



the fellowship message

"Proclaiming freedom for the captives." ISAIAH 61

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The Courage to Surrender by Chris Van Epps

Listen to Chris' story: www.pfhope.com/stories/vanepps.m4a

I pretended to be secure in who I was, but deep down I felt weak, afraid, and ashamed of how different I seemed from the other boys. I wanted to be like them, but I felt like an outsider and was confused about what it meant to be a man. Looking back, I realize that surrendering my life to God required courage, and through that, God showed me that masculinity is not about becoming someone else but becoming the man He created me to be.

I was born to young parents, just eighteen and twenty years old, and not long after I was born, their relationship ended when my dad entered the U.S. Army and became largely absent from my childhood. A few years later, my mom married my stepdad, and what could have been an opportunity for positive male leadership in my life instead became a season of fear and confusion.

While my stepdad provided for my physical needs, he was very strict and emotionally unavailable. Most of the time, I was afraid of him, and with my biological father absent, I never developed a healthy understanding of masculinity or what it meant to feel safe around men. My mom, on the other hand, was my safe place. She was loving, protective, and always there for me.

Because of that, I mostly hung out with girls. They felt safe to me, while the boys felt mysterious and intimidating. Over time, I became very feminine, and eventually I began to look at boys the way the girls around me did. The boys at school noticed, and they tormented me for it. Their rejection only deepened my fear, insecurity, and distrust of other men.

By high school, I had developed a reputation as the "feminine gay guy." The bullying, shame, and confusion became overwhelming, and I attempted to take my own life multiple times. A few days before graduation, terrified of what I might do to myself, I came out to my parents. One week later, I moved across the country to Maryland to start over where no one knew me.

I quickly embraced the gay lifestyle. I started going to underage gay clubs, and for the first time in my life, I felt accepted. Men responded to me in ways I had never experienced before, and the attention was intoxicating. Eventually, I entered my first serious relationship, but after two years, it ended in infidelity and betrayal which deepened my distrust of men. The pain was unbearable, and I turned to drugs for comfort. Before long, I became addicted.



Chris is an alumnus of PF's Taking Back Ground discipleship program.

After hitting what felt like rock bottom, I was afraid and cried out to God for help. I had grown up attending church and knew many of the stories in the Bible, but I never had a true relationship with God. So, when I moved back to Oregon, I started attending church, hoping to develop that relationship. But the church didn't really know how to help someone like me, and eventually I drifted away and returned to my old lifestyle.

I moved to Portland and began working at a gay nightclub as a bartender and DJ. While I had managed to quit using drugs, I replaced them with alcohol instead. Alcohol consumed me and brought out the worst in me. Over the next several years, I destroyed nearly every friendship and relationship I had, and I hated myself for it.

Afraid of the person I had become, I decided to move away for another attempt at a fresh start. That's when I met the man of my dreams and for the first time in my life, I felt truly at peace. Three years later, we entered into a legally recognized union. We adopted dogs, bought a house, and everything seemed perfect. Then 2020 hit and the world turned upside down. Everything felt uncertain and chaotic, and the fear affected our union, which slowly began to fall apart. Desperate, I turned back to God.

As I began seeking Him, I encountered the Lord's presence in a way I never had before. I couldn't get enough! I knew that most churches believed homosexuality was sinful, but I didn't fully understand why. I began attending gay-affirming churches, but something inside me didn't sit right so I turned to Scripture for answers, and what I read changed everything. The gray areas I had been told existed in affirming faith weren't there. I was no longer convinced that my monogamous same-sex relationship was acceptable. I was devastated, because I knew it meant I was living outside of God's will. And I also knew that if I wanted to fully surrender my life to Christ and walk in biblical truth, I would have to end my relationship and leave my lifestyle behind.

For months, I wrestled with fear—fear of hurting my spouse, fear of being alone, fear of starting over, and fear that I would never be strong enough to do what God was asking of me. After spending most of my life searching for peace, security, and acceptance, I felt like I had finally found them, and I was terrified to surrender the life I had built. I became angry and depressed, because deep down I knew what obedience

would cost me. Then one day, my mom called me and told me to read Joshua 1:9: *"Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go."*

That verse gave me the strength I needed, and I left my relationship that same day. I moved in with family and found an incredible church community that walked with me through healing and restoration. In a beautiful twist that only God could orchestrate, the associate pastor at that church had signed up for Portland Fellowship's newsletter fourteen years earlier after someone else had visited the church seeking help for unwanted same-sex attraction. That person never returned, but my pastor knew to point me to Portland Fellowship and in the fall of 2024, I began Taking Back Ground. What that program revealed to me about my childhood wounds and the ways they had shaped my life was beyond anything I could have imagined.

For the first time, I began to understand my fear of men, my longing for acceptance, and my need for healthy male relationships. The program provided a safe place filled with peers and mentors who truly understood my journey. It challenged me in ways that were uncomfortable at times, but exactly what I needed. Through that process, God began restoring parts of my identity, my understanding of masculinity, and my relationship with Him in ways I never thought possible.

It was during that same season of healing and restoration that I met a woman who caught my attention. As I continued to go through the TBG program, our friendship steadily grew, and over the next two years I fell in love with her. In August of 2026, we are going to be married. She has been an incredible part of my journey, helping reveal the man God had always created me to be. Through her, I have experienced a true and Godly love that I never thought would be possible.

The journey hasn't been easy, but God has shown me that the cost of obedience is not always what we think it will be. I was terrified that surrendering my life to Him meant I would lose everything, including my happiness, but in reality it saved me. Philippians 1:6 says, *"And I am certain that God, who began the good work within you, will continue his work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns."* Through surrender, God has been faithful to His word, bringing healing, restoration, freedom, and revealing the man He created me to be.



Chris and his fiancée, Karees

Mentors Who Shaped Us: **KathyGrace Duncan** by Mel Elsasser-Holmes

This year, we are sharing how God has used mentors to shape and transform those struggling with sexual and relational brokenness. We pray these reflections will bless and encourage you to become a mentor yourself, so that God's grace can flow through you to others.

I began my journey with Portland Fellowship back in 2012, months after my dad went home to be with Jesus after a battle with lung cancer. I was raw from grief, exhausted, wounded from my own struggles with unwanted same-sex attraction, and hungry for freedom and healing that could only be found in Jesus. Before I walked through the doors of the PF house on my first night of Taking Back Ground, I remember feeling immense fear that there was no hope of healing for me, and that this would be another community where I would feel rejected and unloved. I'm so glad that God helped me take that first step over the threshold, because on the other side waiting was the start of something amazing!



During my first year of TBG I was very shy and very quiet. I didn't interact much during the lessons and kept to myself during small groups. Oftentimes I would quietly draw in my sketchbook when I would get too anxious to talk to people. I wanted to observe everyone around me to see if they were safe. After some time, I was able to open up and bond with the incredible women in my small group. My group leaders helped me gain confidence in my relationship with Jesus, but also confidence and love for myself, especially in the areas I felt were unlovable. They also portrayed the strength of resilience in remaining steadfast to God and the healing process, despite the hardships life can bring. My old beliefs and lies about God began to fall away. I came to know Him as a loving and caring Father; not someone who merely tolerated my existence and judged me whenever I made mistakes. I was slowly getting to know myself as the woman that He created me to be!

One woman I observed and looked up to was the leader of the other women's group, KathyGrace. When she would walk into the room, the atmosphere immediately lit up with joy! I watched the loving way she interacted with other people with intention and purpose, and enjoyed when she taught and facilitated discussions. I tended to stick close to people in my own small group, but I appreciated KathyGrace from afar.

I graduated Taking Back Ground with a little more pep in my step, eager to dive deeper into community, and I was less afraid of people. The next year's groups were made up of previous alumni from Portland Fellowship programs who wanted to reconnect. My fourth year at PF I decided to join the Upper Room Program, where I lived in community with other interns in the PF house, pursuing deeper spiritual, emotional, and relational maturity. That year I was finally placed in a small group with KathyGrace, as an assistant leader. As I got to know her more, she inspired me to explore my own unique femininity, and helped me understand that I'm truly treasured by God. KathyGrace was compassionate during times of struggle and wasn't afraid to lovingly call me out when it was needed! She carried an air of safety and security, allowing me room to breathe and just "be".

Among the many things KathyGrace poured into me over the years was encouragement to encounter Jesus through my artwork. I'm an artist at heart! I was always drawn (pun intended) towards anything creative and had dreams of being a professional artist. KathyGrace emboldened me to invite the Holy Spirit into my art making process, and I have never been the same since. God has used art as a tool for major healing in my life, and as another way to relate with Him.

Soon after I graduated from the Upper Room Program, I met and married my husband Nathaniel, who had also gone through TBG. We both helped lead small groups at PF for a few years, had our son Elliot, and then we moved to the East Coast in 2020. I graduated from Multnomah Bible College with a Bachelors in Psychology, and I now work with neurodivergent young adults, and I also teach art classes centered around therapeutic art expression. My husband and I have met so many wonderful people and churches where we've been given space to share our testimonies. We would not be where we are today without the love and support poured into us by all of the amazing leaders at Portland Fellowship, including KathyGrace. We are forever grateful! *To connect with Mel's artist pages on Facebook and Instagram, her handle is: **Amazink Creations**

July - August Calendar & Services

tuesdays in july & august

Summer Series

PF's Zoom Summer Series this year is *The Journey*. This 8-week series follows the Israelites journey out of Egypt, through the Wilderness, and into the Promised Land. *The Journey* is open to Christians struggling with sexual and relational brokenness, as well as friends & family of LGBTQ-identified loved ones.

Topics will include:

- Egypt: *Captivity*
- Egypt: *The Rescue*
- Wilderness: *Complaints & Miracles*
- Wilderness: *Instruction & Rebellion*
- Wilderness: *Blessings & Curses*
- Wilderness: *Hopes & Fears*
- Promised Land: *Fighting the Battles*
- Promised Land: *Growing in Freedom*

6:00-7:30 p.m. PST on Zoom
portlandfellowship.com/events.php

july 10, august 14

In-Person Hope Group

For friends & family of gay & trans-identified loved ones. Join us for dinner, an encouraging testimony, and time for sharing & prayer.
6:30-8:30 p.m. PST

portlandfellowship.com/friends_family.php

Follow us!

Get updates and inspirational resources on social media.

Facebook & Instagram:
[@portlandfellowship](https://www.facebook.com/portlandfellowship)

Additional updates:

www.portlandfellowship.com

Speakers, counseling and support for youth

can be set up through the office.

Summer Series 2026: The Journey



This summer, we are offering *The Journey* discipleship program on Tuesday nights in July & August, from 6–7:30pm (PST) on Zoom. This

eight-week study is for those seeking freedom from unwanted SSA & gender confusion, as well as family & friends of LGBTQ-identified loved ones. *The Journey* is also a great introduction to Portland Fellowship for those considering joining our programs in the fall. Zoom intakes required for those new to PF. To register, visit: www.portlandfellowship.com/events.php

Encouraging Resource: Do You See Me?

Ricky Chelette, one of our dear friends from Living Hope Ministries, recently published a helpful new book called *Do You See Me?*

In a confused culture and a church often marked by fear, many of the conversations about homosexuality and sexual brokenness have generated more hurt than healing. Some respond with harshness. Others with silence. Still others with compromise. But what does it look like to respond with both biblical conviction and Christlike compassion? *Do You See Me?* invites readers to:

- Understand what Scripture truly teaches about sexuality and identity
- Recover God's good design for gender
- Explore the deeper roots of sexual and relational brokenness
- Grasp a Gospel-centered vision of real freedom
- Walk wisely and lovingly with friends, church members, and children who struggle

To order: <https://books.by/growth-publishing/do-you-see-me>



The Fellowship Message is a monthly publication of Portland Fellowship, a ministry proclaiming freedom from homosexuality through the power of Jesus Christ.

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