Excerpt

*Our Strangely Warmed Heart*s

Karen P. Oliveto

COMING OUT AS AN EXPERIENCE OF GOD’S GRACE

The United Methodist Church has been debating the lives of faithful United Methodists who happen to be LGBTQ for more than four decades, turning them into an issue to be resolved rather than children of God who possess a testimony of their relationship with a risen savior, people who have had their spirituality shaped by our Wesleyan understandings of grace and sanctification.

Is there any other group that we would marginalize in this way? What has been lacking in our denominational debate has been conversations with United Methodist LGBTQ clergy and laity. Instead of looking for fruits of the Spirit or the way God has touched and changed their lives, the denomination has had non-LGBTQ people define the lives of LGBTQ people and invalidate their personal relationships with Jesus Christ.

*Our Strangely Warmed Hearts* documents in Section One the social and political history of how homosexuality is perceived in American culture and in The UMC. Section Two tells the personal stories of ten LGBTQ United Methodists. They are clergy and laity. Four are people of color. Each of our five jurisdictions as well as a Central Conference is represented here. Ten people speak of how The United Methodist Church helped them fall in love first with God, and then with the church, even when the church tried to withhold its love and acceptance of them. These are but ten stories. Know that there are thousands more yet to be told.

## Sean Delhmore

With my knees trembling, I walked to stand at a pulpit for the very first time. A microphone picked up the sound of paper rattling in my shaking hands, speakers sending out a steady noise like stirring wind. *Can I really do this? Am I worthy? Will anyone still care about me?* Fear crept up my spine, chilling my confidence with paralyzing doubt.

I looked up. Seated in the pews before me were new classmates, staff, and the faculty of a small private school. I’d landed there after verbal and physical assaults hounded me out of my public high school. Somehow I always was “different” enough to spark the ire of classmates. By age six I was asking the public librarian to explain the “faggot” nickname schoolmates gave me. By sixteen, epithets had escalated to assaults and an inability to safely attend school.

A generous donor and admission to a private school offered me the chance to avoid dropping out of high school. Determined to finish school, I began the fall semester planning to hide who I was. Just four weeks into the term, that resolve shattered. It was impossible to find connection, friendship, or honesty with others. I was spending more time trying to hide than I was learning.

The problem? The truth I was hiding is that I am transgender. For all the world’s assumptions that I looked like an androgynous young woman, I knew I was male. And the only transgender man anyone had heard of at the time was a young guy who had been raped and murdered ten months earlier when “friends” discovered he was transgender. My adolescent soul could only absorb this message: *There is no place in the world for me. The world will kill me. I should not be alive.*

Seeking to squeeze out from the granite trap of hiding my true self or risking death, a school administrator helped me find a middle way: I would come out as “gay.” It was technically true (I was attracted to men), if not the whole story, and it might give a little space for my classmates to make space for me to not fit cultural norms. So there I was, preparing to (incompletely) come out in a setting in which no one had yet been public about sexuality or gender difference.

Terrified, I let the blurry crowd of people in the chapel’s pews click into a vision of discrete individuals. Classmates looked on with open curiosity: what would the new kid say? I hadn’t whispered a word to any of them. But the staff and faculty had been tipped off, and slowly I took in rainbow flags and “straight but not narrow” buttons and grinning faces.

Buoyed, I dove into my prepared coming-out speech, hands still shaking, the rattling of papers subtly sounding out. I shared a personal story of soul-killing isolation thrown into fever pitch by social harassment for being always and unavoidably “different.”

When the words on the pages of my prepared text ran out, I looked up, suddenly wrenched out of the pain of my journey into that present moment. Time seemed to slow as the back of my head seeped a drowsy peace through my skull. A warm glow suffused my chest. A gentle chant whispered through my veins: “You are loved. You are loved.” Disbelieving, I shook my head and stumbled down the chancel steps.

I made for the exit, seeking to flee the rejection I presumed. Instead I was swept up in embracing arms and empathetic tears. The wave of support was enough to crack open my heart, sloughing off a fine film of my defensive distance from others.

And then the real work began. Coming out, however partially and imperfectly, was a broader coming out into community. My classmates and I struggled together through different understandings of queerness and identity and how to stay in relationship together. With love and acceptance as a fundamental given, we were freed to be real—to name judgments, biases, and fears. We grappled with homophobia and numerous religious perspectives, and we also went deep into sharing experiences of and complicity with poverty, wealth, racism, possibility, and loss.

This community, and the experience of accountability, started me on a journey deeper into faith. I was amazed to see people express their values, strive for shared understanding, and then challenge and support one another in living out those values. I was left longing for more.

These early experiences propelled me out of my staunchly secular childhood into an adult embrace of Christianity. Hope, an academic scholarship, and intellectual curiosity about how community holds together, ultimately led to graduate study in theology. Learning about Wesleyan theology felt like discovering the words for a tune my heart had been humming for decades. The conviction that personal faith in Christ is lived out socially led me to join a United Methodist Church by profession of faith. I began to see how God’s prevenient grace had worked through earlier experiences like the chapel service and its aftermath.

As years passed and I worked to be a more faithful follower of Christ, I found myself confronted with a persistent stumbling block. While being open about my sexuality, I mostly continued to hide that I was transgender.

The closeting was suffocating. My efforts to live out my faith were hindered by an anxiety that kept me holding back the best of myself. Despite limited social understanding or acceptance of transgender people, I needed to come out, and keep coming out into the fullness of myself.

I immediately was thrust into recurring experiences of hostility and rejection. Being transgender made it difficult to get a full-time job. No matter how strong my resume or skills, I frequently was told I wasn’t “a good fit.” Meager income from part-time work made it hard to scrape together the money to legally change my name, so I found myself with identity documents that didn’t match my appearance. Even though I eventually found the money, post-9/11 fears about terrorism heightened requirements for identity documents and changes to them.

This led to a dark, tightening spiral of difficulty. When my new legal name did not match the one on my rental paperwork, my landlord questioned whether more than one person was living in the studio, in violation of the lease. My driver’s license expired before I could update my name and gender with the Department of Motor Vehicles. Without this common form of identification, and with only an outdated passport with a picture that looked nothing like me, I suddenly found myself unable to conduct the most mundane daily tasks. I was unable to cash checks, use my photo-bearing library card, pick up my prepaid bus pass, or do the travel my work required. This drew me more deeply into relationship with people in my life who were undocumented immigrants. We shared strategies for surviving when life doesn’t fit societal expectations, and commiserated about the added emotional, physical, and fiscal costs of life on the margins. I learned where our experiences resonated and how they were dissimilar, particularly because of the virulent impacts of racism.

For the first time, I became profoundly aware of the staggering number of times per day an ID was required to simply live in the city. Every time I needed to pull out my wallet, there was a clerk or teller or agent who looked at my proffered card in disbelief. Surely the young man in front of them did not go with the feminine name and photo card they’d just been handed? Too often, disbelief turned to anger or suspicion. Sometimes they called the police, accusing me of fraud. Other times, they refused to assist me. Always, the explanation that I’m transgender made the situation worse. Virulent threats and stinging condemnation were all-too-common outcomes of simple trips to the bank or grocery store.

The constant struggle with hostility and exclusion threatened to engulf me in a blaze of retaliatory—or preemptively defensive—anger. Thankfully, here is where I unexpectedly found grace. I waded through hard moments with John Wesley’s Covenant Prayer surging like the hard tide across my lips: “I am no longer my own, but thine . . .” I recalled and relived those moments I had experienced, like Wesley, a strangely warmed heart. Below the skin-deep flickers of shame and anger and distrust I experienced in the wake of sustained social exclusion, I held fast to that early whispered truth: *You are loved. You are loved.* And as a child of God, as God loved me, so too Christ called me to love others as wildly and wondrously as I was loved by the Divine.