

Is there room in the PC(USA) for those of differing orientations?

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From the book

Frequently Asked Questions About Sexuality, The Bible, and The Church: Plain Talk about Tough Issues

A collection of essays considering the appropriate participation of gay and lesbian Presbyterians in church life and leadership.

Anne Lamott tells of a seven-year-old child who was lost one day in the big city. She was frantic and confused until a police car stopped to assist. The officer offered to drive her around adjacent neighborhoods until something looked familiar. Suddenly the small child recognized a steeple. With relief, the child instructed the officers to stop the car at the building with the steeple. Happily she announced: "You could let me out now. This is my church, and I can always find my way home from here" (*Traveling Mercies*).

This story brings life to Webster's definition of "orientation" as a "homing faculty or instinct." The hushed question that we are cautious to articulate is whether the church will be able to give bearings to and accommodate those of differing orientations. Will you and I and those who differ from you and me be able to find our way home from the landmark of our church? Is there room in our church for those of differing orientations, particularly differing sexual orientations?

Webster's also defines "orientation" as "the planning of church architecture so that the altar is in the east end." Facing the east positioned the worshipper for the rising of the sun. This definition reminds me of being positioned in just such a way at a Good Friday service many years ago in a retreat center outside Basel, Switzerland. The retreat center was the home of the Schwestern von Grandchamp, the female counterpart to the Brothers of Taizé; the retreat center was called *Sonnenhof*, meaning "halo around the sun." I made the retreat in an attempt to heal from some ostracism I had encountered. The hostile exclusion had come from some men who did not believe women should complete advanced degrees in theology, nor become ordained. I was very angry with their theological orientation and with them.

On this silent retreat, one of the Dominican nuns kept following me to ask, "Would you like to come talk?" My repeated negative replies did not deter her. Eventually, I gave up and met with her in the garden. As we say in clinical parlance, I ventilated. She heard my raw anger for one hour without saying a word. When I had finished, she made one comment about these hurtful men: "Christ died for them, too." I became angrier, and the anger did not subside until I found an ikon in the gift shop, an ikon of Mary Magdalene before the risen Christ in the garden, near the empty tomb (John 20). Mary Magdalene called him Rabboni or Teacher. I found my mandate to continue in my doctoral program and towards ordination; my orientation was towards the Teacher, towards the risen Son. On Good Friday at Sonnenhof, we knelt at the base of a large cross in the sisters' chapel. My struggles did indeed look different from that vantage point. I have gone back many times to that vantage point, in times of challenge and times of anger. Is there room in our church for those of differing orientations?

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person or position. Sociologist Georg Simmel dealt with the complicated cultural/sociological dynamics of the "stranger" or "wanderer" or "sojourner" always in a figure-ground relationship to the home or host country (*Soziologie*, 1908). In a 1977 article Donald N. Levine developed Simmel's thought in a typology of "stranger" relationships which included the following: guest, sojourner, newcomer, intruder, inner enemy, marginal man or marginal woman. Varying degrees of "social distance" are involved with the various categories, from the vantage point of those in the home country.

Varying degrees of theological distance occur in the church, when the stranger or intruder or enemy is considered in a figure-ground relationship with the host theology. This phenomena can be dis-orienting. When I encounter someone who is resistant to my position on an emotionally-laden topic, I ask myself silently the question Dr. Letty Russell taught me to ask: What is at stake here? What would the individual have to lose if he/she saw the issue from my vantage point? This exercise and the insight that can ensue has often assisted me, not in agreement with, but in compassion for "the stranger."

Orientation is technically "a position with relation to the points of the compass." Yahweh is described in the Hebrew Bible as setting a compass upon the

face of the depth (Proverbs 8:27b). Those who partake in the *basileia* and banqueting of God will come from many points of this compass: “then people will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the *basileia* of God” (Luke 13:29). We may well be feasting with those who were theological and sociological strangers. The cycles of violence with which strangers or enemies or intruders have sometimes been treated will be replaced with a compass of compassion. There is an ultimate orientation like the magnetic north that supercedes proximate orientations. H. Richard Niebuhr spoke on the distinction between proximate goals and the ultimate goal of our faith which is love of God and neighbor (*The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry*, 1956). Proximate goals are worthy; they include denominational issues and passionate causes involving sexual orientation. These proximate goals may even come close or very near to the ultimate goal of our faith; however, they must never be the central point or orientation of our faith, lest they become gods in themselves, and we become lost finding our way home.

Sexual orientation engenders a volatile debate in our church today. We seek desperately to understand the arguments from all angles. There are various

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theories as to the “why” of differing sexual orientations: socialization, genetics, and abuse. I would like to think if a sexual orientation has grown out of a reaction to abuse, the church would especially be a place from which to find home. Theories regarding the source of sexual orientation are changing over time. For example, at Georgia Baptist Hospital in Atlanta, we residents were trained with the DSM III-R (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Third Edition-Revised, 1987). Homosexuality was considered a “sexual disorder not otherwise specified” (p.561). Today, residents in pastoral care and counseling train with the DSM IV. In this revised edition, homosexuality as a sexual orientation is no longer categorized as a sexual disorder by the medical/psychiatric field.

Is there room in the church for those with differing theories and orientations? I believe this is possible if we image ourselves as adopted children of God (I develop this idea more fully in *The Spirit of Adoption*, 2003). In the last three decades, social workers and sociologists have changed their understanding of families constituted through adoption. Three decades ago, families undergoing adoption were counseled to believe that an adoptive family would be the same as a biological family. That view has been called “rejection-of-differences” and led to

dysfunctional and unhealthy families (David Kirk, *Shared Fate*, 1964). Adoptive parents were told by agencies that the adopted child “would be just like having a biological child.” We now know that is not so. Adopted children often have a differing set of genes, heredity, physical characteristics, and abilities than the adoptive parents. Social workers and agencies now counsel families into “an acceptance-of-differences,” if there is to be a healthy and functional family.

The church is a family constituted through God’s adoption of us. This adoption imagery of inclusion into God’s family is mentioned in Ephesians, Galatians, and Romans. The metaphor of adoption into God’s family is used more often than the birth imagery, or second birth imagery, as in John 3. That means we may not look like each other, we may not vote like each other, and we may not have the same sexual orientation. However, we have been adopted as God’s children through Jesus Christ, the Firstborn; our inheritance has been sealed with the guarantee of the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 1). Perhaps if we can move into an acceptance-of-differences that an adopted family must have to be healthy and functional, we can actualize some of that inheritance.

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Here is my revised version of Anne Lamott’s story:

There were three small children who were lost one day in the big city. They were frantic and confused until a police car stopped to assist. The two officers offered to drive them around adjacent neighborhoods until something looked familiar. The officers had a hard time believing they were from the same family; one child had been adopted from China, one from Guatemala, one from Nebraska. They looked very different. They also couldn’t agree on their directions.

The three adopted children, sisters and brothers, huddled together in the back seat of the patrol car. With relief, the children instructed the officers to stop the car at the building with the steeple. On this one point they finally agreed: “This is our church. As a family, we can always find our way home from here.”