



When Illumination is Personal: My Testimony of Praise

Opinion by Kyle Kelley

Have you had that feeling it's time to step out and do something or say something, and then there is that deep breath you take before you pause, "am I really ready to do this?" That's where I was on a recent Sunday as I finished my weekly task of leading the "Testimonies of Praise" portion of our service in our wonderfully diverse (but still young) Church for the Highlands in Shreveport.

Each week, it's basically open mic to anyone to proclaim for what they are thankful or to share a burden or prayer concern. Most anything can happen. It may be thanksgiving for a few months of sobriety or not returning to jail or no longer being homeless, or gratitude for finding a faith community of true acceptance.

At the end we light a candle and recite a short litany of unity in celebration of that diversity that looks like heaven. This diversity has shaped us. We are deeply grateful for it and don't take it for granted. We are blessed with African Americans, Anglos, Latinos, wealthy, middle class, poor, recently or currently homeless, former incarcerated, educated, uneducated, disabled, mentally ill or challenged, young and old, professionals, blue collar and more.

Add to the list a growing number of LGBTQ folks, who once they realize we take Jesus' radical inclusion seriously, become among our most enthusiastic members. I have been blessed by all these folks who have taught me what it means to trust, persevere and even be joyful through hard times. They are also teaching me to be real and honest and to understand my privilege.

Why my hesitation then, why the deep breath on this Sunday? Well only that Friday CBF had announced its new hiring policy through the "Illumination Project," a two year endeavor to find clarity regarding how it would relate as a body of churches on issues of human sexuality. Back in 2000, CBF adopted a policy (in a vote that was far from unanimous) that forbade the hiring of any LGBTQ folks. Increasingly, CBF'ers have become dissatisfied and uneasy with the policy and a growing chorus has called for its elimination.

The new policy removes any mention of sexuality as a criteria for hiring and instead lists issues of faith, integrity, commitment to church, Baptist ideals, etc. It is a policy we can feel good about. Then the other shoe drops with an "implementation" process that Bill Leonard has called "incongruous." This procedure backdoors exceptions by which LGBTQ folks can be

hired for some positions, but not for others.

There are nuances and details to the policy and process which I don't have space for, but there are a number of well written stories, responses and reflections on the issue at baptistnews.com and ethicsdaily.com which I commend to you. I will say very few people like the policy, sometimes for different reasons.

CBF did take the healthy step of talking about the issue. It is uncomfortable and risky for the average person in the pew. No wonder many churches avoid the topic. For our LGBTQ brothers and sisters, this silence is more than uncomfortable, it is a negation, a rejection of who they are, a message implicit and explicit of being unworthy or worse, a subtle or not-so-subtle wish they would go away.

Of the six most active churches in CBF-LA, half have gone through a discernment process and decided for full inclusion of LGBTQ members. The other half have either been silent or near silent, not ready for a conversation or have a variation of "don't ask, don't tell." Certainly each church has its own context and is at different places on the journey.

Still pausing before I light the candle on this Sunday morning, I reflect on my larger CBF community of faith. CBF has fed me for over 15 years, captured my passion with the Together for Hope ministry in which I have invested heavily. Those 4 fragile freedoms of Baptists that Walter Shurden has enumerated: they are in my blood. CBF has preached a big tent, inclusion, being the presence of Christ, forming together in a world without borders. But is that really who we are?

In our little congregation, we are learning to be real with our brothers and sisters, to stand with them in the face of the threat of deportation, or racism and white supremacy, or the traps of poverty, violent communities, poor schools, payday lending, and an unjust prison system. Our LGBTQ sisters and brothers have particularly sad and painful stories of rejection and abuse by the church. One gay brother was at the point of suicide. Another told me our church has been a sanctuary.

I know the "traditional" view. I was raised Southern Baptist, preacher's kid too. I also can tell you of a number of times when the church got it wrong (Gentiles and the Judaizers, slavery, role of women, Copernicus/Galileo) to name a few) and the "traditional" view has to be amended.

I am reminded of Paul overcoming barrier after barrier to the Gospel in the book of Acts by the testimony of the new believers who were thought to be outside the acceptable fold. So what do I do when I see the evidence of faith and the Holy Spirit in my LGBTQ church members? What do I do when I see my own lesbian daughter live a life so captivated by Jesus and his Sermon on the Mount? These are not abstract policy or philosophical debates. This is personal. This is my faith family,

cont'd on back



**Doing
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my literal family. These are living, breathing people who have blessed and enriched me, who are taking me deeper into the community of faith and bringing me closer to Jesus. These are folks who have kept the faith in spite of the church.

When you know somebody, when you love somebody, you take a new look. I know the frequently quoted texts, the purity codes of the Old Testament which also forbid eating crawfish and touching pig skins...i.e. footballs. (Tell me you're not a sinner!) I also know the texts of Paul which appear likely to refer to older wealthy men abusing young boys. There are lots of resources and arguments to read out there.

There are coherent, rational interpretations and understandings which take into account our new cultural, scientific, and experiential understandings and still treat the Bible with integrity. Our church found the book *Walking the Bridgeless Canyon*, written by a straight female evangelical layperson as one easily understandable and accessible resource for our discernment process. Mel White's *Stranger At the Gate*, tells the story from the inside, by a former ghost writer for Billy Graham, struggling in his faith journey to come to terms with who he was.

It is not a book or an argument that convinces anyone though. No, it is the testimony, the story, the relationship with an LGBTQ brother or sister that changes you. Then you go find that resource, that book that helps you make sense of this paradigm shift, this new movement of the Spirit.

I take a deep breath and look out at my congregation and say, "God has called a wonderful group of folks to this faith family from all walks of life. Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, a kind of parent organization for us adopted a hiring policy this week that tries to make LGBTQ folks second class citizens in the Kingdom. But we know better, there is room at the table for everyone. We don't take that for granted and we are gonna light

our candle now."

There were looks of surprise and shock, like I had experienced, and even a gasp from one member, but then a renewed determination on faces to continue to be the church we are supposed to be.

So what happens next with our little church? We will look at other Baptist bodies to partner with. Will we stay in CBF? I don't know. CBF doesn't really deserve its LGBTQ members. Many are quite long suffering and forgiving. My lesbian daughter, learning I was writing this article said, "Be sure to mention all those Baptist pastors (including those not for full LGBTQ inclusion) who supported my anti-bullying of gays efforts in the legislature."

I love CBF and its proclivity to partner with others. There is room for difference of opinion, but I can't find a way to justify discrimination in hiring. I want to know why in this new paradigm shift which is underway, CBF has to go in stages. Can we just move directly from slavery to justice and skip the Jim Crow phase? CBF gay pastor Cody Sanders, in his gracious article notes that opening up some positions for LGBTQ persons is progress, but not justice. Some folks may be able to remain in CBF and work for more inclusion. Some will feel the need to move on and they should be blessed if that is their conscience.

When our church elders and council meet to discuss this, it will be prayerful. I believe it will be gracious. However, it will also include front and center those LGBTQ voices on those boards who will take their place at the table. They will have extra weight in this discussion, for I cannot be part of re-abusing my sisters and brothers. It is my testimony of praise that we have tasted freedom and learned a new way of the Spirit at Church for the Highlands and it is unthinkable that we could go back and "unlearn" or "untaste" deliverance for our family.



Greetings from Lake Providence

by Marc Boswell, CBF-LA Together for Hope Director

It's been a cold, wet start to the year in Lake Providence. Towns throughout the Louisiana Delta have suffered from water problems due to aging infrastructure and strapped municipal budgets. High school students in Lake Providence missed an entire week of school due to heating issues related to the school's boiler system. Neighboring towns declared states of emergency as days and weeks went by with severely limited access to clean water.

After a rough beginning, though, things seem to be getting back on track. Many local Lake Providence adults have started their adventure in the Licensed Practical Nursing program at the community college. Many community partners, including Together for Hope, are working together to assist them on their eighteen month program. The branch of the college in town offers a very small number of programs, and programs like Practical Nursing can only be started once every year and a half. When that window of opportunity closes, adult learners have few other options to pursue a college or vocational/technical education. Please be in prayer for these students as they work hard to achieve their goals and begin building a better future for themselves and their families.

Along these same lines, Together for Hope continues to push toward creating educational opportunities for local residents. I'm currently working with a local organization to provide additional tutoring for any nursing students who may need extra help with math. Also, a local resident, not in the

nursing program, approached me recently to seek help with reading. This individual - in her late 30s - isn't able to read at all. Through the Learning Center, I'll be working with a local tutor and with this individual as she pushes toward her goal of learning to read. Likewise, the GED courses are continuing with a new group of students. They're working very hard and starting to take (and pass) the five subtests that they have to complete in order to earn their diploma. We celebrate with our first graduate of 2018, LaTonya, who finished in January.

Lastly, the local public high school has been richly blessed to have a new teacher, Patrick Neeley - a long time friend of Together for Hope and gifted artist - who is teaching art classes at the school. His fellow teacher (and fiance), Liz Henke, continues to work with the Art Club. Through Together for Hope, these students have access to art supplies (e.g., modeling clay, water colors, pastels) that the school would otherwise not be able to provide.

Thank you for your continued prayers and gifts!



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CBF-LA STAFF

Mike Massar,
Coordinator
mikem@ubc-br.org
225-766-9474

Kyle Kelley,
Communications
cbflouisiana@gmail.com
318-780-4127

Marc Boswell,
Together for Hope
mjboswell3@gmail.com
252-363-8098

Send gifts to CBF-LA, 520 Olive St.
Shreveport, LA 71104 or give on-line
at cbfla.org.