

REAL MINISTRY IN A COMPLEX WORLD

# Leadership

JOURNAL

The following article is located at: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/le/2013/fall/leaving-my-lesbian-past.html>



## Leaving My Lesbian Past

The church that walked with me away from homosexuality.

Charlene E. Hios

It was a Sunday morning, the beginning of football season. I was wearing my Dallas Cowboys jersey, ready to root for them. I was visiting my parents who lived in Las Vegas. I looked forward to spending more time with them after the game. They were heading off to church, and I was heading to the casino to watch the game.

That is, until Mom and Dad asked me to go with them to church that morning. They wanted me to meet some of their new friends and to meet the pastor and his wife.

I had nothing against going to church, mind you. It was just that the game would be starting at 10:00, and, well, I preferred watching football to attending church. In the back of my mind was also the fact that their church is one that believes homosexuality is a sin. My thinking was that it would be easier on everyone if their lesbian daughter just took herself to the casino to watch some football.

But I ended up going to church that day. Even though I was almost 35 years old, I was still my parents' daughter, I was visiting their home, and I knew they had their hearts set on my going with them. Little did I know how significant visiting their church was going to be for me.

Mom and Dad introduced me to each of their friends at church that morning. I was impressed with how friendly everyone was. Toward me and toward each other as well. As the service started, the church had a "welcoming time," and folks were out of their seats and literally walking clear across the church to say hello to someone they did not know or had not seen in awhile.

Many came my way, sporting huge smiles and bright eyes. They spoke words of welcome. Some gave me huge hugs. A couple of them told me they were not Cowboy fans, so not to tell anyone they hugged me!

Never had I felt so welcomed, so accepted. I felt as though this was where I belonged. It was as if they were family I had never met.

The last time I had gone to church was, well, I couldn't remember. Maybe a Christmas Eve Mass years ago? I wasn't sure. My parents did not bring me up in the church.

When Mom and Dad moved to Las Vegas, Dad was invited to attend a men's Bible study at College Park Baptist Church. Shortly after that, Dad, at age 60, was born again. A bit later, at age 65, my mom also was born again. My parents were both excited to share their newfound experience with me.

I enjoyed the rest of the church service. The music was great. A full choir, their faces aglow, led the worship. It seemed everyone was full of smiles that day.

Throughout most of the sermon, Pastor Bob's face held a smile. Sometimes he would catch my eye, and it felt like he was speaking straight to me. He spoke that morning on the armor of God. He had my attention through the whole sermon.

As the service ended, several members of the choir, still in their robes, flocked toward me. I looked around to see where they might be going. They were all coming to greet my parents and me. Little did I know that Dad often sang in the choir, and they all wanted to meet me, his daughter. I thought they looked like a group of heavenly angels as their arms opened to hug me.

Finally, it was time to go home. Or so I thought. The next game started at 1:00. If we hurried, we could grab something to eat and head back to my parents' house to watch football. No such luck. Mom and Dad wanted me to go to their Bible study with them. Aargh. They would not let me take the car, go to the house, watch the game with my kid brother and then come back to get them at halftime. So, off I went to afternoon Bible study.

I quickly got over not being able to watch the game. The study had my attention. It was about God's son, Jesus, the man on the cross who died for the sins of the world. I was familiar with the cross, but I hadn't known the name of the man on it nor the significance of it.

I didn't get to watch any football that day. But I did meet a lot of nice people. The day at church did not go the way I thought it would. I thought we would get into arguments about homosexuality. No one brought it up. Surely they could tell I was butch. But they were so welcoming and loving, I saw no judgment nor did I feel any. I felt as I had never felt before—accepted.

Not long afterward the company I worked for promoted me to a regional executive position that would require me to travel all across the country each week. The CEO suggested that I move to Las Vegas. It made sense to move in with my parents rather than getting a place of my own, since I would only be home on the weekends. I could pay them rent. It was a win-win situation for us all.

Part of the arrangement was that my parents hoped I would join them at church each Sunday. They wanted me to experience the love, acceptance, and peace that they had from their new personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

Since my first experience there was so enjoyable, I decided to give it a shot. I also noticed the difference in both of my parents since they had become Christians. They both seemed to have a peace that I had never noticed before. They still had issues, but they were somehow different. It was a good different.

## According to God's Design

As I started attending CPBC, I learned more and more about God's love and about his Son, Jesus Christ. Many times in Bible study I would question what the Bible says about homosexuality, and they were always gentle in their answers. They told me they believed the Bible to be God's Word and that God did not create us to be homosexual. It was not according to his design. They then took me to the book of Genesis and showed how God created everything and how everything had an order. They said that God made the man and then the woman to be the man's companion, one complementing the other.

I would argue that the writers of the Bible either had something against homosexuals or that the Bible did not translate the words properly from the ancient language into our current day English. I argued that the writers did not know homosexuals as we are today. I argued that the word "homosexual" was not even in the original English Bible. I agreed that two men together sexually was not right, but I saw nothing unnatural with two women together sexually. Looking back, I do not know where these arguments came from, but they made sense to me at the time.

The folks at CPBC never initiated the discussion of homosexuality. It was always me who wanted to discuss it. They were more interested in my personal walk with God and my relationship with Jesus. Though they were concerned about my homosexuality, they explained that God would be the one to work on my homosexuality and my belief that God made me that way.

I learned much later that there were some who were not appreciative that the church showed so much love and acceptance toward me, the lesbian. Someone told me that some left the church. That saddened me. I hope those who left will come to see that the church was doing the right thing. They loved me with the love of Jesus Christ. They were compassionate truth-tellers, just like Jesus.

They were the people who talked to me about homosexuality by taking me deeper into the Word of God. They knew they could not argue me out of my homosexuality. The first matter at hand was to introduce me to Jesus Christ, to the Word of God, not to introduce me to heterosexuality.

Though I did not realize it at the time, I was in a huge spiritual battle that went on for at least a year, if not longer.

**They could not argue me out of my homosexuality. The first matter was to introduce me to Jesus, not to heterosexuality.** Once I started going to church on a regular basis, it was as if every girlfriend, every lover, I had ever had contacted me by phone or came to visit me in Las Vegas. They tried to bring me back into a relationship with them. I explained to each, as gently as I could, that something was going on with me, deep inside, and I was beginning to believe that perhaps homosexuality was not the right lifestyle. Even though it had been my identity for years.

A little more than a year after visiting the church, I came to Christ. I attended Bible studies, I sang in the choir, I was a part of these folks. They accepted me into their family.

They did not push the issue of my homosexuality. It was not an issue for them; they knew God would eventually take care of it.

And he did! The more I studied the Bible, the more my conviction grew. God and I stayed up long nights talking about homosexuality and why he made me this way if it was wrong. Slowly I heard his answers; slowly I came to realize homosexual behavior was wrong. I could not figure it out, but I knew I should not act out on my same-sex attractions. It was God speaking to me (not audibly), not the church telling me.

After being a new Christian for about a year, one Sunday night Pastor Bob preached on seven Bible passages that address homosexuality. The same passages that I had always believed the translators translated incorrectly or had nothing to do with lesbians now struck a different chord in me.

I realized when Pastor Bob gave the invitation that homosexual behavior was wrong, and God does not make us homosexual. I could barely walk down the aisle in order to publicly repent from my sin. I realized for the first time that for almost 20 years I had believed a lie.

Thank you, God, for helping my eyes to be open. Thank you, God, for your forgiveness!

## **Our Part, God's Work**

It is because of this that I do believe a person can be in Christ and identify as gay, though one must eventually realize that homosexual behavior is inconsistent with a faithful relationship with Christ. It is a process! One does not come to Christ and then magically all your sinful desires and attitudes go away.

It takes time to recognize parts of your life are sin. It is essential but it takes time to admit the sin and turn away from it and toward God. This is not an easy process. There is a lot of struggle as you fight it. But at least for me, God takes it away a bit at a time.

It has taken 15 years for me to be completely healed of my same-sex attractions. It is a process that began one Sunday morning at College Park Baptist Church of Las Vegas.

CPBC accepted me just as I was when I walked through the door that Sunday morning, they loved me with the love of Jesus Christ with their compassionate truth-telling, and God used them to mend me, to mold me, and eventually send me out into ministry.

*Charlene Hios is executive director of Bridging the Gaps Ministries in the San Francisco Bay area.*

*A sidebar follows that tells the story of the church that was instrumental in Charlene Hios's change of direction.*

### **Sidebar: THE PASTOR'S SIDE OF THE STORY**

We asked a few questions of Bob Williams, who was pastor of College Park Baptist Church in Las Vegas at the time Charlene Hios began attending.

#### **It seems like the welcome time was an important and intentional part of worship at CPBC.**

CPBC loved to greet folks. It was one of the highlights of the service. An open and loving welcoming time was an integral part of the worship experience. It often took a while to get the congregation back to their seats.

#### **Did you consciously emphasize a person meeting Jesus before expecting any change in their lifestyle?**

Early in my time at CPBC, there were questions about abortion and other social issues. My response was settled and consistent: "If people don't have a relationship with God through Jesus, they cannot be expected to have the values and convictions of believers." I have known folks who claim that "believers will act like believers from day one." I have always disagreed. Scripture teaches that believers will mature as the Holy Spirit shapes their Christian experience.

Our inner-city Las Vegas church witnessed many new believers struggle with habits and temptations of the old life before growing to maturity in Christ.

#### **Was it hard to welcome a homosexual and wait for Christ to bring about lifestyle change?**

Charlene's parents had come to faith in Jesus at CPBC. We loved Richard and Norma, and we wanted to love their daughter too. It was a no-brainer. We believed Jesus wanted Charlene to know him just like her folks did. That is why the Lord brought us together.

#### **What did you notice about Charlene when she first visited?**

Charlene talked about her "butch" self in her article. Yep, we noticed, but for the most part, the church didn't mind. Those that struggled with ministry to homosexuals struggled with other issues also. We offered help and ministry to them too. Our church welcomed people who crash hard because God put them in our path to help them. Some church people opted out of the journey. Those who stayed on got to see victory in Jesus. We prayed for Charlene and loved her. She was growing up in Jesus, and it was fun to experience.

#### **How much experience did CPBC have with people living a homosexual lifestyle?**

As an inner-city church with a multitude of hurting folks, CPBC grew to some size before I arrived in the 1990s. The church was faced with the usual decision whether to stay in the inner city or take its considerable resources and move to the growing suburbs. CPBC chose to stay in the inner-city and invest heavily in the ministry there, looking past where people were coming from, and focus on where people could be if they knew Jesus.

#### **Were same-sex attraction and relationships something the church talked about publicly?**

I'm not sure how much was said publicly, but given the overall attitude of the church toward loving people to Jesus, homosexuality was just one of many issues that keep people from finding their identity in Christ.

#### **Did you get criticism for having a lesbian at church?**

Some but very little. Our church's position was clear. We existed to love people into a faith relationship with God through Jesus. Most members were praying and anticipating ultimate victory in Charlene's life. We simply got to be part of the work God had already begun in the lives of Charlene and her family.

## What do you recall of the time you preached on homosexuality with Charlene in the congregation?

I remember that evening service well. I was preaching a series on "Christians Confronting Social Issues." It was not a condemnation of people in same-sex relationships but was meant to explain what the Bible says concerning the homosexual lifestyle and how believers can help. Charlene was there that evening, but it wasn't planned by me. God put it all together.

We had a Spanish-speaking congregation that met in our church. Several members of that congregation who also spoke English attended our service that evening.

As the service ended, it was our custom to invite folks to come to the front of the auditorium to pray. Some would pray alone, others could pray with a church member gifted in praying with others.

As Charlene knelt to pray, a woman I'd not seen before from the Spanish congregation knelt beside her and began to pray, "Lord, deliver this woman from her lifestyle," or words to that effect. She prayed so loudly we all could hear. I hoped the Lord was doing something miraculous in Charlene's life, and at the same time I prayed that the lady hadn't blown it all with her boisterous praying beside a woman she didn't know!

As it turned out, God had it all in his control. Charlene shared that God had finally gotten through to her. The struggle was over.

Shortly after that evening, we gave Charlene time to share her story with the congregation. God does so much more in people's lives than we can ever imagine when we simply let God do what God does.

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