

## Called to Break Rules

By Matt Hartfield

In 1989 I attempted suicide twice, having decided that I could not reconcile my homosexuality with my Christian faith and with my family. My mother had told me that she no longer loved me, that the Bible said that homosexuality was wrong. I was not welcomed in my home church, nor was I welcomed in Campus Crusade for Christ, where I had begun making friends the year before I came out. In the psychiatric hospital, my doctor told me that she believed that I would never be happy as a gay man, that homosexuality was wrong, and that I would have to change if I wanted to survive. All of these rejections were based on church-endorsed beliefs that homosexuality is wrong and that faithful church members should reject lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people.

Thankfully, there was one woman on the hospital staff who broke the rules. This woman risked her reputation, her working relationship with my doctor, and her job by telling me that the doctor was wrong. She told me that she was a lesbian, and that it was possible to be homosexual and live happily and healthily. She brought me a gay newspaper where she had circled the contact phone number for a meeting of the Society of Friends, a group that was affirmative of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people. Upon leaving the hospital I was able to make contact with them, and for the first time found a community that spoke to both my Christian background and my homosexuality.

That was not the end of my struggles with suicide, but it was the beginning of the end. Over the next year I became involved with support groups that helped me to let go of my suicidal feelings and accept myself for who I was. I eventually found a church home at the First Baptist Church of Granville, Ohio. At the time the church was not Welcoming and Affirming in name, but they welcomed me with open arms and helped me to continue growing into the person I am today.

There came a point when the Columbus Baptist Association and the American Baptist Churches of Ohio told First Baptist Granville that we would have to quit welcoming homosexual people into the church. The General Board of ABC-USA had passed a resolution stating that, "We affirm that the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching." The CBA and ABC Ohio used this statement as a rule for all churches to follow, and told FBC Granville that it must change its ways. Thankfully, FBC Granville broke the rules.

Sisters and Brothers, my story is not a rare one. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, suicide is the fifth leading cause of death among 5 to 14 year-olds, and the third leading cause of death among 15 to 24 year-olds, surpassed only by car accidents and homicide. Multiple studies into the root causes of teen suicide have determined that lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth are at a much higher risk of suicide than their heterosexual counterparts. Approximately 20% of lesbian/bisexual girls and 28% of gay/bisexual boys report having attempted suicide in the past, compared to 14% of heterosexual girls and 7% of heterosexual boys.

A large number of those attempting suicide cited the Christian church's message against homosexuality as a contributing factor in their decision to kill themselves. These statistics are gleaned from the children who have survived. We have no way of interviewing the children who were successful in their attempts to kill themselves to determine how great a percentage were gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender.

I submit to you that it is impossible to ignore the cries of these children and remain the people of God. Throughout history, Baptists have stood up against oppression and spoken for those whose voices are not being heard. Throughout history, Baptists

have provided sanctuary to those who are fleeing persecution. Throughout history, Baptists have broken the rules.

Roger Williams founded a new colony based on the ideals of religious freedom and cooperation between the native peoples of our land and the European settlers. He had been kicked out of Plymouth for his views, and his writings were banned and burned in England. Roger Williams broke the rules, and Roger Williams was a Baptist.

In the years preceding and during the Civil War, groups of Quakers, Baptists, and other committed people of faith violated the law by helping escaped slaves make their way north into New York, Ohio, Michigan, and eventually Canada. These committed Christians broke the rules, and many of them were Baptists.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and many other less well known African-American religious leaders were at the heart of the African-American civil rights movement. They mobilized their followers to rise up and demand to be treated as human beings. Dr. King broke the rules, and Dr. King was a Baptist.

No matter what you believe about homosexuality, I urge you to consider these children. Ask yourself if you believe that God's church in this world is called to stand silently by while children suffer and die, or if you believe that God's church is called to stand with these children, to help them to know God's love. No rule that harms children is a rule of God.

In order to prevent our children from becoming statistics in a future study on teen suicide, God calls us to break such rules. In order to live out the promise of God's peace, God calls us to break such rules. In order that we might be God's Church in this world, God calls us to break such rules. I am called to break the rules, and I am an American Baptist. I urge you to join me ▼

Your Brother in Christ

*Youth Focus is inspired by Pat Duffey, who was an advocate on behalf of children at risk during her time on the Steering Committee. Her work goes on.*