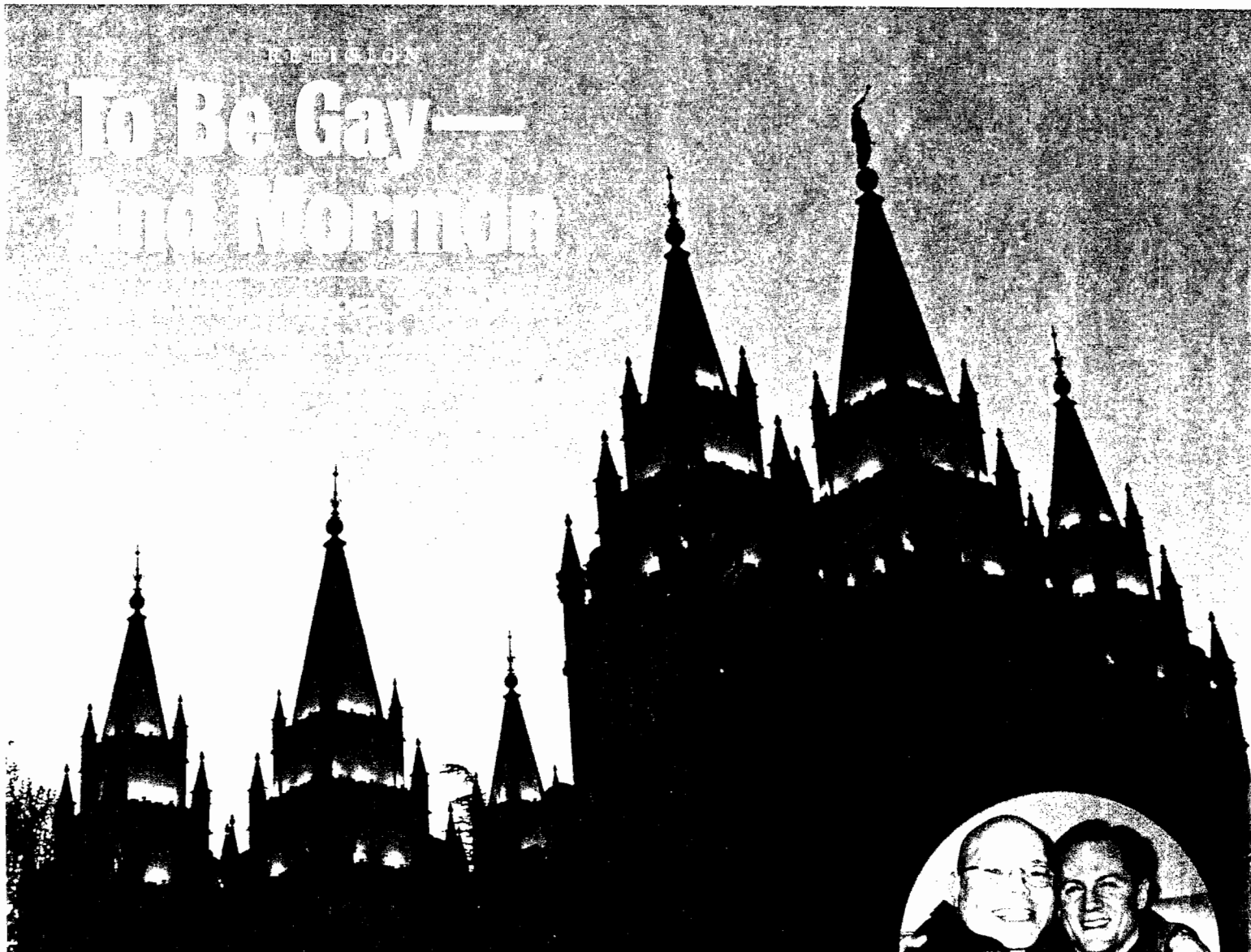


To Be Gay— and Mormon



BY MARK MILLER

IT HAD BECOME AN ALL TOO FAMILIAR sound. Late on the night of Feb. 24, Stuart Matis's mother lay awake in bed, listening to her 32-year-old son pacing his room, unable to sleep. She worried that his depression was worsening. A year earlier Matis had told his parents he was gay, and all three, as devout Mormons, had struggled to reconcile Matis's homosexuality with the teachings of their church. Matis found little comfort in Mormon doctrine, which regards homosexuality as an "abominable" sin. A church therapist instructed him to suppress his sexuality or to undergo "reparative therapy" to become a heterosexual. Matis was especially frustrated by the church's energetic efforts to pass Proposition 22, California's ballot measure banning same-sex marriage. The YES ON PROP 22 signs that dotted his Santa Clara neighborhood, many placed

there by church members, were a reminder of his failure to find acceptance as a Mormon and gay man.

Matis concluded he could not be both. That night, his mother got out of bed and wrote a letter asking the church to reconsider its position on gay Mormons. Only later would she learn that her son had been up writing his own letter, to his family and friends, explaining why he couldn't continue to live. Early the next morning, 11 days before voters would overwhelmingly approve Prop 22, Matis drove to the local Mormon church headquarters, pinned a DO NOT RESUSCITATE note to his shirt and shot himself in the head.

Matis's death galvanized gay activists, who accused Prop 22 supporters of driving him to the grave. Friends and family agree that the church's active support of the measure contributed to his decision to end his life

**Sharer
of the
secret:**

*Matis
(right) with
his friend Clay
Whitmer in late 1999*

when—and where—he did. Clearly, they say, he was trying to make a statement.

But that is only part of the story. Though gays and lesbians enjoy more rights and protections than ever before—last week Vermont approved same-sex partnerships akin to marriage—gays in search of spiritual support often find their church, synagogue or mosque to be far less accepting. To Mormons, who adhere to a strict moral code of conduct, disapproval by the church can be especially devastating. For Stuart Matis, it apparently was too much to bear. (The Mor-

mon Church declined to comment about Matis. "Suicide is a tragedy of great personal loss for family and community," said a spokesman. "We express our sympathy and have respect for the privacy of the families.")

Even as a young boy, friends recall, Matis cherished his Mormon identity and the church's moral demands. But at 7, Matis began harboring a terrifying secret: he realized he was attracted to boys. For the next 20 years he kept the secret from everyone he knew, and prayed fervently for God to make him heterosexual. He tried to make up for what he considered his shortcoming by being perfect in other areas of his life. He studied hard in school and attended every church function he could. Though he deeply loved his family, he showed little outward affection, fearing he would blurt out his secret in an avalanche of emotion. "He would punish himself if he had a [homosexual] thought," says his childhood friend Jenifer Mouritsen. "He wouldn't allow himself to go to a friend's birthday party or [wouldn't] watch his favorite TV program." Instead, he would sit in his room and read Scripture. He set goals for himself not to think about boys for a certain length of time.

In some ways, being a Mormon made it easy for Matis to conceal his homosexuality. The religion strictly forbids any intimate physical contact between men and women before marriage. As a teenager, Matis hung out with a group of boys and girls who went to parties and school dances together.

As he got older, it became more difficult to keep his feelings hidden. He enrolled at Brigham Young University in Utah, spending hours in the library looking for a technique for becoming straight. After graduating, he eventually landed a job at Andersen Consulting back in California in 1996. Handsome and single, he seemed a perfect catch. At church, he avoided well-meaning members who gently prodded him to settle down with a nice Mormon girl.

Finally, early last year, his agony spilled into the open. Depressed and desperate, he had begun for the first time to conclude that maybe the church was wrong. He thought about leaving it. He approached his local bishop, Russell Hancock, and told him he



“He felt if he were just better, if he were a little more righteous, if he prayed more, that God would change him.”

—BILL MATIS, *Stuart's younger brother*

was gay and had thought about killing himself. Hancock, who counseled Matis for several months, says he “pleaded with Stuart. I said if this is a choice between life and the church, he should choose his life.”

Hancock urged him to tell his parents he was gay. Matis had told only one other person, his friend Clay Whitmer. The two had met in Italy, when both were serving their obligatory proselytizing mission for the church. Back in California years later, Whitmer and Matis confided to each other that they were gay. Matis's brother, Bill, and sister Katherine began wondering aloud about their brother's sexual orientation. Their mother went to Stuart's room early last year to settle the matter once and for all. “Stuart, are you gay?” she asked. “Yes, I am,” he said.

To Matis's surprise, his family accepted his homosexuality. They spent many evenings talking and crying into the night.

He was able to tell them how much he loved them. Unburdening himself to his family was a relief; yet it did little to lift his depression. He struggled to figure out how to live as a gay man without disobeying the teachings of the church—which requires gays and lesbians to remain forever celibate. He went to a few gay dance clubs and parties but didn't dare consider intimacy with men he met, and apparently remained celibate his whole life.

Matis's despair mixed with anger. He lashed out at the church's teachings in a blistering, 12-page letter to a cousin. “Straight members have absolutely no idea what it is like to grow up gay in this church,” he wrote. “It is a life of constant torment, self-hatred and internalized homophobia.” Matis stopped going to church altogether, but would not let go of his faith in the church. “He was able to [reject Mormon teachings on homosexuality] intellectually,” says Alejandro Navarro, a gay friend, “but emotionally he couldn't.” Late last year, he told his parents he'd bought a gun, but warned them that if they tried to put him in an institution he would never speak to them again. The last week of his life, in a final act of separation, he stopped wearing his “garments,” the ritual shirt and shorts many Mormons wear under their clothes.

Matis's parents found the suicide note on their son's bed the morning of his death. They frantically called his friends, hoping they'd know where he went. One person did: Clay Whitmer. Matis had told Whitmer of his plans to commit suicide. Whitmer planned to cheer up his old friend, but didn't get there in time. A few weeks later, anguished at his friend's death and tormented by his own long-term depression, Whitmer put a gun to his own head.

“Mother, Dad and family. I have committed suicide,” Matis's note began. “I engaged my mind in a false dilemma: either one was gay or one was Christian. As I believed I was Christian, I believed I could never be gay.” Stuart Matis struggled his whole life to resolve that dilemma. The people who dressed him for burial were struck by the sight of his knees, deeply callused from praying for an answer that never came. ■