

RENEE SAPPINGTON: My name is Renee Sappington, and this is my partner Connie Campbell. And, we want to share a little bit of our story with you. We have always known that we are loved. We each grew up in a good home and in a good church community. And based on the love and support that we experienced growing up, it was easy to know that God loved us unconditionally. Even so, when we realized we were gay, we each really struggled with it, and we wondered if this was something we needed to give up for God. Uh, we wondered what our families and friends would think, and we wondered what it meant for our faith and our place in the church.

DR. CONNIE CAMPBELL: And it was years later, actually in church, that we met. It was as pure and innocent a meeting as two persons could have. Uh, we spent many hours talking about our faith and our faith journeys. We were really in the same place, both of us having come to the point where we realized that being true to God meant being true to ourselves. We didn't date long at all before I knew that this was the person for me. This person I loved was wonderful and smart and funny. She helped me to be a better me, and I actually helped her to be a better her. Together, we were more than the sum of our parts. Over the course of a year, we knew we wanted to spend our lives together. So, we wrote our vows, and we went to the church. But since the denomination of which we were members does not condone same-sex unions, we did not go in. Instead, we remained in the parking lot. And there, outside the doors of our church, but no less in the presence of God, Renee and I vowed to love, honor and cherish each other till death we do part.

RENEE SAPPINGTON: And, that was 11 years ago. Since then our relationship has grown, as has our faith. And as our faith grew we found ourselves needing a new church home. Around four years ago, we started attending a small study group at Parkway Hills United Methodist Church. We started going to Sunday School and the worship service and soon realized that we had found what we were looking for. We joined the church and felt very welcomed. We don't actually know how many of the members realize we are gay. Our Sunday school ... (interrupted by Dr. Campbell)

DR. CONNIE CAMPBELL: They do know. (Laughs)

RENEE SAPPINGTON: I guess more know now. Our Sunday school class truly treats us as a married couple. They recognize that our experience is the human experience. Our sorrows and our joys are very much the same as theirs. And we have found a community that values our presence, our insights and our gifts. But even as we found so many open doors – and we celebrate them – we are painfully aware that some doors remain closed. Indeed, we are here before you today, but only after a great deal of struggle as to what it means to stand before so many people who don't know us and express that we are a couple. And perhaps some of you are having to struggle with even hearing us out. We realize that at some churches in this denomination that we would be denied membership. And we also know that were we to say our vows today, we would also be standing outside closed doors.

DR. CONNIE CAMPBELL: The church is God's house, not ours. We grew up in the church; we met in the church, and we are a part of the church. We are in the church not because of how the church addresses homosexuality but rather in spite of it. We are in the church because we are in relationship with God, and to be in such a relationship means that you are bound together as a part of a larger community of faith. And when you call God your Father, you just don't get to pick and choose who your brothers and your sisters are. Renee and I are fortunate enough to know that we are loved and to have found such a wonderful community of faith. We have no doubt that God embraces who we are and blesses our relationship, that God's doors are open even when the churches' doors sometimes aren't. We also know that many others are not so fortunate. That they have been met with judgment or condemnation. That they are hurting, angry or confused, not realizing that the church just doesn't always speak for God. Some have given up on themselves; some have given up on God, and some – understandably so – have given up on the church. We, on the other hand, choose to hope believing this church that we are a part of, a church whose faith is founded in the life and death of Jesus, in His teachings and His promises, this church will find the courage to follow His radical example – opening new doors and always showing God's love to all. Thank you.