inspired me to work hard and teach the gospel with the Spirit. But my hopes were destroyed when I started to fall in love with him. We were like a normal companionship. You know, when we would come home and get ready for bed he would undress in front of me just like any other normal companion—just roommates, no big deal. I thought to myself that I must not have the Spirit or I wouldn't have these thoughts. It was torture and I became very depressed and homesick. I finally figured out what was wrong with me all this time.

I had always wondered about whether or not I was gay, but after about two months into my mission there was no doubt. I had never been with men in such close quarters, and the feelings that I felt were just like the feelings that [ward youth leaders] said I should be feeling for girls. I decided then and there that I would use my mission to live the commandments and turn straight. . . [But] I had about the same type of feelings with each new companion. I would get aroused when I heard them in the shower because I knew they were naked. Then I would start to feel guilty.

Ironically, the practice of keeping companions always within sight of one another is intended, among other things, to deter sexual transgression on the part of missionaries (*Missionary Handbook* 1973).

For those who were already aware of their sexual orientation at the time of their mission call, knowledge of their homosexuality did not temper their desire to serve. Moreover, those who had previously confessed to their bishops that they had homosexual inclinations were not discouraged from serving their missions, provided they had not had a serious homosexual encounter. Harryman, in Schow *et. al.* recalls:

My mission call to Japan came in the fall of 1970. During the week I spent in the old mission home<sup>14</sup> in Salt Lake City, we heard among the many

inspiring messages given to us by various general authorities of the church some terrifying ones about the evils of unrepentant sexual sin. The word which I could barely say to myself was repeated several times. Homosexuality, we were warned, was consummate evil, and any unrepentant person was doomed to a mission filled with spiritual darkness and failure. I was certain they were right, and with my heart pounding, I requested to speak to the Mission Home president. Upon hearing my confession he assured me that I was involved in the darkest of sins. But after questioning me about specific instances and people I had been involved with, he determined that since I had only homosexual feelings but no experience, I was clean and worthy to go on my mission. I left . . . determined to be the best missionary that I could be. (Schow et. al. 1991, p. 24-25)

Informants report with frequency that the opportunity to serve a mission was seen as an excellent chance to put off the “carnal world” and purify themselves of their homosexual thoughts and feelings. Many, in fact, decided to serve in the hope that a controlled, spiritual environment would at last cure them of their homosexuality. Jenkins writes:

I filled a successful mission but was disheartened to return, realizing that my prayers for change remained unanswered. I had felt confident that through complete devotion to the Lord on a mission I would be blessed in return with the fulfillment of the greatest desire of my heart. (Jenkins 1978, p. 1)

Most, like those cited above, report that the experience only intensified and solidified their homosexual inclinations—in spite of the fact that accounts of actual homosexual encounters between missionaries appear to be extremely rare.<sup>15</sup>

Nevertheless, near encounters or incidents of masturbation accompanied by homosexual fantasizing are almost always enough to send an elder to his mission president<sup>16</sup> to confess. Approaching the mission president to confess is reportedly at least as terrifying as confronting the ward bishop, because potential penalties for serious sin committed by missionaries are severe and extraordinarily stigmatizing.

Those who confess to an attraction for a companion are almost always transferred to a new companion. Sometimes this transfer occurs on the regular mission transfer day, which comes up once a month. If the president feels that the need for a transfer is urgent, however, the move may take place between transfer dates—an immediate signal to the other elders that something is very wrong.<sup>17</sup> Being transferred mid-month carries a heavy



stigma among missionaries.

Elders who have had a homosexual encounter while serving their missions may also be sent home, often to a church court if the encounter was a serious one. Being sent home from a mission is particularly stigmatizing, especially in Utah communities and other areas where there is a high concentration of Mormons.

In addition to voluntary confessions, missionaries are urged to tell the mission president if their companion is engaged in any wrong doing. Those gay elders who do not confess but are caught by their companion in an overt behavior, or who admit their feelings in confidence to a companion are usually summoned for an interview by the mission president. One former missionary recalls:

**Informant:** The Z.L.'s<sup>18</sup> were in town and needed a place to stay so they stayed with us. We only had two beds so the companionships doubled up in the beds. The lights were off and we were talking and laughing in bed. It was like a sleep over. I started feeling strange [pause] you know. My companion sort of moved in the bed and brushed up against me. You know, he sort of brushed up against me.

**Researcher:** What do you mean?

**Informant:** He brushed up against my body, and he could tell, I mean, do you know what I mean?

**Researcher:** He turned in the bed or something and felt your lower body?

**Informant:** Yeah.

**Researcher:** And you had an erection?

**Informant:** Yeah.

**Researcher:** Then what happened?

**Informant:** He stopped talking and everything. I could tell he was freaked out and the next day Prez<sup>19</sup> called up and told me we were going to have a transfer. So everyone in the mission knew something was up. Then I had an interview and Prez asked me if I liked guys. I couldn't lie. I wasn't mad at my companion though. I was glad because I thought that now I could make a change. I had felt so gross before, and then I thought that I could change. Even though everybody thought bad of me I thought that I was better off. It lifted a weight off my shoulders.

### **Encountering Homosexual Members: Initial Church Reactions**

Voluntary confession to ecclesiastical leaders is the most common scenario wherein the LDS church becomes aware of a homosexual member. These leaders are also, more often than not, the first confidants to whom the gay Mormon admits his homosexuality. For

gay Mormons, then, the experience of “coming out” is very different than for most non-Mormon homosexuals. In the LDS community, coming out does not signify the acceptance of a new identity or a reconciliation with one’s homosexuality, but rather an attempt to repent for sin or a plea for help in changing one’s sexual orientation.

While data suggest that in non-Mormon spheres friends and family are typically the first to be told of an individual’s homosexuality (Cain 1991; Wells and Kline 1987), in the LDS church it is most commonly the ward bishop or mission president. One man, describing himself as “completely committed to gospel ideals” states that “as I had done during my entire life, I turned first to the church” (Schow, *et. al.* 1991). This pattern certainly holds true for the most part among informants to this study, and seems to be highly correlated with the religiosity of the individual at the time he became aware of his sexual preference. Those reporting high religiosity were much more likely to first confide in the bishop or mission president than those who were only marginally religious at the time. Also, the religiosity of the informant’s family seemed to have an impact on the decision of who to approach first; those coming from very religious families chose most often to confess to ecclesiastical leaders. The reasons for this are obvious:

My parents wouldn’t have been able to handle it. They were, and are, very devout. So even though I didn’t like my bishop all that much I had no choice. I had to talk to somebody, but it couldn’t be my parents. I even worried about the bishop because I feared that he would betray my confidence and tell my folks. It would have been the end of the world for my mother to find out that her son was gay. What am I talking about? She did find out—years later—and it was the end of the world. I guess I knew what I was doing, huh?

When a gay Mormon approaches the bishop to confess homosexual thoughts and feelings, or an actual homosexual encounter, the church has a fairly uniform and predictable response. That response, however, has varied greatly as the church has softened its discipline of homosexual members over the years.

Among older informants to the study, the most common initial reaction of their ward bishop was one of confusion or embarrassment. Most simply did not understand what they were being told.

That was about 1968. No one had even heard of the word 'gay' as we use it now back then. My bishop just sort of looked at me. If I would have actually [had a homosexual encounter] it might have been different, but I was just confessing about my thoughts. I don't think that he really understood what I was trying to tell him. I had tears streaming down my face and I was pleading with him and he just sort of looked at me. After a while, he said that he would have to call the stake president and that he would get back with me. He didn't know what to do.

According to this research, few bishops in the late 1960s and early seventies—which is as far back as information from our interviews can reliably go—were prepared to deal with the emotional and psychological needs of gay ward members who approached them with their homosexuality, and certainly few were familiar with scholarly literature discussing the nature and causes of homosexuality. An historian at a Utah university who served as a bishop from 1966 to 1972 explains:

Although I had heard of homosexuality, it was mostly in the context of how Gibbon<sup>20</sup> viewed it! I fully believed that it was an act of depravity, sort of the last rung on the ladder of personal, moral decay. My response to the young man in my office was that we would have to convene a church court, even though the offense was just kissing and homosexual petting. . . . Then I assured him that he would not be excommunicated for such an offense, and that there was hope for forgiveness. Then I just kind of told him 'Go thy way and sin no more.'<sup>21</sup> He seemed extremely sincere about asking for forgiveness and was absolutely wracked with guilt. That is why a few weeks later I was stunned to learn that had been involved in another homosexual incident. I just didn't understand what being gay was all about.

In spite of bishops' confusion and misunderstanding during the years before the publication of the church's first bishops' guidebook for dealing with homosexuality, the course of action nearly always taken, as in the scenario recounted above, for those who came to the bishop to confess any sort of homosexual experience was to take formal, institutionalized action, usually in the form of a church court.

Roberts (1990) reports that in order to maintain the orthodoxy of believers and uphold consensus in matters of faith and doctrine, religious organizations may, when forced, resort to coercive means of social control. In the Mormon church, coercive social control is exercised through the use of sanctions which limit participation in church activities and sacraments. There are three levels of sanctions, the most mild of which is

called probation. Probation is usually fairly informal and involves an agreement on the part of the church member being censured to refrain from taking the weekly bread and water sacrament and to cease attending the temple until the probation has been lifted. Probation does not typically involve a formal church court, but rather a meeting between the bishop and the church member.

More serious is disfellowshippment, which is an institutional sanction administered by a church court. Disfellowshipped members are allowed to attend church meetings, but cannot have church callings and may not participate in priesthood ordinances or partake of the sacrament. The ultimate sanction prescribed by a church court for very serious offenses is excommunication. Until recently, the names of excommunicated members were announced to congregation members at certain ward meetings, and the resulting stigma from such public condemnation was often severe.

One former bishop reported that, in his experience as a bishop from 1963 to 1970 in a small Utah town:

I saw a number of young men who had [homosexual problems]. Those who had had only one experience or just a very few might usually just get a probation period, provided that they hadn't gone very far. Also, I felt it was the Lord's will to go easier on Aaronic priesthood holders than on Melchizedek priesthood<sup>22</sup> brethren. But if a young man had a lot of involvement or had had [oral or anal sex, then the person] would almost certainly be at least disfellowshipped. Melchizedek priesthood holders who [had engaged in such activities] were excommunicated, but those punishments weren't up to me, they were meted out by church courts.

The response of bishops in the 1960s and 1970s to those who had not had homosexual experiences, but were nevertheless vexed by their homosexual thoughts and feelings is somewhat less uniform, but almost always involved directing the young homosexual Mormon toward more "masculine" behaviors.

Some informants stated that, during their initial visit, when the bishop realized that the concerns of the young man involved only thoughts and feelings, bishops simply dismissed the confessor by confidently declaring that "nature [will] take over in relatively short order." Harryman reports that his bishop merely "Assured me that what I needed to

do was to continue to date girls, participate fully in church activity, and follow the commandments" (Schow, et. al. 1991, p. 24). When the tormented youth returned for subsequent visits, however, bishops began to make suggestions and concoct strategies for reorienting homosexual thoughts.

Most informants who approached their bishops in this time period note that the ward leaders usually suggested that they do more "manly" things, apparently in the belief that homosexuality was a result of improperly internalizing traditional gender roles, or of being effeminate. "He [my bishop] told me I should begin exercising more, that I should hike or play baseball," said one informant. Particularly common were exhortations to begin practicing with the ward basketball team.<sup>23</sup> One writer, recalling a counseling session with a general authority, writes:

As a final thought he suggested that I might aim for more masculine activities in life, such as playing basketball. The advice was given in good faith and was appreciated. But I wondered if he saw the dilemma. Had I confessed to heterosexual problems, would he have prescribed more physical contact with girls, culminating in the showers? (Anonymous 1976, p. 32)

One puzzling bit of information, reported frequently by older informants, was that bishops and church authorities advised them that homosexual urges and the urge to masturbate is heightened by wearing briefs. Fred reports that, in about 1974, his bishop "Asked me if I wore briefs or boxers. I told him briefs and he said that I should switch. He said that that might solve the problem in and of itself." And Roger states that his bishop "told me that my manhood needed to breathe, that I was probably having difficulty because I was wearing underwear that was too small for me."

The provenance of this strange bit of counsel is unknown, but logic would dictate that it must be from some sort of official or semi-official directive, since it occurs with frequency among older informants to the study.<sup>24</sup> Jenkins' narrative provides further evidence. He reports that, in the early seventies, a general authority of the church "counseled me to . . . think manly thoughts, be faithful to the church, and not to wear tight pants." (1978, p. 1)

When gay ward members returned to their bishops weeks or months later, proclaiming that looser shorts and participation in organized sports had not curbed their homosexual desires, bishops typically began counseling the young men to begin heterosexual dating. If the counselee was already seeing a young woman, he was encouraged to increase the seriousness of the relationship, and the level of physical affection in the relationship. Mitchell remembers that:

Finally he [the bishop] told me that all I needed to do was to get with some girls and start dating. He said that at first it might be hard, but that in the end my instincts would fix the problem. He said that sexual attraction [to the same sex] was unnatural and that seeing girls would fix it. He had expected it to happen all by itself, but that in my case I might have to actually date girls in order for it to happen. 'You just need a jump-start,' he told me.

Those who were able to successfully manage a serious heterosexual relationship or who had completed a mission were typically advised to marry as soon as possible. Harvey was told by his stake president that "we usually like to have this straightened up before a man gets married, but marriage always cures it."

Older informants report that they received considerable pressure from church leaders to marry, and most say that they were instructed not to tell their potential spouse that they were gay. This advice was given by a general authority to a gay man writing anonymously in a journal for Mormon scholarship: "He [the authority] asked me to picture myself capable of [heterosexual love making]. . . . He felt I should marry but counseled me definitely not to tell my wife I was a homosexual as it would strain the relationship too severely." (Anonymous 1976, p. 32)

A number of gay Mormon men, including several informants to this study, chose to marry heterosexually, hoping that this would at last change their sexual orientation. In many instances, as Chapter five will demonstrate, the results were disastrous.

The final and most dramatic method used by the church to try to change the sexual orientation of gay members was "negative behavioral" or "aversion" therapy. Aversion therapy involves using the principles of Skinnerian behaviorism to attempt to change a

homosexual person's sexual preference through negative reinforcement. Church-owned Brigham Young University conducted a great deal of research throughout the 1970s in order to determine the relative merits of aversion therapy in "treating" homosexuals (Stout 1987).

Homosexual men became participants in the reconditioning studies in one of two ways. A few were referred by bishops, stake presidents and mission presidents who were familiar with the studies, but most were BYU students who approached the university's psychological counseling center for help with emotional problems. Some stated that they approached counselors because of their homosexuality alone, and others noted that they initially sought counseling for other problems, and that their sexual preference came out during the course of therapy.

Several informants to this study were participants in aversion therapy experiments. Most recalled that they began their participation in the research projects by going through a period of counseling, often including hypnosis and group therapy. Then, when the experiments in aversion therapy began, they were shown homoerotic photographs while painful electric shocks were administered.

David reported that he was involved in various aversion therapy experiments and attended sessions once or twice a week. He recalls that:

**Informant:** They would put a—I don't know—a shocker thing on my arm and one on my leg and have me lay down on a couch. Then they would have me close my eyes or they would put a sleeping mask on me. Then they would ask me to fantasize about having sex with a man. While I was fantasizing they would, at various times, send a shock into to my arm.

**Researcher:** So you never knew exactly when the shocks were coming?

**Informant:** No.

**Researcher:** Did it hurt?

**Informant:** Oh yeah. Oh yeah. Later, they changed it so that we could gauge the strength of the shock ourselves. I always put it on pretty low because it hurt like hell!

Alan reported that he was never shown any photographs, but was given post-hypnotic suggestions by his LDS therapist that he would become ill if he entertained sexual

thoughts about men. Later, when mere post-hypnotic suggestion proved futile, he was advised to induce vomiting with ipecac syrup while thinking about homosexual sex.

Harryman corroborates these accounts closely, writing that as he viewed homoerotic photos:

Random and painful electric shocks would be sent through my arm. Later the procedure was modified. When shock was being introduced during the viewing of a male slide, I could stop the shock by pressing a plunger, which would cause the slide of a clothed woman to appear on the screen. Even now other details of the therapy are too embarrassing for me to write about. (Schow, et. al. 1991, p. 28)

Participants in the experiments were told often in counseling sessions that they were making excellent progress, although Harryman admits that "The criteria used by my counselor to determine whether or not I was cured of homosexuality were not clear to me" (Schow et. al. 1991, p. 28). In spite of this, all of the informants to this study who participated in negative reinforcement experiments left their therapy feeling that nothing had changed, in spite of assurances from doctoral students who administered the experiments that they had been "cured."

All I got was a bunch of burns on my arm. I remember that a couple of nights after I finished the session and [the counselor] told me that I should now begin to pursue marriage I had a vivid dream about kissing and hugging a man. When I awoke I cried for hours. I realized that nothing could be done and that I would have to bear this cross to the grave.

Aversion therapy experiments began to taper off at BYU, both because the experiments were a failure, and because the APA was becoming increasingly critical of such therapeutic techniques. By 1983, only remnants of the program remained. Faced with the realization that the program did not work, and that there seemed to be no way to change homosexuality into heterosexuality, and further beset by outspoken gay Mormons who demanded better, kinder treatment, the church began to lighten up on gay members who approached their ecclesiastical leaders for repentance and help.

Younger informants to the study report a very different experience in the bishop's office than their older counterparts, especially those who approached their bishops after



about 1988. While initial visits still involve exhortations to “play it straight,” show up for ward basketball practice and have regular, sincere personal prayer, those who return to the bishop’s office insisting that they are, in fact, homosexual are immediately referred to LDS social services or an LDS counselor. It then becomes the counselor’s job to assist the young man in changing or managing his orientation and maintaining his mental health, while the church’s sole concern is the personal worthiness of the priesthood holder in question.

Most informants in this era were surprised and impressed at how sincere and solicitous bishops were as they listened to their problems. Rather than the expected condemnation and the threat of excommunication, most informants reported that the bishop expressed his love for the gay member, and provided assurance that the church would never turn its back on him, provided he tried with all his might to live the commandments.

Today, a member who approaches the bishop with a voluntary confession is rarely brought before a church court, unless his homosexual experiences are very extensive, he has AIDS, or he holds a position of high responsibility in the church. Even then, disfellowshipment is the usual outcome of such a court, provided the homosexual member is penitent and commits to live by the moral standards of the church. Excommunication is very rare for homosexual members in the church today, even for those who “slip up” time and time again, provided that the member honestly desires to change and repent, and that “slip ups” in question become less and less frequent and are not serious (i.e. involve anal sex or performing oral sex).

Because of this more relaxed atmosphere, many gay people who are in good standing with the church are more or less out of the closet to a select few in the ward. (Although most continue to keep their orientation a secret to their families.) Some even have ward callings, though none are allowed to work with the youth or hold high positions with considerable responsibility, like be a member of the bishopric. All, of course, must be committed to and working toward changing their sexual orientation, or, short of that, at least be committed to living a celibate lifestyle. The words of this gay Mormon typifies the recent experience of gays who are willing to change or live celibate within Mormonism:

I recently came out to my bishop, stake president, elder's quorum president and single adult leaders, plus several LDS friends, and none of them has ever said anything terrible to me. I was released as a single adult representative because of my orientation, yet the singles chairperson encouraged me to keep coming to the council meetings because they need ideas. (*Affinity* 15(2):3)

In spite of this new climate of compromise, the pressure on gay members is still intense. In the interests of safeguarding the personal worthiness of ward priesthood members, bishops will usually aid the confessing homosexual in his struggle to refrain from having homosexual experiences and fantasies by holding frequent and searching interviews with the gay parishioner. Such interviews never fail to assess the frequency and intensity of homosexual thoughts and the extent and frequency of masturbation. Mark, a freshman at a private college in Salt Lake states that:

**Informant:** I see him [the bishop] every other week for about a half hour. We talk about my scripture reading and fasting. He asks me everything. It keeps me safe from doing anything wrong, but I am so worried about my next interview that I spend all my time making sure that I'm not thinking or acting gay. It takes a lot of effort.

**Researcher:** Do you ever have a problem with masturbation?

**Informant:** Now you're starting to sound like him.

**Researcher:** No, [laughs] it's just a concern that some others have had.

**Informant:** It's hard on me. That's all I can say. I don't know how much longer I can live like this.

**Researcher:** What will you do? Do you think you can [change your sexual orientation?].

**Informant:** No, they want me to keep this up for the rest of my life.

**Researcher:** Is that realistic?

**Informant:** I don't know what to do. I know that gospel is true, but I also know that I can't change what I am. I mean, the people at LDS Social Services know that too. What they want me to do is to live like this forever.

**Researcher:** Celibate?

**Informant:** Yeah.

**Researcher:** Well, can you?

**Informant:** Could you?

Submitting to a battery of interviews is standard fare for those who wish to keep their church membership intact, and several informants reported that "life under a microscope" is extremely stressful. Richard, like several informants in this study, decided it

would be easier to claim to be “cured” than to continue his weekly interviews with his bishop. But, in order to make the claim believable, gay members must begin heterosexual dating in earnest and marry in short order.

Most, especially those that report high religiosity, submit to the scrutiny and continue for some time attempting to tightly control their thoughts and feelings. They struggle to keep their sexual encounters to a bare minimum, and always stop short of oral or anal sex in order to avoid the possible trauma and stigma of a church court.

### **Reasons for a policy shift**

A paradox presented itself while researching the shift in the LDS church’s treatment and discipline of homosexual members. While the change in policy came swiftly after the church became convinced that sexual orientation was not always chosen, and that homosexual members were indeed sincere in their efforts to change, church rhetoric and the condemnation of homosexuality from the pulpit and in official church printed matter did not abate. As late as 1992, official publications and textbooks being used in LDS Institute<sup>25</sup> classes continued to refer to homosexuality as a sinful, chosen aberration (*Achieving a Celestial Marriage* 1992). This, of course, begs the question of why a church that had few qualms about excommunicating homosexual members in the 1970s and early 1980s had decided to keep these same members in good standing, under certain conditions, in the 1990s. Certainly the pressure placed on the church by a society rapidly liberalizing with regard to homosexual rights played a part in this transition, but interviews with bishops and gay members revealed that, while movements in the nation at large may have been an accommodating social structural backdrop for these changes, they are not the immediate, proximate causes of this shift in policy.

Bishops report that a major reason why gay members are much less likely to be excommunicated in the 1990s is because most of those who were being excommunicated were not returning to the church. As was mentioned earlier, after a minimum one year waiting period, members who have lost their church membership are allowed, if they have

successfully repented, to be rebaptized into the church. Rebaptism carries with it all of the blessings of one's original baptism, including the remission of all sin previous to the ordinance. Thus, for the church, excommunication is seen as the easiest, best way to repent of very serious transgressions. That is why Mormon idiom refers to church courts as "courts of love," because they facilitate complete repentance (McKonkie 1966).

The problem is, most people can't face the other members of the church and aren't strong enough to admit to their peers that they have sinned, even though the scriptures teach that all have sinned. None of them were coming back to the church. The church's first obligation is to save mankind, and if a church policy is not helping people be saved, then the Lord will allow it to be changed. You can't be saved outside the gospel. Since I've been a bishop, we have only had one excommunication that wasn't asked for by the person or where the person didn't desire repentance, and that was for child sex abuse. So it isn't just for gay people. People usually don't get excommunicated for adultery or fornication anymore either, unless they ask or are not remorseful. I think that they should ask sometimes, because a contemplative year without the blessings of the gospel can do more toward keeping a member faithful to the end than the years and years it might take to repent without a court of love. But, so be it. Once again the people of the church choose to live a lower law and by doing so they deny themselves blessings.

The other reason that research has uncovered as to why homosexual members are rarely officially censured by the church deals with the Mormon outlook on the sanctity of the family. Shepherd and Shepherd note that preserving the nuclear family in the wake of the perceived threats presented by modern America has become "the major sociological frame of reference for [LDS general] conference speakers. The Mormon church is portrayed as serving the basic needs of the family, and the family in turn is defined as the basis of the church" (Shepherd and Shepherd 1984, p. 85). Shipps notes that because of Mormonism's unique doctrine of eternal marriage and the practice of "sealing" children to their parents in sacred temple ceremonies, the "Family is [Mormonism's] 'unit of exaltation' rather than the individual" (Shipps 1985, p. 149). Indeed, one of Mormonism's most familiar and ubiquitous colloquial aphorisms is "Families are forever." This slogan appears frequently in talks given by ward members in church meetings, on wall hangings in Mormon homes, and, in places where there is a high concentration of Mormons, on bumper stickers and

license plate frames.

The problem is, in order for a family to be forever, or to gain exaltation, all of its members must be individually exalted as well. Homosexuality, of course, threatens personal exaltation and, by implication, family exaltation. Bishops, when pressed by the researcher, admitted to a great deal of deliberation when deciding how to handle homosexual members, in spite of fairly rigid official guidelines. "I have to protect the priesthood and make sure that its members are worthy," said one, "but I must also preserve the family." Thus, excommunicating homosexual members has ramifications on the worthy members of the gay person's family. This, more than any other social phenomenon, has led to the church's decision not to excommunicate homosexual members and, more importantly, to accept celibacy on the part of its gay priesthood holders, rather than demand a change in orientation.

William Sims Bainbridge (1989) has demonstrated that while joining a radical cult movement, suicide, and committing a felony are all highly negatively correlated with church membership in the United States, homosexuality is not. What this means is that orthodox, devout Mormon families are just as likely to have to deal with a homosexual family member as their less religious counterparts. The implications of this are obvious when one examines the speeches and teachings of Mormon leaders on causes of deviance in the family.

### **Mormonism, Homosexuality and Families**

The preservation of the nuclear family is modern Mormonism's most celebrated message. Cowan (1985) points out that the precipitous rise in the divorce rate immediately following World War II prompted church leaders to begin emphasizing the primacy of the family as the bedrock social unit for society and the church. Joseph Fielding Smith, tenth president of the LDS church, epitomized these sentiments when he stated that the home was, first and foremost, a place where family members could grow toward exaltation together (Cowan 1985).

The influence of righteous parents and a gospel centered home is extolled by church leaders as the best way to protect children from falling into transgression. Women, these leaders teach, should remove themselves from the work-force so that they can watch over their children; men should provide for the family and preside over the home with the priesthood (Cowan 1985). In such a home, it was promised, children would not depart from the teachings of the gospel and turn to sin.

Ninth church president David O. McKay, whose tenure as church president lasted from 1951 to 1970, is perhaps best known as an advocate of the traditional, nuclear family (Cowan 1985). In a conference talk that has become a classic in Mormon circles he asserted:

No other success can compensate for failure in the home. The poorest shack in which love prevails over a united family is of greater value to God and future humanity than any other riches. In such a home God can work miracles *and will work miracles* (*Conference Reports* October, 1962, p. 78. emphasis mine)

The sentence that begins the foregoing quote is a common Mormon maxim. The closing sentence, a puzzle for many pious families. The fact that having a homosexual son or daughter is not related to family religiosity has prompted many faithful Mormon families to ask, in essence, "Whence the miracles?" This presents a dilemma for a church that believes that being gay is learned and chosen. Having a gay child is most definitely "failure in the home" especially in light of the words of the canonical book of Proverbs: "Train up a child in the way he should go; and when he is old, he will not depart from it." (Proverbs 22:6)

This Biblical pronouncement is fortified by the *Book of Mormon*, which states that church members who are steadfast and stalwart in their beliefs will not "suffer [their] children . . . that they transgress the laws of God." (Mosiah 4:14). Further, Cowan (1985) cites David O. McKay: "Every child is, to a great degree, what he is because of the ever constant influence of home environment and the careful or neglectful training of parents." And, finally, former church president Spencer W. Kimball writes that "Home life, proper

teaching in the home, parental guidance and leadership are the panacea for the ailments of the world and its children. They are the cures for spiritual and emotional diseases and the remedy for its problems." (*Conference Reports*, April 1973, p. 130)

For the most part, these "diseases" are believed to be sexual in nature, and Shepherd and Shepherd point out that the church's emphasis on stable, righteous families serves, among other things, as a safeguard against sexual immorality.

Traditional family life (in which the father is the head of the house, children respect and obey their parents, and parents set a proper example for their children is legitimated as a divine institution which must be strengthened as a bulwark against the disintegrating forces and immoralities of the modern age. Sexual immorality is perceived as a prime evil to be guarded against (Shepherd and Shepherd 1984, p. 86)

While having a homosexual son or daughter can present difficulties in any American family, the message of Mormonism exacerbates the problem. The Mormon prescription for strong, moral families implies that a home that raises a homosexual child is a home that is characterized by poor parenting.

The Latter-day Saint parents of gay children, not surprisingly, suffer greatly when they discover a son or daughter's homosexuality. One mother writes:

We have a homosexual son. (That has been the most difficult sentence for me to say.) They [my husband and son] had delayed telling me because they knew how much it would hurt me. They were right. . . . The day he brought his temple clothing to me and said he could no longer be active [in the church] was a devastating day in all of our lives. (Sunstone 14(3):5)

Jan Cameron, the mother of a gay son and founder of the support group HELP (Homosexual Education for Latter-day Saint Parents) writes that "We hurt as parents because we see our hopes and dreams diminish for that child—no mission, no temple marriage, no grandchildren, and worse yet, maybe no eternal family" (Schow, et al. 1991). Informants corroborate, reporting that their families, especially their mothers, often blamed themselves for a homosexual son, and either shared in the guilt associated with their homosexuality, or could not bring themselves to believe their son was gay. Jenkins recalls:

I have talked at length with my own father about [my homosexuality]. It

required a great amount from him. He is a good father, very loving, a bishop, high councilman, faithful and devoted to the church and his family. My mother, before she died, was never able to accept my homosexuality. On her deathbed she pleaded with me to marry. (Jenkins 1978, p. 48)

In addition to feeling unworthy, families with a homosexual son are often stigmatized by the ward. One informant stated that "The folks in the ward started to murmur. They started to wonder what my mother had done that I turned gay." Another, describing a similar situation said "That was the hardest for me. I felt like I had let my mother down because she blamed herself even though she had nothing to do with it."

Sometimes, however, there are prominent families in high positions in the ward who are beyond reproach. When a gay son from one of these families approaches the bishop, there is usually a considerable effort made by ward leaders to keep it as quiet as possible. Evidence from this study supports the idea that the higher the orthodoxy of the gay Mormon's family, the lighter the punishment and penance prescribed by bishops and church courts. One informant, whose father's life was characterized by a life-long commitment to Mormonism said:

My dad had taught institute for fifteen years, that was longer than the bishop had been a member of the church. I was told that the situation would be handled more or less 'in house' and I got the distinct impression that the prospect of my dad finding out about the situation terrified my bishop.

LDS teachings about the relationship between church and families presents an interesting paradox in the sociological study of gay Mormons. The notion that "Families are forever" and the importance of temple marriage to secure an eternal family are a theological stumbling block for gay members, but it is, nevertheless, what appears to be keeping them from being excommunicated. As one bishop put it, "It just affects too many families."

### **The Choice to Leave Mormonism**

Ironically, while the commitment to work toward changing one's sexual orientation



or remain celibate is seen by the gay Mormon as an attempt to retain his membership at any cost, this same commitment eventually leads to voluntary withdrawal from the church on the part of many gay members. For most, the decision to finally leave the church takes agonizing years, but many see it as the only way for them to enjoy sexual relationships, or live their lives as the person they really are.

Some, after years of intensive interviews and pressure from church leaders, begin to doubt their religion. "When I was trying as hard as I could, but I still had wet dreams about men and I was still attracted to men, I started to think that maybe I wasn't the one with the problem. Slowly I started to doubt that this was really God's church." For others, the realization is more dramatic and sudden.

One Sunday, two and one half years ago, I was teaching another gospel doctrine class when it dawned on me that I didn't believe anything I was saying. I had been absolutely repressing who I was. I had dated every single LDS woman in the region and felt no attraction to any of them. I sang in the [ward] choir, but the words meant nothing to me. . . . I admitted to myself what I had always known deep inside. I asked for a release that Sunday and stopped attending church meetings. . . . I essentially wanted nothing to do with an organization that had no use for me as a homosexual. . . . I miss many things church membership has to offer. (Affinity 16(3):5)

Some reported that falling in love was the catalyst that led them to discard Mormonism. Ray, who had his name removed from church records in 1992 claims that "I found the meaning in [my lover] that I was looking for from the church." Thus, while they are given a healthy supply of "second chances" by today's church to change their orientation or reaffirm their celibacy, eventually it is the gay man himself that finally gives up in most cases. One writer claims:

Many gays quietly slip away from the church with their faith in God usually intact though somehow changed. Others stay, with the torturous knowledge that they can never participate fully and that the same brothers and sisters who profess to love everyone in the ward on Fast Sunday would feel a little differently if the truth were known (Dialogue 20(1):9).

Those who do decide to stay in the church can choose between two basic strategies for harmonizing their sexual preference and the doctrines of Mormonism. First,

they may accept the church's definition of homosexuality and its rules for appropriate behavior for gay members and attempt to keep their gospel covenants through celibacy, marriage or changing their sexual orientation. Or, they may reject the church's definition and rules by attempting to reform the church through activism while celibate, or by living a gay lifestyle while hiding from the church—rationalizing and reinterpreting Mormon doctrine in an unorthodox fashion to be consistent with their gay lifestyle. Those who choose orthodoxy are examined in chapter five. Those who seek a change in the church and who walk the tightrope between openly gay and actively Mormon are outlined in chapter six.

### Notes to Chapter IV

<sup>1</sup> Researcher Roy Cain (1991) concludes that most gay men in this country feel acute anxiety when they become aware of their sexual identity, and most deliberate thoroughly, if not excessively, over the decision of who, when, and how to tell others of their homosexuality.

<sup>2</sup> For an example of this type of rhetoric, see Kimball (1981).

<sup>3</sup> Mormon high school students are encouraged to attend a daily scripture study class called simply "seminary" to provide religious balance with their secular studies in high school. The Church Educational System is the LDS church's administrative branch that hires teachers to run this program. In Utah and other areas where there is a high concentration of Mormons, "released time" arrangements with local high schools allow the church to hold seminary in buildings that are adjacent to the high school during normal school hours. In areas with fewer Mormons, seminary is typically held at the Mormon chapel in the morning before school begins.

<sup>4</sup> The "stage" metaphor and memorizing a hymn to chase away evil "players" is a well known strategy used by Mormons to control evil thoughts. The idea was originally suggested by apostle Boyd K. Packer. (See Packer 1979)

<sup>5</sup> This Book of Mormon verse reads: "And if men come unto me I will show them their weakness. I give unto men weakness that they may be humble; and my grace is sufficient for all men that humble themselves before me; for if they humble themselves before me, and have faith in me, then I will make weak things become strong unto them."

<sup>6</sup> Fasting is a common means of soliciting divine intervention in the LDS church. It has many purposes: e.g. to ask for forgiveness for sin, to plead for the return of health to ill loved ones, to bring rain in times of drought, etc.

<sup>7</sup> "Priesthood" in the Mormon church is defined differently than in most Christian denominations. In the LDS church, the priesthood is offered to all worthy males. Composed of various levels, the initial office in the priesthood is offered to worthy boys at age 12.

<sup>8</sup> After being excommunicated, most people are allowed to rejoin the church after a minimum one year waiting period. For those who have committed extremely serious sins, excommunication is often seen by the church as an essential step in full repentance. The process of excommunication and its impact on gay Mormons will be discussed in detail later in this chapter and in chapter 6.

<sup>9</sup> For whatever reason, the slim majority of informants to this study understood that they were gay earlier than the average quoted by Kuntz. Just under half of the men who were asked when they first realized that they were homosexual said that they identified themselves as "gay" or "attracted to men" before the age of 20. This is especially true of younger informants who reached puberty at a time when the homosexual rights movement was already prominent, and messages about and definitions of homosexuality were readily available from the media and other sources.

<sup>10</sup> Women also serve missions for the church, but their participation in the missionary program is voluntary and their term of service lasts for only 18 months. Young men, in contrast, are commanded to serve a mission. Prophet Spencer W. Kimball in 1974 remarked, "The question is frequently asked: Should every young man fill a mission? And the answer has been given by the Lord. It is 'Yes.' Every young man should fill a mission" (Arrington and Bitton 1979). Not going on a mission, particularly in Utah, can greatly stigmatize a Mormon male within church circles and within the community. In 1991, 43,395 missionaries were sent to proselytize, with over 200,000 serving since 1980 (1993-1994 *Church Almanac*).

<sup>11</sup> With rare exception—e.g. the rules allow a missionary to occasionally work with an elder who is not his companion, or, on rare days, to work with a male member of the church who is a priesthood holder. In no instance is a missionary allowed to be out of the sight of a priesthood holder. Being discovered without the company of one's companion or authorized priesthood holder is a serious infraction of the mission rules.

<sup>12</sup> Especially dedicated and experienced missionaries are often given the opportunity to be "trainers", responsible for giving new missionaries just entering the mission field instruction on seeking and teaching converts.

<sup>13</sup> Schow (1990) however, reports that his son chose not to fill a mission because of homosexuality, in spite of the fact that he had not had previous homosexual experiences.

<sup>14</sup> Prior to departing for the mission field, missionaries are assembled at the Mission Home, now called the Missionary Training Center. Here, new elders are given inspirational talks by church leaders and memorize scriptures and lessons that will aid them in their proselyting.

<sup>15</sup> Anonymous (1986, p. 137) recounts the story of an elder who became "involved with a companion," but this anonymous report cannot be verified. No informant to this study reported engaging in a sexual act with a companion. A few, however, mentioned that they had been sexually involved, or "nearly involved" with church members in the mission field. One reported that he had been sent home from his mission for "letting a man in the local ward touch me." Schow and Raynes (Schow et. al. 1991, p. 197) report that "Gary," a gay Mormon acquaintance, was involved in "non-orgasmic genital caressing" with a companion.

<sup>16</sup> Missions are presided over by a mission president, usually an older man whose life has been characterized by dedicated church service.

<sup>17</sup> The surreptitious (but always subsequently discovered) mid-month transfer for homosexual inclinations is also detailed in the fictional story "The Interview." See Bennion (1985).

<sup>18</sup> Missions are divided into zones that are presided over by an experienced set of missionaries called "Zone leaders". Zone leaders do a great deal of traveling throughout their zone. Since some zones are large, zone leaders often spend the night with companionships in their zones.

<sup>19</sup> "Prez" is common mission slang for the mission president.

<sup>20</sup> Edward Gibbon's classic *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* postulates that one of the reasons for the downfall of Rome was gross moral decay, typified by homosexuality. See Gibbon (1985).

<sup>21</sup> A paraphrase of Jesus' admonition to an adulterous woman in John 8:11: "Go, and sin no more."

<sup>22</sup> There are two divisions of the Mormon priesthood, the Aaronic, or preparatory priesthood is mostly held by boys ages 12-18. Their priesthood responsibilities are limited and they can perform only a few priesthood ordinances. Men in the church, provided they are active and worthy, hold the higher, or Melchizedek priesthood. This priesthood carries with it greater responsibilities and the opportunity to perform more complex and significant church ordinances.

<sup>23</sup> Almost all modern LDS church buildings contain a basketball court, and most wards field at least two basketball teams and participate in inter-stake and intra-stake basketball tournaments throughout the winter. Basketball is an inextricable part of the Mormon male experience, especially in Utah.

<sup>24</sup> A former bishop told the researcher that one possible reason for this advice is that experts in human fertility often counsel men with low sperm count to wear boxer shorts instead of briefs, since sperm production must occur at temperatures lower than body temperature and briefs can hold the testes too close to the body, making them too warm. Low sperm count was believed by some church authorities, he claimed, to be a cause of homosexuality. Another church leader mentioned that he had been instructed to tell young men in his ward not to wear briefs because their tight fit promotes nocturnal erections and emissions.

<sup>25</sup> LDS Institute is the university counterpart to seminary. The church has institutes of religion adjacent to most large state universities in the western United States.

## Chapter V

### Playing by the Rules: Celibate, Married and “Changed”

The LDS church presently defines homosexuality as a learned and, for many, a changeable condition. It further requires that homosexual members who wish to remain in the church either change their orientation, or, if this is not possible, live a celibate lifestyle without sexual expression. While mistakes or “slip ups” in the form of some limited sexual activity are tolerated to a certain degree, gay church members who do not show earnest remorse and recommit to living church standards upon confessing these transgressions must either lie to church leaders in subsequent interviews, or suffer church disciplinary actions. It is an uncomfortable compromise, but it is a compromise that many are willing to make. Those who charge that the church is unrealistic in its demands are answered with an austere response: the church simply does not condone sexual relationships outside of marriage in any form whatsoever. One bishop, typical of others, defends the church by asking:

What about a woman that is unattractive and no one ever asks her to marry? Should the church say, ‘Oh well, because it is not your fault you can have sex with whomever you please.’ No! What about a man who cannot find a woman to accept his proposal? Should we say that he should be allowed to buy a prostitute just because its not his fault? So it isn’t just gay people, there are many who have to manage without sex for the period of their mortal lives. Lots of people have to live without sex. I would hope that a priesthood holder in the Lord’s true church would have at least as much faith and ability to sacrifice for the gospel as a Catholic priest. They volunteer not to have sex! Surely someone with the Melchizedek priesthood can be as strong as that!

The decision to choose celibacy as a method for managing the contradictions inherent in being a Mormon homosexual for the respondents to this study seems to be related with several variables. First, this group of gay Mormons are characterized by very high religiosity and typically come from homes that are similarly devout. Second, informants choosing this route seem to come from areas where the influence of the church is strong—typically locales in Utah, and almost all were born into the church. Further, those who choose celibacy are more likely than others to be young, probably because—as we

shall see—their older counterparts were either excommunicated or encouraged to enter into heterosexual marriages, which they did.

While the official Mormon church may countenance abstaining gays as active members, it is likely that the lay membership of the church, were they at the helm, would not.<sup>1</sup> Roberts (1990) reports that the Stake High Council in his San Francisco ward debated whether or not to kick gay members out of the church, and individual members of the ward confided in him that they felt that such members should be excommunicated. So, while celibate gays are allowed to keep their membership, they are admonished, in order to avoid stigma, to divulge their orientation to other church members on a “need to know” basis. Depending on the bishop, this may even include members of the immediate family. Additionally, gay members are strongly advised to sever all ties with other homosexual people they might know, and to vigorously eschew cultivating any new associations with other gays. What this means for most celibate gay Mormons is that they live solitary, lonely lives with few social outings.

Sometimes the solitude becomes difficult. Walter confided to the researcher that he began volunteering at the homeless shelter “Not because I care all that much, but because it gives me someone to talk to. They’re about the only ones who don’t judge me.” David reports that the local talk radio station is his “best friend,” and Harvey spends over \$200 a month on an electronic computer “chat” network where he swaps stories with “other misfits, losers, and computer nerds who don’t have a life.” One man even reported that he drove around the streets at night looking for hitchhikers, just so he would have another person to talk to. Jenkins (1978) whose experience as a homosexual Mormon has brought him into contact with many celibate gays writes:

Recommending to the homosexual that he abstain from the sexual expression of who he is has far-reaching consequences. It cuts him off from the only real possibility open to him to experience love. The more frightening fact is that it unquestionably condemns him to a life of loneliness which cannot and is not ministered to by any facet of the church or society. No amount of temple going, priesthood meetings, home teaching or special interest activity will ease the loneliness. This can only be realized through a mature, loving intimacy. The men who I know who have followed the course of abstention have a conspicuous diminution of humanness in their

lives. They are, for the most part, a mixture of flat, uninteresting, impoverished personalities with a conspicuous tenseness and anxiety that is never focused or constructively expended.

### **Mormonism and Singleness**

For some, this solitude is self-imposed because they cannot bear the stigma attached to them by their family and former friends. Seth is typical among many Mormon gays who say it “feels like I have a scarlet ‘H’ or something on my chest.” They report that being celibate is a “catch 22”: if they reveal their sexual orientation, they will be stigmatized for being gay, but if they successfully live a celibate lifestyle past a certain age they suffer the onus of being single in a church that demands marriage from every member.

**Researcher:** Do you have family in town?

**Informant:** Yes.

**Researcher:** Well why don't you visit with them?

**Informant:** Because they always bug me about getting married. They ask me if I'm seeing somebody or they say 'We can set you up with so and so.' They never stop.

**Researcher:** So they don't know you're gay?

**Informant:** No. But I don't know what's worse, having homosexual problems or being 31 and single.

Many report that, because of the limitations on their social contacts, their only significant interaction with others outside work occurs within church circles. Here again, the specter of being single in a church where only married people receive exaltation creates a formidable double bind. Seth continues:

That's very hard, too. The only time you are with another human being having fun is in the context of church. And that's a time when every second you are reminded that you are gay. Because the church is all about getting married and you are not. People say things about you. I know how some handicapped people must feel. I find that I catch people consciously avoiding the subject of marriage—just like you might find yourself trying hard not to stare at a person with a handicap. Their tact is too obvious and phony that it's totally tactless. I wish they would just come out and say, 'So why aren't you married?' I know they're thinking it.

Marriage is of paramount importance for young men and women in their twenties



in the Mormon church. The church teaches that the decision to marry should not be postponed for an education or to acquire additional savings (*Achieving a Celestial Marriage* 1992). Being single beyond "marriageable age" has certain unpleasant repercussions on the single member. A content analysis of LDS church general authorities' statements about being single in 1983 revealed that:

Being married is one of the most important ideas within Mormon culture, emphasized almost to the exclusion of other states of being. Much like the moon that is visible only when reflecting the sun's light, mention of singleness occurs most frequently in articles and talks about marriage, most frequently coupled with exhortations to marry. (Raynes and Parsons 1983, p. 35)

Because men in Mormon culture are supposed to initiate courtship and propose marriage, they are often characterized as selfish and immature by church authorities if they are in their late twenties or early thirties and are not married. Harold B. Lee, eleventh president of the Mormon church announced: "Brethren, we are not doing our duty as holders of the priesthood when we go beyond the marriageable age and withhold ourselves from an honorable marriage to these lovely women" (*Ensign* Jan. 1974, p. 100). Thus, single men in the church are seen as shirking their priesthood duties if they are not actively seeking marriage. Raynes and Parsons continue:

Even though singleness is equally "wrong" for men and women, there were clear gender differences in the attitude of authoritative statements. Women were gentle victims of man's selfishness. Thus, unmarried men need to "repent" of singleness as they would any other sin, and the chief means of persuasion was threats. (Raynes and Parsons 1983, p. 36)

Participants in this study in their thirties who were living a celibate lifestyle report that the stigma associated with being single was a tremendous burden.

In order to facilitate marriage as quickly as possible for those who happen to be single or divorced (also an undesirable status in Mormon circles) the church sponsors "singles wards," where single people are removed from their home wards and come together for Sunday meetings with one another. These wards (or "meat markets" as one informant called them) also host a variety of social functions, such as dances and outings,

that encourage single people to interact and date. The entire structure of the ward is geared toward marriage. An anonymous writer (1976) reports that exhortations to marry as soon as possible are delivered with great frequency from the pulpit in such wards. Ironically, homosexual men in the church are instructed to attend these singles wards because they are, after all, single. Attrition by marriage in singles wards is rapid, and gay men report that as they became the "old bachelors" in the ward, they were submitted to ever increasing pressure to marry.

In order to alleviate some of this pressure, many gay men say that they began to date heterosexually. Lamborghini (1992) notes that homosexuals often have a number of techniques that allow them to "pass" as straight in social situations where they do not want their sexual orientation discovered. Dating was one such technique used frequently by gay men in this study. "[Dating] gave me an excuse," said one, "because I could say that I just hadn't found the right one yet." Many respondents to this study said that they had excellent experiences while dating, and valued the women they dated as friends. But, when the women being "courted" began to press for marriage or a serious relationship, things often turned sour. Particularly disastrous were encounters where dates began to ask for and give physical affection. One writer recalls:

On the way home my date slid over in the seat and started kissing me again. At her apartment I made a concerted effort at nominal petting. I tried everything, including the old ploy of thinking of boys. It was awful. I found myself growing physically ill. It was so shoddy I could no longer stand myself. . . . What does a person do who knows the gospel is true, who believes fervently in marriage for time and all eternity, who sustains the president of the church as a prophet of God, and yet is so warped that even kissing a girl can be accomplished only by cheap and demeaning subterfuge? (Anonymous 1976)

### **Other Aspects of a Celibate Lifestyle**

In addition to the pressure that comes from being single in the Mormon church, many celibate gays report that they often have a difficult time resisting the temptation to engage in sexual activity. Most celibate respondents know where the local gay taverns and

“pick-up points” are in their respective towns, and most admitted that they had, from time to time, entertained the thought of frequenting such places. Most had not, however, stating that while homosexual sex with a lover would be a grievous sin, “cheap sex with a stranger would be unforgivable.”

In spite of church counsel, many seem to have other gay friends that they have encountered at singles wards or other places. Respondents say that they sometimes become involved in necking and petting with these associates. Some regard this as unacceptable and work toward eradicating these indiscretions, but others feel that a passionate kiss or embrace is an allowance or small indulgence that they can enjoy from time to time. Eric states that

A boy can kiss his girlfriend and its not a sin, so I feel like I can kiss [my friend] and it is not a sin. I know my bishop wouldn't feel that way, but I think that the Lord feels like if it isn't a sin heterosexually, then its not a sin homosexually. I'll tell you though, it sometimes gets hard to stop, but I want to be worthy for my mission.

Overall, however, most of the celibate gays in this study hold themselves to very strict standards, and view even kissing and touching as inappropriate, although most said that they would not feel the need to approach their bishop for such a minor offense.

For some, the pressures associated with being gay and LDS eventually leads some homosexual Mormons to seek professional counseling. Although they are cautioned not to seek counsel outside the church regarding their homosexuality, the stress they feel can often manifest itself in other ways—typically in the form of stress-related disorders, which prompt them to go to the clinical community for help. Sometimes, astute clinicians are able to ascertain through counseling with celibate Mormon gays that celibacy is affecting their mental health. One man writes:

Recently one of my gay friend who is active in the church was told by his doctor that his celibacy was a source of unhealthy stress in his life. . . . A couple of years ago I began seeing a counselor due to job related stress. Though I was able to avoid discussing both my religious beliefs and my sexual orientation for many months . . . when these factors finally did surface, the therapist immediately identified celibacy as a contributing factor in my over-stressed life. He [pointed out] that to deny myself of even the

possibility of a loving, caring primary relationship was damaging to my self image, as well as to my relationships with others. . . . There is no doubt that such counsel is one of the bones of contention between 'traditional' church values and the psychiatric profession. (*Affinity* 13(4):2)

For the most part, celibate gays described themselves as generally unhappy and resigned to an "incomplete" life, although this is not the case for everyone in this category. One interesting finding is that while celibacy has its obvious drawbacks, informants usually noted that living in self-imposed solitude was good for their careers. Those celibate gays that were students typically excelled, and those in the labor force were rising stars in their respective companies. Said one "It's kind of like how when you go blind your ears improve. Same here. I guess if you can't do things and serve another person you serve yourself." Most seemed to accept their lot in life, believing that this is truly the way God would have them live. Writes one, "I never expect, nor do I desire the church to condone homosexual practices" (*Dialogue* 22(1):6).

Still, there was an admission on the part of several men living a celibate lifestyle that they were uncertain how long they could endure the strains of solitude. One man said that he "hold[s] on only because I believe these are the very last days, and Christ will be coming soon—within a few years." Some go to great lengths to remove themselves from the very possibility of succumbing to temptation. One man, who has lived celibate since 1984 was in the process of selling his home to move to a tiny town in Nebraska where "there couldn't possibly be any gay people." Another, with the same strategy living in northern Manitoba writes:

For those of us who are homosexual and committed to the restored gospel, life can be difficult at times. . . . I have solved the problem by living and working in an area far from either an organized ward or temptation. It is a very lonely life, but it beats the alternatives. . . . I carry on in the hope that at some time in the future, not in this lifetime I suspect, all things will be made clear. In the meantime, I endure. (*Dialogue* 19(1):23)

Others wait patiently, hoping against hope that new revelation from God will direct the church toward greater tolerance of homosexuality, and homosexual behavior.

Interviews collected for this study from informants with other strategies for

managing their homosexual identity within Mormonism show that many men initially adopt a celibate lifestyle. Most abandon it after a few years, however, claiming that the costs are simply too great. But some, who are accepting of the church's definition of homosexuality and its prescription for appropriate behavior on the part of believing gay church members, see it as their only choice, and endure.

### **Homosexual in a Heterosexual Marriage**

Less than a decade ago, celibacy would not be the appropriate response for those wishing to play by the church's rules. Until quite recently, the ultimate church prescription for "curing" homosexuality was to instruct the gay member to marry in as timely a fashion as possible. Many accepted (and some still accept) this advice, and, like many non-LDS gays, entered into heterosexual marriage. Many of the older respondents to this study are either married or divorced. Most stated that while they had grave reservations at the time they entered their marriage, they felt that this was an appropriate step, and something that the Lord would want. A few felt that marriage would change their orientation.<sup>2</sup> Others were more pessimistic, but felt that they could manage a happy life and an acceptable marriage in spite of their homosexuality. Norman, for example, states that he feels good about his relationship with his wife of eight years, but has problems dealing with the fact that he has not told his wife the truth about his sexual orientation.

Consensus among those in the study who married said that they were discouraged, either explicitly or implicitly from telling their fiancées that they were homosexual. Church authorities, they report, assured them that things would change after marriage, or insisted that there were no homosexual people, only homosexual behaviors, and thus there was nothing to tell. Because of the church's strict stance against premarital necking, petting and intercourse, informants say that their fiancées and girlfriends did not think that the lack of physical affection in the relationship was out of the ordinary, and thus the facade was fairly easy to manage. "She just thought I was a pillar of will power," said one.

Joshua, ignoring the advice of his bishop, told his intended bride about his

homosexuality, but his candid admission did not postpone or cancel their wedding plans.

He recalls:

We wept, of course, but in the end we decided that—she decided that—we should marry. As I look back on it, I see that she was getting old, you know, old and unmarried by church standards, and she probably thought that I was the best she could do. She was a wonderful woman and everything, but I guess she wasn't a real catch by 'straight' standards. She had a 'sweet spirit.'<sup>37</sup>

While being gay did not seem to disrupt a Mormon courtship among many respondents, serious and wrenching strains usually surfaced shortly after the wedding. Most report, for example, that they had a difficult time maintaining sexual relations with their partner. Some even admitted that they had to fantasize about men in order to keep an erection during sex with their wives—something that filled them with guilt.

This lack of interest on the part of gay husbands was often interpreted by wives as a sign that their husbands did not love them, or found them unattractive. In spite of their verbal reassurances, most gay husbands had difficulty assuaging these concerns without finally admitting their homosexuality. One man, whose marriage eventually ended in divorce writes:

The marriage had problems from the very beginning. I loved my wife very much, but my innermost desires remained one of physical attraction toward men and not her. During this time, in addition to much prayer, fasting, and working in the church, I spent my entire life savings on psychiatric help to 'cure my problem' and to save our marriage. My wife did not know the exact nature of the problem, but she knew that there was a problem and also worked, prayed and did all she could. (Affirmation 1980, p. 17)

Informants generally claim that they tried virtually everything to save their marriage and salvage some semblance of a sex life before finally disclosing to their spouse the nature of their "problem." Those who had the means usually spent years in personal and marriage counseling and most increased their level of activity in the church in the hope that God would see their devotion and fix their marriage. Since the church often counsels couples who are having difficulty in their marriage to have children, many became fathers hoping that children in the home would mend the relationship. Some were able to remain

married for a number of years with limited success, but their homosexual feelings, they report, did not go away. One man writes:

Little did I know (or wish to acknowledge) that festering within me were hidden aspects of who I really am. I am gay . . . I have been married with children for twenty years. One son is serving a mission. Even though my wife is my best friend and companion, I have known since my teen years that I have had an attraction for males, although until recently these feelings were kept well hidden. (*Affinity* 14(12):2-3)

Eventually most of the married men in this study had to come clean with their spouses. One man writes:

Sitting in the counselor's waiting room a short time later, I contemplated my reasons for being there. For 25 years I had remained virtually silent about my homosexual feelings. Along the way I had served a mission, graduated from BYU, married in the temple, become the father of two children and held a variety of church callings from nursery leader to young men's president. I had been a virgin until marriage and faithful to my wife ever since. Nevertheless, the homosexual thoughts had not stopped when the 'appropriate' avenue of intimacy had opened through marriage, as I had thought they would.

My private means of dealing with what I called 'my cross to bear in life' was through prayer, fasting, and dedicated church service. As hard as I tried to suppress my gay thoughts and fantasies, nothing had completely eliminated them. Sometimes I felt successful for periods of time, but eventually, the feelings would return. The hope of finally finding a 'cure' kept me from fleeing the waiting room.

[In the course of therapy] I was invited to consider telling my wife of my homosexual feelings. At that point in my life, I would have found it easier to cut off my right arm than discuss this subject with my wife. (*Affinity* 13(10):3,10)

Other men had similar stories, recalling that their wives were deeply hurt, shocked, betrayed and horrified.

The subject of marriage to a homosexual in the church came to the fore in Mormon circles in 1986 when poet Carol Lynn Pearson, whose inspirational works are widely read among church members, published her book, *Goodbye, I Love You*. This autobiographical book tells the story of Pearson's marriage—a marriage to a homosexual man who eventually divorces her, contracts AIDS, and dies. *Goodbye, I love You* was an immediate best-seller in LDS bookstores, and two informants reported that, after reading the book,

their wives confronted them about their homosexuality. Gordon states:

I knew that [my wife] picked up [Goodbye, I Love You] because she had her suspicions. I knew that when she finished reading it she would know. I mean the book talks about all of the things that her husband used to do that should have tipped her off. The book is what tipped my wife off. I guess it was a good thing, though, because she approached me in a kind way, but she knew.

Surprisingly, discovering Gordon's homosexuality did not prompt his wife to divorce him, although that seems to be the fate of most marriages of this nature. The LDS church discourages divorce, even when one of the spouses is homosexual. A couple afflicted with this difficulty approaching a bishop for counseling will almost certainly hear that saving the marriage is of paramount importance, especially if the gay member of the dyad has not had an actual homosexual encounter. Nevertheless, when such marriages do end in divorce, the church takes pains to minimize the stigma experienced by the wife.<sup>4</sup>

Some who remain married may be postponing the inevitable, but a few seem to be able to make it work, and report no signs of abnormal marital strife. Richard, for example, reports high marital satisfaction. He claims that his marriage actually improved after he admitted his homosexuality. "At no time," he reports, "did either of us even use the word divorce." He says of his marriage:

Well, it is better than a lot of marriages. I think that there are people with a lot bigger problems in their marriage. I mean, our marriage doesn't have a lot of sexual fireworks or anything like that, but it has quiet respect and a great friendship. I'd rather have a very little in the way of a sex life than have adultery. Since we live the commandments we have been able to keep our marriage. Marriage was not meant to be easy, but it was meant to last forever. In the resurrection we will be happy that we stayed married. I think my wife would say the same thing.

Although many have tried to place themselves in Richard's position, few can actually attain it. We can never know how many gay men are presently married in the Mormon church, and this researcher had great difficulty convincing those who were reported to be in such unions to consent to an interview. It seems that men who guard a deep secret from their own spouse are loathe to confide in a sociologist, regardless of the



lengths pursued to ensure anonymity—especially a sociologist who has discovered their sexual preference through a former lover! The only group of married gay men who were not shy about being respondents to the study are those who claim to be “former homosexuals”.

### The “Former” Homosexuals

This researcher was puzzled, fascinated and challenged by those who claim to have changed their sexual orientation. Claiming to be “cured” of homosexuality is a common strategy of those who want to duck out from under church pressure and intensive bishop’s interviews, and I had always supposed that the letters on file with LDS social services from the many who had “changed” through prayer and fasting were from just such people. At least some are undoubtedly fabrications (I spoke to several who contrived such testimonials) but there seems to be a small but active group of sincere men who claim to have changed from homosexual to heterosexual through, as one puts it, “prayer, faith, repentance and endurance.” Most of these men were encountered at a conference sponsored by an organization for changed gay Mormons called the Evergreen Foundation, although some came to my attention through gay friends who were trying, unsuccessfully, to change.

Raymond claims to have reversed his sexual orientation. He points to a powerful religious experience that occurred during a trip to the mountains to pray<sup>5</sup> that changed him “from a gay man, into a worthy man.” Raymond describes the experience and its outcome with great emotion:

**Informant:** It was like my head was being opened up and this being was looking at me, at my soul. I felt like that even though I was unworthy I was loved. It was a powerful being, but I knew right off it was an angel. I had been praying and I was on my knees, and I didn’t look up. Then I felt great peace and when I got up, I knew that I had changed.

**Researcher:** Changed? From homosexual to heterosexual?

**Informant:** Yeah. I just felt different. I know its crazy and you don’t believe me, but that’s okay. I know what happened. After that I was never tempted about men again. Then two years later I met my wife.

**Researcher:** You never thought about men after that?

**Informant:** Well, I thought about them, but not sexually. You know? Like a normal man thinks about men, as buddies.

**Researcher:** And you began to desire women?

**Informant:** Yes, like a normal man desires women. So I think that gay people can change. They just don't know they can change. They haven't tried hard. This happened after I'd been trying for years without goofing up.

**Researcher:** So you feel like you chose to be gay?

**Informant:** No, I think I was born gay; I just chose to be straight.

Spencer notes that he was involved in homosexual activity and had several lovers, but when the guilt overcame him, he approached his bishop for counseling. Unlike Raymond, his "conversion" was a process and, rather than change from homosexual to heterosexual, he seems to have changed from homosexual to asexual.

**Informant:** I began to change my life. I repented and left my gay friends.

Sooner or later, the excitement that I had for men left me.

**Researcher:** So you no longer desire to have sex with men?

**Informant:** No.

**Researcher:** Do you desire to have sex with women?

**Informant:** I don't desire to have sex with anyone. But if I was going to have sex with someone, it would be my [future] wife.

**Researcher:** So, did you once fantasize or think lustfully about men?

**Informant:** Yes, oh all the time. I was gay all the way.

**Researcher:** And now?

**Informant:** Now I realize that the world is preoccupied with sex. There's more to it than sex.

Some of the "changed" admitted to reorienting their bisexuality toward heterosexuality, and one expressed a belief that men who "are totally gay may have to live celibate." In addition, a few, like Tim, may have merely been labeled as gay so forcefully by peers that they began to believe the label. Tim states:

I discovered that there is no such thing as gay. I just have this faggy little twang in my voice. Its just my voice so people thought I was gay. In high school they started this lie that someone walked in on me [performing oral sex on another student] in the bathroom. They all said I was a fag. Pretty soon I thought that they couldn't all be wrong. So I got involved in the gay scene. I had a lot of friends there. I even did some things with some guys. But then I said, 'Hey, I need to straighten up' so I went to my bishop. . . . I never did things like that again.

In spite of men like Tim, who can be explained away simply, men like Raymond

challenge what the psychiatric literature says about the ability of gay people to change sexual orientation. More striking still is Peter, who insisted, after an initial interview wherein he detected my skepticism (in spite of my best efforts to conceal it<sup>6</sup>), on being re-interviewed with his wife present so that I would not think he was lying. His wife corroborated that the first years of their marriage were a struggle and that the couple rarely had sex. Peter states:

**Informant:** Through time though, and with a counselor, I started to change. I saw a new counselor that was LDS. Then we moved back to Utah to be closer to the church. I had stepped out on her before, but soon I had no desire to.

**Researcher:** Stepped out with men?

**Informant:** Yeah, but then in a few years I started to warm up to making love with her. Now, it isn't the kind of love they show in the movies, its a more emotional love.

**Researcher:** Does it have erotic undertones?

**Informant:** Yes, undertones, yes—good word. It is now an important part of our marriage, and I never think of men. I don't have homosexual thoughts.

**Researcher:** Do you mind me asking how often you make love?

**Informant:** At least once a month. And I don't think that's bad for people who have been married 15 years.

Research on those who claim to have changed their sexual orientation is *terra incognita* for those who study homosexuals sociologically. While those in this study who have changed state that the church was instrumental in their transformation, it is interesting to note that, except for Raymond, those who have "changed" report lower religiosity and less frequent church attendance during the changing process than most of those who live celibate. Thus, it would seem that strict obedience to church counsel may not be the primary factor involved in changing.

### Consigned to Hell

Quite unlike those who have successfully changed, the last group of respondents who accept the church's definition of homosexuality and its concomitant rules for behavior are those who have either tried to change and cannot, tried to live celibate and cannot or

attempted heterosexual marriage and are unable to remain faithful. (Some have tried all three.) In spite of these failures, they are men who believe that the Mormon church is God's true church, and they report high individual religiosity. These are men who live the kind of double life described by Humphreys (1975). They may attend church with their wives on Sunday, but they have secret homosexual liaisons on most other days of the week. They have long since given up hope of changing, and seem to be convinced that they are destined to inhabit the telestial kingdom—the LDS equivalent of hell.

Most men in this category are fairly religious, or at least have strong beliefs or "testimonies" of the LDS church, though they may or may not attend church meetings. They are typically church members who were born into the LDS church and most live in urban areas in Utah. While they desperately wish they could change their orientation or develop the will power to live celibate or be faithful to their wives, they are resigned to the fact that they cannot. They unanimously report that the lure of easy sex at gay bars or local "pick-up points" is too much for them to resist. One, typical of many, confided to me that

At first I used to say to myself, 'Stop that now. You can't go into those places [gay bars] anymore.' Then after a while I stopped kidding myself. I stopped mocking God with false repentance and I just decided to not worry about it anymore. If I'm going to be judged by God anyway, I may as well do as I please. I'm going to the same place anyway.

Another echoes these sentiments exactly, writing, "I had left BYU and the church, convinced that I was going to hell and may as well find some small pleasures along the way. My homosexuality was too shameful a thing to admit to my dearest friends, so I just disappeared without looking back" (*Affinity* 13(4):1).

Gay Mormon (or former Mormon) men who believe they are destined for hell are to be found *en masse* in Salt Lake City's gay bars. While some seem to eventually manage to break free of the church and alleviate the guilt associated with their homosexual behavior, some—years after their last church meeting—still feel that they are only biding their time, waiting for God to condemn them.

### Notes to Chapter V

<sup>1</sup> In the course of constructing this thesis, the researcher had occasion to discuss its theme and content with scores of LDS faithful. Most were generally surprised to discover that celibate gays could remain church members, and not a few commented that they believed such individuals, whether or not they had engaged in homosexual activity, should be removed from church membership rolls. More analytically, Crapo (1987) notes that official church policies often vary considerably from "grass roots" ideas about how the church should be run.

<sup>2</sup> Anecdotal data from Anonymous (1986) supports this finding. Anonymous writes of one man who sought him out for counsel: "Like many who use missions for a cure, Curtis entered marriage hoping for a change" (Anonymous 1986, p. 139).

<sup>3</sup> "Sweet spirit" is a common euphemism for "unattractive" in Mormon circles. It is especially used to describe women who possess all of the desirable qualities in a mate, except physical beauty.

<sup>4</sup> A church manual entitled *Achieving a Celestial Marriage* sheds light on the church's position: "Under the most perfect conditions there would be no divorce permitted except where sex sin was involved. In this day divorces are permitted in accordance with civil statutes, and divorced persons are free to marry again without the stain of immorality which under a higher system would attend such a course" (*Achieving a Celestial Marriage* 1992, 85).

<sup>5</sup> Raymond states that he modeled his camping trip into the mountains of Utah on Jesus' forty-day fast in the wilderness recorded in the New Testament. Like Jesus, he went without food on his journey.

<sup>6</sup> Peter said that I "wrinkled my nose in disbelief" whenever he claimed that his sexual orientation had been changed.

## Chapter Six

### Mormonism and the “New Mormon Gay”

Not all gay Mormons accept the church’s definition of homosexuality as a disorder or unnatural state of being. Many have rejected this notion completely, claiming that their homosexuality is nothing to be ashamed of, and an integral part of their personality. For those who regard their homosexuality as an acceptable status, yet still wish to retain their membership in the LDS church, a great deal of compromising, rationalizing and harmonizing is required to make the two statuses congruent. There are considerable theological hurdles in the path of Mormons who believe their religion, but refuse to accept the church stigma placed on homosexuals. And gay church members who believe that church prohibitions against all forms of homosexual behavior do not reflect divine will must navigate significant social obstacles to keep their membership intact.<sup>1</sup> Reaching a comfortable compromise between Mormonism and homosexuality is difficult, but there are many gay Mormons who at least make the attempt. Some seem to have succeeded.

#### Rejecting the Church Definition of Homosexuality

Often, gay Mormons begin to accept their sexual preference as an inextricable part of their identity when they realize that continued struggles to change their sexual orientation are futile. Knowing that their attempts at changing or living celibate meet or exceed the measures of self-control that heterosexual Mormons must employ to effectively live their religion, these men begin to feel that perhaps God accepts them as they are—gay. This awareness, many respondents report, eased a great burden of guilt and fear. Lach writes:

When it first entered my mind that homosexuality might be a good thing basically, and that perhaps God wanted me to be as I am, I regarded it as a Satanic prompting. Paradoxically, I was filled with peace, well-being, and a sense of tremendous relief. It was as if I had been born again. As often as I would ponder those thoughts, they would bring great spiritual joy. There could only be one source of the peace I was feeling. I had felt it before, and, on my mission I had taught others to recognize it. Was I not under

obligation to follow the Spirit in the direction I was being led? (Lach 1989, pp. 35-36)

In spite of their belief that God would have them gay, a heretical position according to Mormon church leaders, many who reach this conclusion retain a firm "testimony" of the truthfulness of the LDS church. Most have no desire to leave the organization. Indeed, many will do virtually anything to keep their membership intact—except continue to deny their sexual orientation. Again, Lach explains:

My own interest in gay/lesbian spiritual liberation is more than academic. I am a Mormon, from a long line of Mormons, yet, I am also a homosexual. I have come to realize that I cannot cease being either. Thus, happiness depends upon my ability to reconcile these two facets of my nature. (Lach 1989, p. 34)

Informants for this research who choose to accept their sexuality *and* be actively LDS are an interesting and heterogeneous lot. Most are urbanites, and most are better educated than their celibate or married counterparts. Many are college students who have found that living away from home gives them the freedom to finally express themselves as gay men, but that the teachings of Mormonism still provide religious meaning that the university and its community does not afford them. A number of informants in this category were involved in campus gay groups, and this association seems to have instilled them with something that other gay Mormons do not possess: a desire to challenge and question the church about its stand on the issues affecting gays. Infused with a real, but tempered, spirit of activism, these individuals have formed organizations for gay Mormons and have dubbed themselves "the new Mormon gays". The general aim of these "new gays" is to persuade gay Mormons to leave the closet and work toward changing their church. Their goal is nothing short of acceptance for gays and the institutionalization and official sanction of at least some form of homosexual sexual expression within the church. While they are in the minority, they are vocal. Almost all of the written output from gay Mormons that comprised the documentary analysis for this study was penned by gay people pushing for their cause. Although they recognize that they are against great odds and are but a fraction of the homosexuals within the church, they see their course of action

as preferable to the alternatives:

The new Mormon lesbian and gay is indeed a rare species at present. Though not at all in danger of extinction, the numbers remain few. So far, they are very much the exception among homosexual Mormons, most of whom seem to be the willing 'heirs' of a tradition which exacts the heavy toll of individual autonomy and personal identity in exchange for a rather dubious existence of societal respectability and security.<sup>2</sup> (Cheever 1985, p. 16)

The logic of the "new Mormon gays" is simple. Most Mormons, they reason, even those with high religiosity, do not believe *everything* that the church teaches. The church's stance on homosexuality, they assert, is one of those things that they happen to take issue with. They part company with most doubting Mormons, however, when they call for action and attempt to persuade the church to change. They further distance themselves from those with other "closet" doubts by attacking one of the church's bedrock social and theological issues: the definition of appropriate sexual conduct for church members.

In terms of their acceptance by the gay community at large, their very association with a church that is seen by mainstream gays as "homophobic" is viewed as reactionary and backward. As one gay man, himself a former Mormon, put it to this researcher, "Anyone who hasn't left the [Mormon] church completely, in my opinion, is still in the closet."

This, of course, presents a dilemma. Gay Mormons who are openly gay and actively Mormon seem to be marginalized—stuck between two incompatible communities. Again, the preferred course of action is to speak out against the intolerance of both antagonistic groups—calling for the church to accept them as homosexuals and calling for "mainstream" gays to accept them as Mormons.

Many of us, as Latter-day Saints, do not agree 100% with everything that the gay movement does or says. Likewise, we do not agree 100% with everything that the church says or does in regard to homosexuality. We are in a very delicate position: when we express our love of the Gospel and our Mormon faith and heritage, we run the risk of disapproval by our lesbian and gay sisters and brothers in 'our' community; when we affirm our instinctive gay nature, we run the risk of swift excommunication from 'our' church. The easy thing to do, then, is to just remain invisible and live a



double life. But is that the honest thing to do? Does it help others? Does it help you? (Barber 1985a, p. 21)

Though the question as to whether or not they are living a double life anyway may be open, there is no doubt that the “new Mormon gays” have not remained invisible. They have quite consistently and energetically lobbied for their cause, flooding *Dialogue* and *Sunstone*, journals of Mormon art, culture and scholarship, with articles and letters to the editor calling for the acceptance of gays by Mormon leaders and lay members.

A vigorous backlash to their call to arms has not been invisible either. Orson Scott Card, a Mormon and well-published science fiction novelist, blasted gay Mormon activists in a *Sunstone* article, saying:

One thing is certain: one cannot serve two masters. And when one's life is given over to one community that demands utter allegiance, it cannot be given to another. The LDS church is one such community. The homosexual community seems to be another. And when I read the statements of those who claim to be both LDS and homosexual, trying to persuade the former to cease making their membership contingent upon abandoning the latter, I wonder if they realize that the price of such 'tolerance' would be, in the long run, the destruction of the church. (Card 1990)

According to Roof and McKinney (1987) the bulk of the members of the LDS church would agree with Card. They note that Mormons compare favorably with even the most conservative Protestant groups in their condemnation of homosexuality, reporting that only 15% of Mormons agree with the statement “Homosexuality is not always wrong.”

But, in spite of this, the “new Mormon gays” have their supporters, as well. Several articles in *Sunstone* and *Dialogue* have been written by heterosexual Mormons in support of their gay fellow church members. And certain presentations by heterosexual church members calling for increased tolerance for gays have found their way into various symposia for Mormon scholarship and culture. Schow, a heterosexual, writing in support of the right for gays in the church to have some form of sexual outlet says:

Would Jesus find homosexual expression sinful on the grounds that sexual intimacy outside of marriage is forbidden? I doubt he would look at the matter that simplistically. The God-man who said that ‘the Sabbath is made for man, not man for the Sabbath’ would probably say something similar about marriage. (Schow 1990, p.11)

Much like Schow's reasoning, gay Mormons who want acceptance from the church have similar points to make. They make arguments and appeal to logic in an attempt to convince others, as well as themselves, that a homosexual relationship can be consistent with the teachings of the LDS church. For the most part, their rationalizations are rejected by the average Mormon, but liberal church members and gay Mormons who have not yet left the closet sometimes take heed. Although the arguments used to attempt to harmonize homosexuality and Mormonism are as varied and heterogeneous as the gay Mormons themselves, they nevertheless seem to fit loosely into three broad arguments.

### **Harmonizing Mormonism and Homosexuality**

The first and most common argument used by gay Mormons pushing the church for change involves their generally held belief that homosexuality is a part of one's genetic or hormonal make up. Since homosexuality is caused at the level of individual biology, they reason, it is ineluctable. Because of this, it should not be wrong or sinful according to church doctrine because people in the church are not fore-ordained to evil.<sup>3</sup> This reasoning turns the tables on the official church that says because people are not fore-ordained to evil, homosexuality cannot be a biological phenomenon (Booher 1985; Jenkins 1978). One informant, an astute scriptorian, remarked: "The Book of Mormon says that the Spirit is given to every man to know good from evil. I've known that I was gay since I was a little boy, but never felt it was evil—someone who has never been gay said it was."

The second argument states simply that prohibitions against homosexuality do not have the force of scripture or divine revelation behind them, and they are therefore valid only as the opinions of the individuals expressing them, even if that individual is an apostle or prophet. Gay Mormons point to the unique LDS doctrine of continuing revelation as evidence that these prohibitions reflect policy decisions made by church bureaucrats, rather than the will of God.

The church teaches that the president of the church, or prophet, and his apostles receive continuing inspiration and revelation from God (O'Dea 1957). In the early days of

Mormonism, church founder Joseph Smith wrote down the revelations that he received and compiled them into a book of scripture called the *Doctrine and Covenants*. As the church grew and moved from a small movement governed by the charismatic authority of its founder to a larger one characterized by bureaucratic authority (see Troeltsch 1931 and Weber 1947), this practice changed. Although modern apostles and prophets claim to receive revelation and inspiration, these revelations are no longer canonized like the writings of Joseph Smith.<sup>4</sup> This leaves open to interpretation just exactly what statements are binding on the church, what pronouncements have the authority of scripture, and how much of what apostles and prophets say is their own opinion and how much is the word of the Lord. For example, although individual prophets and apostles have spoken out vehemently against the laws of biological evolution, there is no official church statement that constitutes a divine directive on the subject. Theoretically, LDS church members may believe in biological evolution if they so choose, and some do. Church leaders have also spoken out against inter-racial marriage from time to time, but church members are, and always have been, free to marry anyone they desire without endangering their church membership.<sup>5</sup>

Homosexual Mormons point out that, like evolution and inter-racial marriage, there is no extant *revelation* about the nature of homosexuality, nor one concerning homosexual relations either. They argue that the speeches of apostles and prophets condemning homosexuality, because they are not presented as *revelation*, are merely the opinions and personal beliefs of those individuals expressing them. Indeed, in the entire corpus of Mormon scripture, excluding the Bible, same-sex relationships are not mentioned a single time. Noting this, one gay man writes:

As [most Mormons] see it, the Lord by means of his prophets has repeatedly condemned homosexuality. But has He? Where are these prophetic denunciations so often cited by the opponents of same-sexuality? They are not found in the *Book of Mormon*, the *Doctrine and Covenants*, or the *Pearl of Great Price*—an astonishing omission given the alleged gravity of the sin. . . . Mormon prophets have not condemned homosexuality on the strength of prophetic authority. . . . Not even statements from the First Presidency which have appeared in various editions of the bishop's

handbook can make the claim of [being revelation] since they represent an arbitration of policy, not doctrine. (*Sunstone* 14(3):3)

While it is true that the church does not have a doctrine of homosexuality, bishops point out that the church does have clear-cut doctrines that spell out what types of sexual expression are appropriate and in what context. Further, the *Doctrine and Covenants* contains an interesting phrase, used commonly by the LDS faithful, that ensures the prophet near infallibility when speaking on matters of church and doctrine. Fourth president of the church Wilford Woodruff, in a canonized declaration assured the members of the church that "The Lord will never permit me or any other man who stands as President of this church to lead you astray" (*Doctrine and Covenants, Official Declaration 1*, p. 292). This declaration seems to seriously injure the argument that homosexuality should be acceptable within Mormonism because it is not prohibited by revelation. The declaration is official, it is scripture, and it is widely known and quoted in the church. Still, this declaration is sufficiently broad and vague to allow one gay Mormon to feel comfortable remaining in the church by saying, "I have come to the conclusion that the only true revelation for guiding my life is personal revelation" (Mortensen 1985, p. 31)

Gay Mormons skirt the issue of Biblical verses that condemn homosexuality by referring to theologians and scholars in Protestantism who write that, in every instance, the verses in question condemn homosexuality in the context of prostitution, rape and idolatry, but do not prohibit homosexuality, *per se*. Lach (1989), in a pamphlet for gay Mormons entitled *Homosexuality and Scripture from a Latter-day Saint Perspective*, performs a fairly complex exegesis on these verses, attempting to harmonize them with Mormon doctrine. The success of his efforts, of course, depends on the reader. Many gay Mormons, however, are satisfied with his response.

Mel Barber's article, "David Loved Jonathan: an Analysis of I Samuel 18-20" (1985b), argues that homosexuality is actually condoned by the Bible by interpreting the famous friendship of King David and Jonathan as a homosexual relationship. After citing a particular verse Barber writes:

As they secretly meet for the last time, David falls to the ground and 'they

kiss one another' not just for a few moments, but 'until David exceeded' (I Samuel 20:41). To exceed means to pass or surpass, or in this case, to pass out with emotion. Now if that's 'friendship' or fellowship or brotherly love, I am certain that there are a few of us who could use a few more friends! (Barber 1985b, p. 36)

While these attempts to harmonize the Bible with homosexuality are interesting and no doubt helpful to some, most Mormons do not feel threatened by Biblical verses that contradict their beliefs anyway. For Mormons, the Bible, while inspired, is filled with errors and is an inferior work of scripture compared to the *Book of Mormon* and *Doctrine and Covenants* (Mauss 1991). Mormon scripture states that the Bible is the word of God only "As far as it is translated correctly" (*Pearl of Great Price*, Article of Faith 8). When presented with a contradiction between Mormon belief and the Bible, Mormons, gay or otherwise, are likely to refer to this Article of Faith in their defense.

In addition to its absence in Mormon revelations and books of scripture, gay Mormons also point out that the founder of Mormonism, Joseph Smith, never mentioned homosexuality in any of his speeches or personal writings. In fact, a curious quote from Smith's diary was pointed out to this researcher by a gay Mormon who was very well versed in LDS church history. In the entry for April 16, 1843, Smith writes: "It is pleasing for friends to lie down together locked in the arms of love to sleep, and awake locked in each others embrace and renew their conversation" (Faulring 1987, p. 366). Upon reading the quote to me, the informant remarked:

Now I know that there is nothing sexual about that, but does that sound like something that a homophobic person would say? If homosexuality was such a sin, would a prophet who saw the face of God say a thing like that? Can you imagine [current church President Ezra Taft] Benson saying something like that? What has happened to this church?

These last sentiments typify the third common argument used by gay Mormons to harmonize their sexual preference with their religious beliefs. It is the claim that church leaders have fallen into apostasy. Evidence for this falling away, they assert, is the church's systematic discrimination against gays and women, something that the Lord would never condone. Several gay Mormons have blasted the church leadership for their position on

gays on these grounds, stating that they believe that the prophets and apostles are not receptive to God's will, no longer receive revelation from God, and are abusing their priesthood power:

I believe that Heavenly Father is disappointed in the leaders of the church for not bringing their misunderstanding of the sexuality of his gay children to him instead of leaning unto their own understanding.<sup>6</sup> I believe Heavenly Father is displeased with church leaders who seek to put words in his mouth by presenting their opinions as inspired truth. Only when they say 'thus saith the Lord,' is it scripture. Otherwise they speak as men. (Postelwaite 1985, p. 28)

Nevertheless, in the midst of admitted ignorance on the subject, church leaders continue to claim definitive answers to the questions about homosexuality, to rule arbitrarily on membership, and to demand blind obedience. Could such action be categorized as 'unrighteous dominion', or an attempt to exercise 'control or dominion or compulsion upon the souls (and minds) of the children of men?'<sup>7</sup> I think that there is no doubt that such actions are properly (and quite frankly charitably) so categorized.

We have learned from our own experience and long church service that what the church tells us about homosexuality is not true. Homosexuality is not learned and acquired; it is not something chosen. Prayer, church service, fasting, counseling, marriage, confession, shock therapy, excommunication incarceration and suicide do not solve or change the homosexual. Being raised a Mormon always exacerbates the psychological dilemma, because of the untruths that the church teaches. (Miller 1985, p.45)

Some gay activists within the church see some hope for their condition. Some say that these untruths can be set right if gay Mormons play their cards right. They point out that the church is constantly changing, and is usually responsive to external pressures. Sometimes this is true. Threats of martial law seem to have stopped the church from practicing polygyny, external pressure from civil rights groups seems to have been instrumental in winning the right of people of African descent to hold the priesthood in 1978, and the women's movement seems to be pushing the church toward greater recognition of women (see Bush and Mauss 1984, Hanks 1992, Van Wagoner 1986). Thus, gay Mormon activists may have a point. Responsible activism, they argue, is the only way to bring leaders who are, as one states, "Bloated with their own self-importance" in line with what they believe God would truly have: "Mercy and justice for all Saints. No one

using church office for personal gain.”

“We have to drag them [church authorities] kicking and screaming into the 1990s,” remarks one. This kind of language, of course, is sedition, and attacking church authority is grounds for excommunication. In spite of this, one letter writer to *Sunstone* writes:

As for the appeal to contemporary authority, it is, of course, the same sort of authority which once pronounced plural marriage the path to exaltation, but then later the sure road to apostasy; once explained black people as genetically separate because spiritually inferior, then later perhaps as equal but definitely separate, and finally mercifully as neither. It is an authority that until recently felt altogether comfortable with the notion that men are directly answerable to God while women, on the other hand, are directly answerable to men. Now, it seems, authority is no longer so comfortable. Oh, how times and the ‘timeless’ change. And I for one am happy to see these awkward amendments to the ‘forever fixed, unchanging and eternal’ pretensions in our rhetoric. (*Sunstone* 14(4):6)

While this researcher believes that most of the gains that benefit gays in today’s church are to be credited to church efforts to keep families intact in the hereafter (see chapter four), gay people see subtle policy changes in the church as signs that they are making headway.

Arguments against the church’s stand on homosexuality and what one informant calls “respectful militarism” are the chief tools used to combat the ideological and theological contradictions that face gay Mormons. In addition to these, those that would reject the church’s definition of homosexuality must also negotiate a perilous social situation within the church as well. Dissension and protest are seen as sure signs of apostasy within the LDS church, and those who speak out often do so at the expense of their membership. Gay members who are vociferous and are found to have a lover are most assuredly excommunicated, unless they vigorously recant.

Maintaining their church membership is of considerable concern to many gays, and those that choose a gay lifestyle spend a great deal of time ducking the church and hiding their active homosexuality from church leaders. Many, because of the softening attitudes toward gay people in the society at large, are completely out of the closet, except to ward leaders and church contacts—the complete reverse of those who adhere to a celibate lifestyle.

While they often engage in sex, they profess that they prefer monogamous relationships, because “it is still a sin to be a slut.” Some allow their church activity to slip, or they travel from ward to ward with friends to avoid having to face a bishop’s interview or take a church job.

We’re the queer circuit riders. I try to go every week, but its a different place every week. My lover and I certainly can’t live apart, but we know that if we’re found out we’ll have to go to a church court. He says he won’t lie to the bishop, so we’re the queer circuit riders. I don’t want to get X’ed.<sup>8</sup> I don’t want to lose the priesthood.

In spite of their open lifestyle and belief that the church is wrong in its condemnation of gays, many who live an active gay lifestyle still shiver at the thought of excommunication. Many still believe that the true priesthood is to be found only within the church, and many still accept the *Book of Mormon* and the story of Joseph Smith. Roger, who has lived with a lover for three years, typifies the feelings of gay Mormons who would most certainly face church court if they are discovered:

**Researcher:** So are you really a member if the only thing stopping you from being X’ed is the fact that your bishop doesn’t know you have a lover?

**Informant:** I don’t think the bishop would be acting in the name of God if he X’ed me. No one has the authority to take my membership away but God.

**Researcher:** So why do you care if he knows you have a partner?

**Informant:** I don’t know, I guess I shouldn’t. I just figure that what he don’t know won’t hurt him, and it won’t hurt me either. I’d feel—I don’t know—naked if I got X’ed.

Thus, the fact that these gay Mormons engage in sexual activity does not necessarily diminish the strength of their personal beliefs. Many who have not attended church in years remain devout believers. One informant, from Washington D.C., mentioned that he had gone deeply into debt so that he could attend the University of Utah, where he hoped he could find a gay Mormon partner.

It is interesting to note that a number of informants, while they have rejected the church’s standards for the sexual behavior of members, have internalized the Mormon norm of endogamy. The newsletters of Affirmation, the largest, best organized support



group for Mormon gays regularly features personal ads where Mormon gays can contact one another and develop relationships. Some ads even request that potential callers be returned missionaries. Match-making is a major latent function of Affirmation. Writes one member, "I don't come to Affirmation so much for the support, although I do get a lot of it. Mostly I like the people and the friends I've made. I really want to meet an LDS man and make a life with him" (*Affinity* 13(12):6).

The tendency toward endogamy among these men is sometimes very strong. Some have even ended relationships that they felt were very rewarding and promising because their lover was of a different faith. One man writes, "While in Idaho I met a young man in the army and we became seriously involved. As much as I liked him, we eventually broke up because he wouldn't convert to Mormonism" (*Affinity* 13(7):3).

### Facing Church Court

All of this activity, of course, is of great concern to the LDS church. Although the church does not hunt down sexually active gay members to excommunicate them, when such a person comes to the attention of the bishop, and there is sufficient cause to believe that the report is true, the church will summon the member to a church court. As was mentioned earlier, those that show remorse for their actions, agree to repent, either move their lover out or move themselves out and submit to the inevitable battery of interviews that are sure to follow, are usually spared the process of excommunication. For those that show no remorse or who refuse to end their relationships, their removal from the church is a foregone conclusion. In a pamphlet for those facing excommunication, Affirmation leaders acknowledge:

When you are called into church court for homosexuality, you will be excommunicated. There are NO gray areas. Either you are a homosexual or you are not. Being that black and white, the trial is short and you are excommunicated. If you are a homosexual and admit it, when you are called to a court you will be excommunicated; unless you decide to repent on the church's terms. You may avoid excommunication for a while, if you decide to lie to the court. (Axelson and Mortensen 1983, p. 11 emphasis in original)

Some do lie to the court, but in such cases the church is likely to follow up and discover that the gay member has given false information.

For many homosexual Mormons, facing a church court is extremely stressful. The thought of being cut off from the church, even for one whose membership has been marginalized by a homosexual relationship, is often difficult to bear. But some, like those who do not sustain the church president because of his stand on homosexuality, simply state that no one on earth has the right to excommunicate them from God's church. They vigorously deny the church court's authority, calling the action "unrighteous dominion" or an abuse of priesthood power. Some reason that membership in a church that has fallen away is not necessary for salvation and that excommunication does not explicitly involve removal one's priesthood or revoking one's temple blessings. Axelson and Mortensen (1983), both excommunicated Mormons, write:

Remember: your soul is NOT on trial; only your membership in the temporal church. They cannot take away your salvation, your testimony, your faith, your life or your God. They can only take what you let them. They will tell you that they are taking everything. There are many who have gone through this process before. They survive. They prosper. They succeed. (Axelson and Mortensen 1983, p. 3 emphasis in original)

They further reason:

In reality, [excommunication] only means that your membership on Church records has been lifted and the exercise of priesthood authority no longer has the sanction of the church. The church cannot remove one's priesthood or the ordinances performed by it. It is interesting to note that when you come back into the church after excommunication . . . your priesthood and temple ordinances are 'restored' by the laying on of hands. What this really means is that they never took them away in the first place. They are merely restoring the recognition and sanction of the church. (Axelson and Mortensen 1983, p. 12)

Many excommunicated homosexual Mormons continue their lives after church court as if nothing ever happened. They attend church meetings in other wards when they desire, they read the *Book of Mormon*, some even attend institute classes. Many search dutifully for another Mormon man. While most recall that they were deeply troubled and fearful about being called to church court, they seem to report that the experience was not

as bad as they had expected. "I left feeling pretty much the same," said one, "I still feel the Spirit. It wasn't the end of the world." All of the excommunicated members in this sample indicated to the researcher that they still believed strongly in Mormon doctrine and the power of the priesthood, and expressed a firm desire to rejoin the church if and when it decides to allow homosexual marriage.

Some gay Mormons, far from fearing excommunication, actually volunteer to be removed from church membership rolls. Michael explains that:

It is my form of protest. The scripture states that if you use your priesthood authority in a way that God would not approve of, then your priesthood power is null and void. I volunteered for church court because I wanted to protest. It was my form of protest telling the church that I am gay and there is nothing wrong with me. I am worthy of the temple and my partner and I should be allowed inside to be together forever. I have been excommunicated by the church, but not by God because those men did not have the authority to excommunicate me.

Those who voluntarily withdraw from the church can be similarly interested in maintaining ties to the Mormon church through social interaction with other Mormon gays, and by church attendance or participation in other church functions. Most, like those who were removed from the church against their will say that they "Look forward to the day I can be accepted as God made me. When that happens I will be the first in line to be rebaptized. I know that the gospel is true, when the church is true again I'll be back."

### **The Conservative Reformers**

Not all gay Mormons who would like to see the church change its position are so critical. Many are more soft-spoken in their rhetoric and tame in their behavior, but are just as adamant in their aim. There are those who reject the church's definition of homosexuality, but nevertheless feel that the best course of action to reform the church is to work *within* the church to change it. Firmly committed to the idea that homosexual relationships should be countenanced by God and the church, they feel that the best way to bring about the acceptance of such relationships is to remain celibate—speaking, but not

acting, against the church. Such members are “out of the closet” even in church circles, but their lives are characterized by personal worthiness and a commitment to church service. They take every opportunity, however, to admit that they are gay, that God made them that way, and that they look forward to the time when the church will accept them as they are. One man writes:

What could they do to me—stone me? For the first time in my life I realized that being gay and being Mormon didn’t have to be mutually exclusive. The ‘contract’ between me and the church was simple, I reasoned: I was expected to refrain from sex, but not from admitting my homosexuality (*Affinity* 13(4):1)

“Lead by example” seems to be the motto for those in this camp. Their letters to the editor and comments at meetings express their belief that by living the gospel to the letter, but insisting that homosexual expression should not be forbidden by the church, they will be able to show LDS leaders that they are worthy members and should be allowed to enter the temple. “I feel working within the church will be more effective,” one explains, “that’s how blacks got the priesthood—not from confrontation” (*Affinity* 13(12):6) Another, writing in *Affirmation’s* monthly newsletter asserts:

We can show people [that] even though we are gay, we can still have high standards and beliefs. Gay people can find the right mate and live together for eternity too! I am proud to be a member of the true church and a member of *Affirmation*, too! Let’s show the church that we can be some of their best members. (*Affinity* 13(12):6)

Often, those who choose this route to reconciling their homosexuality with Mormonism are appalled and dismayed at the “promiscuity” of their more liberal counterparts. One informant confided to the researcher, perhaps naively, that “If all gays would play by the rules and stay morally clean, we might be accepted in the church by now.” These sentiments are expressed more cogently by Postelwaite, who writes:

The Gospel is still binding on us. We are still responsible for the light we have been given. The gospel is still the way to bring happiness into our lives and the only way to make it back to our Heavenly Father. Let us not use our sexuality as a cop-out to what we know is right. Because we love someone of the same sex is no reason to stop praying to our Heavenly

Father, who loves us and wants to help us, or to ignore the blessings of the gospel in our lives and the happiness only it can bring. (Postelwaite 1985, p. 28)

That “bind,” of course, is a check on sexual expression in a gay relationship. Thus, while waiting for a change in church doctrine and policy, these members are content to live celibate or at least severely restrict their sexual activity, while at the same time asserting that homosexuality can be consistent with LDS teachings. Most seem to have unrealistic expectations about how much influence they can actually bring to bear on the church. And almost all are shocked and bewildered when they discover that they, in spite of their “moral cleanliness” have been summoned for a church court or disciplinary meeting with the bishop.

Most homosexual saints do not realize that in addition to their sexual behavior, the church is interested in their associations and in the beliefs that they publicly espouse, as well. Just as feminists can face church disciplinary action for being actively pro-choice or supporting feminist causes that the church deems radical or dangerous, openly associating with other homosexuals and expressing a belief that contradicts church doctrine is grounds for church discipline. Axelson and Mortensen point out:

Directives from the church indicate that to be excommunicated one must be guilty of homosexual acts; just being a homosexual or having homosexual thoughts or feelings is not sufficient. But most often church authorities use ‘unChristian-like conduct’ as the grounds for excommunicating homosexuals and consequently need not prove any act. Of course, from the list, other possibilities could be used but ‘unchristian-like conduct’ is the most common and the least difficult to prove. (Axelson and Mortensen 1983, p. 7)

This researcher found that “apostasy” was the most commonly used excuse to disfellowship or sometimes even excommunicate a gay Latter-day Saint who had had no serious sexual contacts with other men. Again, when summoned by the church, individuals were given a chance to recant and agree to repent on the church’s terms. Those who refused or did not show remorse were usually officially censured.

Among those whose actions did not merit a church court, many were still asked to

relinquish their temple recommend.<sup>9</sup> During temple recommend interviews, potential temple goers are asked if they knowingly associate or sympathize with any apostate group or apostate cause. An answer in the affirmative is sufficient to warrant the recommend's suspension. Thus, it is difficult for any gay Mormon who openly rejects the LDS church's definition of homosexuality to function as a church member in full faith and fellowship.

### **Affirmation**

More often than not, when the temple recommend of a gay Mormon is revoked for association with apostates, the apostate group in question is Affirmation. Affirmation seems to be the landing spot for most Mormon gays who want to push the church to change its stand on homosexuality. In its early years, gay Mormons report that Affirmation was a great source of support and information, helping many sort out the contradictions and pitfalls associated with being gay and LDS. While some still give Affirmation high marks, most members will concede that the group is wracked with internal dissension. Leadership changes are frequent, and disputes over the mission and purpose of Affirmation are bitter and sometimes acrimonious. The problems arise from the fact that Affirmation membership is split almost evenly into two rival camps.

Camp one contains those Mormon gays who are heavily involved in the gay rights movement, are active in regional and national gay issues, and who subscribe to the radical and often boisterous methods of activism employed by certain high-profile, radical gay groups. Many in this group have voluntarily chosen excommunication, or have been cut off from the church after their sexual behavior was uncovered by ward leaders. At first, their desire to continue to affiliate with the church puzzled me, as they are often angry and caustic when speaking of the church and its general authorities. But after attending several meetings, I concluded that one of the main reasons they continue to move in Mormon circles is the unique cultural experience that being raised Mormon provides. As was pointed out earlier, Mormonism is a complete way of life, and people who have shared in this way of life, whether or not they are still active participants in it, have many shared

meanings, a mutual familiarity with the language and world view of Mormonism, and a similar biography.

Most of these gay Mormons say that they still believe in the church “deep down inside,” but that they can have nothing to do with the organization until it changes its homophobic ways. For them, Affirmation meetings are mostly a chance to meet with others who have been down the same difficult path of being gay and Mormon. It is a chance for them to swap “war stories” (many of which have found their way into this thesis.) Some even use the meetings as a place to pick up sexual contacts. One man states, “It’s just that because they are Mormons or ex-Mormons we have more in common. I usually have a nice evening with men I meet here because we have a lot to discuss.”

Camp two consists of those who want to move for reform from within the church, and who look to Affirmation more for support in harmonizing homosexuality and Mormonism than in providing social contacts. Members of this faction are often shocked at the liberal attitude toward sexuality of other Affirmation members. One pointed out that he was “stunned when [Affirmation leaders] handed out condoms at a retreat, but didn’t open the meeting with prayer.” They are similarly disapproving of the tactics that members of the more vocal faction use to attract the attention of the church. One writes:

I would not like to see Affirmation members chained to the temple gates in protest. I think political activity should be handled in a socially acceptable manner. We should make ourselves known in the church—our numbers and strength—but I don’t want to be a part of a renegade Mormon group. I think there is a midpoint where Affirmation can be positive, supportive, educational and a benefit to gay LDS members and, in a small way, good for the church. (*Affinity* 13(12):6)

Like those in Thumma’s study who left the predominantly gay and liberal Metropolitan Community Church to join a conservative gay evangelical group, conservative members of Affirmation feel that the group’s more outspoken members are “putting gay before God” (Thumma 1991, p.338). “They don’t act like Latter-day Saints,” one remarked, “they have no testimony.”

A brief glance at Affirmation’s membership statistics shows just how bipolar the two

camps are, and how evenly divided the membership is between them. In a non-systematic membership survey conducted by the leaders of Affirmation, 46% of those polled report that their membership is intact, while 48% are excommunicated (voluntarily or otherwise) or disfellowshipped—a near even split. Similar polarization is present with regard to church attendance. Forty-four percent are regular or occasional church goers, while 54% rarely or never attend church. With regard to sexual activity (where non-response was high<sup>10</sup>), 24% are either celibate, or have sexual relations no more than yearly, while a full 66% report sexual relations weekly or daily. Thus, the membership is deeply divided (*Affinity* 13(12):2-3).

This division came to a choleric head recently at the annual Affirmation retreat. The controversy centered, among other things, on the selection of a non-LDS keynote speaker. One man, upset by the choice and its implication, wrote a letter to Affirmation's newsletter, *Affinity*, expressing his displeasure:

How can the [keynote speaker], a non LDS individual enlighten us [on the plight of gay Mormons]? I feel as though the general authorities had invited Oral Roberts or Billy Graham to offer the opening address at General Conference. . . . As a returned missionary, I relate to the similar struggles experienced by other RMs—the long hours of fasting and prayer, soul searching, and family confrontations—but a non-Mormon just has no idea what we've gone through. My needs (and I'm sure my view is echoed by many others) would be much better met by hearing the personal stories of fellow RMs and how they've been able to integrate their sexuality with Mormonism. (*Affinity* 13(11):2)

Tensions were high at the retreat, and many with a more conservative bent were angry at the way the conference was handled. "It was totally non-denominational," said one. "You would hardly have known that we were Mormon gays. It was like any other gay activity." Another, quoted in *Affinity* remarked, "I don't feel my needs are being met as an active LDS person" (*Affinity* 14(6):2 emphasis in original).

Sensing that this dissension could spell the end of Affirmation, the group's leadership again changed hands in 1993. In a front-page address to the members of Affirmation, executive director Marty Beaudet conceded, "The light at the end of



Affirmation's tunnel has been dim recently, if not completely turned off." He added, however, with cautious optimism: "I would hope that the beginning of our term on the executive committee will have a brightening effect on it" (*Affinity* 15(2):1). Nevertheless, Beaudet seems to be aware that repairing the rift between the two polarized camps is impossible, and instead seems to be opting for a "strength in diversity" theme saying, "If Affirmation has seemed to stagnate and struggle to grow in the past, it is not due to our differences, but our inability to understand and accept those differences" (*Affinity* 15(2):1).

One of the leadership's biggest woes seems to be the inability of Affirmation to retain members. A full 40% of Affirmation's membership choose not to renew every year. The reason for this, in spite what each successive new leadership team might think, is not that the organization is necessarily being mishandled or that the polarization of members is the harbinger of inevitable extinction. It may be, rather, that Affirmation as an organization is most effective as a halfway-house for gay Mormons who are deciding whether to place their faith in the church's definition and prescription for homosexuality and homosexual behavior, or to part with the church once and for all to assume the identity of a mainstream homosexual.

Those who are leaning toward an open, unencumbered gay lifestyle use Affirmation to wean themselves from the cultural and spiritual ties that continue to bind them to Mormonism. Once mere vestiges of these ties remain, they leave the church—though some still continue to have certain aspects and characteristics of a Mormon upbringing firmly embedded in their personal psychology:

It [my decision to leave the church] still haunts me. My lover asked me the other day about something from the temple ceremony and I just couldn't [divulge the information]. I was afraid to say it.<sup>11</sup> It still sort of follows me around. I still can't decide what to do with all those experiences I had on my mission. It has made me very afraid of death.

In contrast, those who prefer the security of the church over the expression of their sexuality see for themselves that managing a homosexual lifestyle is probably not possible within the context of orthodox Mormonism, and turn their back on the mainstream gay

experience and search for happiness within the confines of the church. Either way, both groups are, for the most part, destined to leave Affirmation. Either way, all gay Mormons must, at some point, choose whether they will follow the prophets or their sexual preference. As one writer succinctly observes:

There is much that is good and beautiful in LDS theology. Some people who recognize their homosexuality are willing to walk the mental tightrope to stay in the church while others can't. Either way, the decision is extremely painful—like cutting out a part of yourself. (*Dialogue* 20(1):9)

### Notes to Chapter VI

<sup>1</sup> These obstacles and hurdles are outlined in detail in chapters two and three of this thesis.

<sup>2</sup> The use of the word "societal" here probably refers to Utah communities where the lines between church standards and community standards are blurry.

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of the Mormon doctrine of fore-ordination and its implications for gay members, see Chapter three.

<sup>4</sup> With rare exception. The 1978 church decision to allow people of African descent to hold the priesthood was canonized and placed as an appendix to the Doctrine and Covenants. It was not, however, divided into verses or presented in "King James" English as were the revelations of Joseph Smith.

<sup>5</sup> The reader is directed to Crapo (1987) for a complete discussion of the nature of official doctrine and its relationship to Mormon folk belief.

<sup>6</sup> A reference to Proverbs 3:5

<sup>7</sup> This is a reference to Doctrine and Covenants 121:39, a famous Mormon scripture which states, "We have learned by sad experience that it is the nature and disposition of almost all men, as soon as they get a little authority, as they suppose, they will immediately begin to exercise unrighteous dominion."

<sup>8</sup> "X'ed" is Mormon slang for excommunicated.

<sup>9</sup> Entrance into the temple is strictly controlled. Only those screened by their bishops may enter. When one has been found worthy to enter the temple, a "temple recommend" is issued. The bishop or stake president, however, reserves the right to revoke this recommend if an individual is found unworthy in the course of subsequent interviews.

<sup>10</sup> I talked to several Affirmation members who had refused to answer questions about their sexual behavior on the membership survey. For the most part, they were celibate or only rarely had sex. It is reasonable to assume that those who regard sexual relations as inappropriate would be more likely to decline to respond to questions about their sexual conduct.

<sup>11</sup> Members attending the LDS temple swear an oath never to reveal the particulars of the ceremony to others. Doing so constitutes grievous sin.

## Epilogue

This thesis has focused on how gay individuals within the Mormon church must choose between competing definitions, or labels, of homosexuality and conflicting prescriptions for the appropriate behavior of homosexuals that are attached to these labels. The modern, high profile push for gay rights in America presents one label and one set of behavioral guidelines, inviting gays to take pride in their sexual preference, to disavow traditional attitudes which regard homosexuality as sick, perverted and sinful, and live openly and proudly as gay individuals. The pressures exerted on gay people, including gay Mormons, in this country from the message of this movement is very powerful, as anyone with a television set or radio can attest.

The LDS church, in contrast, a powerful force in the lives of most active church members, counsels gay members that homosexuality is inferior to heterosexuality. It presents for gay Mormons an opportunity to achieve eternal salvation by either changing, through faith and devotion, from a homosexual to a heterosexual, or by living a celibate life with a promise of an eternal reward for this abstinence in the next life.

The rewards of the gay rights movement involve the here and now, the rewards offered by Mormonism involve the hereafter. Neither has much to give to the other realm. For gay *Mormons*, life without the teachings of the church is a life without the security of family and loved ones in heaven, and a knowledge that one must face the world without the power to act in God's name. For Mormon gays, life without the hope of a partner or appropriate sexual expression is often the prescription for a lonely and unfulfilled life. Each domain is diametrically opposed to the other, and each is, in its own way, an inextricable part of the life and world view of the homosexual Mormon.

In the preceding chapters we have seen how some choose to leave the church in favor of an open, expressive homosexual lifestyle—the here and now. We have seen how some choose to abandon or repress their homosexuality in favor of the security of knowing that an eternal reward awaits beyond the grave. And, finally, we have also seen how some, unable to completely let go of either the temporal or the eternal, have tried to somehow

manage and balance the two together.

There is, however, one group that remains. Unable to reconcile homosexuality with Mormonism, and unable to compromise or give up either, an unknown, but significant number of Mormon homosexuals choose to take their own life. Durkheim (1966) demonstrates that individuals who are no longer able to find meaning in the social order and who are unable to internalize societal norms in a meaningful way are beset by what he calls a state of “anomie”—feelings of worthlessness and normlessness. Unable to find their place in the larger society, the anomic may turn to suicide.

As chapter four points out, suicidal thoughts are common among Mormon gays. These thoughts seem to reflect the marginal position—the anomie—of those inescapably tied to two incompatible communities. One LDS homosexual says:

**Informant:** I think about suicide because I can't see where I would fit in. I mean you can't be a Mormon and be gay, and you can't be gay and be a Mormon. I mean that's all I know.

**Researcher:** How often do you think about suicide?

**Informant:** Do you see this? [Lifts up bed skirt, reaches down, shuffles around in a box and reveals a pistol.]

**Researcher:** Whoa!

**Informant:** I think one day I'll probably use it.

**Researcher:** I think that maybe you should see somebody . . .

**Informant:** [cutting off researcher] What are they going to tell me? Huh? Either don't be gay or don't be Mormon.

Sometimes, being faced with excommunication and losing the meaning and security provided by the church is the deciding factor that prompts a gay Mormon to commit suicide. An Affirmation publication reports, “We have no statistics to back this up, but we are certain that many people commit suicide rather than face the disgrace of excommunication” (Affirmation 1980). One informant recalls his experience from 1981:

When [my lover] got the letter [summoning] him to church court he cried for days. He said he could not live without the church. I was concerned about him, but I didn't think he was serious. He said we would have to break up. I thought he was depressed but that he would get over it. . . . When I came home from work [several nights later] he had [asphyxiated himself in the car]. His note said that he didn't know what to do. That to die by suicide was better than to die without the church or me.

And a letter writer to *Dialogue* adds:

My friend Steve was . . . a gay Mormon. Entrapped by BYU security, he 'voluntarily' underwent aversion therapy at BYU and was later pressed into marriage by a zealous stake president who claimed that prayer, laying on of hands, and 'commitment' had cured him. It hadn't and a few years later Steve was sexually active with other men, estranged from his wife and children, and overwhelmed by guilt—the product of a good Mormon upbringing that had taught him to hate himself. Despairing, Steve turned to the church for help and was eventually excommunicated by a 'court of love.' Two weeks later he took his own life. (Dialogue 21(1):5)

Others may kill themselves because of the guilt and shame they feel over their emerging sexual preference. While chapter one of this thesis mentioned that homosexuality *per se* is not regarded as a mental disorder by the APA, the DSM-III-R does outline a rare but well documented disorder called ego-dystonic homosexuality. The ego dystonic homosexual is one who is unable to accept his (or, presumably her) homosexuality. Such individuals are said to filled with self-loathing and guilt. The disorder can be exacerbated by social conditions that disallow a normal homosexual identity assumption—social conditions that are described as being rather similar to those reported by many respondents to this study (Coleman, Butcher and Carson 1984). The disorder is closely linked to suicidal behavior. While it is beyond the scope of this study to make psychiatric diagnoses, the words of one gay Mormon are insightful: "In almost every case," he writes,

The church overwhelms the young man with guilt. In some cases the guilt produces panic, desperate unpredictability, and even suicide. I have been rather close to several such individuals and know of other young returned missionaries who were unable to accept their sexuality and took their own lives. (Schow 1991, p. 261)

The number of Mormon gays who choose suicide can never be known. But it is not surprising, given the theological and social stumbling blocks that are placed in their way regardless of which way they turn, that some do. The very fact that suicide is a viable option for those involved in the delicate balancing act between Mormonism and sexual preference lends credence to the idea, presented in chapter 1, that the meanings and labels attached to statuses by powerful social institutions are of great importance for those inhabiting those statuses. In some cases, as we have seen, meaning is more important than life itself.

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