

Unashamed

A Coming-Out Guide
for LGBTQ Christians

AMBER CANTORNA

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We Need One Another

Building an Affirming Community

We are each of us angels with only one wing, and we can only fly by embracing one another.

—Luciano De Crescenzo

I never played with Barbie dolls as a kid, but I knew what they were—small plastic representations of what a woman was supposed to look like. With a tall, slim body, blonde hair, and blue eyes, Barbie was the model of perfection. I, on the other hand, was none of those things. I was big-boned, I had brown hair and hazel eyes, and I can't ever remember a time in my life where I felt thin. The one thing I did have in common with Barbie was the ability to wear a perpetual smile.

No one ever told me directly that's what I was supposed to do. I just knew. I copied the Christian women around me whom I looked up to as role models. Sitting and drinking tea, they talked about Joyce Meyer and shared why they believe "everything happens for a reason." In my youth, I didn't question it. It was normal. But as I moved into my teen years, I began to take note of what was going on around me. In my ultraconservative environment, I noticed that outwardly, the people I interacted with did all the right things—they went to church, they homeschooled their children, they led Bible studies, they went on mission trips, they fasted on a regular

basis, they acted like they had it all together and were always happy—but they were never *honest* with each other. I remember thinking to myself, *This isn't authentic community. I feel like I'm trapped in the masquerade ball from Phantom of the Opera.*

They called it being “blessed” or claiming the “joy of the Lord” as their strength. They used prayer, trusting God, and additional faith as their tools for handling any and every situation. They seemed perpetually happy, but they weren't *real*. Then I realized, perhaps I never liked Barbie dolls for the same reason that I struggled to connect with people: they were fake.

Even as I took part in young adult accountability groups that were said to make us more like Christ and strengthen our spiritual walk, it felt like a big facade. No matter what group I joined, the confessions that came from the women around me were things like slipping up on their diet or failing to spend an hour in Bible study and prayer every day that week. I thought to myself, *Either these women are seriously superficial or I am way less spiritual than I thought, because calorie-counting was the least of my worries this week!* It seemed so trivial to me compared to the deep secrets I harbored.

Sitting and listening to each of these ladies' confessions, I scrambled for what to say when my turn came. I was simultaneously desperate for someone to truly know me and terrified to show anyone what was in my heart, especially those with a plethora of Christian clichés on their lips. My struggles that week weren't petty things like slipping up on my diet or losing my temper with a family member. The battles I wrestled with were the ones no one wanted to talk about: struggles of deep depression, intense anxiety, crippling mental health, loneliness, and cutting and other forms of self-injury. But those types of confessions made people uncomfortable. Not knowing what to do with information like that, they'd often just slap a Band-Aid on it by saying something like, “We will pray for you,” or “Just trust God, and he will give you strength to overcome it.” That made me feel even more alone than I did to begin with. Over time, I learned it was better to just keep those things to myself.

But as far back as I can remember, I deeply longed for someone to see behind the masked smile I'd been trained to wear. I was desperate for at least one person with whom I could show the unfiltered me. I wore the mask because it was expected of me; I danced because that is what happy people do, but deep inside I longed for more. I longed for people to stop hiding behind idealized masks of perfection. I longed for authenticity. I longed to have the freedom to be real. I'd fine-tuned how to play my part, but it was exhausting, lonely, and suffocating for my soul. Little by little, I felt like I was dying inside.

I lived the first twenty-seven years of my life behind that mask, and the death of my soul was drawing near. But as I reached the end of my rope and was now struggling with my own sexuality on top of everything else, I went out on a limb one last time and typed "gay affirming church" into Google in a final attempt to find authenticity and a beacon of hope for my soul. A church in Denver appeared in the search results. Perusing their website and feeling like it held potential, I took the risk of emailing the pastor and poured out my very broken heart to him. Almost immediately I received a very warm response, followed by an invitation to visit.

So the first weekend of January 2012, I drove from Colorado Springs to Denver to visit this church for the first time. My whole world had been turned upside down over the past few years when I unexpectedly fell in love with my female roommate. It was the one thing that was *never* supposed to happen. In the order of unforgivable sins, that was at the top. The words my parents spoke when they found out about it had silenced me for months: "Amber, don't *ever* tell anyone about this, because if you do it will ruin your reputation forever."

Bound to a secret that ate away at my soul, my coping mechanisms of self-harm returned, and I was convinced that the unacceptable combination of having sex outside of marriage and doing so with a woman, as opposed to a man, made me useless to God. I believed that no man would want me after losing my virginity to a woman. I was devastated by the disappointment I knew I had caused my family, and I felt I

was an utter failure to God. My life became bleaker by the day. Darkness clouded my brain, and suicidal thoughts began to take hold. It was more than I could bear.

Driving the sixty-seven miles between my house in Colorado Springs and this church in Denver, I understood this action as my final attempt at trying to make sense of the mess in my heart. Somehow I mustered the strength to give hope one last shot. I was desperate for a reason to keep living, but I was also afraid that people might actually see me—and equally afraid that they might *not* see me. I longed to be seen but didn't know what the consequences of that might be. I had hidden for so very long. I longed to belong and to feel safe. I wanted to hope, but I was afraid to hope for fear that I'd be disappointed.

Arriving at the church and making my way into the sanctuary, I sat with both hope and fear in my heart, waiting to see which would triumph. As the congregation began its service, among the first things I heard were the words of their ethos, which are read at every gathering:

Married, divorced, and single here, it is one family
that mingles here

Conservative and liberal here, we've all got to give a
little here

Big and small here, there is room for us all here

Doubt and believe here, we all can receive here

LGBTQ and straight here, there is no hate here

Woman and man here, everyone can here

Whatever your race here, for all of us grace here

In imitation of the ridiculous love almighty God has
for each of us and all of us, we choose to live and love
without labels.¹

Tears streamed down my face. For the first time in years, my soul felt hopeful, alive, and free—like it could breathe.

They saw me and knew me. In many ways, I believe these were the words my heart had longed to hear all my life. *Now, this is authentic community*, I thought. It was deeper than a mere superficial reality. It was inclusive, honest, raw, and real.

That was the day I found my people, the day my heart found a place to call home, the day I learned I could bring all of me to the family of God and didn't have to filter what I said when I walked through the church doors. That day became a defining moment for me that would carry me through the months and years to come.

I drove from Colorado Springs to Denver every Sunday for the next six months, watching as people interacted with one another before, during, and after church. The atmosphere of this church was different from those I'd known. There was a love, warmth, and authenticity in the air that made it unique and refreshing. Rather than putting a mask on when they walked into church, people seemed to be taking off their masks and leaving them at the door. People who had to hide who they were during the week to their family, friends, or bosses—or all of them—could come inside these church walls and feel safe, like they belonged.

This captivated my soul, and I immediately began working on building community by meeting new people, exchanging stories, and going to lunch with a group of church members after every service. Those lunch conversations were the first time in my life that I heard people talk about their love for God and their love for their same-sex partner or spouse in the same breath without any conflict in between. I met couples who'd been together ten, twenty, even thirty years. That was monumental for me in terms of normalizing what I was going through. It was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. Not only that, but they were honest about their struggles, open about the difficult parts of life, and didn't seem to be hiding anything. I'd longed to meet these kind of people all my life, and it revolutionized the way I viewed what was possible for my future, giving me hope for life out from behind the mask.

THE IMPORTANCE OF BUILDING AUTHENTIC COMMUNITY PRIOR TO COMING OUT

Building community prior to coming out is vitally important for several reasons. First, it will help acclimatize you to a new kind of normal. Meeting and spending time with healthy people who love God and are committed to their same-sex partner or spouse or are confident in their gender identity give you hope for what you can have in your own future. You need healthy role models to give you confidence for a happy, fulfilling future. Just because you're gay or bi or trans does not mean that you can't get married or have a family with kids if that is what you want. Options are available to you, but you need to be in a space that models those choices in a healthy manner.

Second, you need support. You could come up against an entire spectrum of roadblocks in the process of coming out. You don't want to be scrambling for support when those challenges come. Having a foundation in place will sustain you when the road gets rocky.

There are many different kinds of support, but a few things to look for in order to start building your own supportive community are as follows.

An affirming church

While connecting to your local LGBTQ center and other types of support groups and organizations can be helpful, connecting to an affirming church is critical because it addresses your need to be seen as an LGBTQ person as well as a Christian. In a world that often tells people you can't be both, you need a place where the two coincide to see the possibility for yourself. Being an LGBTQ Christian is a unique challenge that not all LGBTQ people face, and you need a safe place to bring all parts of you without having to segregate or compartmentalize.

A good therapist

We talk more about the value of therapy in the next chapter, but finding a licensed therapist who respects where you are in your faith journey as well as supports the discovery process of

your LGBTQ identity and how to integrate both into your life is extremely helpful. An understanding therapist gives you not only a confidential space to process but also the confidence and tools you need to move forward. While many therapists can help you with interpersonal struggles, I recommend finding one who specializes in working with LGBTQ people, if possible, particularly LGBTQ people of faith. If you're struggling to find a therapist in your area, The Christian Closet is a web-based resource that provides online therapy for LGBTQ people of faith.

A close friend

You should have one to three friends whom you can put on speed dial and know that you can call them anytime. Talk with those friends ahead of time and explain that, in the process of coming out, emotions might hit you unexpectedly and you will need support or a listening ear. Explain what kind of support is most helpful for you—suggestions, unconditional listening, prayer, and so on—and ask if they are willing to take on this role for you.

A pet/companion

Not everyone has three great friends to put on speed dial. Something I learned in my coming-out process that I previously underestimated was the power of a pet. Animals are an amazing reflection of God's love and can teach us so much. Not only that, but if taken care of and treated properly, their love is truly unconditional, which isn't true about most people. When I got Half Pint, my Shih Tzu–Maltese mix, prior to coming out, I had no idea how much strength she would lend me in the following years. Every time I walked through the door, she was excited to see me. She didn't care if I was gone eight hours or ten minutes. To her, it was the best part of the day. On my hardest days, just knowing that there was a heart-beat waiting for me when I got home made the days a little less lonely. Even the knowledge that she depended on me daily for the simplest things like food and water gave me a sense of elementary purpose. Taking her for a walk meant I went outside

for fresh air. Knowing she needed to be fed pulled me out of bed in the morning. Knowing she was there to cuddle with me while I slept made the nightmares a little less scary. Sometimes all we need is a little consistency and normalcy in our day coupled with some true unconditional love. If you're at a place in your life where you have the time and resources for a pet, a little bundle of fur could make all the difference.

A small group

Involvement in a small church group offers a great opportunity to build additional support. Attending an affirming church is a good first step, but you can often end up lost in the crowd if you're not intentional. Being a part of a small group lets you be seen. You get to know people, and they get to know you. Not only does this give people the opportunity to support you through your own process, but you'll be surprised at how much your helping others with your presence gives you strength you didn't know you had. Investing your time, energy, and resources into others and allowing them to invest theirs into you is a true sign of community.

A hotline

While all these tools are important and have a place, sometimes you can't predict when something is going to trigger you and your speed-dial friends aren't available. Maybe something has even come up involving one of them. Having a hotline number on hand and knowing someone is always available to talk can help give you a sense of peace when so many other parts of your life feel out of control. There's no shame in reaching out. In fact, one of the best things you can do for yourself is to gift yourself with the chance to be heard. If you're unsure of which hotline to call, a list of numbers is available in the Resources section of this book.

The most important takeaway is to start building your support system *now*. If at all possible, create your supportive community before you need it. If it is too late for that and you're

already treading water, do what you can now to jumpstart a community for yourself and let people know of your need for support.

Looking back, I can say without a doubt that the support network I had through my church and other avenues of involvement before, during, and after coming out absolutely saved my life. I attended my new church in Denver for four months before I came out to my family. Three months after coming out, I moved to Denver to be closer to a body of support; it was that crucial for my survival. When I had next to nothing but knew I needed to relocate to Denver, a church friend lent me the money I needed until I could get on my feet. When I became really sick with pneumonia but didn't have health insurance or money to pay for a doctor, a friend from choir gave me the money and demanded I go. Years later when I had absolutely no family at my wedding but desperately needed to feel supported in the act of my marriage, my church family sat where my biological family should have been and stepped in to help fill the void.

Even today, my affirming community continues to support my wife and me as we deal with challenges that arise for us. The people in that community continue to be our chosen family and carry us when times get hard. They are our people, and you need to find your people too.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN AN AFFIRMING CHURCH AND A WELCOMING CHURCH

A few years ago, my wife and I decided to visit a local sister church of the church in which I was raised. On our first Sunday there, the pastor happened to preach a sermon about their doors being open to everyone in the community. "Everyone is welcome," he said with enthusiasm from the stage. He went to extensive lengths to explain that no matter what your background or financial status, no matter where you lived or what "sin" you committed—whether you were a single mother or

had been incarcerated or lived on the streets—you were welcome and belonged here.

My wife and I sat listening carefully to that list, but unsurprisingly heard no mention of the LGBTQ community. I knew this pastor and his wife from the parent church where we'd both been members. Following the service, I took a step of courage and raised the question. I wrote him an email, mentioning my background, my long involvement at our parent church, and my recent marriage to my wife. I asked him if he *truly* meant all were welcome or if his statement actually meant everyone except me.

He didn't remember me at first, but upon agreeing to meet my wife and me for coffee to discuss the matter, he remembered not only me but also my family very well. Our mutual connection to a former church world and memories we both shared softened his heart a bit, and the door for conversation seemed to open as we sat and dialogued about our faith journeys. He asked questions with a fairly open mind and seemed open to learning. Eventually he admitted that his church was rather neutral on the subject of same-sex relationships and that we would never hear him preach about it from the pulpit one way or the other. He wanted us to feel welcome in his church.

Then my real question came: "So if I wanted to join the worship team or lead a small group, would I be allowed to do that?" He paused and admitted he wasn't sure. No one had been gutsy enough to ask him that question point-blank before. He said he would pray about it, talk to the church leadership, and let us know.

Anyone who has been through a similar process at a church knows what the answer was. As at many other churches, we were "welcome" to attend, give our money, and volunteer our time, but not to lead. Leading as a gay Christian woman wasn't a risk they were willing to take or theological support.

For some reason—perhaps longing, nostalgia, or stupidity—my wife and I decided to visit just one more time. The day we went was ironically the second part of a two-week sermon

series on sex. The first sermon, which we had missed, had been on “Good Sex,” and the week we showed up was (you guessed it) the discussion of “Bad Sex.”

A knot began forming in my stomach from the moment I heard the title and continued to churn with every passing minute. I waited in fear and anticipation of what may come. Then the moment finally arrived. To my shock but sadly not my surprise, when offering examples of bad sex—including pedophilia, pornography, and incest—this same pastor with whom we’d just had coffee only weeks prior also listed homosexuality.

I wanted to stand up and walk out right then and there. My blood was boiling, and I immediately felt not only betrayed but very unsafe.

I left so deeply hurt that day. I was hurt because he told me to my face that we’d never hear him talk about this from the pulpit. I was hurt because I felt like we had established some kind of rapport and respect for one another, yet he still listed my beautiful and pure marriage to my wife as defiled. I was hurt because I felt betrayed once more by someone who knew my history and my family, and with whom I shared years of mutual memories. I was disturbed and disheartened.

I ruminated on that sermon for weeks. Finally, I felt like I needed to tell this pastor how his words affected me. After sending an email that vulnerably revealed my pain and heartache, his response was short and simple: he wasn’t going to apologize or alter what the Bible clearly stated as truth. That was it.

I could never bring myself to walk through the doors of that church again.

Because of stories like this and the heartbreaking experiences of so many other LGBTQ people in church spaces, it is vitally important to know the difference between simply being welcome in the church and being fully affirmed as equal in the body of Christ. Many churches say, “All are welcome here,” but what they really mean is that you are welcome to attend service, give your tithe, and maybe even volunteer in a “lesser” role like hospitality, but when it comes to serving in

a leadership capacity or getting married, they draw the line. This stance is damaging for so many LGBTQ people because it causes us to feel subhuman or less-than simply because of our sexual orientation or gender identity.

If you choose to engage in a welcoming but not affirming church because you feel God is asking you to stay and be a light, at least know ahead of time where the church stands theologically and what their doctrine is concerning LGBTQ people so that you're not hurt or surprised down the road. Some people feel called to stay in those situations; many of us do not. Choosing to engage in a non-affirming faith community can be deeply damaging to your soul in the long run. What's more, choosing to *not* engage in a faith community that is damaging to your soul is completely right and healthy. God would not ask you to stay in a harmful place. You have every right to protect your heart and walk away if staying is at all detrimental to your physical, psychological, emotional, or spiritual health.

HOW TO FIND A SAFE AND AFFIRMING CHURCH COMMUNITY TO FEED YOUR SOUL

With the launching of Church Clarity in 2017, we are fortunate to now have a way of knowing exactly what a church's policies are in regards to LGBTQ inclusion. On its website, ChurchClarity.org, you can search by region or denomination and find churches in your area that have been scored. Each church listed has undergone a complete review by one of Church Clarity's advocates and, based on its policies, placed in categories along the lines of Non-Affirming, Undisclosed, Unclear, Actively Discerning, and Clearly Affirming. You can review what each rating means, and if you are curious about a certain church you don't see listed, you are able to submit the church's name for review.

Church Clarity advocates for transparency of church policies regarding LGBTQ inclusion, and I believe their work

is vitally important for the health, well-being, and spiritual growth of LGBTQ Christians. It's important because the difference between "welcoming" and "affirming" matters—a lot. It marks the difference between "you are equal here" and "you are welcome despite the fact that you're flawed." It marks the difference between "we celebrate who you are" and "we want to fix who you are." And it also marks the difference between "we embrace you" and "we love the sinner, but hate the sin." We need to understand a church's policies so that we as LGBTQ people know what to expect before we walk through the door—so that we feel safe and can protect ourselves from additional spiritual trauma. We need to feel equal and included—like we belong.

BUT WHAT IF MY AREA DOESN'T HAVE ANY AFFIRMING CHURCHES?

You may live in an area that does not yet have an affirming church nearby, or perhaps there are affirming churches but not in the same faith tradition in which you were raised. If that is you, know first that you are not alone. Many people are still searching for that safe home church community where they feel fully embraced. Slowly, more churches are coming out as fully affirming, but it is taking time. If you don't have an affirming faith community from your denomination in your area, you have some options.

Consider trying a new denomination

A new faith tradition may be different than what you are used to. It may stretch you a bit, but it may also refresh you. This is the perfect time to open yourself up to the insight and richness provided by other denominations or faith traditions that are not your own. You may even find it freeing and liberating to worship God in a new and different way. Allow yourself space to grow and be open to learning something new.

Get online and plug in with some of the resources listed in this book

Connect with others virtually and build an online faith community. Social media gives us the unique opportunity to connect with like-minded people all over the world. The more you join groups on Facebook and follow like-minded people on Twitter and Instagram, the more those websites's algorithms will connect you to the resources you are looking for. Start by following some of the people listed in the Resources section of my website at AmberCantorna.com. I try to keep an updated list of bloggers, organizations, books, podcasts, and musicians that I feel could be helpful to those on this journey.

Attend a progressive Christian conference

A growing number of progressive Christian conferences each year provide safe places for everyone, including LGBTQ people, to learn and grow in faith together. Some of these conferences are the Q Christian Fellowship Conference, the Why Christian? Conference, the Evolving Faith Conference, The Reformation Project Conference, and the Wild Goose Festival. Being in an affirming space, even if only for a weekend, can be immensely encouraging and uplifting for your soul.

Start a small faith community of your own

Advertise a small group or support group gathering in your home, at your church (if they will let you), or at a local coffee shop. If you create something that doesn't already exist in your area, people will find you. Most likely, they want a safe community just as badly as you do.

Community is one of the key components that will help you thrive through your coming-out process. Begin making a plan now of how to build your support network so that it will be as strong and rich as possible when your coming-out time arrives. You'll need them to lean on, and if you choose the right people, they will actually want the opportunity to be there for you.

TO THE PARENT AND ALLY

If you are a parent or ally of an LGBTQ person, support them by helping them find a safe faith community. Offer to help them research affirming churches in their area and go with them the first few times they attend. Going to a new church can be intimidating for anyone, but for the LGBTQ person who has already been traumatized by harmful theology in church spaces, walking into a new community can feel extremely vulnerable for them. Lending your support can give them the strength they need to start on a new path of spiritual healing and wholeness.

FOR THE CHURCH LEADER

If you are a church leader in an affirming church, go to Church-Clarity.com and have your church rated and added to their list of clearly affirming churches. As the number of LGBTQ Christians continues to grow, the need for more affirming churches is vital for the success and health of our diverse believers. Make sure they know they are safe, valued, and included in the body of Christ where you worship.

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