

How Should We Respond to Those Struggling With Homosexuality?

When my brother—a fifth-generation preacher’s son—came out of the closet, I encountered one of the church’s biggest dilemmas of our time: How should we

respond to those who struggle with homosexuality?

The day was supposed to be the greatest of my life. I was 29, getting married and had arrived at a local eatery to meet my brother, Eddie, and ask him to be my best man. I couldn’t wait to see his reaction when I invited him to be the most important person in my wedding other than my incredible bride-to-be.

His reply changed my life forever. Thankfully he didn’t decline with a “No.” But neither was his answer a hearty, “Oh, yeah! Congratulations, bro!” Instead, my only brother’s reply was a tearful, “Richie ... I’m gay.”

What? That definitely wasn’t the response I expected. My thoughts raced: That’s simply not possible! No way! How could a family like ours, so deeply rooted in church, have a member who isn’t following suit, who isn’t living the same lifestyle we’ve always lived?

You see, I’m a fifth-generation ordained minister. In my family, leading churches and doing ministry is a part of our heritage. But in a split second, one of the biggest issues of our time had hit home (literally) for my family and me. This person—my brother—became what many other Christians thought of as our dirty little secret.

Looking back to that moment 10 years ago, it’s easy to see that a lot has changed in the way society views homosexuality.

States have legalized gay marriage. It seems that in every election this issue is on the ballot in California and other states, and probably will be until same-sex marriage is fully legalized.

But a decade ago, things were different. Through his series of poor choices, Eddie eventually contracted AIDS. When I learned about his condition, I was confident there would be a medical solution.

This is the 21st century, I thought. Unlike 20 or so years ago, there are medications that help control the virus now. My brother can live a productive life, and all should be great. Right?

It didn't happen that way for my family.

A Dream Comes True

Fortunately, Eddie was welcomed into the L.A. Dream Center. Matthew Barnett, the center's pastor, and his team ministered to him in a way he had never seen before. The Dream Center staff loved him, celebrated his creativity and didn't judge him. My brother *experienced* the love of Jesus and, as a result, accepted His grace and forgiveness.

I'll never forget his phone calls. He'd say: "Richie, God is so awesome. He doesn't care what I've done. He loves me just the way I am."

You see, it took a church—a group of Christians who loved Eddie just the way he was—to reach him for Jesus. The Dream Center team did not tell him: "Clean yourself up. Stop doing this and never say that or go there again, and we might let you come to our church."

No, they said: "Come as you are. You are welcomed, loved and celebrated here." My brother saw Christ in the people of that church. But I don't think he would have seen Him at every

church. (Would he have seen Him at yours?)

Church Attitudes

Because my family had never discussed AIDS or thought it would touch us directly, and because I'd never been part of a small group at church where it was addressed, I was totally unequipped to deal with it.

How about you? Would you be ready for it? How about your church? Is homosexuality discussed openly? Most churches overlook it or ignore it. Worse, they are afraid to make an effort to understand how we should love others as God has commanded.

Wouldn't God want us to pursue the gay community like we would any other people group? Wouldn't He want us to go after them for Jesus with the same tenacity we pursue the family units we perceive are perfectly intact and capable of raising our churches' monthly giving?

We should lead the way in welcoming gay attendees into the faith. We should assist them in their journey with God and in pursuing Him more deeply.

✖ During my time as the executive pastor of Free Chapel in Orange Co., Calif., I vividly remember the debates and friction caused by Proposition 8 (the state's same-sex marriage amendment). Tension in and out of the churches in California was at an all-time high.

Our strategy at Free Chapel for diffusing the tension was to invite and welcome homosexuals into our church body. Many ministries joined together and strategized on how to reach out to this community in love, while others regretfully chose the other path of exclusion.

This issue and so many others can be summed up like this: Until something attacks your family, it isn't likely to be at

the forefront of your concerns. But when it does, then it becomes real in *your* life, and your opinion about it changes.

How Did Our Story End?

My family lived through this HIV attack on my brother. We watched an incredibly talented and intelligent young man lose the physical battle. My brother passed away as a result of HIV at age 28.

My perspective toward the gay community was changed by my undying love for my brother. His life and struggles taught me to love in ways I never knew before.

Do I have any doubt about his eternity? *No*. One choice secured his eternity in Christ and removed past transgressions, just like it has for me—the guy who has just written a Christian inspirational book, who blogs and who stands in the pulpit of a great church on Sundays.

God doesn't play favorites, and we can't earn His favor with our good deeds. Since God is "no respecter of persons" (see Acts 10:34-35), my brother and I will one day reunite with my sister, who also passed away at much too early an age. My brother was gloriously saved, and through his life we've learned more about the Father's love.

I have so much respect for the way Eddie lived his final months just waiting to meet his Savior face to face. He lived in almost total seclusion his last few months. It was his way of resisting the temptations that were on the other side of his apartment door. His flesh wasn't strong enough to be out in public without wanting to participate in some of the things that took his life, so he stayed indoors and protected his eternity. How many of us could do the same to avoid our area of temptation?

What We Must Do

Chances are, you or someone close to you has a loved one who is living a homosexual life. God wants you to love them unconditionally. Here are three simple ways we all can do this.

1. Show them Jesus. Please love them, welcome them and minister to them. A church and its people “loved” my brother back into a relationship with Jesus that ultimately secured his destiny into heaven!

2. Get real about sin. Let’s realize that we all have a natural inclination to certain things that challenge our walk with God. On the sin scale, is homosexual fornication different than heterosexual fornication? No. Yet do we condone heterosexual fornication more readily than homosexual fornication? I would say most of us do. Sin is sin, wrong is wrong, and any sin breaks God’s heart.

3. Pour on the grace. Make no mistake; we are to follow the Bible in its entirety. The instruction manual is clear, and we are to resist all temptations. But we all fall from time to time (see 1 John 2:1-2). Even though Peter denied Christ three times (and yes, he walked on water with Jesus), he was not disqualified from a wonderful purpose. It was Peter who was used to preach on the day of Pentecost. God gave him a place to fit in.

My plea to the body of Christ is before you judge or form an opinion, before you shun or disqualify one of God’s own children, think about this: Where would this person fit in to Jesus’ group?

I’ve served as a church leader at many churches and heard every reason for why “We can’t let this or that happen, pastor!” But I know this as Eddie’s brother: If we had created a place for him to serve, to use his gifts and talents, and to be celebrated, he might still be with us today. Just maybe part of God’s plan for my brother was to open our eyes to his

dilemma.

When looking at the gay and lesbian community, there are many factors that churches and organizations should research and understand. But when it's all said and done, I hope our conclusion is one of love, compassion and an attempt to show Jesus to any and all who are outside the body of Christ, for any reason.

We must go after the Eddies of the world for Jesus. In doing so I believe we can make a difference to a community of people—and make them God's people.

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