

Affirmation: Singing the Songs of Our Redemption, 1977 to 2007

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Holladay United Church of Christ
Holladay, Utah

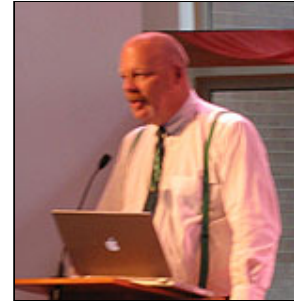
I am so deeply honored to be here this evening at this milestone celebration, commemorating the fact that in 15 days, on Monday, June 11, 2007, Affirmation turns 30.

I stand before you today – *I AM ALIVE TODAY* because 20 years ago I started attending Affirmation. I showed up at what was then the Wasatch Chapter, a confused, embittered, frightened, and deeply suicidal 25-year-old Gay Mormon, struggling in my soul to reconcile my sexuality and my spirituality, and I thank God that wonderful people like Russell Lane, Chuck Thomas, Dave Malmstrom, and Keith McBride reached out to me with the strong hand of fellowship, friendship, and unconditional love. I was suicidal from a life of self-hatred, alienation, social condemnation, and quite frankly ecclesiastical abuse.

I was at the Tabernacle as a young man during the priesthood conference session when Boyd Packer gave his infamous “For Young Men Only” speech, and remember him praising violence against me and even worse, acknowledging that I felt I deserved such retribution for my sinful thoughts and desires. As a youth, I also nearly memorized Spencer Kimball’s chapter “The Crime Against Nature” in *The Miracle of Forgiveness*, which used vitriolic and disparaging language like “ugly, detestable, abominable, diabolical, demonically-inspired, vile, vicious, disgusting, hateful” to describe me and my sexuality.

The members of Affirmation were also there to support me through my bishop’s court, when I met with my bishopric, which included Ted Wilson, who was then running for governor. Fortunately, that court only decided to put me on probation, which was the perfect decision for me at the time, because, with hindsight, I know that had they done nothing to me, I would have languished for many more years in Mormonism; or if they had decided that excommunication was in order and forwarded my case to a High Council court, I would have killed myself out of shame and humiliation. But being put on probation angered me just enough to help me to leave and go find my own spiritual path, which I call the Good Rainbow Road, taken from my Indian brothers who walk what they call the Good Red Road.

To date, not one church leader has apologized or asked forgiveness for how I was treated consistently through 10 years as an “out” Gay Mormon, with the exception of Ted Wilson, who is here with us tonight, and who just a few months ago emailed me, after reading my published story about my bishop’s court, which won an Affirmation writing award a few years back. It’s the essay titled “Losing My Religion, or How I Baked a Custard Pudding and Lost My Faith in Mormonism”. I was stunned to read Ted’s words, telling me how sorry he was for any pain that he had caused me at that time, and affirming that he now realizes that the cause of LGBT equal rights is a just cause. Of course I wrote back the following day my unequivocal acceptance of his apology, and with that, many years of anger fell away from my shoulders. Thank you, Ted!!



Connell O'Donovan presenting his paper at the event commemorating the 30th anniversary of the founding of Affirmation. Holladay United Church of Christ, Holladay, Utah, 27 May 2007.

As I begin to touch upon the historical events that led up to the founding of Affirmation in 1977, I must give my sincere thanks to Bob Waldrop, who was there when Affirmation was founded. He

lives in Oklahoma now and he and I held a lengthy email correspondence over several months, as I teased his memory for details about that event. I also acknowledge a 2002 interview that Hugo Salinas and Jay Bell of Affirmation held with Stephan Zakharias, who was the founder of Affirmation. My other sources are newspaper articles in the *Salt Lake Tribune*, the *Deseret News*, and Salt Lake's Gay paper of the time, *The Open Door*, as well as one article from the international Gay newsmagazine, *The Advocate*, which in 1977 was exclusively staffed by former Mormons living in LA and San Francisco, who called themselves the Mormon Mafia.

The Spring and Summer of 1977 was an incredible crucible for the Queer community, both locally and nationally. Nationally, Dade County, Florida had become a rallying cry for the Gay rights movement, when the County revoked sexual orientation from its non-discrimination policy, and Florida's Citrus Queen, Anita Bryant, commenced her nation-wide anti-Gay crusade, Save Our Children, Inc. The implication of her crusade was the vile lie that all homosexuals are pedophiles and all pedophiles are homosexuals. God surely has a wicked sense of humor, for her little son that she dragged around with her on her campaign of course ended up coming out as Gay himself a few years ago.

I well remember the news broadcast that spring of 1977 from Des Moines, Iowa in which a Gay rights activist, posing as a media reporter, threw a banana cream pie in her face during a live news broadcast. She quipped "Of course it was a fruit pie," and then bowed her head in prayer to ask God to save him from his sin of homosexuality. I remember watching that broadcast on the television, a 15-year old boy in Syracuse Utah, and secretly, silently I rejoiced that she had been so publicly humiliated. The LDS Church later invited Ms. Bryant to come to Utah for the Utah State Fair, and both Spencer Kimball, and the General Relief Society President, Barbara B. Smith, held news conferences praising Anita Bryant and her work to save America from "the homosexual menace."¹

Meanwhile, back at BYU in 1976, trouble was brewing. On September 1, 1976, BYU's Board of Trustees founded the Institute for Studies in Values and Human Behavior, hereafter referred to simply as the Values Institute, with Dr. Allen E. Bergin as its director.² Although the public was not informed of the true nature of the ironically named Values Institute, its goals were to produce an anti-Gay scientific book, written by Bergin and Victor L. Brown Jr., funded by church tithing monies, which would be printed by an eastern press and made to appear as though it had no ties to the Church. This would then be used as "secular evidence" to back up the church's homophobic stance. Other Values Institute goals were to prepare anti-Gay papers and rebuttals, support academic and scientific research vindicating the church's stance on homosexuality, and lastly to recommend to the First Presidency "specific steps the Church might take in combating homosexuality and other sexual misconduct."³

And most horribly, at Brigham Young University in 1976, Dr. D. Eugene Thorne, head of BYU's Psychology Department, oversaw Ph.D. student Max Ford McBride in his PhD dissertation that involved experiments on Gay men using Gay and Straight pornography with electric-shock therapy. They started out with 16 Gay male BYU students and staff, but two committed suicide during the experiment, so the study only ended up with 14 subjects.

Now Stephen James Matthew Price (who later changed his name to Stephan "Zak" Zakharias), a 22-year-old Gay convert to the church from Davis, CA (near Sacramento) was living in Utah at the time and personally knew the two men who had committed suicide during Thorne and McBride's electric shock therapy on them, and this became the driving force behind his conviction that a support group for Gay Mormons needed to be formed ultimately in order to prevent any further suicides.



Stephan Zakharias

Bob Waldrop, a young convert and missionary recently returned from Australia, moved to California where he came out in 1975 and then

became affiliated with the Metropolitan Community Church (or MCC – an evangelical church with a specific ministry for Gay people) in San Jose and decided to train for the ministry. About that time, Rev. Alice Jones of MCC Salt Lake decided to leave Utah and she invited Bob Waldrop to move to Salt Lake and take over her ministry, since he had an LDS background. He arrived in Utah in February 1977 and became the worship coordinator for MCC Salt Lake. An avid Libertarian (even to this day), Bob has always been driven to secure human rights for all people, regardless.



Bob Waldrop

In the early spring of 1977, Salt Lake MCC sponsored an organizational meeting in their gymnasium on 900 West 400 South. Waldrop and several other Gay Libertarians and MCC members (all of whom had been LDS, by the way), including Thor Upwall (1944-1995), Kay Kellerman, Rev. James Sandmire, and a Lesbian named Dorothy M., had come up with the idea to organize a “Salt Lake Coalition for Human Rights. (BTW, I only give full names if I have permission, or they have publicly announced their sexuality, or if the person is deceased.) Besides MCC and the Libertarians, representatives from the newly founded Royal Court, as well as the Gay bars, and the Socialist Workers Party became involved, most of whom were former LDS and even BYU students. These non-Libertarians included Joe Redburn from The Sun, Larry Pacheco from Radio City Lounge, BYU student Kenneth Kline, Paul L, Camille T., a woman named Carol who founded the Royal Court, and Tony Adams, a black Socialist who was mysteriously murdered a year later.



James Sandmire



Leonard Matlovich

This group decided to hold a large conference later that summer, on June 9-12, called the Salt Lake Human Rights Conference. They invited nationally prominent Gay activists David Kopay and Leonard Matlovich as their keynote speakers. David Kopay, although not LDS, had been an NFL quarterback, and had come out of the closet after retiring. Leonard Matlovich, was a highly-decorated Vietnam vet who had been a Mormon convert, and after earning a purple heart, came out to the Air Force, which had tried to expel him and he was successfully fighting their anti-Gay policy in Court. He was also the first out Gay person ever to appear on the cover of *Time* magazine.⁴



Cloy Jenkins

I must also mention that Kenneth Kline, one of the organizers of the Salt Lake Human Rights Convention, had been involved with organizing Gays at BYU, and in fact is the one who had published the pamphlet now known as *Prologue*. *Prologue* had been written in the spring of 1977 mainly by Gay BYU student Cloy Jenkins, aided by Ricks College faculty member Howard Salisbury. Jenkins wrote this paper in response to an anti-Gay lecture he had attended on campus delivered by Dr. Reed Payne – at the time, Jenkins’ remarks were simply known as “the Payne Papers”. Kenneth Kline had gotten Donald Attridge to do a pencil sketch of the BYU campus for the cover artwork, and published the Payne Papers, and then somehow had gotten the pamphlet to be mailed out by the Church Office Building to all General Authorities, plus TV and radio stations, and many BYU professors, etc. making it look as though the pamphlet was a BYU publication and approved of by the Church. This stunt caused a HUGE controversy in the Church and on campus at the Y, bless his heart. In any case Kenneth Kline had somewhat sneakily booked the Mormon-owned Hotel Utah for the conference. However when the Presiding Bishopric, which ran the Hotel, found out the exact



Howard Salisbury



Hotel Utah

nature of the “Human Rights” convention, it reneged on the contract and the convention had to be held at a much smaller, lesser known hotel downtown.⁵

Stephan Zakharias and his network of Gay friends at BYU, decided to use the Salt Lake Human Rights Convention as the vehicle to organize what was then called Affirmation: Gay Mormons United.

I want to talk a bit about the name for a moment. The name is certainly a consequence of the whole touchy-feely “positive vibe” of the late 60s and early 70s. Gay Catholics had organized in 1969 and called themselves Dignity. Lutherans Concerned was founded in 1974, as was the Gay Episcopalian group, Integrity. LGBT Methodists had begun meeting in the early 1970s, but in early 1977 they formally organized as Affirmation: Gay United Methodists, or GUM for short.⁶ Zakharias and his group from BYU seem to have taken that name from the Methodists, only instead of GUM it was GMU, Affirmation: Gay Mormons United. Within Utah circles, GMU also stood for Gay Mormon Underground, especially on the BYU campus. Zakharias later said that they chose that name because they wanted to affirm their unity in opposition to Mormon attempts to “divide and conquer,” and in fact, Spencer Kimball and Boyd Packer in their early 1970s pamphlets and speeches often forbid Gays to meet together, and were told not to speak to each other, emphasizing personal alienation. To these tactics, Zakharias said,

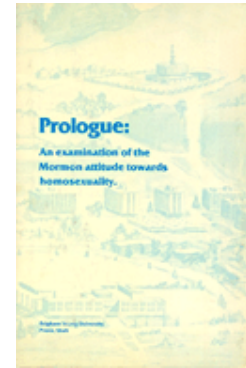
We were saying, “Nope! We are *not* going to stoop to the divide and conquer program,” so we decided to band together, so we were going to be an affirming group that supported and welcomed each other, and we were going to stand united – so that’s how GMU was named.

I also want to point out that within the Mormon tradition, we have the 1971 founding of the support group for Black Mormons, named Genesis.⁷ And this group became a specific pattern for LGBT Mormons to follow, recognizing a shared sense of misunderstanding, misinformation, and the need to band together for social and hopefully ecclesiastical change.

Zakharias has stated that he founded Affirmation realizing that there were basically four aspects of support that Gay Mormons needed, which are all still quite relevant today: LGBT Mormons need psychological support, social support, spiritual support, and political support.

Fear of church retaliation (leading to excommunication, expulsion from BYU, and being outed to families and wards) kept the members of Affirmation from using their own names in meetings. Many of the early Affirmation members used their middle name as a given name and their mothers’ or grandmothers’ maiden name as their surnames.

Back to the Salt Lake Human Rights Convention: Friday June 10th was reserved mainly for press conferences and the two keynote speeches by David Kopay and Leonard Matlovich. On Saturday, June 11th, the attendees broke out into various caucuses and it was on this day that Affirmation: Gay Mormons United was formed by Stephan Zakharias (a.k.a. Matthew Price), and about nine other men and four women (believed to be Camille T., Dorothy M., Marcia, two women only known as Marcia and Jennifer; Zakharias called these four women “the glue of Affirmation” that kept it together.) Tight security at the hotel prevented LDS infiltration, and in fact, two Mormon security



Prologue: An examination of the Mormon attitude towards homosexuality was published by BYU student Cloy Jenkins, with the help of Howard Salisbury, Lee Williams, Kenneth Kline, and others. The art on this cover was created by Donald Attridge.



“Gay Mormons Organize,” *The Advocate*, 2 November 1977, pp. 30-31. When Paul Mortensen read this story, he decided to organize the LA Chapter of Affirmation. Image scanned by Jay Bell.



Paul Mortensen



Ina Mae Murri

agents posing as Gays, were caught and turned away from the convention; attendees were told by word of mouth to wear any color of shirt but white and these two men showed up in white shirts and were thus caught. Other than organizing the group, the newly formed Affirmation decided to set up weekly “Family Home Evenings” in which members would meet on Monday nights to fellowship together in Salt Lake and I believe also in Provo. Zakharias claims that there were two Gay people in BYU Security at the time who would quietly let Affirmation know “what was going down, to help them dodge any booby-traps” set by the Church. The following day, Sunday the 12th, there was simply a kegger and barbecue held at Memory Grove and thus ended the Salt Lake Human Rights Convention.

Affirmation got off to a fairly good start, especially after a November 1977 article on it appeared in the *Advocate*. After that article came out, membership skyrocketed and Paul Mortensen, in Los Angeles, started a chapter there. Zakharias, paranoid about Church security tracking him and other members down, moved to Denver around Christmas 1977 and moved Affirmation’s national offices there. Soon though he burned out and relinquished his post to Paul Mortensen and the rest, Paul has written about and that can be found on the Affirmation website.

I’ve looked at the past, now let’s look to the future. I have come up with six challenges for Affirmation’s future to help it create a society in which Affirmation is no longer needed:

1. End the suicides of our LGBT Mormons brothers and sisters; as the Affirmation online “Book of Remembrance” shows, these have skyrocketed since 2000.
2. Stop non-consensual, mixed-orientation marriages.
3. You **MUST** grow internationally – how many of you here served non-English speaking missions? PLEASE volunteer to translate Affirmation pamphlets and the website into the language you learned. The two essays I wrote that won the Affirmation Writing Award, I also translated into Portuguese because I served my mission in Brazil.
4. Use the Internet voraciously yet wisely – THIS IS KEY to your mission.
5. Build stronger alliances with such groups as Genesis, The Mormon History Association, Sunstone, etc.
6. Last but not least, I strongly believe that is time for Affirmation to call the Church and its leaders to repentance for its homophobia – but first we **must** be ready to forgive (and that is the biggest challenge).

In the immortal words of Bob Marley, “Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery – none but ourselves can free our minds. So won’t you help me sing these songs of freedom, and of redemption. 'Cuz all I ever had is Redemption Songs. **'Cuz all I ever had is Redemption Songs.**”⁸

Every single one of us LGBT Mormons is a personal witness of the strength and power of homophobia in LDS culture, as well as a witness of our own strength, power, and resilience in the face of such institutional oppression. Building upon the work of our own pioneers, like Cloy Jenkins, Howard Salisbury, Jeff and Lee Williams, Donald Attridge, Stephan Zakharias, Marcia, Jennifer, Paul Mortensen, Ina Mae Murray, let us stand strong together as witnesses to the continuing plight of the homosexual, bisexual, and transgendered within Mormonism. Let us continue to sing our songs of redemption loudly, clearly, fearlessly!

I beg each and every one of you to make a commitment tonight to stand tall and proud, to tell your stories, to sing your songs of redemption, to bear your witness to the world. While there is no way we can tell “the Brethren” what to do (and they wouldn’t listen in any case), I sincerely believe it is our calling, whatever our current relationship to Mormonism is, to JUST BEAR WITNESS.

It is my prayer that Affirmation continues on its vital mission to be what I so desperately needed 20 years ago:

Welcome the stranger, be a voice for the silent, be courageous for the fearful, love the unloved, bind up the wounds of the broken, listen intently to the unheard, be a community for the alienated, give a place of rest to the weary, be strong for the weak, bear witness against falsehood, speak truth to misunderstanding and speak love to hatred and fear, wipe away all the tears of sorrow.

Don’t be merely queer; don’t be merely a peculiar people; BE EXTRAORDINARY – BE FABULOUS. Live life as Thoreau challenged himself:

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practise resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion.⁹

I bear witness to you that life *is* sublime. Elegant. Beautiful beyond words.

The UC Santa Cruz campus where I work is part of the Henry Cowell Redwood State Forest. There are trees alive right now on my campus, which were alive when Alexander the Great conquered the western world; it’s a life-changing experience to be in the presence of one of those ancient ones. The redwoods are the second oldest beings on this planet, second only to the bristlecone pines of the High Sierras. The redwoods are also the tallest living beings on this planet, yet their root system only goes to a maximum of six feet into the earth and no deeper. Human beings are the only known destroyers of this tree: no fire, no illness, no pest, no wind can fell them. So how do these mighty trees remain standing, despite hundreds of years battling the elements with such an unbelievably shallow root system? **THEY HOLD ON TO EACH OTHER!** Their roots are shallow but they travel far, extending out for hundreds of feet in all directions, reaching out to each other, grasping on to each other’s roots for much-needed support.



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So, hearkening back to Stephan Zakharias, be united in spite of all the voices calling for our alienation, rejection, eradication - do not give in to “divide and conquer”. In the immortal words of Plato, an army of lovers cannot be overcome!¹⁰ Thank you *so much!*

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