

## Beyond Queer Fear? Turbulent Times for Supervision in Ministry

Stephen V. Sprinkle

“Revisit the article you authored ten years ago.”<sup>1</sup> Behind that invitation lay two guiding questions for this essay: (1) What has changed during the decade since I argued that fear of the sexual Other deforms ministry education and challenges supervision? (2) In what ways may field educators and CPE supervisors minister to, support, and supervise seminarians experiencing some version of queer fear?

On the surface, change appears incremental and swift for LGBTQ-IA<sup>2</sup> people. If “all boats rise together in a rising tide,” queer<sup>3</sup> seminarians and clergy should enjoy the benefits of increased tolerance. There is little to support this assumption in church and church-related precincts, however, though some mainline denominations have moved toward more tol-

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*Editor's note: In the 2008 volume of Reflective Practice, Stephen Sprinkle penned a powerful essay entitled “Queer Fear” in which he described the fear that queer seminarians live with and that shapes their spiritual development. Ten years or more have passed since that publication, so I asked Dr. Sprinkle to revisit his earlier essay: What has changed, what is the same, and what do we still need to do to adequately prepare queer people for ministry? Readers may wish to review Sprinkle's 2008 essay before reading this essay. It is available at <http://journals.sfu.ca/rpfs/>.*

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erant policies in their authorization processes for ministry.<sup>4</sup> Landmark political and legal victories, such as the overthrow of the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), Don't Ask, Don't Tell (DADT) for military service, and the legalization of same-sex marriage in all fifty states have yet to be matched by ecclesial liberalization toward LGBTQIA persons seeking to enter or to come out in ministry. As the Reverend Andrew Shelton, a Texas cisgender<sup>5</sup> heterosexual field educator, said to me recently, "The church is a dangerous, unstable institution for queer people. Too many emerging queer ministers get hurt by churches to encourage others to become clergy these days."<sup>6</sup> Another Texan, the Reverend Kyle W. Herron, a cisgender heterosexual bivocational pastor and public school educator, said, "I level with [LGBTQIA] students who come to me asking about vocations in the church. I don't discourage them, but I let them know how hard it is for gay friends of mine to be ministers. There are too many nasty Christians out there who don't believe the gospel."<sup>7</sup>

Their caution is echoed by the Reverend Marian Edmonds-Allen, Executive Director of Parity NYC, a national non-profit that helps congregations and faith organizations, clergy, seminarians, denominations, and seminaries become more LGBTQIA sensitive and celebratory: "Stories are grim from the field. Especially if a queer person is seeking to enter parish ministry, the way is hard, long, and filled with disappointment. Parish vocations are the toughest nut to crack. Chaplaincies are better options." Her longtime experience as a queer person and advocate prompts her to take so-called "liberalizing initiatives" by denominations with a large grain of salt. "Even if they pass pro-tolerance resolutions in their denominational assemblies, I warn queer seminarians that the reality in congregations is tough and likely to be hurtful. Even if they get a call to a church, complications with the second call cause so many of them to wash out."<sup>8</sup>

The Reverend Nathan Russell, pastor of Washington Avenue Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Elyria, Ohio, an openly gay and life-partnered cisgender man, faced frustration, rejection, and constant damaging microaggressions from officials and pulpit search committees in two different denominations before finally securing his current pastorate. It took him over two years. "I have a collection of fifteen rejection letters from search committees, . . . the congregations that entered me into the interview process," he said. "I am mindful that if I were a transgender woman of color, I

would not likely be where I am today. Part of my ministry is to open doors for others who do not have the advantage of my white privilege.”<sup>9</sup>

Admittedly, the LGBTQIA community in the United States has benefitted from political, judicial, and legislative advances during the last decade. The American public has become more open and tolerant of the idea of queer people at most levels of society.<sup>10</sup> The consensus among the network of professionals of which I am a part, however, is that this is a hard time for queer folk to enter ministry. The gains of the Obama years, though important and notable, have lulled LGBTQIA people and progressive allies into a sense of false success and security.

Michelangelo Signorile issued a wake-up call to all Americans with the publication of his book *It’s Not Over: Getting Beyond Tolerance, Defeating Homophobia, and Winning True Equality*<sup>11</sup> in 2015. Signorile warned the LGBTQIA community of “victory blindness” in the aftermath of the strides made toward tolerance won during the Obama years:

We’re overcome by the heady whirl of victory, a kind of bedtime story that tells us we’ve reached the promised land. . . . Even with the enormously positive developments, . . . homophobia rages on in America. . . . Maybe it’s time to get rid of the bedtime story and wake up from the dream.<sup>12</sup>

Signorile calls our times “dangerous” even in the most LGBTQIA-accepting cities such as New York, Philadelphia, and Seattle because “at the same time that all the great strides have occurred, discrimination, violence, and tragic horror stories—in addition to the daily slights that all of us who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender have experienced for years—have not only continued, they’ve sometimes become more blatant.”<sup>13</sup> Studies show that fewer people are actually openly out than we have come to believe, and it is increasingly perilous for LGBTQIA people to be out in what we have assumed to be the more liberal regions of the country.<sup>14</sup> Then cometh Trump and the white evangelical nationalists.

The Trump years did not invent anti-LGBTQIA bigotry. It was lying there just beneath the surface, nurtured by toxic religiosity and ready to be amplified and weaponized. Studies by researchers at Guilford College show that beliefs about same-sex attraction and gender identity that underlie biases against LGBTQIA people have changed very little—if at all—despite the advances that have taken place nationally.<sup>15</sup> Trump’s cynical anti-LGBTQIA

agenda is motivated by his white evangelical supporters—an extremist coalition of Christian ideologues and theological malpractitioners dedicated to recriminalizing nonheteronormative people and behaviors. Human rights activists have documented ninety-two separate attacks by the Trump administration against the queer community between January 2017 and January 28, 2019.<sup>16</sup> Emboldened zealots in state legislatures followed suit by filing dozens of “license-to-discriminate” bills that legalize and encourage bias against LGBTQIA people, cloaked in the language of “religious liberty.”<sup>17</sup> The introduction of explicitly transphobic “bathroom bills” in North Carolina and Texas and a brace of Kansas bills called “the most vile, hateful, and disrespectful anti-LGBTQ bills in the country”<sup>18</sup> are examples of a broad range of explicit attacks against the queer community.

Progressive faith communities have largely remained negligent in the face of the mounting backlash against LGBTQIA people. Perhaps their fear of being labeled “liberal elites” by evangelicals is to blame, or their own buy-in to the “both sides” delusion promoted by virtually all U.S. major media.<sup>19</sup> Moderates sat idly by while members of the queer Christian community lost their jobs after coming out or were forced to leave by draconian anti-gay employment policies of churches and non-profits such as the venerable American Bible Society.<sup>20</sup>

Religious backlash against LGBTQIAs reached a crescendo in February 2019 with a return to explicit theological attacks by the infamous “God’s Voice Conference” (intended “to equip Christians to stand against ‘LGBTQ+ Christianity’ inside the Church”) in Edmond, Oklahoma<sup>21</sup>; the Rome summit on sex abuse that attracted accusations against “hedonistic gay people” from anti-gay Roman Catholic cardinals<sup>22</sup>; and the United Methodist Special Session of the General Conference in St. Louis, where the hopes of millions of progressive United Methodists were crushed by a coalition of “traditionalists” who re-inscribed anti-LGBTQIA bias in the third largest denomination in the United States and once again barred openly professed and practicing queer people from ordination.<sup>23</sup> The futures of a multitude of LGBTQIA seminarians and clergy have been thrown into a zone of fear, insecurity, anxiety, and uncertainty.

## HOW TO MINISTER AND SUPPORT

These are the realities professionals must face squarely if we are to minister to queer people who answer the call to service in contemporary faith communities. It is time to act for the well-being of real people in truly daunting situations. Plainly speaking, counselors, field educators, ministers, and other helping professionals have homework to do.

- Revisit LGBTQIA 101. Educating ourselves about what it is like to be queer in America is all-important. Read Signorile's book. Learn what queer theologians and faith leaders have to say. There is an abundance of excellent literature you haven't read yet. Get acquainted with why 48 per cent of the community refuses to align with any religious organization or church.<sup>24</sup>
- Subscribe to an LGBTQIA news service and keep up to date on what is current on the internet. Stop the delusional "both sides" diet being fed the public by major media outlets. There are never "two sides" to attacks upon the humanity and dignity of people created in the image and likeness of God. No more pro and con panels.
- Solicit the narratives, insights, and theologies of queer people. Listen to them. They are the authorities on their own lives.
- Relentlessly ferret out the vestiges of heterosexism and homophobia in yourself. Remember that, of all people, LGBTQIA people are hypersensitive to signs of hesitation about their human worth, their relationships, and their worthiness for ministry.
- Next, when encountering queer inquirers, students, and clergy seeking advice and help:
- Leave discouragement to others. You are not a proxy for God, for a search committee, or for an ordaining body. Encourage them to examine their call honestly. Elicit from them the support they have from spouses, family, friends, and their spiritual home. Level with them about the difficulty and probable pain that lie ahead. Learn how to be supportive without being proscriptive.
- Coming out is only the beginning for prospective LGBTQIA ministers. Encourage your students to resist the "covering demand" that calls upon them to play down who they are or to "tone it down," which is actually intolerance of the Other camouflaging as good advice.<sup>25</sup> Stop telling them how they ought to live in "your" world.
- Work with them on their network of support—their biological family and/or their chosen queer families; professionals they need such as medical caregivers, lawyers, counselors; affirming pastors and spiritual directors to address the long journey ahead.

- Strive to connect them with mentors, and monitor these relationships from time to time. Wise, self-secure mentoring is needed by every minister in formation, but this is especially true in the black church and Latinx contexts where a strong, compassionate mentor, such as a senior pastor, makes the difference between job security and joblessness.<sup>26</sup> Vet mentors before you suggest them.
- Get to know the settings where students will do fieldwork. Review these settings regularly. Don't preclude a person from serving in a setting, but share with them what you know about its leaders and history. Ultimately, the decision is the student's, which shows respect and your willingness to stand beside them in the days ahead.
- Teach self-empowerment, self-affirmation, and nonviolent means of self-defense. Only a rare queer minister will not need to learn which fights to pick, never to bluff, and, when the time comes, to hunker down and push back self-confidently and strongly. No one will help someone for long who doesn't know how to stand up for themselves.
- Remember, even a professional like you can be wrong. Learn from your mistakes. And for God's sake (literally), cultivate and maintain a sense of humor. You are going to need it.

In 2008, I contended that "religious institutions are actually to blame for much of the isolation and alienation queer folk suffer."<sup>27</sup> I see no reason to revise that estimate. We have not moved beyond queer fear. Nor are we likely to anytime soon. The effort and the struggle, however, are worth it. Faith communities and the professions we represent need LGBTQIA people to enter them and lead. May God find us working for the sake of the beloved community when justice and joy finally arrive.

## NOTES

- 1 Stephen V. Sprinkle, "Queer Fear: Ministry Made Strange by the Fear of the Sexual Other," *Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry* 28 (2008): 103–21.
- 2 "LGBT" was the parlance of the last decade. Now, shorthand for queer folk has become more intentionally inclusive and nuanced. "LGBTQIA" recognizes the former groups, lesbians, gay men, bisexual persons, and transgender persons, and also recognizes queer and/or questioning persons, intersex persons, and abstinent persons.
- 3 "Queer" as an umbrella term for all deemed Other in terms of sexuality and/or gender identity and expression is widely used in journalism and academia and among younger generations. For some, the term is fraught with bad associations and condemnation, but nonetheless it is gaining more acceptability year by year.
- 4 For example, decisions to liberalize the authorization of LGBTQIA candidates for ministry have been made by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Protestant Episcopal Church, the Alliance of Baptists, and, in certain regions, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). The retrograde decision of the United Methodist Church, the largest mainline Protestant denomination in the United States, to reject any possibility of recognizing queer clergy, however, is a shot across the bow warning that the strides toward equality in professional ministry are slowing. A rare ecclesial advance is the election of a third openly gay bishop of the Episcopal Church for the Diocese of Maine. The confirmation of the Reverend Thomas James Brown to the episcopate is still in process, but expert opinion indicates that his consecration will take place in June 2019. See Peter McGuire, "Maine Episcopalians Elect Openly Gay Bishop," *Portland Press Herald*, February 9, 2019, <https://www.pressherald.com/2019/02/09/maine-episcopalians-elect-new-bishop/>.
- 5 "Cisgender" refers to the consonance between a person's biologically recognized gender at birth and their perceived gender in the public world. Its converse is "transgender."
- 6 Personal interview with the author, January 30, 2019.
- 7 Telephone interview with the author, February 23, 2019.
- 8 Telephone interview with the author, February 22, 2019. "Second call" refers to the second parish job after initially entering parish ministry.
- 9 Telephone interview with the author, February 22, 2019.
- 10 See, for example, the Public Religion Research Institute finding in "ruby red" Texas, that the majority of Texans support protections for LGBTQIA people. David Taffet, "Poll: Majority of Texans, Even Evangelicals, Support LGBT Protections," *Dallas Voice*, February 1, 2019, <https://www.dallasvoice.com/poll-majority-of-texans-even-evangelicals-support-lgbt-protections/>.
- 11 Michelangelo Signorile, *It's Not Over: Getting Beyond Tolerance, Defeating Homophobia, and Winning True Equality* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2015).

- 12 Signorile, *It's Not Over*, 3. For a fuller discussion of the ill effects of victory blindness, see pp. 1–24.
- 13 Signorile, *It's Not Over*, 3–4.
- 14 Signorile, *It's Not Over*, 44–46.
- 15 Signorile, *It's Not Over*, 48–52. Researcher Rachel Riskind and her colleagues used data garnered from Project Implicit, a joint project of Harvard University, the University of Washington, and the University of Virginia to support these conclusions, particularly about the biases of heterosexual men.
- 16 Bil Browning, “Here Are the 92 Times the Trump Administration Has Attacked the LGBTQ Community (So Far),” *LGBTQ Nation*, February 6, 2019, [https://www.i9l-tion.com/2019/02/92-times-trump-administration-attacked-lgbtq-community-far/?utm\\_source=LGBTQ+Nation+Subscribers&utm\\_campaign=87213011cc-EMAIL\\_CAMPAIGN\\_2019\\_02\\_06\\_05\\_32&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_c4e-ab596bd-87213011cc-430838761-comments](https://www.i9l-tion.com/2019/02/92-times-trump-administration-attacked-lgbtq-community-far/?utm_source=LGBTQ+Nation+Subscribers&utm_campaign=87213011cc-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2019_02_06_05_32&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_c4e-ab596bd-87213011cc-430838761-comments).
- 17 See “United States: State Laws Threaten LGBT Equality,” Human Rights Watch, Feb. 19, 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/02/19/united-states-state-laws-threat-en-lgbt-equality> and the comprehensive 2018 Human Rights Watch report, “‘All We Want is Equality’: Religious Exemptions and Discrimination against LGBT People in the United States,” <https://www.refworld.org/docid/5a8aa1884.html>.
- 18 Alex Bollinger, “Kansas GOP Introduces the ‘Most Vile, Hateful, and Disrespectful’ Anti-LGBTQ Bills in the Country,” *LGBTQ Nation*, February 14, 2019.
- 19 Signorile, *It's Not Over*, 126–33. Signorile reports that a University of Missouri Center of Religion and the Professions three-year study found that “by persistently reducing a diverse range of religious voices . . . into a ‘religion versus gay’ frame, the news media is largely omitting a pro-LGBT religious perspective and ignoring individuals who identify as both LGBT and religious, particularly those who identify as Christian” (as quoted on p. 132).
- 20 See Nina Shapiro, “‘I Am a Gay Christian’: Debates about LGBTQ Acceptance Roil Seattle-Area Non-Profits, Churches,” *Seattle Times*, December 1, 2018, <https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/i-am-a-gay-christian-debates-about-lgbtq-acceptance-roil-seattle-area-nonprofits-churches/>; Yonat Shimron, “With New ‘Affirmation’ Policy, American Bible Society Loses LGBT Staffers,” *Religion News Service*, January 23, 2019, <https://religionnews.com/2019/01/23/with-new-affirmation-policy-american-bible-society-loses-lgbt-staffers/>.
- 21 See Michael Gryboski, “Hundreds to Attend ‘God’s Voice’ Conference Aimed at Stopping LGBT Agenda in Churches,” *Christian Post*, February 22, 2019, <https://www.christianpost.com/news/hundreds-to-attend-gods-voice-conference-aimed-at-stopping-lgbt-agenda-in-churches.html>; Facebook, “God’s Voice: A Biblical Response to the Queering of the Church,” <https://www.facebook.com/GodsVoiceConference>; Peter LaBarbera, “God’s Voice Conference to Equip Christians to Stand Against ‘LGBTQ+ Christianity’ Inside the Church—Responding to ‘Revoice’ Movement,” *Americans for Truth About Homosexuality*, November 11, 2018, <https://americansfortruth.com/2018/11/10/gods-voice-conference-to-equip-christians-to-stand-against-lgbtq-christianity-inside-the-church-responding-to-revoice/>.



- 22 Bil Browning, "Catholic Cardinals Say Rampant Sex Abuse in Church Isn't Clergy's Fault and Blame 'Homosexual Agenda,'" *LGBTQ Nation*, February 20, 2019, [https://www.lgbtqnation.com/2019/02/catholic-cardinals-say-rampant-sex-abuse-church-isnt-clergys-fault-blame-homosexual-agenda/?utm\\_source=LGBTQ+Nation+Subscribers&utm\\_campaign=14230bf29e-EMAIL\\_CAMPAIGN\\_2019\\_02\\_20\\_05\\_18&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_c4eab596bd-14230bf29e-430838761](https://www.lgbtqnation.com/2019/02/catholic-cardinals-say-rampant-sex-abuse-church-isnt-clergys-fault-blame-homosexual-agenda/?utm_source=LGBTQ+Nation+Subscribers&utm_campaign=14230bf29e-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2019_02_20_05_18&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_c4eab596bd-14230bf29e-430838761); Edward Pentin, "Cardinals Burke and Brandmüller: 'End the Conspiracy of Silence,'" *National Catholic Register*, February 19, 2019, <http://www.ncregister.com/blog/edward-pentin/cardinals-burke-brandmueller-abuse-crisis-symptom-of-turning-away-from-trut>; Tom Gjelten, "As Pope Holds Sex Abuse Summit, U.S. Catholics Not Hopeful for 'Bold Moves,'" *NPR*, February 20, 2019.
- 23 Carol Kuruvilla, "United Methodist Church Splinters over Some Members' Refusal to Accept LGBTQ Christians," *Huffington Post*, February 26, 2019, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/united-methodist-church-lgbtq-schism\\_n\\_5c74470ee4b03a10c2309f0c](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/united-methodist-church-lgbtq-schism_n_5c74470ee4b03a10c2309f0c).
- 24 "A Survey of LGBT Americans," *Pew Research Center Social and Demographic Trends*, June 13, 2013, <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2013/06/13/a-survey-of-lgbt-americans/>.
- 25 Signorile, *It's Not Over*, 80–103.
- 26 Marian Edmonds-Allen of Parity NYC has noted success for emerging ministers in black churches that are not historically open and affirming when a strong, even "fierce," mentor is shepherding a protégé.
- 27 Sprinkle, "Queer Fear," 114.