

### **Loving and Lifting our LGBTQ children with Christ as Our Guide**

Session Topic: Many families in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have a child that identifies as LGBTQ. With this identification comes many heartfelt questions, concerns, and discussions as our child navigates their own decisions on their terms. Elder Quentin R. Cook challenges, "Let us be at the forefront in terms of expressing love, compassion, and outreach. Let's not have families exclude or be disrespectful of those who choose a different lifestyle as a result of their feelings about their own gender and/or orientation."

How do I have open conversations with love, respect, and support as I acknowledge the difficulties faced by my LGBTQ child? How does my personal covenant relationship with my Savior enhance my ability to walk with my child while they make decisions about their lives? How do I partner with the Lord in supporting and loving my LGBTQ child? How can I help them build their own relationship with Christ and the assurance that they are loved as a child of God?

Talk:

I am grateful to be here with you. I want to welcome the LGBTQ families. I use the term LGBTQ families because when one member of the family comes out, it affects the whole family.

I have always been in an LGBTQ family. My oldest brother Preston is gay, and my son Jake is gay. Four years ago, I started an organization called Lift and Love to literally Lift and Love LGBTQ families. We work with thousands of individuals and family members like you.

They come to church for the much-needed peace the Gospel can bring, only to be confronted with questions and tensions, both internal and external, that they could have never imagined. This tension creates immense pain and threatens the loss of connection to the gospel.

In my work people always want to know how I stay active in the church? I am going to be real with you, It's HARD. For me it is all about connection. After all, the gospel of Jesus Christ is, at its very foundation, about eternal connection. Staying closely connected to the Lord helps me navigate this journey. Staying close to my son helps me support him as he navigates his.

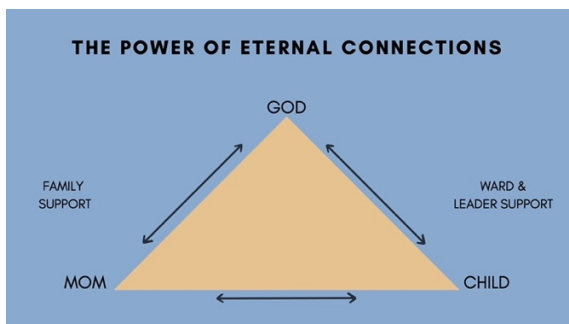
This past Christmas my side of the family traveled to the Holy Land and Egypt for a once-in-a-lifetime trip. Here is one of my favorite photos from the trip, all of us in front of the pyramid at Giza. Notice the pyramid is a triangle.



Did you know that the triangle is the strongest shape? I thought the square was, but if you put enough pressure on one side of a square it will collapse into a rhombus, just like the boxes in your basement.

Even if big pressure is applied to one side of a triangle, the other sides will compress and stretch to absorb the tension, keeping the shape sure.

Because of its ability to take pressure, I think the triangle is a powerful shape to talk about three eternal connections that are critical to navigating this journey. First, our connection to our children. Second, our connection to God. Third, our child's connection to God. I will also speak to two critically important support systems. First, family support and second, ward and stake leader support.



### FIRST CONNECTION: US TO OUR CHILDREN

Elder Jeffrey R Holland said, “No love in mortality comes closer to approximating the pure love of Jesus Christ than the selfless love a devoted mother has for her child.”<sup>i</sup>

My mom passed away a year ago this month. A little while ago, I was going through paperwork and found a talk she had given at her Stake Women’s Conference in 1997. She’s telling a story that happened in the 70s, in a time when most parents lost connection with their gay children.

She began her talk: *One lovely Sunday afternoon Brooke and I were sitting with our family in Sacrament meeting. The bishop was talking about his concern about many problems of the families in our ward. In fact, he said there were only three families that weren't dealing with a rather serious problem. Brooke and I smiled and wondered who the other two families were.*

She continues, *...Several weeks later, our whole world crumbled in an instant when we found out from our Bishop that our oldest son—the wonderful, bright, outstanding boy we loved with all our hearts—was gay.*

My mom's first thoughts were—

*Not our son, it couldn't be.*

*What had we done wrong?*

*We tried to be such good parents.*

*We carefully raised him according to everything we knew was right.*

*How could we make him better?*

*How could we make him change to be "normal"?*

*As we sought help for him and for our family and struggled with our feelings of anger, guilt, denial and fear we went through a difficult journey of understanding. Over the years we have come face to face with the power of love and we know that God does not abandon us.*

*We have found we had an enormous capacity to love as we have reconciled our feelings about a society that misunderstands him, a religion that rejects him, and a God who loves him.*

*My life has been enriched by having a gay son. And I will support him every step of the way.*

To speak openly about having a gay son 26 years ago was likely the bravest public thing my mom ever did.

My parents fully loved and supported Preston. He was an important part of our family, and so was his partner. My brother came out to the world in the 80s when the world thought being gay was a choice.

He was called a deviant.

He was blamed for not being faithful enough to cure himself.

He constantly heard the message that there was something terribly, terribly wrong with him.

These messages damaged him. They disconnected him from himself, from the church, and from his identity as a child of God. His life was full of pain. Six years ago, at the age of 58, my brother Preston ended his own life. His last words describe an unbearable sadness that he was not accepted ... or acceptable as he was.

Preston's death and his pain were particularly hard because I had received clear spiritual promptings that my own son Jake was gay. A year later, Jake came into our room late at night, shut the door, and said we needed to talk.

Gratefully, because of my brother, we were prepared for this moment. When he said the words, “I’m gay,” we were ready with the love and support we knew he needed. We pulled our big 18-year-old boy in between us on our bed and told him how much we loved him and that we knew how much God loved him. That sacred moment was one of absolute peace for all three of us—so peaceful that my husband fell asleep while we were talking.

Jake graduated from BYU last week and is off to grad school. He has a lot of difficult choices ahead of him, choices that only he can make, but we know he’s thoughtful, and he will be guided by the Spirit. And he has us and we will support him EVERY.STEP.OF.THE.WAY!

## **THE SECOND CONNECTION: US TO GOD**

I’ve been wrestling with the complexities of this space for 40 years. Sometimes this process has been exquisitely painful. I’ve worried I’d lose faith in the church or in God. I’ve cycled through confusion and fear and there are times when I have come to the Savior with RED HOT anger and open wounds.

I’ve road tested the Savior’s promise in James 1. The very scripture that Joseph Smith turned to when he had questions. You know it: “If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God.” So how cool is this? James is the Savior’s brother.

We all know the KJV but I’m going to read these verses to you, from the NIV because the wording is a little more modern and conversational.

*Consider it pure joy, my brothers, and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.*

*James 1:2-5 NIV<sup>i</sup>*

Testing this pattern has given me confidence to go to the Lord with every bit of anger, frustration, and all the questions I might have. And I have a lot of questions.

About a month before my son came out, he wasn’t doing very well. He was hurting and angry, and I felt like he was disappearing into himself, and he’d all but stopped talking. We had an honest, real conversation about depression and suicide and asked some questions from an on-line test; he self-scored high on half of them. The next morning, I called a therapist and his pediatrician and got help.

Watching Jake struggle against himself was breaking my heart and breaking me down. It had barely been a year since my brother’s death; I wasn’t not going to let the same thing happen to my son.

Later that morning, somehow, I dragged myself to a book club lunch that I didn’t want to go to. I was trying to keep it together when my daughter texted me a photo. She was on a BYU study abroad for her major in Copenhagen, Denmark at the church where the original marble Christ sits.



The photo of Christ with his hands reaching forward filled my broken heart with such sweet peace.

As I was looking at it, I realized there was an inscription under the feet of the Savior. It said “KOMMER TIL MIG”. I happened to be sitting across the table from a dear friend who served her mission in Denmark, so I asked her, “What does this mean?” With her big warm smile she said, “It means Come to Me.”

Come to me. So Easy. Just come to me.

THAT’S MY HOW—I go to him.

And rather than rebuke, HE gives me peace that I can hold on to until pain subsides.

That peace He sends usually comes from others, like my friend who happened to speak Danish and many others who love, minister to, and support our family. I have been the recipient of goodness from countless inspired women who have lifted me up and bound my wounds.

EVEN with these tender mercies It is not easy for LGBTQ families to come to HIM in the ways we had so easily before. So, we must find new ways to deepen our connection so we can go to HIM.

**Music** has been another critical tool for living in this tension. When nothing else soothes my aching heart, I have a playlist of favorite hymns and gospel songs, and a few Disney songs that my kids tease me about, but they help me find peace so I can feel Him again.

**Scriptures** have been another tool. As I read with all the questions I have as a mother, the Spirit teaches me in new ways.

I read about Eve, who was faced with a complicated choice she had to make for the good of her family. Because of her wisdom and strength, she grew in understanding and reliance on God.

Jochebed put her baby Moses in a basket and sent him down the river, knowing he would probably be raised outside of her faith. She trusted that God would protect and guide him. I see the same faith in many families whose LGBTQ children are leaving or have left the church.

Notice how often women and mothers in scripture partner with God to solve complicated problems. Eve, Jochebed, Rebecca, Esther, Sariah, Mary, Elizabeth, and Abish, and more, all guided to a solution different than the norms of the day.<sup>iii</sup>

And notice, there are no perfect families in the scriptures.<sup>iv</sup> NOT ONE. But there are plenty of families in complicated situations. And when they turn to the Savior, He guides them. In each story HE says, I know you feel broken or forgotten, but watch what happens with your faith and my power.

### **The Last tool I'll share is the Temple.**

Recently, I felt a nudge to work at the temple.

The Initiatory is a reminder of the power of God's blessings that I have access to as I strive to be faithful. An increase of strength, ability to know truth from error, protection from the advisory, and a reminder that we are to have JOY in our families—even when they are imperfect. Maybe because they are imperfect.

In the Endowment, I've learned the importance the Lord places on agency. We are meant to learn by our own bitter and sweet experiences. We're promised further light and knowledge as we Ask, Seek, and Knock. He wants us to ask. He is anxious to teach us.

The Endowment has been a place of important personal revelation about my unique family and the plan the Lord has for each of us.

These are some of my tools for navigating the tension in this journey. They aren't going to fit everyone. Few people like getting up at 4:00 am for a shift in the temple.

In the final address of April 2023 General Conference, President Nelson testified that whatever the question or problem, "...the answer is always found in the life and teaching of Jesus Christ."<sup>v</sup>

I invite you to go to Him. Trust Him. As you do you will know the power of His eternal connection. TRUST Him to guide you. He is the way.

### **THIRD CONNECTION: YOUR CHILD TO GOD**

Brace yourself, this is the hard part. Notice we are nowhere in this connection.

I know we love these babies, and we want to march them right to their full potential. But we also know it's not the Lord's way. Many of our children will use their agency and make decisions that drive us crazy or cause big heartaches. This experience is hardly limited to our LGBTQ children.

Have faith, not fear, the Savior is the connection. Our children are his children. He knows them, and He will guide them in ways that they understand.

The best thing we can do is teach them young and remind them often that his hands are always stretched out as he says, "Come to me."

If you have lost connection with LGBTQ loved ones, do what you can to reconnect. They desperately need us to stay connected, supportive.

Our LGBTQ children are under attack.

The voices of the world tell them they are not valued as they are.

The voices say they are not divine children of God.

The voices of the world tell them that there is something terribly, terribly wrong with them.

Our children are constantly hearing these dangerous messages that cause shame and separation, spiritually and emotionally, from themselves, from family, and from God.

Even after all we can do, many of us will watch our children walk away from the church. Or us. If this happens you may have to change the way you connect a little.

We know the gospel can be a feast for the soul. But it can never be enjoyed if it's force-fed. Find common ground to rebuild your relationship.

When the fear creeps in, and I know it does, remember what Joseph Smith taught the women in the very first days of the Relief Society, "If you live up to your privilege, the angels cannot be restrained from being your associates." <sup>vi</sup>

Mothers, go to the Savior and ask for his angels to watch over your child. Have Faith, YOU are in divine partnership with Heaven. As we protect and nurture our relationship, we will be a powerful tether stretching between our child and the Savior.

There are two important supportive factors I want to touch on.

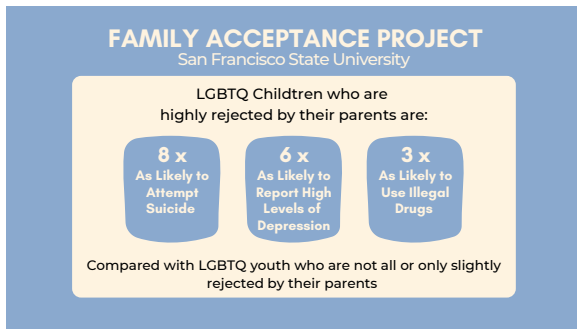
### **SUPPORT FROM FAMILY**

Studies, including *The Family Acceptance Project*<sup>vii</sup>, created with a Latter-Day Saint researcher, show:

LGBTQ Children who are highly rejected by their parents—meaning they are kicked out, blamed, told they can't talk about their orientation, or told their orientation is against God, are:

- 8 times as likely to attempt suicide,
- 6 times as to report high levels of depression, and
- 3 times as likely to use illegal drugs

Compared with LGBTQ youth who are not at all, or only slightly rejected by their parents.



These are shocking numbers and prove that the family is vitally important not only for the spiritual health of our LGBTQ children, but good mental health and well-being.

Tom Christofferson tells a story about his LGBTQ family in his book, *That We May Be One: A Gay Mormon's Perspective on Faith and Family*. Years ago, the family was going on vacation, and Tom wanted to bring his partner. One of the brothers was so uncomfortable that he thought he might not bring his children on the trip. His mom and dad gathered his four brothers, including Elder D. Todd Christofferson, and sisters-in-law for a council.

Tom remembers, "They began with prayer, and then, as I recall, my father talked about the importance of unity and loyalty to one another. My mother said, 'I am ashamed to say it, but there was a time when I thought we were the perfect Mormon family... but then life happens, and I realized that there is no perfect Mormon family. The only thing we can really be perfect at is loving each other.' ...The most important lesson your children will learn from how our family treats their Uncle Tom is that nothing they can ever do will take them outside the circle of our family's love." Tom said that became their guiding principle.<sup>viii</sup>

When we realize the goal is not for a perfect Latter-day Saint family but to become perfect at loving one another, we can grow together and become stronger as we partner with each other and the Lord.

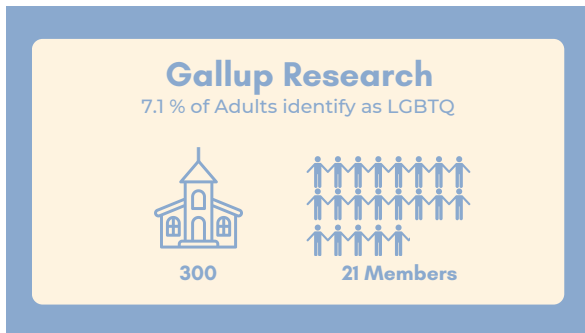
### **SUPPORT FROM WARDS AND LEADERS**

It's been 50 years since my parents realized my brother was gay, and in many ways, we are in a vastly different world.

We know now that being LGBTQ is not a choice. Young children come out to their parents when they start to realize they are different from their peers, usually around puberty, if not before. Because our children are so young and vulnerable, many parents are fiercely protective of their emotional, physical, and spiritual well-being. These messages no longer land on the individual alone. They are felt by and threaten to disconnect the entire family, often before local leaders know that there is an LGBTQ person in the family.

The latest Gallup Research says 7.1% of adults identify as LGBTQ. That means if your ward has 300 people, 21 people in your ward might identify somewhere on the LGBTQ spectrum. That is a big number and doesn't include their family members.





Local leaders and ward members play such a vital connective role in helping individuals and families know that they belong. Most people I meet are desperately trying to stay connected.

Jean B. Bingham, former Relief Society General President, talked about this kind of disconnection during the BYU Women’s Conference in 2021. She taught, “Studies have shown that the number one reason people leave religion is that they feel judged or unwelcome. That is cited more often than doctrinal disagreement or lack of belief. The good news is that situation can practically be eliminated if we really open our arms and hearts to everyone. We can seek to ‘be a light, not a judge.’ That is something left only to the Lord. Our responsibility is to extend an open hand and heart. As we do that, we find that we have created a safe place for sharing, a safe place to grow, a safe place to become our best selves.”<sup>ix</sup>

Get to know the resources for LGBTQ members on the church website. <sup>x</sup> There is good information for families and leaders there, including Elder Cook’s challenge from the session topic, “As a church, nobody should be more loving and compassionate. Let us be at the forefront of expressing love, compassion, and outreach.”<sup>xi</sup>

President Nelson has often spoken of the Gathering of Israel. In this last conference, he said, “The Savior’s message is clear: His true disciples build, lift, encourage, persuade, and inspire—no matter how difficult the situation. True disciples of Jesus Christ are peacemakers.” He continued, “My dear brothers and sisters, the best is yet to come for those who spend their lives building up others. Today I invite you to examine your discipleship within the context of the way you treat others. I bless you to make any adjustments that may be needed so that your behavior is ennobling, respectful, and representative of a true follower of Jesus Christ.”<sup>xii</sup>

We are called to be gatherers, connectors. Our Heavenly Parent’s LGBTQ children and their families need our open hands and open hearts to help them stay connected and close so they can feel the light and warmth of the Savior’s gospel.

Sisters, my testimony of the Savior has been forged along this journey. I count it all joy that I was raised in a loving faithful LGBTQ family. I have been stretched. I have had to dig in. Because I’ve had to rely on the Savior, I have come to know Him, and I know I am known by him. He strengthens and guides me. I testify that the LORD LOVES HIS LGBTQ Children exactly as they are, and I believe they have much to teach us. In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Jeffrey R Holland, Behold Thy Mother, General Conference, October 2015

<sup>ii</sup> James 1:2-5 NIV

<sup>iii</sup> Russel M. Nelson, A Plea to My Sisters, April 2015

<sup>iv</sup> Neal A. Maxwell, Take Especial Care of Your Family, April 1994

<sup>v</sup> Russell M. Nelson, The Answer Is Always Jesus Christ, April 2023

<sup>vi</sup> Relief Society Minute Book, Nauvoo, Illinois, Apr. 28, 1842, Church History Library, 38

<sup>vii</sup> <https://familyproject.sfsu.edu/publications>

<sup>viii</sup> <https://www.ksl.com/article/46175330/christofferson-brothers-share-how-they-remained-as-one>

<sup>ix</sup> The Promise of Belonging, Jean B. Bingham, Sharon Eubank, and Reyna I. Aburto, BYU Women's Conference, April 2021

<sup>x</sup> <https://site.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/life-help?lang=eng>

<sup>xi</sup> Quintin L Cook, ChurchofJesuschrist.org, Same-Sex Attraction Leaders, December 2012

<sup>xii</sup> Russell M. Nelson, Peacemakers Needed, April 2023