

ANDREW MARIN

Mission and the Gay Community

Andrew Marin's recent book, *Love Is An Orientation*, draws on his experience of bridge-building between Christian and GLBT communities. In this interview with *Anvil*, he provides some of the background to his work, explains its vision and principles and offers some challenges to those in the UK about the need to think and act in a Christ-like manner.

Andrew, you were brought up in a conservative Christian context in the US, so how did you first encounter the reality of the gay culture?

I first encountered the gay culture the summer after my first year at university from 1999 to 2000 when my three best friends all 'came out' to me in three consecutive months. Growing up in a very conservative mega-church in America (where there is already a large and vocal disconnect between the GLBT (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender) community and conservatism) my friends' admission sent me running as far away from them as I possibly could. I took the easy path by cutting ties with them and I didn't even think twice about it. That was because I didn't know how – with such a clear theological, social and cultural schism between our beliefs – I was ever going to be able to peacefully and productively engage them, the three people I cared about more than anyone. But running from them gave me no spiritual or emotional satisfaction as I realized that, at the time each one of them separately shared with me their most sacred of secrets, I abandoned them for my own comfort.

So what changed as a result of that experience and how did it affect your sense of calling as a follower of Christ?

When I ended the relationship with my best friends the only question I had for God was: 'Why me?'. I was so caught up in why God would let my three best friends be in the one group that I had intentionally singled out and made fun of for the first nineteen years of my life that I never stopped to think of what it must have been like for my friends to grow up with *me* as a best friend.

A few months after I had cut ties I was praying and I strongly felt the Spirit convicting me to go back to them, which would eventually answer the ultimate 'why' question I had been asking since they came out. One evening I called them up and we talked for the first time in months. It was the most uncomfortable conversation I ever had, and yet it was also the most freeing. Not because they had any definitive answers for me, but because we all knew our lives were never going to be the same from that night forward. In my spirit I kept hearing, 'You want to know why Andrew... then go and find out for yourself'. That just meant one thing to me – I had to move into the predominantly gay neighbourhood of Chicago called Boystown and start learning how to live my faith in real time, in real life, amidst the one population of people that I never wanted anything to do with. I didn't have

any theological language for it at the time, but recently Dave Gibbons, pastor of Newsong Church in California, wrote a book called *The Monkey and the Fish*.¹ One of his main theses was that the cultural understanding of Jesus' words to go and love your neighbour as yourself literally meant to find the person most unlike yourself and relentlessly pursue them in Christ's love. Since that first night of reconnection, my new life's goal became clear and I knew how it had to be accomplished: by getting immersed in the one neighbourhood I had been running away from, not towards.

So, can you give us a sense of what the Boystown area you moved into is like?

Demographically. Boystown is a little over one square mile on Chicago's Northside, centered on the famous Halsted Street. In 1998 there was a multi-million dollar restoration of Boystown. It included the addition of dozens of lighted rainbow poles throughout the neighbourhood acting as street lights, the prominent display of rainbow flags on every building and the commencement a few years later of one of the largest GLBT community centres in the world. These outward statements by the city of Chicago were all a part of the official designation of Boystown as one of the foremost destinations for GLBT people throughout the world.

The neighbourhood currently boasts sixty different GLBT bars, nightclubs, strip clubs, specialty sex shops, a bath house and restaurants owned by, and catering to, GLBT clientele. Throughout the years I have had the opportunity to travel to, and work in, some of the most famous gay neighbourhoods throughout the world. I am yet to see any gay neighbourhood quite as 'out' and GLBT-specific as Boystown. At least visually, the major piece that sets Boystown apart from all the other gay neighbourhoods are its unabashed X-rated storefront windows. There is no mistaking where you are as soon as the north or south boundary of Boystown is crossed.

You presumably made contact with churches in Chicago, how did they react to your vision of a Christian presence to this community?

The answer to this question turned into one of the saddest years of my life. I was a twenty-four year old kid convinced of the vision the Lord had led me towards: to build a peaceful and productive bridge between two diametrically opposed social and theological communities. I set up The Marin Foundation to implement that vision and started a Bible study that grew to over one hundred people consisting of all walks of faith and sexuality (gay Christian, ex-gay, celibate, transgender, straight conservative and liberal Christian). I started seeing how relationship dynamics changed as Christ was made central with the purposeful knowledge of growing in a biblical reconciliation (reconciling God to human and human to human) not the current culture war definition of reconciliation (which is 'you believe what I believe otherwise you're wrong and homophobic/Christphobic').

Without knowing how to start involving churches in this small movement, I literally opened up the Chicago phonebook, flipped to the heading 'Churches' and one-by-one I called all 2,671 churches in the city of Chicago. For the first full year of The Marin Foundation in 2005, besides continuing the Bible study classes, I had anywhere between four and six meetings a day, seven days a week with many of the senior pastors throughout the city. I wasn't asking for money, I was rather

1 Gibbons 2009.

communicating that the topic of homosexuality was going to be one of the most important lasting memories of our current generation, something the church will be judged on, and something that will greatly influence (positively or negatively) our own influence as Christians. *Each one of the first 641 churches* that I talked to all said the same thing:

‘You’re 24 years old and you’re trying to do something that has never been done before. It can’t be done. Stop wasting my time’.

Dejected, I left each of those 641 consecutive churches questioning whether I had indeed heard God’s voice or not. But I saw with my own eyes the Lord moving powerfully in the small gatherings and I was convinced that, no matter who thought I was crazy, that The Marin Foundation’s bridge-building work was of the Lord. So, from that point on, my thought was that it doesn’t matter who or what joins in because I don’t serve for an institution’s approval. I serve God and do His work; no matter what.

The sad part of all of this is what happened in the wake of all of the rejection. Two years later I was attacked in the national media by a very well known American gay commentator. At that point conservative churches, organizations, universities and seminaries started wanting to partner officially with The Marin Foundation and inviting me to speak and teach as they said to me,

‘You’re getting attacked in the national media by a radical gay media figure – you must be doing something right’.

That is what launched The Marin Foundation from a small organization wanting only to show Christ’s love to the one square mile that is Boystown, Chicago into an organization with a national voice. It still hurts me a great deal that it took a national media attack, with all of the death threats and hate mail that I received thereafter, to wake-up the church. At the end of the day, though, it was the Lord’s best path to give this work an impactful voice so who am I to question that?

It has been very humbling over the last few years to see how many conservative Christian churches, organizations and universities have passionately embraced The Marin Foundation’s bridge-building work (just as many GLBT organizations have been embracing it as well). Change, cultural shifts or theological/social/political challenges from the secular world are not always met with much enthusiasm. The issue is at what point the church learns how to continue holding her theological belief system and yet still do significant things for the Kingdom within the realm of what broader culture deems acceptable – usually in opposition to many conservative beliefs.

The point of a corporate realization by the church that it is a significant topic to learn how to engage the topic of homosexuality productively has hit the forefront in a variety of locations, denominations, individual churches and Christians’ lives across the world. I am very encouraged about what the future holds in building sustainable bridges between the GLBT and theologically conservative communities. This Movement is quickly spreading and thriving because there are so many people in both communities yearning to learn a new paradigm of what it means to dignify a journey that lives in the tension of faith and sexuality without having to cast aside a theological belief system. My experience has shown that this might just be the beginning of something very exciting.

But it remains the case that many Christians and many churches, especially those which are evangelical, find it very hard to reach out to the GLBT community, despite it being what many might call a significant 'unreached people group'. Why is there this problem and disconnect?

I see three main reasons. *First*, and I don't want to sound too graphic, but it's the anal penetration that keeps conservative churches from having any interest. From a conservative biblical framework, sex is meant to be the most sacred and intimate of unions between two people and God. Through the conservative mindset then, GLBT people are desecrating the most holy of holy acts, an act given joyfully by God to a man and a woman. Gay sex, in no way, shape or form registers in a conservative theological or practical framework. Since it is corporately so repulsive, it is just easier to shut off socially, theologically and relationally rather than to immerse yourself intentionally and look at such a topic as we would any other missiological framework.

Second, there is the political arena. Like no other people group or sub-population within mainstream society, the GLBT community is unified in such a powerful way that their voice gets heard. It gets heard loud and clear. I know from personal experience working in America as well as the UK that there are few things that bring on more fear in evangelicalism than the GLBT community's full political and social acculturation into society. The reason is that if the political arena is 'won' by gays and lesbians, there is then no stopping full legal, scientific and theological acculturation as well, making evangelicalism and a conservative mindset completely obsolete. This political fear and battle has resulted in a very clear 'us versus them' mindset. Because of this the GLBT community is no longer an 'unreached people group' for Christ. They are a political enemy to be outlasted, outsmarted and overcome.

The *third* reason is that the church has, by and large, substituted African HIV/AIDS for the GLBT community. Did you know that the capital of the United States, Washington, DC, has a higher HIV/AIDS infection rate than 26 African countries? Did you know that one of the largest churches in America, which does so much good in Africa, generally neglects the local HIV/AIDS clinic right next to them? I know the lesbian who runs that clinic very well and, despite the numerous times she has peacefully reached out for help, she continually gets ignored. Here's the reason why she gets ignored: it's because from a social, theological and political perspective it is way easier to help a starving child and mother in Africa with AIDS (not that it's wrong to do so because it needs to be done) than it is to work with a GLBT person here, whether they have HIV/AIDS or not. Why? Because the starving mother and child won't talk back or question any social, political or theological beliefs or traditions. In recent years the Church has been using HIV/AIDS as a route of escapism against humbly serving the GLBT community where they holistically need it spiritually, physically and emotionally.

We've talked a bit about the Christian response and challenge, but what did the gay community make of having a straight evangelical among them?

I will never forget the first time I ever went into a gay club with my best friends after we reconciled! No more than five minutes after entering the club, I was approached by someone who asked me if I was gay. When I said no, they smiled, turned around to a waiting group of friends, pointed at me and yelled, 'I told you

so! Pay up!'. I have since discovered through all of my interaction in the neighbourhood over the last decade that the GLBT community has an extremely accurate 'gaydar'. They can pick out a straight guy from ten miles away! The unique side effect to their 'gaydar' was that I became a walking ice-breaker by doing nothing other than humbly, as a listener and learner, stepping into a world I knew nothing about. A flow of people would approach me asking why I was there, what I was doing and why I would even care to visit. Daily (and nightly), I ended up in life-altering conversations for hours upon hours. After a while, I started to notice two very specific trends. One, people would inevitably end up in tears telling me their life story. Two, the tears were usually brought on by a story about a negative experience with Christians or a church. Their tears and openness to share was a surprise to even those doing the crying and sharing. Walls were being quickly torn down and soon I was known by many in the community as 'Straighty-Straightperson'. Most of the GLBT people in Chicago didn't even know my actual name; they just knew I was the safe straight evangelical who always hung out with a group of lesbians. At the time I didn't know what to do with this new information and label, but I knew I had to keep returning as something had to be done.

The part that stung me the most throughout all of these interactions was when the mirror got turned around and held up to my own face. I realized that I was getting out-Jesus-ed by gays and lesbians. I say this because my faith in Christ is based on what it means to be a come-as-you-are-culture (1 Cor. 9:19-23 among many other texts). Until I immersed myself in the GLBT community I didn't realize how far away from a come-as-you-are-culture I was actually living; they had to be 'changed' and 'fixed' and on 'my timeline' before I was ever willing to enter into any type of relationship or conversation. That is not how Christ lived nor how the Church should look at itself or its ministry. And yet that is the exact hardened and stubborn place I felt comfortable within. I quickly learned that once the insulators of traditional engagement are removed (from both communities), that's also the same moment that the stereotypical cultural burdens of oppression are also removed, allowing God to move freely through each of us towards a true expression biblical reconciliation.

So what lessons did you learn and what mistakes did you make when you first started out?

I have already covered some of the main lessons I learned at the beginning so I'll speak to some of the mistakes.

Looking back to the beginning I can see two key mistakes that I made, though I wouldn't necessarily label them 'mistakes' because I didn't know anyone or anything that had gone before me to help guide this journey. Each day was, and still is today, a new adventure so that I feel I'm continually learning on the fly.

Regardless of semantics, the first thing I would have done differently was to take more time to process my surroundings and subsequent experiences as they were happening. My personality is one that just dives in and tries to figure it all out later. However, for me, 'later' is usually years later, trying to reflect on the big events that I can remember. I decided to blindly throw myself into the most awkward, challenging and overwhelming situations I could find, without any knowledge of how I was going to react, handle, or cope with any of it. Those beginning years I missed so much for the long-term because I was concentrating

so intently on the right now. It's good to live in the moment, but not at the constant expense of important lessons that can help you and others navigate new terrain for not only your own well being but also for future generations. I now have a blog to process each new experience, which I post on daily (www.loveisanorientation.com) so I won't miss a thing, privately or publicly, for all of us to enter in this journey together.

Another mistake was that, since I felt no one could understand what it was like for me, a straight conservative male immersed in the GLBT community, I thought 'what is the point in trying to explain my experiences to others?'. I felt I couldn't get any sound advice anyway, because most of the advice I received was to leave the neighbourhood and start living a 'normal' life again. All that this inflated view of myself turned out to be was a lonely road, feeling that it was me against the world; and that is no way to thrive in any context of life. My mindset and my attitude were off-centre. I almost had an aura of snobbery around me, that because I was 'treading a new path', those on the outside didn't have any right to speak into my life. Putting the weight of the world on my shoulders wore me out so quick I didn't even know what hit me. I collapsed. I regret every second of those thoughts, and that is a very difficult thing for me to admit though it's a necessary part of the unabashed transparency needed in order to work towards building any difficult bridge.

From the standpoint of interaction with the GLBT community I honestly don't feel like I made many 'mistakes'. I am not saying that in a haughty fashion but rather because I believe that for all of us there is no wrong way to listen and learn humbly. Incarnational, cross-cultural living, or whatever you want to label it, is about learning how to live and love in real time. With that life comes the unique ebb and flow of what it truly means to publicly, intentionally and consistently be somewhere you don't belong. With that life comes intensity – spiritually, emotionally, socially, relationally, politically – all of which you can never really be prepared for, no matter how thorough a cultural exegesis you think you've done.

To me, faith and theology aren't just about intellectual understanding. It's also about a passionate and released knowledge in Christ of what it means to put hands and feet to the messiness, the grey area, the unanswerable questions, the pain, the joy, the doubt and the fear and brilliance that are all called life. No humanly constructed model or framework is ever perfect but just as God wants our hearts more than our dogmatic rituals or sacrifices, He will also righteously lead us through the beautiful struggle of life on earth. Paul Young, who wrote *The Shack*,² recently told me, 'God's will is always good. We just tend to look at it through our bad lenses'. An unquenchable heart turned toward God's best journey will always reveal his good will, even if only looked at through our bad lenses.

2 Young 2008.

Are there particular biblical principles of mission and evangelism which shape your work?

I delve deeply into what I call the Theology of Bridge Builders: The Big 5, in my book, *Love is an Orientation*.³ Instead of just repeating what I wrote in my book, I will focus here on a few other biblical principles I rely heavily on.

The Kingdom of God is inherited through belief (John 3:5-8)

I feel that so often, especially when talking about the GLBT community, theological conservatives focus so intently on behaviour modification that they completely forget about what it means to live and thrive in a baseline belief in God through Jesus Christ. I mentioned this in response to an earlier question, but what does it mean for us to be a true come-as-you-are-culture that works on God's timetable, not on ours? I am not saying that any and all behaviours are biblically acceptable but what I am saying is that looking generally around the Church today, the proper progression of faith is not starting in the right place.

Faithful commitment over time is success (Proverbs 16:3)

What if a GLBT person never agrees with a conservative interpretation of Scripture? What if they accept Jesus Christ and then pronounce they are a gay Christian? What if they say they hear God clearly tell them that living in a same-sex, committed and monogamous relationship is a blessed, God-ordained way of life? Have you not done your job? Did you fail? Are you not fulfilling even the most baseline of Christian standards? The answer is that a faithful commitment to God is already a success. The more accurate translation of Proverbs 16:3 is, 'commit to the Lord whatever you do and your plans will be established'. Success in God's eyes is completely different from our modern understanding of the term. The fallout from this incorrect alignment leads to a creation of false expectations for ourselves in comparison to God's biblical promises.

There are two main Kingdom differences between *establishing* and *succeeding*. First, *establishing* is rooting your motives and actions in God's unknown process while *succeeding* is beating the competition with tangible outcomes that the mainstream (whether secular or religious) deems worthy. Second, *establishing* is the spiritual understanding that there is personal contentment in faithful commitment. This is not an excuse to be lazy but it is the Kingdom parallel to the flesh's second version of *succeeding* which is having contentment in knowing the outcome. Christians today set themselves up for this disconnect because most of us only use a model of Success versus Failure, a model created with the rise of an 'advanced' Western mindset of philosophy, evolution and business. All of those have since led us further from Christ's metric of success.

3 Marin 2009: Chapter 7 (pp114-39). Although based on some of the texts traditionally used to support a conservative stance on homosexuality, it is important to recognize that my Theology of Bridge Builders is not a substitute for a traditional interpretation of Scripture. That is one of the biggest

misconceptions from people reading my book through a lens of conservative skepticism. The Big 5 Principles are rather a new theological starting point of common ground working towards biblical reconciliation between two communities who don't agree on much.

All sins are equal (James 2:10)

I believe the Bible is the Word of God, breathed by the Holy Spirit through human authorship. With that as my framework, Romans 3:23 communicates that all people have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. In addition to each of our imperfections as humans striving to be formed closer to God's image, we must also remember James 2:10: from a Kingdom perspective, if you commit one sin it is as if you have committed them all. So then, biblically speaking, what separates my sin from anyone else, whether purposeful or not? Nothing.

A humble servant is an effective leader (1 Corinthians 9:22)

'I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some'. This was lived out by Paul and modeled first by Jesus (Matt. 7:1-6 among many other references). It's such a simple concept and yet so difficult to live out. Proverbs 16:7 says that if your ways are pleasing to the Lord even your enemies will live at peace with you. This verse is not saying that you just live at peace with your enemies. It is saying that they will reciprocally live at peace with you. Is your life and your love permeating so much that even your enemies recognize and revere the God behind it? This is the type of humbleness that relentlessly pursues, serves and loves despite social, cultural, political or religious norms, doing so until they can't see you anymore because they can only see Christ in you and, because they are at peace with that, they are also at peace with you. All possible means that I might save some ...

Thanks, Andrew, let's turn now from the principles to the structures and programmes. You've mentioned The Marin Foundation which you started, how did it develop and what does it do?

I had no intent to ever run a religious organization. Even after I immersed myself in the GLBT community my goal was not to turn that experience into my life's work. I just wanted to go and learn about, and from, a community that I had intentionally put off my whole life to that point. Growing up, I went to secular schools and in university I received an athletic scholarship to play baseball as I studied psychology. When I graduated I tried to obtain my PhD in clinical psychology from a secular university but, when it came to the topic of my dissertation, the university and I had some major disagreements. I wanted to do research in the GLBT community regarding religious practices and how that ties into sexual behaviour and social and religious acculturation. The university told me that I had to 'drop God' from the research otherwise I couldn't move forward. So the university and I parted ways and I started The Marin Foundation (TMF) towards the end of 2004. The original goal of TMF was to be a research institution, initially just to complete the research study I felt the Lord had laid on my heart. Throughout the years, however, TMF has grown into much more than that.

Today The Marin Foundation strategically partners with GLBT and religious organizations in order to build a systemic bridge between the two communities through scientific research and biblical and social education. TMF has five main pillars that constitute the backbone of the organization in working to accomplish our vision.

The *first* pillar is educational. It consists of thirteen classes that are held separately for the GLBT and straight religious communities regarding the social,

political, historical and theological schisms. This is in order to actively pursue ending the culture war. There is an emphasis on full religious acculturation for the GLBT classes (Track number 1) and a focus on learning how to build a bridge with GLBTs peacefully and productively in the classes for the straight religious community (Track number 2).

The *second* pillar is scientific research. Our current study 'Religious Acculturation within the GLBT Community' has recently been completed. This study has become the largest study ever done in the GLBT community pertaining to religion and spirituality (specifically focusing on American life and culture). It is the very first of its kind to look at how past, present and potential religious practices influence sexual behaviour and the religious and social acculturation of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people. The results from this study will be published in a feature-length book in 2011 as well as in academic journal articles leading up to the book's release.

The *third* pillar is our Living in the Tension community gatherings. These are held twice a month in Chicago, as well as around the country. In these gatherings gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, ex-gay, celibate and straight (liberal and conservative) people willfully come together to enter into a place of constructive tension, intentionally forming a community and environment that together takes on the most divisive topics within the culture war that is faith and sexuality.

The *fourth* pillar is dissemination. This entails speaking at churches, universities and GLBT and religious organizations, appearing in the media (TV, radio, internet), publishing in academic journals and magazines, as well as composing feature-length books and curriculums. TMF's dissemination goal is rooted in being active and mobile throughout the local community. However, in order to continue advancing this bridge-building Movement, there also must be a national focus to disseminate on larger scales that reach the most amount of people possible.

The *fifth* pillar, Re:creation, as it is called, works with conservative, liberal and GLBT churches, organizations and universities across the country in order to facilitate a variety of trainings, classes and forums. This work is done with the intention of creating self-sustainable bridge-building communities in different parts of the country that can continue in the process of making a systemic difference to overcome the current disconnect between these two disconnected communities. A sustainable Movement happens when numerous smaller communities all rise up believing in, and working towards, a common goal. Re:creation is at the heart of that work.

You've obviously gained a lot of experience working in this area, in what ways have you found that Christians and Christian churches need to change in order to reach the GLBT community?

Three things immediately come to mind.

First, one of the questions I frequently get asked is, 'How do I live out the truth in love?'. My experience has shown that there are actually two potential underlying questions here. The first is: 'When do I get to tell them it's a sin and how quickly can I help them change?'. The second is, 'I am literally just trying to figure out how to live, and how to learn, and how to love. And I don't know how to do any

of that with the GLBT community'. For me, there is no better place than to come to somebody in the gay or lesbian community that we love and say, 'I am trying to learn how to live and how to love and I don't know and I don't have the answers. And unless you let me into your life, and we do this thing together with Christ rooted in the middle, nothing is ever going to change [with me]'.

Second, I never want to sit here and say that I have all the answers. I never want to know what every step along the journey is. That's not my job. Christians feel pressure to know and solve everything. Believe me, I know. Pastors in particular are approached all of the time for answers to all of life's unanswerable questions. And anything less than a good answer reflects poorly on their Christian leadership. That pressure to be 'in the know' trickles down from the pulpit to the laity so most people make an automatic association that being a good Christian also entails being definitively knowledgeable about every issue of importance to the outside world, even those issues that no one has figured out. That pressure is perceived by the broader GLBT community as arrogance. In the minds of many GLBT people, Christians believe they have all the answers, not only to life in general but to gay sexuality in particular.

It's alright, in fact it's ideal, to know that you don't have to know everything or have all of the answers to every potential aspect surrounding the topic of human sexuality. I fight almost daily the urge to come up with some theory that addresses each of the hotly contested questions of human sexuality. Our thought is that if someone would just come up with a few key answers, life would be so much easier. But God's ways are higher than human ways; the path he calls us to take often looks to us like it goes nowhere, even goes in circles. And from God's perspective, there is no better place to be. In order to sync in to God's direct path, then, sometimes we have to let our human understanding and need for concreteness with constructs such as sexuality go a little blurry.

Third, just because we validate someone's life and experience as legitimate to them does not mean that we believe in a 'pro-gay' theological belief system. There is a difference between validation and affirmation. Yet when people in the broader church look at me, or people like me, they often say, 'Whoa, wait a second, you're flying off the handle! You believe in a pro-gay theology!'. The point is that I've never said that. Since I live my conservative faith out differently it scares a lot of people. That's because many in the church have not been equipped with the correct language or understanding to be able to wrap their minds around Christ-like Christian living in today's context.

There was a large Christian magazine that recently asked me, 'Let's say, Andrew, that everyone buys into what you say. Let's say every church buys into what you say. What's going to happen forty years down the road? Tell us, why should we believe you?'. Here's the exciting part and the scary part: I don't know what it's going to look like forty years down the road.

The majority of the church has been so concerned with X, Y, and Z, that very few have ever focused intently to work on A, B, and C in the right way over a sustainable amount of time so that we can figure out what X, Y and Z will look like. If people want to talk to me in forty years, when I'm 68, I'll be able to look back and definitively say, 'Here's where culture shifted. Here's where the church shifted. Here's where the gay community shifted'. But until that point I am working

every day to encourage Christians and the broader church to stop putting the carriage before the horse because God doesn't only work when we know what the outcome is going to be.

How would you describe the way in which you have seen God at work?

I have hope in answering this question because I have seen two very clear trends as I speak and teach around the world: one trend from within the GLBT community and one trend from within conservative Christians. These trends are important because they are a small measurement that God is clearly at work throughout this topic on a large, structural level around the world. I could give stories and examples of individual lives, but those are easier to 'brand' as successes. True sustainable differences are many times made in the overarching smaller trends that eventually become a cultural norm.

The trend I have noticed from the GLBT community is that they are tired of feeling the pressure from their own GLBT hierarchy to conform to the social and religious norms that are 'expected of them'. So they are pushing back and pockets are trying to live out this new journey in relationship with each other and also in relationship with many people who are considered their opposition.

From the conservative world, the one thing that I have been hearing more than anything else recently is, 'I feel like the Lord is pulling me in a direction to be with the GLBT community, but I'm scared and don't know what to do'. I have a little slogan that says, Right from the Gate you Can't Relate. Understanding that you don't understand is how bridge-building occurs and true Kingdom reconciliation happens. And it is happening from both communities; both sides of the divide.

Most of your work has obviously been focused in the US but a few months back you visited the UK. What did you discover on that visit and what do you think might help Christians in the UK?

I spent a significant amount of time in my recent tour throughout the UK interviewing people from both the GLBT community (secular and Christian) and the straight Christian community (liberal and conservative), including scholars, theologians, bishops, pastors, believers, non-believers, members of Parliament and everyday people on the street.

If there is one common thread that arose throughout these different populations it's that, culturally, the most common large-scale practice regarding faith and sexuality is just safely to avoid the awkwardness that is inherent with the disconnect between the two topics. This observation was no more apparent than in the significant political and religious apathy, especially in the younger generations. That caused me to wonder how tightly correlated is the culture of secularism woven into the potential works, impact and relevance of the Church?

Statistically speaking, with only 10%-15% of adults in the UK attending church monthly or more frequently, Britain is rightly categorized as a post-Christian nation. This is quite a contrast with American church-going but I would argue from what I experienced that the church-attending Christians in the UK are more passionate than the 70% of Americans who claim to be Christians have ever been throughout my lifetime. I would also argue that, despite the grand number of Americans claiming their Christianity, America is also a post-Christian culture. To me, Christianity should never be a label, but an action. The moment the actions stop,

no amount of intellectualization can tangibly reclaim and regain an impactful relevance. The pure and honest love and hunger I experienced throughout the churches I attended in the UK left me pondering: if there is so much excitement inside the church walls, why is there so little impact outside of those walls?

Sociology adds a few important thoughts to these quandaries. First, minority cultures usually form tighter bonds to each other within their inner-group settings. Thus vibrant Christian communities flourish amongst themselves; together they are united around a common minority structure which is based, in this case, on belief in God. Second, the dominant culture sets the tone for the minority culture outside of the minority's own gatherings. After a gathering I spoke at on the recent tour, one UK Christian leader told me, 'The Church is more concerned with preserving a perception of respectability than it is with realistic Kingdom work'. I was shocked by that statement and the bluntness in which it was so boldly claimed. Since the Church is already numerically small, add to that the institutional hierarchy's fear of becoming completely obsolete and one can see how the majority secular culture does indeed influence a potential Christian impact outside the walls of the minority Christian gatherings. Therefore, instead of risking further irrelevance, it is more rational for many institutional leaders to remain relatively silent on divisive and potential 'relevance-threatening' topics such as homosexuality.

One UK gay leader gave me a variety of examples where there have been pockets of public conversations between the GLBT and Christian communities at seminaries throughout the country. He also noted however that these types of dialogues are not sustainable because very few from either community are willing to put themselves out there to take the attacks that will come from both sides and yet still keep pressing on building a bridge. Once again, the fear of entering into a perceived no-win journey trumps what could turn into a countercultural Movement towards a very public biblical reconciliation. The most succinct summary about the lack of structural dialogue regarding homosexuality was what I was told by a UK Christian leader: 'It is easier and safer to just not say or do anything'. That strategy, however, has backfired.

A good friend of mine who works for a religious organization in the UK recently told me a story about an experience she had while attending a UK Christian conference. From what many other UK Christians have corroborated it gives a well-balanced picture of the current landscape regarding homosexuality. She was talking to a group of five teenage boys and asked them, 'What is the biggest ethical dilemma you face in your lives today regarding your faith?'. Their response? Each of them said homosexuality. Why? 'Because the Church isn't giving us a framework of engagement, the silence leaves us wondering what teachings are right: the Church or mainstream society'. In a post-Christian culture, in which secularism dominates perception, is it any wonder the younger generations, even those who are Christian, are solidifying and aligning themselves more with a mainstream point of view? As one young person, who was raised in the church, told me when I stopped to talk to him on the street: 'It's just too easy to walk away from the Church because they're not running after us'.

Shortly after that conversation I was interviewing a youth pastor from London and when I told him what that youth had just said, he prophetically stated, 'The Church needs to realize that power and relevance do not come from a

denomination; they come from the incarnation'. I believe his words provide the final answer to solve the issue of regaining cultural relevance amidst a dominant secular society: sustainable cultural influence can only be achieved through a movement of believers incarnationally living out the power of the gospel outside the safety of their own minority gatherings. This is so difficult because it is the exact opposite of human intuition that innately gravitates towards those who we are most similar. Yet sometimes a forced reassessment of how belief and life need to intertwine can be the exact awakening the Church needs to unleash a radical love filled with an unquenching passion that cares not about image, but about living a faith that even mainstream culture stands up and notices is uniquely inspired, no matter what the outcome. Just as in Joshua 3, it only takes one step into the place where death is a certainty before God parts the waters for the faithful who care about doing His work in real time, in a really messy life. Intellectually understanding such a construct and actually living it out are worlds apart. Whether in the UK or the States, my passion is to see the Church remove the cultural burdens of oppression from herself and live in the power we have been given through the incarnation, and the Incarnate's death and resurrection.

What differences do you see between the UK and the US regarding the topic of homosexuality and the response of the churches?

I will be very clear on this. Right now the UK has a unique opportunity to potentially model for the rest of the world how to properly address and work within the tensions of faith and sexuality; leading the path of what peaceful and productive systemic relationships look like.

I believe this because, thus far, neither the GLBT or Christian communities have publicly or sustainably rallied their masses against the other. I know there will be Christians reading this who feel marginalized and disagree with me on that statement, citing things like proposed legislation that might threaten free speech in relation to sexuality. However, in regards to an irreconcilable national culture war between the GLBT and Christian communities, in comparison to America, there is no culture war. The UK is not even close to the very vocal, firmly rooted, abhorrence-filled structural disconnect that exists in America between our two communities.

There was a point where America was at the same place as the UK but unfortunately our GLBT and Christian communities gave in to the explosive disconnect birthed out of years of un-met silent tension. At the time, there were no national Christian or GLBT leaders willing to initiate and sustain any amount of conversation in a productive, God-honouring fashion. The only American national leaders that rose up fueled the fire and dug each community further into their stagnant modes of engagement, unsuccessfully trying to convince the other side they're wrong and need to give up everything they have ever fought for. This aggressive, back-and-forth schism has persisted for the last decade with no reprise in site. I work every day of my life closely involved with both communities, acting as a bridge, attempting to shift the local and national conversation back towards a more productive trajectory. Each community is so strongly opposed and wounded by the other, both are convinced that each will win. In my estimation, even if the culture war lessens to the point where they can talk to the other rather than past the other, the American GLBT and Christian relations will still be about twenty years behind.

That doesn't have to be the same fate for the UK. I believe it won't be what happens if the right leaders from each community come forth to shape the national conversation. But a note of caution – I saw many similarities in the beginning stages of the American culture war clearly on display throughout the UK on my recent trip. There are signs from gay groups, prominently displayed that say, 'Gay: Get over it!'. There is also public denial of the budding disconnect on the part of the Church. When I asked a Christian reporter about the signs hung around the country she said, 'I already thought we were over it?'. The unfortunate truth is that if the GLBT community felt the Church was indeed 'over it' there would be no need for the signs. Any further amount of ignoring this much-needed cultural redirection will land the UK in the exact same place as America. Look at my country now – it's an embarrassing and sad state of affairs on display for the world to watch as many in the States continue to set such a poor precedent.

The thrust of my work today in America is to elevate the conversation. I define elevation as changing the conversation, working to find a new starting ground beyond the traditional fighting areas that have only torn us further away from a true biblical reconciliation. The wonder of the UK's current situation is that there is not much of a systemic conversation to change, because ultimately one hasn't been nationally sustained or publicly fought about for any significant length. The time is now to step out and show the rest of the world what an advanced national relationship between two communities that, on the outside, don't seem to ever have that much in common, truly looks like. There is more in-depth and practical applications on how to start building a bridge individually and systemically, in my book, *Love is an Orientation*.

You've already mentioned some conservative concerns about your approach and your response to them but, given the debates in the Church of England, the wider Anglican Communion and other denominations, what do you say to those who are concerned you are undermining a traditional conservative stance on this topic?

I do not hide the fact that, theologically, I believe in a traditional interpretation of Scripture. The difference that ultimately leads to others being 'concerned that I am undermining a traditional conservative stance on this topic' is because I live out my conservative beliefs differently. I live them out incarnationally with my wife in the gay community, though I am straight and have always been such.

As I explained, I intentionally moved into the gay neighbourhood to learn from and listen to the same GLBT people that I wanted nothing to do with, that I didn't agree with socially or theologically and that I repeatedly hurt and thought not worthy of *my* Christ.

It is very difficult for me to respond to such accusations from my own brothers and sisters in Christ. Not because I can't put together an air-tight missiology that completely aligns with a conservative paradigm but rather because I am confused why my actions threaten so many people, why they feel the need to resort to knee-jerk reactions that question my belief system, a belief system no different than theirs. Maybe it's because I use Jesus' example and I won't answer 'yes' or 'no' to 'yes or no?' questions? Maybe it's because I use Jesus' example that I didn't come to preach and live among already saved Christians but rather came to those who are well acculturated with a great life and don't feel the need to know Him? Maybe

it's because I use Jesus' example of not being the first one to cast a stone as I concentrate more intently on the plank in my own eye before the speck in my brother's? Maybe it's because I use Jesus' example of a humble servant, one that relentlessly serves those on the outside while asking nothing in return? Maybe it's because I use the biblical model of knowing my Kingdom Job Description: it's the Holy Spirit's job to convict, God's job to judge and my job to love? Or maybe it's because I use all of these examples with gays and lesbians and that just flat out frightens a lot of people who are already threatened by a God that longs to see a simple and pure faith lived out on earth as it is in heaven.

I have to admit that, in their fear, they hurt me. I have great pain when brothers and sisters call me names because of their own fear. I have great pain when a UK Christian website prints that I am more dangerous to Christianity than the openly gay bishop Gene Robinson. I am still yet to figure out what is dangerous about me. Is it my conservative belief in Scripture or is it that I model my life after Jesus? At the end of the day, if how I am living my faith is dangerous then, Lord willing, might there be more dangerous believers around the corner to keep relentlessly working toward a biblical reconciliation between two warring factions no matter who or what, from either community, tries to tear us from God and from each other.

Andrew, thanks for sharing so much of your story and vision with us. I know you are planning to spend more time in the UK in future, including Spring Harvest in 2010. We look forward to hearing and learning more and trying to 'elevate the conversation' and find a pattern of Christ-like mission here.

Andrew Marin runs The Marin Foundation (which can be found at www.themarinfoundation.org and contacted through info@themarinfoundation.org). He has a daily blog about faith, sexuality and culture at www.loveisanorientation.com and his book *Love is an Orientation: Elevating the Conversation with the Gay Community* (InterVarsity Press 2009) can be purchased on Amazon UK as well as at the website of Spring Harvest (where he will be speaking in 2010). Anyone interested in looking into the possibility of bringing the bridge building work of The Marin Foundation to their church, organization, university, or conference can make contact through an email to speaking@themarinfoundation.org.

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