

TESTIMONY FOR PRIDE SUNDAY

**By a Filipino United Methodist Minister
Pine United Methodist Church
June 3, 2007**

I stand before you filled with gratitude for the space you have provided for me to have the courage to share about myself and what I hope for. I share this very important moment in my life with you, knowing that I am with people of kindred souls. It has been a long and arduous journey to where I am now. During my whole life, I have longed to utter these words publicly, especially before my own faith community. I'm 39, and for the last 13 years of being an ordained Elder of the United Methodist Church I only say these words in painful silence, but today, empowered by divine grace and encouraged by your embrace, I say: I am gay. I am gay. I am gay.

I was born and raised in the Philippines. I am a cradle Methodist and my family is very conservative. I am not out to them yet, but I know that in time I would have that opportunity. I responded to the call to ministry in 1978. I was 10 years old. But it was also that same year that I became conscious that I was different – I had crushes on my male classmates. I thought then that it was a confusing coincidence. Today, I believe it is an affirmation of my being a gay man called to Christian ministry. Back then, I thought it was just a phase.

I was a freshman in high school when I watched “Blue Lagoon” with some friends. They were all excited to see Brooke Shields, but silently, I was checking out Christopher Atkins. He was so hot. I went home that evening filled with guilt. I remember many nights when I prayed and asked for forgiveness for being different. I could not even make myself say that I am gay. I was so frightened to be one. I was so confused and always prayed that God would change me. In order to cover up this secret identity, I consciously exhibited homophobic behavior. I once told a gay high school classmate that he was going to hell for being gay. But deep inside me I had this terrible fear that I would burn in hell for being gay.

I went to a very conservative Bible college in Manila for my undergraduate studies. Our college motto was “The Living Word for a Dying World” and we were trained to be evangelists. I had high hopes that I would be transformed in Bible college, but no, it did not happen. I began having doubts about my call to ministry. But, I was the youngest evangelist then. I was preaching fire and brimstone sermons in public squares at age 18. I would get this high from seeing people come forward to be born again in response to my preaching. But I knew the church believed that homosexuality was inconsistent with Christian teaching. I was convinced then that I was living in sin, that I had a dual identity – I was a conservative Christian evangelist, but I was also gay.

I went to a very progressive UMC and UCC seminary in the Philippines but being gay and Christian was never talked about in class. Liberation theology made an impact in my life. I became a social justice activist, joined protests, but I still kept my being gay a secret. My activist friends never talked about it. I was helping others struggle for liberation, but I needed freedom myself. I felt so incomplete.

My most painful experience while in seminary was being in a very informal relationship with another seminarian. We loved each other. But we never named who we were, what we were doing, and why we were together. We were both dating women too. It was confusing and frustrating. I loved him so much, but a year after we graduated from seminary he got married, and I stood by him as his best man. But that's not the worst. I fell in love again with another man and was in the same kind of relationship that I just shared with you. He is also a pastor. Because it is difficult to be gay, Christian, and Filipino, we had no commitments. He got married, and I solemnized his wedding.

In 2000 I sat as an alternate delegate to General Conference and was blessed to cast my vote on changing language in the Book of Discipline about homosexuality. I also attended the 2004 General Conference. In both sessions we lost the vote to strike out discrimination from our denomination. As people spoke against affirmation and full inclusion for queer people, and as I watched them vote, I cried. The church I loved and offered my whole life to was pushing a dagger into my heart. It seemed that I was invisible, that I did not exist, that I was not a human being, that I was not welcome.

There was a time I was ready to leave the church. I sought out the MCC congregation in Manila. The joy I experienced during that MCC worship service was so powerful and moving. That was the first time I had communion with fellow LGBT faithful. We sang joyfully, we sang from our hearts as queers in spiritual exile longing for the promise land. I was in tears as we broke bread and shared this holy meal. My plan to leave the UMC did not push through because that same Sunday, the MCC had a guest preacher – a friend of mine, a Filipino UMC pastor from the Illinois. We had a long talk. Coincidence? No. It was then that I became determined to remain United Methodist because I wanted my beloved church to experience such freedom and love I felt that day.

We still have a long way to go. The fact that my name has not been mentioned is a testament to the danger and discrimination that still hound queer persons in the United Methodist Church and many Christian denominations. I stand behind an invisible veil. I am inside a glass closet, my voice still muted by the noise of hate, and my heart longing for the church's embrace. I also long for my mother's embrace. Two years ago I was seeing this guy and things didn't work out between us and I was a wreck. I cried a lot and felt so hurt. Then one day my mother sent me a text message. She was in Manila. She told me how she dreamed about me and that I might not be feeling well. I cried all the more because I could not even tell her about my loss and pain. It is difficult for us when the church does not affirm the love relationships we have as gays and lesbians. But I believe that love will prevail. I believe that many more will come out and we can not be ignored.

I am not looking simply for a place at the table. I am not looking for tolerance. I believe that the narrow and dull table of injustice has to be thrown out. We need a bigger more colorful table. But to truly have an open heart, an open mind, and an open door – the church needs to be transformed from within.

I wrote a poem two years ago. It was dedicated to someone I loved but never loved me back. Today I see this poem mirror my love relationship with the church. I titled it “Irony.”

Irony

Light moves into darkness
Night into day
Sun and moon cross the heavens
Day into night.
Fleeting moments of ecstasy
Arms straining to reach
Touching the void
Seeing but never feeling.
Empty yet full
Flowing but restrained
Muted in the cacophony of sounds
Rainbow colors of black and white.
Staring into blank space
The mind races to comprehend
Hot and cold
The heart speaks, no one listens.

My friends, I am glad you’re listening to me now, but many queer persons of faith are still in the dark. Many of us are hidden, silent, trapped. But we have one thing in common. Our spirits are united and cannot be shackled. You, me, and our closeted sisters and brothers are one in hoping for affirmation and reconciliation throughout the world.

There is one phrase that we find in many parts of Scripture that I really like: “And it came to pass...” It reminds me that all this silence, discrimination, and exclusion will come to pass. I look to the rainbow knowing that the bright light of affirmation is just behind the clouds that shroud many of our churches. The warm embrace I have received here at Pine UMC are rays that herald the coming of a new day. Amen.