

Stephen Carnahan

Auburn, Maine

My name is Stephen Carnahan and I am the pastor of the High Street Congregational Church in Auburn. I'm not only a pastor, I'm the son of a pastor as well.

I grew up in my father's church, which was a member of a fundamentalist denomination. This was a church that took it for granted that homosexuality was unacceptable and a sin that would eventually send one to hell. I really didn't hear much in the way of sermons or lessons about this. In that world homosexuality was a sin of such magnitude that it was never even mentioned. My church reflected the cultural norm of the times. Homosexuals were forced to be invisible in the church and the community.

As a child, I accepted this without any thought. It was very removed from my life. In fact, I didn't know of anyone who was identified as a homosexual until I reached high school. I was aware of some students that were referred to as gay by some of the others, but it didn't seem to impact my life much.

However, as I reached the final years of high school and moved into college I began to question many of the assumptions of the religious perspective I had been taught. In particular, I began to be uncomfortable with the church's position of exclusion of women, racial groups, and GLBT persons. Eventually I left the denomination in which I was raised, and moved into the United Church of Christ.

The UCC at the time was deeply involved in the question of homosexuality and faith, and was working out what it meant to be a church that was open to the LGBT community. Though I was sympathetic, I was still unsure of my position. I did not move out to the forefront of this issue that was becoming a more and more significant part of our church life nationwide. I had been pastoring for about three years and began to develop a circle of colleague friends, that included a man named Bob. Bob was the pastor of a church nearby, and we often met at various meetings or conferences.

Bob and I hit it off right away. He had a great sense of humor and was lots of fun. He had many friends and introduced me to them so that I became part of Bob's big circle. We found a great many things to talk about, from theology to politics to music. We talked a lot about the changes coming in our churches. Bob was also a devout Christian. I saw how deeply moved he would be during worship, how he prayed with all his heart, how he tried to understand the message of the Bible. He spoke openly and freely about his love for Jesus. For someone who had such a lighthearted attitude toward life and work, he took his faith deeply and spiritually, and I was inspired by this.

One day Bob called and asked if I would meet him for lunch. It was then that he told me that he had decided that I would be the first one he would tell that he was gay. He said that he was tired of living with this secret, and was looking for people he trusted to tell about it. He told me that he was in a committed relationship, which he mostly had to keep hidden. He nervously said that he hoped I would continue to be his friend. He asked my

advice about coming out to his own congregation and to our colleagues, advice I felt very ill-prepared to give. The fact was that Bob's confession presented me with a serious problem. Here he was both a gay man and a devout Christian. This was the final straw that broke down my prejudice. All the theological and Biblical arguments against homosexuality were defeated by this good man of deep faith. That began the transformation for me, which led me to stepping forward in my church and community to call for the full inclusion of LGBT persons. At the time I didn't realize what a great favor Bob had done me.

Bob didn't live long after this, dying suddenly while still in his 40s. But he left me with a great gift, the gift of openness. Because it was some years after that that my own son sat down with my wife and I to say that he was gay. At that time we were able to embrace him and assure him that we loved him and that we were glad he was able to be open and honest with us.

Sometimes I shudder to think what would have happened if I had still been caught up in the prejudice and ignorance in which I was raised. What if Bob had not shown me that there was no contradiction in saying "I am a gay Christian"? What if my son had felt unaccepted in his own family? Being gay is a hard enough life in our society with your family's support, it is tragic without it. I hope the day will come that my son, when he falls in love, will be able to be open as other people are. I am working for the day that he and his chosen will not have to hide, but will be able to celebrate their love in legal, equal marriage.