

On Gay Rights and an end to bullying from the pulpit  
Rev. David J. Huber

National Coming Out Day was Oct. 11. It was a day of observance and awareness about gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people and their allies. Managed by the Human Rights Campaign, the United State's largest LGBT advocacy group, it has become an international event as our gay neighbors the world over continue their struggle for religious and political freedom.

Thankfully, there has been forward movement. Many corporations offer benefits to straight and gay partners. Sports, entertainment and political figures are playing, performing and serving openly. Our LGBT sons and daughters may now openly serve in our military to protect their nation. And according to a May Gallup poll, American opinion switched this year to a majority supporting gay marriage, a right recognized in six states and Washington, D.C. Being "out" is becoming easier. But sadly, it is still risky. A risk that comes too often from my Christian brothers and sisters. Jesus calls us to love all our neighbors, not to dehumanize, physically abuse or make life difficult for them. Their rhetoric stirs up negative emotions in their flocks. Directly or indirectly, speech that demonizes or dehumanizes LGBT people, even if not specifically advocating violence, certainly leaves room for assuming it could be a morally beneficent act.

In May 2011, Carol Anne and Laura Stutte of Tennessee had their house burned down to rubble and their garage spray-painted with "QUEERS" while they were out of town celebrating their anniversary. Since then, Jerry Pitman Jr. and his partner Dustin Lee were beaten up in the parking lot of Grace Fellowship Church in that same state as they tried to attend worship. Jerry's father, the pastor of the church, is the one who directed some men to beat his son and boyfriend to keep them out of the building. The police did nothing until ABC News picked up the story. Children and college students are bullied in schools for merely appearing to be gay. Those who actually are often suffer more dire physical, mental and religious harassment that drives some to suicide while school administrations do not defend them or stop this psychospiritual torture. The past year has seen a rash of teen suicides that received national attention. The latest victim was 14-year-old Jamey Rodemeyer, who committed suicide after a year of harassment just a few weeks ago. Jamey had even made a video for the It Gets Better Project to help encourage other gay youth to persevere and hold on.

To give a human face to the reality of homosexuality and anti-homosexual bias, I list some others: Justin Aaberg, 15, of Minnesota, whose school had three LGBT-bullying-related suicides in one year; Tyler Clementi, 19, the Rutgers University student who jumped off the George Washington Bridge; Seth Walsh, 13, of California; Raymond Chase, 19, of Rhode Island; Billy Lucas, 15, of Indiana; Lance Lundsten, 18, of Minnesota; and Zach Harrington, 19, of Oklahoma. There are hundreds more who do not make the news and remain nameless heroes in the struggle for freedom. Determining the suicide rate of gay teens is difficult, but it is higher than their straight counterparts. Some in the religious anti-gay community use that as ammunition against homosexuality. That is a false tautology. Suicide happens because of the life-denying environment created by bullying, hating, and violence against those whose difference is seen as a divine carte blanche for abuse. Each death was unnecessary. Each should lead us in corporate confession for allowing a system that makes a moral good out of mistreating those who are the

image of God. We can redeem their deaths by ending bullying, harassing and condemning the innocent in our schools, workplaces, political discourse, and from our pulpits. Teenage years are rough enough. To intentionally unwelcome gay teens, when the support of a community of Christian love can literally be the difference between life and death, is unconscionable.

But there is hope. If you are a gay teen (or adult) wondering if you can be Christian, the answer is yes. If you are struggling with your sexuality or suffering from bullying, there are open and affirming congregations that will accept you in the fullness of your God-created being without needing to hide or pretend. Some of those churches are even pastored by gay clergy. They provide sanctuary and help whether you are religious or not. None of God's son and daughters have to accept bullying or abuse, including you. There are churches and other religious homes that would feel blessed to have your spiritual gifts and faithful witness, and who will happily extend to you a handshake of fellowship. You are not alone. It does get better and it has been getting better. Especially when we work together for justice and inclusion of all of God's people.

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