

“Mom, I’m Gay”



*Loving Your LGBTQ Child
and Strengthening Your Faith*

Revised and Expanded Edition

SUSAN COTTRELL

WJK WESTMINSTER
JOHN KNOX PRESS
LOUISVILLE • KENTUCKY

CONTENTS



| | |
|---------------------------------------------|------|
| Foreword by Justin Lee | xi |
| Preface to the Revised and Expanded Edition | xiii |
| Preface to the First Edition | xv |
| Acknowledgments | xvii |

PART 1: COPING WITH THE SHOCK

| | |
|----------------------------------------------|----|
| 1. The Outing | 3 |
| 2. It's Not about You | 7 |
| 3. You Didn't Cause This | 11 |
| 4. The Power of Denial | 15 |
| 5. The Power of Anger | 19 |
| 6. Praying Away the Gay—the Impossible Dream | 23 |
| 7. Hoping for Change Can Hurt | 27 |

PART 2: UNDERSTANDING YOUR CHILD'S EXPERIENCE

| | |
|-------------------------------------------|----|
| 8. "You're Not Gay, You're Just Confused" | 33 |
| 9. Terrified to Tell You | 37 |

| | |
|-----------------------------|----|
| 10. What Not to Say, Part 1 | 43 |
| 11. What Not to Say, Part 2 | 47 |
| 12. Beyond the Binary | 51 |
| 13. “He’s Wearing a Dress!” | 55 |
| 14. The Masculinity Myth | 59 |

PART 3: RESPONDING IN LOVE

| | |
|------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| 15. Embrace Your Child | 65 |
| 16. Where’s the Love? | 69 |
| 17. Don’t Shame Your Child | 73 |
| 18. What Are the Conditions of Your Unconditional Love? | 79 |
| 19. Surrender Control | 83 |
| 20. Let Go of Your Plans | 87 |
| 21. Bear Their Burdens | 91 |

PART 4: WORKING IT OUT WITH GOD

| | |
|--------------------------------------------|-----|
| 22. Don’t Destroy Your Child’s Faith | 97 |
| 23. You Don’t Have to Protect God | 103 |
| 24. God’s Got This | 107 |
| 25. The Ultimate Fear: Hell | 111 |
| 26. The Slippery Slope of Sin | 115 |
| 27. The “Clobber Passages” (Old Testament) | 119 |
| 28. The “Clobber Passages” (New Testament) | 125 |
| 29. Please, No Child Sacrifice | 129 |
| 30. Speak the Truth | 133 |

PART 5: FINDING A COMMUNITY OF SUPPORT

| | |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| 31. You Need Support Too | 139 |
| 32. Ignore the Naysayers | 143 |
| 33. Words That Hurt, Words That Heal | 147 |
| 34. Does Your Church Tell Good News . . . or Bad News? | 151 |
| 35. The Church in Crisis . . . or the Church in Chrysalis? | 155 |
| 36. Your Kid Will Be Fine | 159 |
| Appendix | 161 |
| Notes | 175 |

FOREWORD



In my years of Christian ministry work, I have heard from countless parents struggling with how to respond to their child's coming out as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender.

Many of these parents are suffering from guilt, doubt, and confusion. They are committed to their faith and want to stand for what's right in God's eyes. They also love their children and would do anything to shield them from harm. But if their children make decisions they feel they can't support or if they find themselves trapped in a conflict between their church and their child, how do they strike the right balance? How do they show unconditional love without betraying their convictions?

In my own writings and ministry, I have sought to help parents grapple with these questions as Christians—but I am not a parent.

Other books have been written specifically for parents from a parent's perspective—but without a Christian focus.

Now, Susan Cottrell offers us a book from a Christian parent's perspective, in what will surely be an oasis in the desert for so many parents.

In this book, Susan avoids focusing on the polarizing

politics of homosexuality. This is not a book about same-sex marriage or Bible debates on sexual morality, though Susan does offer some thoughts of her own along the way. Instead, this is a book about how you can respond as a parent or loved one—knowing what you can change and what you can't and recognizing the ways your own response has the power to mend a damaged relationship or push your child away forever.

You may find, as you read, that Susan draws some conclusions you don't agree with. That's okay; I encourage you to keep reading anyway. Ultimately, even if you don't come to the same conclusions Susan has come to, I think you'll find much to appreciate in her approach, along with many important reminders about God's supremacy in all things.

Whoever you are, whatever you are going through right now, know that you are not alone. Many others have been down this road before, and many others are going through it alongside you.

I pray that this one mother's words offer you peace, courage, and a renewed sense of hope in an otherwise turbulent time. And I pray that God will guide and comfort you in your journey, bringing blessings you never expected out of even the darkest nights of your soul.

Justin Lee,
Executive Director,
The Gay Christian Network

PREFACE TO THE REVISED AND EXPANDED EDITION



A WORD OF LOVE

I took my laptop with me to the kitchen for a lunch break from writing this book—I like to enjoy *TED Talks* as I cook—and today it was “10 Most Inspirational Ads.” It was ad number eight, I think, that got me. I won’t do it justice here but essentially: the little boy was caught stealing medicine for his mother, but a kind man gave him a break, paying for the meds and giving him soup as well—then thirty years later when that man ended up in the hospital, the boy turned out to be the doctor and so was able to forgive the insurmountable hospital debt. On the bill, he wrote: “All expenses paid 30 years ago with three packs of painkillers and a bag of veggie soup.” You’ve seen the kind.

Suddenly, I wept. I turned off the burner under my leftover fajitas and let the tears fall, deeply moved by the profound and inherent kindness of which human beings are capable. I wept for how often people in this world need a hand to pull them up (like the little boy stealing the pain meds), need a very large break (like the man facing the hospital bill), need simple kindness (like the LGBTQ community and their families).

I wept at how many LGBTQ people need bread, but

their families give them a stone—or worse, a snake (Matt. 7:9–11).

Kindness is woefully under-expressed in our human family, yet kindness changes hearts.

I published the first edition of *“Mom, I’m Gay”* in January 2014, compelled to help terrified parents navigate the treacherous waters—societal, family, and church—that they suddenly faced because they had an LGBTQ child. I knew how disoriented these parents were, and I longed to help them—and especially *their kids*. I knew that to help the parents was to help the kids (of any age), and these kids have stolen my heart.

In these two-and-a-half years, much has changed. The Supreme Court has made marriage equality the law of the land. Many places now warmly welcome LGBTQ people. But in many ways, nothing has changed. The law still sanctions housing and workplace discrimination. Too many parents still live in terror of “homosexuality” and respond viciously to their own children. Parents who *embrace* their gay kids are still vilified.

Unkindness and rejection are perpetuated in God’s name.

I fervently hope that this revised and expanded version of *“Mom, I’m Gay”* will continue to comfort both parents and their LGBTQ children, help put their fears to rest, and help revitalize them to this amazing life they have been given.

With love,
Susan

PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION



A WORD OF HOPE

When our daughter first told us she was attracted to women, we were shocked. The usual questions flooded us: What would this mean for her life? Would she be safe? Would she ever have children? We had no idea what lay ahead.

But here's the realization that smacked us: we were now the "others." Whether we shared this information or not (we thought we would *not*), the church was no longer our home. In our twenty-plus years at wonderful, "grace-based" churches, we had not seen one *out* gay person, nor one family standing in support of their gay loved one.

One year later, our youngest daughter came out as well. I always joke that when the second child comes out, you as a parent immediately think: "Okay, it *is* us!" But in the years that followed, we realized that no, it was *not* us. It was who they were, and we were simply the safe place for them to come out.

So here we were with our beloved queer daughters on one hand, and the church teaching *conditional* acceptance on the other. We dearly love our Jesus who retrieved us from more perils than we can articulate. We also knew we would give our daughters only the unconditional, all-embracing love Jesus showed to the very farthest outcast—like us. If the church

would make us believe that unconditional love was somehow a compromise of our faith, it was that teaching that needed to be examined. Not Jesus, and certainly not our parental love.

The church veneer had begun to crack prior to our daughter's revelation. Pastor worship, sin management, rules-based behavior, even the disproportionate application of "discipline"—all this had eroded our faith, not in the Jesus who'd dramatically changed our lives over the decades, but in a church system becoming increasingly irrelevant to a world seeking *life*. Although much good work was being done, most of our experience was of the church's overriding focus on behavior modification; we'd already experienced this during some marital challenges when our church was startlingly unequipped to offer anything usable in our time of crisis.

Over the three years that followed our daughter's revelation, we met many Christian parents of gay kids, and we realized we were not the only ones to see that the emperor had no clothes. I believe that God is shaking the church until what's left is the unshakable: *God*. I believe God is shifting the attention from behavior modification to the profound, transformative, life of the Spirit. That is where our hope lies.

Our primary job is to love God and love others, and let God take care of everything else. We can have more peace than we ever knew possible, and joy beyond our wildest dreams, as our children flourish in God's inexhaustible love for them. I hope you will join me on this quest!

Susan

PART 1



COPING WITH THE SHOCK

CHAPTER 1



THE OUTING

Easter Sunday night, we sat down to watch a movie. Anthony said, "Mom, I have to tell you something." I thought, "He got a girl pregnant; he asked a girl to marry him." . . . Ha ha. He said, "Mom, I am gay." I looked at him and said, "What?" He said, "I am gay." I thought someone stopped my world and tore my guts out and handed them to me. Instantly I thought, "You ruined MY Easter weekend . . . how dare you." I asked him, "Are you sure?" Now I realize how stupid that question was. I realized it was wrong as soon as I said it. It was a nightmare. He went to bed. Needless to say, I didn't sleep. I threw up all night."

—Patricia

"Mom, I'm gay."

You want to shove those words back in the box and put the lid on. Your child is gay. Or bisexual. Or questioning. You never saw this coming (or maybe you did). It was not what you had in mind, and it may go against everything you believe. You instantly wonder where you went wrong.

This book is a primer to help you through the process when your child (niece, grandson, sibling, or any other loved one) comes out.

Texas couple Amy and Jen (age twenty-two) had already professed their love for each other before they told their families. Amy had grown up Southern Baptist, with all its admonitions against homosexuality. She was working in a national Christian ministry, and her job agreement included an undefined clause about “moral behavior” expected of all employees.

Jen’s parents were liberal, agnostic ex-hippies. Naturally, Jen and Amy told Jen’s parents first, to gain the support needed to face Amy’s parents.

But Jen’s liberal parents went ballistic. Jen’s mom called Amy’s workplace and got her fired. She called friends and relatives. Then she told Jen she never wanted to see her again.

Amy’s parents turned out to be kind and loving, and they actually worked to restore the damage Jen’s parents had caused with others.

Parents (aunts, uncles, grandparents) have a choice of how to respond to their loved one’s coming out. I write this book to show you that you have a choice and the enormous impact your choice can make on your relationship with your child, as well as on your child’s future. I use “parent” and “child” throughout for easier reading, but this book is for anyone with an LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, or Questioning) loved one. Certainly when it’s possible, a parent’s acceptance is without equal. But when it’s not, another caring relative or friend can make a great difference as well.

My heart breaks for the many families in turmoil, trying to reconcile their faith with their love for the child—especially as that despair is unnecessary. Jesus’ response to humanity is completely different from the fracturing response we see in too much of the church and the community.

To many parents, Christian or not, a child’s “outing” is

not good news, and you may find yourself searching your soul for answers. You want to know how to deal with this revelation. My husband and I were in your shoes six years ago. As we wrestled with all our questions and fears, I started FreedHearts, a blog to help reconcile the love of Christ with the LGBTQ community, families, and friends. Because this terrible chasm simply does not have to be.

FreedHearts (www.freedhearts.org) has grown into a ministry to the Christian LGBTQ community, Christian parents, and all Christians willing to engage in meaningful conversation about two great issues:

1. The great disparity between the call of Christ to love and embrace in contrast to Christians' generally unloving response to the LGBTQ community.
2. The question, is homosexuality a sin? Given all the interpretation and lived experience involved, it's an important question.

These are not questions you need to wrestle with immediately. Our focus right now is helping you deal with the shock you may be feeling and guide you in a loving response to your child. I encourage you to set aside what you already know (or think you know) on the moral and cultural issues surrounding homosexuality and ask God to show you afresh what is in store for you. If you are a Christian, you need God's personal revelation now more than ever. Whether you end up supporting same-sex marriage and relationships (what is known as "Side A" in the gay Christian community) or continue to believe those relationships are sinful ("Side B"), something much bigger and more foundational is at stake here: *How are you called to respond to your beloved son or daughter?* That is the essence of this journey.

FreedHearts Work

This section at each chapter's end offers questions to ponder along the way. My hope is to guide you through this maze of confusion, past some of the biggest dangers, to help you find your way to freedom and wholeness.

Describe what happened when your child came out. Did they tell you or did you find out? What were the circumstances? Were you shocked, or did you have an idea? What was your response?

CHAPTER 2



IT'S NOT ABOUT YOU

Oh, I said such horrible things. I asked him how he could do this to us, how could he disappoint us like this. It was all about us. I'm ashamed even to think of it. But I finally realized (in prayer) that I was being as selfish as the day is long. He was the one having to bear all this, not me. Now I consider it an honor to defend my gay son.

—Colleen

So often when our children come out, we think it's about us: Where did I go wrong? How could this have happened? What can I do to fix it?

No matter how you view gayness in general—even if you heartily embrace your gay brother or lesbian neighbor—to hear your own son or daughter say they are gay can knock you back. When you become a parent, you know to expect the unexpected. But nothing can prepare you to hear that your beloved child is gay. This is the child you have cradled, spoon-fed mashed bananas, and imagined in a beautiful future. How could this be? What will people say? What does the future hold? You can't even get your head around it.

News of your child's orientation opens a Pandora's box

of emotions. Anger, fear, hurt, blame, guilt, denial. You want to shove it all back in and close the lid tight. You might accuse your child. Or try to talk some sense into them. Or cajole. Or threaten. None of this does any good, of course—it only wounds. But what other options do you have? Just to talk about options implies that somehow our child's direction is up to us—that we can take some action to steer this ship.

Instead, we need to understand some basics.

This is not something your child did to you. They did not “choose gayness” to rebel against you, get back at you, or make your life miserable. In fact, it really has nothing do with you. You did not cause it, and it's not a failure on your part. Think about it: Would your child *choose* to risk being shunned by their Christian family, bullied by peers, and ostracized by their community? Think back now on when you chose to be straight. You see what I mean? You didn't choose; it just was.

Assimilating this news about your child will require you to sort out what is yours and what is not. I hope to help you embrace your issues wholeheartedly and leave your child's issues with your child.

How do you handle your own feelings and also accept your child? How do you love them unconditionally, despite intense pressure to “hold them accountable” (whatever that means)? You may think having an LGBTQ son or daughter is the end of the world. It's not. This is the same child you loved unconditionally five minutes before they came out.

If your expectations lie shattered at your feet, then they are *your* expectations. Let God replace *your* vision for your child with *God's*. As a younger Christian, I'd been taught that homosexuality was a sin. I believed that trauma somewhere in someone's past caused it, even if they didn't remember it. To my surprise, God completely shifted my

understanding. God revealed to me the many people who had great childhoods and yet are still gay and reminded me of the many people with traumatic childhoods who are still straight. Studies show no correlation between childhood trauma and being gay. Take some time to talk with God about your questions and listen for God to speak truth to you. You may be surprised.

New and unusual circumstances can draw from us new and unusual responses. Let your loved one's coming out stir up a love response beyond what you could have possibly imagined. Many parents feel instantaneous fear when their child comes out—fear for what lies ahead, not only for their child but also for themselves. Rather than trying to talk your child out of what they're telling you, you can decide to be their biggest ally. Instead of pushing you into fear, let this disclosure bring forth the protective mama bear you didn't know was in you. (This mama bear lives in both mom *and* dad.) The many parents in our FreedHearts groups have all had to learn this—but we have learned it.

We may fear for ourselves, wondering, “What will the neighbors say?” or “What will our church say?” While those responses may be understandable, choose to set them aside. Your child has taken a big step to talk to you. They were hoping you would listen and respond to them about *their* life. They did not anticipate the need to please *your* friends, *your* extended family, the pastor, and all the busybodies you know. Don't let this undue burden fall on your child.

FreedHearts Work

Look back on your initial response to your child's coming out. What were your first thoughts? Talk about your fear, anger, shock, and other emotions.

As you think about that, how much of this had to do with you versus having to do with your child? This can be painful to look at, I know. Don't be ashamed as you discover the parts of your response that were all about you.