

Families Are Forever... and for Now

Remarks made at the opening of the 2013 Sunstone Symposium in Salt Lake City, Utah, on July 31, 2013

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In keeping with the theme of this symposium, in relation to our LGBT brothers and sisters, one could speak of bodies in terms of the literal bodies of LGBT saints; the metaphorical body (using Paul's first letter to the Corinthians), and the doctrinal body (the body of teachings that affect the lives of gay members). One might also consider how the literal bodies of LGBT Mormons are regarded as somehow not fully human/natural—that is, as bodies that either don't have normal human desires or are not deserving of normal human expression. One could also speak of our culture's willingness to sacrifice the literal bodies of gay members by driving them to self-destructive behaviors, including suicide.

Focusing on the metaphorical, in his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul uses an extended metaphor of the body to teach us about the body of Christ (the church and its constituent members). That image also applies to families, groups, organizations and nations—social structures in which we live and move and have our being. In reality, we belong to bodies of other bodies—individuals and groups to whom we are related or connected—biologically, socially, or spiritually. The documentary film *Families are Forever* is based on one such body, a faithful Mormon family, and its relationship to other bodies (their extended family, congregation, community and church). All of these bodies, to follow Paul's metaphor, are interrelated and co-dependent—and the health of all is dependent on the health of each individual member. What *Families are Forever* illustrates is that the healthy functioning of each of these bodies is dependent on love and that when individual members of these bodies fail to love other members, fail to nourish and sustain any member within the body, both the individual bodies and the body as a whole suffer.

Paul says something profound about the Church that we tend to forget—that we should have special concern for those members of the body of Christ, not who are, but whom we consider weaker, less honorable and unpresentable. In relation to the last of these, think of all the disparaging remarks and discriminatory and un-Christ like behaviors that one hears and sees towards LGBT people and among members of the Church about the “homosexual lifestyle”—in short, Paul is speaking about those whom we consider less righteous and less worthy than ourselves (which includes, both historically and at present, our attitudes toward and treatment of our LGBT sisters and brothers. That is, we have considered these our fellow saints dispensable, whereas Paul says they are indispensable. What instead should be our behavior toward these brothers and sisters? Paul makes it very clear: “On the contrary, those members that seem to be weaker are essential, and those members we consider less honorable we [should] clothe with greater honor, and our unpresentable members [we should] clothe with dignity.”

For a long period of time, as Latter-day Saint families and congregations and as a church, contrary to Paul's admonition, we have said to our LGBT members “We have no need of you; you are not part of our body.” Paul condemns such behavior, saying, “But God has so

composed the body, giving more abundant honor to that member which [we perceived] lacked, so that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another.”

Clearly, as families and as congregations we not only have not given more abundantly to our LGBT members, but rather as friends, families and congregations we have excluded them from our various bodies—including our bodily (i.e., physical) presence. Paul says the consequence of our having done so has caused these members to suffer, and he reminds us that “if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it.” which has certainly been the case—and continues to be so to an unacceptable degree. As families and as congregations, we have suffered too long over this issue. Families are Forever shows us what happens when all of the members of a family honor a member who is in pain and treats him with dignity. Again, to quote Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, “If one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it. So that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another.” (1 Cor. 12: 12-31, NIV, NEB). Families are Forever demonstrates how one family can set the example for other families, for congregations and for the Church as a whole.

Before we see the film, Dr. Caitlin Ryan will speak about her research at the Family Acceptance Project as it related to the film, especially her research on the profound differences she and her colleagues have found between families’ accepting and rejecting behaviors on the health, safety and well-being of their LGBT children. This includes her research on, respectively, religious condemnation and acceptance of LGBT adolescents and how our expression of God’s love or withholding of love affects their self-esteem, well-being and risk for suicide, depression, substance abuse and HIV infection. Her research is groundbreaking and is changing the way families, institutions and government agencies relate to and provide services for LGBT young people and their families. Her research also provides the first empirical foundation for Paul’s admonition that we must provide greater honor and dignity towards those members of our family and Church bodies whom we have dishonored and discriminated against in word, thought and behavior.

First, I would like to say a few words about Dr. Ryan herself.

Dr. Ryan is a highly respected researcher and practitioner who has been a pioneer in the field of LGBT health for nearly four decades. Her contributions have been recognized by many professional and community groups, and her approach to promoting wellness and reducing health risks and negative social outcomes such as suicide and homelessness for LGBT young people is changing the paradigm of care for how LGBT young people are served across disciplines and systems of care. Her work with families and congregations is opening new ways for families and congregations to support LGBT people in the context of religious beliefs and values. She has been honored by the leading mental health professional organizations, including the American Psychiatric Association and the American Psychological Association, which recently presented her with its Distinguished Scientific Contribution Award. Her research and new approach to family-based care is being utilized across the U.S. and in other countries—and by clergy and religious leaders in other religious organizations.

Over the first nearly two centuries of its existence, Mormonism has survived—and thrived--through the help of friends—other believers who believe in us and have sacrificed to help and serve us--from General Thomas Kane, who helped the Saints during their exodus to the Great Basin, to Richard Mouw, President of Fuller Theological Seminary, who currently fosters dialogue between Mormons and other Christians.

Caitlin Ryan is such a friend. It has been a particular pleasure for me to be her collaborator on the booklet we have written for Latter-day Saint families, *Supportive Families, Healthy Children: Helping Latter-day Saint Families with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Children*, and on this important film. Caitlin's interest in producing the booklet and this film is motivated in large part by her recognition of the central focus on families in Mormon theology and religious practice. It is her hope that our application of the research she has been doing on LGBT children and adolescents will inspire other faith traditions to adopt these same principles and thus bless their LGBT members and families. She has started doing similar work with other religious groups.

Believing as we do that the Holy Spirit can inspire anyone who does God's work in the world, I don't think it is at all inappropriate to suggest that Caitlin's work has been so inspired. Certainly the ways in which her important research is helping Latter-day Saint families and leaders is inspired, even heaven-directed. Caitlin has devoted many thousands of hours and invested hundreds of thousands of dollars to bring her research to Latter-day Saints to help us deal with this issue in a more enlightened—and more Christ-centered—way. It is my hope that Latter-day Saints will not only recognize the importance of Dr. Ryan's work for us but that we will find ways of being as generous with her as she has been with us. In practical terms, this means raising the money to pay for the research, publications and now film that Dr. Ryan has so generously expended on our behalf—and for her future work, including on Latter-day Saint families. I'll say a few words at the end of the evening about how you can contribute to this important work. In the meantime, as you watch the film and listen to the panel participants, consider how much you might be able to contribute personally and how you can apply what you have learned from her research in your own lives as well as those of your families, friends, and congregations.