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Faith and Same-Gender Attraction

A Look at Ty Mansfield's *Voices of Hope*

Allen E. Bergin and Marian S. Bergin

This unusual, beautifully conceptualized book¹ features personal accounts by nineteen men and women who struggle with same-gender sexual attraction (SGA) in themselves or loved ones, as well as one man who is challenged by transgender identity (GID). All are striving to live by the doctrines of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which sometimes means going against what feels natural to them and against prevailing societal currents that encourage them to express and celebrate their inclinations. These accounts are written with an openness and authenticity that draws the reader into their inner worlds in a most personal way. We have read and studied many books about SGA, and we found this volume to be unique.

Personal Themes

While the book does include ten pages of relevant references and resources, it does not follow the usual protocol for reporting case histories or clinical data. Instead it presents accounts that are more like the testimony of witnesses in a court of law, in a Church testimony meeting, or in an autobiography. As such, readers need to approach these life stories as the personal documents that they are. They do not pretend to be proofs of anything. Rather, the authors have bared their souls with transparent honesty. Laden with doubts, conflicts, and regressions, they do not claim magical transformations but convey the full complexity and anguish—as well as the joys—of their journeys.

The personal narratives of change documented here are rooted in deeply spiritual motivation and divinely inspired promptings so tender and open that critiquing them would be irreverent and crass. We, therefore, let them stand for what they are—open windows revealing the difficult lives and the crosscurrents inherent in dealing with SGA within an LDS context. There is a nobility in these stories, accentuated by open recounting of pain and suffering before and after changes were made. There is also authenticity in

their admissions that old feelings do not disappear completely and in the painful poignancy of wistful memories that try their souls.

The book includes six sections, each introduced by a doctrinal essay written by a prominent LDS author who is familiar with SGA. The first-person accounts within each section illustrate the principles introduced by the author. Written by Brad Wilcox, M. Catherine Thomas, Wendy Ulrich, Camille Fronk Olson, Robert L. Millet, and Michael Goodman, these doctrinal essays provide a thoughtful, carefully crafted, orthodox context for the spiritual and emotional challenges that accompany efforts to cope with SGA.

The heart of the book lies in the compelling stories that the editor, Ty Mansfield, solicited and that he characterizes as putting a “seal of living reality” on the gospel teachings that precede them. Mansfield, who has himself struggled with SGA, explains his motivation: “I longed to hear the real, lived experiences of real, live Latter-day Saints—flesh-and-blood people who had been where I was” (4). We applaud him for creating this book. We also join him in the trepidation expressed in his epilogue: “It’s hard to say anything on this topic without some form of backlash by someone” (359).

Mansfield’s introductory essay is an enlightening and moving autobiographical account of his journey through the “hell” of internal turmoil to the “heaven” of marital communion. He weaves four concepts into his introduction, asserting them as the foundation of his volume: (1) being rooted in Jesus Christ, (2) proximate vs. ultimate hope, (3) standing as witnesses of God, and (4) our covenant to mourn with and comfort others. These concepts, he argues, “have often been neglected in conversation about homosexuality in the LDS community” (8). He intends these principles to be a way to shift from past debate-like approaches to an approach that invites civil dialogue and shared testimony.

The editor’s deep feelings about the fourth concept are palpable as he pleads with all in the LDS community to honor their covenants to “mourn with those that mourn . . . and comfort those that stand in need of comfort” (Mosiah 18:9). Doing so would reverse our common cultural practice of rejecting and isolating those who so acutely need our empathy and support and would mark a huge step forward in behaving as God’s covenant people ought to behave. Mansfield quotes a friend as saying, “If they [those with SGA] feel the most love in the gay and lesbian cultural community, that community wins; if they feel it with God’s covenant people, then we win” (28). We join Mansfield and his contributors in this heartfelt desire.

Mansfield’s emergence as a key spokesperson for same-gender-attracted men and women began nearly a decade ago when he coauthored *In Quiet Desperation: Understanding the Challenge of Same-Gender Attraction* (Deseret Book, 2004). That book centered on the tragic suicide of Stuart Matis, who

in protest and desperation shot himself on the steps of an LDS chapel in California. The resulting book was a rare attempt by a major LDS publisher to reach the wider LDS audience about SGA issues.

In *Voices of Hope*, we find continuing movement toward more openness about the private struggles of SGA Church members. Twelve of the narrative writers courageously use their own names, perhaps indicating an increasing sense of trust that the general LDS population can handle the intimate matters revealed in their accounts. As one contributor grappled with whether to include his name or not, he told Mansfield: "When I made the final decision to use my real name, knowing the potential for backlash, I decided that there is a war being waged, and our side is losing while gay cultural ideologies are winning. We are losing because people like me feel the need to hide and pretend. I pretend not out of fear of the gay community; I pretend out of fear of the negative reaction I will get from people in the Church" (21). Although public disclosure may not always be wise, we express our loving appreciation for the risk taken by him and others and express our hope that they will all find their bravery rewarded.

As clinicians, we have counseled with a number of SGA clients and also have personal family experience with SGA, including two of our sons. We know many of the same dilemmas, struggles, regressions, and wrestles with the Lord that are recounted in *Voices of Hope*. We understand the agonizing scenarios that unfold when SGA challenges arise in individuals and their families. We empathize with Kathleen Marsden as she recounts her struggle to come to terms with having a son suffering from depression who was living with a male partner:

The initial steps in my journey to peace were trying to find someone or something to blame. First it was my fault, and then it became my husband's. . . . Everything I read seemed to indicate that we should be careful about placing blame for the agony our boy was experiencing. Amidst his own anguish, he tried to assure me that nobody had ever abused him or mistreated him in ways he felt contributed to his attraction. During the following months, he often commented that he would rather be burdened with anything but this particular trial, occasionally even alluding to thoughts of wanting to end his life. As a younger man, he thought if he was good enough the feelings would go away. I cried incessantly. My heart broke to think that he had suffered in silence for so many years (139).

Later in her story, she recounts: "My dilemma between loving my son and his partner and loving the gospel was gradually resolved: I love the gospel and the Church of Jesus Christ, and I love TJ and his partner. For me, it eventually became that simple. . . . I need not choose between my son and the gospel. The Church does not need to alter its teachings because I love

these young men. For me, it isn't a choice of being faithful to one or to the other; I have heart enough for the gospel and for TJ, and to spare." It seems that the resolution of her despair resulted from realizing that disapproval of the same-sex relationship did not require her to lessen the love she felt for her son. She applied the doctrine of love in her situation as declared in many scriptural injunctions, for example, "Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ" (Gal. 6:2).

Many of the stories in the book allude to shame as an early primary emotion for same-gender-attracted individuals. Leaders and parents who hold negative feelings about SGA sometimes shame and reject those struggling with it because they have limited experience with this challenge. Robbie Pierce's account is illustrative. At age thirteen he identified himself as "gay" and could not stop the negative cultural messages from plaguing him: "The crisis here was one of identity. I couldn't be gay. I was a good Mormon kid. . . . Something I had not asked for was happening to me. I began to arrange my memories of my life to make them fit in with this new idea" (45). He then recounts a searing shame-based memory: "At dinner in a restaurant shortly after my own self-discovery, one brother tauntingly called another 'gay,' and Mom slammed her fists on the table. The bang and the clinking of silverware and glasses made every head turn toward her as she seethed, 'None of my children would ever be evil enough to be gay.' And yet, 'gay' was the most accurate adjective I had for myself" (46).

Even though Robbie Pierce does not use the word shame, undoubtedly he felt shamed. It is important to understand and distinguish between the meanings of shame and guilt. Healthy guilt tells us we've done something wrong. When we identify the wrong as sinful, it leads us to repentance, forgiveness, and the Savior's healing power. Shame tells us that we *are* something wrong, that the core of our being is defective and undesirable. At this point, shame often triggers feelings of helplessness and hopelessness, which can lead to the belief that we shouldn't *be*, because there is something inherently bad about us. And thus many SGA individuals descend into shame's sinkhole, feeling that they are not redeemable. To avoid the pain of this dark and desolate place, many escape into obsessive sex and other addictions. Some feel so desperate for relief that they take their own lives. This book is an important aid in helping Latter-day Saints more fully understand the SGA predicament and behave in more loving, covenant-keeping ways.

Social, Emotional, and Spiritual Themes

These reports of "lives in progress" teach insightful lessons for all people of faith, regardless of orientation, who wish to endure victoriously the onslaught of a fallen world. They teach that we live in a "sex-saturated"

culture where physical sensation and momentary pleasure predominate, and where the minds of many are clouded from the real reasons for mortal existence. *Voices of Hope* provides an antidote and a way out of compulsion and dissolution. It features faith, freedom, integrity, authentic emotional connecting, and self-sacrifice that all mark mature and committed relationships.

An unusual example of these qualities is illustrated by the story of Kenneth Hoover and his friend, Steven, who lived together and both contracted HIV/AIDS. Kenneth reports that through spiritual counsel and divine power, they found the strength to abstain from sex and support one another. Eventually, Kenneth baptized Steven, and they have remained celibate partners for thirteen years at the time of the book's publication. Both regularly attend church and the temple. Each holds a calling in their Oakland, California, ward. They emphasize the love of Christ and of each other. The example of their newfound spiritual priority is one that heterosexuals could learn from. Too many LDS heterosexuals, married or single, have never learned how to put first their social, emotional, and spiritual commitments and place legitimate sex as an integrated expression thereof.

An unusual theme of spirituality is woven into most of the accounts in this book. Prayer, promptings, and healing moments all attest to the divine interventions that frequently occurred. These happened in the context of counseling with priesthood leaders, desperately searching private prayers, healing encounters with loved ones, priesthood blessings, professional counseling, anguished repentance, and meditating.

Perhaps we have here a selective sample of people who made it into light and healing. We do not, of course, have a random sample. How many people have tried similarly and failed, we do not know. What we do know is that we have diverse paradigms presented here of how spiritual forces worked for good and, in many instances, above and beyond temporal and human efforts alone. The depth of pain that was eventually relieved by these invisible means is a phenomenon to behold. Even if it is documented only by this small group of testimonies, the stories reveal a power that inspires. Could it be that this small coterie of people who have described their pains, their hopes, and their faith-driven reforms exemplify pathways that others can learn from? Perhaps their narratives can prompt feelings of hope where despair prevails.

Remarkably, going against the cultural norms of the day, Tyler Moore, a married Latter-day Saint with SGA, shares some truths he discovered about himself:

I've learned that what so many in what is commonly referred to as the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community told me is

absolutely correct. I do need to be ‘true to myself.’ My true self, my first and foremost identity, is a *brave son of God*. From this identity I gain the ability to be a husband, a father, a son, a brother, a friend, and a student—all secondary to my primary identity. Because I am a son of God, I can lay my weaknesses and sins at the feet of my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. As I have allowed Him to take my heart of stone and replace it with a heart of flesh, He has made true peace possible. . . . It was change from the inside out, not the reverse. It was more than just finding healthy male relationships or simply learning sports. It was something deeper I needed, deeper even than sex or sexual identity; it was finally finding a way to accept myself as worthwhile and to know I was worth loving. (185–88)

Scientific and Political Themes

Voices of Hope is not a scientific report, and it does not pretend to be one. It is also not a polemic making claims about how likely sexual-orientation change might be. Rather, it is a narrative conveying details of personal struggles in how to implement the doctrines of the gospel of Jesus Christ and its program for self-development and how to be touched by God’s spirit in the process. Such effort, often guided by principles of repentance, has yielded a “newness of self” for those who have disclosed their processes.

This “newness of self” is manifested in most of these cases; but it cannot yet be quantified into a statistical report. It might be argued, however well these peoples’ struggles turned out, that they are not a representative sample, or that there were no objective pre- and post-tests of their condition, or that there are insufficient long-term follow-ups. Such critiques are correct, but they are beside the point. What we have here are descriptive reports of something very significant happening to a lot of people. The real issue is whether this can spread and affect the lives of others who study these accounts or who find enough inspiration to discern the principles involved and apply them to their own personal dynamics. If so, then we have the germ of a benevolent movement, and a controlled outcome study is not yet relevant.

Official or political views of mental health professions that oppose SGA change do not apply. No one here has asserted that they had mental illnesses or that they required the application of techniques that had been tested for efficacy and safety in outcome studies with untreated placebo-control groups. The self-descriptions of the respective changes that each of these contributors reported were often aided by professional counselors in auxiliary roles, but the primary processes were spiritual and partook of religious motivations in church contexts. Freedom of religion thus trumps the overbearing interests of those activist groups or accreditation agencies that engage in endless critiques of spiritually based change.

With respect to the controversies over whether SGA can be changed, it should be noted that the cohort of people assembled by Ty Mansfield were judged by us to be mainly people who could be listed initially as “exclusively homosexual” or 5–6 on the Kinsey Scale of sexual orientation. We judged only one case to have moved all the way to 1–2 on that scale, namely, mostly heterosexual. Many, but not all, of these cases moved toward the midrange or “bisexual” and continued to have homosexual feelings. Thus, they were not declaring miracle cures. Instead they (1) felt homosexual urges to be less intense and urgent and, therefore, more diminished and controllable, especially after children were born to them; (2) found ways to accommodate their lives to the Church-inspired guidelines for living; and (3) experienced the satisfactions of being integrated into and prized by the mainstream culture, thus being less dependent upon the nurture of an alternative subculture. It should be noted here that we are applying the Kinsey Scale to the self-reports as illustrative only. The scale, of course, has limitations, as does employing the scale outside of a clinical setting.

There are two other caveats to consider regarding our otherwise positive view of this book's distinctive contribution to a controversial debate. First, this is a selective sample of success stories. Harm could be done if persons with SGA or their helpers and families assume that dramatic improvements can readily be obtained by following the principles identified herein. There is a danger that failure to achieve inflated hopes may yield to despair. Second, theory and research show that sexual orientation arises from multiple pathways; therefore, we are dealing with homosexualities (plural) and not a uniform phenomenon that can be explained or changed by a single approach.

Yet we find this book, as we stated previously, to be helpful, hopeful, and faith promoting. We recommend that the word be spread to read it.

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Marian S. Bergin is a clinical social worker (retired). She was a program director in behavioral medicine for seven years at Utah Valley Hospital, served clients in private practice for twenty-five years, and was also appointed as an adjunct clinical faculty member at the BYU Comprehensive Clinic.

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1. Ty Mansfield, comp., *Voices of Hope: Latter-day Saint Perspectives on Same-Gender Attraction* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2011). [^]