

Features/Advertising

# New memoir on growing up gay in a CRC mission field

Former Christian School teacher re-discovers her need to worship, commitment to church after decades of wandering

Nandy Heule

When her nephew was about to get married in Grand Rapids, Michigan, in 2011, Anna Redsand looked forward to a beautiful ceremony at the stately St. Mark's Episcopal Church in town and spending time with a favourite brother. Her nephew had just graduated from Calvin College, and she felt proud of him and his lovely partner.

After a bright start to the big day that summer, as her eyes wandered across the pews filled with friends and family, Anna started feeling unhinged. She sobbed through most of the ceremony. Afterward, she fell weeping into the arms of her brother. It's not the reaction she expected or had hoped for.

"If only I had had this," she explained during a break from promoting her upcoming book at the Festival of Faith and Writing in April at Calvin College in Michigan. "My family just wanted my relationships to end."

Witnessing the wedding between her gay nephew and his new husband made her acutely aware that family support surrounding this young couple was exactly what she had longed for her entire life.

In her new memoir, *To Drink from the Silver Cup: From Faith through Exile and Beyond*, Redsand, 68, shares the story of her youth as a missionary child. Her parents served as Christian Reformed missionaries with the Navajo Nation in New Mexico. She started teaching Sunday school at age 12, sang hymns in English, Navajo and Spanish at a county jail as a teenager, and was asked to "bring the message" before graduating from high school.

But when her father suggested she should become a "Bible Woman," she refused, she says, but for different reasons than her dad may have suspected.

"I was a huge disappointment to my Dad," she says. Not much earlier, the missionary compound had discovered a secret sexual relationship between two women. Redsand, who had already experienced some sexual attraction to another teenage



Redsand, left, grew up in New Mexico; her parents served as CRC missionaries to the Navajo Nation.

girl, says she lived in fear.

"I felt an overwhelming need to hide both my fear and my sexuality at all cost," she says.

Instead of going to Bible school to prepare for the Navajo mission field, Redsand attended Calvin College and eventually became a teacher in a Christian school. Nine years and a suicide attempt later, she left her job and her Christian Reformed congregation.

"I couldn't thrive because there was no support." She says she realized she couldn't change, she loved another woman and couldn't be in hiding about it any longer.

Her mother tried to educate herself about homosexuality and understand her daughter but eventually told Redsand she just couldn't accept her child's life choices as a lesbian.

Wendy VanderWal-Gritter is the executive director of New Direction Ministries of Canada, attends a CRC church and wrote the book *Generous Spaciousness: Responding to Gay Christians in the Church*. She was also a member of the CRC Synodical Committee to Provide Pastoral Guidance Regarding Same Sex Marriage. She says some Christian parents who initially refused to accept a child's sexual orientation may now wish to heal the relationship with a son or daughter.

"Parents can reach out and reconnect," says VanderWal-Gritter. "Parents can acknowledge, 'I did not love you unconditionally, please forgive me. I want to get to know you, your family and what is important in your life.'"

"It's about building trust," she adds. "Have the child raise any topic of faith or spirituality. Don't try to lead that conversation."

As churches work through the deci-

Meantime, Redsand says in a lifetime of teaching and wandering from town to town across continents she continued to be deeply troubled with leaving the church and the faith of her youth.

"It was the greatest loss of my life," she says about her Christian faith even while she suffered alienation, if not complete rejection, from her parents and many family members. "My [Christian] faith had been so central in my life."

After years of experimentation with Hinduism and other traditions, she says "I always wanted to make peace with what I had lost."

Redsand carefully explored various denominations and, a few years ago, found a home in an inclusive Presbyterian congregation with a strong commitment to social justice.

"If you are a member of the LGBT community, don't give up," she says. "You can find a way to return [to church]."

Nandy Heule (right in the photo above) is a freelance writer in Toronto. She can be reached at @nandyheule.



Redsand (left) and VanderWal-Gritter at Calvin College in April.

sions made at Synod, VanderWal-Gritter says "In all our deliberations [within our families, churches, and communities], we can never forget the children of God for whom this is very personal. Always connect ideas to people."

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