

1. You have an interesting coming out story. What was your experience?

Harriet Dart, who was president of P-FLAG, the night in 1988 I called her very upset about coming out, kept me alive. She called me every half hour to make sure I was okay, asking me questions on the pretense of helping me to find a place to stay, gently giving me support and encouragement.

I had just separated from my wife and young children. I was despondent, shaken up. Alone.

Earlier in the week I had called my own pastor, a Southern Baptist minister, for his support and prayers. He told me never to come back to his church again. He made me feel unwanted. An outcast. I was afraid I would never see my family again.

Harriet Dart counseled me to take things one day at a time, reassured me P-FLAG was there for me, that others had a similar faith crisis and journey to acceptance.

Church was important to me, had been since I was five years old. Spiritually I drifted about for awhile with out a church home, until I found out about MCC-Detroit through some friends I met. My first Sunday was so welcoming. The sermon was self affirming for me. The choir sang an old familiar hymn "Blessed Assurance." I was deeply moved.

I knew this was where I needed to be. And -- I've stayed ever since. As Harriet Dart predicted, it's been a growth journey for me, spiritually, emotionally, intellectually. While working as an accountant, I studied for the ministry. I became an ordained MCC pastor in 1997.

Twelve years later my kids, Brian and Amy and her fiance, often attend services. My sister and her family accept and support me; and I've come to fully realize that God loves and supports me as a gay person.

2. How do you bring your own experiences into your work at the MCC?

When I get a call from someone telling me he or she is married with children and is gay or lesbian, I want to tell them: been there done that. My own experiences in being the whole gay person that I am -- positive and negative -- help me relate one-on-one to those I minister to. It's, so to speak, God's gift of understanding, channeled through me and my past experiences.

I have children. I've lost jobs. I've filed for bankruptcy. Been without transportation for a year. Lost loved ones. Cared for a father with Alzheimer's. Had my son serve in Iraq. Not once but twice because of a last minute extension of duty. As a parent I've been afraid for his life year by year, month by month. He's been home a year now, and doing well in college.

And on the joyful side, I've also celebrated life and love with a same-sex partner. And soon will welcome the birth of my first grandchild. A boy, with, appropriately enough biblically, the name of Luke (unless they go with Mark Jr.).

I use humor -- an element too often lacking in many traditional services -- in my sermons as a way to make congregants and visitors feel comfortable, to help people relieve any stress they feel when they walk into a new church, hoping to find comfort, peace, and understanding.

I believe that from all our human experiences we have an opportunity to grow and to learn, about ourselves, about others, our world. Our congregation is diverse, integrated. From many faith backgrounds, many ethnic groups and races.

3. Many LGBT people struggle to reconcile their faith and their sexual orientation. What is your advice to someone going through this?

Too many young -- and old -- LGBT religious seekers get hurt, disoriented, denigrated by some fundamentalist, patriarchal churches who thoughtlessly -- but many times intentionally -- condemn them for being who they are, taking scripture verses out of context, repeating unfounded lies, old distorted prejudices, preaching a gospel that is foreign to the message of love and acceptance that Jesus taught. Love and acceptance!

My philosophy is that I'm here -- and MCC-Detroit is as well -- to help church-alienated persons restore their relationship with God in a community that affirms them as whole and worthwhile children of God. I know of course that MCC-Detroit is not for everyone; but I work with an incredible group of clergy from various churches in the Metro Detroit area and can recommend people to other affirming churches they might be more comfortable with.

It's a struggle to be sure. We have the right-wing hate mongers telling us we can't be gay and Christian on the one hand; and we have many LGBT people, on the other, asking us why we want to be Christian in the first place. Being part of the LGBT community we often lose a lot of advantages heterosexuals take for granted. Sometimes our jobs, family, friends. But when we loose our faith that is the absolute worse thing for so many of us. With open and affirming churches we can regain that lost relationship with our Creator, rediscover God in a new light.

4. Why do you believe it's important to give back to the LGBT community?

When I came out I soon also found Affirmations, PFLAG, Triangle Foundation. They were there for me. They offered me hope, inspiration, a sense of place. Along with giving back to the LGBT community I now am blessed to give back to the City of Ferndale as a Police Chaplain.

If everyone in the world gave some of their time, talent, finances to help various nonprofit organizations, our world indeed would be a much better place. Every food bank would have a surplus of food. Every organization would have an abundance of volunteers to staff their centers and so on.

For we who are LGBT, instead of fighting among ourselves for the "almighty" dollar, we might consider sharing and offering our resources and talents with each other. When that happens everyone wins. It isn't just about individuals giving back it's about organizations giving back to others. At MCC-Detroit Detroit, we open our doors for free to organizations that need space for services or meetings.

5. In what ways do you stay involved in the gay community?

I volunteer with the Triangle Foundation, working with the Motor City Pride committee, and doing a mass commitment ceremony the Saturday before Pride. Last year thirteen couples celebrated their love with friends and family gathered around them in front of Ferndale's City Hall. I've worked with Affirmations answering the hot line, served as a youth facilitator and served on the Center's Board of Directors.

I'm also on the Transgender Day of Remembrance Committee for its annual service held at MCC -Detroit. I try to financially to support Ruth Ellis House, Triangle, Affirmations, and HRC. I've also been a guest speaker for classes at Wayne State University and have hosted Spring Arbor University classes at MCC-Detroit.

On another level I help get my church involved with the community. This past Sunday we raised \$1100 to help sustain Full Truth Church's continuing ministry. In the past we've raised thousands of dollars for Tsunami and Katrina victims.

Our church altar is surrounded each Sunday with usually filled baskets for donations of food and clothing for Ruth Ellis House. There's an altar container with a pink scarf tied around it, for a collection to help find a cure for Breast Cancer. All of these collections that we do for things outside the church help to remind us that we are part of a bigger picture.

Once a year we have a "Goods and Service" auction that raises around \$5,000. One third of this amount goes to Ruth Ellis Center; one third goes to a "Benevolence Fund" to help people in the community that need help with rent, groceries, medical expenses and utilities. The remaining one-third goes to our general fund.

As pastor and as a committed Christian I've been truly blessed to lead and to have a congregation that is dedicated to supporting our LGBT community -- and allied communities -- with dedicated time, exceptional special talents, financial support and outreach. Together, we've come a very long way.