A Hetero Haven in a Heartless World:

Gay Pain and Church Politics[1]

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To many politically-minded observers, American political culture seems to be a site for apathy and the reproduction of personal comfort. At the same time, controversies over such issues as immigration and bilingualism, abortion and homosexuality suggest that even if America is not divided into two firmly entrenched and culturally warring camps, there are some issues that people care enough about to fight over (Williams, 1997). In fact, Americans sometimes fight bitterly within their families, communities, schools and places of worship, while still seeking to define those zones as free from what they consider 'politics'. I look here at how church debates over homosexuality bring to light the competing interests and structural hierarchies that inhere in the zones—such as church—which members most wish to see as politically innocent. In fact, I show that their very desire for comfort and respite from politics is what leads members to unintentionally reproduce the hierarchies of power and privilege they wish to escape and transcend.

Throughout the United States in recent years, communities, legislatures, and religious groups have seemed to polarize around questions related to homosexuality, and the fury of these debates might lead one to wonder what it is about homosexuality that sparks such explosions. Seeing mainline Protestant churches in the US as both particular in their relation to the sacred, and as, in some ways, examples of American communities with distinctively American views on politics, I decided to approach this question by hearing from people who do not identify as

activists and who wrestle with the issues surrounding homosexuality. I found those people in two United Methodist congregations.

The United Methodist Church (UMC), whose more than nine-million members make it the second largest Protestant denomination in the US, resembles many other major Protestant denominations split over issues related to homosexuality. Its official policy states that 'homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching,' but there has been a great deal of news-making struggle over that policy in the church. It comes up for debate every four years at the denomination's 'General Conference,' where clergy and lay representatives modify the official church rules and principles.[2] Furthermore, like in many religious groups in America, the UMC hosts many more local level struggles, like those in and around the congregations I looked at. These struggles put people in a position to articulate their beliefs not just about sexuality, but about how to know God's intentions for people and how to live the best life possible.

Drawing from what people say in these situations, I make the case that, while homosexuality touches on salient issues around marriage, sex, identity, faith, Scripture and God, one of the main reasons these debates are so explosive is that they highlight the politics—the hierarchies of power and privilege—that inhere in those areas where people wish to be most innocent of politics—church and family, emotions and marriage. This paper examines how members need for church to be a place that is free from the politics of everyday life, where they can feel that they are fundamentally innocent. It shows how the political nature of sexuality threatens the church as a zone of innocence.[3] Then, the bulk of the paper focuses on how church members working within the frame of Christian love use a language of 'pain' to attempt to depoliticize homosexuality to make it seem to belong in church. Finally, it examines the unintended and, for some, counterproductive consequences of this strategy.

I wanted, at the outset of the larger project from which this paper comes, to hear from people who varied in their attitudes about both homosexuality and political activism. I thus settled on one predominantly liberal and one more conservative evangelical congregation, where I attended services, adult Sunday School classes, Bible studies, meetings, luncheons, retreats, and spent time informally with members, as well as conducting a total of roughly sixty interviews.

I spent fourteen months in the first congregation, the relatively liberal City UMC.[4] City Church is a large downtown congregation that is a little over half white, with roughly twenty percent of members being black and twenty percent Asian, and prides itself in its diversity. This congregation was considering joining the national Reconciling Congregations Program, the RCP, whose stated goals are to affirm and welcome gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals into the life of the church, and to correct the church's traditional exclusion of homosexuals and ban on same-sex-oriented sexualities, which its members call 'homophobic' and see as intolerant and incompatible with Christian love.

I then spent seven months in the evangelical Missionary UMC, located in a small city roughly seventy miles from City Church. Missionary was largely white, being in a Midwestern city of about eighty-five thousand people, but its members and leadership tried to be open to people of all races and ethnicities, and they collaborated with a local African-American congregation on projects and worship exchanges. Some of its members and staff were involved in a Church political movement loosely allied with the Transforming Congregations movement. This latter movement agrees with the RCP that the church should not shut homosexuals out. However, unlike the RCP, the Transforming Congregations movement (and its larger cousin, the Confessing Movement) maintains that the church's duty is to help homosexuals to leave behind the sin of homosexuality and find healing, to transform through Jesus Christ (becoming what is

often known as 'ex-gay'). Supporters of the Transforming Movement, including most of the Missionary congregation, respond to homosexuality by striving to 'hate the sin, but love the sinner.'

Similarities among members of the two congregations are striking. All believe in a loving God and Christians' duty to show love and compassion. All define sin, generally, as separation from God—a state of being that is intrinsic to being imperfect and human, but which people must constantly strive to overcome with God's guidance. Young and old, new Christians and people who have been Christian their whole lives, members of either congregation in either city might believe homosexuality to be sinful or might not. What determines whether members believe homosexuality to be sinful is a question beyond the scope of this paper, but what is clear is that some members feel very strongly on the question, one way or another, and that this question has demanded a great deal of church members' attention in the denomination as a whole, as well as in these congregations, in recent years.[5]

Of course, church members constantly disagree with each other on all kinds of things. Usually, they simply act as if they agree so that the church can do its work in the world instead of bickering. But the controversy over homosexuality goes deeper than most conflicts. To understand the explosiveness of these debates, we must understand how they threaten church members' view of church as a haven from politics.

Despite their apparent differences, members of these congregations were constrained by a broader discursive structure which opposed the transcendent ideals of church, community, and comfort, from the worldly human conditions of pain and politics. The material and bodily grounding of politics, as well as its association with self-centered utilitarianism, make politics seem unspiritual and incompatible with many people's ideals of what church is about. Similarly,

church marriage casts one particular way of organizing sex—itself—as 'spiritual' rather than bodily, while casting non-marital sexualities, including homosexuality, in the class of the non-spiritual, the bodily, and that which does not belong in church. These ideals have been confronted and complicated by a gay identity-politics movement that frames the church's traditional stance on homosexuality as exclusive and unchristian, thereby attaching homosexuality explicitly to political challenge and controversy. While these trends link homosexuality to the unchurchly realm of politics, both pro-gay members and some of those who believe homosexuality to be sinful have found a language to help to frame lesbians and gay men as belonging in church: the language of gay pain and healing.[6]

These members, like much of American culture, see pain as a result of the strategizing and cynicism of politics; a result which the church should ideally combat with Christian love, to provide 'healing.' Seeing gay men and lesbians as pained allows many church members to see them not as perpetrators but as victims of 'politics,' and thus to belong in the church. However, in a context where many people believe that one-man-one-woman marriage was ordained by God as the timeless and quintessential human relationship, framing lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered people as pained may, in the end, amount to denying them full membership in a church community, or in the American citizenry. In the pages that follow, I look at how members used languages of pain to justify welcoming gay people into the church, and how the opposition between church and politics puts gay members into an untenable position.

Homosexuality in Church Politics

To understand why homosexuality has sparked such explosive debates within churches in recent years, it is important to understand that church members build and maintain church as a zone of innocence, a zone where people can act, think, and feel as if they are free from the questions of power and privilege that dog them in everyday life. In my observation, the ritual

process of church services themselves help to create in people a sense of what Victor Turner calls *communitas*. Turner opposes communitas to the formal bonds and distinctions between people, defining the bonds of communitas as 'undifferentiated, equalitarian, direct, nonrational (though not *ir*rational)....' (Turner, 1974: 46-7). We might see these anti-communitarian and formal distinctions between people as the hierarchies and grievances of everyday American life—the gross and petty injustices, the alienating and insecure work life, the family ideologies that constantly punish people for failing to mirror a virtually impossible ideal.

In a world that constantly positions its members in hierarchies and which defines both power and the lack of power as personal failings, people seek respite in those places where they can feel that they can transcend those worldly distinctions. To feel part of a larger whole, to feel the radically egalitarian bonds of unmarked humanity, members must act *as if* church really is a space where everyone is radically equal; they must suppress the hierarchies that pervade the church.[7] They must overlook the internal conflicts. Often, for many people, this suppression is very easy to accomplish, at least temporarily.

In fact, even though I am not a believer, there were a number of times at both congregations where, because of the circumstances of how a ritual was set up and how closely I identified with others there at the time, when I felt this sense of profound connection to the others assembled and all of humanity, in a very Durkheimian way. There were times when I was moved to tears by this feeling of connection and transcendence. For many church members, that's what church is about; that feeling indicates God's presence.[8] That feeling can only come about, however, when members manage to see the church as free from the secular world's hierarchies of power and privilege.

For many members of these congregations, church is at its worst when it gets crossed with politics. This opposition of church and politics may seem surprising, since there is a long tradition of Protestant church involvement in politics in America, and this tradition certainly lives on today, in movements from both conservative evangelical and social justice ends of the Protestant religious spectrum. Both of the congregations that I look at had contingents who were highly involved in both governmental and the so-called 'culture wars' types of politics; in fact, that was why I found them for this study.

Regardless of this level of political involvement, members of both congregations, *even political activists,* expressed an overwhelming disdain for what they called 'politics.' People not active in church debates called politics 'humanity killers' and 'bad thinking,' while activists attempted to delegitimate their opponents by calling them 'politically motivated,' to say they were either beholden to secular trends or idolizing their own worldly prejudices. I saw this among members regardless of their political leanings; even those who felt called by duty to engage in politics saw politics itself as their opponents' sole motivation, while they believed themselves to be motivated by duty to create a more Godly world.

For instance, Pete Vogel participated in church politics a great deal, helping to organize activities of the conservative Confessing Movement for Missionary UMC's region. Even so (or because of that), he explicitly criticized the debates between the Reconciling and Transforming/Confessing movements, saying:

> I almost see it as, we're too quick just to celebrate an identity. [...] So, for me, I would have a hard time, I mean, there are some folks [living a homosexual lifestyle] that have [histories of] abuse and things like that. That, if we're in ministry together, then let's bring those people to a point where they can deal with the pain. And experience the healing, and experience the redemption. Rather than using them as a political toy. And I think that's what we're doing. Is that both sides are using homosexuals as tokens for their own agendas. And I think the loser is not going to be the Reconciling or the Transforming. It'll be the person who's in need of healing.

Pete defined politics as using people for agendas, using them as 'a political toy,' and elsewhere he referred to the situation as kings and queens, using 'pawns' to fight their battles. Pete saw this sort of instrumental thinking and 'use' of people as contrary to the work of God and the church. For him the church's primary function was 'healing,' for homosexuals and everyone else in need.

Pete saw people's way as opposed to God's way, not just in the cynical means by which people manipulate and hurt each other for political gain, but in people's very desire to stray from God's path. In his view, homosexuality was no different from any sex outside of one-man-one-woman marriage; he saw all non-marital sexual activity as a result of both humanity's fallenness and the pain caused by that fallen state. He remarked:

> God does have a plan, and the plan scares people because it says that the road is narrow, and we live in a society that does not like narrow roads, and we want to shatter things like that, and just have freedom. [Pause.] Which is to me the promiscuity, is the freedom.

In Pete's understanding, God had clearly dictated that homosexuality was sinful. For him, politics, promiscuity, and homosexuality were all results of people's distance from God, their desire for freedom from God's narrow road. In his view, this desire for freedom caused people to experience what he called 'brokenness,' which ranged from the scars of failed relationships to the feelings of being used and abused that he saw resulting from sexual experiences that God never intended.

Like Pete, City Church's Ruthie Shafer saw politics as opposed to the true purpose of the church. Ruthie, who saw homosexuality as a good part of what she calls God's 'rainbow of creation,' appeared to identify with political organizing at the other end of the spectrum. She associated the struggle for the acceptance of homosexuality with the spiritual leadership and nonviolent protests of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Mohandas Gandhi, saying:

> To the extent that we come together, and spend time together, and we learn from each other, in formal and informal ways, then we will evolve as a community. And so, you and I have differing opinions, and our opinions will be modified and our approach will be different. That's the healthy way to do it. Um,

> the polarized way of doing things, in human methodology, at the other end of the line is you and I have a disagreement and it escalates and escalates and we become polarized not just because of our ideas but now because you're pushing me. So now I must become positioned with my ideal because it's my weapon, and the ultimate of that is war. So as Christians we've been given, if you will, tools for working with each other and caring for each other, that are beyond that, but we fall short in using them. But yes, I do have great faith that there's a way to follow the path of Gandhi and Martin Luther King and all the others before us that have shown that you can make huge social change, that you can warm the hearts of mankind, and you can do it in peace. Yes, I do.

For Ruthie Shafer, the 'human' way of doing things was to be divided, to polarize, to escalate conflict. Leaders like King and Gandhi had power to 'make huge social change,' she pointed out, but that force came from their spirituality and their connection to other people, their power to 'warm the hearts of humankind.' In Ruthie's analysis, their power and ability to transform the world came from their 'healthy' way of doing things, rather than the '*human* methodology' of polarization and war.

Ruthie's understanding of God drawing people together related to her belief that homosexuality was part of the genius of God's creation. She remarked:

> I believe we are, to use a contemporary image, but I truly believe it, that we are a rainbow of God's creation. And that there are many, many, many diverse ways in which we can come together as human beings in this form, and each of those diverse variations, no different from what we see in the boundless variety of nature throughout the world, is for a purpose. And that purpose is to keep us alive and healthy, and exciting. And I think that when we deny that, we are denying God's genius of creation.

Unlike Pete, who saw God's path as narrow, Ruthie saw God's creation as expansive. In her words, the key to God's way of doing things was for people to come together—alive, healthy, exciting, and as she said above, caring for each other.

These two members come from very different congregations, but both paint a picture of humanity without the church as cynical, manipulative and pained—in other words, both Pete and Ruthie saw people without the church as either the perpetrators or victims of politics. This is why both of them maintained that the church must open itself up to gay men and lesbians: the church held humanity's only hope, and humanity included everyone. Pete opposed the 'person' in pain to the 'identity' he said people were too quick to celebrate. For him the church could

provide the healing homosexuals needed so they could heal from their pain and return to God's path, which he saw as the path of either celibacy or one-man-one-woman marriage. For Ruthie, the 'human methodology' of polarization and war required the church's tools of caring and peace, to 'warm the hearts of mankind,' and to appreciate the full range of God's creation. These two members clearly disagreed about the morality of homosexuality, but for both, gay people had to be dissociated from politics in order to belong in church.

Members like Pete and Ruthie saw church as a place to get away from the base, cynical, worldly politics of secular life, to transcend those divisions and markers that kept people from living according to God's plan. The problem for gay and lesbian members, however, was that this opposition between politics and church obscured the power and privilege that invisibly structured church life. When gay and lesbian members began to demand equality in the UMC, they responded to what they saw as double standards—the UMC's rule against ordaining 'self-avowed practicing homosexuals' and its refusal to recognize same-sex unions or marriages based on its claim that 'the practice of homosexuality' is 'incompatible with human teaching' (*Discipline*, ¶304.3, §65C, ¶65). Those members who believed that God either made them gay or lesbian, or that God demanded that they be gay or lesbian, saw the UMC denying not only their rights in the church, but their relationships with God.

When gay and lesbian members protested this state of affairs, they brought to light the ongoing imbalances of power and privilege that denied them full membership in the church. They thus found themselves being blamed for church politics; they themselves were accused of 'causing dissent.' In a world such as church that sets itself up in opposition to politics, lesbians and gay men seemed to many not to belong. As the debate at the more liberal City UMC became

polarized, people on both sides attempted to disengage from politics. One of the most striking ways many attempted to create this distance was by turning to a language of pain.

The Power of Pain

As we saw above, Pete Vogel's comments drew from large-scale debates about homosexuality; in response to the church's traditional rejection of homosexuals, Pete sought to find a language that would convince traditionalists to welcome homosexuals into the church, to help them to find healing, rather than drive them away. His evangelical congregation engaged in no all-out battle over homosexuality. At City Church, on the other hand, the debates were far more immediate. The politics of homosexuality had exploded in sometimes vicious controversy over whether or not the congregation should join the pro-gay Reconciling Congregations Program (RCP). Many members of City Church were, like Ruthie, frustrated that homosexuality caused the congregation to divide into two camps, each feeling the need to win against the other.

For instance, Ron Wilson was a long-time member of the diverse City Church who had been opposed to joining the RCP based on his heartfelt belief that to accept homosexuality was to go against the Bible. When I first started attending City Church and the debates about joining the RCP were being reopened, Ron summed up his desire to find a way for members to allow each other the space to do what they needed to do without causing anyone else to feel, in his words, 'beaten on.' He cast the problem in terms of two groups of people causing each other pain, but as he did so, he hinted at the political, or anti-hierarchical, nature of the move to affirm homosexuality. Ron said:

> I know that it's hard for the homosexuals, that they feel beaten on. But there must be some way [for the Church] to be loving without making other people feel beaten on, or that they're being dragged into it by their hair. They say your rights end where my nose begins. The problem is how to accommodate people, how to be welcoming and allow the Reconciling Committee to do the work they feel they need to do, without hurting the others [those who, like me, believe homosexuality is sinful.]

Here, Ron attempted to show Christian love and compassion for the homosexuals, who felt 'beaten on.' However, he made it clear that addressing homosexuals' pain could hurt those who believed homosexuality to be sinful, by 'dragging them into it by their hair.' If homosexuals felt beaten on by traditionalists pointing out that the Bible forbids homosexuality, then comforting the homosexuals, by 'dismissing' what traditionalists believed the Bible to say, was hurtful in the other direction. Ron recognized that the debate about homosexuality in the church was a question of who could have their own way when both ways were not possible—that it was political. He struggled to come up with a way that the church could accommodate everyone, and in doing so, he countered the RCP-proponents' claim that homosexuals were being oppressed by the church, asserting that traditionalists felt that the homosexuals were beating on *them*.

Without necessarily hearing Ron's analysis or those of other traditionalists, pro-gay members attempted to disengage homosexuality from such political equations. When I started attending City UMC, a group of members of the congregation had moved for a second time to try to get the congregation to join the RCP and become what is known as a Reconciling Congregation. Part of what they called their 'healing process' after a particularly 'wounding' explosion of two years prior included a series of four 'Reconciliation Meetings.' Members of City Church were invited to go to these meetings to express their concerns or ask questions about homosexuality or the RCP. About 12-20 people attended each meeting, which also included at least one representative from the pastoral staff and a pastor from a neighboring Reconciling Congregation.

In all of the Reconciliation meetings, participants struggled over where to place homosexuality in the church-politics dichotomy. Supporters of the RCP attempted to break the equation that links homosexuality to politics, so that homosexuality could be seen as belonging

in the anti-political realm of the church. To make homosexuality seem to belong in church, these supporters invoked gay people's pain.

At one meeting, members used a language of pain to link issues of social justice to the anti-political realm of church. The discussion began on the topic of what it would take for the church to feel actually welcoming to gay men and lesbians. After a bit more discussion, the topic moved on to RCP-supporters' need to be 'patient' with the church as it attempted to undergo a change of heart and mind. Gordon Voller, a white man in his fifties, compared contemporary debates over homosexuality to the Civil War, viewing both as situations that caused 'wounds.' Gordon spoke to supporters of the RCP, positioning himself as one of them, saying:

> One. The Civil War was 130 years ago, and the Methodist Church hasn't done a whole lot in that time to heal the wounds left over from that. Some wounds take longer to heal than you might expect. Second, I have friends who are United Methodist ministers who think they are as devoted and loving as you think you are, and who think we are dead wrong on this issue. So just because we all seem to be of fairly like mind is no reason to think this is a simple issue. It's an emotional issue. […] The body of this church shouldn't be destroyed over this issue. It could take a long time. We need to be more patient.

In this comment, Gordon framed what some in the church call 'justice issues' in terms not of oppression and power, but in terms of more individual-level phenomena. For Gordon, the Civil War resulted not in new relations of power, but in 'wounds.' Gordon admonished those who wanted the church to change its policies quickly that they needed to be patient; the Civil War was a long time ago, while the issue of homosexuality, in his version of church history, was much younger. In calling for patience, he called for members to stop demanding change and to allow those who were 'just as devoted and loving' as RCP proponents to have their feelings too. In these comments, Gordon attempted to remove the disagreement from the level of politics, and to recast it as an issue of people's different feelings. Furthermore, he implied that if RCP-supporters weren't patient, they would bear the responsibility for destroying the church.

In the discussion, Gordon's comments drew a response from Alex Carter, the congregation's thirtyish seminary intern. He said, 'Well, as a student, I am required to take a course on the history of the denomination. I *have* to learn this.' He then gave a brief history of the UMC's splits over slavery and the ordination of women, then compared these to the current split over homosexuality within the UMC's Council of Bishops. He linked that history to the current discussion, saying, 'So, as a student, it's interesting to see how social justice comes about. But as a human being, it's painful, to see things be so slow.'

Here, Alex responded to Gordon's call for patience, implying that patience, in this case, allowed injustices to continue. Alex situated himself as a student who was required to learn history, to justify and almost apologize for his analysis. He hinted that the church's slow progress in achieving justice accommodated injustice. But rather than say that directly, he said that to him 'as a human being,' the situation was 'painful.' Like Pete Vogel, Alex invoked the *human being* as the figure in need of comfort and healing the church could provide. Situations that might elsewhere call for an analysis of power, here in the church, called for the healing of wounds or the palliation of pain. By positioning himself as a human being in pain as opposed to an interested student or a political advocate, Alex virtually demanded compassion, a compassion that he hoped would result in changing the church's unjust policies.

Alex made it clear to me one-on-one that he did think about these justice issues as political, but he did not see using a language of politics as the way to change people's minds or hearts. I spoke with him alone about that meeting a few days later. After a lengthy discussion of pain and injustice in the church, he made a wish, saying:

> I wish some things would be said at those meetings. I wish someone would show up and give witness to what the church's stance on homosexuality can do. Stand up and say, 'Because I thought I was so unworthy, I lived this life of many sexual partners, and not feeling like I was worth doing it safely, and now I have HIV or AIDS.'

Alex wished that gay people would give witness to their own pain, in this case, the incontrovertible pain of AIDS or HIV, believing that such a witness would change church members' minds, show them the results of their actions, or somehow show them the light.

In a different Reconciliation Meeting, Nancy Cook made the move Alex had hoped to see, but not on her own behalf. Nancy was a fiftyish married woman whose community development work stemmed from the twentieth-century theology she had learned during the Civil Rights movement. At this particular meeting, the discussion turned to the question of whether homosexuality was innate and therefore God-given, or whether it were Christians' duty to preserve social order by following religious codes against forbidden practices. Nancy interjected by sharing her own thought process, saying:

> ...I too was at a point of thinking about society collapsing, I had feared that we would be saying anything goes. About God's intentions for us, and thinking, 'If people choose to reject God's plan for us, to reject their creative ability God has given us, then they are rejecting God.' But then I came to think about the pain that homosexuals must be feeling, all the rejection, that comes from the social structure. And, I just saw the movie *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, and that movie is really shocking, to see the pain people are in that they feel they have to do such —*wild*— things, just to be able to say 'this is who I am.'[9]

For Nancy, the pivotal question had been whether homosexuals rejected God, by rejecting their 'creative ability,' or whether it was the case that homosexuals are actually constituted as gay by God (saying, 'this is who I am'), and then rejected by society for being how God made them. Nancy came to understand that gay people did such 'wild' things not to reject society or God, but because of their pain.

In an interview with me later, she elaborated on her analysis of the film, saying:

> The thing that struck us about it was the pain. Um, I wondered if it was, it was both the pain in being something other than what everyone else is, and sort of the flamboyant drama to deal with it, just ridiculous but gorgeous drama, and just the struggle that didn't go away. The guy that *had* had a wife, and, anyway, I thought it was... I really liked it. For me. For me, because I was, like I say I grew up—I didn't even know about homosexuality. [...]
>
> And I realized I thought that, like, we all have self images, and ways of dealing with our images of ourselves. And I think, 'Black is Beautiful' was a way within the black community itself of saying look, giving ourselves creative images of who we are as human beings, people that live out of other images,

> that's not who they are. You see all sorts of gay men, kind of the outrageous gay behavior, I think, is a way of, dramatizing a self-image, or trying to over-compensate a self-image of being different. Of saying, 'Let's just be dramatically different,' you know, maybe that's healing, and. What seems shocking to me, there's some behavior there that's coming out, that's.... Anyway.
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> Dawne: What seems shocking is there's some behavior...
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> Nancy: Well the, the um, gay rights parades, like in San Francisco and New York and everything, that are just so outrageously, I use the word because of the way people dress and don't dress and everything, you know. I come from a very conservative Kansas community. [...] So anything that's kind of outrageous is shocking to me. But I realize that it reflects a self-image, or trying to deal with a self-image, so that's my own thought…
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> Dawne: […] So are you saying that people see themselves as, like, different or something so they dramatize it to make it fabulous….
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> Nancy: Yeah. To themselves. Because if everyone is saying, it's like if everyone is saying to black people, 'You're no good. You can't do it. You don't have a history. You don't even know who your grandparents were.' What that does to that community. […] So, they're kind of a victim. That's what you see there. And maybe the same kind of thing, people say, 'You're a walking sin; you're abomination,' well, a person's gotta, for their own self, they'll either operate out of that, or they've gotta compensate somehow.
>
> […Y]ou know, theologically or Scripturally, Christ died for people, for your sins. What does that mean? God loves you. What does it mean that the Bible starts with the creation story? And then it was good, it was very good. Some of us will take some parts of creation and say that's good, but the rest of it, that's all messed up.

In this conversation, Nancy tried to work out the meanings and origins of the 'shocking' things she saw gay people doing, and an analogy helped her to see the shocking behavior and dress as the pain of difference and exclusion. She compared the outrageous performances in the movie and in the New York and San Francisco Pride parades to 'Black is Beautiful,' thus positing gay outrageousness as a means for people to construct more positive self-images, combating the negative images that said to gay people, 'You're a walking sin; you're abomination.' She reinterpreted such outrageousness as a way to help gay people to compensate for the negative things society says about them, to find 'healing,' and to realize that Christ's death was for everyone, and God's creation is all 'very good.'

Nancy hesitated to articulate and then wrestled with her own shock at these displays, repeating that she grew up in a conservative rural community. She struggled to be accepting, and indeed, she brought to our interview a copy of a sermon she felt captured the essence of Christianity, Paul Tillich's 'You Are Accepted' (Tillich, 1987[1948]). Nancy seemed to struggle

with her shock, striving to be more Christian, which to her meant more empathetic, more accepting, and more aware of the context of a society that feeds some people—in these examples black people and gay men—negative self-images that make them feel bad about who or how they are. What helped her to make this move was understanding the *pain* underlying gay people's outrageous displays.

If we draw from her earlier comment, we can see that her recognizing the pain behind these displays moved her to understand gay people as rejected, painfully, by society, rather than themselves actively rejecting society, or God. If they're in that much pain, she seemed to say, it can't be their conscious choice. She characterized homosexuality as 'the struggle that didn't go away. The guy that *had* had a wife,' suggesting that the gay male character in the movie had tried to be normal, but even with his struggle he couldn't help but be gay. Even the public and political outrageousness of some Gay Pride parade contingents weren't 'political,' in her view. They weren't defiantly rejecting; they were painfully rejected.

Alex Carter wished for gay people to witness to their own pain and suffering. Nancy Cook shows us how such a testimony can be effective, since understanding gay people as pained had moved her to understand homosexuality as one of God's surprising and miraculous gifts. While issues such as HIV/AIDS policy, discrimination, and general anti-gay beliefs have, in other contexts, led to protest and public expressions of anger and outrage (for instance, the Stonewall riots and ACT-UP demonstrations), in the church these issues must be dealt with in less 'polarizing' and 'divisive' terms. Instead of looking to another and saying 'your worldview contributes to my oppression,' in the church it is only legitimate to say 'someone feels pain' or preferably, 'I feel pain.' And not just to say it, but to really feel it.

Nancy's and Alex's strategy for gaining acceptance for gay men and lesbians can be effective, but it does not necessarily lead to equality in the church, nor does it necessarily change people's theological views about homosexuality. In fact, pain figures prominently in Transforming discourse as well. For instance, at a national conference of the Transforming Congregations movement, former Exodus International president Joe Dallas (his real name) addressed a crowd of about 100 people wishing to create or extend the transforming ministries of their congregations. He described different types of homosexuals, but his language of pain came through most clearly when he described those particular homosexuals who had a political 'agenda to normalize homosexuality combined with intolerance for opposing viewpoints,' whom he categorized as the 'militant' homosexuals.

Dallas felt that in order to deal lovingly yet firmly with militant homosexuals, Christians (who, by his definition, believed homosexuality to be sinful) needed to understand the pain many homosexuals had experienced, to understand and 'respect the rage' while still following the Apostle Paul's exhortation to 'speak the truth in love' (Ephesians 4:15). Dallas, himself ex-gay, shared with his audience a detailed and heartfelt picture of the life of the young homosexual, who lived in fear and ridicule burdened with feelings he or she did not ask for, forced to lie and hide. He agreed with the popular pro-gay claim that most gay people do not choose to be gay, that they discover in childhood that they have feelings that might make them different. He explained:

> And the child often feels very awkward, very unwanted, very different. And very uncomfortable and very unsure of himself or herself. Now, you remember the schoolyard. What is one thing that is absolutely unforgivable, in the schoolyard environment? Insecurity. The feeling of not belonging, being different. And so when the child enters into that environment, or young adolescent, with the feelings of either inadequacy or ostraci[sm] or intimidation, what do the other kids do? Do they gather around and say, 'Oh my goodness, you seem to be dealing with gender insecurity and same-sex issues. [Laughter.] How can we affirm you?' [Laughter.] No, the little monsters peck 'em to *death!*

> Imagine, the sense of helplessness. Having feelings you didn't ask for. And feeling as though if you did admit those feelings to *anyone*—family, friend, priest, parent—you could meet with repercussions that might border on and/or include violence. The sense of the unfairness of it all […] Until *finally* that young woman or young man learns at some point in their development that there's a whole community of people. With the same feelings, and many of the same experiences. And what this person had to hide for so many years can now be celebrated. […]
>
> And the sense of resentment over all those years of hiding, over the insults, over in *many* cases the very real fear of violence. Over the ostraci[sm]. And sometimes, unfortunately, even over some of the ill-advised or stupid or contemptuous remarks from people of many religions and faiths. Christians included. How the unfairness seems to build up. And how in fact in many cases, there develops a resolve to never ever let anyone intimidate, humiliate, persecute or mistreat me in any way. And the development of the sense of Us versus Them. Of there being a whole population out there of people who are the enemy, people who promote what comes to be seen as intolerance and bigotry and homophobia. And the absolute *rage* […]
>
> Now, I think they're wrong. I think they're so very wrong to celebrate something that God never intended. I think they are so very wrong to see the Christian population and other faith populations as enemies, and I think many times the claims they make are exaggerated and unfair. But good grief, I can respect the rage even as I refuse to be jerked around by it. I think it has its genesis, in something very deep and something very profound.

For Joe Dallas, 'refus[ing] to be jerked around' by militant homosexuals did not preclude having Christian compassion for them. He advocated 'respect[ing] the rage,' a rage which he attributed to 'something very deep and very profound.' In his view, the deep and profound roots of gay militancy could be found in childhood helplessness in the face of mysterious feelings of difference and the associated schoolyard terrors.

In Dallas's understanding, homosexuals feel rage and think in terms of 'Us versus Them' because, in part, of the insults and threats of violence that they have confronted, coming even from people of faith. For Dallas, however, even though homosexuals face, 'in *many* cases the very real fear of violence,' their 'Us versus Them' perception of 'intolerance, bigotry, and homophobia' comes not as a result of a rational analysis of power in society, but as a result of fear and shame, especially in childhood. For him, the pain of gay childhood accounted for what he called homosexual militants' 'intolerance of opposing viewpoints.' Dallas suggested that seeing the pain behind the militancy could help Christians to reach out to homosexuals, to offer the understanding and compassion homosexuals really need.

Such analyses of pain had a place among members of my two congregations as well. For instance, Pete Vogel's understanding of homosexuality owed a great deal to the ex-gay movement, but Pete directed the bulk of his compassion not toward the so-called militants, but to the vulnerable people he saw as manipulated by the gay movement. Like Joe Dallas, Pete wished to extend compassion to gay men and lesbians, understanding them to be in pain. He too stood firm in his belief that homosexuality was sinful, like many of the things that tempt people. He was aware that sometimes people with his beliefs had been characterized as intolerant, and he wanted to prove that accusation wrong.

To paraphrase Pete's account, the gay movement consisted of political actors who could manipulate vulnerable people into taking on a gay identity to further their own agenda. These vulnerable people could come from two groups: those who had been abused (sexually or otherwise), or those who had been teased in childhood for being non-masculine boys or non-feminine girls, which he blamed on traditional society's rigid gender roles. In either of these cases, which Pete believed to represent most (if not all) gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals, Pete believed that politics capitalized on people's pain. In his view, as we have seen, the gay movement could snatch these victims up and give them the comfort of an identity and a sense of belonging, but one which the Bible clearly says is sinful.

While Pete believed homosexuality to be sinful, he made it clear that he had nothing against people who identified as gay or lesbian. Pete said:

> For somebody who comes to me and says, 'Pete, I don't care about a gay gene, this is really who I am, this is who God made me,' I don't hold any condemnation to them. Because to me, 'Hey, I don't blame you. You're a pawn. You're a pawn. You've been burnt, probably from the church. And we as Evangelicals have created a place, maybe, where you don't feel safe.' Which is sad. […] And if you're being battled for, in the church of all places. So if somebody comes up to me and says, 'Pete, I don't care what you think of me, I'm living with this man,' okay, let's go to lunch, let's have a friendship. They're not my issue. I mean, I'd follow that same pursuit probably.

Pete saw homosexuality as sinful, but he did not think that homosexuals were necessarily bad people. Rather, he saw them as victims—of their abusers or tormenters, of the gay movement that used them as pawns, sometimes even of the church that burned them.

Even though Pete Vogel and Joe Dallas disagreed with Nancy Cook on many important points, all three saw gay people's pain as necessary in order to find gay people a place in the church. For Dallas, pain meant that gay militants needed love and compassion so they could shed their 'Us versus Them' mentality, their intolerance for opposing viewpoints, and eventually, their homosexuality. For Pete, it meant 'Hey, I don't blame you. You're a pawn,' and 'Let's go to lunch, let's have a friendship.' And for Nancy, pain meant gay people's wild behavior was just their way to foster a positive self-image. Nancy saw society's prejudice as the source of gay people's problems; Pete and Joe Dallas too recognized that even before someone identified as gay or lesbian, even their own church's traditional stance or 'stupid or contemptuous remarks' may have 'burnt' some people.

For Joe Dallas, homosexuals turned to politics because they had experienced great pain and mistreatment; militancy provided psychological relief. Similarly, both Pete Vogel and Nancy Cook saw gay people as unable to make conscious political choices, and it was this inability that rendered them unthreatening and deserving of compassion. For Nancy, the shocking things she saw gay people doing were just a way to dramatize their difference and feel fabulous. For Pete, gay men's and lesbians' pain made them vulnerable to being used as pawns by the movement actors fighting to up their numbers. Recognizing gay people's pain, however, also allowed him to make gay friends, just as such recognition helped Joe Dallas to stand firm in his faith while showing homosexuals Christian love.

Comfort and the Politics of Pain

There are a number of reasons that a focus on gay pain appeals to these church members, and to Americans in general. First, many people really do feel pain, for instance, because of the way they feel the church treats them or because of the conflict in the church. Furthermore, the pain argument works; Nancy Cook herself claimed to have changed her mind based on her reflections on gay people's pain. Similarly, those who believe homosexuality is sinful can use a discourse of pain to help make the church less exclusive and more open and compassionate to homosexuals, to allow Christian love to help homosexuals to change while distancing their own beliefs about homosexuality from 'politics.' Almost all of those we have heard from in this paper recalled the pain that the church itself has inflicted on gay people, and they saw that fact as unfortunate. This is why both the Transforming and Reconciling movements have sought to move the church to welcome gay people explicitly.

Furthermore, looking at church as a place for these middle-Americans to remove themselves from the realm of American politics, we can understand why debates about homosexuality have proven so explosive. These debates bring to light the tacit hierarchies that inhere in the church, uncovering the politics at the heart of church *communitas*. As we have seen, members desire for church to be a haven, a place of comfort from the pain and politics that force people to think of themselves as rooted in bodies in the world, and seeking a transcendent haven from these worldly conditions is part of what it means for members to seek closeness to God. In a world that casts certain emotions as true and politics as cynical, seeing gay men and lesbians as caught up in emotion allows non-gay members to see them as free from 'political' motivations.

What does it mean to see pain as the reason to concede that gay people belong in church? To answer this question, it helps to consider that lesbian and gay members challenge the apparent

timelessness of one-man-one-woman marriage. Whether they demand recognition for same-sex marriages or reject marriage as an institution, they show that human beings can live in non-normative ways and, in movements like the RCP, they demand that their fellow church members see their sexuality as something holy and giving rather than worldly or selfish. To cast gay people as pained is to disallow that challenge—pain becomes their extenuating circumstance, and the people who are in it require to be healed and comforted, not to be engaged as rational critics with a new perspective on life.

True pain makes people seem distant from, rather than engaged in politics. However, this belief in the distance between politics and emotion itself allows languages of emotion to serve certain political ends. Since the nineteenth century, activists have spoken of pain to inspire people to take certain kinds of political action.[10] From the abolition movement to the anti-sweatshop movement and other contemporary left movements, left politics have often depended upon rhetorics and images of pain to bring attention and relief to the plight of the oppressed, the stereotyped, and the marginalized. However, this strategy has often cut in both directions.

In the discourse of the Transforming movement, gays and lesbians are seen not as whole adults with different experiences of God, life, and sexuality, but as people whose special pain and 'brokenness' renders them socially distant and needing special treatment (such as counseling or support groups) until they can find 'healing' in the church. When the church positions homosexuals as pained, it creates a relationship of mourning, producing a distance that insulates itself from interaction and change with gay men and lesbians.[11] When church members who believe homosexuality is inherently sinful cast it as a symptom of pain, they perform a 'social deathmaking' of the homosexual, hoping and praying that the human being underneath the homosexuality can find new life—a life free from the shackles of homosexual sin.

Does this social deathmaking also happen when pro-gay advocates use a discourse of gay pain? Lauren Berlant (1999) sees the politics of pain not only distancing people with power from those in pain, but also working in left identity-political movements themselves. As we saw with Alex Carter and Nancy Cook, the pro-gay movement in the church takes its cue from American identity politics. In these movements, actors base their claims in the pain caused by the failure of American political ideals to recognize marginal people—those at the bottom of American hierarchies of race, gender, sexuality, and the like—as full citizens of the American, or church, ideal.

These strategies work because church members, as members of the American public, recognize pain as a language of truth. About American left identity politics, Berlant comments:

> In this political model of identity trauma stands as truth. We can't use happiness as a guide to the aspirations for social change, because the feeling of it might be false consciousness; nor boredom, which might be depression, illness, ore merely a spreading malaise. Pain, in contrast, is something quick and sharp that simultaneously specifies you and makes you generic: it is something that happens to you before you 'know' it, and it is intensely individuating, for surviving its shock lets you know it is your general survival at stake (1999: 72).

As Berlant sees in contemporary and historical invocations of pain in American politics, we have seen here that pain works to help to depoliticize people and to silence dissent. Her observations about the usefulness of pain help us to see how this political strategy would resonate with church members so well. Like God, pain appears to be beyond politics, a source of self-evident truth that demands universal compassion.

This language of pain seems particularly suited to a religious context. Because members believe their role is to show compassion to the hurting and give relief to those in need, pro-gay church members can think and speak of gay people's pain as the reason the church must be open to them. They can see pain as the opposite of God's intent, seeing God as the universal redeemer and sustainer, and the church as God's place on earth for redemption and healing. In spite of the

Christian theme of the suffering servant, healing and comfort from pain (and politics) are part of what it means in America today for members to desire to know God and worship God.

As Berlant points out, however, pain need not be said to produce clarity; people can just as easily see it producing instability, panic and misrecognition (1999:58). In fact, we have seen church members interpreting gay people's pain to mean that they do not know what is best for them, that they struggle to discover the truth under their homosexuality, that they have been used as pawns by the gay movement. While pain produces clarity, it can simultaneously destabilize lesbian and gay members. Pain can cast them as irrational and incapable of legitimate adult reason and critique, while appearing to cloud their perceptions of their personal relationships with God and their understandings of what God demands of them.

Add to this the danger that when a movement aims to alleviate pain, its goal becomes comfort, not equality. When church members invoke lesbians' and gay men's pain, they turn them in to unthreatening figures whose difference resembles that of hurting children, not rational adults with rational grievances and well-thought and inspired alternatives to oppressive norms and regimes.

As a site for the legitimate deployment of feelings language, church differs from supposedly secular American politics only in intensity. In the latter, emotions and faith are simply two among many possible sources of political rhetoric. Furthermore, in secular America, the ideal separation of church and state offers varying levels of competition to the ideals of civil religion and 'one nation under God' (see Demerath and Williams, 1992; Williams and Demerath, 1991). For many church members, the cynical use of religious themes for political gain is reprehensible, yet if they dare to imagine a better world, it is faith that helps them in that imagining. From their standpoint, politics divides people with the wedges of cynicism, conflict,

and power. They want communities of mutual care, especially church, to shelter people and heal them from the effects of such inhumanity.

When those who believe homosexuality is sinful use a language of gay pain, they seek to frame gay people as deserving of Christian compassion rather than scorn. When pro-gay church members use the same language, they attempt to show that traditional church attitudes are harmful and do evil in the world rather than good. Whether the people using the language think homosexuality is a sin or a gift, however, the language of pain reproduces the power that non-gay members have—the power to patrol the boundaries of church membership, and the privilege to 'just be,' unmarked by their own special pain. Pro-gay members argue that gays belong because they are in pain, hoping that the language of pain will bring about an end to the privilege of normative sexuality in church. However, in demanding that gay members evince pain, that language does not overthrow that privilege, but reinforces it.

Notes

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[2] These rules and principles are published in *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church,* also known as the *Discipline*.

[3] I follow members in defining the church broadly as the population of Christianity, 'the body of Christ.'

[4] The names of congregations and members are pseudonyms, unless otherwise stated.

[5] People often suggest that the essential divide is between 'literalists' or those who believe the Bible to be understood as a word-for-word clear message for today, and 'contextualists' or those who believe the Bible must be understood both in its historical and cultural context and as containing some passages that are meant to be understood metaphorically. This is a specious divide, however, since all members interpret some parts as literally as possible ('love your neighbor as yourself') and some parts contextually or metaphorically ('If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out'). The significant question is when particular members see particular passages as directly relevant and when they see the passages as requiring contextual or metaphorical interpretation.

[6] Church members and movement participants sometimes included bisexuals and transgenderists in populations of people requiring the church's justice and care, however, it was far more common for people in my two congregations to refer to 'homosexuals,' 'gay people,' 'gay men and lesbians,' or 'gay and lesbian people' than to include bisexuals and/or transgenderists.

[7] This 'as if' is of central importance, since congregational conflicts over clergy roles and styles, liturgies, programs and even building infrastructure are all in part about members' authority and power—church members constantly engage in some form of politics even if it bears no relation to larger social movements. Nina Eliasoph (1998) powerfully describes the kinds of work Americans do to live *as if* they are free from politics, even as they engage in different ways with large-scale issues of power.

[8] It is not surprising to Christians that a non-believer would feel what they see as God's presence. A United Methodist ministry professor, William Willimon remarks, 'Sometimes it's possible to *act* as a Christian before you *think* like a Christian.' (Willimon, 1990: 98).

[9] *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (directed by Stephen Elliott, 1994) is about three performers, two drag queens and a male-to-female transsexual, traveling in their bus (Priscilla) from Sydney into the Australian outback.

[10] For instance, in abolition. See Sánchez-Eppler, 1992.

[11] This analysis draws from Lauren Berlant's (1999) use of Freud to shed light on the uses of pain in American politics.

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