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## NATIONAL NEWS

### Gay Mormons share stories on eve of conference

**Trials, excommunications common for those who dare to come out**

**ELIZABETH PERRY**

*Friday, October 05, 2007*

Affirmation, a gay Mormon group, is celebrating its 30th anniversary in Washington with a national conference this weekend, ministering to members and former members of a church that, like many, is divided between religious identity and the acceptance of homosexuality.

Gay Mormons have faced a range of adversities, from excommunication and estrangement from families to reparative therapy and even shock treatments.

Andrew Evans, an Affirmation member who plans to attend this weekend's conference, said being Mormon is as much an institutional faith as a cultural identity that, in his case, goes back seven generations.

"In some ways, being Mormon is a lot like being Jewish," he said. "It is your heritage, your cultural identity, your world view, your family and all your closest relationships."

He grew up doing all the "right" Mormon things as an Eagle Scout, a Brigham Young University student and a missionary. He said he knew for a long time he was gay, but didn't accept it until he realized he would never be able to marry a woman. When the school threatened to expel him and take away the credits he earned, Evans said he agreed to undergo reparative therapy.



**Andrew Evans**, a gay Mormon who was ostracized after coming out, is still estranged from a few of his siblings because of his sexual orientation. (Photo courtesy of Evans)

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"Although my therapy was relatively harmless, the university was still conducting shock therapy on other gay students at the very same time," he said. "I remained closeted until grad school, when I met my partner."

He said he came out to his parents and felt alienated from his family and church. Eventually he was excommunicated. Church leaders gave him the option of leaving his partner and saying he had "fallen into temptation and was trying to change." He chose to stay with his partner and said that while his relationship with his parents has improved, he is still estranged from a few of his eight siblings.

He said a highly centralized body of leaders with a narrow sacred doctrine runs the church. The challenge for gays, Evans said, comes when the official voice of the church conflicts with the personal experience of its members.

"Faithful members will not dare contradict official doctrine," he said. "Yet with homosexuality, so many members have had experiences that fall outside the church's official statements. This causes a kind of psychological, emotional and spiritual turmoil that few outsiders can comprehend."

Dave Melson, chair of the Affirmation conference, said the group's membership of about 1,200 runs the gamut from those who are still active in the church to those who have been excommunicated or choose not to have anything to do with it. Melson estimates the conference will draw about 160 members from across the United States, Canada and Europe. Members in South America will watch via web cast.

The conference will take place Oct. 5-7 at the Hyatt Regency on Capitol Hill. Melson said the Columbus Day weekend dates are no coincidence, because they fall during the same weekend the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is holding its conference in Salt Lake City, Utah.

"It's an opportunity for fellowship and education for our members," he said. "It also provides a way to be updated on news and the political situation. Being prominent and open puts pressure on the leadership."

The conference will include a keynote address by Bishop Gene Robinson, the first openly gay man to be ordained a bishop in the Episcopal Church. Other speakers will include authors Carol Lynn Pearson, Jonathan Rauch, Buck Jeppson and representatives from Human Rights Campaign, National Gay & Lesbian Task Force and Equality Maryland. Other speakers will include Sgt. Brett Parson, a gay

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ELIZABETH PERRY



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officer with D.C. Metro Police, and Lisa Polyak and Gita Deane, a lesbian couple who lost a lawsuit against Maryland when they sued for the right to wed. The weekend will include performances by the D.C. Cowboys and a performance of Steve Fales' new play, "Mormon American Princess."

Affirmation formed in Salt Lake City in 1977 and provides support for gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgender people who are having difficulty reconciling their sexual orientation and their faith. It also educates church members and leaders and provides a forum for the discussion of gay issues. The Washington chapter has been around since 1982, with approximately 25 active members. The group meets the fourth Sunday of the month in a private home.

Sam Wolfe was excommunicated from the church after speaking in front of his congregation in June 2006. He said outsiders are often surprised by how much progress still needs to be made in the church by its leaders. He said church leaders backed themselves into a corner when it came to civil rights regarding blacks in the 1970s, just as they are doing now with gays. Blacks were excluded from the Mormon priesthood until 1978, when then-President Spencer Kimball lifted the ban.

"They believe certain people speak on behalf of God," he said. "It was difficult for them to come back two decades later and say they were wrong. Only under intense pressure did they come back and say they were wrong."

Wolfe said some members of the church are ready to see gays accepted.

"The division is between leaders stuck in the old view and an increasing number of members of the regular church who are warming in their view of gay people."

Wolfe's Mormon ancestry goes back to Andrew Jackson Shupe, a Virginian member of the Mormon Battalion who crossed the plains into the Salt Lake Valley with Brigham Young in 1847. Wolfe was raised in the church in D.C. and became a missionary in France and Luxembourg. He came out to himself and left the church, but decided to return to his local ward (congregation) in an attempt to find acceptance as an openly gay man.

"It was a positive experience when I came out to my ward," he said. "People came up and thanked me for what I said, and a few came up and said they were gay."

The leadership of the ward was upset by Wolfe's coming out to the congregation and calling for a place for gays in the church. They began the process of

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excommunication three weeks later and notified Wolfe two days prior to the hearing. Wolfe said he was not given any time to prepare and was not told what the charges were against him. The church court convened from 9 p.m. to 1 a.m. and Wolfe was charged with breaking the law of chastity and apostasy, another term for heresy.

"They lied, brought in a number of false witnesses who read statements against me," he said. "I didn't know them and they did not know me well."

He said the church court kept asking him about his sex life, but that there was no evidence to support the charge that he had sex outside of marriage with anyone. By 1 a.m. the chastity charge had been dropped, but he was excommunicated on the heresy charge.

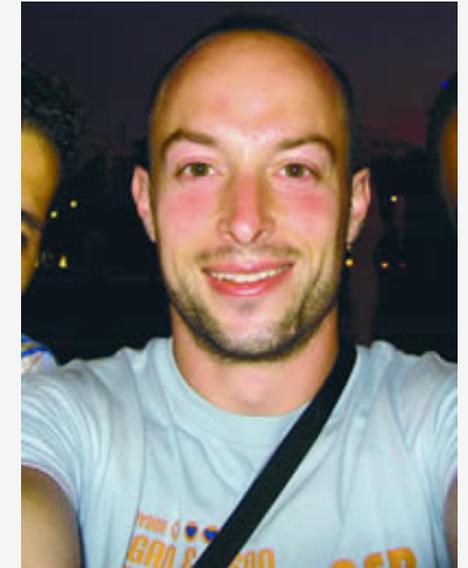
Today Wolfe is finishing his first year as an associate at a New York law firm. He said he has taken a step back to get some distance from the situation, but would like to do some work on behalf of gay Mormons.

"I've done a little work with Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah," he said. "Helping them with regard to changing their policy against gay and lesbian students. There was a slight policy change, but it remains to be seen how they put it into practice."

Another member of Affirmation said her experience as a Mormon was mixed. She agreed with Evans that the church is homophobic because "if they find out, you're done, but friends in Utah who know I'm gay are OK with it for the most part." The woman declined to give her name because she is in the military, but talked about the differences between men and women in the church.

She said males are brought up with the expectation that they will become part of the priesthood as adults. Females are not allowed to become priests, so it is more acceptable for them to remain single. She said Mormon lesbians tend to walk away entirely or remain deeply closeted.

"Men are the ones who are pressured to get married, have children and create a Mormon household," she said. "Each [gay man] has a personal journey because they are going against their church, family and the priesthood."



Sam Wolfe was excommunicated after coming out last year. (Photo courtesy of Wolfe)

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