

Good morning, my name is JC. I am a gay man. I could easily be the poster boy to represent someone who did not want to be gay and spent a lifetime trying not to be gay. I was asked to give the message today on ONA Sunday. Someone suggested I share why I am a part of Hope and how I got involved in Hope Church. Surprisingly, my involvement had nothing to do with the church being ONA or with the fact that Sandy Brown, a good friend, was a church member at the time. I didn't even know what ONA meant when I joined and I had just met Sandy and don't think I even knew she was a church member.

One day I got a call from a lady who introduced herself as Holly Feldman who was church moderator at the time. Somehow, she knew that I played piano. She asked if I would ever consider being the church's pianist. My first gut reaction, unspoken, was, "Lady, over my dead body."

I was raised Catholic and believed every word I was taught. I eventually entered a seminary because I wanted to be a priest. I was there for four years. By the way, on the topic of ONA, a classmate of mine EO eventually became the national director of Catholic Charities. It was during his directorship that Catholic Charities stopped being in the business of adoptions because they did not want to adopt children to same sex couples and the law said that they could not discriminate. When this happened, I tried to contact Eddy to discuss the situation, but all efforts were blocked. If only he could meet Moi and Ryan and their beautiful family.

After my four years at the seminary, I decided to join the religious order that taught at the seminary, the Salvatorian Fathers or Society of the Divine Savior. That was the first BIG MISTAKE of my life. I entered the noviciate of the order, a kind of cloistered monastic setting. The order was not a monastic order, but their one year noviciate was monastic-like. I did not stay long. My personality was not suited to the setting. I found it very depressing. I was maturing in my sense of reasoning and was finding aspects of Catholic practices unreasonable. And I as a gay person found it difficult being in such close quarters with people to whom I was attracted.

I resumed my life in regular society. I eventually decided to marry a female friend, thinking I could change myself. I was honest with her and told her of my same sex attraction. She also felt I could change myself and she would help me. SECOND BIG MISTAKE. I realized very quickly that it was a mistake. But I made the commitment and felt I had to stick with it. I stuck it out for 36 years.

I was so miserable during that time that I sought answers again in religion, MY THIRD AND BIGGEST MISTAKE. It was like jumping from the frying pan into the fire. I joined an ultra- conservative pentecostal church. We could not dance, play cards, drink alcohol or

smoke, go to movies or even seek medical help from doctors. All healing came from faith in God. If you did not get a resolution to a health problem, it was because you didn't believe strong enough. It was there I learned that the stricter you are in religious thinking, the bigger hypocrite you make of yourself. I never experienced their "born again" experience. Because of that, in their eyes I was a sinner destined for hell. And I believed them. It was there I witnessed the maliciousness and danger of the practice of speaking in tongues. It was a great way for someone who was ticked off at another person to vent their wrath by jumping up and down pointing fingers and babbling in some nonsensical tongue. It was nothing but a self-spirit hiding behind the guise of a divine spirit. It was because of these experiences that I coined the term "arrogant religion." (I'm right, you're wrong. I know everything, you know nothing. I'm going to heaven, you're going to hell.) Yet, I stayed with them 25 years.

They say that in order to make a real change in one's life one must reach rock bottom. I reached that rock bottom. My rock bottom was the conclusion that when I died I would go to hell. I didn't care anymore. I said OK, but until then I'll do the best I can with my life. I left the church and separated from my wife (we never divorced). I soon realized that I wasn't going to a place called hell. I had been living in hell. Hell is something people do to each other here on earth.

Back to the call from Holly Feldman. I told her I would consider the offer. I needed the extra income at the time. I knew I could do the job and felt that I could resign anytime if I sensed "arrogant religion". My first Sunday here sitting at that piano was quite an experience. I was just waiting for arrogance. None came that first Sunday nor any Sunday afterwards and I felt I found my spiritual home.

On Mental Health Sunday Carol M. gave a poignant message about her belief in angels, people who helped her through difficult times. I know there are angels because I'm looking out at a room full of them right now. Religion doesn't have to be complicated. I have arrived at a very simple philosophy: "We are all in this life together. Let's help each other get through it". If we spend our time living for each other, caring for each other, helping each other, we will have no time for rules and regulations, judgement, condemnation, or fixation on an after-life.

It is prayed every Sunday during the Lord's Prayer: Thy kingdom come. I'm not waiting for an after life kingdom. Thanks to you and your position of ONA, for me the kingdom is here now. It HAS come. It's in this very room. It's here I sense the divine. If people are capable of making hell for each other, we also are capable of making heaven for each other. It's our choice. For me the kingdom is here and we are each other's angels.