

More on the Candidates and Inquirers Retreat: A past participant shares their experience

I would also like to share a story from my life with you. A friend and mentor told me of a retreat for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered Presbyterians who were inquirers and candidates for ministry. He was someone who was supportive of me- a life-line- in a place where not many people understood how someone could be gay and called to ministry. This mentor, who was also a wonderful pastor-like friend, was in the process of ordination and in an 18 year long relationship with his partner. I wrestled with how this could be, but as I got to know him I could not tell a distinction between his call to ministry and other heterosexual pastors' call to ministry.

The feeling I had when I met with him was both of terror and of joy that finally I could find a person who understood the loneliness I felt. He knew the pressure I felt to be heterosexual that came from many people in my life, including myself. I had resigned myself to being single and hiding my desire of a relationship with a woman. But I felt like I was living a lie, and this lie was tearing me apart. I desperately needed to face the truth about myself in a way that was accepting and not self-loathing. I wondered if it was possible to live as a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ and also be affirming of my sexuality.

This pastor friend of mine wanted to connect me with other people in my situation. He recommended that I attend a confidential retreat where PC(USA) candidates and inquirers from all over the country came to be in community, worship and discern God's Word together as we studied the Bible-doing a Hebrew word study, played games, took hikes and had conversations about our different seminaries. We crossed the span of conservative and liberal, closeted and out the closet and somewhat out of the closet, but when we got together barriers were broken down and no one had to hide. We could just be ourselves and be filled by this time of spiritual retreat.

I was open to the Spirit but still stubborn in the flesh. Like Peter, I needed God to show me the vision multiple times. I literally trembled with fear at the beginning of the retreat (what if my family finds out, what if my church finds out, what if...?) As I listened and shared a weekend with them I began to see these lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people more as wonderfully gifted seminarians and pastors than as strangers. I began to see them as friends, but upon arrival at the retreat I would not have expected to find Christ in each person as I did.

With every encounter, I felt God was chipping away at a hardened part of my heart-that was unwilling to accept God's creation of me and God's grace for me the way that I am. This was hospitality where I least expected it. To start with- a hug from the pastor I had been in contact with and then help finding my room. Next I found a welcome bag on my bunk bed made with such care for each person at the retreat. I pulled out a beautiful scarf knit with many colors out of this welcome bag. As I held it I felt the tears coming and I let them out- the pain and sadness, emotional stress and grief that I felt. All of these emotions were met by a carefully made scarf with this blessing attached.

"May God's grace be upon this stole...warming, comforting, enfolding, and embracing. May this mantle be a safe haven...a sacred place of security and well-being...sustaining and embracing in good times as well as difficult ones. May the one who receives this stole be cradled in hope, kept in joy, graced with peace, and wrapped in love."

And with it I was blessed. Throughout the weekend, especially during Communion, I experienced God's grace in new and different ways. Similar to my conversion to Christianity, I felt God's warmth and comfort through this gay Christian community. Astonished I left the retreat feeling as if I had known more what it means to be baptized into Christ's Church, to be welcomed as a child of God.

This week our chapel team has tried to make space for each of us to share testimony. We believe that the Spirit can speak through testimony as it did through strangers in Acts 11. The Spirit can change people-like Peter, like me and you-and even call us to testify in uncomfortable places. Your testimony is important, too. We wish we could hear everyone's testimony today, but we are limited by time. So, we invite you in the coming weeks to make space to hear and to share testimony with us and with each other. May the breaking of bread today be a catalyst for making space to share stories both with the stranger and with each other. Amen.