

My Church Sent Me into Exile, Repented, and Welcomed Me Home

By Rev. Jim Lucas

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“Jim, we sinned against you. We need to repent. Will you forgive us?” In the spring of 2022 a pastor, an elder, and a deacon articulated this plea on behalf of a church that had sent me into exile 24 years earlier.

How could I say no? So I said yes—and experienced one of the most beautiful, healing events of my life. In this Evangelicals Concerned keynote address, I will tell you the story.

Let me begin by thanking Dr. Ralph Blair, who heard about this remarkable reconciliation event and invited me to tell the story in this setting. I am deeply grateful to Ralph for his decades of brave, pioneering service. In the beginning years of my coming out as a gay Christian preparing for ordained ministry, Ralph’s “Record and Review” newsletters provided a lifeline of hope. Over and over, I found myself thinking, “Wow! Could it be that the church has been wrong in its treatment of gay people? Could it be that God loves us just the way we are?” Of course, the answer was—and *is*—a resounding yes! But in the 1970’s, 1980’s, and 1990’s there were very few Christians who were saying so. Ralph was one of the few. Thank you, Ralph! Your legacy lives on in all the LGBTQ+ people whose lives you have touched through your counseling, research, and prophetic writing.

Early Life and Coming Out

And now for my story. Of course, a story of healing and reconciliation includes hurt and brokenness. So I will begin there. Actually I will begin before that.

I grew up as the oldest child of four in a healthy, loving, devout Christian family. We were active in a nearby congregation of the Christian Reformed Church (CRC), a Dutch immigrant denomination rooted in the Calvinist branch of the 16th Century Protestant Reformation. My great-great-great grandparents Steven and Dena Lucas were founders (in the mid 1800’s) of the first CRC in North America, located here in West Michigan. My mom grew up in the CRC’s counterpart in the Netherlands and immigrated with her parents and brothers to Michigan after World War II. So our family’s roots in the CRC run deep.

A hallmark of the CRC is its emphasis on education, which often leads CRC people to start and run Christian schools. I attended such schools from kindergarten through seminary. Already in high school I began to feel a call to pastoral ministry. So after graduation I proceeded to the CRC-owned Calvin College (now Calvin University), where I joined the pre-seminary program. I was passionate about my faith, and I wanted to nurture the faith of others.

It was early in my time at Calvin College, however, that I became honest with myself about the fact that I felt romantically attracted to other guys on campus. This was the early 1970’s, and I

had never heard anything affirming about gay people. I had only ever heard remarks of utter disgust. So I thought that being “homosexual” was literally the worst possible thing that could be true of me. I felt traumatized.

In response, I did the only thing I could think of: I prayed that God would heal me of this terrible affliction, which was how I thought about being gay at the time. However, the more I prayed, the more I noticed the good-looking guys on campus! I can laugh about that now, but not then. In fact, I fell into a deep depression, mixed with a nearly paralyzing anxiety. I felt trapped. I felt abandoned by God and angry with God. Meanwhile, I didn’t dare tell anyone what was going on in me. So I felt increasingly isolated in my shame.

What was I to do? And how was I to make sense out my strong sense of call to pastoral ministry?

Over the next few years, I found God answering my prayer for healing—but in a very different way from what I had imagined. I had thought that God would heal me by changing my sexual orientation, but instead God healed me by transforming my way of thinking about being gay into one of acceptance, then affirmation, and eventually celebration. Over a period of time, the anxiety dissolved and the depression evaporated.

This transformation took place through a combination of experiences. Here’s a brief summary:

- The loving acceptance of other Christians as I took my early steps of coming out.
- Reading literature that demonstrated first, how the church has historically misinterpreted Scripture and second, how a careful reading of Scripture can lead to an affirmation of same-sex unions.
- Meeting other gay Christians, who were—surprise!—really cool people. (I had always heard that “homos” were weird and disgusting. Wrong!)
- Therapy with an excellent psychologist, who helped me realize that it’s okay simply to be who I am. (What a concept!)
- Recognizing that this new, affirming approach was incredibly life-giving and healing. (Didn’t Jesus promise an abundant life in John 10:10? Didn’t Jesus say that by their fruits you shall know them?)
- The reassurance of the Holy Spirit, gently whispering in my heart and mind, “Jim, I love you just the way you are. Why can’t you love yourself the way you are?”
- Coming out. (For me coming out was an essential component in my healing because it was a way to affirm for myself and others that God loves me just as I am. So I don’t have to hide.

Initial Years of Ministry

Now let's fast forward. I completed Calvin College and Calvin Theological Seminary (the CRC's one and only seminary), and I was ordained as a pastor of a small CRC congregation here in Grand Rapids. After a few years, this struggling congregation decided to disband.

What was I going to do next? Through a series of circumstances that I now see as providential, I came to the conclusion that God was calling me to start a new ministry that would provide support and advocacy for gay Christians. I worked with others to begin such a ministry in the early 1990's. A staff member of Calvin College, my *alma mater*, heard my story and invited me to give a lecture on campus about being gay. I used the opportunity to give my public coming out speech, which I entitled, "What Would You Say if You Knew I Was Gay?" Since this was the first time a CRC pastor had stated publicly that he was gay, the presentation made news. Before long my coming out story was in the CRC's denominational magazine, called *The Banner*, and on the front page of the *Grand Rapids Press*. Local TV interviews followed.

All this free publicity propelled our fledgling organization into a time of speedy growth. Soon our small nonprofit, which we called As We Are (or AWARE for short) was able to raise enough funds to hire me full-time as a chaplain. So for a few years in the mid 1990's, I did LGBTQ+ ministry full-time, providing individual pastoral counseling, leading groups, and speaking in churches and colleges.

During those early years of the ministry, As We Are held its gatherings at Eastern Avenue Christian Reformed Church, the church that I had joined after my previous church had disbanded. The congregation extended generous hospitality to our group and to me personally. Members welcomed me, affirmed me, and even elected me as an elder after my coming out speech.

Sent into Exile

For the next part of the story, you need to know something about the polity of the CRC. In order for ordained ministers to keep their ministerial credentials, they need to receive a "call" by a local congregation to a ministry that is recognized by the denomination as fitting for an ordained minister. When a church disbands, a classis (a regional group of churches) can grant an extension of credentials to allow time for the pastor to find a new ministry position and calling church, but this time is limited.

So in order to keep my ministerial credentials, I asked Eastern Avenue CRC to call me to my position as the chaplain of As We Are. I'm sure you can anticipate the roadblocks. Up until this point the denomination had not recognized chaplaincy in an LGBTQ+ ministry such as As We Are. Eastern Avenue Church addressed this issue by appointing study committees and asking Classis Grand Rapids East to appoint a committee to provide advice.

After years of such study, the congregation and classis affirmed the legitimacy of ministry with LGBTQ+ people, at least theoretically. So Eastern Avenue Church said it was ready to take the

next step to call me to my position as the chaplain of As We Are. By this time, I had also begun ministry as a hospital chaplain, and so I asked the church to call me to this position as well.

During this next stage, however, an elder pointed out that in our long process of study and conversation, I had not revealed what I believe about gay relationships. He was right. I had intentionally avoided any public statement about this, although already in seminary I had come to the conclusion that God honors the faithful, loving partnerships of gay couples (what I would now call marriage). I wanted to build bridges rather than walls, and I knew that my beliefs on this matter could burn some bridges.

The elder insisted that for the calling process to continue I must state what I believe. I knew that I was in a catch-22. If I said what I believed, this elder would likely object to the church calling me. But if I refused to speak on the matter, he would also object.

I decided to say what I believe. It was time to come out of the closet in a new way.

I'm an optimist by nature, and I believed that the good people of Eastern Avenue Church would do the right thing. I knew this new piece of information would require some further conversation, but I believed that in the end they would still call me.

However, after much intense conversation, the council voted NOT to call me. Their reason was that I held a belief about same-sex unions that was contrary to that of the denomination—and that this belief had direct bearing on my ministry. Furthermore, they felt obligated to conform to denominational standards.

I felt devastated. Without a church calling me, I knew that soon the classis would withdraw my ordination. I called the pastors of two other congregations that had invited me to preach after I had come out as gay. I asked if their churches would be willing to call me. Both pastors replied, "Oh, Jim, our congregation isn't ready for *that*."

So in May 1998 Classis Grand Rapids East of the CRC "released" me from the ordained ministry. The CRC Church Order word "release" sounds rather benign, but on that day I felt that I had been brutally kicked out of the CRC ministry. I also felt that I had been kicked out of the denomination that I had grown up in, studied in for my entire education, loved, and served for many years. Technically, the CRC didn't kick me out of membership, but I felt so hurt that I could no longer worship at Eastern or any other CRC for years. In fact, for the next few years I seldom went to church anywhere. The pain was simply too great.

Life in Exile

After a few years I began to worship in an affirming United Church of Christ (UCC) congregation, which welcomed me warmly and helped me gain ministerial standing in the UCC. For this I am deeply grateful. As the years went by, however, I realized (typically as I sat in church on Sunday mornings) that I felt that I was in exile from my spiritual home. No matter how hard and long I

tried, I simply couldn't feel at home in the UCC or that local congregation. Worshiping there became increasingly difficult as it simply reminded me of my grief in exile.

So with increasing frequency I found myself praying that the CRC would welcome me home from exile. Deep in my heart I genuinely believed that God would answer my prayer. How could I be so hopeful, so sure? The answer is simply that I had seen the Holy Spirit working to transform people's hearts and minds, and I knew that the folks at Eastern Avenue Church and many other CRC people were open to the Spirit's work. In fact, as the years went by, I met more and more CRC people who had become affirming. I told some of them how I felt about wanting to return home from exile, and the word eventually got to a few Eastern Avenue Church members who decided that something needed to be done.

Welcome Home

So in early 2022 an elder of Eastern asked if I would be willing to talk. Over the course of a few months I met with the elder, a deacon, and a pastor. They reported that the congregation had gone through a transformation in its understanding of LGBTQ+ people, and they had agreed as a congregation to come out as open and affirming. They knew that as part of this transformation they needed to reach out to me and seek reconciliation.

In our series of conversations over scones and coffee around a kitchen table, they invited me to tell my story. They listened attentively over the course of several meetings, and then they reported that the church council was ready to issue me a formal apology. "Jim," they said, "we sinned against you 24 years ago. We need to repent. Will you forgive us?"

The words were shockingly clear and profoundly restorative. I have to admit that a snarky side of me thought, "Wow, when does the church ever repent of anything?!" But I bit my tongue. After all, I could see that these folks were sincere. And what they were saying was an answer to years of prayer.

So I assured them, "Yes, I forgive you."

Other parts of the multi-session conversation resonated with me as well.

- At one point I said, "Back in 1998 I felt betrayed by the church." I expected some words of excuse or minimizing. But instead the elder replied immediately, "You didn't just *feel* betrayed. You *were* betrayed." I thought, "Whew! Finally someone gets it!"
- At another time I expressed my concern about how the congregation would respond if the denomination objected to the church's efforts at reconciliation—and its larger decision to become open and affirming. The pastor quickly responded, "It's more important for us to follow Jesus than to follow the Christian Reformed Church." That was the best answer I could imagine!

The next step in the process was for me to meet with the current church council plus some members from the council of 24 years ago. One of the leaders read a formal written apology, stating that they had wronged me and asking for my forgiveness. I replied, “Thank you. I forgive you.” Then one by one the elders, many with tears streaming down their cheeks, offered their personal apologies.

- One of the elders from 24 years ago, cried, “Jim, how could I have been so wrong? I am so sorry for how we hurt you.”
- Another elder, with refreshing honesty, confessed, “I knew I was voting wrong 24 years ago, but I was afraid.”
- Later one of the elders reported that this time together was one of the most Christ-like experiences she had ever had in all her years in church.

Reconciliation Service

A celebration was the final step in this reconciliation journey. Initially I imagined a short liturgy with just a few people. But the church leaders told me that they imagined a grand celebratory church service in the sanctuary followed by a large catered meal in the fellowship hall. They insisted that I invite as many people as I wanted. They said, “There can’t be too many.”

And it was in fact a grand celebration. About 175 people came to the Reconciliation Service—church members, friends, family, and people who had been a part of my LGBTQ+ ministry over the years. Afterwards, many people said it was one of the most moving church services they had ever attended.

During the service I gave some words of reflection, explaining that this was a dream come true. Here are a few excerpts:

- In 1998, when I asked the Eastern Avenue Church council to affirm my LGBTQ+ ministry and my hospital ministry by issuing me an official ministerial call, I believed this church would do the right thing. Which is to say, I *knew* you would do the right thing. . . . My timing was just off by 24 years!
- Twenty four years ago I felt devastated, in large part because . . . I genuinely believed you would do the right thing. Many people at the time said to me, “Jim, you actually didn’t see this coming? You’re so naïve.” My response at the time was, “I honestly didn’t see it coming because I really did believe in the good folks of Eastern Avenue Church, and I believed in God’s love and power within them.”
- I had to wrestle with that accusation of being naïve, and I came to this conclusion: It’s okay to be naïve. In fact, I embrace being naïve because it’s far better than . . . becoming cynical. Sure, the vulnerability of being naïve can open one up to being hurt,

but it leaves open the possibility that people can change Being cynical, on the other hand, closes the door to all these possibilities.

- I'm glad that, by God's grace, I was able to follow the path of being vulnerable, of believing the best of you, of trusting God's Spirit to work in you, just as God's Spirit had worked in me.
- So yes, I felt deeply disappointed 24 years ago. I felt rejected. I felt as though my church family sent into exile far from my spiritual home. It was extremely painful, and I could no longer worship here.
- But as one might expect, if one were the slightest bit biblically literate, God was with me in my exile. In fact, by God's love and grace, I *thrived* in exile.
- For example, I learned in an experiential way that the Body of Christ is way bigger than the Christian Reformed Church. God led me to a home in exile at Plymouth United Church of Christ with a very gracious pastor, who is here today. Thank you . . . !
- Being in exile also gave me the freedom to extend the love of God to LGBTQ+ people in ways I would not have dared, if I had remained a CRC pastor. I've had the immense privilege of extending the love of God in a myriad ways to countless lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, gender non-binary, and other people who felt rejected by their families and faith communities. This includes officiating at several weddings. I feel immensely grateful to God for giving me the gifts and opportunities to make a difference in the world.
- Why am I telling you these stories? It's really to testify to the reality that God is One who specializes in bringing good out of bad, of bringing healing out of wounding, of bringing restoration out of brokenness.
- In addition to my professional life, my personal life has also been really good. I have wonderful family and friends, an intentional community that feels like an extended family, two official godsons, and several unofficial godchildren. I have a lovely home and enough financial resources to share. I've had the joyful opportunity of helping to make a home for refugees from several different countries, and through them I have learned in new ways about how wide and deep is the love of God.
- So I've been thriving both personally and professionally in the last 24 years. But I still felt as though I was in exile from my spiritual home and that I longed to return home. Over the last 24 years, I told this to some people, and I told them that I believed the CRC would eventually welcome me home. I truly knew it deep in my spirit. I also jokingly told them that I have longevity genes in my family. So I might be in my 90's when it happens. But look! I'm only 68! This time around you exceeded my expectations!

- Some people have asked me, “Why do you even want to go back to that church that hurt you?” My response is, “Why wouldn’t I want to be part of a community that practices repentance and love in such a clear, specific, and powerful way?” And, “Why wouldn’t I want to return home?”
- So thank you for saying yes to God’s nudging, to God’s expansive love. Thank you for being humble enough to say, “We sinned against you, Jim. We’re truly sorry. We need to repent. We want to follow Jesus. Will you forgive us?”
- And I’m thankful to God for giving me this opportunity and the grace to respond by saying, “Yes, I forgive you.”
- Family and friends, what we are doing here today is rare and historic. We are witnessing and participating in a risky, lived theology. It’s beautiful. It’s the healing, restorative power of God at work. It renews my faith. And it gives me hope for the future of the Christian Church.

The service was followed by a delicious catered meal of Mediterranean cuisine, with nearly every seat in the fellowship hall filled. During an open mike time, several people stood up to reflect on my ministry and on the historic nature of this event. After my 16-year-old godson Elias spoke, I spontaneously jumped up to give him a hug. Later one of the pastors reflected on this and said it was “a holy moment.”

After the event I spent some time debriefing with friends. My friend Tim offered the most memorable commentary: “I have never been to an event like that before. It was weird—in exactly the way the church should be weird!”

Home from Exile

Since that Reconciliation Service, I have been worshiping at Eastern Avenue Church most Sundays. At first it felt awkward, but now it feels comfortable. I feel at home—home from exile.

I felt especially at home a couple of Sundays ago when a young lesbian couple, who had recently joined the church, stood up to thank the congregation for hosting a baby shower for them (their baby is due any day now). They said they had never imagined finding a church that would welcome them as a gay couple in this way, and they are so happy to know that they are in a church where their baby can be baptized and loved.

You might be wondering what reaction Eastern Avenue Church has been getting from the rest of the CRC. Truth be told, it’s a mixed bag. I am delighted to report that a growing number of CRC congregations are officially coming out as open and affirming. The last count I heard was eleven, and currently five of those are in our local Classis Grand Rapids East.

Tragically, the denomination as a whole seems to be heading in the opposite direction, with some folks becoming more strident in their condemnation of LGBTQ+ people and the churches that affirm us. Some of these folk seem ready to expel any and all affirming churches. Others expect a denominational split.

When I think of this, I feel sad—sad for the LGBTQ+ youth growing up in condemning churches, sad for the way that fearful people are turning others away from the church and sometimes away from Christ, and sad for these folks themselves because they are missing out on the expansiveness of God’s love for them and others.

How do I handle this sadness? I focus on the amazing work that God is doing among the churches that are becoming affirming. It’s exciting to see this newfound awareness of the depth and breadth of God’s love. It’s as if the church is saying, “Wow, we didn’t realize that God’s love was THAT big!” It’s a joy to see this new stage in the church’s history, and I am grateful to God for the privilege of being part of it.

Thanks for reading my story! May God bless you in YOUR life story!

Rev. Jim Lucas earned his Bachelor of Arts degree from Calvin College in 1978 and his Master of Divinity degree from Calvin Theological Seminary in 1985. He was ordained in the Christian Reformed Church for 13 years and is now ordained in the United Church of Christ. He is also a retired Board Certified Chaplain (BCC) with the Association of Professional Chaplains. Jim worships most Sundays at Eastern Avenue Christian Reformed Church.

Jim’s career started as a congregational pastor. In the early 1990’s he began LGBTQ+ pastoral and advocacy work with As We Are, an organization that later transitioned to GIFT Grand Rapids, which Jim still serves as a part-time volunteer chaplain. Jim also worked part-time as a hospital chaplain for 22 years until his retirement in 2020. Jim enjoys living in a cohousing community called Newberry Place in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and he especially enjoys being a co-sponsor for an Afghan refugee family that is part of Newberry. For recreation he likes to garden, bicycle, camp, travel, hike, and attend the sporting events of the kids in his life. Feel free to email him at JimLucas12@gmail.com.