

Soul Trauma: The Plight of LGBTQ+ Church Members

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How much longer should 21-year-old church member Bob, who's fought to live straight for 10 years, continue his personal agony to remain a faithful Adventist? Bob's existential dilemma has two elements: First, his attempt to remain Adventist and retain his admittedly unsteady salvation. Or, second, living more openly as the gay man he knows himself to be—regardless of consequences. Bob's endured years of agonizing prayer, study, and counseling.

Recently, Bob has largely come to terms with his non-heteronormative identity. But still he's plagued with a sense of residual sinfulness, shame, and guilt. Last month he came out to his helpful therapist and to a couple of close friends—but not to his family or church youth group. Bob's long had a sense of unworthiness.

If more friends knew his gender, the anticipated social isolation—even if unintended—would surely erode his already shaky self-esteem. And if his mental health slipped further, sleeplessness would increase, and he fears that suicidal ideation would again raise its deadly head.

Official Church Condemnation of LGBTQ+

Bob's trauma only deepened when his online search turned up two official Church statements:

“Sexual abuse of spouses, sexual abuse of children, incest, homosexual practices (gay and lesbian), and bestiality are among the obvious perversions of God's original plan” (From “A Statement of Concern on Sexual Behavior,” Annual Council, 1987).

“Homosexuality is a manifestation of the disturbance and brokenness in human inclinations and relations caused by the entrance of sin into the world. While everyone is subject to fallen human nature, we also believe that by God's grace and through the encouragement of the community of faith, an individual may live in harmony with the principles of God's Word....God's Word that transcends time and culture does not permit a homosexual lifestyle...” (From Annual Council actions, 2012)

These statements by his denomination's assembled world leaders, its highest-tier Executive Committee, only deepened Bob's trauma. They pronounced that:

- His intrinsic nature, one he'd intuitively sensed since a kid, was a product of Edenic original sin.

- His gender/sexual identity is condemned by the culture-free, time-defying Holy Word of God.
- His intrinsic sexuality is akin to spousal sexual abuse, child sexual abuse, and bestiality.

Tragically, Bob—bright, sensitive, and by nature religious—is the personification of church-induced “soul trauma.”

Gen Z in America: General Characteristics and Pro-LGBTQ+

Bob’s trauma is only heightened due to him being right in the middle of the Z Generation: Americans born between 1997 and 2012 (Pew Research). Bob, typical of his generation, is highly aware. He knows that 1 out of 5 in his generation are non-binary.

Bob, like so many in his Gen Z cohort, has high social anxiety. And his anxiety was only exacerbated by his academy life being significantly disrupted by Covid shut-downs. For multiple reasons, he seems to naturally expect the worst to happen. He hates being lectured, but he’s full of questions—and what he can’t find online, he most appreciates getting from authority figures who aren’t pretentious, those who make themselves “present” to him.

Bob senses that many of his peers are more *spiritual* than *religious*—and he’s drawn to that distinction, but due to his strict Adventist parents and elementary school he can’t easily distinguish the two. Also, he guiltily dreams of resembling the stronger personalities in his circle of friends—those quite free in their sexual relations, and who see LGBTQ+ issues as a no-brainer (the latest Pew polling shows 1 in 5 in Gen Z identifying as LGBT). Further, he aspires to a self-confidence that allows some of his peers to give pastors and teachers the “Gen-Z Stare”: a flat, unsmiling cultural stance that says, “I’m aware of your social/religious games, and I’m not playing.” Bob has his own Gen-Z stare: often a blank expression, fueled mostly by personal anxiety and fear. (Data in part from ChatGPT.)

The current percentage of Gen Z who *self-identify* as LGBT is about 17% in Europe, and 22% in the US. The best polls show that 70% of Gen Z believe that LGBTQ+ persons are morally acceptable.

North American and European Prevalence and Acceptance of LGBTQ+

Social acceptance of LGBT persons is strong in both the US and Western Europe, with the latter being marginally more supportive. Whereas the US has federal legislation allowing same-sex marriage (for now) and prohibiting employment discrimination, at the state-level protection of LGBTQ+ rights is more fractious. Western European countries generally offer more comprehensive legal protections for LGBTQ+ persons. Public support for same-sex marriage is 65%+ in the US, whereas it is 70%+ in Europe.

The percentage of adults who identify as LGBT in Western Europe is about 6% (vs. 5% ten years earlier), and in the US about 9% (vs. 4% ten years ago).

But back to our story of Bob.

Loma Linda University Health as a Welcoming and Affirming Community!

Bob was a bit encouraged when an online search revealed some Loma Linda information—although he’s a bit suspicious, as his parents have long warned him about those “California Adventists.” Bob discovered that none other than President Richard Hart of his denomination’s leading medical institution, Loma Linda University Health, eight years ago wrote to his thousands of students, faculty and staff that LLUH must be a “welcoming” and “affirming” community for LGBTQ+ people. And Hart led in establishing a Diversity Council, charged with addressing a broad spectrum of diversity, including LGBTQ+ people on campus.

Hart devoted a 2017 issue of his fortnightly *Notes from the President* to LGBTQ+ concerns. This passage particularly caught Bob’s attention:

It is critical that we understand, treat and support everyone we encounter, regardless of their hereditary, cultivated, assigned or self-assumed sexual identity. That is what we do as health professionals. It is what our code of conduct expects of us.

Hart continued:

My own interactions suggest that most LGBT individuals are not trying to stand out, or fly a flag – they are longing to be accepted as part of the human race and community they find themselves in...Christ Himself spent his time on earth reaching out to individuals who were marginalized during his day... While the Bible doesn’t give us a specific story about Jesus relating to an LGBT person, individuals under this umbrella would certainly fit into His lexicon of those deserving His compassion and care.” (2/2/2017)

***The Widening of God’s Mercy: Sexuality within the Biblical Story*—Richard and Christopher Hays**

Bob was further encouraged when he discovered that last year Richard Hays—likely the leading theologically conservative Biblical scholar in the US—had radically changed his mind about the Bible on same-sex marriage. Hays’ former 1996 book, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, was widely influential in hundreds of pulpits and some denominations on LGBTQ. There he’d contended:

“We must affirm that the New Testament tells us the truth about ourselves as sinners and as God’s sexual creatures: marriage between man and woman is the normative form for

human sexual fulfillment, and homosexuality is one among many tragic signs that we are a broken people, alienated from God's loving purpose." (p. 400).

Last year (2024) the world of Biblical interpretation was jolted when Richard Hays, with son Christopher, published their *The Widening of God's Mercy*. In their new book, Richard Hays candidly admits 28 years later: "I have come to think I was wrong" (223). Now Hays was *not wrong* in his textual exegesis: the Bible is uniformly against same-sex relations, he candidly admits. Hays now reads the *whole* Bible with *expanded vision*, one that sees a larger, merciful God with an ever-widening circle of acceptance. Sexuality must be placed within the overall Biblical story of God's ever-widening grace and mercy.

The Hays father-son team contends that God can and has changed his mind about same-sex relations (citing 1 Samuel 15, where God is both not changeable like mere mortals, and six verses later "regretting" that he'd made Saul king). However, at a more profound level of Biblical interpretation—and this is their central point—a deep reading of Scripture portrays a God whose mercy is ever widening to include the widow, sojourner, foreigner, slave, eunuch, Gentile—and now the LGBTQ+ person whom we know is largely hardwired to be as they are.

The Hays team follows Karl Barth, whom they quote as making a distinction between "what the apostles and prophets said" and "what we must say on the basis of the apostles and prophets" (215). In other words, a contrast between the letter and spirit: a difference between the exact words of ancient writ *and* what we must say today based on sacred history.

Richard Hays insightfully declared in his earlier book that New Testament ethics isn't merely to look "for ethical rules and general principles." Rather, we should "seek, under the inspiration and guidance of the Holy Spirit, to reread our own lives within the narrative framework of the New Testament, discerning analogies—perhaps startling ones—between the canonical stories and our community's situation." Then Hays chides himself for not following up on his acknowledged "importance of analogical imagination": "I am indicting myself for my past blindness" (222).

Scholarly acceptance of *The Widening of God's Mercy* has been mixed. Progressive reviewers praise the work as, e.g., an "unsettling surprise" of God's mercy, as they appreciate the Hays' reading of the Bible as transcending its specific condemnation of same-sex relations. The most common criticism from evangelical scholars is what's perceived as the Hays' devaluation of scriptural authority, though these critics appreciate the Hays' pastoral concern.

Ellen White Possibly Concurring with the Hays on *The Widening of God's Mercy*—?

Our friend Bob is steeped in a "literalist" reading of the Bible—and Ellen White's writings. For example, because White repeatedly condemned coffee use, he continues like most Adventists to see coffee-use as ever sinful—despite overwhelming evidence of its health-benefits (<https://atoday.org/how-would-you-like-your-coffee/>).

Yet, as deep-seated as literalism is in Adventism, there's another side to Adventism—indeed it's Ellen White's own understanding that divine truth is dynamic and ever-evolving. For example, White contends that “Old errors must be abandoned, and new light revealed. We must unlearn false ideas....” *6T* 392. Elsewhere she similarly says: “The truths which God gave in the beginning were limited; they were in accordance with the capacity of the people to receive them...God adapts His teaching to the capacity of the learner.” *Education* 13.

Ellen White's God ever lures toward new understandings of truth—truth that is “*present*” to a particular time and place. That's “present truth.” The 7th day Sabbath was present truth in the mid-1840s. Righteousness-by-faith was present truth in the late 1880s. Might acceptance of LGBT church members be “present truth” in 2025? Regardless of one's answer, most significantly there's a progressive dynamism to White's counsel.

Bob's Next Move...

Next year Bob finishes his BS degree at an Adventist university in the eastern US, and he's considering attendance at Loma Linda University. That's in part because of President Hart's position on LGBTQ+. But Bob also knows that there are several Sabbath Schools/congregations at which he can study/worship. For example, Advent Hope is a group of like-minded younger adults he'd be theologically akin to—except for Advent Hope's stand on homosexuality. And the LLUC has its Anthem service, which he hears is open and accepting. And if he wants to attend a vibrant and accepting congregation of mostly young worshippers, there's Crosswalk only 2 miles away from the University Church.

As Bob considers his next personal/professional step, he's increasingly hopeful.

Enter Nuru...

Nuru is a 23-year-old graduate student (studying for an MBA) at the 4,000-student Adventist University of Central Africa—the largest in the nearly 6-million member East Central Division of his denomination. Nuru is like Bob in several ways:

--First, his name Nuru is similar in that its Swahili meaning suggests light, shining, and enlightenment. Bob is short for Robert, which comes from two German words, meaning bright and fame;

--Second, he too has known himself to be gay from an early age; and

--Third, both are thoughtful, sensitive souls who continue to grapple with their sexuality.

Even more than Bob, Nuru is constantly online—and he has the latest AI large language models, ChatGBT and the latest version of Perplexity. After a thorough search, he estimates that only some 2.5% of fellow citizens are LBGT.

LGBT in African Adventism

Of course, Nuru has heard of Pastor Ndimukika—a rising, outspoken star in the Adventist world. Nuru heard him preach to thousands at a recent camp-meeting. Dr. Moses Maka Ndimukika, earlier the president of the Uganda Union Mission, was just in July, 2025 elevated to Executive Secretary, East Central Division.

What’s notable here is that Adventism’s position on LGBT got widespread news coverage when Dr. Ndimukika promoted and then celebrated the passage of his country’s “Anti-Homosexuality Act” two years ago (<https://atoday.org/the-silence-is-deafening/>). Ndimukika has long opposed gay-rights in his nation, stating in 2012 that he “fully” supported legal punishment of LGBT activity. Considering Ndimukika’s position, the General Conference has stated that its LGBT official polity opposes violence, imprisonment, and death. Nevertheless, in July 2025, Ndimukika was elevated to Executive Secretary of the 5.7 million-member East-Central Africa Division of the General Conference—by far the largest Division in the church.

LGBT in Africa

The LGBTQ+ issue hasn’t yet achieved the prominence in the Global South church that it has in North America—and it may not for many years, if it ever does. Although Africa is vast and customs and cultures vary, LGBT activity faces a harsh social stigma and heavy criminalization. Nigeria is typical, in seeing same-sex activity subject to imprisonment under its Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act. While in Tanzania such activity is punishable up to 30 years in prison, Sudan’s Penal Code allows for the death penalty. South Africa’s LGBT record is an outlier and in stark contrast: 8% of citizens identify as LBGT+ and citizens have equal rights, including legal anti-disclination projection. Botswana’s High Court overturned anti-LGBT laws in 2019, but reliable surveys show <1% identifying as LGBT due to social stigma. Most good studies survey “social acceptance,” rather than self-identification, due to social stigma. And such studies report 1-3% of Africans are likely LGBT.

The Africanization of Adventism

The Africanization of Adventism is as *real* as its *inevitable impact*. The reality: *Most Adventists will be African in less than 3 years*—given current growth rates. The impact: Africanization was evident at least 50 years ago, and its future impact is yet to be imagined.

What began as a mid-19th century New England frontier-expanding remnant of the Great Disappointment is now a denomination in over 200 countries that’s almost the size of its combined American siblings—the Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Christian Scientists.

Institutional Weathervane for LGBTQ+: Women’s Ordination?

When I was a communications/theology major at Southern Missionary College in the mid-1960s, the ideologically conservative Gordon Hyde (then a speech-teacher, later head of the GC Biblical Research Committee) told me that he expected women to be ordained in Adventism within a relatively short time. Of course, Hyde's prediction was wrong. But what happened? It was Adventism's accelerating growth in the Global South, a region less friendly to gender equality. Accordingly, church leadership had a demographically informed change of mind.

In 1973 some 50 church leaders, most all associated with the North American church, gathered at Camp Mohaven in Ohio. This conference was the first official Adventist theological discussion *and affirmation* of women's ordination. The Mohaven Report called for immediately ordaining women as local church elders, with ordination of women for ministry to follow. The Annual Council of 1973-74 approved of women as ordained local elders, but rejected ordination for gospel ministry, calling for further study. Cultural concerns were paramount. General Conference archivist Bert Haloviak quotes internal GC memoranda indicating that leaders believed that women's ministerial ordination would cause "severe cultural conflict" in Africa, Latin America and parts of Asia. (Haloviak, "The Adventist Church and Women's Ordination: The Difficult Road Ahead," unpublished paper (GC archives (ca. 1994), pp 6-8). Note the male-dominated hierarchal systems involved: tribal, Catholic, and caste.

Conscientiousness, Examination, and Duty

How should disputed issues be resolved in a Christian manner? St. Paul had problematic congregations, and his advice 2000 years ago is equally applicable today. This was his advice to the troubled church in Thessalonica: "Do not quench the Spirit" (1 Thess. 5:19, RSV); the more contemporary NIV reads: "Do not put out the Spirit's fire." And then the two versions quoted are nearly unanimous on the commonsense follow-up: "Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil" (1Thess. 5:21-22, NIV).

Paul's counsel had two parts: First, God's Spirit is at work, and don't stifle the Spirit—let it do its work. Second, "Test" what the Spirit is supposedly saying; don't be gullible, accepting every idea as equally valid. But by what standard is a church member—or a church body—to "test" an idea? Paul doesn't say. But the implication is for a believer, for a congregation, to apply the best of knowledge and analysis available at the time.

Similarly, Ellen White, in a justly famous quotation, calls for a follower of Jesus to invoke one's honestly held and deepest conscientiousness in following what God calls one to do, and never give up: "The greatest want of the world is the want of men...men whose conscience is as true to duty as the needle to the pole, men who will stand for the right though the heavens fall" (*Education*, 57).

The above prophetic counsel applies to Nuru's plight: a strict minority gay man in a culture that severely stigmatizes LGBTQ+ identity, not to mention lifestyle. And we add to that, he's a very bright and sensitive soul who's very informed, and knows who he is. But as he himself "tests" what the Spirit is doing, as he seeks to be as true to himself as possible, he has a choice: A) He can come out as a gay man (and be ostracized, and possibly jailed), to say nothing of being

disfellowshipped from his church; or B) He can continue what he's done throughout his young life: remain closeted and endure a numbing of his soul. All things considered, including his soft-spoken nature, Nuru seems content with how the Spirit's leading him to take the second option.

Conscientious Diversity or Institutional Crisis? The Resolution is Yet to Unfold

Applying the above Pauline and “Ellena” counsel to the corporate church, particularly as it deals with Women's Ordination and with LGBTQ+ members is, of course, more complicated than applying it to an individual member such as Nuru.

Regarding Women's Ordination, the world church has chosen to forbid willing Divisions (such as the North American Division) from moving ahead with Division-wide ordinations. Accordingly, three Union Conferences in the NAD have chosen—after “testing” the Spirit's leading and in being utterly true to their consciences—to allow and encourage ordination of qualified women within their territories.

Regarding the welcoming and acceptance of LGBTQ+ members, the action is at the congregational level. For example, there are at least three congregations in Southern California that welcome LGBTQ+ members:

- Glendale City Church has for decades been an openly welcoming congregation, and for several years employed a gay associate pastor;
- La Sierra University Church in a 2019 business meeting voted a welcoming/affirming statement;
- Crosswalk Adventist Church, Redlands “welcomes the diversity of humankind...including those of us who are LGBT.”

Such Adventist congregations are likely to outliers for the foreseeable future.

World Adventism, given its fundamentalist roots, will likely remain majority-fundamentalist. And for at least the foreseeable future dominant Adventism will discount LGBTQ+ persons, who will experience numbing to toxic trauma. However, Adventism has a tradition of anti-creedalism, education, and dynamic concepts (e.g., present truth, progressive revelation, and ever-learning/unlearning), indicting that there may always be a faithful minority that differs from the mainstream that itself is also faithful, just in a different vein.