

From:

OPEN HANDS

Vol. 13, No. 1
Summer 1997

Open Hands is a resource for congregations and individuals seeking to be in ministry with lesbian, bisexual, and gay persons. Each issue focuses on a specific area of concern within the church.

Open Hands is published quarterly by the Reconciling Congregation Program, Inc. (United Methodist) in cooperation with the Association of Welcoming & Affirming Baptists (American), the More Light Churches Network (Presbyterian), the Open and Affirming (United Church of Christ), and the Reconciled in Christ (Lutheran) programs. Each of these programs is a national network of local churches that publicly affirm their ministry with the whole family of God and welcome lesbian and gay persons and their families into their community of faith. These five programs—along with Open and Affirming (Disciples of Christ), Supportive Congregations (Brethren/Mennonite), and Welcoming (Unitarian Universalist)—offer hope that the church can be a reconciled community.

Open Hands is published quarterly. Subscription is \$20 for four issues (\$25 outside the U.S.). Single copies and back issues are \$6. Quantities of 10 or more, \$4 each.

Subscriptions, letters to the editor, manuscripts, requests for advertising rates, and other correspondence should be sent to:

Open Hands
3801 N. Keeler Avenue
Chicago, IL 60641
Phone: 773 / 736-5526
Fax: 773 / 736-5475

Member, The Associated Church Press

© 1997
Reconciling Congregation Program, Inc.
Open Hands is a registered trademark.

ISSN 0888-8833

My Son Mitchell

By Teri Shugart Erickson

Honoring gender differences in children is crucial to their well-being.

My son Mitchell is five years old. He's different from most other boys, and he has been for as long as I can remember. At home, he plays Barbies with his sister and lip syncs to music wearing dresses that twirl. He loves to have his nails polished and to wear red lipstick. At school at recess, Mitchell jumps rope or climbs the jungle gym with the girls. At home, Mitch likes to make clothes for his stuffed animals out of fabric scraps, and then makes furniture for them out of cardboard. He has a Brio train set, a huge fire truck, and a bin of plastic dinosaurs, but he never plays with them. We haul them out when boys come over to play, but the toys mostly stay up on the closet shelves. At night, Mitchell often sleeps in one of his sister's nightgowns.

Despite being an atypical boy, Mitchell is happy. He's learned how to manage his world so that he can be himself, yet fit in with the world. His father, seven-year-old sister and I are very supportive of who he is—we don't differentiate between "girl" and "boy" things at home. Yet, Mitchell is very clear on the world's ideas of what's acceptable for him to do or be. He'll be Jasmine or Esmeralda at home, but for Halloween, when he has to walk the neighborhood, he'll choose a boy character or an animal. On sharing day at school, he won't bring the new Barbie he just got, he'll bring a stuffed animal or a typical boy toy, even if it's something that he never plays with. He's even said that boys don't do certain things or wear certain things.

Making New Friends

Mitchell doesn't make new friends easily, he just rotates having over the same three girls he has been friends with for years. When these friends are

over, they often play dress up games. Everybody gets to be a girl character. When Mitch does have a new friend over, I've seen him test the waters by putting on a dress or a girl costume and watching to see if his new friend notices or laughs. Or, Mitch will casually mention that he likes to wear dresses. One boy said, "Are you nuts?" and another just laughed. Girls aren't necessarily more sensitive to the issue: new girl friends often try to make Mitchell be the boy character.

Mitchell once had a good friend who was a boy. Harry. Harry's moved away now, but I still hold up that friendship as a model for what a friendship can and should be. It's easy for Mitchell to be friends with a girl who likes the same things he does, but it takes more work when a friendship requires accommodation of different interests. Harry and Mitchell, on their own, had mastered that art. Harry, a boy with typical boy interests, and Mitchell, a boy with typical girl interests, would play fantasy games where each boy got to be the character they wanted to be. Harry might have a dinosaur figure and Mitchell might have a girl figure, and those boys would make up a story where those two figures would play together. This friendship withstood the test of time and contact: the boys played together almost every day, and never tired of one another.

I believe what made the difference in this relationship, versus other friendships that haven't been so successful, was Harry's mom, Lynn. She treated Mitchell with respect and acceptance. Lynn's most important contribution to the friendship was to never try to get Mitchell to play something or be something that he had no interest in playing or being. (Many moms are convinced



Mitchell at age 4, loves to hula dance

that they can turn Mitchell into a more typical boy.)

Mitchell once had a brief friendship with a boy from his preschool class, Nicholas. What I remember most about Nicholas was the time when I was driving the boys to play at Nicholas's house for the first time, and Nicholas told Mitch "Now, I don't have any girl toys." It was the voice of concern for his friend, that he might not have what Mitchell



Mitchell's favorite dress-up clothes at age 3 (my wedding veil and shoes)

needed. Mitchell said "That's okay" and the boys found plenty to do at Nicholas's house that afternoon. That exchange exemplified for me what acceptance of differences is all about: we don't pretend that they don't exist, and we figure out ways to enjoy being together, even when we're different.

Mitchell went to a birthday party for a boy in his class last month. All the boys in his class had been invited, no girls. Beforehand, Mitch was worried about having no one to play with at the party, so I was happy to see his

fears unrealized. The other boys were calling out "Hey, Mitch!" to get him to run alongside them; they included him in all their chasing and building games; Mitch was one of the guys. It warmed my heart. It was then that I realized exactly what my heart's desire is for my child: I don't care what he is, but I desperately want him to be liked and wanted.

Well-Meaning Relatives

Every Christmas, well-meaning relatives give Mitchell fire engines with sirens and action figures that transform into monsters. He cried when his sister opened the Barbie that was on his Christmas list. My sister-in-law had asked what Mitch wanted for Christmas. When I told her "a Jewel Haired Mermaid Barbie or a Sailor Moon doll," she said that she just couldn't buy something like that for him. She bought him a matchbox car that he gave to Goodwill.

When my parents were visiting us last Christmas, Mitchell and his sister put on make-up and lipstick, and then came out to the living room to show us all. His dad said "You look wonderful!" His grandmother (my mother) just rolled her eyes. She never says that she disapproves of Mitchell's interests, but she has mentioned several times that I need to play Legos with him more, that he loves playing Legos with her when

she's baby-sitting him. Although it's true that Mitchell enjoys playing Legos with his grandmother, he never self-selects Legos as an activity. He selects Barbies and stuffed animals. My mother believes that Mitchell's lack of typical boy interests is my fault. It irritates me that it is a societal goal for Mitchell to develop typical boy interests.

Growing Up Knowing What Gay Is

My son once told me that he wished he were a girl. I think the main reason he said that is that he wants the freedom to wear velour dresses to school, leotards to gymnastics class, and taffeta to church on Christmas Eve.

Mitchell knows what being gay is. We talk about it in our family, and we read children's stories with gay characters. If Mitchell is gay, I want him to grow up hearing about being gay in the same way that he hears about different colors of skin and special talents that only a few possess. Not as an affliction to be overcome or a cross to bear, but with the knowledge that, as God's creation, he is perfect just the way he is and that we (his father and mother) wouldn't change him for the world. Luckily, we both believe that.

Being Included in Church

Our church is not a reconciling congregation, more out of inertia than any political or religious beliefs, but we are welcoming to people who are different from us. But a church needs to be more than welcoming, it needs to be affirming. Since the United Methodist Church's official position is anti-gay, there aren't any children's Sunday School materials that affirm being gay. If a child is gay, they need to see gay adults as full participants and leaders in the church, so that as they grow up in the church, they don't see their differentness as a reason to leave the church. For churches with no openly gay congregants, it is even more important to have children's religious books and Sunday School curriculum with ordinary gay characters. I want all children to see that being gay is not separate from being Christian.

more →

In the absence of positive gay images in written materials and accepted openly gay congregants, what the church *can* do right now (and ours does) is to affirm the idea of all of us being different and, at the same time, promoting the image of God creating all of us in God's own image. We can celebrate our differences rather than only welcoming people who look just like we do.

Historically, people who are different have been outcasts, and children who are different are no exception. On Children's Sabbath last year, our Sunday School children wrote their own liturgy about outcasts (at right). I asked the question "Who are the outcasts?" and the children responded over and over again, creating this wonderful responsive reading. Notice that almost every answer has to do with being different.

"I ache when I think about having to not be who you are, or to lie about who you are, to fully belong to a church."

Our family used to belong to a church more conservative than the one we belong to now. The pastors were of the "love the sinner, hate the sin" mind about homosexuality. The congregants covered the entire spectrum—both welcoming and anti-gay. But, the welcoming ones were silent. Always silent. When I invited my friend Jim, who is gay, to come to my church, he said that he wouldn't be welcome there. And he probably wouldn't have been—not totally. He and his partner wouldn't have been included together in church events, wouldn't have been part of the social fabric of church, unless they downplayed who they were. I ache when I think about having to not be who you are, or to lie about who you are, to fully belong to a church.

I want more for my son. I want him to be a full participant in the life of a

Children's Sabbath Responsive Reading	
Who are the outcasts in our world?	<i>A girl who was born with a skin disease and a girl with one eye.</i>
Who are the outcasts?	<i>Kids with braces or glasses.</i>
Who are the outcasts?	<i>Kids who can't hear or are blind.</i>
Who are the outcasts?	<i>Kids at my school who get there on a bus.</i>
Who are the outcasts?	<i>Kids in wheelchairs.</i>
Who are the outcasts?	<i>The special education kids who look different.</i>
Who are the outcasts?	<i>Sometimes it's me.</i>
How does Jesus want us to treat outcasts?	<i>He wants us to be nice and helpful, and to treat them kindly.</i>
How does Jesus want us to treat outcasts?	<i>Like a brother or sister, or like a friend.</i>
How does Jesus want us to treat outcasts?	<i>We shouldn't stare, and we should share our things with them.</i>
How does Jesus want us to treat outcasts?	<i>We should treat them the way that we want to be treated.</i>
	<i>But, that's not just for outcasts, that's for everybody.</i>
	<i>—Sunday School children</i>
	<i>Crystal Springs United Methodist Church</i>
	<i>Children's Sabbath, 1996</i>

church, fully accepted for who he is, appreciated for what he can do. I want his spiritual life nurtured and prayed for. As he grows older, I want him to continue to want to go to church, knowing that he is an integral part of that faith community. When he is older and finds a partner, I want him to be able to commit to that partner in a religious ceremony at church, promising before God, his congregation, his family, and

his friends to remain faithful for life. No matter what the sex of that partner. He is only five years old. ▼

Teri Shugart Erickson is the director of Christian education at Crystal Springs United Methodist Church in San Mateo, California.

