

## THIS SIDE OF THE TRACTS

SINGLE IN SAN FRANCISCO:  
A MEMOIR

By Karen Southwick



An underlying spirit of love—as well as colorful incidents—knit together a ward “family.” Four members were (left to right) Janina Cobar, David Howard, Sonia Bedon, and Blain Stoddard.

*The San Francisco Single Adult Ward stood for an embrace of diverse cultures, lifestyles, heritages and ethnicity, a loving standard of what the gospel of Jesus Christ should be, but all too seldom is.*

IT WAS LATE SUNDAY AFTERNOON on a crisply brilliant fall day in San Francisco when you just have to be outside. I'd returned from a long walk with the dog to find a telephone message from Bishop Richard Smith. I knew why he was calling, and my heart sank.

He'd been bishop of the San Francisco Single Adult Ward for less than a month, so his phone number was unfamiliar. I punched the buttons clumsily, unwillingly, but the

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connection was made.

“Hello,” a male voice, low, guarded.

“Bishop Smith?”

“Yes.”

“This is Karen Southwick returning your call.”

He cleared his throat. After some discussion, he got to the point. “We’ve found someone else to play the organ . . .”

I'd been expecting this for two weeks, ever since, in Relief Society, another ward “long-timer” had said the just-called bishop was quietly telling all over age thirty-five they must leave the ward. This would be her last Sunday, she said. But there have been rumors about this ward for years, I said. Why not wait to see? Because, she said, this time it's true. She'd heard it straight from someone

who'd already been asked to leave.

Next week, her foreboding was proven correct. The bishop released her and several others, nearly all, I realized, among the older group of singles. From the organ, where I was waiting to launch into the sacrament song, I glanced over the congregation and breathed deeply. I was almost the only one left. But who would they get to replace me? To my knowledge, no one else in the ward played the organ. When I was gone, they used a pianist.

Yet the following Sunday, here Bishop Smith was telling me they'd found someone to play the organ.

“Who is it?”

“We'll be fine . . .”

. . . without you. He didn't actually say that, but the implication was there.

I'd spent a decade spanning four bishops in the San Francisco Single Adult Ward, and now this unsought parting triggered a Proustian flood of recollection. Most of it was about what the ward stood for: an embrace of diverse cultures, lifestyles, heritages and ethnicity, a loving standard of what the gospel of Jesus Christ should be, but all too seldom is. I remembered when Bishop Stan Roberts, my first bishop at the ward, came to talk to us Relief Society sisters. I expected the usual admonition to follow the brethren or a plea for more service or improved visiting teaching.

I was stunned when he cautioned that he was going to talk about the homosexual men in the ward. It was a word never heard inside church walls, except in condemnation. Yet here was someone saying it with love. He estimated that 20 percent of the men—one in five—were gay. Though I did not know it then, Roberts had been actively fellowshiping gay members and returning them to the fold. Until then, any acknowledged homosexual had usually been excommunicated.

These men need understanding and compassion, he said, just like the rest of us. We don't know everything about homosexuality, but gays don't do it out of choice or perversion; being gay is innate. Do what you can to encourage them in the Church, he urged us, for it's a difficult battle for them to remain faithful.

“I still feel that there's something different in [gays'] make-up from birth,” Roberts said in an interview for this article. “Some may do it out of choice, but among members of the Church, I didn't see many of those.” Roberts was bishop from 1984–89, after having been the high councilor assigned to the single adult ward. He said his outreach to gay members had been inspired by Apostle David B. Haight, who'd said, “We need to get people

out of the caves of San Francisco."

Roberts' simple philosophy for the single adult ward was: "Everyone is welcome here." He said gay members faced tremendous struggles to remain faithful. He said one gay member of the ward, Jim Lemmon, whom Roberts had known since Lemmon was a boy, "taught me the need for compassion." He recalled that Lemmon's mother "nearly had a nervous breakdown because the prevailing theory was that the mother [of a gay man] had been too dominant and the father too passive." Casting blame, Roberts said, "was not going to solve the problem."

Every Saturday morning at their home, Roberts and his wife, Fran, held a meeting where the issues of homosexuality and the Church were discussed. "The best home teachers and visiting teachers were those people who had really serious problems," he recalled. "They knew they probably wouldn't get married, and the Church puts a lot of pressure on people to get married and have a family. I tried not to add to that pressure. Doggone it, it was hard enough already." He also named a gay man as one of his counselors, someone who had been excommunicated and then re-activated and re-ordained to the priesthood. "He was a great help" in the fellowshiping effort, Roberts said.

The bishop dealt forthrightly with sexual sin: gays and straights had to live the gospel, which meant celibacy for singles. "I told people, if you want to partake of the bless-

ings of the temple, you have to toe that line of chastity. I didn't have a right to let anybody go to the temple who wasn't worthy." Not everybody was successful. Gay and straight, "some dropped out, and some did okay," he said. Even though the Scriptures state that the least amount of sin will not be tolerated, too many Mormons label homosexuality "as the worst sin that can be imagined," Roberts said.

In the mid to late '80s, the AIDS epidemic was in full swing in San Francisco. In the ward, a young hairdresser, Tom Morgan, had been the first to sicken. He'd been re-activated when a ward member who lived in the same complex invited him to church. He had been a teacher in the priesthood when he died. "He was on his way," said Roberts. "He had come to grips with his feelings about the Savior." Morgan "liked to hug everybody," a trait that Roberts could appreciate, since he shared it. Ward members took care of this man as he slipped away. "He kept his sense of humor to the end," Roberts said.

The human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) had infected other members of the ward. Our Relief Society and home teachers soon became all too familiar with the deadly scourge. They cleaned the houses of those afflicted, bought them groceries, drove them to doctors' appointments, visited them in hospitals, and, inevitably, sorted through their belongings and attended the funerals. At the time, AIDS was a death sentence, hitting its

victims with infection after infection, draining away strength with "wasting syndrome." It was easy to recognize the sufferers—that pinched look, that stumbling walk, that exhaustion. New members of the ward would sometimes get up and move away from those with AIDS. It was a frightening disease.

Roberts remembered when a stake patriarch from Canada had come to see his son who was hospitalized in San Francisco with AIDS. "He asked me how come I didn't excommunicate [his son] because he had AIDS. It was filthy," Roberts told him bluntly he was wrong. The father visited his son again. "Then he came back and said, 'Please forgive me.'" Eventually, he took the son home, where he died.

Roberts scheduled educational sessions to teach ward members about AIDS. Our Relief Society president at the time, Jean Perry, who was a nurse, teamed with Lemmon, who later died of the disease, to explain that you couldn't catch it from sitting by someone, even if they sneezed or coughed; or by using the same toilet; or by touching them. Inside and outside the Church, "People were very homophobic and HIV-phobic then," Perry recalled. Bishop Roberts "condemned the immoral activity without condemning the person." Perry said that as Relief Society president, she worked with members, both gay and straight, who struggled with sexual issues, drug abuse, and other problems. "How many heterosexual people slip?" she asked. "Because they didn't get HIV, it doesn't show." The ward helped people try to overcome the consequences of self-damaging behavior, Perry said.

For most people, love eventually overcame fear. I accompanied the choir then, and we were often called to perform at the bedside or at the funerals of those with HIV. One woman who had moved into the ward from the South was at first openly disgusted by the prospect of dealing with homosexuality and AIDS. Then she got to know some of the gay men. She sang with them in the choir, and they talked to her, as they did to many of us, about their struggles to stay in the church. In the end, she wept and put her arms around them as they died.

I remember sitting in the hospital room of one man, a tenor in our choir. His voice was weak and thready now, but the message came through: how much the ward had meant to him. His family had disowned him; his former companion was dead. There had been no one else there for him but the members of the ward. We were there when the torrent of words subsided and he was at rest.



"...SYMPATHIES WITH APOSTATE GROUPS? WELL, EIGHT YEARS AGO SUNSTONE PUBLISHED MY LETTER TO THE EDITOR."

JOHN DEPOISIER

***"Many people . . . will remain single during this life, or a good chunk of it. Active participants in singles wards should be encouraged and applauded, not questioned for overstaying their welcome."***

Another man, also a choir member, could barely be heard any more, but he came every week to our hourlong practice. He was always on time, and as we waited for enough people to start practice, he would tell me about his latest medication and how much stronger he felt. He would describe the change in his symptoms in excruciating detail. The illness had, in a way, become his life.

So to hang on, he had to go over and over the minutiae. But the inexorable virus loosened his grip, and he passed on. When I went to his funeral, I was astonished to find he'd been born in the same year as I had. He'd seemed so much older, wasted; I had been unaccustomed to thinking about people my age dying. AIDS changed that, cruelly and swiftly.

In early 1989, Roberts was released as bishop, a difficult, exhausting but ultimately rewarding time, he said. "What we tried to do was say, 'We're all children of God. We all have difficulties, so let's get along and help each other.'" He said his legacy was in getting people "to listen to the promptings of the Holy Ghost, that still small voice that speaks to us all." What he learned from members, particularly those struggling with sexuality, was their willingness to tell the truth. "In a family ward, many people skirt the issues, but in the singles ward, we met the issues right on and said, 'what can we do?'"

In the January 1989 *Flamingo News*, a newsletter published by gay Mormon activists, editor Marty Beaudet said about Roberts: "If the healing process is to continue, it is now up to us who Bishop Roberts has assisted to do for others what he has done for us. In addition, the straight members have gained insights from his leadership

which have enabled them to make gay men and lesbians feel welcome."

The new bishop, Lee Wade, had been serving as a stake missionary to the ward, along with his wife, Betty Jo. A convert who attended Sunstone conferences, Wade was tolerant, kindly, humorous. But even his tolerance could be stretched too far. It was the day in 1990 that James Kent wore black

high heels, "A stake conference speaker spoke of his uncle who didn't fit in, but yet his ward always made him feel welcome." The next week, as Kent got ready for church, he asked himself, "just how accepting is the Church to those of us who are different?" He added, "I was in an angry phase at the time and it was a dare for me to find out just how tolerant the ward, the bishop, and the Church would be."

I didn't see Kent during Sunday School, but I heard that the bishop had called him into his office. Recalled Kent: "I can still see me with those pumps in my hands, and after a prayer by the bishop, slamming them down on his desk and asking him, 'Tell me, what difference does it make whether or not I wear pumps to church?'" After a lengthy discussion, Wade finally said: "Lee Wade is offended by what you did, but Bishop Wade needs to be impartial."

The following Sunday, Kent said, "Bishop Wade came up to me, shook my hand and gave me a hug, and said, 'Hey, Cha-Cha, how're you doing?'" Which gave a good laugh to the bishop, my friends, and me." Kent never felt the need to wear pumps to church again. "That was the first and last time." Once, he confesses, he and a friend showed up at a Saturday night Mardi Gras party in full drag. Ever since, invitations to costume parties at the singles ward have stated: "no cross-dressing, please."

Kent's bitterest critic in the ward was a man who had lived the homosexual lifestyle for years, had alcohol and drug problems, and then renounced both drugs and being gay. (This man was a wonderful ballroom dancer; he once told me he had learned



Karen Southwick, left, spent a decade in the San Francisco Single Adult Ward. Her first bishop, Stan Roberts, right, estimated one fifth of the ward's men were gay.

pumps to church. Kent, who openly talked about his homosexuality in testimony meetings, had decided to make a statement, he told me when he came to choir practice in the unusual footwear. I was a feminist who advocated giving the priesthood to women, so Kent and I sympathized with each other's struggles to fit into the church. What kind of a statement? I asked. That gender isn't as rigid as we think, he replied. I wasn't sure this was the way to do it. High heels are the stupidest apparel that women wear, I told him. They're uncomfortable and damaging; find another way to make your statement.

Kent, who moved to Philadelphia in 1992 and recently re-activated there, recalls the day vividly. The week before he donned the

dancing in gay bars, where they took turns leading, so he figured he could better understand how to lead in mixed couple dancing.) David Howard, who joined the ward in 1990, remembered this man and his fiancée speaking during a 31 May 1992 sacrament meeting. Howard wrote in his journal: "He said he first began coming to the ward six years ago and was a gay activist. A mighty change took place in his life. A miracle. Now he was marrying a girl he truly loves . . ."

Sunday School teachers from the singles ward all remember a brain-impaired man who was singularly faithful in attending meetings. He would sit close to the front, raise his hand and make rambling, disjointed comments. Said one former teacher, "I just said, 'thank you very much,' and moved on." The man also showed up in his bathrobe for ward volleyball night, but in contrast to the reaction to Kent and his pumps, no one said anything about he robe. They just went on with their game.

Not only colorful incidents made the singles ward what it was. The underlying spirit

of love uplifted and knit together a "family," even of those who were misfits and rebels. "I will always be amazed at the talent and diversity of that ward," said Kent. "For many members, it represented the loving family they had never had or were far away from. All were welcome no matter where they lived, how old or young they were, no matter how they lived."

Aline DiNoia, a convert from Tunisia, North Africa, was another individualist. She wore extremely short skirts and always spoke her mind. "They [the ward] accepted me," she said, "a person with a very strong sense of self who didn't want to dress like everyone else. It was good to be part of it."

Jean Perry left the ward in November 1994 after she married another member, Matt Verley, whom she'd introduced to the gospel. The two had met while swing dancing at a San Francisco ballroom and now have a two-year-old daughter, Julie. Perry-Verley was forty when she married and nearly forty-one when she gave birth. "Marriage doesn't have to be perfect to be

very good," she said. On the other hand, she appreciated the singles ward as an oasis where people "could turn their lives around." Because many members were isolated from their own families, "we really were the family for each other."

One person I shall miss very much is Aileen Olson, who had been in the ward for many years and was over the age limit. She is a devoted member who goes to the temple and fulfills her callings faithfully, upholds her leaders, and never fails to have a thoughtful comment when difficult issues are raised in Relief Society or Sunday School. When I e-mailed her about how discouraged I was about being "cast off" by the singles ward, she responded:

"I've wondered if the great group that is leaving will be remembered for how much we've contributed, how committed we've been; how we kept the ward going for years with our willingness to serve. . . . Then I realized, 'Hey, the one who knows is the Lord! He knows my heart. He's seen my offerings over the years. He will be my judge. And it is His kingdom I am serving.' So it's really not about recognition. . . . It's about taking a calling and magnifying it and knowing that the Lord knows what you've done and how well you've done it."

In her testimony upon leaving the ward, Olson commented that when she joined in 1989, "this ward was kind of scary, but it was a very loving ward. Everybody was accepted. I hope the next generation coming in will carry on that tradition." She added, "No matter how odd you were or what you looked like or how you dressed or where you were in the gospel, you were accepted. People missed you if you weren't here. This is a Church for everyone. There's a place in God's kingdom for all of us."

Joe Fong, another "old-timer" who testified, spoke about going back to the time of Bishop Roberts and said his time in the ward "has made me a better person." Fong, who has cerebral palsy that inhibits his walking and speaking, served a two-year mission to Hawaii and held numerous callings in the ward, including membership clerk and second counselor in the elders quorum. He was a fixture in every fast meeting, even the last one at the singles ward he would attend, always getting up to share his love of the gospel.

"I felt that because I was more likely to get a calling, the opportunity to serve was much greater here than it would have been in a family ward," he told me. His lasting impression of the singles ward is the "spirit of love" that pervaded it and the "spirit of trying to



MARVIN FRIEDMAN

*"The real reason we're in Bosnia is so that in thirty years there can be a temple there—look at Korea and Japan."*

*"I accompanied the ward choir, performing at the bedside or funerals of those with HIV. I had been unaccustomed to thinking about people my age dying. AIDS changed that, cruelly and swiftly."*

understand people's challenges." People aren't perfect anywhere, of course, and Fong said he often thought members were hesitant to approach him. "But I could have gone up to them, too," he said.

Janina Cobar, originally from Guatemala, spent four years in the ward. "I was a stranger, and they took me in," she said. "I felt so welcomed by everyone . . . all of a sudden I had all these great, supportive friends. I grew from their testimonies, their friendships, and their talents." She calls the ouster of herself and others "the end of a great era. I will always be grateful for the opportunity I had to be part of such an incredible ward, and I will treasure these years with my fondest of memories." She added: "It didn't matter what country, what race, how tall, how skinny—we were all friends and enjoyed each other's company. Love and acceptance was what made our ward so special."

Under Bishop Wade's successor, the very straightforward Richard Hollon, called in 1993, the ward became more orthodox. "I told those whom I dealt with that to be gay is okay, but to be sexual would be violating their covenants," Hollon said. His wife, Marilyn, said stake officials were concerned that the singles ward had gone too far. "There was this group of gay people who wanted to set the agenda. Richard [Bishop Hollon] told them he didn't care whether they were homosexual or not; that was between them and God. But if you break the law of chastity, you're subject to the same discipline as anyone else." The number of gay men attending the ward has dropped considerably, due to inactivity, attrition, and from deaths from AIDS.

Hollon was stern but loving. He recalled

at least two funerals where the families of men who had died of AIDS would not attend. "You love your children," he said, "whether they do good or bad." David Howard remembered attending the 24 July 1994 memorial service for Dan Stephens, who had lived with AIDS for more than a decade before succumbing. "He feared the church of his youth and God," Howard wrote in his journal.



James Kent, left, was in an "angry phase" when he wore high heels to church; Joe Fong, right, who has cerebral palsy, felt a "spirit of understanding" from ward members.

"Despite his fear, there was a conviction to do something about getting straight with God and receiving forgiveness for his sins." Stephens returned to Church and, several years later, went through the temple. "The sickness, though it killed him in the end, was the catalyst that helped him turn to his creator," Howard said. "He was like the prodigal son."

**D**URING Bishop Hollon's tenure, the policy that anyone who was striving to live the gospel could attend the singles ward was still largely intact. Hollon said that during the past year, rumors had begun about the demise of not only singles wards but also ethnic wards. "We were told

we would be eliminated," Hollon said. But it didn't happen. Hollon speculated there may have been many complaints to Church headquarters about discontinuing the wards. Whatever happened, the San Francisco Single Adult Ward remained in existence, but Hollon, at the request of the stake presidency, began talking to members in their fifties to tell them their records were being sent to

their geographical wards. He also contacted the bishops of those wards to tell them about the change.

"It was obvious that we had two wards within one, a singles ward [for older adults] and a young singles ward," said Hollon. He suggested the formation of an older single adult ward, which would hold its sacrament meeting with the young singles but have separate Sunday School and Relief Society/priesthood meetings. This suggestion was not accepted. When the time came for his release, in August 1997, Hollon asked

the San Francisco West Stake President, Rand Ollerton, to announce the coming change. Finally, after all these years, the San Francisco Single Adult Ward would live up to its designation as a ward for young singles. Everyone else would be asked to leave.

"I see a need to have singles wards," said Hollon, particularly in a region like the San Francisco Bay Area where the two overlapping stakes have about two thousand single members. Hollon said such wards give singles a stability they otherwise might not have. "This is a ward that shows love no matter what your situation, what you might find yourself involved in."

Bishop Richard Smith was left to carry out the new policy, which he did behind closed

doors. Neither he nor Ollerton, at least while I was still there, ever made any public acknowledgement, and the remaining members of the ward were left to puzzle out what was going on. (Both Ollerton and Smith declined to be interviewed.)

One sister voiced the concerns of many when she wondered why a church focused on eternity would make such a big deal about a birth date. A Catholic friend of mine wondered why any church would discourage active, participating members from attending. His own church and others are working mightily to hold on to their members by any means possible. Of the way the change was made, Hollon added: "I don't think they understand the total needs of those in this age group who were turned out and told to go find out where they belong." The ones who left under Hollon's tenure "knew their new bishops, and the bishops knew their names and had their records."

From officials who did not want their names used and from other members, I heard varying reasons for the change at the ward and, I gather, others in the Church. If the age range in singles wards is too great, older men "hit on" the younger women. Singles wards are meant to be temporary, and something is wrong if people wind up there for years. The geographical, family-oriented wards need the service of the single people. More than half the San Francisco West Stake, in which the singles ward is located, is composed of single members. If the single adult ward skimmed off the most active ones, what happened to the rest? Better, some suggested, to have active singles groups on a stakewide basis, and indeed, as this was written, ex-members of the ward were being called to start firesides and home evenings.

What is clear is that the Church continues to wrestle with the issue of what to do with its single adult wards. Should we even have them? If we do, they should be treated like other wards, not as if they were something slightly shameful, to be left behind as soon as possible. In today's world, many people, even those inside the Church, will remain single during this life, or a good chunk of it. Active participants in singles wards should be encouraged and applauded, not questioned for overstaying their welcome.

Single and family wards do need to have more contact. They're already talking about scheduling overlapping meetings so that single members can serve in Primary and mutual callings but still have their own sacrament meetings. The danger in eliminating singles wards is the marginalization of single people. The Church is devoted to family

values, and its meetings reflect this, especially the speeches from the pulpit. I've attended both family and singles wards, and I feel much more empathy in the singles wards for how difficult it is to be unmarried in a Church in which family is paramount.

I also think a greater age range is good for both younger and older singles; after all, there's a real possibility that you might not find your eternal partner in this life. Many young people, especially women, view that fate worse than death. But if they can look upon older people who are having fulfilling lives in the Church and in their careers, that is a blessing. It might even help the young women learn to "just say no" when the older men hit on them; after all, that's an age-old problem hardly confined to the Church. And

for us "old folks," interacting with and mentoring younger people allows us to continue to grow.

It is devastating emotionally and spiritually to be suddenly thrown out of a ward you have attended and served faithfully for years because your birth date falls at the wrong time. As Bishop Roberts put it, "Doggone it, it's hard enough already." The Church should be extending a helping hand to all those who are repentant and struggling to live the gospel, single and married, gay and straight. The San Francisco Single Adult Ward leaves a great legacy of love and acceptance. I echo Aileen Olson's words when I hope that the next generation can carry that on.

*Forgive us; we know not what we take for granted.* ☐



## THE VACATION

We once drove through Yellowstone Park,  
our only vacation.

My father, proud in his red convertible,  
top down, his shoulders bouldered like tanks,  
his prize blue eyes wide, then thin  
in a face of fast laughter.

My mother's moist white skin reflected the sun  
off high cheek bones as she told a funny story.  
Her blonde hair kept splashing my face as I leaned  
into the crease from the backseat to listen,  
masked in her spring scent  
like the wash on her clothesline at home.

I rarely think of those early days  
when love was still a fruit without bruises.  
More often I wake abruptly, shaking,  
two in the morning a bad habit,  
my father shooting the blank from the gun  
over my mother's head.

He only wanted to scare her, must have forgotten  
I was in the house.

Or the night her bedroom door  
swallowed the imprint of his fist,  
a strange man staggering from her room,  
jaw bearded in blood.

I look at black and white photos from that trip,  
myself taking turns holding hands  
with each parent  
while the other works the camera,  
never a way to keep us all in one shot.

—KERRI BROSTROM MASTERS