

More Light on Bisexuality and Transgender

Three Sisters' Lunch

PCUSA 214th GA, June 18, 2002

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The Reverend Erin Swenson (erin@erinswen.com)

E: Thanks to More Light Presbyterians, The Shower of Stoles Project, and That All May Freely Serve for hosting the first ever Three Sisters' Luncheon.

S: Thanks especially for beginning with the B and the T, which folks usually leave to last.. that is if they ever really get to us.

E: If you have a question you would like to see addressed here, you will find a 3X5 card at your place. Please write your questions and give them to Michael or Bear.

S: If, at the end you have more questions or want to talk more about it, we would love to see you at the Three Sisters Suite this afternoon at 4:00, that's in the Huron Room at the Marriott Courtyard.

E: And we have information available at the table (indicate table) and our email is printed there so you can contact us if you want either during or after the General Assembly.

S: I would like to introduce Erin. Erin was born Eric in Buffalo, NY, and moved to Atlanta, Georgia at the age of 10. He joined the Mt. Vernon Presbyterian Church at the age of 12 where he sang in the choir, led the youth group, and was Moderator of Atlanta Presbytery's Youth Council. Eric attended Georgia Tech, Georgia State University and Columbia Theological Seminary, where he completed both an M.Div. and a Th.M. in pastoral counseling. Ordained in 1973, he served churches in Dalton, Lithonia, and Atlanta before starting a counseling practice in Marriage and Family Therapy. Eric married at the age of 20, and has two daughters. In 1995 Eric became Erin and her ordination was questioned and subsequently upheld by the Presbytery of Greater Atlanta. Erin continues to maintain rich family relationships with her former spouse, Sigrid, and her two grown daughters. Erin is currently involved in starting an educational non-profit, the Southern Association for Gender Education.

E: It is my pleasure to introduce Susan Craig, who describes herself as a lifelong Presbyterian, which only seems natural for someone who grew up in Princeton, NJ. She joined Nassau Presbyterian Church at the age of 12, where she sang in the choir and was active in the Westminster Fellowship. After an American Field Service year in Belgium she attended Stanford where she got her degree in French literature and music. Susan married and raised two children while working as a choral conductor and music instructor at Hamilton College in upstate New York. Seminary was the beginning of a second career for Susan following an amicable divorce. After completing Princeton Seminary Susan was ordained and has served the church in campus and women's ministries, and is currently Pastor of the United University Church at the University of Southern California at Los Angeles, one of our More Light Churches. Susan's children are also now grown, and she is blest with a beautiful granddaughter. She is devoted to her partner of six years, The Reverend Bear Ride, also a Presbyterian. Susan, do I take that to mean that you are a lesbian?

S: Erin, please don't label by the sex of my partner. As a matter of fact I am bisexual. Bisexual women and men are those who experience physical romantic or emotional attraction to people of both sexes and of different gender identities, whether or not we ever act on that attraction sexually. So what does that mean for you, Erin? How do you describe yourself?

E: In the world of transgender, transsexuals are the ones who desire medical treatment to change their physical sex. There are lots of other kinds of transgender people, cross-dressers who cross gender lines temporarily, drag performers who do it for fun or profit, and people who in one way or another consider themselves both genders, and lots of other gender expressions. I'm one of the boring transsexual types.

S: We're bisexual and transgender; and we're children of God, just like you.

E: Transgender experience is about who we are, not about our sexual orientation. Transgender people can be gay, lesbian, bisexual, asexual, or any other kind of sexuality, and we are all children of God.

S: Bisexuality is a sexual orientation just like heterosexuality or homosexuality. For bisexuals, as for all of us, sexual orientation is about our **being**, about who we are; it's not about our doing or our behavior. All persons may or may not express our orientation in our behavior. In this way bisexuals are just like you.

E: We are created in God's image and being, just like you.

S: Bisexuals are single or dating, celibate or sexually active, married or in committed partnerships. Transpeople are just the same. In both our communities there are those who live ethically and those who do not, just like in the whole human family.

E: As bi and trans Christians we experience the same call to live the Great Commandment as everyone else, to love God with all that is in us and love our neighbors as ourselves.

S: As bi and trans Presbyterians, like you we claim God alone as Lord of our conscience.

E: If you came to this conference with transphobia...

S: (interrupting) or biphobia...

E: We hope in getting to know us better these barriers to understanding and community will disappear.

S: We hope you will become supportive bi-standers...

E: (interrupting) and become trans-formed. In everything that matters...

S: We are children of God...

Both: JUST LIKE YOU!

BISEXUALITY: Three Sisters' Lunch, PCUSA GA, 6/18/02, the Rev. Susan Halcomb Craig

Let me pick up from Urvashi Vaid's story at the Three Sisters' Dinner of her cab driver's unanswered comment, "What I really don't understand is bisexuality..." and speak about that as an openly "self-affirming and practicing" Presbyterian bisexual woman of faith, and a child of God. And let me begin by giving thanks to God for the beautiful and blessed gift of my sexuality and yours, for all that is intimate and passionate and good in us, and for the faith God has that we'll learn to express our sexuality in wise and holy ways.

"Bisexuality" as a word takes a little work to understand, so I applaud you all not simply for showing up, but also for paying the freight to be here today. Thank you. On the one hand, the "bi" part of bi-sexual implies two, and you know the kind of trouble that can get us into! And the "sexual" part seems to make people think of "sex, sex, sex" [though why more for *bi*-sexual than *hetero*-sexual baffles me]. On the other hand, the word is fun to play with. We shorten it to Bi, and we make up words like Bi-ble, or bi-phobia, or bi-bliography. We hope as you become supportive bi-standers, that you'll use inclusive language, remembering that the word "*homosexuality*" doesn't include us [bisexuals are a Third Thing]; and we hope that you'll choose the whole mouthful: "gay, bisexual, lesbian, transgender" when speaking of the GBLT community. [Bi the way, Erin says the tomato's the best part of the sandwich, so don't forget the T!]

I think the Kinsey scale helps understand bisexuality. With 0 for "exclusively heterosexual" and 6 "exclusively homosexual" poles, and the whole human race strung along the spectrum between, it's evident there must be a lot of bisexuals! We clearly can't come in a single mold, as the gradations between numbers suggest. Instead, we exhibit bisexualities as we move along the continuum: some of us drawn more to same-sex, and others to different-sex partners; some like me pretty much in the middle; and many of us drawn more to bisexual partners of either biological sex [think about it!].

Recent research has moved beyond binary categories of male and female, gay and straight. Fields like gender and queer studies, queer theory, biology, psychology, and sociology open up old dualistic boxes and offer wide-ranging discussion on the origins of sexual orientation and gender identity. To date there are few sure answers. How does one become bisexual? We suppose in the same way that one becomes heterosexual, a gay man, or a lesbian. Is it a choice? We assume not, like all other orientations, preferences or genders.

But all bisexuals recognize the flash of attraction to both women and men. Of one it's said, "When you walk into a room, your eyes light up for men and women." Of others, that in our "dreams and visions" both women and men appear. Feminists call this creative power of connection and energy *eros*, and we respond when we experience it with, "God is good!," or with Anne Lamott's simple prayer, "Thank you." It is good, it's even fun to be bisexual!

A great many of us find that our bisexuality deepens our spirituality. When it's time for us to fall in love, our "time to embrace" [Eccl. 3], we don't know if it will be with a woman or a man. And so we experience the Spirit's movement in our lives, "blowing where **it** chooses... but [we] do not know where it comes from or where it goes" [John 3.8]. Although it's often said of us that, "You bisexuals can choose..." for me, falling in love feels a whole lot more like *being chosen*.

Bisexual persons fall in love based on the quality of relationship that develops with another—is it compassionate and faithful, mutual and just?—more than the sex or gender of a partner. As writer Anne Cameron’s character Suzy says in Daughters of Copperwoman, “...meat and bones don’t matter, it’s what’s inside them, the love spirit” [118]. It’s the Love Spirit that matters to us.

Recently there was an article in the Presbyterian Outlook in which a theologian from Princeton Seminary wrote that, “...the very idea of ‘bisexuality’ seems inseparable from casual, promiscuous and adulterous relationships...” [3/15/02, “Thinking Outside the Box” Part 3, paragraph 3, Geo. Huntzinger]. Leaving aside the ignorance and disrespect that this statement demonstrates, it does surface the bisexual issue most on people’s minds: the assumption that we ‘need’ two concurrent partners, one of either sex, and at all times. [A friend jokes, “That’s why bisexuals always look so sleepy!”]

I confess I’m not sure where these fears come from. Perhaps they rest on the myth that bi-men and women are half-homo- and half-heterosexual, and therefore ‘need completing’ from each one. But we’re not half anything--we’re whole, and we’re bisexual. Or perhaps detractors, who often call us ‘confused,’ are themselves confused about gender identity, thinking we ‘need’ ‘some of each.’ But bisexuals are more likely to be ‘both/and,’ and to have ‘mixed’ gender identities of stereotypically feminine and masculine traits. We don’t lack or require complementarity or opposition from another.

Instead, the real questions to raise regard sexual ethics [‘Sexthics,’ for short!] and faith. The Presbyterian “More Light on Sexual Ethics” statement and the interfaith “Religious Declaration of Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing” by SIECUS, the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the US have been adopted by More Light Presbyterians. Together with other similar ethics, these affirm a single sexual ethic of covenantal fidelity for all people of faith, regardless of sexual orientation. You and I, bis-trans-hets-gay men-and-lesbians in community, are held to one and the same standard of love and justice in our committed partner relationships. And whether we succeed or fail to live up to that standard, we honor and are called to it, and rely on God’s grace to help us live it out.

Which brings us to Katie Morrison and Lisa Larges, who played the virtuous sisters Chastity and Fidelity in our Three Sisters’ worship service at this General Assembly. Many are reinterpreting the confessions in today’s context and understand *chastity* to refer to sexual expression confined within devoted relationship, as in monogamous marriage, or in “singleness,” as in covenantal partnerships where marriage is not possible. The opportunity to live chaste lives is then extended to bi-women and men, lesbians, gay men and transsexuals, as well as to the heterosexual community. [Heidelberg Catechism, answer to Question 108.]

But *fidelity* offers more range of motion. Coming as it does from the root *fides* for faith, it’s often colored by our beliefs, as well as by our moral convictions. In a relational sense, ‘fidelity’ stands for steadfastness, for staying-with-another, and for commitment for the long haul. The More Light Presbyterians sexual ethic “focuses on things that matter, including the dignity and worth of every person, the right to accurate knowledge about human sexuality, a single ethical standard for intimate relations [obviously including bisexual people], and the recognition that commitment, fidelity, and integrity are fundamental to all relationships of moral substance.”

In the end, the question of fidelity is owned by all of us. In every age, and among persons of every orientation and preference, there will always be those who argue that fidelity in relationship need not require sexual monogamy. And there will be those, among them people of faith, who argue for 'fidelity' as sexual exclusivity in committed partnered relationship.

So to speak personally, although I know it's also for a sizeable group of others, this latter form of fidelity is my choice. In faithful relationship I most value mutuality and equal power, responsibility and doing no harm to another, and living a balanced life in right relationship with God, neighbors and self. I have only experienced all these to be possible when I reserve my sexually-intimate loving for relationship with my partner.

So much for the scary 'lifestyle' of this Presbyterian bisexual woman. You and I know that heterosexual, gay, lesbian, questioning and bisexual women and men will choose to structure their intimate relationships in a variety of ways. I simply want to emphasize two things: 1) that there's nothing particular to *bisexuality* that predicts or necessitates multiple relationships; and 2) that learning to be ethically responsible means **all** of us need to greet the spark of *eros* in each other with gratitude, while making wise and holy decisions about whether or not to act on it sexually.

It took 25 years for the word *bisexual* to appear on the T-shirts for the San Francisco Pride March. That was 1995. Thanks again to the Three Sisters for so carefully including the T and the B in the language of this movement for justice. We invite all gathered here to do the same. Help stamp out bi-and-trans invisibility! And May it be so!

**TRANSGENDER: Three Sister's Luncheon, PCUSA 214th GA, 06/18/2002,
The Reverend Erin Swenson, erin@erinswen.com**

You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before all people, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Creator in heaven.

Matthew 5:14-16, NIV

Introductory Remarks

When opening my remarks before a large audience I often will ask for a show of hands, the question being, "Who here has gender?" Usually a moment's hesitation is followed by the slow raising of hands, everyone looking around to see how everyone else is answering the question. Finally most everyone has their hands raised. "We all have gender," I remark, adding "It's part and parcel of every human experience." When you were born the doctor announced your sex, or what she thought was your sex (mistakes are regularly made) to the world. "Congratulations, Mom. You've got a girl!" she would exclaim if she saw no penis, or "You've got a boy!" if she saw one. And for most of us all the truths about sex, gender and attraction proceed as expected from that one fateful announcement.

The Vicissitudes of Sex

If you are like me you were raised to believe that biological sex, the purely physical part of it, is clear. We are either male or female and that's end of it. The fact of the matter is, however, that there is hardly anything either/or about the way we are made, and biological sex can be as ambiguous as any other aspect of our being. The part of us the doctor who delivered us looks at to announce our arrival can often defy categorization, much to the chagrin of all concerned. Our hormones, an invisible aspect of our biological sex, can vary widely. Even trying to depend on chromosomes, the old 23XY for males and 23XX for females doesn't work. There are many women born and growing up female who have a "normal" male chromosome patternⁱ. And there are variations on the chromosomes themselves, like XXX, XXY, XXYY, or X0. Clearly those of us who want solid ground to stand on about human sexual differentiation will find no comfort here! In fact researchers have discovered as many as 2% of live births result in a child whose anatomy does not fit the either/or male/female modelⁱⁱ.

The implications of this are enormous when we look at our church and realize that this suggests that as many as 50,000 Presbyterians are in one way or another intersex. The "average" Presbyterian Church would, therefore, has between four and five such individuals.

This is enough to set our heads reeling, but we should have been prepared. Our own scriptures show us that perfect sexual dimorphism (the technical term for the either/or way we view anatomical sex) has never been reality. The ancient Hebrews knew this; making sure that physically imperfect animal specimens were not used for ritual sacrifice. Eunuchs were, under Levitical Law, excluded from the holy places. They were usually the product of war or royal desire for protectors of the harem. In fact the word *eunuch*, used for a castrated male, actually means, "bed keeper." It is in the words of Jesus recorded my Matthew that we discover that eunuchs could also be born that wayⁱⁱⁱ, hence the recognition that perfect sexual dimorphism is not reality. We should have known.

The Hegemony of Gender

When we move from anatomical sex to gender we move from biology to identity, in fact, socially constructed identity^{iv}. Reason might lead us to believe that this would be the really malleable aspect of human expression, and in some ways it is. Our *gender identity* is that internal sense we have of being a boy or a girl, a man or a woman. Developmental scientists are pretty much in agreement that gender identity is fixed and unchangeable by the time we reach the age of five. *Gender role*, or expression, is the way we act out our gender in the social sphere. It usually, but not always, correlates to our gender identity.

For most of us this all works out well. Born clearly male anatomically, we feel like men and act like men socially. Or vice-versa, born anatomically female, we feel like women and act like women in society. Considering how complex this all is it's almost miraculous that it works out this way as often as it does!

Then there are the rest of us; the ones for whom all the pieces don't line up this well. Born anatomically female, I may grow up with great turmoil over the fact that I don't really feel like a woman. Try as I may, my gender role betrays this and others see me as tom boyish or butch. Or I might have no questions about my gender identity as a woman but enjoy acting more mannish. Our world tolerates and even celebrates this kind of dissonance in women. Many successful women shop almost exclusively in the men's clothing department, and a woman attending a ball in a tuxedo can be considered chic.

But men don't enjoy the same societal flexibility. Born anatomically male, if I feel any questions about my inner sense of being a man I had better not express them because allowing myself the freedom to express femininity will cost me much. I am more likely to drop out of school, to experience the rejection of my family, to suffer economic deprivation, and even die earlier than my male peers. Men who shop for their clothing exclusively in the women's department don't do nearly as well as their female counterparts. Just try attending a formal ball as a man in a gown!

It's little wonder that people for whom sex and gender don't correlate spend vast amounts of energy making sure they fit the social norm for gender expression.

The Refuge of Faith

It was March 1995, when I picked up the phone and called the chair for the Committee on Ministry for the Presbytery of Greater Atlanta. I asked him how one went about the process of changing a name on the rolls of Presbytery. He said, "Just address a letter to the COM with the request. By the way, what are you changing your name to?"

"Erin Katrina Swenson," I replied with some degree of hesitation.

"Why do you want to change your name to that?" he asked, the intonation of rising stress apparent in his voice.

"Because I am in the process of transitioning from one gender to another and this name will fit my new gender expression better," I replied hoping naively that this would be adequate.

"I'll have to get back to you," Lloyd replied, obviously anxious to get off the phone.

He did get back to me, not twenty minutes later and asked that I address my letter to the COM with three things: 1) The request for the name change, 2) a description of my intended process of gender transition, and 3) what my intentions were regarding my ordination to the office of minister of word and sacrament.

“I really don’t want to change everything else,” I pleaded, “Just my gender. I love my calling and work as a minister and have no intention to change that.”

“We will need this nonetheless,” He demanded, and our conversation was at a close. The process had begun.

If you had met me when I was a little boy you would have noticed very little about me that seemed out of the ordinary. I was quite shy, and had some considerable trouble playing with other boys, but otherwise seemed very normal to myself. I would never have said that there was anything unusual about my gender, although my friends sometimes wondered about my affinity for music over baseball.

In my tenth year, however, all that changed. Home alone for the first time in my life, I found myself without rhyme or reason making treks to the powder room to stuff tissue wads in my tee shirt to simulate breasts. My female friends tell me that they were doing the same thing, anticipating the surge of nature in their maturing bodies. I expect that some of my male friends did this as well, but probably out of playfulness or boyish exuberance. For me it was different. I would gaze at myself in the mirror with deep awe and a profound sense of shame. I had no idea what was going on; I only knew that it came from deep inside of me and it seemed wrong. A few months later I found a name for it.

When taking the old papers to the storage room in our suburban Atlanta home one day, I saw a headline that riveted my attention, “Ex-GI Becomes Bride.” These days such a headline wouldn’t mean much, but in the world of 1958 it was cataclysmic. For the first time I read the word *transsexual*, and immediately knew that this word described me. I didn’t really know it, but I had discovered my gender. Now in suburban Atlanta, Georgia in 1958 in a middle class Protestant family I knew better than to run to my Mom and tell her I wanted to change sex. I knew instinctively that my survival depended on not telling anyone. And so my secret life began, and would continue for almost four decades.

Simultaneously with these events my family began attending a new little Presbyterian Church formed as an outgrowth of Atlanta’s Peachtree Presbyterian. The Message at Mt. Vernon Presbyterian Church was clear; God loved me no matter what. What’s more God knew me outside and in. Perhaps it was the wonderful loving presence of the people at Mt Vernon, or maybe it was the desperate need in my quivering ten-year-old soul, but somehow the message penetrated. I knew that if other people found out about my terrible gender secret I would certainly lose their love and respect. But that was not the way with Jesus. He loved me with all my brokenness, and so He became in many ways my closest companion. The church became the center of my life through adolescence. It was natural that, as I began to search for how I would contribute, I should consider service in the church.

Something inside of me desperately wanted to be normal, however, so I began to create systems of belief about human nature that allowed me some sense of normalcy. Perhaps the most important of these beliefs was that all boys really wanted to be girls (after all, I was a boy and I did). The trick was that it was a vast secret among boys, something never spoken. This meshed nicely with the notion that as I grew older I would fall in love with a woman, and all of these strange feelings inside of me would somehow become projected onto her as a part of bonding. The lyrics of romantic music seemed to me to suggest this might be the case “I gave her my heart,” or “you made me into the man I am,” carried ideas that, for my desperate heart, offered hope that this might indeed be true.

And it did become true. A couple of months after my 20th birthday I met Sigrid and fell deeply in love. And I was cured. It was easily the most wonderful nine months of my life. The following March, around my 21st birthday, however, I found myself once again staring at myself in the mirror, all the old ghosts having returned. I was devastated. Lacking courage and still sensing I would lose everything I loved, I once more endeavored to keep the secret. I devoted myself to my family, to school, to church and work to distract myself. The next 25 years would bring lots of things to do: complete four earned degrees, build a house and remodel another, raise two daughters one of whom is severely disabled, build one of Atlanta's best group psychotherapy practices, build a sailboat, earn a pilot's license... I could add more but you get the point. The energy I needed to spend in the service of distracting myself from my gender issue was enormous. I began seeing counselors and therapists within a year after my ordination in 1973, and continued in psychotherapy for the next 22 years.

It all worked. I managed to create a belief that I could outlive my secret. Then I began to get older and the depression that had begun as an adolescent began to worsen. My relationship with Sigrid and our daughters began to feel the stress. One day in the mid-80s Sigrid sat down with me and told me that she had made an important decision, that when our two daughters left home she would be leaving as well.

I was devastated. That was the final straw, and I began to understand that all my psychotherapy, all the relentless hard work, and all the prayer... that none of it would cure me. I considered and rejected suicide as too angry a thing to do to the people I loved. My four therapists, all men, had worked with me over the years to try to overcome, compensate for, sublimate, and alienate my strange proclivities. I finally chose to see a woman, and one well acquainted with gender issues like mine. It did not take Margaret long to help me see that the anguish I had felt for so many years was not over confusion about my gender but over fear that the people I loved would reject me for it.

That began a process that led eventually to my gender transition and to the day I called Lloyd to ask the COM for its help. Nineteen months, many COM meetings, one-on-one meetings with COM members, and two Presbytery votes later my ordination was finally confirmed by the Presbytery of Greater Atlanta (186-161) and, at last, my name changed on the rolls of Presbytery.

ⁱ This condition is known in medical terminology as androgen insensitivity syndrome (AIS), or testicular feminization. It is so common that large cities often have AIS support groups. Cleveland has such a support group.

ⁱⁱ Fausto-Sterling, A., *et.al.*, "How sexually dimorphic are we? Review and synthesis," American Journal of Human Biology, 12:2, 2000, pp. 151-166.

ⁱⁱⁱ "For some are eunuchs because they were born that way; others were made that way by men; and others have made themselves eunuchs because of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it." Matthew 12:19, New International Version.

^{iv} "What is gender? The term "gender" refers to the socially-constructed differences between men and women, as distinct from 'sex', which refers to their biological differences." Gender in Agriculture: a World Bank Learning Module, <http://www.worldbank.org/gender/module/overview/gender.htm>.