

I Experience Same-Sex Attraction—

Would Church Members Welcome Me Back?

By Bouke “Bob” S. Ecoma Verstege

Note from the author: I share my story as an expression of my gratitude for the Church leaders and members who welcomed me with open arms, helped me return to full activity, and have served alongside me as fellow disciples of Christ.

On July 27, 2013, after a long battle with Alzheimer’s disease, my life partner of 25 years passed away. Jay Eldredge was a world-renowned cardiologist. We had both served missions for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when we were younger but then distanced ourselves from the Church because of same-sex attraction.

Jay’s death, although not unexpected, was devastating. I felt heart-broken and lost and alone.

While driving home after making the funeral arrangements, I felt the influence of the Spirit overwhelm me so strongly that I had to pull over to the side of the road. I knew that God was speaking to me, calling me back to Him, but I was resistant. “Can’t you see that I’m suffering?” I said aloud. “I can’t face going back to church right now.”

But the more I protested, the more the Spirit pulled at me, inviting me back to church.





Would I Be Accepted?

I was deeply worried about returning to church. I hadn't been to a sacrament meeting in 25 years. Would they even accept me? Would I accept them? What would the bishop say? I felt anxious and unsettled and still heavy with grief.

But my testimony of the gospel had never wavered in all those years. Jay and I loved the Church and its guiding principles—namely, charity, mercy, and forgiveness. I knew that Christ was my Savior and that His Church was The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I had known that since my conversion and baptism at the age of 14. I wasn't about to deny that now.

Finally, after mustering the necessary courage, I called the Linwood Ward in New Jersey, USA, to find out what time sacrament meeting started.

As Sunday approached, the adversary put many obstacles in my path that could have easily prevented me from attending. How grateful I am that the Holy Ghost persisted.

I felt nervous as I entered the building, but the opening hymn in sacrament meeting reassured me that I was home again. The hymn "Come, Come, Ye Saints" (*Hymns*, no. 30) invited the Spirit so powerfully that tears flowed down my face. I knew in that instant that Heavenly Father was aware of me and the deep sadness I was feeling.

That hymn has become an unofficial anthem of sorts for the Church, but it has become my personal anthem as well.

"Come," the hymn invites me. "Though hard to you this journey may appear, grace shall be as your day."

My journey *was* hard. But grace *did* attend me as promised.



FULL-FLEDGED MEMBERS

“Someone who is following the covenants and the standards and teachings of the gospel of Christ—though they

may be dealing with same-sex attraction—really there’s no reason they cannot be fully participative [or] be a full-fledged member of the Church and hold callings and speak and enter the temple and serve there. And all the other opportunities and blessings that can come from Church membership will be available to them.”

Elder D. Todd Christofferson of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, “LGBT People Who Live God’s Laws Can Fully Participate in the Church” (video), ChurchofJesusChrist.org/topics/gay.

Bishop Darren Bird and the rest of the congregation were wonderful and welcoming. They accepted me as their brother in Christ.

Reconciling with God, through Christ

The words of “Come, Come, Ye Saints” took on greater meaning to me, however, as I felt Heavenly Father directing me on how I should proceed.

*We’ll find the place which God for us prepared,
Far away in the West,
Where none shall come to hurt or make afraid;
There the Saints will be blessed.*

I went west and bought a home in Fountain Hills, Arizona, USA, where I met Bishop Jerry Olson. When I requested to meet with him and shook his hand, the Spirit impressed upon me that this man would help bring me back into full activity in the Church.

As I began visiting with the bishop and embarking on this reconciliation with

Heavenly Father, I witnessed many spiritual miracles. I was open with the bishop, for which he was grateful. He said that helped him better understand where I had been and where I was now in my relationship with God. He also lovingly informed me that this was the first time that he had had an opportunity to minister to someone with same-sex attraction, and he asked for my patience and forgiveness if he said or did anything to offend me throughout the process.

I thanked him for his honesty and said, “Well, this is my first time as well. We’ll learn together.”

Thus began a wonderful journey and friendship!

Soon I had an action plan on how to become a member in good standing again. I accepted the loving and prayerful counsel with a grateful heart and began the process.

Solace in the Temple

Later, as I followed that counsel and worked hard to draw closer to Christ, I accepted a call to serve in the elders quorum and received a temple recommend. In the holy temple, as I communed with Heavenly Father, He showed me how much He loves all His children. I felt solace and a deep desire to please Him.

Months later, a new bishop was called, with whom I have also developed a loving friendship. Bishop Larry Radford knew of my circumstance and appreciated my service in the elders quorum, where he



ILLUSTRATION BY JENNA PALACIOS

said I had served with love and devotion not only for the quorum but also—and more importantly—for God. His kind words and encouragement helped me feel that the Lord and my fellow Saints were pleased with my service.

I now faithfully serve as the ward clerk.

Understanding Who I Am

Having same-sex attraction and being an active member of the Church is not always easy. But as I put all my faith and trust in God, I can feel Him strengthening me. Critics will no doubt say that I'm not being true to who I am or that I'm disappointing the LGBT+ community.

I understand their frustration, and I obviously don't have all the answers. I can only speak of my own experience. And that experience has taught me this: I am Heavenly Father's son, a child of God. That's the one and only label that matters to me. As a result, I try not to allow the world's labels to define me. I fear that will limit my potential and eternal progression.

Satan is very clever. He knows that by using labels, he can divide us as a community and as a church.

With that perspective in mind, the choices I make are not based on my same-sex attraction but on how to be a true disciple of Christ *with* same-sex attraction. As Nephi said:

“O Lord, I have trusted in thee, and I will trust in thee forever. I will not put my trust in the arm of flesh. . . .

“ . . . I know that God will give liberally to him that asketh. Yea, my God will give me, if I ask not amiss; therefore I will lift up my voice unto thee; yea, I will cry unto thee, my God, the rock of my righteousness. Behold, my voice shall forever ascend up unto thee, my rock and mine everlasting God” (2 Nephi 4:34–35).

Love of My Fellow Saints

Throughout my return, I felt the loving companionship of my leaders and fellow Saints, including active and less-active LGBT+ members. I found a place where I could thrive. I found among them the attributes of Christ that I had always associated with my faith: mercy, compassion, understanding, and, above all, love.

As I struggled along the path with my Savior, I felt comfort and peace as I turned to Him, knowing that I wasn't walking that path

alone. Several bishops were there beside me. Members of my quorum. Sisters in the ward. I even had a young man in the ward ask me if I would ordain him a priest. His kind invitation deeply moved me. He saw me as a man who holds the priesthood of God and who can exercise that priesthood in service to others.

These opportunities to serve and worship with my fellow Saints have lifted me and—along with the many blessings I've received from the Lord—helped me experience the love, understanding, and acceptance that I needed.

The Savior said, “I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you” (John 14:18). Those words are true. I needed comforting, and He came to me, more abundantly than I could have imagined. ■



THE GOSPEL TENT

“The gospel tent truly is big enough for everyone with a desire to follow the Lord. Whenever someone says or feels contrary to that, I think of Bob Verstege and wish they could meet him and serve with him. Brother Verstege is a walking example of what the Atonement of Jesus Christ can do when put into action. As a bishop, I am lifted, taught, and encouraged by this humble man on a daily basis.”

Bishop Larry Radford, Fountain Hills Ward, Scottsdale Arizona North Stake