

Painful lessons from a pastor's viral transgender post

OPINION MARK WINGFIELD | MAY 31, 2016

“Does God still love me?”

That is one of the most painful questions I have been asked in the past two weeks after [writing a commentary that went viral](#) and made me a most unlikely spokesperson for the transgender community and their families. As a result of that post being read by more than 1 million people either online or in print, I have heard the personal stories of people from all over the country. In two weeks' time, I have exchanged personal correspondence with more than 400 people.



Surprisingly, the vast majority of those conversations have been positive — and not just positive but filled with emotion and gratitude — and a fair amount of pain. I have heard from transgender persons, from the parents and friends of transgender persons, from clergy, doctors, teachers, counselors and lots of average people.

One transgender woman wrote to tell me her story and signed off with these words: “Sincerely, a woman who hopes that God still loves her.”

Most transgender persons are not against God; many just fear that God is against them. Or, more specifically, they believe the church is against them. Many of them — a vast number in fact — have grown up in the church and are people of deep faith. But they are people who have been asked not to come back, have been removed from membership, have been shunned. And so have their families.

One of the most heartbreaking messages I received was from a single mom with four kids, including one who is transgender. This entire family recently was kicked out of their church. The mom — who had been accused of child abuse by her pastor for letting her boy dress as a girl — wrote me to ask for help in finding another church in her city where they would be accepted.

Another new friend, as a youth, had been a deeply devoted Bible study leader in his church but was asked not to attend that church anymore after coming out with a non-conforming gender struggle.

And so it is no wonder that people who shared my post on social media often said something like this: “I can't believe I'm sharing something written by a Baptist pastor, but you've got to read this.” Sadly, the church of Jesus Christ is most known today for what we're against rather than who God is for.

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The following excerpt from an email represents a common sentiment: “You are a pastor from the most conservative, Bible-thumping part of the country. Your quiet words go a long way to helping those who have had no voice. ... I cry when writing this because of what you are doing and how much it helps and means the world to me.”

As the original post indicated, I set out to learn more about transgender persons, to get beyond the headlines and to plunge into something deeper than the toilet wars. And it turns out that in some ways corporate America is doing a better job of addressing the essence of a person’s whole self than the church. This is not to say that all of American business has this figured out, but many corporations are trying to learn, trying to do the right thing for their employees. One of the key phrases being used — there even was a TED Talk about it — is this: “Bring your whole self to work.” The idea is that employees perform better if they don’t have to live in fear at work.

Why is corporate America ahead of the church on this? It seems to me Jesus would say, “Bring your whole self to church.”

Embracing that idea, though, would require churchgoing folks to be honest in ways that transcend far more than transgender persons. In polite church culture, we have been conditioned to understand that it is dangerous to be our true selves at church — especially if we don’t fit the image of a perfect Christian. We say, “Come as you are,” but we really mean, “Come as we are.”

In fact, few among us probably feel free to bring our whole selves to church. We all are fearful of talking about the ways our children have deviated from the norm, our struggles with depression or financial insecurity or even food insecurity. One of the other things I’ve learned through the years as a pastor is that most church members wait until they’re facing foreclosure before asking for help with keeping a house due to unforeseen financial disasters. Most of us only feel like we can talk about the happy stuff, the easy, fluffy stuff, when we come to church.

And in all these conversations of the past two weeks, I have found myself weeping and shaken. I have learned more than I ever imagined — not only about the details of transgender life but also about what it means to be human.

As my commentary went viral, I discovered that the transgender community was immediately kinder to me than the church has been to them. In the commentary, I confessed that I didn’t know any transgender persons, or at least I didn’t think I did. Immediately upon publication, I began hearing from folks who said this: “I will be your transgender friend.” Tears came to my own eyes as I read these lines over and again and realized that I was hearing from strangers who were willing to open their lives to me in much greater proportion than they feared the church would be willing to open itself to them. This is painful and convicting.

One of my new transgender friends told me about attending a church in a very conservative Texas college town and hearing for the first time that God loves him



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specifically. In this church, the pastor made a point to say not just that God loves everyone but that God loves you, whether you're young or old, male or female, gay or straight, Republican or Democrat, Aggie or Longhorn. And to my new friend, sitting on the back pew of that church, these words sparked a journey back to the faith that had been recently lost.

As a pastor, I'm pretty sure of this one thing: The story of Jesus is much more about who's included rather than who is excluded. "For God so loved the world" includes everyone.

So as my 15 minutes of fame in the national spotlight fades, here's the most important thing I want to say about all this: God loves you, whoever you are, wherever you are. Whether you're a conservative or a liberal, a traditionalist or a progressive, a Protestant or a Catholic, a male or a female, gay, straight, trans, whatever. God loves you. Now, what are you going to do with that love?

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