

The University of Alberta

**Naming the Elephant in the Room:
Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Youth Within Christian Schools**

by

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**A project submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Education**

DEPARTMENT OF SECONDARY EDUCATION

**Edmonton, Alberta
Spring 2007**

Abstract

Based on research by Remafedi (1987), Henning-Stout (2000), Jordan (2000), Tharinger & Wells (2000), and van Wormer & McKinney (2003), lesbian gay, bisexual (LGB) youth face multiple risk factors. Given that 20% of LGB youth often self-identify in early adolescence or during middle school years according to Savin-Williams (1998), and that 40% “come out” during high school or late adolescence, school environments figure prominently in the lives of these youth. To this end, schools are specifically mandated by law and Professional Codes of Conduct in Alberta (Alberta School Act Section 45(8) and Alberta Teacher’s Association Article 9), as in many other jurisdictions, to provide safe and caring environments for (LGB) youth. The four personal histories presented in this paper deal with how a Christian school, many supporters of which confessionally and philosophically see LGB attractions, practice, and lifestyle as anormative, affected the identity development of four LGB students.

Acknowledgments

I wish to thank my supervisor Dr. Jim Parsons for the encouragement and thoughtful suggestions that he provided during the time this project took to complete. His encouragement provided the clarity and confidence that guided me to completion.

Additionally, I thank Dr. Dennis Sumara. There is much more I could say but let this suffice; without his encouragement and assistance, I would not have completed this program.

Other individuals who deserve special thanks are Alyce Oosterhuis, Leo Mos, Annelies Knoppers, Stuart Williams, Marian Williams, Rose Nydam, Karen Belter, Brad Smilanich, and Roy Berkenbosch; the steady support, encouragement, counsel, assistance and/or friendship provided by these individuals at critical times have contributed immeasurably to this project being completed.

And finally, I thank my four interviewees, Robert, Cameron, Betty and Jane who courageously, literally shared their lives with me and gave me permission to use their stories to make this project idea a reality.

Project Limitations

1. This study follows fulfils the requirement for a course-based Master's of Education; the research is delimited and presented in such a way as to fall within the parameters of a project.
2. A variety of names or terms related to homosexuality appear in the research. Some research uses the term gay, and lesbian to designate male and female persons respectively who are sexually attracted to persons of their same sex. As research either broadens its scope and understanding, or narrows its specificity, terms such as same-sex orientation, same-gender orientation, sexual minority youth or bisexual, transsexual, transgendered, two-spirited, and/or queer are used. Designations abound and selecting an appropriate name to fit my project has been a challenge.

After much consideration, I have decided to use the broad term LGB – lesbian, gay and bisexual. My initial preference was for same-gender orientation, but given that it did not appear as frequently in the research as LGB, I opted for the more common designation. The research I used focused mainly on lesbian, gay and bisexual youth which relates directly to the orientation of the four individuals whose stories are the main focus of this project. I did not use LGBTTQ given that the designations transsexual, transgendered, two spirited, questioning and queer youth did not address the context of this project.

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Introduction

There has been a great deal of “water under the bridge” since I first remember meeting a person who was lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB). Given that my childhood took place in the 1950s, and that my conservative immigrant parents possessed only a functional English vocabulary, it is not surprising that my education regarding human sexuality was basically non-existent. Other than the usual schoolyard information exchanges, the details that I did absorb about human sexuality came via a book given to me by an older sister. But, given the fact that human same-sex activity was considered criminal activity until 1969 (Lepischak, 2004, p. 85), there was no mention of homosexuality or LGB individuals in my personal education. Assuming that the world of sexuality consisted of nothing other than the information in the book, I was suitably shocked when I first encountered LGB individuals.

Fast forward to 2000; the messages about human sexuality are definitely “out of the closet.” For decades the media have been using sexual images to sell products, and feature films have contained varying degrees of sexual content, but until the 1980s, the images and sexual content presumed heterosexual orientation and practice as the basic norm. However, in the past two decades, LGB concerns and issues, such as benefits for same-sex partners and fostering children in non-traditional families – as in the case of Mrs. T.¹ (Filax, 2002) – and public events, such as annual Gay Pride marches, have become more common. Heteronormative institutions and culture, while still dominant, are being challenged to accept and accommodate the aspirations and expressions of LGB individuals. While this is controversial terrain for

¹ In 1997, Mrs. T., a foster parent, made public a ban on ‘non-traditional’ families fostering children and youth as directed by then Social Services Minister, Stockwell Day. Mrs T., mother of several birth children, and foster mother to over 70 foster children, who at the time of the ban was no longer in a traditional family, was denied foster children in January 1997. Mrs. T contested the decision through the government appeal processes. In April 1998, a Court of Queen’s Bench Justice ruled that the media could publish Mrs. T’ s name, thus breaking her anonymity, a measure she had chosen in order to protect the identity of the foster child in her care. For the time in between 1997 and 1998, Mrs. T was denied foster children.

many adults and societal institutions (witness the same-sex marriage debate), it is a veritable minefield for adolescents who face the confusing developmental task of identity formation. Unfortunately, adolescents who are raised and nurtured in conservative Christian environments may face an even thornier moral/ethical landscape than most adolescents.

The research that I have conducted for this project is situated against the backdrop of thirty years of teaching experience within a Christian school that is rooted theologically and philosophically within the Reformed Calvinist tradition and belongs to an association of schools known as Christian Schools International (CSI)². In one of my last years of classroom teaching, I had occasion to observe two LGB youth as they negotiated a secretive relationship in an environment that was not particularly LGB friendly. I have had LGB students in my classes prior to this experience, among them, Delwin Vriend, who took his case relative to sexual discrimination with the Alberta Government all the way to the Supreme Court of Canada. Interestingly, I taught three of Mrs. T.'s foster daughters. While the Supreme Court ruling in Vriend vs. Alberta has become landmark legislation for the LGB community, the Alberta government prevented Mrs. T. from fostering throughout 1997 and 1998. Also, my two daughters, who both graduated from Christian school, had close LGB friends.

My reflections about these LGB former students have generated several research topics. I am intrigued as to how LGB students have experienced the environment at a Christian school, and I am interested in their stories. I want to learn what it feels like, as an adolescent, to be told by teachers and fellow

² Christian Schools International (CSI) is an educational organization serving Christian schools. Founded in 1920, it has more than eight decades of experience serving Christian schools throughout North America and the world. The basis of Christian Schools International is the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, the infallible Word of God, and CSI's view of the world is firmly rooted in the Reformed tradition of Christian theology. This world-engaging ethos permeates the philosophy of Reformed Christian education and shapes everything it does as Christians—and as educators. CSI has more than 475 schools serving over 100,000 students in North America, and its head office is located at 3350 East Paris Ave. S.E., Grand Rapids, Michigan, 49512

students that as a person you are loved, but that the actions that give expression to your sexual identity are hated. I want to know what it is like to try to hide a sexual identity, to live wondering who you can trust with your most intimate secret and/or to worry about how you can undo the “choice” some people seem to believe LGB people make. I want to understand the kind of loneliness that attends the growing awareness that you have a different orientation and that heteronormativity is not your norm. I want to know if the research concerning LGB teens with respect to suicide, violence, drug use and sexual behavior corresponds with what happens in the lives of LGB students within Christian schools. And I want to hear about moments of grace when LGB students were supported and/or affirmed just for who they were, finding their place in a larger world.

The research question, ***“What impact did the atmosphere at the Christian school you attended have on your identity development as a LGB individual?”*** attempts to capture my interest in the identity development of LGB students in faith-based schools. However, this project cannot possibly address all aspects my interest and, as a project rather than a thesis or dissertation, its research is limited in depth and breadth. What this project can do, and hopefully does, is to present the stories of four LGB graduates of Christian schools that are rooted in the Reformed Calvinist tradition and give a glimpse into their lives. Their voices will contribute to a much-needed dialogue.

Importance of the Study

No matter what their moral, religious, ethnic or cultural background, identity formation, as discussed by Schlegel & Barry III (1991), is a normal developmental task for youth as they approach and enter puberty (Aries, E., 2001). It is true that ethnic or cultural milieus may have a different process of identity development; but, overall, identity formation is a universal developmental task. In some cultures, such as in that of the Making of the Men

cult among the Keraki people of West of the Fly River in New Guinea, as described by Benedict (1938), rites of passage are clearly defined community events. Other cultures, such as the Papago in Arizona or the Ojibwa in Canada (Benedict), gradually incorporate responsibility for adult roles into a child's daily experiences. In comparison, since the shift of population from rural to urban centres, mainstream North American adolescents generally negotiate the transition to adulthood in the company of their peers, without the partnership of adult mentors, as is common in Ojibwa society, or without the sanction and ceremony of the community, as in New Guinea. Graduation from high school, which occurs closer to the end of adolescence, is the closest approximation that North American adolescents have to a public rite of passage into adulthood (Fasick, 1988).

For LGB youth growing up in conservative Christian environments, such as those in the school where I taught, the tasks of adolescence are the same as for all youth. Not only do LGB youth need to weigh career, occupation and work choices, and carefully negotiate relationships with respect to their growing autonomy, but they also wrestle with issues pertaining to sexual identity. For the most part, these youth will be socialized by home, church and school to see heterosexuality as normative and right, and homosexuality as abnormal and sinful. But, according to research by Patterson (1995), cited by Tharinger & Wells (2000), as in any normal population, approximately 6% to 10% of these youth will consider themselves to be gay or lesbian. D'Augelli (1996) found that "sexual minority youth are commonly first aware of their same-sex attraction at about 10 to 12 years of age" and that "the increasing social acceptance of lesbians and gay men has allowed more sexual minority youth to become aware of their sexual orientation at an earlier age" (Tharinger & Wells, p. 160). While 6% to 10% is a small percentage relative to the total population, when one takes an ecological perspective, such as developed by Bronfenbrenner (1977), and considers the number of friends and family that are related to and

affected by this LGB group, the issue can hardly be swept under the rug or sidestepped as insignificant.

LGB youth, whether from liberal or conservative homes, face a difficult and complex task in negotiating their sexual identity. While mainstream youth do struggle with their sexual feelings and their expression, according to Savin-Williams (1988), they “flow naturally into the abyss of ‘normal sexuality’” (Aries, 2001, p. 322); that is, society recognizes heterosexual transition from childhood into masculine or feminine sexual attractions and roles as the usual path of human sexual development. For LGB youth, coming to grips with their sexual attractions and desires is “an extremely stressful process because it often occurs in the context and ecology of cultural denial, distorted stereotypes, rejection, neglect, harassment, and sometimes outright victimization and abuse” (Tharinger & Wells, 2000).

The context in which LGB youth develop their sexual identity is indeed troublesome. Tharinger & Wells rightly identify *actual* and *feared* reactions and rejection from others as an even deeper challenge that plagues LGB youth. According to Tharinger and Wells, it is the rejection by parents, siblings, friends, peers, extended family members, spiritual guides and God that is both actual and feared; in other words, LGB youth may fear having no advocates, no intimacy and no God. This context is the reality for many LGB youth in conservative Christian circles.

To suppose that all Christians and Protestant Christian schools, or even CSI member schools, view same-sex orientation similarly is inaccurate; a full range of opinion exists regarding homosexuality within the realm of those who are supporters of Protestant Christian schools. If one were to represent the range of this opinion on a continuum, the far right side would be home to some Christians and Christian school communities that present themselves as strongly anti-LGB; in these settings, homosexuality is seen as an aberration or

violation of the creation order as presented in the Bible, and all expressions of same-sex orientation are deemed abominable. Persons holding these beliefs would not necessarily openly advocate violence but at times, unwittingly and deliberately, direct verbal, emotional and psychological abuse toward LGB individuals. What is possibly the most extreme example of this strong anti-LGB sentiment would be the reported response of Trinity Baptist church in Owensboro, Kentucky, to the University of Southern Indiana for inviting Judy Shepard to campus to talk about the murder of her gay son, Matthew, in Wyoming in 1998:

Trinity Baptist church in Owensboro is upset that USI invited Judy Shepard to talk about the hate crime death of her son, Matthew Shepard. The protestors believe that homosexuality is against the laws of God. Church members sent out a news release stating: "TBC to preach truth in the form of signs to Fag-invested Univ. of Southern Ind." They continued by saying: "Matt is in hell, where he gnaws his tongue in pain, blasphemes God, screams in agony and curses other fags in Hell throughout eternity."

<http://www.google.ca/matthewshepard>

On the other far end of this continuum are the pockets of Christians supporting Christian schools who see same-sex orientation as an expression of normal diversity within the population and who would support full rights (such as same-sex marriage) for persons who are LGB. Christians of this persuasion do not read the Bible literally or use it as a textbook. Dr. Hendrik Hart, Professor of Philosophy at the Institute for Christian Studies (ICS), a graduate school in the Reformed tradition, explains in his foreword to Dr. P. Pronk's book *Against Nature?: Types of Moral Argumentation Regarding Homosexuality*,

Normally Reformed people would not be tempted to derive their sense of what is "natural" straight from the Bible, nor would they use the Bible to become informed and knowledgeable about homosexuality. Reformed Christians have a long tradition of regarding the Bible as a book of faith and not as a text for geology (the flood), biology (evolution), hygiene (purity code), economics (jubilee), or whatever else. The Bible gives us our ultimate perspective, our fundamental orientation for our lives, but does not provide us with data and concepts that we can simply and directly use in our time. Its concrete morality is not and cannot be ours. It is not a moral text. The Christian faith is not moralistic. (p.xii)

With respect to homosexuality, Dr. P. Pronk, (1993) Professor of Dogmatics and Philosophy at Hogeschool Holland, an affiliate of the Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, The Netherlands, holder of doctorates in biology and theology, and author of *Against Nature?: Types of Moral Argumentation Regarding Homosexuality*, states without hesitation that Bible texts “unanimously reject homosexual behaviour” (p. 265), but argues that “the fact that the Bible forbids homosexual intercourse is not the whole story” (p. 310). Just how the rest of the story unfolds involves what a reader actually does with the Biblical text; in other words, it is a matter of hermeneutics. Rather than take the Biblicist position (the Bible says what the Bible says), Pronk (1993) argues for a hermeneutic that takes into account the context and meanings that Scripture readers may bring to a text when he states,

Between the text and its interpretation stands the believer as user and meaning-bestower; he decides on the weight to be attributed to the text. This is not done arbitrarily but depends on a person’s theological ‘viewpoint’, hence with his fundamental faith assumptions. (p. 279)

Pronk goes on to describe three “revelational models of interpretation” that underlie different hermeneutics employed by Bible readers. The first model of interpretation argues that moral guidelines can and must be deduced from the Scripture simply and precisely because they are in the Scriptures. Christians of this opinion closely follow what is written in the Bible. The second model argues that guidelines for action can be taken from the Scripture, – but not because they are in the Scriptures, but rather because they are good for people. Because the guidelines are good for people, they can also be traced to the Scripture. The final model of interpretation insists that the guidelines of the Scriptures must allow Christians to do God’s will, which is discovered in determining what brings liberation to God’s people. As a result of this, Christians of this persuasion will not automatically do what Christians of other generations did; rather, they wrestle with how to live their faith in a manner that expresses what it means to be made in the image of God and is responsive to the gospel’s message of grace.

Two mid-scale positions also emerge on the continuum. The first of these, well to the right of centre, argues that LGB individuals are acceptable as people but the practice of anything expressing same-sex orientation is sinful, a position expressed clearly in the phrase “*love the sinner, hate the sin.*” Dr. Michael D. Williams (1996), formerly at Dordt College, Sioux Center, Iowa, now at Covenant Theological Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri, expresses this when he writes in the *Christian Educators Journal*

The reasons for the biblical prohibitions [of homosexual activity] is the same reason why modern loving homosexual partnerships must be condemned, namely that they are incompatible with God's created order...he [Paul] is saying that we cannot condemn the homosexuals because, apart from Christ we are equally under the righteous judgment of the law...However strongly we may disagree with homosexual practices, we have no liberty to denigrate the humanity of the homosexual. (36: 2, 7 & 9)

The other mid-point position, slightly to the left of the centre of the continuum, would suggest that LGB individuals experience a sexuality that has gone awry; in other words, it is not what God intended for human sexuality. What makes this position different than the “love the sinner, hate the sin” position is a practical, compassionate allowance, an allowance that Dr. Lewis B. Smedes, Professor of Theology at the School of Psychology, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, California, expresses when he writes in his book *Sex for Christians: The limits and liberties of sexual living*

I think that homosexuality is not the sexual orientation that God intended in creation. It is a genetic lapse.... I think that, if celibacy is not possible, it is better for homosexual people to live together in committed monogamous relationships of love than not. Homosexual partnerships that are committed offer the best moral option available. (p. 243)

Clearly, as noted, Christians read the Scriptures through different lenses. The purpose of this discussion is not to undermine the unique ways that people of faith understand and use the Bible. Rather the issue is how can educators, parents, and supporting church communities best contribute positively to the healthy identity development of LGB youth within Christian schools. For supporters of CSI schools rooted in a Reformed Calvinist heritage, the idea of

things such as baptism and covenant situate the understanding and discussion of the personal histories presented in this paper in a particular confessional place. And the themes that emerge from the histories and my analysis of these themes reflect that confessional place.

Review of the Literature

Relevant literature presents a troubling picture of life for LGB youth. While many conservative Christians may wish to dispute the statistics regarding LGB youth, such a dispute represents a calculated denial of reality. A higher than usual level of substance abuse is characteristic for LGB youth (Jordan, 2000). Jordan refers to the research of Savin-William (1994), which shows that some of the reasons for substance abuse and its associated risk factors (peer pressure, desire to experiment, and pleasure) may be the same for both heterosexual and LGB groups. But LGB youth have the added stress of dealing with a society that is heterosexist and homophobic. Jordan also cites Rotheram-Borus et al. (1995), who noted that problematic behaviours (substance abuse, conduct problems, aggression, delinquency and sexual activity) were more likely to appear in clusters or as a syndrome in gay and bisexual youth than for heterosexual youth. The 1989 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' "Report of the Secretary's Task Force on Youth Suicide", cited by Talburt (2004), revealed that some 30% of teen suicides are related to issues of sexual identity. A Canadian study done by King (1996), cited by van Wormer and McKinney (2003), found that gays and lesbians have nearly fourteen times the suicide ideation of heterosexual males. And van Wormer & McKinney cite Chung (1999) to document that homelessness is also problematic for LGB youth; of 125,000 homeless teens, half have been thrown out of their homes after disclosing their orientation to their parents. Complementary studies by Remafedi (1987), Blake, et al. (1995), Faulkner & Cranston (1998) and Nairen & Smith (2003) all corroborate the troubling risk factors for LGB youth. van Wormer and McKinney summarize clearly

The high rates of suicide, post-traumatic stress disorder, and substance abuse among gay and lesbian youth are indications of internalized homophobia that results from growing up as a sexual minority in a heterosexualist society. When people internalize the rejection that has been directed their way, they are less protective of themselves and more likely to engage in high risk behaviors such as heavy drinking and drug use. Young males thus are more apt to fail to practice safe-sex, exposing themselves to HIV infection; bisexual females are at the risk of doing the same. (p. 415)

While much of the literature deals with the negative aspects involved in identity formation for LGB youth, Talburt (2004) cites the identity development models created by Cass (1984) and Troiden (1989) as an alternative for understanding LGB youth identity. Both Cass and Troiden treat “subcultural needs as natural” (Talburt (2004) and present the identity formation process constructed by “committed homosexuals” as the normative model for LGB individuals. Troiden’s model has four stages:

- childhood sensitization (feelings of difference from same-sex peers),
- adolescent identity confusion (feelings of shame, denial, anxiety exacerbated by stigma and inaccurate knowledge about homosexuals)
- identity assumption (coming to define the self as homosexual and presentation of self to other homosexuals), and
- commitment (adopting homosexuality as a way of life marked by self-acceptance of homosexual identity and role).

This model, with its sense of movement from an awareness of difference to a sense of self-acceptance and contentment, downplays the notion of crisis used by Erikson (1968) cited by Aries (2001). For Erikson, the resolution of a crisis at each stage of development is a demanding task and failure to successfully resolve the developmental crisis delays and in some cases even prevents positive identity development. A more significant feature of Troiden’s model is that same-sex orientations can no longer be seen as unnatural or abnormal, a rather controversial paradigm shift for some individuals. And Talburt (2004)

maintains that harassment, stereotypes and fears of rejection commonly experienced by LGB youth could be minimized by adopting this new model.

Troiden and Cass do not present the only alternatives to the discussion of identity formation in LGB youth. Many conservative Christian people argue that same-sex attraction is a matter of personal choice, and, given the media's open presentation of homosexual characters and the proposed changes to the definition of marriage, they argue that liberal society is simply encouraging this problem behaviour. Savin-Williams (1998) seems to support this contention when he reports that

an increasing number of gay/bisexual youths are self-defining their sexual identity at increasingly younger ages, largely because of the recent visibility of homosexuality in the macro culture (such as the media), the reality of a very vocal and extensive gay and lesbian culture and the presence of homosexuality in their immediate social world (Aries p. 323).

As an alternative to the increasing acceptance of same-sex orientation in society, some conservative Christians, such as those associated with *New Direction for Life Ministries* (also known as *Flight Ministries*), *Exodus International/Exodus North America*, and/or *Focus on the Family*, propose reparative therapy (also referred to as transformative or re-orientation therapy). According to Worthington (2004), re-orientation therapy is based on several assumptions: namely, that heterosexuality is biologically, morally and psychologically superior to homosexuality; same-sex orientations are a matter of choice and choice can be changed; and change is preferred for healthy identity to develop. These assumptions are reflected in re-orientation therapies which teach that same-sex orientation is the result of a poor or broken relationship with God. In *New Direction for life Ministries/Telling Our stories*, a testimonial given by "Don" states

Once the basics had been covered, the road to healing could begin, but the leader said we must be willing to leave our issue(s) at the foot of the cross. Unless we were willing to let go of our baggage, we weren't ready to receive God's healing.

Re-orientation from a same-sex orientation requires therapy that blankets individuals in prayer, re-educates them through special guided sessions and gradually leads one to the acceptance that they are not LGB but that they are children of God. Successfully re-oriented individuals offer moving testimonials that chronicle the changes in their lives from being LGB to living as heterosexuals. For LGB youth within conservative Christian contexts who are busy negotiating a sexual identity and struggling with same-sex attractions, reparative therapy must sound heaven-sent. Indeed, anything that could “fix” the feelings that cause so much turmoil and heartache would be warmly received; one could be an accepted, valued and active member of the Christian community.

But reparative therapy has its detractors. Nicolosi (2003), Tozer and McClanahan (1999), and Beckstead and Morrow (2004), as cited by Worthington (2004), all state that reparative or re-orientation therapies have been used as an oppressive action against LGB individuals in society and that the potential for harm to LGB individuals exists and is well-documented. Mills (1998) claims that the credentials of the therapists associated with reparative therapy are sometimes suspect, that results published are not followed over time and that many “restored” persons are really not changed. Mills’ claim that restored individuals are not really changed is substantiated by White (1998), a gay evangelical Christian, who describes in his book *Stranger at the Gate*, how he pursued every available means to undo his same-sex orientation: personal prayer, confession, penance, professional therapy, shock therapy, exorcism, marriage and family life. White writes “there is no evidence that ‘reparative therapy’ has permanent success in the lives of most of those who claim a cure, and weeks, months, or years later, most realize the temporary nature of that ‘cure’ ” (p. 271).

White’s efforts were not superficial or short-term in nature; for the better part of twenty-five years White attempted to escape his same-sex orientation. Nothing broke it or even tempered it; White was irrevocably gay. In his words,

“homosexuality is a permanent human condition. To live with integrity, a homosexual person must eventually accept that reality and get on with his or her life” (p. 200). Again, this is substantiated by Grace’s (2001) comments on transformational therapy when he says, “one might live/act straight but it is improbable that one can change ones’ sex-and-gender differences” and by Pebbles’ (2004) work with ex-gay and ex-ex gay narratives. Pebbles (2004) reveals that re-orientation therapy may produce a change in expressed identity for ex-gay individuals but same-sex attractions are never removed. Ex-ex gay persons simply cannot sustain the new identity created through therapy and therefore return to their original same-sex oriented identity.

Methodology

The data for this research project was gathered by conducting interviews with four (two male, two female) LGB alumni of CSI Christian schools during the fall of 2006 and spring of 2007. The alumni were selected on the basis of their availability, their willingness to participate in the project, and/or upon recommendation from Rev. Roy Berkenbosch, campus pastor of The King’s University College. One alumnus, with whom I had an initial telephone conversation and interview, decided not to participate, at least, that was my conclusion when my telephone messages to arrange for subsequent interviews went unanswered. The participating alumni are between the ages of 23 and 27, are “out” to family and friends, are in committed same-sex relationships and are members of the Christian Reformed denomination.³

All but one of the interviews took place at my home at the request of the

³ The Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA or CRC) is a Protestant Christian denomination which follows Reformed Calvinist theology. The church promotes the belief that Christians do not earn their salvation; but that it is a gift from God despite one’s failings and that good works are the Christian response to that gift. The denomination currently counts nearly 300,000 members in approximately 1,000 congregations across the United States and Canada, and has its roots in the Dutch Reformed churches in the Netherlands. (wikipedia redirected from Christian Reformed Church)

interviewees; one interview session took place by telephone. Two interviewees supplemented the interview material with written responses, e-mails and/or creative professional pieces. The research question *“What impact did the atmosphere at the Christian school you attended have on your identity development as a LGB individual?”* served as a guide for each interview. Prior to the interview, a series of guiding questions (see Appendix) was created and then given to the participant for consideration during the introductory interview. While all the topics raised by the questions were covered in the interviews, the order in which the questions were addressed varied from interview to interview. In addition, the interview often gave rise to supplementary topics and questions which were also discussed.

The introductory interview was approximately 45 minutes in length and consisted of an informal social exchange (we had tea and cookies) followed by an explanation of the origin and goals of the research project. Each subsequent interview was approximately two hours in length, was recorded using a Realistic CTR-85 voice-activated cassette tape recorder and was transcribed by myself. After the introductory interview, a minimum of two interviews was conducted with each participant; the maximum was four. To set the context for each interviewee, I selected and presented quotations from the interviews as a succinct life history, prompted by Casey’s (1993) life history model. Casey comments that the life history model challenges those who read the life histories and the one who solicits the histories to not “sit in public judgment upon them” (p. 24). Utilizing responses from participants is also significant for Casey’s model; I too have employed this technique. After discussions with my participants, I analyzed, sorted, and categorized the interview material into the following themes which permeate the interviewees’ responses:

- feelings and experiences of fear, rejection and loneliness
- the lack of and need for role models
- tension between personal/sexual identity and religious teachings

- the desire to belong to a Christian community
- acceptance of sexual identity and orientation
- survival tactics

A mitigating circumstance affects every interview: namely, all interviewees are personally known to me. I know their families and/or they have been my students and/or they have been guests in my home. In an effort to provide anonymity, I have not included the taped interview transcripts as appendices. All names used are pseudonyms, and references that could identify the interviewee, their family or their setting have been removed. Each interviewee has seen and had opportunity to shape the text used in the project; as much as possible, the story told is their story rather than my creation of their story. Their desire to continue to be a part of their faith community as LGB youth is an important consideration for a much needed dialogue regarding the place of Christian LGB individuals in Christian schools and beyond.

The Interviews

The quotations selected and presented are intended to give an honest sketch of the lives of Robert, Cameron, Betty and Jane (all pseudonyms). The quotations are personal and often quite revealing and follow a natural chronology that traces each person's early memories through to commenting on their current setting. As well, the quotations are presented in conversational form replicating the interview setting and have been validated and approved by each interviewee.

Robert:

Early years (family life, elementary school, defining moments)

when I was growing up I was a quiet kid, off to the side, I was called 'different' by everyone, didn't have too many friends... I had one friend in Grade 2 who I really liked, he was the only one who I would go over and sleep over – I hate to say it but I enjoyed sleeping in his bed with him

I loved hanging out with the girls...I always got considered one of the girls...I had one guy friend and all the others were girls...I was a little girlish but nothing felt wrong about it. I would hang out with my cousins and use imagination, play with dolls and stuff, something else than hockey and sports

my brother wanted me to go out and play hockey with him and it was fine but it wasn't me; it was like I felt forced to go, it wasn't me

Early adolescence (family life, junior high, defining moments)

I came out to myself in Grade 7 when a teacher said about homosexuals – “when a guy loves a guy and a girl loves a girl, they're gay” – and it hit me and I remember saying “so that's what I am” but then I realized I'd said it out loud. That's when the teacher told me ‘but they're going to hell’ and that really scared me – like, then what am I to do?

then there was my best friend that I fooled around with a little bit, experimenting. I hate to say it but I was glad I did it, I enjoyed it and it felt good. Then of course you realize what you've done and it's like “I can't do this anymore, like wrong, bad, I can't”, but later you're wanting to do it again...did it quite a few times again, it felt good, comforting

I remember trying to make friends with the cool guys because it would make me seem straight – I tried to hang out with the cool kids and it never really worked, it felt like I had to perform and be someone different

in Grade 9 I really started trying to convince myself that I'm straight – I remember getting my brother to buy porn and I would watch it to hopefully have it turn me

straight. I brought Playboy to a friend's place trying to convince them that I'm straight – it's so irritating because you're not paying attention to other stuff going on in your life and you're just focused on this one thing – like I'm not gay, please don't think that I am

one person did touch me – it's awkward to talk about it and I don't know if the person remembers but he used to beat me up, grab me and play with me and it was horrible. It felt wrong, like no one should ever be able to hold you and touch you there, the way it was done felt wrong. If I gave up struggling it was over and done with – it was strange, creepy

people would call me gay, they would tell me that I ran like a girl an stuff like that. One time one of my classmates was being really strange and so gay that I remember verbally gay-bashing him myself just because you get them off you so they won't look at you that way

one of my teachers was always there for me – I remember [teacher] praying in the morning, saying something about prayers we can't talk about and just always looking at [teacher] made me feel comfortable because [teacher] has the personality that [teacher] could be gay too, just how [teacher] acted and talked. I felt comfortable with [teacher]; if I came out with anything I wouldn't be criticized for it

Later adolescence (family life, high school, defining moments)

we went on a school trip, such a stupid idea putting three people in a boat who didn't know each other, and who don't know how to swim or use a boat and put them in a lake – it was horrible. I still remember people laughing at me because I was “screaming like a girl”

I remember trying to be friends with people but I felt that they knew something was different about me and they would talk to me and smile and nod and then go “OK, I've gotta go” –they never wanted to deal with me. The friends I had were just friends at school, never did things outside of school

I got a computer and started looking at porn...like seeing a guy would really turn me on so I started typing in gay porn and I remember the sites coming up and me thinking, I should not be looking at this, I don't want this...you know inside you that you are interested so much and that you really want to look but it's wrong. I remember crying because I got so frustrated because of all the trauma going on in my head – like why, why am I gay?, if this is so evil and wrong why am I wanting to do this so much?

I remember voicing my opinion in class about homosexuality and people were looking at me like ‘what are you talking about’. It felt good to voice an opinion in class but I felt bad too because I remember a couple of times going with the crowd and saying derogatory things

two guys really bothered me. They would come up and pull my hair, they called me gay, and in one class one of them would grab my leg and it would just disgust me. It felt creepy and wrong for him to do that

one girlfriend I had never wanted to hug or kiss me, we were best friends...I remember walking hand in hand down the mall and feeling that it was two girls just walking strutting our stuff

of course when you turned 18 everyone went to the bar and all that... of course getting drunk for me was a really bad idea – a lot would come out and I would basically come out to people. I made it clear that I was either gay or bisexual but it was hard because I really didn't want to talk about it because I didn't want it to be true

Adulthood (defining moments)

I came out in November I graduated in June. I knew stuff was going to change when I came out; I never expected my friends to take it and say you're the same person – a lot of my friends that I had, I lost as soon as I came out

I felt personally that I had to sleep with women to convince myself that I wasn't gay – you see, high school was over and I was starting over. So I dated a girl after graduation, even had sex with her but it didn't feel right at all. I had to think about men just to get turned on in any way whatsoever. I broke up with her because I just couldn't do it anymore

people who were my friends in high school, I've lost contact with I was at a bar with some friends and I turned the corner and heard this laughter and unique voice and I'm like 'Oh my God, (name)' and she is like, "Oh my God, Robert". I remember saying, "thank God I wasn't the only one"

I told my pastor that I was gay and he basically said it's alright to be gay but you cannot express it, cannot tell anyone about it, cannot have a relationship, and you need to go to classes to help you because a lot of people have been made better. He basically put it that God gives us a choice about what we do but we should make the right choice

I want my boyfriend to be involved with my family but my one parent has said no so I've stopped going. It doesn't change who I am, my boyfriend could be with me for a long time so [parent] had better start getting used to it. My other parent is really supportive and will have my boyfriend in the house but it's also a little sad – that parent feels I should carry on the family name

it's so much betterin the past year I've been dating someone new and just everything's gotten – I actually feel loved, I feel wanted, I actually have someone I want to be with for God knows how long

Cameron:

Early years

I do remember hanging out with a friend of mine, I was maybe 5 or 6, and complaining about how all the boys talked about girls all the time – 'Why are they so obsessed with girls? What's the big deal?' I asked. 'You don't talk about girls

all the time do you?’ and he didn’t really say anything. At that moment, I realized oh he did, but with other people, just not with me. And that was a funny moment of realization, of being different, but at that point I didn’t think too much about it

Early adolescence

my memories of sexual identity only make sense in hindsight – a boy on my swim team who I would walk to school with sometimes, I would watch him play soccer before school and I would say I had a crush on him...or the video I have of me video taping this same boy sleeping and making a comment on how cute he was sleeping

I’d rather play with cars in my room than play hockey on the street, I’d rather do the musical at church or... there were enough oddball friends of mine that weren’t into those things so that I wouldn’t be alone in that although I was in some respects ostracized from perhaps the larger group, the group who did play hockey

Later adolescence

looking back I don’t know how I managed to survive the daily taunting, the being scared of entering the school by the door closest to my walk in order to avoid the crowded and unfriendly main entrance; I walked around to the back door. The school was divided into the 10/20/30 route or the 13/23/33 route and most of the unkind boys were in the latter. They took special joy in whispering rude things to me while sitting behind me in home room

one day after school I came to my locker and someone had used a knife or something and had written “fag” on my locker. I went to the office and said that there was graffiti on my locker and the next day it was painted over. I don’t know who did it...did they call me fag to say I was gay when I didn’t even know myself? – I wasn’t even out to myself.

there was this guest preacher who came and there was an assembly in the gym and he made some comment about being here to talk about some topic, love I think, and then he launched into a tirade against homosexuality. One teacher walked out; I felt I couldn’t walk out because of how that would colour me. I was really upset because what the pastor was talking about wasn’t about love, it wasn’t about understanding how difficult that it might be to be struggling with being gay in a Christian school and also at such a volatile time in someone’s life...there is a sense of your immortal soul and the weight of responsibility of being a Christian and what that requires of you

we were on a school trip and there were some boys who I didn’t get along with and they yelled ‘I want to kill Cameron’. Later when we were at the communal gathering place, singing and such, I was really miserable. A fellow student took note of my state and we talked to the teachers who definitely expressed concern and support for my position. Later there was an assembly and a meeting, I think the principal spoke, and things changed after that. I didn’t think it would but I remember things got easier

I had other outlets in my life – I took piano, alternate classes, had an interesting part time job and a girlfriend ...that relationship got me through high school because my girlfriend was open minded and knew of a world beyond that little one (in terms of arts and culture) and was also sexually experimental and more

experienced than I was so that was exciting at the time. In many ways this was my sexual awakening. And once it was awake, I could attend more finely to who I was attracted to

Adulthood

and having gone to a Christian school, I feel like I really bought into it – the idea of a Christian school or the way of thinking behind Christian education, the way that God is present in every subject that we do and that our life is about being grateful for the gifts and to exercise those gifts, to train them but then the life around me in the school wasn't necessarily reflecting the Christian values... to me there was always a kind of disconnect between the theory of Christianity and the way it was practiced in the school – and probably more so because of what I was coming to terms with

I've read a some books – What the Bible really says about homosexuality by Daniel A. Helminiak and Homophobia; A History by Byrne Fone ... I always find I have a need to research these things because that is where I come from...this is the growing up, the world that I come from, what my family holds dear...so to look at what the Bible really says is important

a lot of those [high school] friendships are still very important to me... there's a similar quality to the way these people live their lives to the way I live mine, a sense of searching, a sense of exploration, a sense of graciousness in the way that they live their lives and the way they appreciate the people that they run into. Those who I hold dear were also supportive back then...in the sense that our friendship is more important than where ever we go and whatever we turn out to be

when I came out to my parents, my one parent's reaction was extraordinary. That parent said, "I love you, you are my child" and hugged me and continued by saying "but don't forget the gospel". That was what that parent wanted to leave me with. I'm not exactly sure what is meant by that, it is something I still deal with because to my parents, that is so important. My other parent commented that 'it's one thing to know you are homosexual but when you bring someone home, that will be more difficult, that will be a different situation. But together, their response has been very loving, very generous, very warm and very kind, especially in contrast to the response of other families such as my partner's family

the point at where I felt comfortable with the label even though I don't like labels was when I came out to my parents. Labels are shorthand, like they tell people I'm gay but that doesn't explain who I really am

Betty:

Early years

I remember learning from a classmate what "homosexual" meant when I was 9, in Grade 4. Being thus aware, I don't think I ever met anyone who I either knew to

be or thought to be same-sex oriented until I was in junior high or high school. I remember visiting our neighbours across the alley when I was in elementary school. They were two women who lived together and I was curious about whether they slept in the same bedroom, but it never occurred to me until a decade or so later that they may have been a couple

Early adolescence

I was never as interested in boys as my other female friends were and when I was interested in boys, I remember that it was rarely because I was physically attracted to them; in fact, I would be surprised when other girls would comment that a particular boy was hot or good looking and I recall always being a little baffled as to the criteria of what made an attractive man

Later adolescence Note: Betty attended a public high school for grades 10-12

I did not become aware of my orientation at a specific point in my life, though I think it probably started when I was in high school. I recall having thoughts like, "I wish she were a boy" about certain female friends and acquaintances of mine. I look back now and think I must have had "crushes" on them. I also remember assuming that everyone felt a certain degree of attraction toward others of the same gender

in the community I was in during high school, people didn't really think about the person involved, they just simply thought that homosexuality was bad. It was not something people wanted to talk about and it seems as if no one in the community would acknowledge that any family member was gay or lesbian

I think that I was a little more exposed at the public high school than I may have been had I attended the local Christian school. It seemed like it was out on the table in the public school and it wasn't so much about passing judgment. Lets face it, everyone in high school is confused about who their sexual identity anyway. It's a very hard time and everyone is just trying to express themselves

Adulthood

we [Betty and partner] are currently talking with our elder and pastor about ourselves and they really don't know what to do with us; we would like to be members of our church community in the same capacity as anyone else. I want to tell people that there is nothing to be afraid of – we are ordinary people. The denomination says we should be celibate if we are going to be members but truly, that is not an option

as far as schools are concerned, if LGB students do not have good healthy role models, then they may gravitate toward the unhealthy stereotypes that are out there. In their struggle to develop a strong healthy identity, a lot of good could come out of it if they had healthy role models. People get stuck in communities that are unhealthy because they have been rejected

my partner and I have had some interesting experiences about when coming out. It was difficult to know when to tell; when we told some people they reserved judgment. In discussions after, they told us that they would never have agreed to support a lesbian relationship before knowing us. Now, knowing my partner and me, they are more positive. They do not see homosexuality as a defining factor in determining our friendship. They are now not calling our faith into question because of our relationship

Jane:

Early years

a lot of people say they knew [their orientation] in elementary already but I didn't; I thought I was like every other kid

when I was a kid I didn't know about it [homosexuality]. I found out a little while ago that a certain teacher I had when I was younger was gay – I had no idea, I was like, “holy cow” – I was so sheltered

Early adolescence

as a child my family was there for support –some of my good friends at school and their parents were always there for support too. But then, once high school hit and I realized this about myself, my family support was still there but there wasn't one hundred percent support because of that

I'm a really shy person to begin with so had people maybe even asked me about it I would have been willing to talk about it but I'm not the kind of person to just go out and say it – it was through sports I met other gay people and that was great

I couldn't change – in junior high I had a crush on boys and what not but it didn't really materialize into anything and now, I think I couldn't go back

Later adolescence

at high school I hung out with all my friends and after high school I hung out with my girlfriend and she had it the same way. She never told any family or any of her friends and it was just like we had our own separate little thing going on

it began as a friendship first ... and then she started progressing... at first we hung out with a whole lot of people and then we just wanted to hang out with each other. We never really talked about it [feelings for each other] because we are both really shy... she had never had a girlfriend before and neither had I so we both really didn't know what was going on or how to go about having a relationship... it took some time, it was a very natural progression... it was like we grew up together

I didn't tell anybody but then, in Grade 12, I think everyone was kinda starting to figure it out, like my closest friends because all my spares I would be going to hang

out with my girlfriend and they wanted to tag along and I didn't know how to say "no I don't want you guys to come along" but sometimes they did and they started to catch on. Then in Grade 12 one of my friends said that she knew about it and it was kind of a shock because I didn't know that any one knew about it

I didn't want to be ostracized from the school either, like it's high school and kids are very judgmental, opinionated, and very vocal about their opinions. To my knowledge I can't remember if there were any "out" students there while I was there

I was just the kind of person who could be friends with any group – I didn't experience any negativity because I wasn't 'out'. Maybe if I had been out it would have been different. I made really good friends in high school and had no negative feelings about anything

Adulthood

more and more I stopped hanging out with high school friends because I had plans with my other friends. That's the only thing I regret is losing touch with some people, not being able to hang out with them as much because it was not my priority at the time just because that's how it is when you're in a relationship, and I was in a relationship that I couldn't talk about. It's kinda sad about that but you have to sacrifice some things I suppose

after I came out I thought, now comes the hard part... with what's happening in my life, my parents need to know. I should tell them sometime – I'd been pushing this aside for my whole life

my one parent's response was a little harsher than I had expected. I knew there would be disappointment but I didn't think it would be like it was. I got a note from my other parent that made me cry, it took me by surprise because that parent always seemed like the harsher one. I had wanted my other parent to soften the news but then the one that seemed more harsh was the one being more supportive at the end – saying that I was still loved etc.... things are working out really well now that my parents are on board

I try to avoid the whole church part - but it's weird because I grew up going to church believing this one huge thing and now I don't know what to believe anymore just because there is this big barricade between them ever accepting who I am –so the church thing is hard... I just wish for the church it would be no big deal – I'm gay and that's it

Themes in the Narratives

After participating in the interviews, and listening to, and transcribing the tapes, I noticed that several similarities began to emerge. These similarities did not immediately translate into themes; the observations were rather general at first, and the commonalities became more apparent with continued re-listening and re-reading. Initially, I noted that each story was indeed different; no matter how similar the demographic particulars of the interviewees, each participant as a person was very different from the others and experienced his or her situation differently. For example, although Robert, Betty and Jane all attended the same elementary school and Robert, Cameron and Jane all walked through the doors of the same high school, how he or she experienced the atmosphere at the school was unique. I simply could not have interviewed individuals more different from one another had I used any criteria other than simple availability for my selections.

It also seemed to me that Robert and Cameron had more negative experiences at school than did Betty and Jane. Robert's comments about being called "gay" or "fag" and Cameron having someone say they wanted to kill him because of how his sexuality was perceived by classmates certainly illustrate a negative and threatening atmosphere. This observation corresponds with Green's (1974), and Jones and Tinker's (1982) sexual identity development literature that concludes that society is more tolerant of same-sex actions between females than males. In other words, it is more acceptable for females to be "tomboys" than for males to be effeminate; tomboy behaviour is seen as assertive and interpreted positively as an expression of a desire to achieve, whereas effeminate expressions are seen as "sissy" and interpreted as a sign of weakness. Robert's effeminate demeanor was ridiculed whereas Jane's interest in sports was accepted at face value.

Finally, I was surprised at the positive experiences that the participants mentioned or alluded to; I had initially presumed that the experiences would have

been overwhelmingly negative. To hear Robert recall the teacher who acknowledged the unspeakable or “*prayers we can’t pray*” at morning prayers or Cameron remember the teacher who walked out of the assembly are reminders that sensitivity and support, albeit individual and muted, did exist. However, while it might sound positive to hear Jane say she enjoyed high school and had no negative experiences, it is troubling for me to hear that the simple absence of verbal slurs or bullying constituted a *positive* experience. Being silent, avoiding confrontation, and exercising continual caution so as to not offend seems about as positive as playing tennis while handcuffed. I did not hear Jane talk about being affirmed and accepted for who she was, actions that are clearly supportive and essential for identity development.

But with listening and re-listening, I did find areas of commonality – themes that emerged although Robert’s, Cameron’s, Betty’s and Jane’s individual stories differ. And while I may have expected the feelings and experiences of LGB youth at Christian schools to be different from those in public secular schools, that simply wasn’t the case; feelings of fear, rejection and loneliness, struggles for self-acceptance, concerns for community acceptance and the need for role models leap over the faith divide and manifest themselves in a rainbow of survival tactics. The common themes should silence the critics who may suggest that the experiences chronicled are more a function of individual personality than related to LGB issues. Again, the themes are as follows –

- feelings/experiences of fear, rejection and/or loneliness
- the lack of and need for role models
- tension between personal/sexual identity and religious beliefs
- the desire to belong to a Christian community
- acceptance of sexual identity and orientation
- survival tactics

I. Feelings/Experiences of Fear, Rejection and/or Loneliness

One recurring theme that I heard from Robert, Cameron, Betty and Jane was fear – the fear of rejection from family, friends and/or social group; the fear of being found out; the fear of being ostracized or alienated, as well as the fear of the future. These fears are not entirely foreign to adolescent youth as their identity develops, but, for LGB youth, the fear is more intense precisely because they are a minority in a dominant heteronormative setting. When LGB youth are prevented from taking part in school activities, such as when Marc Hall was denied permission to take his boyfriend to his Catholic high school prom (cbc.ca/news/story/2002/05/10/hall), or when a Grade nine student at Ontario Christian School in Ontario, California was expelled from school because school authorities discovered her parent was in a non-traditional family (*The Banner*, November 2005), it is understandable that LGB youth fear the attitudes and actions of a heteronormative majority. Wrestling with the growing realization that you are different is difficult and can be clearly heard in the comments that follow from Robert, Cameron, Betty and Jane:

Robert: *yah it is a little hard – you get to high school and you only have four friends and then three of them ditch you and you only have one and you try to make all new friends*

then I came out – I still talked to a bunch of people when I came out in November – then they stopped talking to me in December – I still remember buying Christmas presents for a couple of my friends but never gave them because they stopped talking to me

[friend involved in sexual exploration] felt a little uncomfortable – for a while he didn't want to be left alone with me because he felt really uncomfortable – I still remember getting in a fight with him at school and after, the first thing that went through my head was 'I hope he doesn't tell' – that was the scariest thing for me – I felt I had to make my friendship good with him because oh God, who knows what could happen

it's actually words that hurt even worse, the mental abuse that gets put on to students ... in high school I was getting called gay, its really hard when it's in such a derogatory way

when I painted my fingernails my [parent] really found that really girlish; only girls do this or that... I never looked at it that way – anyway, [parent] finally snapped at me, grabbed me by the throat, and got I got up into [parent's] face because I was

just sick of being put down and having someone on my case and stuff like that – I felt so angry I got mad... I left and I didn't care where I was going

in high school I was scared a lot of time –I was scared my parents would kick me out, push me aside, leave me alone and I thought I'd lose everything in my life if I came out – I hated being in high school and not being able to come out – very frustrated – I'm still a person, I'm still a Christian, I'm still a good person but I'm not happy at all

Cameron: *my closer friends in high school knew that I wasn't entirely opposed to the idea of being gay – not to say that I wasn't scared of it*

and then a couple of weeks later, someone goes 'you know every time you say "hey you"' it sounds kinda gay' and I got really upset. For every suggestion that something I was doing was gay I got really defensive and really uncomfortable

in terms of my own sexual orientation, just a sense of not belonging there, of not being spoken to or not being a part of that community as I grew older especially... maybe more so now as I see peers of mine who are getting married and are having children

it's always a question of what is someone going to think when they find out that I am gay. I think part of that has to do with a way that a heteronormative culture makes gay men feel – like "half men" or like "girly boys",.. that I'm not completely a man because I'm gay. Something I know I hate, and I hate that about myself, but I can't be more open to a wider variety of gender expression –that men could be so much more kinds of men; the definition of man that seems to be standard in North America is so tiny. And yet it's something that I strive towards even as I deride it, and even though I know, because I'm gay, I'll never get there. Even though it's hard, I don't give up on it. And sometimes even in my relationship that's one of the things that I attack; that I would verbally attack other gay people for not being "manly" enough

Betty: *initially, it was as if a weight had been lifted; it was a relief to personally come to terms with this... I was also torn when I started to come down from the euphoria of having discovered mutual attraction and love. I started to worry about what my family and peers would think; what I would do about church etc.*

even though I attended a public school, as a family we were immersed in the [denomination] community, and it has very conservative elements... There is denial and derision and fear of homosexuality in those circles

Jane: *I had this big imagination where I was 'oh my parents are going to kick me out of the family and not want anything to do with me', to the other extreme where I thought that they would still love me cause I'm their child and all that. But I had no idea where they would fit into the spectrum with their acceptance of it... I knew that they knew but I just didn't want to vocalize it because it was so stressful*

so I didn't know how they would be, how they would react...would they still be my friend and this and that so that is why I didn't tell them. It's hard just because you

have to hide so much of your life really, certain people in your life don't get to know certain things, you don't tell...

my biggest concern was disappointing my parents. I didn't have any problems with it myself but I knew my family would... that upset me more than anything. I worried about what the future would be like too, how the family would take it, would I ever have kids because I always wanted to have kids so... We're still planning on it but that's another thesis

Development theorists such as Erikson (1968) and social psychologists such as Maslow (1968) suggest that all individuals have basic needs; for a positive self-identity to emerge, basic security issues, such as the need for food, shelter, acceptance and trust must be satisfied. For Erikson, who described identity development in terms of resolving a series of crisis, or for Maslow, who mapped development in terms of a hierarchy of basic needs, if the foundational issues were not resolved, healthy developmental progress could not occur. Given an environment that says one's sense of self and sexuality is unfortunate at best and abnormal at worst, such as occurs in a conservative Christian school context, the climate of support and acceptance required by adolescents is not fostered.

One does not need to be a psychologist to know that love and acceptance of an individual provides the foundation needed for a person to thrive; if popular anecdotes recorded in publications such as *Reader's Digest* or *Chicken Soup for the Soul* have any value, it may be that they give voice to the common need for acceptance and the positive results such support has for the individuals who receive it. Tharinger and Wells' (2000) work on the need for continuity for caregiving from families and schools gives credence to the argument that LGB youth require genuine support to counteract both the actual and feared rejections that are a problematic part of the development of LGB youth.

II. Lack of and Need for Role Models

I wonder if there is a person alive who has not, as a child, been asked “What do you want to be when you grow up?” I suspect that the various answers to that question were significantly affected by individuals who were observed either first-hand (as a child observes his or her parents; a student observes his or her teacher) or as presented in the media. I still remember being totally impressed as a child by the Ontario Hydro linemen who put new hydro poles on our farm – for several months running, I amused my family by scaling the fence posts on the yard using baler twine as a substitute for the leather belts and harnesses used by the linemen. But more important than career choice was identity and sexual development, a process in which I was influenced by my parents and others in a much more profound and long lasting way. For heterosexual youth, role models, both positive and negative, abound. But listen again to Robert, Cameron, Betty and Jane; their identity journeys are largely bereft of positive LGB models, potentially leaving them confused, vulnerable and alone. Thankfully, basic characteristics such as civility, decency and honesty transcend sexual orientation; those characteristics also resound through Robert’s, Cameron’s, Betty’s and Jane’s voices.

Robert: *everyone says there is so much more outside of school and all that and one day I realized that I am concerned about everything else –why was I worried about everything in school – it’s just that tiny little box, there are so many more people out there like me, more than I ever imagined. I’d heard of Gay rights march and heard that there are quite a few people and not until I actually walked in it and went “there’s hundreds of me, thousands of me, and that’s just in this city.” It makes you realize that everyone has probably gone through this*

Cameron: *I think the biggest thing that I feel is the invisibility of gay people, it’s never brought up, it’s never talked about, “there are no gay people”. Hummm. And I think that’s partly what’s so difficult about it – it’s that you have no reflection of yourself to grow with and so often that’s important at that age, with any child to have someone you can look to and say that’s what I’m like, that’s what I’ll be like when I grow up and so for me those images weren’t from religious studies or church, they were from pop culture*

when I think of my the way that I’ve approached coming out with my family and I contrast that with a relative of mine ...so he’s in this relationship with this man, and it doesn’t sound like a very healthy relationship – I only hear bits and pieces and

sometimes my mind is boggled because if I was in that same position, in that same family, same environment, would I end up any differently?

Betty: *when an adolescent feels that he/she might be discovering that they have a same-sex orientation, I believe it is our duty to convey that it is possible to live in healthy, happy same-sex relationships. If we support our young gay Christians, if we give them room to acknowledge who they are as sexual beings and as children of God, if we give them support, then maybe they'll be better to stay within their traditional support systems, and won't be compelled to become involved in unhealthy habits that tend to fulfill stereotypes*

Jane: *well, she had never had a girlfriend before and neither had I so we both really didn't know what was going on or how to go about having a relationship*

so we just met one friend through friends and she took us under her wing and introduced us to a whole community and showed us that the feelings we were feeling were normal and that [homosexual feelings] are nothing to be ashamed of"

For Robert, Cameron, Betty and Jane, negotiating their development as a LGB youth was difficult. Most youth enjoy the benefit of role models who provide a picture against which the youth can test their own feelings and ideas. Leaders in the community, in churches and in schools often provide a secondary mirror for the developing adolescent to view alongside their parents and other family members. Without LGB models within their immediate circles, the LGB youth may feel invisible and, consequently, often look to popular culture for validation. For Robert, the difference of having the one teacher who *simply "looked like he could have been gay"* was significant, in that Robert felt safe and valued in that teacher's presence. Because we know how influential role models are, imagine the positive spin-offs that could occur if LGB individuals were openly validated as LGB people within Christian circles.

Attachment theory also figures strongly in discussing both the influence of role models and positive identity formation. Bowlby's (1969, 1980) theory of attachment, cited by Tharinger & Wells (2000), argues that attachment behaviours are innate and form a basis for personal security and development. LGB youth often have the "attachment rug" pulled out from under them when they come out; parents, schools, family and religious institutions are critical in

serving as anchors for LGB youth as they attempt to negotiate the pains of identity formation (Tharinger & Wells 2000).

III. Tension between personal/sexual identity and religious teaching

Sandwiched in the middle of thirty-one chapters of wisdom literature in Proverbs is the proverb *“train children in the right way, and when old, they will not stray”* (Proverbs 22:6 - New Revised Standard). The Israelites were no stranger to this proverbial wisdom as Deuteronomy 6: 7 – 9 told them to tell their children about Yahweh and the law of God: *“when you are at home, and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign upon your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.”* Acting on the instruction and promise of Deuteronomy and Proverbs, many Christian parents within the Reformed Calvinist tradition baptize their children, take them to church, have them attend church education classes and enroll them in Christian day-schools. Many parents also encourage their young adult children to attend Christian colleges, all trusting that the teachings that nurture their children will encourage the growth and acceptance of faith in their children’s lives. Interestingly, the comments that Robert, Cameron, Betty and Jane make do not reject what they were taught; rather, they experience a painful disconnect and tension between their sexual identity and what they have been taught about human sexuality by the triumvirate of church, school and home. The position taken by many people that homosexuality is chosen and/or that celibacy is the only acceptable lifestyle is particularly troublesome for Christian LGB youth.

Robert: *you really don’t want to hear that the church won’t support you in who you are; they want you to lie, they want you to be unhappy and live alone... if you aren’t living with a woman you have to live alone. I want to be happy, I want to live with someone forever, like just because I want to be with a guy doesn’t mean I don’t want to get married and have a family. There is no way I’m going to waste my time and sit around... it pushed me away from the [denomination]; yah they want me there but they want me to shut up – really irritating*

I asked, "if it's such a sin, how come I was born this way?" and he [pastor] basically put it that God gives us a choice about what we do but we should make the right choice, so he [Pastor] never really tried to say that it was choice of my own to make but he said that God made me be able to choose what I want... somehow deep down inside of me, I apparently chose this a long time ago... even before I was able to think about it I chose this

my teacher was slightly open-minded – a hard-core Christian but who understood that there is a world out there too and that somehow that world has to fit in a little bit. It was said that there were other [gay] people out there. I didn't like my religious studies class.... it felt odd because I couldn't voice my opinion without it being wrong and it's hard to have an opinion being wrong when it's your belief

my [parent] goes, "no, you can come home whenever you want to straighten your life out and get back onto the good path." I couldn't believe that my parent would say that to me. [Parent] keeps riding my case about it

I really haven't been going to church, we are trying to find a church that both my boyfriend and I like but ...we never really found a good church to go to. We went to one church and it was really nice but the nice little sermon [about the evils of homosexuality] made me so upset

Cameron: *in a Christian school – it is not only about being true to yourself or discovering who you are, there is a sense of your immortal soul; a sense of the weight of responsibility of being a Christian and what that requires of you. So I think that is something that is unique to a Christian school and what we feel we are being called to be beyond who we are discovering*

I'd gone to the profession of faith classes and I found it really exciting to explore what the church was saying, about what the doctrine was, because I have a great affinity for my denomination, for the way that they think through their faith, but I never made profession of faith... I didn't feel ready to make that commitment to the church and also because I was dealing with coming out at the same time... they were all conflicting in a way, I never made that step

so we [church elder and Cameron] talked a bit about what that [homosexuality] means and I think what surprised me was some of the prejudices, maybe not prejudices –it is a strong word – but ideas or theories of what gay people are like that he had from having no experience with gay people. It seems to me that he said there are normal homosexuals who live their own lives, but then there are those promiscuous ones that you see on television and that get all the news, the more flamboyant ones, who don't hide so easily or who aren't invisible. I guess, and for me it was almost shocking, the ideas he had about gay people when I was sitting there across from him, and him knowing me from years at the church

and I think something else in terms of this courage, or this humility towards something that one doesn't understand – it seems to me to be a very Christian idea, if we think about the Christian idea of grace, or forgiveness or even creation, we can't understand or fathom really how it all works. The concept of forgiveness of sins is extraordinary in the Christian story, and there's such a sense of humility and graciousness that is needed to face that – I have this image of someone on bended knee when I think of this humility – I've seen Christian grace in the way my family has treated me and I've seen it in some of my friends in how they've dealt

with my coming out. And that takes courage and that's why Jesus was such a great figure for us to follow

I can't say that others are wrong [about homosexuality] because it's a question of beliefs...and maybe because I'm still struggling with this – because I don't know if it's right or wrong, I don't know if it's a mortal sin or whatever. I don't know, so maybe I'm scared that they're right, so to even to bring it up with someone, because I don't know, and I'm willing to admit I don't know, then I feel weak in terms of that argument

Betty: *there are passages in the Bible that condemn sexual perversion. I believe that these perversions involve activities that are hurtful to those partaking in the activities or those who are connected to them. I do not believe that a homosexual relationship that is committed and monogamous falls into this category. All the same, I do not necessarily believe that same-sex orientation was part of God's original created design; it is among a multitude of things in creation that have diverted from perfection, and I am convinced that God's redemptive power can work through all of these things, including same-sexual orientation*

Jane: *my friends don't have a religious background, just either their families didn't or they just don't agree with it now at this stage of their life. So then when they hear that I came from such a religious family they're like "boy, that's difficult"*

The church thing is difficult because from the church's standpoint, it's [homosexuality] just considered the sin above sins. And when you hear the word it's a negative thing – homosexuality and church they don't really mix from things you hear

I don't like the phrase "love the sinner, hate the sin" because love and hate are the two most polar opposite emotions and putting them together in the same sentence regarding the same person just doesn't seem possible to me. If you're going to love a person, love them no matter what. Loving one aspect and hating another – it just doesn't make sense to me. And that's the church's standpoint, that's where they sit with the subject so I don't know where to go from there

The comments, "they want me there but they want me to shut up"(Robert), "there is a sense of your immortal soul"(Cameron), "God's redemptive power can work through all these things"(Betty) and "I don't know where to go from there"(Jane) cut to the core of the tension between what these LGB youth have been taught and who they actually are. Who could maintain the faith and be part of a community in the face of such an obvious disconnect? While listening to Robert, Cameron, Betty and Jane, I cannot ignore the tension that surfaces in me. There is something about having sat through years of baptism services at church and having heard and actually believing the promises of being part of

a covenant or faith-family that tug at me. The theological position of “loving the sinner and hating the sin” is untenable in that it creates the inner conflict that Robert, Cameron, Betty and Jane describe and potentially disenfranchises them and other LGB individuals from their faith-community; it seems counter to the Reformed understanding of baptism and covenant wherein water serves as a symbol of God claiming each child as a member of a covenant of grace and, together with the gathered faith-community, pledging life-long love, nurture and support. It is not that I think there is any actual magic in the baptismal sprinkles that mark the foreheads of these youth but it does give me pause; if the promise that accompanies the baptismal sprinkles cannot withstand the mystery of the why of same-sex orientation, then of what value is that baptismal promise? Given that same-sex orientation is not a choice but rather part of the very nature of a person, efforts must be made to affirm such individuals in the full faith-community – churches, schools and community events alike. “Hating the sin, loving the sinner” is simply not in the ball park.

IV. Desire to Belong to Christian Community

Question. What is your only comfort in life and death?

Answer. That I, with body and soul, both in life and death am not my own but belong to my faithful Saviour, Jesus Christ...

This first question and answer in the *Heidelberg Catechism*, one of the confessional documents of the Reformed faith, and the Christian Reformed Church, is one that Robert, Cameron, Betty and Jane have, in various forms, heard often. The question and answer are inseparable; together they sustain all the Christian teaching Robert, Cameron, Betty and Jane have experienced from their earliest Sunday school classes to their highest level of Christian education. Not only that, but each of these LGB youth have also been baptized as infants and thus, by confession and tradition, belong to a faith-covenant relationship that puts them into a community of covenant-minded believers. While all children belong to basic biological family unit that, except for tragic or unusual

cases, nurtures and supports them as they develop, Robert, Cameron, Betty and Jane also belong to a faith-family that has promised at their baptism to help care for them and encourage them in their faith. But the faith-family to which they belong is deeply divided on how to respond to same-sex orientation, and some faith-family members do not embrace their LGB relatives. As I listened to Robert, Cameron, Betty and Jane tell their story, I was struck by how each of them indicated in some way that they wanted to be a part of their faith-families as LGB individuals. Questions about their own beliefs are not spawned so much by their own questioning of theology as from the lack of acceptance they feel as LGB individuals.

Robert: *I still do want to find a church but I don't want to find a place that's pointing fingers and pointing me out and saying oh, "you're evil" But I miss going to church though. I feel like I am losing a little bit*

it's not like I'm expecting a church to suddenly change so it associates with just everyone – I don't suddenly want to go to a whole new religion just so that it fits my life. I've grown up in one denomination and my boyfriend grew up in another and he understands that they told that he was wrong and whatever but he's still a member of that denomination. We haven't wanted to go searching around for a church – it's not the "funest" thing to go do on a Sunday morning

Cameron: *but then as I grow older, I'm thinking, what place does the Bible, what place does the church, what rhythm of who Jesus really was, have in my life... it's interesting that something might have meant a lot to me in my high school years in terms of how I live my life, exercises less sway now that I'm older*

and there were a few friendships in the Christian school that I really valued. Because I'd been away from a Christian school and because we came from similar background terms of similar ethnic group, and similar religious background, I valued Christian education... I really appreciated and was excited about having that connection

and I realized in that moment when I came out to [church elder], I came out to the church, that if there was going to be that voice or that representative in the church who is gay for younger people to say its possible to be gay and in the church, that person would have to be me; I would have, that would be my role in a sense in the church. Because I was moving away and I'm not as involved in the church community as I once was that...that's not what I'm going to do – that's not going to work out

so, but, then of course, there are going to be people who ask the same question when they are growing up "Where are the gay people in the church who are going to help me in this?"

I don't quite know if a Christian faith in the way that I was brought up is going to be a part of my life... I do know that through the example of my parents and the good Christian people that I know, that there are ways of treating people and ways of living your life that I hold dear in terms of attempts of being gracious toward other people, loving, and open minded, and generous, and these kinds of things... to keep me humble and human because its always been important for me to respect where I come from and respect my family

Betty: *my partner and I love the denomination to which we belong; it is our home, our family, represents our traditions and generally reflects our values for Christian action and learning. It is the most familiar church setting we know and we want to stay with it. And we want to use our gifts. If we cannot be accepted as we are and use our gifts, what is the use of staying with the denomination?*

Jane: *well I wish the church was different for sure – like I wish they would just accept it - homosexuality isn't going away. They are going to have to accept it eventually because more and more people are coming out of the closet”*

people pick out key phrases in the Bible that say this is right and this is wrong – we should look at it as a whole. It shouldn't matter, people are who they are and you should love them regardless. God says that he loves every one so to condemn or judge people on who they like... I wish it wasn't such an issue. I just wish people could see past it

I was thinking about going to church but, I just feel like such an outsider there now

Given the fact that they feel they are not accepted for who they are, I am taken in by Robert, Cameron, Betty and Jane's resiliency and their desire to maintain connections with their faith-community. Naturally, much of this desire has to do with the fact that the community includes their families and acquaintances, traditions and lived histories, as well as basic principles and values. While the link between these faith-roots and their present situation is indeed weakening, it is clear that Robert, Cameron, Betty and Jane, if they were affirmed as LGB individuals, would maintain the faith-community connection. As I hear them, I am reminded of Emmy Werner and Ruth Smith's (2001) longitudinal study on resiliency done from 1955 -2001 and cited by Dixon (2003). Werner notes that children can develop amazing resilience with the influence of even just one advocate or one external entity:

The fourth thing that made a difference for me –when there was no Grandma Kahaunaele, when there was no Wynona Reuben, [or] the many, many others who cared –was that somewhere, someplace down the line, somebody had taught me, 'There is somebody greater than us who loves you.' And that is my hope

and my belief. Whatever that translates for you –a belief in God, a belief in religion, a goal, a dream, something that we can hang on to. As adults, we need to give our young people hope and something to hang on to.”(p.209

Given the powerful expression of faith and hope contained in the opening of its catechism, Christians of the Reformed tradition need to find a way of making the words of the confession come alive in a practical fashion for the LGB youth that are a part of its faith-community. For children of God’s covenant they are.

V. Acceptance of Sexual Identity and Orientation

To some degree, all individuals crave a sense of equilibrium. It is true that there is a time in our lives when we thrive on risk and adventure but those desires usually have a limited shelf-life. The idea of “getting settled” or “settling down” captures more of the usual pace of life and part of getting settled occurs when a degree of understanding and acceptance of ourselves has been accomplished. The period of adolescence is characterized by searching as young people strive to understand themselves and their world, and to create an identity for themselves. Robert, Cameron, Betty and Jane have experienced the searching of adolescence and have come to a point of accepting their sexuality and orientation. For the most part, they are past the point of questioning their sexual identity; they are out to their families and communities, they are in committed same-sex partner relationships, and they are creating a life for themselves. They have experienced five of Erikson’s (1968) eight stages of development (trust vs. mistrust, autonomy vs. shame and doubt, initiative vs. guilt, industry vs. inferiority, and identity vs. identity confusion) and negotiated each developmental crisis in a positive fashion.

Robert: *I would like to say you’ve really got to realize that it’s here – it’s not something you can change about yourself, you’ve been this way forever and you don’t ignore it. If you’re ignoring it, looking straight ahead and not checking the sides and everything, you’re missing so much and you’re probably hurting other people... Even with my old friends, and all that –it didn’t change who I am, I’ve always been the gay guy, not the guy who suddenly comes out of the closet*

the idea of “loving the sinner but hating the sin” – it’s an impossibility. Just because I’m gay someone may try to accept it, but really, that person still hates me. I didn’t make a choice to be like this – like I said before, I would never have chosen this –never in my whole entire life

Cameron: *when I think about myself, when I think about transgendered, or transsexual people, which is an experience completely outside of mine, the only way I can approach that is with an ‘I don’t understand or I don’t know’ –it’s almost a position of humility – that there is something that I can’t experience; that the human experience is so broad that there is no way that I could possibly know what that’s like*

and because I’m “out” at school and “out” at work – a lot of my work is based on a queer identity; I live in a gay relationship, and all these friends and family who know these things – its not an issue for them, at least its not something they confront me with even though I may feel sometimes intimidated by it. But really its things I feel I’m inflicting upon myself. And that’s a struggle that I don’t know if that will ever go away. I don’t know if it’s because I feel I can pass for straight pretty easily; that I feel like I’m so close to being normal, but this is the one thing that holds me back and maybe I just want to be normal, so I hate to think that. ...sometimes, it’s so weird to think about; sometimes I love being gay, sometimes I hate being gay...and sometimes I wish it wasn’t even an issue that I thought about. That would be great

and in some ways it feels like, looking back, as I think about it now, those difficult years after high school, I had to get past this issue of being gay and it took years before I could begin living my life – I always feel like I’m catching up, I always feel like I’m behind; like where I am now I wish I was 4 years ago because of those three or four years that I feel I lost in terms of this difficulty, in dealing with being gay

Betty: *I am blessed to say that my partner and I had a commitment ceremony. We were surrounded by a community of over 80 people, most of them friends and family who are connected to the denomination. That we were comfortably able to invite almost all of our immediate and extended family members is a testament to the grace of God in our lives*

another thing that I’ve said before, but would like to repeat, is that being gay is not the definition of who I am. I remain, first and foremost, a child of God. I have gifts that I want to use to serve my community, and to propagate peace and justice in this broken world. And yes, I am in a same-sex union. I have a loving partner, and our relationship is a significant part of my life, but it is not the only part of my life

Jane: *she had an interest in me ... a whirlwind of emotions came... I was questioning but I liked her too, it just felt right and I never looked back. When it happened, it was like, this is great*

I never really denied it, I knew it was what I was and I accepted it full-on and I was OK with it. Just being in a happy healthy relationship was really good, it being my first one, it was a good one to have and grow through and experience all those feelings

no I never really questioned myself, at first I was wondering if it was just a phase but then it just felt really right and I couldn't imagine going out with a boy. I didn't think a boy could feel as good as she did. It just didn't fit

I would laugh at them [people who say that with counseling you can change]. I'd say, no, I didn't choose to have a life where I had to hide my whole life – If I could choose, it would be so much easier – it would be just the opposite, but that's not how it worked out... I didn't choose how it is. It's just in you I guess

After years of struggle, Robert, Cameron, Betty and Jane have accepted their same-sex orientation. It is important to hear that they have struggled; “*I would never have chosen this*” (Robert), “*I feel I'm so close to being normal*” (Cameron), “*being gay is not the definition of who I am,*” (Betty) and “*I didn't choose a life where I had to hide my whole life*” (Jane). There is a particular poignancy in witnessing a struggle where the cards are stacked; these comments clearly counter the notion that sexual orientation is chosen. But even though Robert, Cameron, Betty and Jane have accepted their orientation, there is still evidence of an on-going struggle. Betty reminds us and herself that she is first and foremost “*a child of God*” as if being LGB and being a child of God might be mutually exclusive. . Cameron struggles with being “*normal*”, a struggle that is rooted in the position that the only normal is heterosexuality. Jane, although the most free of conflict in her acceptance of her orientation, also sounds a note of resignation when she says “*but that's not how it worked out*”. After reviewing the manuscript Cameron he remarked how sad he became when reading these reflections. “*There is no pride in any one of our acknowledgements of who we are,*” he said. “*Perhaps a more positive school environment would be a start in correcting that.*” But, by and large, Robert, Cameron, Betty and Jane have accepted their sexual identity and are currently busy pursuing their interests and living their lives.

Some Christians who regard the acceptance of a same-sex orientation as inappropriate argue that same-sex attractions can be overcome if one submits completely to the power of Jesus Christ. The Exodus International Ministries are dedicated to this transformation and offer reorientation programs for LGB individuals. But a strong caution is echoed in Tozer and McClanahan (1999),

Beckstead and Morrow (2004) and Worthington (2004) given the degree of harm, including the increase in suicidality, that results from the self-hatred generated by reorientation treatment.

VI. Survival Tactics

In the midst of adversity, those who need to provide reasons for others to continue on with a difficult task will at times resort to using motivational clichés. Given the number of hits that surface when one googles “when the going gets tough, the tough get going”, this cliché must be an all time favourite. But considering the adversity that attends the journeys of LGB youth, it is perhaps best to refrain from resorting to such banalities. While Robert, Cameron, Betty and Jane did not experience the most severe of LGB transitions through adolescence given that they did not experience physical violence, were not thrown out of home or school, and did not have or, other than Cameron, did not disclose inclinations towards self-violence, one can hear in their voices the use of survival tactics common to LGB youth. Lying to self and others, repression of feelings, development of multiple personalities and lives, verbal gay-bashing, avoidance techniques, passive or indirect communication, attempting to be straight and withdrawal from familiar social circles are just some of the survival tactics used by LGB youth. The fact that Robert, Cameron, Betty and Jane did not experience the most traumatic of transitions is most likely due to the unconditional love given by their families and/or the support of at least one significant ‘other’. It is interesting that, in spite of their Christian upbringing and schooling, not one of them refer to their faith as an anchor during the years of struggle they experienced.

Robert: *I didn't really want to know them because they weren't like me...I had to lie to myself already... I had a hard time making friends*

I loved hanging out with the girls –I just felt like a girlfriend – my friends even said oh you're just a girlfriend – a lot of people I talked to just saw me as a girlfriend or just a friend, never really looked at me as a potential boyfriend – a lot saw me as asexual – I'm not a boy or girl, I'm just nothing–it felt like I was one of the girls

basically the only people I could feel comfortable talking with were my friends but none of them would really understand – I felt like I had to ignore it [homosexual feelings] – I tried to ignore it most of all

I remember one person saying that it would be absolutely horrible for two men to raise children... and I blew up and said there are no studies proving that two fathers or two mothers can make a better or worse child than straight couples can do... I've heard about amazing gay families and bad gay families but you also hear about good and bad straight families...

I remember trying to make friends with the cool guys cause it would make me seem straight – Grade 8 and 9 I tried to hang out with cool kids and it never really worked... it felt like I had to perform and be someone different – annoying when you're already trying to be someone different, trying to be three things at once

and I still remember verbally gay-bashing him myself just because you get them off of you so they don't look at you that way

I felt personally I had to sleep with women to convince myself that I wasn't gay

when I am with my family, I do hold it back a bit just because there is tons of family around and I know it's uncomfortable for them so I'm not going to shove it down their throats or anything. Even if my boyfriend is there, we will sit beside each other but even if I had straight couple at my house and they were sitting there holding hands and cuddling, I would find that disrespectful

Broke Back Mountain is an amazing movie, it's a movie that had to have been made – it really gets down to a lot of gay relationships, like you have to keep it silent until something really wrong happens, and then you really realize how important it was

Cameron: *and there were other outlets in my life – I took piano and drama lessons and I had a very interesting part time job. I had a girlfriend from half way Grade 11 into university. After high school, I was involved in things where I was meeting people who were gay and for whom it clearly wasn't an issue*

because it's a way I am, that I almost always operate through the official channels to lodge a complaint instead of doing something more informal or more direct than the person who is bothering me

I would verbally attack other gay people for not being “manly” enough

so [my parents and I] wrote letters and e-mails about it [moving in with my boyfriend] because talking about it could be difficult if one gets emotional – so I wrote a letter explaining my position – oh no, actually they wrote a letter first explaining to me why they thought it [living with boyfriend] wasn't a good idea at this time

so in some ways probably after leaving high school or, as I was coming to terms with being gay it was just – I didn't want to be gay because it would prove that they [people who called me gay or fag] were right in a sense... And I didn't want... even though I have no contact with them, I don't want to give them that, that power

I had lunch with some of the most conservative of the friends I've kept. I'm not as close to them as I used to be and because that relationship hasn't changed much I

don't really want to threaten it. I don't know what it is, but I'm shy about talking about my boyfriend around them... but also in those settings, it's with people who don't ask either and I always err on the side of not saying anything about it

Betty: *I come out to my parents in relatively short order after becoming involved with [partner] and realizing that I am gay. [Partner] and I "came out" in our social circles quite quickly. I would say within weeks of getting together. Neither of us was previously known as gay, so we came out as a couple. Word got around pretty quickly, sometimes without us knowing about it. In some ways it was like a race to try to tell the people whom we really wanted to know before they heard it through the grapevine and felt offended that we hadn't told them personally*

I immediately told my sister and her husband about [partner], as well as some of our friends who are in their 30s and 40s. Those folks were really good sounding boards, because they had the perspective of people in the same community, but they're half a generation older than we are, so they were initially more inquisitive and worried about us than were our friends and acquaintances who are closer to us in age

my partner and I do not want to "fly a banner". We recognize the controversial nature of the topic so we do not want to put anyone on the defensive. But we don't want to have to hide or be defensive about it either

Jane: *for years it was like a separate life because just growing up in the family that I did, it never came across me to tell them [parents] because I never knew how they would take it. I just didn't want the thought of them being disappointed so I had pretty much two lives*

I just fit in with everything and if anything did come up I would just shy away. Just because I'm not a big fan of confrontation, I try to avoid it at all costs so I just didn't put myself into those situations that would involve it

I didn't want it to leak into my other life. I guess the first people I would want to know in my family life would be my parents and I would want me to tell them as opposed to finding out from somebody else – that's why I wanted to keep it as separate as possible until I was willing to tell them

I don't even remember the subject coming up very often. I'm sure it did but maybe this sounds wonky but I have no recollections of it. But if it did, I'd probably just sat there silently taking it in. I definitely wouldn't be vocal about it or anything – just because I'm a shy person in class anyway

I never did that [criticize gays] because that would have been like going against myself. I just probably would never bring it up in any situation

so I am just myself – I don't deny it when it comes up but I also don't bring it up or anything like that, I guess my tactic has been, not avoidance, but I just go with the flow and I make people comfortable around me. I had one friend who was always putting it in people's face... people, I could tell, got uncomfortable around her because she was always bringing it up and I saw that so I just act normal and be who I am so and it makes it easier for everyone

Robert, Cameron, Betty and Jane know the position that the official organizations (schools, church, family) in their lives take with regard to LGB individuals; in other words, they know the rules. Given the fact that each of them desires to function within the organization as much as possible, and given their accommodating personalities, Robert, Cameron, Betty and Jane have developed specific strategies for negotiating within a context that is defined by specific beliefs and taboos. Their “modus operandi” bears striking similarities to the tactics explained and described by Micheal de Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Living*. de Certeau (1984) suggests that the use of strategies belong to the realm of institutions that function on the basis of policy and have the power to enforce policy. Tactics, on the other hand,

“concern modes of operation or schemata of action, and not directly the subjects(or persons) who are their authors or vehicles. It concerns an operational logic whose models may go as far back as the age-old ruses of fishes and insects that disguise or transform themselves in order to survive, and which has in any case been concealed by the form of rationality currently dominant in Western culture.”

So when Jane talked about her “*separate*” or “*other*” life, Cameron verbally “*gay-bashed*” other stereotypically gay males, Betty avoided “*putting people on the defensive*” and Robert tried to make friends with the “*cool guys*”, they used tactics akin to the fishes, insects or animals who transformed themselves to survive in an environment that was potentially hostile. While institutions and policy have their place in society, de Certeau argues that the tactics used by individuals to navigate their circumstances and to create space are intriguing. However, not all tactics are equally desirable; one would be hard pressed to support the tactics of avoidance, suppression and lying commonly used by Robert, Cameron, Betty and Jane as well as LGB youth to survive their situations.

Considerations for Christian Schools

Acknowledging LGB youth within Christian school populations is a difficult thing for Christian schools to do. There are many reasons for this, not least among them is the fact that often LGB students and/or their parents often have no desire to be acknowledged; they do not want to be seen as “different.” A diverse understanding of what the Scriptures say also contributes to the difficulty in responding to the concerns of LGB youth and their families; given the range of understanding described earlier, it may, at times be entirely prudent to remain unacknowledged.

Unfortunately, it seems that keeping the veil of secrecy is the path of least resistance; if we don't talk about the issue, there simply is not an issue. But for Robert, Cameron, Betty and Jane, the LGB youth who participated in this project, the veil of silence surrounding their sexual orientation has made their sexual identity development a painful process. Not one of them seeks to be in the limelight; they do not want to be a specific topic of discussion. But they do address the issue of being LGB within a heteronormative atmosphere, and they do want for the foundational approach within a Christian school to same-sex orientation to evolve into one that is affirming of sexual diversity. They do not want other LGB youth to experience the fear, loneliness, rejection and conflicts about beliefs that they have felt.

Robert: *gay students need to know that there are actually people who are just like them, that there are religious groups that totally accept it...it just seems like the Christian school gets right around it – it seems like there's no help out there – you do feel alone. It would be great to say that you're not alone. Not like pointing out people, like you are gay and so are they... just so that they actually know that the teachers see them as still OK... that the teachers understand what's going on in the student's life. I wish my teachers had of known the frustrations I went through thinking that when I left high school, I would be the only gay person in Edmonton*

I would like even for kids who are in high school or junior high now to read about this stuff – the troubles that students have gone through and that some have had an easier time on it – just realizing that that there is more than one story

realize that there are people to talk to out there... really that you're not alone. Teachers might not actually want to teach about it – especially in a Christian school because they might be coming from that religious background that's like

'it's wrong, no we shouldn't help them and stuff', but it has to be talked about... even if it's uncomfortable it needs to be talked about

Cameron: *the first thing that comes to mind is to have courage – but I think that this is the case in any situation where one wants to live the gospel, wants to live in a Christian fashion. You need endless courage because it's about being honest, being generous, and it's about being scared but not being defensive because of that. I think that the attitudes of those who harassed me in school, similar to the youth elder in my church, are expressing in different ways just a fear of the unknown because they can't envision gay relationships... because it's outside their instinct, outside of how they are. And that's the dominant way that things have been structured, to go beyond that and say "I don't know" instead of "I'm scared" – you have to be so brave to do that*

and in a Christian setting, at least in my experience, there was a limited amount of options to think about, so I guess perhaps, what's needed is a place where dialogue is allowed; a place where one won't feel threatened or won't feel like they're risking everything if they want to talk about sexuality or being gay or what it means to be gay in the church. I think that again that is a difficult area because it seems to me, in the experience that I've had, that a lot of Christians are fearful of gay people because they are not familiar with it

it seems so bizarre to think of school, a Christian school, where there is a place that allows for discussions about these kinds of topics, it seems to me so counter to my experience of a Christian school, to even imagine a Christian school that would openly talk about gay or lesbians or the issues of sexuality... and I don't even know what the teachers at a school think about these issues because all that's being presented is a specific heteronormative approach to life. Then how can a 15 year old, who feels he might be gay, start exploring that issue because the people who are around him all the time, the adults, the role models in a sense, don't present an opportunity for that even to be discussed?

Betty: *as far as schools are concerned, if LGB students do not have healthy role models then they may gravitate toward the unhealthy stereotypes that are out there. In their struggle to develop a strong healthy identity, a lot of good could come out of it if they had healthy role models. But there is a problem; if you think or are given to believe that homosexuality is wrong, then why would you want role models?*

Jane: *get your teachers or anybody in leadership positions to just make it known that they're "accepting of it" and don't bring any big personal issues with it into a school setting... just have a place where kids can go to talk, a setting that's available to them*

everyone knows what that [rainbow] means so its a pretty strong symbol. I have seen that – nowadays I've seen it a lot but not when I was in high school, it's very common now in offices and stuff, which is good to see

your project intrigued me; I thought it may bring the issue to community's attention. I don't know who will be reading it but to people who do, it may open their eyes a little bit to know that gay kids at a Christian school aren't such a bad thing – we won't spread the disease to other kids... because there are some parents

who don't want their kids around gay kids because they're afraid it might rub off on them or something –its not going to happen. So somehow if the word can get out that – that's why it intrigued me – I never thought someone would want to do something like this –so it's good

as far as being able to change – the people who are writing those things aren't experiencing it - it's not just a flip of the switch. I do know it can happen with some people but for most kids, it's not the way it is

Robert, Cameron, Betty and Jane's stories set a stage for serious dialogue. What they are saying is not breaking news; in 1973, the CRC's *Report on Homosexuality (Report 42)* called churches to be caring towards its homosexual members as did additional CRC reports from regional bodies (Classis Alberta North and Classis Toronto) in 1991 and 1995. Cameron's comments about courage describe a shift in approach that is needed to move forward in the discussion about the place of LGB Christian youth:

“the first thing that comes to mind is to have courage – but I think that this is the case in any situation where one wants to live the gospel, wants to live in a Christian fashion. You need endless courage because it's about being honest, being generous, and it's about being scared but not being defensive because of that [being scared]... and I think something else in terms of this courage, or this humility towards something that one doesn't understand – it seems to me to be a very Christian idea, if we think about the Christian idea of grace, or forgiveness or even creation, we can't understand or fathom really how it all works. The concept of forgiveness of sins is extraordinary in the Christian story, and there's such a sense of humility and graciousness that is needed to face that – I have this image of someone on bended knee when I think of this humility”

The kind of courage Cameron is suggesting is modeled by Christ and is the kind of courage that moves people beyond being afraid and helps them to be able to live with ambiguity. Perhaps, as a faith-community, if we could concentrate less about our discomfort with “homosexual practice”, and develop ways of simply seeing one another as sisters and brothers in Jesus Christ, together “working out our salvation with fear and trembling” (Philippians 2:12), then we could make some headway in creating an environment that supports LGB youth as they negotiate a positive personal and sexual identity.

Conclusion

I will add my voice to that of Robert, Cameron, Betty and Jane. To meet the challenges of helping LGB youth develop good relationships and a positive identity, Christian schools need to take some risks. While many Christian schools operate independently, the professional guidelines expressed by the Alberta Teacher's Association's Code of Conduct are reasonable professional guidelines for all teachers. Grace and Wells (2001) cite Alberta Learning's *A Vision and Agenda for Public Education*, which challenges schools to create safe and caring school environments for all students, to provide programs and support to meet all abilities and needs, and to recognize the role teachers have in the development of children. Programs and supports for children affected by issues such as learning styles, behavioural challenges, and race and immigration concerns operate in most public and Christian schools, but the issues faced by LGB youth must also be recognized. "Gay and Straight Alliances" or "safe space" initiatives (Wells, 2005) are operative in a number of Edmonton high schools and have begun to create an environment that allows LGB youth to pursue identity issues and socialize within a context of support; Pollack (1998), cited by Tharinger & Wells (2000), maintains that adolescents are "longing to explore feelings of love and sexual attraction within familiar places they can go for nonjudgmental love, encouragement, and support" (p. 159). Such safe places for LGB youth are equally important in Christian schools.

But, for Grace and Wells (2001), places of support are simply not enough. They argue that at school, LGB youth are "included as youth but excluded as queer youth" (p. 139). To promote inclusive learning environments, Grace and Wells argue that the school curriculum itself must reflect queer issues so that both mainstream and LGB students can learn about each other. Library holdings should support a more inclusive curriculum. Furthermore, they suggest that schools should encourage LGB staff to serve as positive role models for LGB youth who are in the process of identity formation. Because

adult authority and cultural and institutional structures play a role in how youth define themselves, Talburt (2004) argues that former assumptions about, and recipes for, action regarding LGB youth need to be abandoned by educators. Youth need to be listened to with only the assumption that they are “complex, competent people whose lives experiences are no more predictable than those of straight youth” (p. 120).

Administrators, staff and community supporters of all Christian schools face a unique challenge. While it would be untenable for conservative Christians to deny a worldview that involves an understanding of the sinful character of humanity, it would be a life-changing project for all involved should they dedicate themselves to finding ways to authenticate the identity of LGB students. Given the somewhat questionable practices and success rates of reparative or re-orientation therapies, Worthington (2004) authenticating the identity formation of LGB youth, both Christian and non, seems to be much closer to the model lived by Christ in his association with the outcasts, prostitutes, publicans, and sinners of his time. If faith-based schools would dare (some may even argue that their Christian mission is compromised if they do not dare), they too could travel down the road of creating safe, caring and authentic environments for LGB youth. Support for such an initiative is provided by the scholarly and pastoral work of theologians such as Smedes (1994) and Hart (1993) and the groups involved in writing the study guides and researching for the Lutheran (1985) and the Christian Reformed Churches (1991). But it would also take enormous courage because the media-savvy, well-funded evangelical groups such as *Focus in the Family*, *700 Club* and *Exodus International* are currently fighting hard against any positive representation of LGB individuals, as evidenced in the treatment of White (1995). White, as an acclaimed media producer and public relations guru for the evangelical groups before claiming his identity as a gay man, has now been vilified and totally ostracized by the organizations that he once served. And the financial backing for anti-LGB groups is obvious when one considers such things as the

orchestrated protest of the same-sex marriage legislation and the extensive media resources tied to Dobson's *Focus in the Family*.

Based on the research, LGB youth attending Christian schools need to be authenticated in order to reduce the risk factors that negatively affect them, to provide them with opportunities for positive identity development, and fundamentally, to afford them a basic human right. Hart (1993) in his forward to Pronk's book, *Against Nature? Types of Moral Argumentation regarding Homosexuality*, gives a courageous perspective, namely that

"Theology and confession do not give us a morality but provide ultimate perspectives that, in addition to other factors, give shape to our moral outlook. But in and of themselves, they cannot solve moral problems. Hence it is mistaken, in Pronk's analysis, to expect the Bible to be the one and only or even sufficient ground for accepting or rejecting an ethic for homosexuality. If an ethic is to be Biblical, and it should be, then it is not because it is an ethic found in the Bible but because the Bible's confessional perspective comes through in the ethic." (Forward, p. xvii),

If Christian schools take their lead from the perspective described by Hart, LGB youth stand a chance of maturing in a usual developmental way and becoming confident members of society. Moreover, if the stories of Robert, Cameron, Betty and Jane are any example, LGB youth will not only maintain their faith-community ties, but they will contribute to the faith-community that spawned them rather than leaving because of being alienated. How much more "water passes under the bridge" before any change occurs within schools rooted in the Reformed tradition depends on the educators, supportive church communities and parents who feel moved to respond to the baptismal watermarks on the foreheads of covenant LGB youth within their communities.

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Appendix: Basic Research Question

What impact did the atmosphere at the Christian school you attended have on your identity development as a LGB individual?

Sample Interview Questions

Personal:

- Could you share when and how you came to understand that you were same-sex oriented? What did that self-knowledge feel like?
- What kind of home environment did you have? What was happening in your life? Could you talk about who was/was not supportive of you?
- As a child and early adolescent, were you aware of others who may have been LGB?
- How would you describe as the degree to which your sexual identity was developed when you attended junior high and high school?
- What were the risks, if any, associated with being open about your orientation when you were in junior high and high school?
- To what degree were you open about your sexual orientation?
- To what degree would you have wanted to be open about your orientation?
- Were you aware of other LGB students at the school when you attended?

School Atmosphere:

- What kind of atmosphere toward LGB students existed at the Christian school during your time as a student?
- Could you describe how the issue of same-sex relationships was most often handled in class settings?
- Could you describe how the issue of same-sex relationships was most often expressed in regular hallway interactions?
- What degree of acceptance, tolerance and or support did you experience from your classmates? teachers? administrators?

Philosophical/Religious Perspectives:

- What is your understanding of what the Bible says regarding sexuality in general? same-sex orientation?
- What does the phrase “love the sinner, hate the sin” mean to you with respect to same-sex orientation?

Summary:

- What is happening in your life right now? What things, if any, stand out for you as key in your journey as a LGB individual?
- What would you like to say to your classmates, teachers, counselors, administrators about this issue from where you are now?

