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Lester Leavitt

Lester Leavitt has become an advocate for gay Mormons across the country

Gay Mormons see change, stagnation in church

by Sarah McCann Nov 07, 2007

WASHINGTON --Lester Leavitt said he first had an inkling he might be gay when, as an 18-year-old college freshman, he was startled by his hope to see certain boys at a party.

"Lester, what are you thinking? Are you gay or something?" Leavitt wondered at the time.

He never went to the party.

"With that thought came so much self-hate because I thought I could be gay," said Leavitt, now 46, who grew up in a small predominantly Mormon town in Alberta, Canada. "If I would've faced it, it would have been too difficult to deal with that."

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Now, not only is Leavitt facing it, but so is the church.

Like many gay Mormons, Leavitt tried to ignore his sexuality and married a woman. Last year, he was excommunicated after telling church authorities he was attracted to men, even though he was faithful to his wife and wanted to stay married.

Six months later, to Leavitt's surprise, the church vacated the excommunication.

Not long after, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints issued "God Loveth His Children," a treatise that said same-sex attractions themselves are not sinful, even though homosexual activity is.

Leavitt, who is no longer married or a member of the Mormon Church, says the pamphlet seems to signal a softening of the church's stance on homosexuality, even if its strict prohibition on homosexual conduct remains intact.

"It's don't ask, don't tell," he said. "If anybody (who is gay) wants to stay in the church, that paved the way for them to do it. You can come out 80 percent of the way. Anybody would be hard pressed to initiate (excommunication)" based on same-sex attractions, he said.

Church spokeswoman Kim Farah said the document isn't a shift necessarily, but a sign that Mormon leaders are talking a lot more about homosexuality. That, she said, is "a positive step."

For Mormons, homosexuality presents a particular challenge because the church's emphasis on marriage carries eternal consequences. Mormons believe heaven is organized by families formed on earth, and that having a family is necessary to reach heaven's highest ranks.

"For a lot of Mormons it's unimaginable that you could be gay. You probably feel like you need to deny it because it just can't happen" said Boyd Petersen, coordinator of Mormon studies at Utah Valley State College.

Homosexuality challenges basic tenets of Mormon doctrine, said Scott Gordon, president of The Foundation for Apologetic Information and Research, a California-based Mormon apologetics organization.

"The core of Mormon theology is the family unit. The Declaration on the Family (a key church document) says marriage is between a man and a woman ... and family is eternal," he said.

Traditionally, Mormons saw homosexuality as a choice - and a changeable one- Petersen said. In the 1970s, the church believed that "homosexuality is a perversion and you can fight it and become straight."

Leavitt, who was the organist for his Florida church before his excommunication, said

he kept waiting for his same-sex attractions to disappear, even after he got married.

“The church told me and everyone like me that this was a social construct, and that if you got married (you would be attracted to women). I was 44 years old and it hadn't gone away,” he said.

Mormons were also very upfront about how they viewed homosexuality.

Alyson Bolles, 32, vividly recalls one incident from Sunday School when she was 15.

“The bishop asked what if a child walked into the kitchen and saw two men kissing? I said the child might think the two men loved each other. The bishop then called on a boy who said, ‘oh it's disgusting.’ The bishop pointed and said, ‘Alyson, he is right,’” she said.

Bolles left the class in tears, but kept the incident to herself. “When the bishop says (you are) disgusting, who are you going to tell?” she said. She later left the church but now works with Affirmation, a national support group for gay and lesbian Mormons.

Now, said Petersen, from Utah Valley State College, the church recognizes “whether nature or nurture, those attitudes are difficult to change.”

So what's a gay Mormon to do? Many within the LDS community say celibacy is the obvious choice, and Farah, the church spokeswoman, pointed out that church teaching on celibacy for single Mormons remains unchanged.

Mormons teach that marriages sealed in a temple allow families to reach the highest levels of heaven. Single Mormons can reach the second-highest level without marriage, but could meet a mate in the hereafter and then proceed to the celestial kingdom, or highest level. The coupling, however, would be a heterosexual one.

Either way, the new document makes clear that same-sex attractions alone do not make someone unworthy, and those who refrain from homosexual activity in this life can “enjoy full fellowship with your fellow Saints, and ultimately receive all the blessings of eternal life.”

Kathleen Flake, a Mormon and associate professor of American religious history at Vanderbilt University, said the only thing that's changed is church leaders have taken a step back from old certainties about the origins of homosexuality.

The position on its effects, however, remains the same.

“We're going to be more careful to not cause you any additional pain,” she said, paraphrasing the document. “But know that a homosexual relationship is not God's plan for you. God's plan is that we come to earth to be like God. By the grace of God, that means getting married and having children with a member of the opposite sex. It means engendering life, because that's what God is all about.”