

**Double Exclusion to Double Embrace: Caring for the Spiritual Care Needs of Transgender, Gender Non-Conforming, and Nonbinary People and Communities**

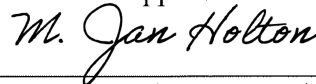
by

Angel Celeste Collie

Duke Divinity School  
Duke University


Date: April 18, 2022

Approved:



---

Jan M. Holton, Supervisor



---

Justin Sabia-Tanis, Second Reader



---

William H. Willimon, DMin. Program Director

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Ministry  
in the Divinity School of Duke University.

April 18, 2022

ABSTRACT

**Double Exclusion to Double Embrace: Caring for the Spiritual Care Needs of Transgender, Gender Non-Conforming, and Nonbinary People and Communities**

by

Angel Celeste Collie

Duke Divinity School  
Duke University

Date: April 18, 2022

Approved:

*M. Jan Holton*

---

Jan M. Holton, Supervisor

*J. S. Tanis*

---

Justin Sabia-Tanis, Second Reader

*Will Willimon*

---

William H. Willimon, DMin. Program Director

An abstract of a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Ministry  
in the Divinity School of Duke University.

April 18, 2022

Copyright by  
Angel Celeste Collie  
April 18, 2022

## **ABSTRACT**

Transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people have historically had a bad relationship with Christianity. We have experienced rejection, physical harm, and spiritual violence justified in the name of faith. Such a history of trauma means it is hard for transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people to find refuge and sanctuary in the church. Those who have reconciled or remained connected to faith are often looked upon suspiciously by others within our communities. Even the most affirming churches fail to recognize the unique needs of transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people. Many others stand by and remain complicit in the harm done in the name of faith. Using memoirs and resources written by and about the lives and experiences of transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people, this resource equips pastors and lay leaders to understand better the spiritual needs of transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people and communities.

## **DEDICATION**

This work is dedicated to transgender, gender non-conforming and nonbinary people, the people who love us already, and those who one day will.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	iv
Dedication .....	v
Contents .....	vi
Acknowledgements.....	vii
Introduction: Congregational and Communal Change: Creating a Caring Community.....	1
Chapter One: Trans(gressive) Theology .....	13
Chapter Two: Silence is Harm: Gaps in Spiritual Care .....	29
Chapter Three: Foundational Concepts and Intersectional Spiritual Care .....	36
Chapter Four: Congregational Care: Creating Spaces of Radical Welcome .....	50
Chapter Five: Trans Inclusion Through Worship, Words and Practice.....	59
Chapter Six: Gender Identity Development Across Lifespans .....	79
Chapter Seven: Sexuality and Relationships .....	121
Conclusion.....	139
References.....	147
Biography.....	154

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I cannot begin to name the countless people who have loved me into wholeness and believed in me even when I found it hard to believe in myself. You know who you are. I am deeply grateful for the time and wisdom of Rev. Dr. Jan Holton, Rev. Dr. Justin Sabia-Tanis, CJ Junk, and Rev. Jakob Hero-Shaw. Your investment in me as mentors, readers, and spiritual beacons means the world to me.

## INTRODUCTION

### **Congregational and Communal Change: Creating a Caring Community**

*I can only hope that a more nuanced understanding of the breadth of transgender hermeneutics will encourage Christians to establish a culture of love and grace towards transgender people.<sup>1</sup> - Katherine Apostolacus*

Many transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people have strained relationships with Christian communities due to years of exclusion and psychological harm. Only recently, some congregations have begun to make intentional efforts to extend the hand of welcome and repair those past harms. With more congregations and communities discerning a call to become welcoming and affirming, there continues to be a need for congregations, pastoral leadership, and laity to care for the spiritual needs of transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people and communities. Through an intersectional identity-conscious lens, this project explores congregational inclusion and pastoral theology for transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people.

By focusing on transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people's lives, identities, and experiences, I will articulate and develop suggested pathways for spiritual care in corporate worship and through the individual pastoral encounter. In so doing, I will add to the literature in pastoral theology and provide new resources to improve the quality of spiritual care for transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people and communities. I have so often heard it said that "to know us is to

---

<sup>1</sup> Katherine Apostolacus, "The Bible and the Transgender Christian: Mapping Transgender Hermeneutics in the 21st Century," *Journal of the Bible and its Reception* 5, no. 1 (2018): 1–29, <https://login.proxy.lib.duke.edu/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/2302031460?accountid=10598> (accessed June 6, 2020), 26.



love us.” This guide provides a window into our lives so that you may begin to know us, fall in love with us in the fullness to which God has called, and thereby become active participants of God’s radical love in the world so that God’s kin-dom on Earth can be realized.

The call to do this work comes from a very personal place. I grew up in a small rural Southern Baptist Church in White Level, North Carolina, and the church was a significant part of my life from as far back as I can remember. I loved everything about it: the singing, the fellowship, the preaching, and Bible study. Early on I felt a strong sense of a personal, loving, and just God. I loved going to church throughout my childhood and had a strong desire to serve God. I would go up beside Great Grandma Hunter and ‘sing’ beside her in the choir. I loved the Bible school lessons and songs that Mrs. Marjorie taught, and Vacation Bible School was something I looked forward to all year long. I often went to multiple Bible Schools in the summer: one at White Level Baptist Church, one at Duke Memorial Methodist Church, and sometimes, even another at Red Bud Baptist Church.

None of these were my home church. My Grandfather served as a deacon at Saints Delight Baptist Church in White Level, and my mother, aunt, and uncle had been raised there as children. I remember during childhood being there almost every time the doors were open: Sunday school early on Sunday morning, church after that, and back again Sunday night and Wednesday night for prayer meetings. I remember attending the occasional Ladies Auxiliary meeting with my Grandmother where I always learned so much about the others in the local community but not so much about the Bible which

looking back makes me laugh. There were not many other children, but I always had a bit of an old soul. It was there that I learned about Jesus, sang “Just As I Am”, and walked down to the altar to make a public profession of faith after I slipped my hand up while every head was bowed and eye was closed and prayed a prayer of salvation.

The verses I learned there, the relationships formed there, and the love of God cultivated there formed my spiritual foundation. As I got older, I desired to be around more youth and people my age. I began attending White Level Baptist Church but would frequently return to Saint’s Delight to worship with my grandparents. Being involved in the youth group at White Level helped me grow deeper into my faith in another way. The youth group was exciting, and we went to Christian concerts, to ski resorts, and held pool parties. At White Level, I was Baptized in the font just behind the choir loft, the defining moment for a Southern Baptist. With a more relatable faith, I grew spiritually there. The youth group and the community there embraced me and loved me. Well, at least I thought they did!

Being a teenager and in Middle school brings about all kinds of exploration and discovery. The youth group was a space to make sense of some of those things. We had programs like *True Love Waits*, where we talked about love, marriage, and abstinence. More and more, however, I felt a growing distance between myself and the things we were learning about love and relationships. Along with discussions about abstinence came many assumptions about attraction, gender, and expectations. I had never really fit in with the girls I grew up with, and I certainly did not resonate with the pressures pushing me to be like them. I was always drawn to sports, like football, basketball, and

Tae Kwon Do. I was a “tomboy” in every sense of the word. In all we were learning, I never saw myself reflected in anything we were learning or heard anything to give voice to my feelings. It instilled questions of doubt about myself and I often wondered what was wrong with me. This began to be internalized into feelings that I was a bad Christian or not faithful enough at a young age which chipped away at my sense of self-worth and self-esteem early on.

Growing up in a small rural town meant that there was not much separation between the community, school, and the church. I saw the same peers and adults in both places. A deacon at church served as the athletics director for the middle school and my favorite ‘lunch lady’ in elementary school served on the volunteer rescue squad with my grandparents. It was the kind of community where you could not get away with much. If I got in trouble at school, word would frequently travel back home before I did. I never fit in with the girls in school and was always more comfortable in the gym or on the ball field. I was on the track team, the basketball team, and fought my way onto the football team where I would eventually start as defensive end. I found a way to carve out space to be myself, but as I got older and into my teens, the community, church, and school began to exert a kind of pressure that told me I was wrong and should put away my “tomboyish” ways. My coaches begin to insist that I ride to games with the cheerleaders instead of the football team to games. Subtle messages about school dances communicated that I should look prettier in hopes that a boy would ask me to the dance. Sex-ed was divided between boys in one classroom and girls in another. The discomfort

inside grew because I could not deny that my experience was different from all of the spoken and unspoken expectations around me.

Then one day, almost like a lightbulb coming on, it hit me: I am a lesbian. Slowly, I began trying to understand what that meant. I searched the internet because I could not find books in my school library, and there had never been one mention of gender or sexual diversity in sex-ed or when we discussed love, marriage, and sex at church. I learned that one of my mother's friends was a lesbian, and I asked to see her because she was the only person I knew who was out. Unfortunately, when I came home, my Mom was on the phone with her, and she had outed me. I later learned that she had 'bet' that I would come out and had made a joke of it assuming my Mom would be as affirming to me as she had been to her. She learned the hard way it can be different when it is a child. My Mom came into my room that night and said, "I hope you know that if you are gay, you are going to hell." She stormed out and slammed the door saying nothing else.

Now everything around me began to fall apart. Coming out had an overwhelmingly negative impact in most areas of my life. Very few of the adults in my life were supportive, and many were downright harmful. My church family, which had always been a home away from home, turned on me, and my "friends" and teammates began to bully me. I went from being a 3-sport athlete, an honor student, and an active member of my youth group to failing my classes, slacking off, and contemplating suicide after being told that the God I had spent so much of my life loving and worshiping all of a sudden hated me and saw me as an abomination.

Previously, the White Level Baptist Church youth group had become like a family to me. We attended camp at Camp Caswell together, went on ski trips, had pizza parties, and navigated early ethical decisions together through a Christian lens. We wrestled with scripture and prayed together just as hard as we played. We took our roles in the church seriously and understood that we were role models for younger members of the congregation. Being a member of that youth group served as an essential navigational beacon for me until I came out. But the friendships I had formed all crumbled after I came out.

During that time in the church, it was customary to pray at the altar during services. After I came out I would find myself surrounded by my peers and our youth minister at the altar. They would pray that I would be released from the “demons of homosexuality.” Pick-up basketball games were commonplace after church as our parents took care of church business. But things got awkward after a few folks admitted that their parents had told them they could not interact with me anymore. The pastor and youth minister condemned my praying on the altar and told me I was making a mockery of the church by going up to pray with my ‘piercings and homosexual colors’ because of a subtle pair of rainbow earrings I wore. As painful as it all was, I continued to go to church and endure it because I believed that is what it meant to be faithful. For a while, I bought into the idea that if I prayed hard enough and became a ‘better Christian’ that God would change me.

However, my formal relationship with the church soon came to an end when I heard a knock on the door one afternoon. My mother opened it, and I heard distant

conversation moving towards my room in the back of the house. After a single knock on my door, my mother opened it, and my youth minister and a member of the church who worked at the local Sheriff's department emerged. They came in and explained they were there to take me for psychological counseling because of my homosexuality. The deputy, who was out of uniform, had his handcuffs in hand. I had nowhere to go because they were blocking the door, so I had no choice but to be handcuffed and taken with them to my youth minister's mini-van. I could see that my Mom's heart was broken, but I know she truly believed she was doing the thing that would save me from what she had long been taught was a sin.

It was a long 45-minute ride to Raleigh as I contemplated how I would run away or escape. I knew that would not be possible with handcuffs and my hands behind my back, although I remember how afraid I was and how tempted I was to run away and hide in the nearest bushes. Once we arrived at a Christian Psychiatric Clinic, I was taken in and evaluated. The 'counselors' there assured my mother and the others that I desperately needed to be admitted as an inpatient to the facility and promised they could help cure my 'homosexual desires.' Thankfully, this was one time that not having insurance was lifesaving. When they found out my family could not afford to pay and I did not have insurance, the situation was not quite as dire, and they referred me to a state-run psychiatric hospital. With more hope from being turned away, we set off for the second psychiatric evaluation of the day.

The experience at the state hospital was very different from the one at the Christian-based facility. They listened closely with more openness and less judgment.

They insisted that the handcuffs be removed and requested that the church member and the youth minister leave while talking with my mother and me. In this conversation, they talked to us about coming out, about sexual differences, and ultimately questioned the beliefs and actions that the church had taken in the name of faith. The social worker provided us with resources, told us about other youth coming out, and congratulated my mother on having a typical teenager.

The ride home was awkward, and my youth minister continued to warn my mother of the dangers that could be ahead. As a backup plan, she suggested that I meet regularly with a Christian counselor she would arrange. Desperately wanting to be a part of my faith community again, I agreed. After the day's traumatic events, I think I agreed in part because I just wanted to avoid being whisked away for another 'psychiatric consultation' somewhere else. I remember my first session with the counselor. We met in the fellowship hall, and she brought me a planner with the Christian music singer Rebecca Saint James on the cover. She had hoped we could use it to track prayers and devotionals meant to help rid me of my 'homosexual thoughts.' I do not think she expected me to respond to the gift with a commentary on the attractiveness of the singer. Early on, she realized that I was a "lost cause," and the sessions did not continue for long. The failure of Christian counseling also meant further distancing and shaming from the church. It was not long before going was unbearable, and I felt forced to choose between my strongest held beliefs from as far back as I could remember and who I deeply knew myself to be.

This sent me into a tailspin of depression and doubting God's love for me. The weight of the church, as God's agent on Earth, had called me condemned. Every time they would say, "God loves the sinner, but hates that sin," all I could feel was that God hated me because my sexuality was a part of who I am. I was told I was sick, sinful, and an abomination in the eyes of God. I tried desperately to hold onto my faith, but I just could not endure the spiritual violence I experienced when I was among God's people. The fear of going to hell and God's pending punishment began to consume me. I questioned whether I believed in God and wondered if I did, why would I want to follow a God who would be so quick to hate and condemn me. I explored other faiths and traditions, but nothing filled the God-shaped hole in my heart.

The church was not the only place where my coming out impacted my life. Middle school was no cakewalk either. Word spread like wildfire, and like at church, people who had at once been friends distanced themselves from me. In the classroom and the hallways, other students, and, in some cases, the teachers picked on me. I was sent home one day for wearing a t-shirt bearing a photo of the Purple Teletubby with the words "Tinky Winky Made Me Do It." This being a pop culture reference to the idea that Tinky Winky was gay because of his upside-down triangle headpiece and gender non-conforming because of the red pocketbook he would sometimes tote.

Students mocked me, snickered, made homophobic jokes, and they once went as far as supergluing me to my desk. Nothing happened to punish the students, but I was sent to in-school suspension more than once after being told that although I had not done anything wrong, it was easier to remove one person than the whole class. I was miserable



at church, school was torture, and although living at home was slowly getting better, nowhere felt completely safe. As a result, I began to engage in self-harm and frequently contemplated suicide, but the threat of hell kept me from following through, as I was taught that suicide is the only unforgivable sin because you could not ask for forgiveness.

I had nowhere to turn when many of the adults in my life did not help and often participated in the exclusion and harm. However, there was one adult at the time who allowed me to be myself without judgment or condemnation. My high school guidance counselor became a lifeline for me. I would frequent her office to escape the torment everywhere else. She was the first to suggest that I look for resources on the internet that might help me find others like me to be supportive. From those searches, I found organizations such as PFLAG, an organization for families, friends, and loved ones of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual (LGBTQIA+) people, and the North Carolina Lambda Youth Network (NCLYN) based in Durham.

Initially, my mother was against any affiliation with the groups because she feared they would lead me toward evil. She refused to read PFLAG literature and threatened to take my computer away, but her tone was beginning to change. She took the literature anyway and later read it. Reflecting on the ‘congratulatory’ comment for having a ‘normal teenager’ by the social worker and witnessing the endured pain of rejection I was experiencing, she eventually gave in and reached out to a contact for the local Rocky Mount PFLAG chapter. It was there that my mother met Mama Chess. Mama Chess spent many hours talking with her, educating her, and supporting her. She introduced my

mother to other family members of LGBTQIA+ people. As a result, my mom saw both how she had been causing pain, and that there could be another way.

Mama Chess's love and commitment, and that of the parents of Rocky Mount PFLAG, eventually influenced my mother and she would eventually give in and let me participate in the activities and Summer Leadership Institute of NCLYN. NCLYN opened many other doors, brought me back to God through an introduction to several welcoming and inclusive congregations, and cultivated early leadership skills in me. In one year after coming out, my mental health improved as my connection to a faith community and communities of people with similar identities increased.

Despite all the trauma in church, Christian faith still played a major role in my life experience. Therefore, it did not take long for me to realize that I wanted to dedicate my life to doing this work so others would never have to experience the spiritual violence, rejection, and abuse I had endured. I wanted to be like the middle school guidance counselor, the PFLAG Mom, or the social worker who served as vectors of love and support. I wanted to be the person I had needed when I was young, alone, isolated, and being bullied in every corner by peers and adults alike. At the heart of this project is that same calling and belief that, through education, clergy, religious leaders, and laity alike have the tools to avoid perpetuating similar violence. My story is only one of the millions around the harm incited, justified, and enacted in the name of faith. Throughout this project, the voices and experiences of others are evoked as outlines for care are presented.

This thesis will fill the gaps that existed when I came out and that continue to exist in many faith communities today. A framework for spiritual care must do four

things: commit to educating oneself, each other, and the congregation on the lives and experiences of transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people and communities and the harms we face; be willing to seek, listen, and be changed by the encounter with our truth and experiences that will result in changing harmful behaviors, practices, and policies; building relationships of mutual trust, respect, care, and solidarity; and finally, work towards a better world for us beyond the ways of the church. The work of this thesis will take a similar shape with these four key themes: education, sharing, creating change, and inspiring action. First, however, this work must be theologically grounded.

## CHAPTER 1

### Trans(gressive) Theology

Scripture and the exemplary we have in Jesus are the strongest tools we have in the work that we do. This work must be theologically grounded to make space for the Spirit to do the kind of heart work that leads to greater love and community. As the church, Jesus should always be the focal point of ministry. The good news is that gender-diverse people are not absent in the larger Christian story.

Queer theology is a way of reading the sacred text through the lived experiences of individuals with marginalized sexual orientations, gender identities, and gender expressions. Taken further, and built on, but not entirely derived from, Queer theology, is the historical and still-emerging field of Trans theology, which reads the text through the lens of trans experience. Trans theologians like Vicki Kolakowski, Vanessa Sheridan, Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, and Justin Sabia-Tanis laid the foundation that Marcella Althaus-Reid built upon. Althaus-Reid in *The Queer God* describes a Queer theologian as someone who “has many passports because she is a theologian in diaspora, that is a theologian who explores at the crossroads of Christianity issues of self-identity and the identity of her community, which are related to sexuality, race, culture, and poverty.”<sup>1</sup>

Queer theology engages gender as a tool for widening the understanding of sexuality, but little is done to address the specific needs of transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming communities. Tara Soughers in *Beyond a Binary God* echoes the overarching omission in her findings that, “although most Queer theology includes

---

<sup>1</sup> Marcella Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 7.

trans\*<sup>2</sup> people, often their specific issues and questions are not part of the discussion, and frequently their presence is only remarked upon in a couple of pages of these books.”<sup>3</sup> More work and attention is needed in the field of Trans theology. Engaging in this emerging field allows for an intentional questioning of gender roles and expectations in scripture and an unearthing of what theology has to say about, and to, transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming individuals. When a community of faith studies scripture and seeks to read the experiences of transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people into it, new possibilities emerge. When our stories, lives, and experiences are left out everyone misses an opportunity to get to know a little bit more deeply the mysterious spirit of God. When the fullness of God is widened the whole community grows in their understanding of the multifaceted presence of God.

God is a nonbinary God. God does not define God’s self in relationship to the gender norms people have constructed. It has been only in our collective imagination that we have painted God in our image. God has been co-opted by power and portrayed as a white, able-bodied, cisgender fatherly figure that serves to uphold patriarchal power structures rather than disrupt them and side with the oppressed. Trans theology invites us to rest in the embrace of the both and neither God that is so much bigger than the social and cultural roles we have created and constrained God to in our cultural imagination. In doing so we make space to meet the tender and vulnerable side of God who weeps, laughs, and is present with us in our very human experiences.

---

<sup>2</sup> Trans with an asterisk on the end (trans\*) was a designation used briefly to denote trans as a broad umbrella term for gender diverse communities, including transgender, gender non-conforming, and non-binary individuals. It is no longer common practice.

<sup>3</sup> Tara Soughers, *Beyond a Binary God: A Theology for Trans\* Allies* (New York: Church Publishing, 2018), 3.

Trans theology invites us to explore gender and embodiment as venues to uncover how power and socialization shape our theology of them both. It allows the body of Christ to reclaim our bodies as sacred gifts from God. Trans theology opens up endless channels for reading scripture anew and positions us to be the kind of nuisance Jesus represented to the religious leaders who relished in their power and influence in his time. We live into the radical calling of Jesus when we risk the comfort of the status quo and ask where power has corrupted and taken precedence over people. When we reclaim our bodies as sacred gifts that God has called good we stand up against the forces that do not intend for us to have a good relationship with ourselves.

Reading diverse gender identities back into worship and theology creates possibilities for reordering existing power structures in favor of the oppressed as it uncovers the elephant in the room.<sup>4</sup> Gender has been the elephant in the room in theology and worship. Scholar Siobhan Garrigan names this in her work *Queer Worship*: “...worship is, like any other public arena, gendered and gendering. What is perceived as ‘neutral’ in worship is in fact a constant negotiation and establishment (through its very performance) of particular and specific power relations based on a particular and specific understanding of gender, and this has consequences for all aspects of church life, including theological reflection.”<sup>5</sup> For me, having been raised in the Southern Baptist

---

<sup>4</sup> Feminist and Womanist theologians have been engaged in naming how gender shows up in worship and other settings for many years now. Queer and Trans theologies are indebted to their work. Naming and questioning the role of gender in worship opened the door to seeing how cissexism is also showing up. The intention here is not to conflate gender, a set of social and cultural expectations, with gender identity, how one identifies in relationship to gender. And yet, naming, questioning, and challenging the way worship is already ‘gendered and gendering’ is necessary to understand places of exclusion for transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people.

<sup>5</sup> Siobhan Garrigan. “Queer Worship.” *Theology & Sexuality* 15, no. 2 (2009): 211–30. doi:10.1558/tse.v15i2.211.

church, God was always portrayed Father. Suggesting anything otherwise was seen as blasphemy. I was surprised to find that after leaving the Southern Baptist church for a progressive congregation that tension around God, gender, and inclusive language was not entirely left behind. Even where there was a commitment to inclusive language there was a frequent default to male imagery for God.

Liberation for queer and transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people theologically is only possible when the genderless, transcendent, both and neither, nonbinary God of creation is reclaimed. Garrigan draws this parallel, "...this ideal heterosexual difference not only makes sure that female submits to male in domestic and civic arrangements, but it also ensures an essentialist imaging of God as male. It is for this reason, as we will see, that queer worship is at its most controversial not when it proposes the acceptability of people coming to worship dressed in leather but when it suggests calling God something other than Father."<sup>6</sup> Theologically, transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming people reflect a lost truth of the nature and image of God.

If we are all created in the image and likeness of God, what does that say about God? Mark Sameth, a Rabbi and historian of the *Tetragrammaton*, recently published an op-ed in the New York Times provocatively asking: *Is God Transgender?* Sameth suggests, "the Israelites took the transgender trope from their surrounding cultures and wove it into their own sacred scripture. The four-Hebrew-letter name of God, which scholars refer to as the Tetragrammaton, YHWH, ... would have read the letters in reverse as Hu/Hi — in other words, the

---

<sup>6</sup> Garrigan, *Queer Worship*, 218.

hidden name of God was Hebrew for “He/She.” Counter to everything we grew up believing, the God of Israel... was understood by its earliest worshipers to be a dual-gendered deity.”<sup>7</sup> Therefore, transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming people reflect an image of God that has been lost but has much to teach us.

I would challenge Sameth to take it a step further and suggest that rather than transgender God is nonbinary. Trans means to cross and to cross gender you would first need to be gendered. A nonbinary God rejects binary gender constructions altogether and corrects our distorted image of God. We rightly see God whose image all of creation is held together in. As a society so consumed with unhealthy expectations around gender, we reclaim a part of our authentic nature when we free ourselves from the socially-constructed trappings of a binary gender system. More importantly, we free our social perception of God as a representation of toxic masculinity. This image of God has been a stumbling block for so many who are unable to connect with the “tough-love-waiting-to-smite-you-the-minute-you-sin God.” There are many images of God outside of the authoritarian image of God. God as parent. God as lover. God as nurturer. God as liberator. God’s image broken free of the trappings of the human tendency to draw God in our image rather than see that we, all of creation, represent the many images of God. God is the main attraction but not the only representation of gender diversity reflected in our tradition or our scripture.

---

<sup>7</sup> Mark Sameth, “Is God Transgender?” *The New York Times*, August 12, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/13/opinion/is-god-transgender.html>.



Bible study is one of the oldest and most sacred ways for a community of believers to come together. Giving voice to our Transcestors<sup>8</sup> in scripture and telling stories that have gone untold for so long restores our place in the larger Christian story. Using scripture in this way, the sacred gifts and the callings of transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people are brought back into the Christian community. The practice of reading the experiences of transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people into scripture and finding evidence that we have been there all along opens up new possibilities for how to connect with God and spirit. The eunuchs weaved throughout the Old and New Testaments are our transcestors.

Eunuchs in the ancient Near East are very different from the contemporary understandings of transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary identities, however, they do represent a gender beyond the binary. For their time, they were gender non-conforming and embodied a marginalized gender expression. For those who were made to become eunuchs, castration was performed at a very young age and resulted in the slower development of secondary sexual characteristics such as voice, muscle development, and fat distribution. This meant there were more than genital differences for eunuchs as the feminization of a eunuch's body was often significant. Their bodies develop in a way that is neither recognizably male nor female.

Theologian Teresa Berger expands upon Matthew 19 and the presence of eunuchs in the early Church. She notes that “the historian of liturgy needs to acknowledge that eunuchs were present in worship. ... As the Jesus logion in Matthew

---

<sup>8</sup> Transcestors is a term coined and used by transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people about our transgender ancestors. Gender non-conforming people have been present throughout history, and scripture is no exception; however, these stories frequently go untold, or gender non-conformity is omitted. Reclaiming our stories and place in history and scripture is an important project.

19:12 makes clear (“there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven”), not only eunuchs themselves but also their disparate origins were not strange to earliest Christian communities. In addition, the account of the baptism of the Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts 8 demonstrates that eunuchs were received into the community of faith.”<sup>9</sup> The unquestionable acceptance of this African gender non-conforming person in the early Church is drastically different from the widespread demonization of gender diverse people today, especially Black transgender femmes and women. It is worth considering what it means when many churches today stand in direct opposition to the practices of the early church.

The presence of eunuchs is only one example of reclaiming our stories and transcestors in the Bible. The story of the unnamed concubine in Judges 19, when read through the lens of Trans theology by applying it to the lived experience of transgender people, presents another example. The brutality of the dismembered, concubine reflects the brutality enacted against transgender women of color almost daily whom we have come to know only through their deaths. Frequently, similar to the concubine they go misgendered, unnamed, and unreported. It is an example par excellence that mirrors theologian Jacqueline Lapsley’s assertion for the concubine in the book of Judges that it is only “in her very absence that she is most present.”<sup>10</sup>

Using the lens of trans experience one could use Judges 19 to flesh out the following contemporary parallels for Black transgender women: being forced into

---

<sup>9</sup> Teresa Berger, *Gender Differences and the Making of Liturgical History: Lifting a Veil on Liturgy’s Past* (Farnham, England: Ashgate, 2011), 136.

<sup>10</sup> Jacqueline Lapsley. *Whispering the Word: Hearing Women’s Stories in the Old Testament* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 42.

survival sex work, the overkill and extreme brutality often exhibited in murders of transgender women of color, the lack of accountability by those who perpetrate these crimes, and the social invisibility experienced by both killers and victims. One might ask if our social, political, and religious institutions, by perpetuating transphobia and exclusionary practices, are doing to transgender women of color today what the Levite husband of the concubine did in Judges 19 when he pushed her out of the house and into the hands of the mob which intended to do her great harm. Using scripture to frame our current reality, leads the church to reflect on its role in perpetuating harm against trans people. Is the church at its worse actively contributing to this harm or at the very least remaining neglectful and thus complicit in it?

Elaine Heath helps us begin with a summary of the social location of the concubine: “she [the concubine] calls the Levite ‘husband,’ but to him she is subhuman, an object to use for sex and slave labor. She does not have the legal rights of a wife. She is the Levite’s chattel property.”<sup>11</sup> Although the reality spelled out above made it incredibly difficult to do, the concubine enacts her autonomy and leaves her husband.<sup>12</sup> Courageously, she journeyed presumably alone to her father’s house. After quite some time her husband went to entice her to come back home and regain her affection. “There is a ‘matter of the heart’ that has fallen into the background and almost been forgotten, like the young woman herself. She has been so marginalized that she is barely discernible, but she is still present, if only subconsciously in the minds of the two men,”

---

<sup>11</sup> Elaine Heath, *We Were the Least of These: Reading the Bible with Survivors of Sexual Abuse* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2011), 40.

<sup>12</sup> Judges 19:2.

asserts Old Testament scholar Barry Webb.<sup>13</sup> This goes on for a few days before the Levite and the concubine would begin their journey back to the Levite's home.

Leaving late in the day meant they need to depend on the kindness of strangers for accommodations along the way. They eventually encounter an old man who would house them and care for them. Not long after getting settled in at the house, an angry group of local men bangs on the door in hopes of having their way with the Levite. The man pleads with the crowd and offers his virgin daughter and the concubine to protect the Levite.

As night falls, the host and the Levite are locked away and safe inside as the mob is satisfied by the substitution of the concubine. According to Judges 19:25 the men of the Gibeah “. . . wantonly raped her, and abused her all through the night until the morning. And as the dawn began to break, they let her go.”<sup>14</sup> It would not be until the next morning that the Levite would emerge again. “Inside, at daybreak, the Levite ‘gets up.’ The expression is chilling in what it implies by its sheer ordinariness.”<sup>15</sup> Packed and ready to resume his trip the next morning the Levite, happens upon the concubine, whom James Martin recounts in his commentary *Book of Judges*, “with her hands on the threshold: obviously as a final, desperate attempt on the part of the dying woman to reach safety.”<sup>16</sup> How long had she been outside the doorway? For author Isabelle Hamley in *Unspeakable Things Unspoken* “the detail of the hands suggests she had tried to enter the house, perhaps beating on the door and crying for help. Yet neither the Levite nor host

---

<sup>13</sup> Barry Webb. *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Judges* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), 459-60.

<sup>14</sup> Judges 19:25.

<sup>15</sup> Webb, *The New International*, 469.

<sup>16</sup> James Martin. *The Book of Judges*. (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 205.

were waiting up for her, ready to bring her in and tend to her.”<sup>17</sup> The men inside were no haven, and though her “protector” had finally stumbled upon her, she was not safe. He called for her to get up, and when she did not respond he threw her lifeless body over his donkey and continued the journey home. “When he gets to his home, however, he does not- as one might expect- bury the woman but rather cuts up her body into twelve pieces and sends a piece to each of the twelve tribes of Israel.”<sup>18</sup> In doing so, he “stresses the threat to himself: the men ‘rose against me’: they ‘surrounded the house against me’; ‘me they meant to kill’.”<sup>19</sup> He would use the story for his gain and sympathies rather than owning the role he played in the woman’s death. The Levite would not be held accountable but instead would gain notoriety and sympathy in his community.

The biblical account of the concubine in Judges 19 sets the stage to explore parallels to the treatment and marginalization that many transgender women of color face. Like the concubine, transgender women of color experience multiple forms of oppression that compound to render them functionally voiceless in almost every social and institutional context. The 2015 survey on the situation of transgender people in the United States found that transgender and gender non-conforming people face discrimination in almost every public accommodation including housing, health care, education, employment, and the criminal justice system.<sup>20</sup> The systemic challenges prove to be virtually devastating. The survey demonstrates that almost every single public

---

<sup>17</sup> Isabelle Hamley. *Unspeakable Things Unspoken: An Irigarayan Reading of Otherness and Victimization in Judges 19-21*. (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2019), 135.

<sup>18</sup> Susan Ackerman. *Warrior, Dance, Seductress, Queen: Women in Judges and Biblical Israel*. (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1998), 238.

<sup>19</sup> Cheryl Exum. *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)Versions of Biblical Narratives*. (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1993), 186.

<sup>20</sup> S. E. James, et al., *The Report of the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey* (Washington, DC: National Center for Transgender Equality, 2016), 77.

accommodation fails to serve the transgender community and many are downright harmful. Like the concubine, transgender and gender non-conforming people knock but the door is not opened.

Just as the Levite was not held accountable in the Book of Judges, when violence happens to transgender and non-binary people today, there is often no resolution. This lack of resolution and accountability is so pervasive that campaigns, launched as recently as this past summer, have been organized to make the public aware of a phenomenon known as ‘gay/trans panic.’ ‘Gay/trans panic’ “is defined by the American Bar Association as a legal strategy which asks a jury to find that a victim’s sexual orientation or gender identity is to blame for the defendant’s violent reaction, including murder.”<sup>21</sup> This kind of twisted defense can only emerge in a society that has systemically dehumanized someone so much that the violent perpetrator can be considered the victim just by the sheer encounter with a transgender person. Much like the concubine of Judges 19, society tends to blame the oppressed for their circumstances rather than reckon with the social and institutional oppression that is to blame. Joseph Jeter’s commentary on preaching on the Judges passage makes an additional argument when he evokes the underlying social contract to protect the honor of the men even to the point of sacrificing the concubine. He points out that, “killers like these often go unpunished. How can this be? ... Anyone who shows disrespect to me (my tribe, my nation), who challenges my (our) standing in the community (world), will answer to me. I will preserve or regain my (our) honor by making them recant. If they will not, it is my right to fight against them

---

<sup>21</sup> Alexandra Holden, “The Gay/Trans Panic Defense: What It Is, and How to End It,” *American Bar Association Journal*, March 31, 2020, <https://www.americanbar.org/groups/crsj/publications/member-features/gay-trans-panic-defense/>.

and kill them if necessary.”<sup>22</sup> This sort of honor killing and celebration is common among those who have perpetuated great harm against the transgender community, too.

There is yet another striking similarity between the violence enacted against both the transgender community and the concubine. Horrifically, in many cases, extreme brutality or “‘the overkill’ in it is the most definitive trait of anti-[transgender] assaults of all sorts.”<sup>23</sup> The concubine would not be honored in life or death. After being brutalized her body parts would become “objects to be used and thrown away.”<sup>24</sup> Many transgender and gender non-conforming people face a similar fate. The same dishonor seems to be true as police, reporters, and families will often ‘deadname’<sup>25</sup> victims. Refusing to use the authentic name someone dies for claiming and living out boldly is a type of violence after death. Using a transgender person’s deadname in the eulogy and burial is in itself a metaphorical dismemberment of one’s authentic identity from their body and their lasting legacy. Hamley reminds us that the “woman of Judges 19 is a nameless victim, one whose community has failed her twice: first by allowing her to be brutalized and second by failing to remember her.”<sup>26</sup> We must not fail to remember accurately. As church and society today, we have an opportunity to do better but first must take responsibility and own the ways we have reflected the Levite in the story by, at worst, perpetuating harm and, at best, remaining complicit.

---

<sup>22</sup> Jeter, Joseph. *Preaching Judges*. St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2003), 133-4.

<sup>23</sup> Hatty Lee and Kai Wright, “Remembering the Transgender Women Murdered Last Year,” Colorlines. Race Forward, November 19, 2010. <https://www.colorlines.com/content/remembering-transgender-women-murdered-last-year>. The article intending to remember members of the transgender community lost to murder incorrectly conflates anti-transgender violence with that of sexual orientation. The conflation of sexual orientation and gender identity is a common phenomenon that activists and educators work to disrupt.

<sup>24</sup> Heath, *We Were the Least of These*, 45.

<sup>25</sup> Deadnaming is when the wrongly gendered name assigned at birth is used for a transgender person instead of their chosen name.

<sup>26</sup> Hamley, *Unspeaking Things Unspoken*, 131.

Hamley concludes that “in Judges 19-21, it is the community as a whole that participates. . . through the ways in which they construct identity, actively oppress, or stay silent, and stand by in the face of abuse.”<sup>27</sup> It lends to the argument that the violence against the transgender community that disproportionately impacts transgender women of color, is the result of a failure of community. Social and institutional structures that have been built to maintain a rigid gender binary, that celebrate heterosexuality at the expense of greater freedom in sexual and romantic relationships, and that perpetuates white supremacy are all implicated. Although the construction and perpetuation of dominant identities at the expense of those at the margins are to blame, it takes the actions of communities and individuals to resist them. A congregation might be wise to ask if expressed theologies have done more to uphold these institutions than disrupt them. As Heath attests in her analysis of the story in Judges, “the very institutions that ought to protect our lives become coconspirators in our destruction.”<sup>28</sup> Trans people are institutionally and socially under attack. It is worth asking: are we the mob actively enacting violence through our policies and practices? Are we the Levite carelessly pushing people outside of the scope of our services and leaving them to fend for themselves in a society increasingly hostile to the identities they hold? Or, are we a community reflective of a just, holy and loving God whose heart is the first to break when one of God’s children is slain? A call to action could be to heed the last message that the tragedy of the concubine inspired as we reflect on her story alongside the plight of transgender women of color in 2022: Consider it, take counsel, and speak out.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 234.

<sup>28</sup> Heath, *We Were the Least of These*, 43.

<sup>29</sup> Judges 19:30.



The parallels of violence between the unnamed concubine and Black transgender women today should serve as a call to action. The church is in trouble when the word of a loving God has been used to justify harm, hate, exclusion, and violence. There are far too many stories of families being advised by well-meaning religious leaders to abandon their loved ones in their greatest time of need by kicking them out or cutting them off. Physical violence, emotional violence, and spiritual violence have all been advised on interpersonal and institutional levels. Parents have been instructed to withhold resources like housing, transportation, money, and food to ‘punish’ such ‘sinful behaviors’. Private businesses and educational institutions have fired or expelled transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming people. All of this harm is made even worse when performed by those in positions of power in the name of ‘love.’ It is not loving, kind, or Christlike. To whom would Jesus deny community, love, shelter, food, or care?

Christianity is uniquely positioned in the conversation. As a whole, it has historically and currently upheld harmful systems and at times also been at the forefront of liberation. For example, Christianity has been used to justify the oppression of women and excluded them from many pulpits or conversely how Christianity has also been used as a cornerstone of the Civil Rights movement to call out racism as a moral issue.

Congregations must repent in word and deed for the times they have allowed theology to justify the harm and exclusion of many transgender people. There is a need to repent when scripture, theology, and tradition have been used to justify conversion therapy, ex-communication, and downright rejection. These are all forms of using scripture to do violence. Spiritual violence is a valid form of violence that “occurs when someone uses a person’s spiritual beliefs to manipulate, dominate or control the

person.”<sup>30</sup> Scripture has been used to reject, shame and control transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people.

At the time of the *2015 U.S. Transgender Discrimination Survey*, “nineteen percent (19%) of respondents who had ever been part of a spiritual or religious community had left it due to rejection.”<sup>31</sup> The statistic does not measure how many churches have failed to act against the harsh reality experienced by those lost to anti-transgender violence. As Charles Blow reminds us, “one doesn’t have to operate with great malice to do great harm. The absence of empathy and understanding are sufficient.”<sup>32</sup> There are signs of hope. The same survey above found that “forty-two percent (42%) of those who left eventually found a welcoming spiritual or religious community.”<sup>33</sup>

There is no place for neutrality given the current social, political, and religious context in the United States in which every year seems to be more deadly and dangerous for transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people. Political efforts all over the country continue to roll back progressive health policies and non-discrimination protections for our communities. As Dr. Elaine Heath attests, “the very institutions that ought to protect our lives become coconspirators in our destruction.”<sup>34</sup> Trans people are institutionally and socially under attack. It is time for all of us, especially spiritual and religious leaders, to honor the legacy of our tradition and our call to “do justice, love

---

<sup>30</sup> “Spiritual Violence,” Newfoundland Labrador, accessed February 10, 2022, [https://www.gov.nl.ca/vpi/files/spiritual\\_violence.pdf](https://www.gov.nl.ca/vpi/files/spiritual_violence.pdf).

<sup>31</sup> James, *Report*, 77.

<sup>32</sup> Saleema Vellani. “Innovating Through Empathy to Thrive in a Divided World.” *Ellevote*, April 12, 2022. <https://www.ellevatenetwork.com/articles/11145-innovating-through-empathy-to-thrive-in-a-divided-world>.

<sup>33</sup> James, *Report*, 65.

<sup>34</sup> Heath, *We Were the Least of These*, 43.

mercy, and walk humbly with God.”<sup>35</sup> We must reflect on the state of our society for those most marginalized and our roles in using the most potent and sacred gift we have: the living Word of God.

These examples present a few ways to employ a Trans theological reading. The scriptures are ripe for such exploration and as an emerging field, the possibilities are endless. The gift of this work for a congregation is the opportunity to become partners and explorers of the sacred text together to invite new ways of seeing and relating to the divine. The exploration of gender in scripture and within the congregation presents opportunities for a better understanding of God, one’s self in relationship to gender, and brings to light the ways worship and liturgy is already gendered. There might be resistance but on the other end the struggle is the promise of blessing. Reclaiming scripture from the violent ways it has been used restores it to its original intention of fostering love, community, and relationship with God.

---

<sup>35</sup> Mic. 6:8

## CHAPTER 2

### Silence is Harm: Gaps in Spiritual Care

It has been more than fifty years since the Stonewall Riots. The multiple-day riots of June 28-July 3, 1969 are viewed as the ones that began the modern movement for equality for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual communities (LGBTQIA+).<sup>1</sup> Since that time, there have been continuing political, social, cultural, and religious movements towards equity and justice. Unfortunately, although transgender women of color led the riots, these early movements primarily maintained a more singular focus on sexual diversity. Only recently have more nuanced narratives emerged that properly place the focus on gender diversity, racial equity, and intersectionality at the heart of the movement sparked by those like Marsha P. Johnson, Sylvia Rivera, Miss Major, and Stormé DeLarverie. They put their lives and bodies on the line to stand up against police brutality, racism, and transphobia. Although these riots and many similar efforts paved the way for lesbian and gay communities, the focus on the inclusion of transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people lags far behind within Christian communities. More particularly, Protestantism in the United States has too often been at the root of sexism, racism, cissexism, and heterosexism.

In 1960, transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people had long been clustered into one monolithic category with lesbian, gay, bisexual people but after

---

<sup>1</sup> Note on language: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Queer, Intersex, and Asexual (LGBTQIA+) is a modern acronym used as an umbrella term for the diverse range of sexual and gender identities. At the end, the “+” sign nods towards the many identities not included in the acronym and the ever-evolving nature of the language used to express sexual and gender diversity. It is important to note that language has evolved significantly throughout the period addressed in this paper. In order to aid understanding and not distract from the primary aim, I am using LGBTQIA+ rather than language that was consistent for the time periods discussed, as doing so would require extensive explanations and contextualization of the historical evolution of language around sexual and gender identity.

Stonewall were just beginning to be viewed as unique, with different needs and identities. Rev. Dr. Justin Sabia-Tanis makes the point that the conflation of sexual orientation with gender identity was “in part because sexual orientation was frequently distinguishable by gender differences. (IE: effeminate men, butch women).” Stonewall introduced the world to a much broader and diverse community that challenged the gay or lesbian binary of the time. This reflected a general trend toward broader social awareness and more nuanced understandings of sexual and gender diversity. Nevertheless, those with a limited understanding of the complex and extensive diversity within LGBTQIA+ communities still conflate sexual orientation and gender identity today. Not surprisingly then, many groups, including religious ones, claiming to be “inclusive” of LGBTQIA+ people do not truly understand the failures of their ministry to meet the unique needs of transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people.

In particular, such churches have failed to understand the specific needs of transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary communities as separate from lesbian, gay, and bisexual communities. Therefore, when we have come to a church hoping to find community, safety, and connection, instead we have too often been misunderstood. The result has been continued mistrust, exclusion, and disappointment. This has been true in both sacred and secular contexts.

For this reason, the working assumption of this analysis is that many early LGBTQIA+ advocacy organizations, ministries, and movements have failed to be mindful and sensitive to the unique needs, issues, and concerns of transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary communities. Notably, the progress from exclusion to embrace between 1950 and the present has not served all communities equally. Those

with multiple marginalized identities, such as people of color or those with fewer economic resources, are often the last to gain access to the protections given to those with more resources and greater proximity to privilege.

This project fills the gaps where Christian-based movements and activism left out the concerns of transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary communities in supposedly LGB‘T’-inclusive church movements and spiritual activism. In doing so, I create a more robust canon of literature that directly increases the number of scholarly works and resources to provide spiritual care for transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary communities.

There are signs of hope, but as an overview summarized in the “Religion and Spirituality” section of *Trans Bodies Trans Selves*, there is still a long way to go:

“Many religious communities have barely begun the process of affirming gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals, much less trans people. We are often not even blips on the radar of most congregations, and our needs and concerns are often overlooked. Many of us struggle to reconcile our faith within religious institutions that do not recognize nonbinary understandings of gender or do not acknowledge transgender as an identity in their community, theology, or practice.”<sup>2</sup>

Other scholars and authors echo similar sentiments. Scholar, author, and transgender theologian Austen Hartke points out that, “Transgender issues and identities, however, have been largely ignored... the writers at “*Christianity Today*,” an evangelical magazine, expressed low-level apprehensions about trans issues beginning in 2008, but it was not until 2012 that the T in LGBT found its first big Christian headline.”<sup>3</sup> This

---

<sup>2</sup> Laura Erickson-Schroth. *Trans Bodies, Trans Selves: A Resource for the Transgender Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 63.

<sup>3</sup> Austen Hartke, *Transforming: The Bible & Lives of Transgender Christians* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 11.

practice of leaving out the ‘T’ is referred to within the community as the ‘silent T.’ Melissa Wilcox, author of *Coming Out in Christianity: Religion Identity, and Community*, points out that “Since the use of ‘LGBT’ became popular several years ago, some have rightly expressed concern that this might be simply a new and empty form of political correctness: that researchers and others would offer this linguistic nod to bisexuals and transgender people without actually including them on an equal footing with lesbians and gay men.”<sup>4</sup> This reality was true within LGBTQ faith-based congregations, larger national organizations, and within more significant movements working for the rights of LGBTQ communities.

Since 2012, the situation has worsened. The emerging awareness of, and subsequent angst about, transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary communities by evangelical Christian communities triggered a series of public and legislative attacks. A key example is a nationwide move to legally forbid transgender people from using the restrooms that align with our gender identities (the so-called “bathroom bills.”) This was not the first time for such legislative attacks but it did gain significantly more attention. Most notably, the conservative North Carolina Family Policy Council “pressed [former] North Carolina governor Pat McCrory to call a special session, which passed HB2<sup>5</sup> through the entire state legislature in one day.”<sup>6</sup> Far worse than being overlooked was this emergence of organized spiritual violence and political activism by many conservative Christian congregations and organizations. This promoted

---

<sup>4</sup> Melissa Wilcox, *Coming Out in Christianity: Religion, Identity, and Community* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2003), 29.

<sup>5</sup> The Public Facilities Privacy & Security Act, aka House Bill 2 or HB2, was an NC statute passed in March 2016. The bill would not allow local governments to pass anti-discrimination legislation and made it law that public facilities with gender-specific restrooms must ensure that they are used only by those with the corresponding sex listed on their birth certificate.

<sup>6</sup> Hartke, *Transforming*, 15.

harmful legislation like bathroom bills in states all across the US. Rev. David Weekly, the first out transgender minister serving the United Methodist Church, notes sadly that “Conservative Christians today continue to lobby against transgender persons, refusing to listen to our experiences or consider the findings of historical and medical research.”<sup>7</sup>

Due to the overwhelming perception and evidence that the church rejects and actively harms transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people, the hostility is reciprocated. The past harms, hurts, and rejections resulted in a dynamic where it is almost as taboo to claim one’s Christian faith within transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary communities as it is to find us in most churches in the US. There has, however, been recent progress in other mainline protestant denominations and contexts.

In 2007, the Center for LGBTQ and Gender Studies in Religion in Ministry at the Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, California, and the National Center for Transgender Equality, “co-sponsored a national Transgender Religious Summit, attracting religiously observant transgender people, ministers, and allies from all around the country.”<sup>8</sup> Transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary religious leaders from many traditions, backgrounds, and denominations came together. That effort led to forming a roundtable of Transgender Religious Leaders, a year-long cohort for developing Transgender Seminarians, and an advocacy organization called the Transgender Faith and Action Network. Nevertheless, significant gaps remain in the empowerment, visibility, leadership development, and spiritual care of transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary communities. In 2018, Katherine Apostolacus

---

<sup>7</sup> David Weekly, *Out from the Wilderness* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers), 2011, 105.

<sup>8</sup> Susan Stryker and Aren Z. Aizura, *The Transgender Studies Reader 2* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 27.



wrote in the article, “The Bible and The Transgender Christian: Mapping Transgender Hermeneutics in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century”: “While the social and political visibility of transgender people has increased dramatically in recent years, scholars, clergy, and lay Christians remain largely in the dark about the theological reflections of transgender Christians.”<sup>9</sup>

The only significant work to lay out a pastoral framework for LGBTQIA+ People today was published in 2007 and entitled *Ministry Among God’s Queer Folk*. David Kundtz and Bernard Schlager begin by saying, “Here we are, though, at the beginning of the twenty-first century and only since the later years of the twentieth century have some religious bodies begun to develop a theology of pastoral care for sexual minorities – lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer people in general.”<sup>10</sup> The sad reality is that most of what has been written, including this text, excludes or only peripherally includes transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary communities. The authors released an update to the earlier version in 2018 with significantly more attention towards transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people and communities. Still, there is much work to be done.

This double exclusion from the church and the contemporary movements for LGBTQIA+ rights can only be corrected by radical embrace.<sup>11</sup> This can only happen

---

<sup>9</sup> Katherine Apostolacus, “The Bible and the Transgender Christian: Mapping Transgender Hermeneutics in the 21st Century,” *Journal of the Bible and its Reception* 5, no. 1 (2018): 1–29, <https://login.proxy.lib.duke.edu/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/2302031460?accountid=10598> (accessed June 6, 2020), 1.

<sup>10</sup>David Kundtz and Bernard Schlager. *Ministry Among God’s Queer Folk* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2007), 1.

<sup>11</sup> The concept of the movement from exclusion to embrace is inspired by the work of Miroslav Volf in his work *Exclusion & Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*. In this work Volf locates exclusion as a sin and presents a theological response to the exclusion of the other.

through intentional efforts towards spiritual care and healing that invites the founders of the movement back into the story and the excluded back home. Before this can happen, congregations, clergy, and lay leaders must first learn about our lives and experiences, seek to understand our needs, and commit to undoing the ways that faith communities knowingly and unknowingly have caused harm to our communities.

## CHAPTER 3

### Foundational Concepts and Intersectional Spiritual Care

Any approach to the healing and spiritual needs of transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people must consider the range of disparities people face based on not only their gender identity, but also any other marginalized identities. Holding marginalized identities within multiple systems of oppression exerts a compounding effect, so that when someone identifies as transgender, gender non-conforming, or nonbinary and holds another marginalized identity, the oppression of all marginalized identities converge to make one more vulnerable and susceptible to harm. Audre Lorde said it best when she exclaimed, “There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives.”<sup>1</sup> Healing for transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people and communities cannot be moved forward without also paying attention to the ways racism, sexism, ableism, heterosexism, classism, and other forms of social, cultural, and institutional oppression threaten our lives. We cannot focus on only one part our identity and find holistic healing- neither personally nor communally. An intersectional approach that takes into consideration that the overlapping of identities is critical.

The *2015 United States Transgender Discrimination Survey* asked almost 28,000 transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming people about our experiences in almost every aspect of life from educational access, healthcare, public accommodations, violence, and more. It overwhelmingly demonstrated a lack of access and the reality of disparate outcomes across almost every system. The very systems meant to uplift, heal,

---

<sup>1</sup> Audre Lorde. “(1982) Audre Lorde, Learning from the 60s.” Black Past (August 12, 2012). <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/1982-audre-lorde-learning-60s/>.

and help us are some of the very ones causing our communities the most harm. With harm coming from almost every aspect of our lives, healing must address the personal, social, and institutional barriers that keep harming us. Therefore, to be a source of healing, the church must become a haven and refuge from the death-dealing storms of oppression. A framework for spiritual care must do four things: educate oneself, one another, and the congregation with a focus on the lives and experiences of transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people and the harms we face; be willing to seek, listen, and be changed by the encounter with our truth and experiences enough to change harmful behavior, policies, and practices; build relationships of mutual trust, respect, care, and solidarity; and finally, work towards a better world for us beyond the ways of the church. The work of this thesis will take a similar shape with these four key themes: education, sharing, creating change, and inspiring action.

A note about the centrality of education: Education is essential in ministering to transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people and communities. Those hoping to help and not harm must try to understand our experiences and needs to be truly responsive. Far too often, *cisgender* people, or those who identify with the sex they were assigned at birth, depend on transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people and communities to educate them. Although we are the experts on our lived experience, it can become exhausting when we are repeatedly asked to educate others on the basics. The goal here would be for our allies to take on some of the responsibility for educating other allies so that when we are asked to share our stories, the uniqueness of our lives, and experiences we can share without having to repeat the basics so regularly. We are eager to be seen just like everyone else, but that is difficult when we are so often asked to

teach foundational knowledge and little space is left for people to get to know us as individuals. The basics like language and terminology can be learned from a variety of sources and places, especially when adopting a foundational understanding. From there, it is just a process of staying abreast of shifts and changes. That is not to say that it will be easy. It will take intentional efforts to learn and understand.

Language and terminology are complex when applied to people, communities, and identities. As a trainer and facilitator, I understand the exasperated request from people attending a training who say, “can you just tell me what it means?” I always wish I could, yet the complexity of lived experience, the intersection of multiple identities, and the evolution of language means there are often no easy answers. As much as I want to take a term, package it neatly, tie a little bow on it and hand it over, the reality is I would just be setting people up for failure.

Language, especially concerning personal identity, is fluid and ever-evolving. For example, language and terminology that was once derogatory have now been reclaimed. The term queer, for example, was previously used to inflict harm and violence. So LGBTQIA+ folks from older generations may respond negatively to its use and the word could trigger past traumas. On the other hand, queer is now a term many people claim for themselves in a liberating way. It is common for universities and seminaries to have Queer Theory or Queer Theology courses. It gets tricky when one tries to label the term simply “good” or “bad.” Queer can be both good and bad. It still has a valid negative meaning and association for those harmed by term. For others, the term is legitimately freeing, liberating, and intentionally politically disruptive; this seemingly contradictory

association and meaning is just as valid. The context of language and terminology always matters.

Queer is an excellent example of the evolving nature of language, but there are other complications and factors that limit the possibility of a single definition for identity terms. Geography, the cultural context, other identities, and the communities to which a person belongs can also influence the meaning of any given identity term. For example, same-gender-loving, a term often used by the Black community for those attracted to someone of a similar gender, is appropriate for Black people. But it would not be appropriate for non-Black communities to use the term.

The most important thing when talking about language and terminology is to approach the conversation with curiosity and cultural humility. It is essential to do your homework for a general understanding of what these terms mean. It takes work and relationships to understand what these words mean when applied to a person, a life, and a community. When there is a desire to know THE definition, humanity is lost in translation. If we substitute meaningful relationships with labels, we will always fail to see the complexity and beauty of the people in front of us. A best practice is always to express that you know what the term means but ask what the term means to the individual concerning their experience and the other identities they hold.

Finally, it is crucial to remember that words and concepts have power. Language and identity-based terms are significant and influential when they bring people together, create community, or help an individual share and claim one's identity. On the other hand, language can be deeply problematic when used to exclude, box people into rigid roles or ideals, or even incite harm or violence. Geography, likewise, can have an

enormous impact on language and terminology both locally and globally. A small rural community's language, terms, and concepts are frequently different from those used at a large research university in an urban setting. Be aware of the variations that could exist and pay attention to the terms people use for themselves and their communities and reflect those back.

Diversity of sexual and romantic orientations, gender identities, and gender expressions has existed across time and cultures. Pursuits of imperial colonialism first sought to stamp out and legislate against sexual and gender differences. Battles against such penal codes continue today in some parts of the world. A different kind of colonialism still occurs today, but it focuses on language. The dominance and exportation of Western norms around sexual and gender diversity have eroded local and indigenous sexual and gender differences. To have access to global networks of support, resources, or funding, communities were forced to adopt western terms and conceptions of gender and sexuality, with little space for the cultural uniqueness of their own sexual and gender diversity. In his work, *Spaces Between Us: Queer Settler Colonialism and Indigenous Decolonization*, Scott Laurie Morgensen points out an even more limiting paradigm: he says that in western frameworks, at least “in the United States, modern queer cultures and politics have taken form as normatively white, multiracial, and non-Native projects compatible with a white settler society.”<sup>2</sup> The result is that the dominant culture continues unchecked and replicated without recognizing how language has reproduced power, whiteness, and the culture of colonialization.

---

<sup>2</sup> Scott Morgensen, *Spaces Between Us: Queer Settler Colonialism and Indigenous Decolonization*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), ix.

An awareness of western concepts alongside localized cultural and indigenous conceptions may seem insignificant, but the consequences have shown themselves to be far-reaching. One of the most well-known examples is the introduction of the famously dubbed ‘Kill the Gays bill’ proposed by the Ugandan Parliament in 2014. Those supporting the bill claimed that the evils of homosexuality had been imported into Uganda from the West, but that was not true. The evil import was the western framework that Ugandan communities had been forced to adapt and retrofit to sexual and gender differences that had always been a part of their culture. In this case, it forced Ugandan Kuchu communities to conform to white, western conceptions of gender and sexual diversity at their own expense. This added fuel to the already-simmering cultural fire and allowed the Ugandan government to label their sexual and gender values as an emerging foreign threat rather than being viewed as a historical part of Ugandan culture.

The bottom line is that if we are to understand these communities, we must use the language and terminology that communities use themselves. When discussing Western communities, it is appropriate to use Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, and Asexual or LGBTQIA+, but it is not broadly inclusive in our increasingly connected and globalized world. Other frameworks have been adopted in health care or humanitarian efforts like the United Nations. Some examples include GSRM, which stands for Gender, Sexual, and Romantic Minorities; and SROGIES, which stands for Sexual, Romantic Orientations, Gender identities, and Expressions. When using SROGIES it becomes vital to qualify it with marginalized or privileged SROGIES.



Foundational terms for understanding gender identity and gender expression include sex (assigned at birth), intersex, gender, the gender binary, gender identity, gender expression, transgender, cisgender, genderqueer, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming. Separate but connected, it is also essential to know the difference between sexual and romantic orientation. This is far from an exhaustive list but gives important foundational terms to enter into the conversation.

When a baby is born, a midwife or attending medical practitioner will look at the external genitalia of that child and make a distinction between male and female. Typically, based only on what they see they will assign the baby a sex. We call this the sex assigned at birth. In many places, male and female (M or F) are the only recognized options for birth certificates. These systems fail to accommodate the wide range of human sexual development that exist. People born with intersex variations, which are hormonal, chromosomal, or anatomical differences, that do not fit the typical definitions of male or female are not accounted for in most of our systems. Yet, they are still labeled either male or female in most cases. By failing to legitimately recognize these intersex variations, and put them as options on most birth certificates, we have created a system of forced conformity. Enforcement frequently happens through painful and unnecessary surgeries as infants. It is more logical to create systems that can accommodate for natural variations in sexual development and not expect humans to conform to inadequate systems. “Research has shown that about 1.7 percent of the population are born with intersex variations.”<sup>3</sup> This is just as common as someone having red hair.

---

<sup>3</sup> M. Blackless et al., “How Sexually Dimorphic Are We? Review and Synthesis,” *American Journal of Human Biology* 12 (2000): 151.

The system that allows for only male and female sex assignments, is a binary gender system. As people with intersex variations show us, this system is simply inadequate and broken. In a binary gender system, sex assigned at birth and gender identity are conflated to mean the same thing. But there is growing recognition of intersex people and variations. For example, in some states birth certificates and legal documents can have the sex listed as an “I” for indeterminate or an “X,” but the option of choosing one of these alternative categories is uncommon with only a few states providing this option.

When we talk about *gender*, we refer to the socially constructed set of expectations, behaviors, and roles that a society considers appropriate for an individual based on the assigned sex at birth. These roles and expectations are formed and socialized in subtle ways daily. It is worth noting that religion as a whole has done much to shape social and cultural norms around sexual orientation and gender expression as well as enforce them. For example, if someone is assigned female at birth, they are expected to exhibit behaviors, fulfill expectations, and seek roles that are considered feminine. Failure to do so leads to consequences for not conforming to social and cultural expectations based on their assigned sex.

The belief underpinning gender from a Christian perspective is often reinforced using the creation narrative as told in the Book of Genesis. Adam and Eve frequently serve as the prototype for cisgender and heterosexual behavior and companionship. The homophobic chant “it’s Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve:” is just as much about gender as it is about sexuality. Theological discussions that reject a cisgender and

heterosexual reading of the story are worth exploring personally and as a faith community.

Categories beyond the gender binary give individuals a way to formally identify their own gender identity beyond the social expectations connected to the sex assigned at birth. *Gender identity* is how one identifies themselves concerning gender. Everyone has a gender identity. Some people's identities match the sex they were assigned at birth, and others do not. People use many terms to name their gender identities, including transgender, cisgender, gender non-conforming, nonbinary, and many more. Although I will talk about some of these, it would be impossible to provide an exhaustive list. The best way to increase awareness is to learn about the many ways people name and identify their experiences in relation to gender.

*Gender expression* is the external presentation of gender or how one expresses themselves in relationship to gender through clothing, behaviors, and mannerisms. You cannot rely solely on gender expression to understand an individual's gender identity. Later we will explore the violence, inequities, and health disparities transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people face, but the reality is that we live in a world where it is frequently not safe for folks to express their gender authentically.

*Transgender* is an umbrella term for someone whose gender identity or gender expression differs from the gender identity expected of them based on their sex assigned at birth. For example, I was assigned female at birth and do not identify as female, so I consider myself transgender. On the other hand, an individual who does identify with the sex they were assigned at birth is *cisgender*.

The remaining essential gender identity terms to mention are nonbinary gender identities. Someone who is *nonbinary* does not identify as male or female and sees their gender outside the gender binary. Someone who identifies as nonbinary might call themselves an '*enby*' as a shortened form of nonbinary. Not everyone who identifies as nonbinary considers themselves to be transgender but some do. It depends on the individual and how they understand their gender identity.

Similar to nonbinary, someone who is *genderqueer* understands themselves and their gender identity as one that does not conform to a binary understanding of gender. Genderqueer is akin to modern conceptions of queer, which notes an intentional disruption of political norms around gender.

Finally, *gender non-conforming* is an identity in which an individual's gender identity or relationship to gender is different from the norms expected and imposed by a binary gender system. Some individuals who identify as gender non-conforming may not consider themselves transgender although some do. Gender non-conforming is the broadest term for someone who does not align with the expectations placed on them in relationship to gender. Some cisgender people consider themselves gender non-conforming based on their individual expression of gender. In some ways, all of the groups I discuss in this paper do not conform to the gendered expectations placed upon them.

It is important to note that sexual orientation and romantic orientation are related to gender identity but they are not the same. One of the mistakes that have not served transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary communities is the conflation of the two. *Sexual orientation* is one's desire (if any) to engage in sexual relationships, while

*romantic orientation* is an individual's desire (if any) for romantic relationships. Not every individual experiences each form of attraction, but we all have a sexual orientation and a romantic orientation, a gender identity, and we all express or communicate our gender in some way. The danger with conflating the two has been a phenomenon called 'the Silent T.' This happens when people assume that the needs of transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people and communities are the same as individuals with marginalized sexual or romantic orientations such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, asexual, or aromantic. It also covers up the truth that those who hold both a marginalized sexual or romantic orientation and gender identity experience oppression on both fronts. Far too often, churches promise transgender people support, resources, and advocacy but when we show up we find that our unique needs, experiences, and issues are not understood at all.

Although this overview of terms and identities is not exhaustive, it provides an excellent foundation to engage in conversations and learn the many other gender identity-based terms people use. Moreover, as previously noted, language and terminology used by gender and sexual minority communities is constantly changing as some terms are phased out, and new terms emerge that better portray the complexity of sexual and gender differences. Therefore, all of us need to stay relevant, seek out publications to stay up-to-date, and communicate with our communities. Establishing personal relationships with transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people and communities in your area is always the best way to stay engaged and continue learning. Participating in events, educational offerings, and standing in solidarity with communities all become ways to learn, grow, and observe without asking transgender, gender non-conforming,

and nonbinary people to do the work of teaching. This will not be just learning language and terminology but ways to rebuild what years of religious and spiritual violence have destroyed between many transgender people and communities of faith.

Finally, there is one element in providing spiritual care that must not be overlooked: caregivers must cultivate a sense of self-awareness and work toward understanding how one's own identity shows up in the room. Transgender, gender non-conforming, nonbinary, and cisgender people internalize the pervasive messages about gender and sexual diversity in our society. Self-reflection is the opportunity to apply knowledge to uncover our biases, myths, harmful embedded theology, misconceptions, and unexamined negative attitudes. When transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people internalize these negative messages about ourselves and our communities it is referred to as internalized oppression. When cisgender people internalize these messages it is referred to as internalized dominance. Philip Culbertson's textbook on pastoral theology, *Caring for God's People: Counseling and Christian Wholeness*, recognizes this need to understand the ways the caregiver has internalized negative messages about diverse sexual orientations. He notes that, "To provide care for lesbian women and gay men, the caregiver must confront his or her own attitudes toward homosexual orientation."<sup>4</sup> The same sentiment stands for those working with people with diverse gender identities, and gender expressions. The caregiver must confront their own attitudes around cissexism to be effective.

In my work at Duke University's Center for Sexual and Gender Diversity, I lead *Transgender 101* workshops across campus. One of the activities I employ is the

---

<sup>4</sup> Philip Culbertson, *Caring for God's People: Counseling and Christian Wholeness* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 209.

“privilege activity.” It lists a series of statements that show how cissexism manifests itself in institutional and interpersonal ways that directly or indirectly communicate to transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people that the world was not designed with us in mind. Statements like the following ask people to think about how privilege manifests itself or how decisions have been made from biased attitudes. As you read through each statement feel free to place a check in any of the boxes that are true for you. If you have most of the boxes checked that is an opportunity to reflect on the comforts afforded by privilege that transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people do not enjoy. Then ask how you can use your privilege to change that reality.

Some of those statements include:

- I can go into any place with public restrooms and be certain that there is a bathroom I can use.
- My gender has been an option on every form I have ever filled out.
- I can express myself through clothing, mannerisms, and activities in public and social settings without fear of hostile or violent activities from others.
- I have never been asked by a stranger what my genitals look like or what surgeries I have had.
- I am confident that I will receive quality medical, psychological, or spiritual care because the provider will understand my gender identity and gender expression.
- I have not had to balance the fear of losing my family and friends with coming out.
- It has not been assumed or stated that engaging in sexual activity is a ‘cure’ for my gender identity or gender expression.

- I have never had to worry that I will be told that I am sinning or will go to hell because of my gender identity or gender expression.
- I do not feel invisible when binary language like brothers and sisters is used.
- I have never hesitated when attending a spiritual or religious event on the grounds that I will be rejected or shunned.

During the discussion part of this “privilege activity,’ I ask the participants: As you reflect on these statements what stood out or was surprising to you? How many of these have you had to think about? These are only a few of the examples of things that transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people have to think about frequently. In many cases, the decisions need to be made quickly and come with negative consequences. For example, trans people frequently have to choose between using a restroom that affirms us but may not be as physically safe or having to choose one that does not affirm and is emotionally harmful but physically safer. And yet, for some nonbinary or gender non-conforming people no bathroom is ever entirely safe. The weight of these things pile up and make the world a harsher and more dangerous place to live.



## CHAPTER 4

### Congregational Care: Creating Spaces of Radical Welcome

Learning and relationships are basic steps at the beginning of a journey towards inclusion and healing in your congregation. But they are only the beginning. Years of religiously-inspired bigotry and death-dealing theology have left far too many wounds. The perception of the church among many transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people and communities is dreadful because Christian theology has been used for years to justify exclusion, the separation of families, ex-communication, and even abusive practices such as reparative therapy. As a reminder, research from the *2015 US Transgender Survey* found that “nearly one in five (19%) of the respondents who had ever been part of a spiritual or religious community left due to rejection.”<sup>1</sup> Equally alarming was that more than one-third (39%) of respondents who have been part of a faith community left due to fear of being rejected because they were transgender.<sup>2</sup> Not only are people experiencing rejection, but the perceptions of rejection are widespread.

One in five responders reported experiencing rejection, demonstrating that harm continues. The church should be a refuge, not the very source of harm. Addressing the role of faith in causing harm to individuals and communities is essential for both individual healing and reframing harmful social and cultural narratives. Religion wields incredible power to create community, but it can also destroy communities.

Congregations looking to extend a welcome to transgender, gender non-conforming, and

---

<sup>1</sup> S. E. James, et al., *The Report of the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey* (Washington, DC: National Center for Transgender Equality, 2016), 64.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 78.

nonbinary people and communities must take responsibility to repair those harms embedded in their practices, policies, and theology.

The first step in repairing the damage is a complete and candid evaluation of how the congregation has historically and systemically helped to exclude transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people and communities either implicitly or explicitly. A congregation must ask itself how transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people and communities experience them and in what ways worship, liturgy, and space is gendered. A few critical questions a congregation might ask itself include:

- Is language gendered in binary ways that exclude non-binary and gender non-conforming people? For example: “men and women, brothers and sisters”.
- Are musical arrangements used that ask the congregation to alternate between parts for men and parts for women?
- Are there gender non-specific restrooms available alongside gender-specific ones?
- Are people routinely asked for their pronouns and encouraged to include them on their name tags?
- Do transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people see other transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people in leadership positions in the church?
- Do sermons speak to the specific needs of transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people and communities from time to time?
- Are references to God other than Father acceptable?
- Does publicity, social media pages, and the website include imagery that includes transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people?

- Is there an intentional effort to recognize days important to transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people and communities, such as the Transgender Day of Visibility and the Transgender Day of Remembrance?
- Does the congregation speak out against harmful legislation when the lives of transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people and communities are under attack?

Although not exhaustive, this list gives a good overview of many areas congregations must think about if they want to become a more welcoming and hospitable place for transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people and communities. Journeying through this work is not easy and takes buy-in from the pastoral leadership, staff, and individuals that make up the faith community.

Churches must demonstrate their commitment to welcome by being willing to work towards change and be vulnerable to receive feedback in response to that change. Far too often, congregations will hang a rainbow flag or a trans flag outside and, in some cases, even participate in the local pride parade but not do the work to ensure that people are safe to worship when they arrive. Genuine welcome into a community takes a willingness to be changed by the encounter. It is not about just hanging up a flag but about incorporating the needs, desires, hopes, and faith of others into the collective life of the congregation. We know when a congregation has done this work and made space for our unique ways of being and showing up. As Dr. Siobhan Garrigan notes in *Queer Worship*, what happens instead is, “the welcome is honestly given, but the LGBT[QIA+] person is required, or feels a need, to ‘mute’ their behavior in subtle ways in order to

participate; muting in the sense of not drawing attention to their LGBT[QIA+]ness.”<sup>3</sup>

True welcome allows for the co-creation of worship space that honors and celebrates the lives, identities, and milestones important to transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people and communities. When that happens, a powerful message is sent that reflects Christ’s setting of the table to invite God’s transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary children to come home and partake. We know when the table has been set anticipating our arrival or, instead, when congregations have to scramble to figure out how to deal with us once we are already there.

Anticipating the arrival of transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people and communities into the life of a congregation can be more easily organized into smaller actions. A congregation needs to focus on five essential areas to become a more welcoming space for transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people and communities. These areas are education, worship, policies and practices, and finally, a commitment to equity and outreach. Exploring these areas will provide a roadmap for extending a full welcome.

Education is an essential first step for a congregation to welcome and embrace transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people and communities. But how can a church educate itself? There are many options. For example, a congregation can invite a local organization that supports LGBTQIA+ people and communities to host a Transgender 101 or host them as guest speakers or preachers (and pay them for their time and labor). It can also use resources specifically developed for faith communities, such

---

<sup>3</sup> Siobhan Garrigan, “Queer Worship,” *Theology & Sexuality* 15, no. 2 (2009): 211–30, doi:10.1558/tse.v15i2.211, 219.

as the Metropolitan Community Church’s *TRANSformative Church Ministry Program*<sup>4</sup>, or *TransACTION - A Transgender Curriculum For Churches and Religious Institutions* developed by the National LGBTQ Task Force Institute for Welcoming Resources.<sup>5</sup> Programs like these can help congregations better understand the terminology, the lived experiences of transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people concerning faith, and provide concrete actions for working towards being a more welcoming and inclusive congregation. Each resource provides metrics, checklists, and resources that can be used with congregation members.

Although workshops, book studies, and curriculums are helpful tools to guide education and growth in a congregation, they do not replace the need to build personal relationships with transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people. Getting to know your community, the specific needs of transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people, and inviting our stories will awaken the heart in ways that no curriculum ever can.

Although inviting spaces for sacred sharing and listening is meaningful, it is vital to properly approach transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people and communities. Far too often, the relationship-building is either rushed or forgotten altogether. When this happens, the exchange can quickly become exploitive. People with marginalized identities are often expected to educate others about their lived experiences. If you ask transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people to share our stories

---

<sup>4</sup> Angel Collie and Mel Martinez, “Metropolitan Community Church Transformative Church Ministry Program,” MCC Church, June 2013, [https://www.mccchurch.org/download/TFCMP\\_2013\\_Final.pdf](https://www.mccchurch.org/download/TFCMP_2013_Final.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> Rebecca Voelkel, “TransAction: A Transgender Curriculum for Churches and Religious Institutions,” Institute for Welcoming Resources, accessed November 17, 2021, <http://welcomingresources.org/transactionfinal.pdf>.

or educate others, that labor must be compensated. Offering compensation is a must to maintain equity in the exchange because this kind of work is emotionally and mentally taxing. Likewise, it is essential to maintain boundaries about appropriate and inappropriate questions to ask.

As the head of Transgender Ministries for Metropolitan Community Church for many years, I worked with a dear colleague Rev. Mel Martinez to develop and oversee the *Transformative Church Ministry Program*. This is a multiprong program designed to support congregations in a journey to becoming more welcoming, affirming, and celebratory of transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people and communities. Passionate churches desiring to complete the program frequently misstep by asking the transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary members of their congregation to lead the program. In many cases, this was not their idea, and they were pressured to do it. It often ends badly when the very individuals the program was intended to facilitate welcome for end up dejected and burnt out from an uphill and disheartening battle. While the needs, voices, and buy-in from transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people in the congregation are essential, church members should not assume that we will be leading the efforts. Education and advocacy efforts should not expect further effort and emotional labor unless these groups wish to participate and compensation is offered. Even then, the efforts need to be a priority for pastoral and lay leaders in the church, and allies need to participate in the heavy lifting of this work. Any attempt to welcome a group most impacted by harmful policies and theologies is only set up to fail when we are expected to carry the burden of this work without support and commitment from the leadership and congregation.

There is a notable tension with involving transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people in the educational process of a congregation. We are frequently overburdened emotionally from always being the authority on the topic, however, we also have a lot to lose if well-meaning efforts at education are ill-informed. It can be a contradiction to hear advice not to ask us to always be in the role of the educator but also ask that you involve us in the process. Intentionality and communication are the keys here. I have personally had the experience of being taken by surprise when well-meaning allies launched educational sessions or programs that unintentionally resulted in singling me out, generating unwanted attention, or making things worse. Invite us into the conversation, listen when we express what our needs and boundaries are, and ensure those boundaries are honored.

Education in any community is not a linear process. In a congregational setting, the community constantly changes as people come and go, so the need to learn and re-learn is ongoing. Far too often, educational initiatives around equity and inclusion are approached from a ‘one and done’ mentality. The idea is that we host one workshop, or one series of events over a weekend, or bring one guest preacher, and we can check the box and move on to the next thing. This approach will never achieve deep understanding, cultural change, and lasting equity. Learning must be an intentional and ongoing effort due to the ever-shifting language and needs of diverse communities. Although the beginning might be a foundational training or workshop, it is still only the beginning. The more complex work comes with deep listening, acknowledging where harm has been caused, and committing to lasting systemic changes. Changes must be championed on a policy level, but it must also be championed at a heart level. Working towards good

policies is essential, but people enact policies. At the core, this is a matter of heart work. Hearts must be softened, opened, and changed. Only through changing hearts can a lasting commitment to equity be made.

Learning, and in many cases, unlearning is hard work. The celebration of the gifts that transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people bring to a community of faith are many, but often they hit close to home and ask everyone to question their deeply held and socialized beliefs. There is a lot at stake for people in having conversations that destabilize the socialization of a binary gender system. We are operating in a culture and context where many have experienced severe social or even physical consequences, or the threat of them, for not fulfilling the gender roles and expectations expected. It is essential to acknowledge that questioning deeply-held beliefs and systems can be disorienting and downright scary. It is simply easier to believe we exist in a clearly-defined world free of liminality and complexity. But very frequently these conversations can hit a tender spot and be very frightening.

In doing this work for many years, I have learned that almost everyone carries pain or trauma around socially-mandated gender limitations. In almost every training I facilitate, I ask the question: “When is a time you have been told you have to do something or could not do something based on the gender you were perceived to be?” Shockingly, so many people pinpoint painful memories associated with this question. Responses range from being kept inside to help with chores and cooking while brothers played outside, frustration about being discouraged from going into one field or another because it is not “for them,” to painful reminders of a time when they were shamed or scolded for showing too much emotion. Over and over again, cisgender people begin to



awaken to the ways their opportunities and experiences have been shaped and narrowed by gendered expectations. As a result, they recognize that although these expectations disproportionately impact transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people, everyone, including themselves, is harmed by them and have something to gain by disrupting them.

Holistic education around gender, gender identity, and gender expression requires participating in person because it asks those in the room to think about their gender and identity in ways they may have never done before. Such exploration makes space for discovery, freedom, and permission to live fully in one's most authentic self, but that is not always the first feeling. Education is a powerful tool, and when it is done in such an embodied way, it can be both terrifying and liberating. The beautiful thing about this kind of embodied, messy, and disorienting work in a community of faith is that our Christianity already calls us to live out an embodied, messy, and disorienting faith. We serve a God of mystery, transcendence, and revelation. Education that draws on those three elements, grounded in the love of Christ and neighbor, promises to be a transformative experience. The Good News is that we are never alone on this journey, as people of faith God journeys with us towards greater love and becoming a more beloved community.

## CHAPTER 5

### Trans Inclusion Through Worship, Words, and Practice

Worship is the most important and sacred act of a community of faith. In worship, the community gathers to sing, pray, lament, praise, and see the movements of God in the world. Liturgy, ritual, and sacraments are embodied experiences on both individual and corporate levels. That is, participants in the physical space agree to the shared meaning of worship. As a result, it becomes a space of transcendent love that honors and affirms the truth of God's love for all of creation and inspires holy action. Worship is the main event of the weekly life of a congregation and it is a key area for living out the value of radical welcome.

Garrigan's unique insight into *Queer Worship* is helpful. She proposes that "worship can be claimed as queer by its very character as a perennially counter-cultural force, one of the key mechanisms whereby the endlessly changing divine-human alliance is established and developed, contested and investigated in this world."<sup>1</sup> Something is already peculiar in a scientific and reason-driven world when space is made for surprise, mystery, hope, and transformation. Ideally, worship is one such collective space. But as has happened far too often, worship can be used to assert dominance and control instead of transformation. Yet, the very message of Christ is one of transcendence, overcoming obstacles, and liberation. Therefore, worship of the present living God with us, Immanuel, should grant the freedom only found in liberation. Garrigan echoes this principle by asserting that worship has a "queering power: far from being limited to an undoing of the oppressions of heteronormativity, worship is also committed to the

---

<sup>1</sup> Siobhan Garrigan, "Queer Worship," *Theology & Sexuality* 15, no. 2 (2009): 211–30, doi:10.1558/tse.v15i2.211, 225.

undoing of any and every site of supposedly established worldly power.”<sup>2</sup> This is good news. The goal of communal worship is to inspire transformation, justice, and liberation. Therefore, it should always be opposed to worldly systems that seek to assert power and control.

At its core, gender socialization is a worldly power used to maintain control over individual behavior. Without a binary system in place to separate our behavior into opposites, that power is distributed differently. Systems of oppression are designed so that one group benefits at the expense of the other. In this case, patriarchy, sexism, and cissexism are all upheld by a rigid gender binary, and everyone loses, including God. Beware when barriers are erected that create separation from God and God’s beloved. Applying human constructions of gender and sexuality to God creates barriers and stumbling blocks. Garrigan notes that “God is no more the author of heteronormativity than [they are] the victim of it: once worship is queered, God is too. God is thus restored to the Being that tradition has long worshipped: beyond gender, beyond binaries (Three in One)...”<sup>3</sup> In the worship space and beyond transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people reflect this divine image worth restoring.

Transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people reflect an image of God that seeks to liberate us all. The undoing of the external forces keeping us at odds with one another provides the church a chance to move towards becoming truly one in Christ. The potential, however, cannot be fully realized until transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people can come to worship God fully and authentically. Although I agree with Garrigan that ideal worship is already inherently queer, it has not

---

<sup>2</sup> Garrigan, “Queer Worship,” 225.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 227.

historically been a space that is easily queered. God, in many cases, is exclusively referred to as male; gender is reinforced through songs and sermons; and rarely do we as gender diverse people see our lives and experiences reflected. There is no ‘one right way’ to extend a full welcome to transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people because every congregation is unique in worship and theology; however, there are important actions that any congregation can take.

True welcome and healing can only happen when worship includes space and time for the lives, stories, and experiences of transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people to be reflected and celebrated. For those who carry the trauma of spiritual violence, it can be significant when the once-closed communion table is opened again. Working in Transgender Ministries in the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches, I witnessed firsthand the transformative power of an open communion table. Being welcomed to partake in communion again evokes waves of emotion for so many. We weep as the chains of being told that we were too unclean and unworthy to meet Christ at the table are broken. So many people, including myself, recounted that being welcomed there again was one of the most potent worship experiences we had ever experienced. I and so many others wept when at the communion table we were reminded of God’s unconditional and unending love.

Liturgy holds this sheer power-- to affirm and celebrate the lives and unique journeys of transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people. It can also be a site of initiation and affirmation used to celebrate milestones in the lives of transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people. For example, beautiful ceremonies that affirm one’s true name, community praying prayers of healing, and the ceremonial

reaffirmation of one's baptism as our authentic selves, are all ways the church can walk alongside transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people in these sacred moments of transition. A dear friend and colleague, Rev. Jakob Hero-Shaw recently shared a story of using liturgy to honor the beginning of a trans person's transition by using the testosterone oil he would soon inject as an oil of blessing. This is a beautiful, creative, and powerful example of the church becoming a space of lifegiving affirmation. When our lives are celebrated and reflected in sermons, stories, and illustrations; and when we are granted full citizenship in the family of God, the whole community moves one step closer to the realization of God's kin-dom.

Restoring and healing a fractured part of the community of Christ brings healing to the whole body. As Christians, we are the walking, breathing, living expression of the love and witness of Jesus Christ in the world, and the world desperately needs the embodied witness of transgressive, transformative, and radical love in a world so broken by hate, division, and exploitation. A mentor and friend, Rev. Mel White founded "SoulForce," an organization dedicated to sabotaging Christian supremacy and uplifting the voices of LGBTQIA+ Christians. He once said, "Real love cannot be silent in the face of injustice," and yet for far too long, many Christians have been downright harmful, and others silent. Worship is a place to lament publicly these sins of our past, enact healing through word, prayer, ritual, and finally, commit to a bold and prophetic witness that restores the rightful place of transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people in the community of Christ and the church.

It is not enough only to extend welcome to transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people and communities in word and worship. Policies, practices, and

procedures, some of them generations in the making, must be reviewed to understand the impact they wield on those with a marginalized gender identity or gender expression. Many faithful and thoughtful church councils and boards have prayerfully considered the operations, beliefs, and practices of a congregation, making the best choices based on the information they had at the moment. Unfortunately, far too often, decisions are made without consulting the people who stand to be most impacted. When decisions are made without the voices and experiences of those with marginalized identities, unintended negative consequences result.

In grassroots organizing, we often say that ‘when we know better, we do better.’ Such an approach opens up space for learning and growth while bypassing the stalling effects of shame. Rather than focusing on the missteps or assigning blame, a healthy way forward for a congregation is to openly explore both the spoken and unspoken policies and practices that order the life of the community of faith. Grace in a community of faith assumes the best intentions of the decision-makers while holding in tension the love and responsibility to seek and undo the blind spots that inform harmful decisions. When making decisions that impact a community, privilege acts as a blinder that disguises the challenges, barriers, and potential pitfalls that are evident to people with marginalized identities. Inviting the perspective of these groups, especially those with multiple marginalized identities, is a significant first step in understanding the ways that the church is negligently uninviting or downright hostile.

For many of us, the experience of a church does not start in worship. It starts well before. With a history of harm and a legacy of exclusion, we often assume that we are not welcome or the church is not ready for us. My own experience in progressive and openly-

affirming congregations has been that, although there is some understanding and competency when ministering to lesbian, gay, and bisexual people, there is still much lacking in understanding the spiritual needs and experiences of transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people. I have been a member of churches that were led by, and mostly comprised of, members of the LGB community, only to experience harm and rejection as a transgender person.

One of the reasons for this gap is a lack of understanding that the needs of lesbian, gay, and bisexual people are different from those of transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people. Marriage equality is a perfect example. Although there are certainly transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people who identify as queer, perhaps a majority, there is an important distinction to be made around gender identity and sexuality. Marriage is frequently a secondary concern to many transgender people who face employment discrimination, housing discrimination, and violence just for expressing one's self authentically. In some cases, marriage equality has helped transgender people. Historically, if two people were married and one person transitioned and changed their legal gender marker, the marriage would be null and void. With marriage equality that is not the case since marriage between two people with a similar legal gender is no longer prohibited. That being said, the movement focusing on marriage equality overlooked the many people still fighting for our most basic rights and safety.

Understanding this history, such as the legal implications listed above, are important. Understanding unequal protections, inequitable policies, and harmful practices requires sensitivity to the subtle ways policies and practices preference cisgender people over transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people. Since we do not live

and exist only inside the doors of the church understanding the current local and national factors impacting our lives is important. Any congregation can make changes that will make a world of difference for transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people.

As a pastor or lay leader, begin understanding the regular practices of the church by asking yourself “What are the values of the community, and how are they reflected in the space, ministries, and priorities of the congregation?” If your goals are to welcome transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people, try exploring the experience of a first-time visitor from beginning to end. Search the church website for clues about the theology and beliefs of the congregation. Are there examples that the church actively participates in the local Pride celebration or hosts Transgender Day of Remembrance services? Does the mission statement of the church specifically uphold the dignity and worth of transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people? Are the images reflective of a wide range of people and identities? Does the website list ‘Men’s ministries’ and ‘Women’s ministries’ that leave non-binary and gender non-conforming folks feeling like there is no space for them? Are there visible signifiers of welcome like a rainbow flag or a transgender flag on the website? Does your website mention ministries intended for LGBTQIA+ people? Many of these questions represent ‘low hanging fruit’ in signaling welcome, and they can have a tremendous impact. *The Savvy Ally: A Guide for Becoming a Skilled LGBTQ[IA]+Advocate* reminds us that we may never know the impact these actions can have as “our visible support of LGBTQ[IA]+



people will have the biggest impact on ones who cannot [come] through [the] door. Being visibly LGBTQ[IA]+ inclusive and supportive saves lives.”<sup>4</sup>

Thinking through the early encounters with the church helps ‘try on’ the perceptions potential visitors might have. It is vital to have multiple people with various identities provide feedback. Each person can report back on moments they feel welcomed, moments they feel like an afterthought, or worse, moments they felt like they were a burden. The goal should always be for potential guests to feel who they are and what they need have been thought about and considered before they arrive. It never feels good when people scramble around us uncomfortably to figure out how to accommodate our needs. It immediately feels like we are a burden. There are many ways congregations succeed and fail when it comes to this. Examples can range from access to gender non-specific restrooms to finding community. In many ways, the smallest gestures can have significant impacts.

When visitors arrive, are they greeted enthusiastically or approached with hesitation? Are name tags provided, and are people encouraged to share their name and pronouns? Do members regularly list their name and pronouns on their nametag? These early interactions will clearly signal welcome. If we need to use the restroom, will there be gender-specific and gender non-specific options? When listening to the announcements, are events listed that are relevant to the lives and needs of transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people? Thinking through these questions can suggest a lot about the readiness of a community of faith to meet the needs of transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people and communities. These

---

<sup>4</sup> Jeanne Gainsburg, *The Savvy Ally: A Guide for Becoming a Skilled LGBTQ Advocate* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020), 117.

examples are only a few of the ways of transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people experience welcome on a surface level. Policies, practices, and procedures go far beyond an initial encounter. Embedded in these ways of being, sometimes written and unwritten, sometimes spoken and unspoken rules will be cues and signals that communicate if a congregation has anticipated and hoped for our participation and inclusion.

Beyond the initial visit, the long-term experience of people that identify as transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary is important. It is crucial to demonstrate awareness of our needs and provide appropriate support and resources for us. We feel like we belong when we can identify role models with identities similar to ours in places of leadership. We feel cared for when historical moments, legislative attacks, or important days are remembered and observed. We get involved when there are events and ministries that are relevant to our needs, experiences, and interest. We are fed when listening to sermons and hear stories and wisdom relevant to our lives. How does the practices of your congregation align with the statements above? If there is an expressed value of welcome and inclusion how would transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming rank you in those areas?

Churches must answer these questions and pay attention to match their expressed values with the reality of how a minority community experiences welcome. The visible signifiers, social media pages, presence at Pride, or community vigils will bring us in, but what is important is that the experience matches the one communicated when we arrive.

A lot of the focus of this guide has been on corporate worship and the experiences of people in the community of faith. It might feel like this is not relevant to providing

spiritual care to transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people, and yet it can mean everything. Having all of the knowledge and skills to care for transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people will mean very little if there are spoken or unspoken obstacles, barriers, or ways of being that create an unsafe or unwelcoming environment for us. Time, energy, and work must be done to ensure that those invited back home to the church will feel welcomed in worship and through policy.

Setting priorities and finding focus can prove challenging for any church. Frequently, groups and congregations will express an additive approach. First, we talk about racism, then we tackle cissexism, and then turn our attention to [insert other cause here]. Although it can seem natural, approaching welcome, equity, and justice issues from this angle can be more harmful than helpful. Although resources, time, and energy are frequently limited, such halfhearted attempts can often do more harm than good. No one is genuinely served by the add-on approach.

Silo-ing one identity over another results in asking people to check one part of themselves at the door. To do this work well and honor the uniqueness and beauty of God's creation, another approach is required- one that Christ demonstrated for us. Christ rarely made friends or extended welcome to the religious leaders or elite of his time. Jesus was closest to, and most present with, those furthest from performative religious piety. Like many queer, transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people, Christ stood outside the temple doors demanding to know why so few were inside while the majority stood outside deemed unworthy to enter. Christ stood in opposition to hollow piety, or one might say to policy and practices if they eclipsed love.

Christ demonstrated an early understanding of true intersectionality.

Contemporary scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, who coined the term intersectionality, calls for the intentional centering of those who are most marginalized in our society. Christ embodied this and was much more likely to associate with those deemed unfit based on the rigid ‘social norms’ of the time. Christ demonstrated a ministry served on the margins.

Foundational to her groundbreaking work in *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics*, Crenshaw suggests that focusing on the lives and needs of those who are most disadvantaged will bring about the radical restructuring to make us all free. In her words, “when they enter, we all enter.”<sup>5</sup> Undoubtedly, Black transgender women embody the center of the compounding effects of anti-Black racism, cissexism, and heterosexism. This has resulted in transgender women of color regularly facing multiple forms of oppression rendering them functionally voiceless in almost every social and institutional context, including the church. 2011 and 2015 surveys on the situation of transgender people in the United States found that “transgender and gender non-conforming people face injustice at every turn: in childhood homes, in school systems that promise to shelter and educate, in harsh and exclusionary workplaces, at the grocery store, the hotel front desk, in doctors’ offices and emergency rooms, before judges and at

---

<sup>5</sup> Kimberle Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989, no. 1 (n.d.): 139–67, <https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=&httpsredir=1&article=1052&context=ucf>.

the hands of landlords, police officers, health care workers, and other service providers.”<sup>6</sup>

However, the survey found the negative impacts are significantly higher for those who also hold a marginalized racial identity. The systemic challenges prove to be devastating. The survey mentioned above demonstrates that almost every single public accommodation fails to serve the transgender community, and many are downright harmful. The church has often been actively harmful or silently complicit as transgender, and gender non-conforming people knock, but the door is not opened. For trans women of color, sexual aggression and violence are coupled and death-dealing violence in cultures that devalue them based on their respective social locations. The actual sin is how often these harms, rooted in toxic theologies, go unchallenged by most churches. Rewriting this reality begins at the systemic level when policies, practices, and procedures are shaped by making central the voices of those to whom the most harm has been done.

Marsha P. Johnson, a Black transgender woman who stood up to police brutality, transphobia, and anti-Black racism in the riot that spurred the modern movement for LGBTQIA+ rights at Stonewall, famously said, “No pride for some of us without liberation for all of us.”<sup>7</sup> I cannot help but think that the same thing is true for today’s church. Until those the church has most violently excluded are fully and wholly welcomed and celebrated, there will be no chance of truly being one kin-dom in God.

---

<sup>6</sup> Jamie Grant, Lisa Mottet, and Justin Sabia-Tanis, “Injustice at Every Turn: A Report of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey,” National LGBTQ Task Force, February 4, 2011., <https://www.lgbtagingcenter.org/resources/resource.cfm?r=283>, 2.

<sup>7</sup> Rachel Chang. “13 Powerful Marsha P. Johnson Quotes.” *Biography* (January 28, 2022). <https://www.biography.com/news/marsha-p-johnson-quotes>.

When the church's ministries, policies, outreach, and focus restore dignity and humanity to those it has denied all of us come closer to the transcendent love of God in the world.

Centering the voices, needs, and experiences of those most disadvantaged and marginalized takes intentional work and effort by churches in the community outside of worship as well as on Sundays. It does not work to put up a welcome sign and passively wait for people to show up at church. The church must show up and demonstrate a commitment to improving the lives and situations of those harmed. It means that church people should show up at the legislature, protest in the streets, and use their access and power to challenge and critique social institutions perpetuating harm. In a word, it takes risks. Many churches with a genuine desire for change and transformation have an equally seductive pull towards the security and safety of not disrupting the status quo. As a member of a mainline Protestant congregational church, I feel the true longing and desire of many to show up boldly and prophetically proclaim Black Trans Lives Matter. But I also see the hesitation when discomfort, especially when tithes are involved, is expressed.

It can be one thing to go out in the world and live an outward commitment to justice and equity but another when the time comes to extend a welcome for the same people and communities to enter our own. It is one thing to go to a street protest and wave a sign but another to share a meal or a pew. It is one thing to write a check or preach about equity and another to change how things are done to reflect equity. Many people will genuinely desire to make a difference but those same people will resist when they have to make changes in their faith community. This is especially true when it comes to comfort and tradition.

But how can churches know what to change? It is okay to ask for help from people outside the church who understand the issues. Specifically, invite consultants, leadership from local LGBTQIA+ organizations, and wider community members into the process of better understanding how different practices promote or distract from the larger goals of radical welcome. Invite members of the congregation into the process and show appreciation for the work and energy put into forming the recommendations. Finally, remember the best recommendations will not go far if they are never implemented.

Implementing systemic changes, especially those held as sacred parts of ritual and tradition, will require patience, education, and acknowledgment of the inevitable anxiety that will arise among the congregation. The church must acknowledge that change is scary. But some old ways of doing things must change to reflect true welcome. Some beloved traditions will need to be reevaluated. It is understandable to grieve their loss, but tradition cannot eclipse extending the love of Christ to those relegated to the outskirts. Inviting others to participate but expecting them to conform to ways of fellowship and worship that harm them is not welcome but it happens all the time. I have heard church people say, “We love to have diverse people worship here, but they need to do things the way we do them.”

Use the strengths you have as a congregation and the tools of our faith to embrace change together. Honor the grief, uncertainty, and destabilization change can bring. At the heart of it, people are afraid to lose something dear to them. These feelings are valuable. Using ritual to express gratitude for things that served a congregation in the past but no longer does is one way to support a congregation in transition. It is possible to

honor the community cultivated by men's and women's ministries over many years while also changing them to live more deeply into that core commitment of fellowship in a way that reflects the current needs of the church. Likewise, celebrate the wins and draw attention to how changes will enable a community to live more deeply into Christ's call. Yes, things may look, feel and be different but God's unchanging love is always at the center of the church. Expanding welcome to more of God's children provides more opportunities to lean into and experience the fullness of God.

Furthermore, it is crucial to make sure that future decisions are made with a goal of equity. Specifically, invite people with diverse identities into key leadership roles, and make sure many voices are heard and considered when making future decisions. Diverse and empowered leadership whose voices are heard and valued is key for long-term relevance and change. It is not enough to invite a guest preacher a few times a year, or focus on PRIDE only in June, or even have one or two people with marginalized identities in leadership positions who are constantly being asked to consult on all things relating to diversity, equity, and inclusion. The work of radical welcome is the work of everyone in the community. Similarly, education and advocacy efforts are not one-time events but must be an ongoing commitment built into decision-making processes at all levels. It is hard work, but the depth of love, grace, and the community it fosters is genuinely sacred.

In my own United Church of Christ congregation, we have created a covenant together that prayerfully reflects our commitment to God and each other. A part of our covenant reads, "...we celebrate our uniqueness as individuals and our common humanity; seeking to heal the brokenness of Christ's body by claiming and loving each



part. With confidence in Christ, we step forward to affirm people of diverse sexual orientation and gender identity as part of God’s creation.”<sup>8</sup> Inviting the congregation to covenant together and with God is a powerful way to affirm the journey and commitment together.

Implicit in this covenant is a commitment to empowerment. Transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people are severely underrepresented in religious leadership. How often do our congregations see and hear transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people preaching from the pulpit? If they do, is it only a few times a year surrounding key days or events?<sup>9</sup> As a young seminarian, I got asked to preach so many PRIDE services or after tragic events that I found myself asking to be invited to preach on other things so that I could grow in preaching other texts. What does it communicate to transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people in the pews when we are only talked about when another one of our own has tragically died? Invite us to preach about things other than our identities because we have a lot to say about all kinds of verses and have diverse theological convictions.

A focus on checking off diversity boxes only results in tokenizing transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people. It fails to recognize the gifts we bring and the callings we have. A collaboration with the National LGBTQ Task Force, The Freedom Center for Social Justice, and the Center for LGBTQ and Gender Studies in Religion and Ministry hosts the Transgender Seminarian Leadership Cohort. The Transgender Seminarian Leadership Cohort is a year-long experience for transgender,

---

<sup>8</sup> “United Church of Chapel Hill Open and Affirming Ministry Covenant,” United Church of Chapel Hill. United Church of Chapel Hill, accessed February 14, 2021. <https://unitedchurch.org/open-affirming/>.

<sup>9</sup> The Transgender Day of Remembrance is set aside to honor the lives lost to anti-transgender violence each year.

gender non-conforming, and nonbinary individuals in religious leadership formation. The need was born from the recognition that transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary seminarians needed support if we were to make it to graduation in unsupportive seminaries. The program founded by Rev. Jakob Hero-Shaw, Barbara Satin, and Bishop Tonyia Rawls, is approaching its tenth year. The mission of the Transgender Seminarian Leadership Cohort has been to empower transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary religious leaders through spiritual formation, support, and professional development.

Many brilliant, deeply spiritual, and called young people have found a home and a community in the cohort. The early iterations of the cohort struggled to find diverse applicant pools, but the number of applicants has become overwhelming over time. Members of the cohort are seeking spiritual connection and opportunities for fully living into our sacred calls to ministry. The harsh reality is that so many people who apply are doing so because they are the only person they know of in their academic program, or they are struggling to be affirmed in their calling by denominations not yet ready for us. In many of our religious leadership formation programs, there are no queer theology classes, and even where there are, trans theology is left out entirely.

We face exhausting boundaries and barriers in our formation. We often have to fight to justify our place in our religious programs while also combating histories of exclusion and scriptural interpretations that label us as sick and sinful abominations. These climates of active exclusion or passive complacency signal that we are 'too much' or pariahs to our faith communities. I have consistently encountered systemic barriers that have prevented me from ordination. One requirement for ministry that often serves as

a considerable barrier is participation in a Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) program. Many CPE programs are connected to hospitals that frequently have dress codes that unintentionally work to deny transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people the chance to participate. As religiously affiliated institutions hospitals utilize their “right” to deny admittance into their programs to transgender people, especially transgender women because they feel that they make the patients too uncomfortable. These programs like to hide behind dress codes but at the root it is downright discrimination.

We ask the spiritual leaders and caregivers mentoring us to create opportunities for us to lead, invite us to speak or preach at other times than PRIDE month or the Transgender Day of Remembrance, and create pipelines to pulpits that affirm our unique callings. Moreover, we unapologetically ask them to speak about our lives, experiences, struggles, and theologies from the pulpit. Then we will be able to see ourselves reflected in the larger Christian story that has left us out.

Naturally, once there is a realization that we are missing and have been left out many congregations will begin outreach right away. Outreach is rarely a good place to begin. First, it is important to be thoughtful about the experience transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people who attend will have. When outreach is the starting point, the congregation often does not have the knowledge and methods to ensure we will have a positive experience. In my work in the church and higher education, I have heard over and over again “build it, and they will come.” First, building spaces of welcome and awareness is crucial. It is best to do the work to ensure a good experience before engaging in outreach and activism. Education is an essential first step. Well-

meaning and having good intentions are not enough. Outreach and activism are psychologically and spiritually expansive. The opportunities for showing up and advocating alongside marginalized people are plentiful.

The relationship between transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people and the church is strained. We, who are gender diverse, often start from the assumption that the church does not know that it has been the cause of so much trauma and pain. For this reason, outreach to transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people and communities takes more than a passive ‘I hope you will show up approach.’ Finding us where we are can go a long way in building a relationship. Ways to do this include sending pastors and church members to support community events like Pride parades. Encourage members of the congregation to support fundraisers for pride organizations and GoFundMe campaigns that help offset cost-prohibitive transition-related needs for individuals. Attending the Transgender Day of Remembrance memorial in your community to mourn alongside us and if there is not one work with the community to host one. Join us in celebration on the Transgender Day of Visibility. When harmful legislation is proposed, write letters to legislators, and go to the Capitol to be a supportive presence by offering prayers, witness, and even water. When another of us is murdered, hold a vigil and commit to a world where no one else has to die just for being their most authentic self.

Moreover, when we do come to your church, introduce us using our correct name and pronouns and direct us to changing rooms and gender non-specific restrooms we can safely use. Please help us feel included and considered when you use language like siblings in Christ, beloved community, or friends. When we are welcomed into the

congregation's life and feel at home there, we are free to become a part of the community, build relationships, and share our gifts alongside the gifts of others. It is then that we will become congregants and members. From this point on, we come from a place of love, trust, and a willingness to be open and vulnerable to receiving spiritual care.

The first half of this book has laid out a framework for a congregation to consider when becoming a more welcoming, affirming, and loving space for transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people. The remaining half will move away from the corporate experience of worship to focus on individual pastoral encounters and needs of transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people. We will explore pastoral counseling best practices concerning the milestones and specific needs in our lives, ranging from coming out, navigating school and college, finding family support, relationships, dating, navigating public accommodations, transition, marriage, births, and finally, death and dying. Although our human emotions of love, loss, grief, and joy are no different from anyone else's, we face common challenges as transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people. We face additional barriers when coming out to ourselves and others: navigating relationships, making decisions about transition and transition-related care, and the stress of navigating many systems and structures that harm us. Understanding the unique challenges we face, the systemic barriers we encounter, and the special milestones and celebrations of our journeys are essential to ensure that the fullness of our experience is seen, celebrated, and cared for.

## CHAPTER 6

### Gender Identity Development Across Lifespans

The next few chapters move through the different life stages to lay out some of the common needs and experiences of transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people. This is one generalized way to separate the information, but it is not the only way. Some limitations arise with any way of organizing the information because each person and experience will vary depending on a multitude of factors. I have chosen to organize it this way to give the caregiver frames of reference to begin. For the purposes of this chapter, chronological age and life stage do not always correlate to where one is in their identity development. When someone comes out to themselves or others has an impact on their development and understanding of their identity. Within trans communities, we sometimes talk about being ‘babies or toddlers’ in navigating the world comfortably with our identities or transition. Many transgender people who decided to undergo hormone therapies might joke about being adolescents as we experience a ‘second puberty’ complete with acne! Likewise, I am only in my mid-thirties, but I transitioned over 20 years ago, so I am considered an elder by my ‘trans kids’ in the community.

#### Gender Expansive Children

There is often an assumption that conversations about gender, gender identity, and gender expression are not for children. In my coming out experience, I was hidden away or deemed ‘too taboo’ or ‘complicated’ when it came to my younger nieces and nephews. Early my uncle would refuse to attend family functions where I would be for fears my queerness would ‘rub-off’ on his children. These ideas could not be further from the

truth. Gender identity development begins at a very young age, and gender socialization happens well before that. We live in a culture that automatically genders babies before they are even born. After someone announces their pregnancy, one of the most common questions is, “do you know what the sex is?” It is such a commonly-accepted phenomenon that gender-reveal parties have become all the rage. In the extreme whole ecosystems were destroyed because of overzealous expressions of fetus genitalia.<sup>1</sup>

Before a child has even been born, colors, ideas of romantic partners, clothing, careers, and interest are waiting for them. This might seem harmless, but such intense early socialization can negatively impact early identity development. According to a research study on “Gender Identity in Childhood” published in the *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, “Nearly all children label themselves correctly by age three years, and by age six years most have conserved gender, or realize that their gender remains invariant despite superficial changes in clothing, hair length, and so forth.”<sup>2</sup> This means that between three years old and six years old, children begin to understand the gender they are perceived to be and an understanding of whether or not their own gender identity is reflected in that.

Jazz Jennings, a teen star of a popular TV show, *I Am Jazz*, came into the public eye when she shared her story and early social transition on national TV at just six years old. She shares her childhood memories in her memoir *Being Jazz: My Life as a (Transgender) Teen*. Jazz remembers as a toddler that “around the house, I was pretty

---

<sup>1</sup> “Gender Reveal Party Couple Face Jail Over Deadly California Wildfire,” BBC News, July 21, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-57898993>.

<sup>2</sup> David Perry, Rachel Pauletti, and Patrick Cooper, “Gender Identity in Childhood: A Review of the Literature,” *International Journal of Behavioral Development* 43, no. 4 (2019): 289–304, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0165025418811129>, 290.

much allowed to wear whatever I wanted. I'd steal Ari's oversize pink or purple T-shirts and wobble around the kitchen in dress-up heels covered in feathers. (In fact, I first started wearing those heels back when I was still in diapers."<sup>3</sup> Jazz continues to share her story and early experiences with gender. The freedom to express herself at home is a unique one. In many cases, behavior like this is punished or shamed. Knowing that gender identity development happens at such a young age in children is vital for those in positions of care to know because positive or harsh responses has been proven to hurt young children's overall wellbeing and development. With more information and resources on social media, children are coming out at younger and younger ages. Knowing this reality influences care in two ways; First, it should direct children and youth ministers to know how their programs and messaging reinforce rigid gender expectations or make room for broader forms of expression. Recognizing the sensitivity of gender development during these times, "a fairly straightforward recommendation [is] that adults—parents, teachers, counselors—should strive to minimize children's development of felt pressure for gender conformity and negative attitudes toward the [an]other gender."<sup>4</sup>

This notion is also crucial for caregivers. When parents, guardians, or others notice that a child rejects the social pressures of gender conformity, it is important not to shame or punish those behaviors. Peer pressure and punishment exist in many places, including the classroom, media, social groups, and in church. Enforcing more consequences and shame can only further repress those feelings and cultivate more profound shame.

---

<sup>3</sup> Jazz Jennings, *Being Jazz: My Life as a Transgender Teen* (New York: Ember, 2017), 6.

<sup>4</sup> Perry, "Gender Identity," 301.



It is important to note that “transgender children have much in common with transgender adults, but because of their age — and because many people still have a great deal to learn about their experiences — there are important differences in how families, communities, and professionals can best support them.”<sup>5</sup> Most important when working with gender-expansive children is to creating room for discovery, exploration, play, and imagination.<sup>6</sup> Allowing these children to be autonomous in their gender expression and to give voice to feelings about their gender is life-giving.

In a spiritual care setting, a host of emotions make suggestions for affirming gender-expansive behaviors in children complex. Parents and loved ones often feel overwhelmed and confused. For example, they often fear the hostility that gender-diverse people face in society. In particular, they fear that their beloved children will experience a hard life of discrimination or most immediately experience rejection and bullying from their peers. The spiritual counselor must validate these fears. They are honest and based on love; however, they are not valid reasons to stamp out or punish gender-expansive behaviors in their children. Parents cannot control the socialization and gender rigidity outside of the home, but a strong, affirming, and loving foundation at home greatly helps gender-expansive children develop confidence and resiliency in other areas of their lives. The work of the *Family Acceptance Project*, the *2011 Injustice at Every Turn Trans Survey*, and the *2015 U.S. Transgender Survey* all back up the importance of family support in achieving positive outcomes.

---

<sup>5</sup> Gabe Murchinson, “Supporting and Caring for Transgender Children,” Human Rights Campaign, September 2016, <https://hrc-prod-requests.s3-us-west-2.amazonaws.com/files/documents/SupportingCaringforTransChildren.pdf>, 3.

<sup>6</sup> Gender Expansive is a term used when talking about children who do not feel like they fit fully into the gendered expectations placed on them based on the sex they were assigned at birth. It is important to note that gender-expansive does not mean a child is, or will later identify as, transgender.

There are many ways that parents, guardians, and caregivers can provide their gender-expansive children the freedom to freely explore their identities without pressure. For example, parents can talk with their children about the meaning of haircuts, clothing choices, toys, extracurricular activities, and hobbies. The psychological pain over a fight because a child wants to wear a princess dress or sport a short haircut lasts longer than such temporary forms of expression. They will change their clothes and the hair will grow out, but the shame and rejection will take root. It can be extremely important for spiritual caregivers to remind parents about the impermanence of gender exploration.

One of the first things that parents of gender-expansive children fear is permanence. Parents worry that allowing their child to express themselves authentically means undergoing permanent changes that the child might later regret. Such concerns are frequently premature. With gender-expansive children, much exploration can be done freely without the pressure of undergoing lasting medical changes.

Statistically speaking, some gender-expansive children are transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary, but many are not. In fact, in two studies of children brought to clinics because of their gender-expansive traits, 50 to 90 percent of those assigned female at birth, and about 80 percent of those assigned male at birth, grew up to be non-transgender adults.”<sup>7</sup>

For parents, balance is essential: when they provide emotional space for their children to explore and live into diverse gender expressions, they normalize the wide range of human expression, interests, and personalities that exist. In that type of home

---

<sup>7</sup> Kenneth Zucker, “On the ‘Natural History’ of Gender Identity Disorder in Children,” *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* 47, no. 12 (2008): 1361–63, doi:10.1097/CHI.0b013e31818960cf.

environment, children are free to play and explore without shame or pressure. Aidan Key, an author, and activist whose work focuses on gender identity development in children reports that “one of the questions most commonly asked by parents, teachers, and therapist is whether gender [expansiveness] could be [temporary]? The simplest answer is yes. The only way to determine whether a child’s interests are short-term is to allow the passage of time.”<sup>8</sup> Key goes on to note that timing, longevity, or permanence are not the point. Instead, the most important factor for parents is to provide “a non-judgmental and supportive response to the child’s exploration.”<sup>9</sup>

It is normal and expected that parents and guardians of gender-expansive youth would present many different questions and feel many different, and even conflicting emotions. It is valid and vital for parents and spiritual caregivers to make emotional space for all of the questions, fears, and emotions that come up. Working through the whole range of those emotions is a necessary step for parents and children. To aid this process, counselors should be aware of the workbooks and journals that have been developed to provide prompts and considerations for parents and children to explore gender-expansiveness together. Two excellent options are *My Parenting Journey with a Transgender Child: A Journal* by Cheryl Evan and *The Gender Identity Workbook for Kids: A Guide to Exploring Who You Are* by social worker Kelly Storck.

Although books and resources are important tools, they are not substitutes for building community and relationships. Parents and gender-expansive children often struggle in isolation and fear what those around them think. Parents sometimes go

---

<sup>8</sup> Laura Erickson-Schroth. *Trans Bodies, Trans Selves: A Resource for the Transgender Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 411.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 411.

through their own ‘coming out’ process because there is social pressure from other people for them to intervene and discourage their child’s gender exploration. One of the most valuable gifts a spiritual caregiver can offer is to connect families to other families having similar experiences—to help them establish their own network of support.

Children need to interact with other gender-expansive peers while parents connect with parents over shared questions, experiences, and resources. One place spiritual caregivers can direct parents is to PFLAG. PFLAG is a national organization working to support families, friends, and loved ones of LGBTQIA+ people with chapters in cities and towns all over the United States. Speaking personally, my own Mother’s introduction to PFLAG changed both of our lives. She met the founder of the local chapter, a parent named Lela Chesson who had lost one of her children, which put it into perspective for my Mom. When Lela shared her own story my Mother remembers the moment when her heart changed after Lela said to her, “after losing one child, you do not care if the other is gay, you just care that they are happy and alive.” Accompanying parents and loved ones of gender-expansive children to local groups and communities like PFLAG can be life-changing for families and their gender-expansive loved ones.

When parents reach out to you as a caregiver, it is vital to affirm a wide range of feelings. For example, people raised in a religious environment, and certainly in a conservative one, might have embedded theologies to explore and process. Some parents blame themselves and believe that they have done something wrong or their child would not be gender-expansive. The most threatening conservative Christian theology instills fear into parents and children that they will go to hell if they are not gender conforming.

Naturally, this leads parents to believe they must shut down their child's gender exploration to prevent eternal consequences.

Given these deep socially-based fears, most parents react negatively and discourage exploration. Many, even accepting parents, experience grief. Author and parent of a transgender child, Cheryl Evans, makes an important distinction here: "Parents of [gender expansive and/or] transgender kids often say they had to mourn the loss of the child as they knew them. Time often reveals to us that it was our expectations, not the child, we had to mourn."<sup>10</sup> Helping families celebrate the expansiveness and creativity of a happy child and process changed expectations makes all the difference. It is also essential to move away from the idea that they are experiencing the "loss of a child." Some well-meaning providers will suggest holding a 'funeral' for the child that is transitioning to process the loss and embrace their child after coming out. Theologian and activist Catherine Moore expresses how damaging a death ritual was for her during her coming out: "while this process may hold value, it is damaging to the trans and/or non-binary person by predicating our existence and truth on a ritual of death."<sup>11</sup> Avoiding this common but harmful trope helps breathe life, hope, and celebration even as one adjusts to a change in expectations without imprinting the 'cause' of such grief onto gender-expansive children.

In an ideal world, every parent would be fully loving and accepting of their gender-expansive child. Even parents with a positive attitude can struggle with the social, cultural, and moral stigma, and oppression that exist around gender-expansive and

---

<sup>10</sup> Cheryl B. Evans, *My Parenting Journey with a Transgender Child: A Journal* (Ontario, Canada: Cheryl B. Evans, 2018), 30.

<sup>11</sup> Catherine Moore, *I Did Not Come Here to Die, Nor Be Your Butterfly*. Personal Essay.

transgender identities. Dr. Elijah Nealy, author of *Transgender Children and Youth: Cultivating Pride and Joy with Families in Transition*, suggests a harm-reduction approach. Nealy asks parents “if they are willing to refrain from one rejecting behavior and begin practicing one accepting behavior, not because they have changed their minds and now believe being transgender is OK, but simply because of what we know about the long-term impact of parental actions on children.”<sup>12</sup> Even in the worst cases, starting with small but meaningful positive changes can refocus parents’ from the fear or anger (harm-producing) to a softening (harm-reducing) position of acceptance and love.

Small changes in behavior can have a tangible impact on gender-expansive children. For example, being neutral is better than actively causing harm. Nealy is drawing off the vital work of the *Family Acceptance Project* when applying this framework. The researchers found that “transgender teens whom their parents and caregivers rejected were at very high risk for physical and mental health problems<sup>13</sup>... they were more than eight times as likely to have attempted suicide, nearly six times as likely to report high levels of depression, more than three times as likely to use illegal drugs, and more than three times as likely to be at high risk for HIV and sexually transmitted diseases.”<sup>14</sup> This research shows that parents who engage in harmful and rejecting behaviors cause significant trauma and pain to young gender-expansive,

---

<sup>12</sup> Elijah C. Nealy, *Transgender Children and Youth: Cultivating Pride and Joy with Families in Transition* (New York: W.W Norton & Company, 2017), 196.

<sup>13</sup> It is very important to remember that transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people do not inherently have more mental health issues. There is a history of pathologizing our identities in negative ways. In fact, gender dysphoria is still listed in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. Higher rates of anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation is a direct result of intense amounts of harassment, discrimination, and violence our communities face.

<sup>14</sup> Caitlyn Ryan, “Supportive Families, Healthy Children: Helping Families with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Children,” 2009, [https://familyproject.sfsu.edu/sites/default/files/FAP\\_English%20Booklet\\_pst.pdf](https://familyproject.sfsu.edu/sites/default/files/FAP_English%20Booklet_pst.pdf), 5.

transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary children. *The Family Acceptance Project Study* demonstrates that rejecting behaviors posed significant health and safety risk. The good news of the project is that simply not causing harm can have a positive impact. Those who had parents or guardians who mostly accepted them with a few adverse reactions “were only about twice as likely to try to kill themselves.”<sup>15</sup> Just encouraging parents to stop the rejecting behaviors makes a huge difference in the outcomes and safety of their children. The goal is always acceptance and celebration, but reducing the harm to whatever degree is critical and impactful when that is not possible.

Acceptance can mean different things for different families, just as the needs of the children can vary. Medical gender transition is almost always a question or point of tension, especially when working with children. This has become a politicized topic. For example, in the previous legislative session in 2021, among the hundreds of anti-transgender bills proposed across the United States, many were directly seeking to prevent anyone under 21 from obtaining medical-related transition care from a physician.<sup>16</sup> In light of such horrendous legislation the “American Academy of Pediatrics” issued a statement asserting that “it is critically important for every child to have access to quality, comprehensive and evidence-based care — transgender and gender-diverse youth are no exception... As pediatricians, we will continue to speak up and advocate for our patients. We also want transgender and gender-diverse youth to know that not only do we care for them, we care about them, we value them and we will

---

<sup>15</sup> Ryan, *Supportive Families*, 6.

<sup>16</sup> Ivette Feliciano, “PRIDE: 2021 Has Set a Record in Anti-Trans Bills in America,” PBS, June 6, 2021. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/pride-2021-has-set-a-record-in-anti-trans-bills-in-america>.

do all we can to ensure they have access to the care they need and deserve.”<sup>17</sup> Such bills are downright harmful and based on bigotry and bias, not data and research.

The topic of transition even for the most supportive parents can evoke some level of fear. Parents often worry that their child will come to regret the decision later on in life or that their child will never have the life they wished for them. Likewise, for some parents, there is a sadness that medical transition might mean they will not have the grandchildren they someday hope for.

There is often less pressure when working with children because there is more time to decide on medical interventions. For gender-expansive children who are transgender and desire transition-related medical care, taking hormone blockers at the onset of puberty, is an option. Many parents are relieved to learn that this only delays puberty, giving their child more time to make the best choice. For young children, the ability to dress themselves comfortably, sport a haircut they feel good about, and use their authentic name and pronouns are incredibly affirming and lifegiving. Dr. Michele Angello and Alisa Bowman, in *Raising the Transgender Child: A Complete Guide for Parents, Families, and Caregivers*, suggest that parents ask their child a simple check-in question— “What do you need to be comfortable?” to make them feel safe and accepted at home. Beyond the home, parents and community members need to create conditions in which children can express themselves authentically by respecting their wishes within reason; ensure that their peers are not shaming or bullying them; and that peers, teachers, and other caregivers are respecting their name and pronouns. Overall, the most important

---

<sup>17</sup> Alyson Wyckoff. “AAP Continues to Support Care of Transgender Youths as More States Push Restrictions.” American Academy of Pediatrics (January 6, 2022). <https://publications.aap.org/aapnews/news/19021/AAP-continues-to-support-care-of-transgender>.



things caregivers can do is encourage parents to assure their child that they love them; help them set goals for working towards greater acceptance; and help get them connected to a gender care clinic or therapist who specializes in working with transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming folks and communities.

Finally, guiding the conversation across all stages of development in the congregation goes a long way. If there is not a PFLAG group that exists can you use the church space to support one? Could the church be a place of education for children and adults? Can the church be a space for providing resources for children, youth, and teens to understand their bodies from an inclusive lens like that provided in the *Our Whole Lives* program, a sexual health and human development curriculum from a faith point of view across a range of ages? Normalizing these conversations early, often, and from many platforms creates communities that affirm the fullness and wholeness of human experience, not only for children but for all members of the congregation. All of these suggestions represent the ideal and may not be where a congregation can start, but they are worth working towards. What *The Family Acceptance Project* demonstrated for children is also true for a community: small intentional efforts matter. The important part is to start somewhere.

### **Trans Youth and Teens**

As younger children grow up, other struggles and opportunities emerge. K-12 education, extracurricular activities, dating, and puberty can shift the needs and the conversation for transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming youth and teens.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> Chronological age and developmental age do not always align. With that in mind, when talking about youth and young adults I am generally meaning people between 12 years old through about 18 years old when many are graduating from high school.

Although gender identity is one aspect of what transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming teenagers face, as community organizers Colt Keo-Meier and Lance Hicks succinctly put it in *Trans Bodies, Trans Selves*, “we may also face other challenges as people of color, poor or working-class people, people with disabilities, overweight people, or gay people.”<sup>19</sup> This range of challenges is important to address. However, the pressures can be especially salient because a strong sense of identity is fostered in youth and teenagers. This is compounded as teens begin to understand many aspects of their identities such as their racial and ethnic identities, their socioeconomic status, making choices about what they believe, deciding their ethical values, and establishing their interests. And all of this comes at “a time when the gender messages and expectations of the binary are especially powerful in directing [people] towards ideal expectations for courtship, marriage, and parenthood.”<sup>20</sup>

The social pressures are even greater because young LGBTQIA+ folks are both questioning their gender and confronting cultural expectations in more visible ways. In *Gender Stories: Negotiating Identity in a Binary World*, the authors name this tension: “Coming-of-age rituals often reinforce the messages peers and schools give about meeting the expectations of the gender binary, providing another way of molding teens to assume adult binary roles.”<sup>21</sup> The rituals of Quinceañeras, Bat and Bar Mitzvahs, and the Debutante ball exemplifies such traditions rooted in race, culture, family, and tradition.

The youth and teenage years are a time of exploration, asserting identity, and claiming agency. This was a necessary time of development in my own life. As a gender-

---

<sup>19</sup> Erickson-Schroth, *Trans Bodies, Trans Selves*, 446.

<sup>20</sup> Sonja K. Foss, Mary E. Domenico, and Karen A. Foss, *Gender Stories: Negotiating Identity in a Binary World* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2013), 69.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 71.

expansive child, everyone always saw me as a ‘tomboy’ and found it cute, but it was not so cute during this later time in my life. The social pressures around gender and sexuality became emphasized with sex education classes, dances, and the onset of puberty. During that time, I did not have the language to understand what was happening and why those expectations placed on me were so confining. I remember going out for the football team and everyone making a big deal about it. I was confused because I just knew I wanted to play football while everyone else focused on my gender. I was allowed to play after a struggle with the coaches and administration, but it only resulted in them trying even harder to enforce gendered expectations on me. They went as far as requiring me to ride to away games with cheerleaders and not with my team. It was a confusing time because I had never seen myself as a girl, so being gendered in those ways by people around me felt foreign.

This time in my life was further complicated by the physical changes that soon came. As someone who never felt like a girl, I remember the shame and disappointment of feeling like my body betrayed me when I began menstruating. I did not understand my friends who were excited about coming into their womanhood because it felt like punishment for me. On top of that, there were consequences at home and school for failing to comply with gendered expectations. I did not have the support or resources to understand what was happening, but I did know I was failing to live up to what most of the adults around me hoped I would be. Around this time in middle school, I came out as a lesbian. It was the closest thing I knew and understood because the word or possibility of being transgender or gender-expansive was not something that I even knew was possible.

I remember just before high school hearing the word transgender for the first time. A friend was telling his story about his trans identity. He talked about how he never understood why people saw him as a girl when he always knew himself to be a boy. He shared other things that made me feel like someone gave voice to my deepest feelings and yearnings. I have never been as sure about anything before or since that time. He gave words to my experience and opened up a new world of resources, community, and possibility for me. I share my own story from this period in my life, hoping that it grounds this work in lived experience. My story is just that- my story, and it is essential to remember that everyone's story, experience, and way of understanding their identity as transgender, nonbinary, or gender non-conforming will be different. Every story is unique and shaped by context and the other identities one holds. A big part of the commitment to learning and supporting young people is being willing to listen with an open heart and provide a non-judgmental, non-anxious presence. The needs, yearnings, and places of pain will be different for every child, young person, adult, and loved one of a transgender, nonbinary, or gender non-conforming person.

When working with young adults, it is essential to validate, encourage, and support their discovery and exploration. I often find that it means so much for a young adult to be encouraged to explore their gender, have fun with it, try on (literally and figuratively) things to learn what works, does not work, and what makes their soul come alive. The most important thing to avoid is shaming the exploration. Activists Keo-Meier and Hicks name ways this plays out when adults “write off our identities as rebellion, confusion, ‘just a phase,’ or otherwise invalidate our experience.”<sup>22</sup> They go on to remind

---

<sup>22</sup> Erickson-Schroth, *Trans Bodies*, 446.

us that “having freedom to explore our gender identities is an important part of becoming an adult.”<sup>23</sup> As a spiritual caregiver, helping to facilitate gender and identity exploration and working with families to do the same is one of the greatest gifts you can give when ministering to transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming youth and their loved ones. Dr. Nealy names a big difference between gender-expansive children and youth: “young children with gender-diverse expressions may not identify as transgender when they grow up. In contrast, youth who come out as trans during adolescence typically continue to identify with their affirmed gender into adulthood.”<sup>24</sup> Knowing this affirms youth and teens in their identity exploration and can assure parents who are afraid of what coming out could mean for their child.

All youth and teens already feel gendered expectations. For example, middle and high school clubs, athletic teams, school dances, and social pressures converge with bodily changes. In her memoir *Being Jazz*, Jazz shares her own experience with the onset of puberty. She recounts, “I went for my annual physical and got some news that freaked me out—I had already started puberty.”<sup>25</sup> For many transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming teens beginning puberty will bring on additional stress and pressure as it did for Jazz and me. Arguably the most stressful decision as our bodies begin to change will be deciding whether or not we want to delay that process medically.

It is important to remember that not every transgender, nonbinary, or gender non-conforming person will want to transition medically, but this is the time youth might begin having these conversations. Dr. Nealy notes, “medical transition generally follows

---

<sup>23</sup> Erickson-Schroth, *Trans Bodies*, 446.

<sup>24</sup> Nealy, *Transgender Children and Youth*, 117.

<sup>25</sup> Jennings, *Being Jazz*, 89.

social transition when the child's or adolescent's transgender, [nonbinary or gender non-conforming] identity has remained consistent over a period of time, and the youth has demonstrated positive emotional and social adjustment in their affirmed gender.”<sup>26</sup>

Parents and young people can be in very different places when it comes to comfort with transition-related medical care. It can be challenging to support the urgency many transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming teens feel to align our bodies with our identities and navigate our parents' hesitation. The fear adults have with taking those steps often feels like a form of rejection for trans youth and teens. For us, the pain of being misgendered is so painful that waiting even a short period feels like an eternity.

For younger teens just beginning puberty the “first steps in a medical transition may include the use of hormone/puberty blockers at the onset of puberty, followed at a later age by [hormone therapy that aligns with one's gender identity].”<sup>27</sup> Using hormone blockers can delay the process and provide more time before beginning hormones like estrogen or testosterone that have lifelong lasting effects. If it is a matter of waiting, or when working with someone who does not want to transition medically, counselors and spiritual caregivers must validate the authenticity of our identity. Too often, the desire or ability to access transition-related care is seen as the proof-text of the validity of our gender identity. Pushing back against this pressure and making space for the needs and desires of the individual in front of you is what is most important.

Decisions around transition, hormone blockers, and navigating families are only a few of the pressures that might occupy the mind of a transgender, nonbinary, or gender non-conforming teen. In *Yes, You Are Trans Enough*, Mia Violet shares her experience

---

<sup>26</sup> Nealy, *Transgender Children*, 84.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 94.

navigating high school, “Across the school, the other kids my age seemed to be enjoying themselves on at least some level, forming meaningful connections and growing into new people. Meanwhile, I just wanted to be home, away from everyone and the weight of their expectations.”<sup>28</sup> As a young trans woman, Mia struggled with feeling foreign and unable to fake the toxic masculinity of her peers. She faced bullying for not playing along in the violent charade and said she believed that she disappointed her father for not finding excitement in ‘boyish’ antics.

More than ever, middle schools and high schools have pride clubs and resources for transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming students. However, it is crucial to consider the social pressures and consequences that still present barriers for students. In some cases, even showing up to the pride club meeting can open students up to criticism or bullying. It is imperative to approach conversations about coming out supportively but delicately. Word can travel fast, and it is often not unlikely that news can travel outside of the school setting. Aunts, uncles, cousins, and parents can easily be tipped off, especially in a world so connected by social media. Talking through safety issues, formulating a plan, rehearsing conversations, and being on standby for support are important ways caregivers can provide care for young adults as they navigate if, when, and how they want to come out. You must have plans in place for what to do whether it goes well or not. Coming out is not a one-time event because there are many coming-outs—for example, with extended family, in church, at school, or to the team. Since it is an ongoing process spiritual caregivers must set expectations and regularly check in to see how things are going.

---

<sup>28</sup> Mia Violet, *Yes, You Are Trans Enough My Transition from Self-loathing to Self-love* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2018), 41.

As a pastor or lay leader in a congregation, it is also helpful to consider what coming out in the congregation might be like. Are there cues about how the youth group or other members might respond? Do you anticipate there will be some angry or negative responses? Frequently, there is a mix of people who are open to accepting us and others who will be vehemently opposed. It is important to think through how to honor the many places people are theologically without allowing for harm to come to us when we are coming out. One way to navigate this is by hosting theological forums or inviting speakers who can present theologically sound affirmation and welcome to transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people.

Another strategy might be to facilitate in-group spaces where LGBTQIA+ people can be affirmed and wrestle with our embedded theologies without the fear of hostility from those who are not affirming. For example, it is common for us to worry or ask ‘what-if’ those condemning us are right? Doing that kind of vulnerable questioning in the company of those who espouse harmful theology can be traumatizing. Honoring both spectrums is possible but it is also not advised to do it in large open settings. Reinforcing affirmation from the pulpit goes a long way in establishing the norms and values of the congregation. Affirming ministries, programs, and library resources all foster welcoming space. Finally, as a pastor or leader in the congregation, the conversation should always return back to asking where is God leading and what strength and tools does the Christian community already have that can sustain having these conversations. Your authority as a leader goes a long way in cueing a response from your flock. Congregants will often look to you for guidance on how to respond. Of course, there is always a risk that becoming affirming will introduce so much anger that some people will leave the congregation.



Perhaps, sometimes it is okay when people leave for other faith communities because they are no longer in line with where God is calling your congregation to go.

Teenage angst against injustice is the embodiment of a future worth fighting for. I firmly believe we should not squash dreams of a better world but help channel them. Standing in a position of power as religious leaders, we can help translate anger at injustice, even when it is directed at our own congregations, into productive activism. As Christians, we share a deep and common history linked to faith-inspired activism and liberation. When allied with the vision of a world not yet realized, the dreams we hold and actions we are willing to take as young diverse Christians is powerful.

Living life beyond coming out to oneself and coming out to others brings its own experiences and challenge for teenagers. Boldly proclaiming one's authentic identity against social expectations and pressures is exhausting. Asserting one's identity on top of transitioning from middle school to high school can prove to be draining. Intense focus on how others understand, like, or interact with the individual is essential. Fears of rejection for coming out, pressures to fit in with peers, and striving for a sense of belonging all inform decisions about coming out. It is crucial to keep in mind that "when a young trans person's trans identity is not visible, there is often fear that once others discover their trans history, they will no longer be seen the same way or be seen as a real or regular guy or girl."<sup>29</sup> Remember, Jesus had some of these fears and tried to hide his truth and calling, too!

This was intensely true for me as a teenager. Although it has gotten better over the years, there is still an internalized fear that many of my relationships are conditional.

---

<sup>29</sup> Nealy, *Transgender Children*, 237.

Deciding when, where, how, or whether I come out as trans always carries the risk of violence or rejection. When a spiritual caregiver knows this and boldly proclaims affirmation of the teen or young adult, it can create safer environments for transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming youth and teens to express themselves authentically.

Isolation, lack of support, and very few mentors are common for trans teens. Many young transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming people do not know anyone in their community, school, or social circle with a similar identity or experience. That in itself can feel crushing as one works to understand new and confusing feelings against a harsh social backdrop. The political situation, and media representation, of transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming people often instills more shame, fear, and dissonance. Mia Violent shares how such representation in the media informed her early stages of coming out to herself as a young transgender woman: “The depictions of transgender people I’d seen on television at the time consisted almost entirely of exaggerated talk-show participants – the ones where the trans person was presented as a laughable concept, a nonsensical clownish figure for everyone else to gawk at. If we were glimpsed beyond reality TV, then we were corpses or killers in gritty crime dramas. The overwhelming message was always the same: Trans people are strange, perverse, and disconnected individuals.”<sup>30</sup> It is critical to understand the potential for shame when this is the dominant social perception. Shame is death-dealing when it takes root. Sociologists and author Brené Brown defines shame, “as the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging—something

---

<sup>30</sup> Violet, *Yes*, 51.

we've experienced, done, or failed to do makes us unworthy of connection.”<sup>31</sup> Feelings of isolation, unworthiness, and disconnection leads to a host of physical and psychological problems. As people of faith, there is a moral imperative to promote life abundantly and stand against any forces that work to squelch it.

Understanding shame emphasizes the vital role spiritual caregivers provide by offering positive representations of transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming people to trans teens. Evoking the image of a God beyond gender, preaching on the worth and dignity of transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming people, and speaking out against the death-dealing political voices determined to steal our agency has incredible power to heal and affirm us. The power of a clergy member in a collar at the parade or protest does wonders to affirm our sacred worth and dignity.

Transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming youth and teens will face specific barriers related to many aspects of life and their development. Gender-divided activities like athletics, overnight trips, or the excitement of a rite of passage like getting a driver's license are overshadowed by a binary gender marker or binary gender expectations. Stephanie Brill and Lisa Kenney in *The Transgender Teen: A Handbook for Parents and Professionals Supporting Transgender and Non-Binary Teens* name the importance of understanding systems of oppression and the ways they show up daily: “The varied forms of oppression they experience every day create extra layers of stress and hardship... once you understand this, you can help [them] navigate these systems and recognize that the struggles they experience are not about them as an individual. The

---

<sup>31</sup> Brené Brown. “Shame vs. Guilt.” Brené Brown's Personal Website (January, 15, 2013). <https://brenEBrown.com/articles/2013/01/15/shame-v-guilt/>.

more your teen understands systems of oppression and develops multiple ways to deal with the pressures, the more they can build resilience and refrain from internalizing negative messages.”<sup>32</sup>

As a Pastor or parent, it is dire to understand how gender socialization or binary gender expectations show up at home, at school, at church, and in the world. We have been socialized not to recognize these systems at work, but they are continuously operating under the surface of what is easily perceptible. Cultivating the eyes to ‘see’ them means talking with transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming people, reading books about our lives, and watching videos where we share our experiences. Not doing this work means we risk failing to perceive the stresses and aggressions transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming people face daily, but worse, we risk replicating them.

The stress from constantly facing shame, stigma, and fears of rejection has lasting impacts. “Minority stress as it relates to transgender, nonbinary, [and gender non-conforming] people has been shown to be at significant levels and to have a direct relationship to mental health conditions. Transgender, nonbinary, [and gender non-conforming] teens have significantly more negative mental health outcomes compared to cisgender youth due to this stress.”<sup>33</sup> This kind of stress is intensified when teens hold other marginalized identities. Facing discrimination and oppression on multiple fronts means increased stress, more vulnerability to harmful outcomes, and fewer places to go for mentorship or support. Transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming people

---

<sup>32</sup> Stephanie Brill, *The Transgender Teen: A Handbook for Parents and Professionals Supporting Transgender and Non-binary Teens* (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2016), 189.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 190.

with multiple marginalized identities often have to pick or choose which identity to seek support around, often over another. Many queer and trans spaces are incredibly whitewashed, so to enter into queer and trans space frequently means codeswitching for people of color to assimilate to the culture.

The story of Blake Brockington hits close to home. Blake is a brilliant and vibrant young Black trans man who was awarded the title of prom king in my state home of North Carolina. Blake and I had been in similar circles and had mutual friends but never met one another. In *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity*, C. Riley Snorton shares Blake’s story. “By the time he was made king, Brockington had already moved in with a foster family. Life with his father and stepmother became untenable after he came out as trans, in the tenth grade. In an interview with the Charlotte Observer, he explained, ‘My family feels like this is a decision I made. ... they think, You’re already Black, why would you want to draw more attention to yourself?’”<sup>34</sup> Blake was a young teen, navigating coming out as trans, dealing with the effects of racism, and the intense rejection from his family. Snorton notes, “The sensibilities expressed by Brockington’s family, particularly in the use of ‘already Black,’ underscore how Blackness and transness are tethered in the contemporary landscape in terms of visibility, in which the form of ‘attention’ directed at Black and trans is frequently articulated...”<sup>35</sup> Brockington’s family understood that Blake was already experiencing the pain, oppression, and discrimination of anti-Black racism. What they failed to understand was that Blake’s trans identity was equally not a choice, but they did very much know the

---

<sup>34</sup> C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), x.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, x.

compounded pain, oppression, and discrimination Blake would face. Tragically, Blake's story is not a happy one. In March 2015, the rejection, compounding effects of anti-Black racism, and transphobia would become too much, and Blake committed suicide.

Blake's story is not an isolated one. Fighting and advocating for trans lives is a life-or-death issue. *The 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey* found that "among the starkest findings is that 40% of respondents have attempted suicide in their lifetime—nearly nine times the attempted suicide rate in the U.S. population (4.6%)."<sup>36</sup> Allowing for such harm to be justified in the name of faith, even just by remaining complicit, is a moral issue.

The journeys of transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming teens often look drastically different from cisgender teens. Bullying and discrimination during this decisive time of educational and professional formation can lead to tragic consequences. Data from the *U.S. Transgender Survey* found that "the majority of respondents who were out or perceived as transgender while in school (K–12) experienced some form of mistreatment, including being verbally harassed (54%), physically attacked (24%), and sexually assaulted (13%) because they were transgender. Further, 17% experienced such severe mistreatment that they left a school as a result."<sup>37</sup>

I did not graduate from High School. It turned into a fight to get me to go every day. I remember my Mother expressing that she felt like she was in a double bind: she felt like an awful parent for sending me into such a harsh environment, where the students and administration harassed me for being trans, and she felt like an awful parent if she let me skip school. When I did go, I would be put in in-school suspension after

---

<sup>36</sup> S. E. James et al., *The Report of the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey* (Washington, DC: National Center for Transgender Equality, 2016), 5.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

being bullied because, as one administrator told my Mom, “it was easier to remove one person than the whole class.” A group of students superglued me to my desk as a prank, and nothing happened to them. It was falsely rumored that I was doing drugs, and I was sent to the school resource officer. The officer put on gloves and refused to touch me when checking for track marks because he did not want to get HIV. After returning for 10<sup>th</sup> grade, the rumor was that I had got ‘the surgery,’ and everyone was snickering and asking to ‘see.’ I had no other choice but to drop out of public school. I was miserable and failing all my classes after being an exceptional student and three sport athlete before coming out.

Thankfully, members of my affirming church community, my Mom who had come around by that point, and my ‘queer parents’ Julie and Lori fought to find other options. Before I knew it, I was on a flight to attend a private LGBTQIA+ high school in Dallas, Texas. The school was called the Walt Whitman Community School. Due to the stigma, the Dallas Independent School District would not grant the school accreditation. A lesbian couple who were members of Cathedral of Hope, the largest predominately LGBTQIA+ Christian Church globally, had learned about the school and signed up to be a host family. Joni and Patty opened their hearts and home to me to live in Dallas to attend school at Walt Whitman, get my GED, and begin classes at a local community college. The school faculty found a gender-affirming therapist who met with me for \$10 a session, which likely did not even cover the gas for her to get to the school for our session every week. Having loving adults, strong mentors, and positive role models in my life kept me in school and working towards a positive future. They gave me the strength to keep going when the weight of oppression and harassment felt unbearable.

That was not the case for all of my classmates at Walt Whitman. A few were homeless because they were kicked out of their homes after coming out as trans to their families. Others came when they could but faced many challenges getting there because they had to work to help support their families or siblings. Some had turned to sex work to survive because they had no other options and would only come to school when picked up by police to avoid jail. These stories reflect those of so many transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming teens and youth.

Homelessness among transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming people is much higher than in the general population. “Eight percent (8%) of respondents [to the *U.S. Transgender Survey*] who were out to the immediate family they grew up with were kicked out of the house.”<sup>38</sup> Looking at the data overall, “nearly one-third (30%) of respondents experienced homelessness at some point in their lifetime, and 12% reported experiencing homelessness in the year prior to completing the survey because they were transgender.”<sup>39</sup> More disturbing was the drastic increase in homelessness when other marginalized identities were considered: “people of color were kicked out of the house at higher rates, with Middle Eastern respondents (17%) being twice as likely, and American Indian (14%), Black (12%), Latino/a (11%), multiracial (11%), and Asian (9%) respondents experiencing this form of rejection more than white respondents (6%).”<sup>40</sup> When one’s basic needs are unmet, the effects compound and leave people economically devastated and at significant risk for harm or violence. Not having a place to sleep,

---

<sup>38</sup> James, *Report*, 72.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, 5.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, 72.



shower, or study make basic things like holding a job, caring for one’s physical and mental health, or being successful in an academic program challenging, if not impossible.

Many faith communities are well-positioned to help transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming people meet their most basic needs. One of the best models is the Metropolitan Community Church of New York Charities. They provide emergency shelter for homeless LGBTQIA+ youth, a food pantry, skill-building workshops like how to apply make-up properly for young trans women, job training services, and mental health care.<sup>41</sup> These are all critical ways to meet the immediate needs of transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming teens and youth. Meeting the physical and mental health care needs of some of the most marginalized in our society strongly resembles the Jesus we serve. I believe this kind of lifesaving response is precisely what the Church is called to do.

### **Young Adults**

Adulthood is relative and presents an arbitrary binary between the stages of youth and adult. This is especially true for many transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming people who must ‘adult’ much earlier in life because of life circumstances. Reaching young adulthood by turning 18 is a time for celebration but evokes uncertainty for many as responsibility increases when one is legally viewed as an adult.<sup>42</sup> Telaina Eriksen, author of *Unconditional: A Guide to Loving and Supporting Your LGBTQ Child*, names the questions a parent, guardian, or caregiver might ask with the “...18<sup>th</sup> birthday in sight. What will happen? Where will they go? What will they do? How will they

---

<sup>41</sup> “MCCNY CHARITIES,” Metropolitan Community Church of New York City, MCC New York, accessed February 12, 2022, <http://www.mccny.org/mccnycharities.html>.

<sup>42</sup> For the purposes of this chapter I am considering young adult to be between the ages of 18 until the mid-30s.

support themselves? Where will they go to college or for training for work? These very normal parenting [or caregiving] questions all are even more urgent because a lot of times our queer [and transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming] children are going out into a hostile world, where queer [transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming] people can still be fired from their jobs simply for being queer [transgender, nonbinary, or gender non-conforming]... .”<sup>43</sup> Entering college or the job market can also prove challenging for transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming young adults.

It can be especially startling for those in the foster care system as they may find themselves homeless the moment they turn 18. This is deeply concerning based on research conducted by the *Williams Institute* on the overrepresentation of LGBTQ youth in the Los Angeles foster care system. The data shows that 5.6% of transgender youth were in foster care compared to 2.25% in the general youth population, with the majority of that 5.6% being people of color.<sup>44</sup> As a pastoral caregiver, it is essential not to make assumptions about a young adult’s prospects and life considerations—shame results in so many suffering in silence. But it is vital to ask probing questions about where they will live, work, and their overall well-being. Shame makes offering that information difficult, but if a caring adult asks, dodging such questions is more difficult. Many young people want adults and mentors in their lives to care enough to ask but frequently struggle to be vulnerable and express their needs willingly. In my work with students, I find that asking directly works best. Maintaining a calm non-anxious and non-judgemental presence

---

<sup>43</sup> Telaina Eriksen, *Unconditional: A Guide to Loving and Supporting Your LGBTQ Child* (Coral Gables, FL: Mango Publishing Group, 2017), 203–204.

<sup>44</sup> Bianca Wilson, Khush Cooper, Angeliki Kastanis, and Sheila Nezhad, “Sexual and Gender Minority Youth in Foster Care: Assessing Disproportionality and Disparities in Los Angeles,” The Williams Institute, UCLA School of Law, UCLA, August 2014, <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/publications/sgm-youth-la-foster-care/>.

cultivates trust and sharing. It might not happen in the first conversation or the fifth but if you keep making time to listen and show care most people will eventually open up.

Entering the job market or applying for college brings different needs and considerations. Many colleges and universities offer varying support and resources for transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming students. Caregivers and parents should help prospective students do the homework to understand which colleges and universities have nondiscrimination policies, gender-inclusive housing, and LGBTQIA+ Centers. *The Pride Index: National Listing of LGBTQ-Friendly Colleges & Universities* offers information about the rights and protections for LGBTQIA+ students at colleges and universities around the country.<sup>45</sup>

Similarly, the job market is challenging for transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming people to navigate. Dress codes, bias, discrimination, and binary gender expectations can impact young peoples' opportunities and experiences when searching for a job. Research from the *U.S. Trans Survey* paints a bleak picture of employment prospects and experiences for transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming people. "The unemployment rate among respondents (15%) was three times higher than the unemployment rate in the U.S. population (5%)."<sup>46</sup> The reality is much more startling for transgender people of color. At (20%), the unemployment rate was four times higher than the U.S. unemployment rate (5%).<sup>47</sup> Getting a job poses one problem but keeping one can bring its challenges. "Overall, 30% of respondents who had a job in the past year

---

<sup>45</sup> "The Pride Index: National Listing of LGBTQ-Friendly Colleges & Universities," Campus Pride, accessed February 13, 2022, <https://www.campusprideindex.org/>.

<sup>46</sup> James, *Report*, 12.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, 6.

reported being fired, denied a promotion, or experiencing some other form of mistreatment related to their gender identity or expression.”<sup>48</sup>

Janet Mock, an activist, writer, and director, shares her experience as a Black transgender woman early in her career in her memoir *Surpassing Certainty: What My Twenties Taught Me*. After being named the top candidate by her supervisor she was forced to wait as external candidates were considered. She reflects on how her experience was shaped by her identity as a “woman of color in America who struggled for place, fulfillment, and achievement in institutions that rarely centered us, from our low-resourced schools to the skyscrapers [she now] occupied.”<sup>49</sup> Janet brings life to the experiences those with intersecting identities repeatedly have. The statistics back up the compounding struggles, from inadequate schooling to the feelings of always being an outsider to the status quo. Understanding the compounding pressures is crucial to providing competent care and support. Janet’s story is not isolated, and it is certainly not within the corporate world or on the job market. Austen Hartke in *Transforming* highlights the experiences of transgender Christians who, like Mock, was seeking place and fulfillment in his calling and vocation. Hartke showcases the experience of Lawrence Richardson, a Black transgender pastor serving in the United Church of Christ. Richardson describes his journey of seeking his place, “It can be really difficult to find Black LGBT Christians in some spaces. When I was younger, it felt like you’re lucky if you find [other] Black people, and then to say Black gay people, and then to say Black trans people is like, wow, you’re asking a lot here. It was really important for me to be

---

<sup>48</sup> James, *Report*, 13.

<sup>49</sup> Janet Mock, *Surpassing Certainty: What My Twenties Taught Me* (New York: Atria Books, 2017), 177.

able to be in space where I could be my whole self... because it's difficult to be who you are if there's a part of you that isn't completely accepted in a certain space."<sup>50</sup>

Mock and Richardson note the struggles of finding places where they could bring fully bring all of themselves. They both point to the assimilation and muting of their whole selves in the spaces they occupy. Mock knew her identities were a liability in her career as she felt firsthand working at a place where her ways of being, gifts, talents, and accomplishments were overlooked and devalued. Richardson felt similarly, as he believed that he could only express parts of himself in specific spaces without it seeming as if it was too much. The struggles for transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming people, especially those with multiple marginalized identities, are much broader than the statistics show. Those things are connected and must be combatted, but they do not account for what kinds of environments need to be fostered for them to bring all of themselves, their dreams, their passion, and their knowledge. It is hard to be creative, thrive, maintain energy, and passion when experiencing microaggressions daily. Understanding such contexts and the spiritual, mental, and emotional toll is a cornerstone for providing spiritual care. Attention to the underlying feelings and experiences means validating the exhaustion of codeswitching, being on guard, and frequently having to conform to dominant ways of existing. It also necessitates the need to create space counter to this.

Preparing transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming people for such a hostile job market is essential. Providing support, keeping a list of trans-friendly workplaces, and being attuned to the needs of the individual can help in times of job

---

<sup>50</sup> Austen Hartke, *Transforming: The Bible & Lives of Transgender Christians* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 104.

seeking and discernment. The Human Rights Campaign publishes the *Corporate Equality Index*.<sup>51</sup> This helpful tool ranks corporations and places of employment based on the benefits and climate for LGBTQIA+ people. Companies at the top of the list have nondiscrimination policies including sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression, provide benefits significant to LGBTQIA+ people, and have supportive resources like identity-based employee resource groups. Places that look good on paper or are comfortable for lesbian, gay, and bisexual folks might not be as good for transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming people or for people who hold multiple marginalized identities. It is always best to seek individuals with similar identities at those places of employment and ask them about their experiences. Encouraging transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming people under your care to do that can go a long way to ensuring that they have a positive experience and are less likely to find themselves in a hostile or unsupportive work environment.

Conversing about passions and vocation, connecting people to job training programs, or even coaching someone through a search process are tangible ways to support transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming people. One often-overlooked barrier is that of professional attire. Gender-affirming professional attire is expensive, and shopping in public opens us up to violence and safety concerns. The Career Center at the university where I work understands this and provides funding to students who cannot access appropriate professional attire. This is one barrier that congregations are often well-positioned to help people overcome. If you have an extra closet, consider hosting a trans clothing closet. Invite congregation members to donate

---

<sup>51</sup> “The Human Rights Campaign 2022 Corporate Equality Index,” Human Rights Campaign, <https://www.hrc.org/resources/corporate-equality-index>.

gently used clothing that transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming people can have. Cultural, social, legal, and medical transition are all very expensive. A trans clothing closet is a creative way to leverage the congregation's resources to support a community with tangible support.

### **Transgender Elders and Aging**

Transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming people exist across all ages and life stages, including those who transitioned long ago and are now aging, as well as those who are just coming out in their elder years. Unfortunately, very little research and few resources exist for transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming elders or those coming out later in life. The need for support and resources is high because issues of ageism, retirement, familial commitments, changing health needs, and end-of-life concerns all come into the picture.

Dr. Vanessa Fabbre, a researcher on gender transitions later in life, has conducted several studies on the experiences, needs, and well-being of transgender older adults. Fabbre found that "a multitude of individual and societal factors intersect when a person comes out about their gender identity or contemplates a transition in later life, but one that stands out almost universally is an awareness of time left to live. An acute perception that there are limited days in which to embrace one's authentic self, experience the joy of feeling whole and congruent within oneself and to face death with a sense of having truly lived is central to the contemplation of transition for many people."<sup>52</sup>

---

<sup>52</sup> Vanessa D. Fabbre, "Gender Transitions in Later Life: The Significance of Time in Queer Aging." *Journal of Gerontological Social Work*, May 5, 2014, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4051396/>.

Dr. Anne L. Koch, in her memoir *It Never Goes Away: Gender Transition at a Mature Age*, shares her lived experience and how facing her mortality gave her the push she needed to come out and live authentically. Koch writes, "... I was diagnosed with a squamous cell cancer on the back of my right hand. This was a big wake-up call, and awareness of my mortality set in. Having a health issue be the trigger for a sudden change of heart is very common with older trans people who wait to transition, but I didn't know that at the time, and when confronted with the possibility of death, I thought, 'Oh my God, I have to get this done before I die.'" <sup>53</sup> Her experience reflects the findings of Dr. Fabbre, who would call this moment a 'dam bursting,' which is defined as "an intense emotional process through which participants asserted agency in the face of constraining social forces in order to pursue a gender transition in later life."<sup>54</sup>

Transitioning at any age exposes people to incredible loss. Rejection from loved ones such as spouses, adult children, friends, or social groups only compounds that loss. Aging itself comes with loss. David Kundtz and Bernard Schlager in *Ministry Among God's Queer Folk: LGBT Pastoral Care* suggests that "the astute pastoral caregiver will acknowledge this and find ways to connect elderly LGBTQ people with others, near or far."<sup>55</sup> Spiritual caregivers must help create a safe community where they can be their authentic selves. Many of the cultural spaces where transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming elders may find themselves may not be safe and affirming.

---

<sup>53</sup> Anne L. Koch, *It Never Goes Away: Gender Transition at a Mature Age* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2019), 35.

<sup>54</sup> Vanessa D. Fabbre, "Agency and Social Forces in the Life Course: The Case of Gender Transitions in Later Life." *The Journals of Gerontology Series B Psychological and Social Sciences*, May 1, 2017, <http://europemc.org/article/MED/27582504>.

<sup>55</sup> David Kundtz and Bernie Schlager. *Ministry Among Gods Queer Folk: LGBTQ Pastoral Care* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2019), 122.



The struggle to find safe and affirming spaces is not limited to transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people who come out later in life. People who come out at any age are finding it hard to age as a trans person. Services and Advocacy for LGBT Elders (SAGE), an advocacy group for LGBTQ+ seniors, has found an unfortunate trend of many seniors feeling as if they have to go "back into the closet to receive the long-term care they need."<sup>56</sup> Fears of mistreatment, inadequate care, or social isolation contribute to the pressures to hide one's authentic identity. This can be incredibly painful for folks who have lived authentically for many years only to be misgendered in their later years. Mathias Wirth, in his study *Demand for Space: Elderly Transgender and Gender Nonconforming People, Healthcare, and Theological Ethics*, takes the conversation a bit further and uncovers other fears: "It must not be forgotten that old-aged trans persons also risk, alongside all the aforementioned losses, having their gender [affirming care] revoked in acute medical or paternalistic health and nursing care. For example, hormones could be discontinued because of possible interactions or cosmetics could be ceased."<sup>57</sup> Issues of agency and self-determination for transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming elders are at stake. As spiritual caregivers, it is essential to understand people's needs and wishes when they can no longer advocate for themselves and be sure that they have their directives written down.

When caring for the spiritual needs of transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming elders, it is vital to understand the years of self-denial and repression they

---

<sup>56</sup> "LGBTQ+ Seniors Fear Having to Go Back in Closet for the Care They Need," SAGE, <https://www.sageusa.org/news-posts/lgbtq-seniors-fear-having-to-go-back-in-closet-for-the-care-they-need/>.

<sup>57</sup> Mathias Wirth, "Demand for Space: Elderly Transgender and Gender Nonconforming People, Healthcare, and Theological Ethics." *Journal of Religion and Health* 60, no. 3 (2021): <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8137567/>.

have likely endured. Rejection and separation from loved ones, loneliness, isolation, and poor mental health are common effects of years of self-denial, hiding, and shame. In fact, it is not uncommon for trans elders to be rejected by their adult children and lose the care they could have provided otherwise. Providing opportunities for healing, community, and belonging is a balm to the isolated soul. Not only are transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming elders frequently carrying some or all of these experiences with them there are often other acute fears and needs. They may also fear seeking the care or resources they need to support them in aging because of negative experiences, harassment, or fear.

Dr. Fabber challenges caregivers to a twofold approach with elders: “Be cognizant of making theoretical strides along with direct service advancements in consideration of transgender aging issues.”<sup>58</sup> In simple terms, one must strive for systemic changes that can better accommodate and account for the immediate spiritual, physical, and medical needs of transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming elders while also working to reframe the double whammy of the negative perceptions of aging and the cissexism that create such barriers in the first place.

### **End of Life: The Wrong Name in the Paper**

Identifying as transgender, nonbinary, or gender non-conforming in our society means always living in proximity to death. Narratives around our coming out are drenched in the grief some of our loved ones experience when we transition. As pointed out earlier, *the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey* found that “forty percent (40%) have attempted suicide in their lifetime, nearly nine times the rate in the U.S. population

---

<sup>58</sup> Fabbre, “Gender Transitions.”

(4.6%).”<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, year after year, the number of murders of transgender, nonbinary, or gender non-conforming people, especially Black and Brown transgender women, continues to climb. Every coming year has been the deadliest on record. Transgender communities are in crisis, and our lives are constantly under attack in a society that actively seeks to harm us, limit our rights, and refuse us even the most basic protections.

Ministry with us necessitates attention to grief, death, and suicide. In 2021 the Human Rights Campaign released a report in mid-November, just before the Annual Transgender Day of Remembrance, “honoring the at least 46 transgender and gender non-conforming people killed in 2021.”<sup>60</sup> The actual number is likely much higher because many murders go unreported or people are misgendered after death. Advocacy and activism are needed for hate crimes legislation and protections for transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming communities. Naming the systemic realities that contribute to such vulnerabilities, creating safer job opportunities for transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming people who are forced into dangerous professions or working conditions; or working against homelessness are all concrete ways to help mitigate the dangerous conditions our community endures.

We grieve the increasing violence towards transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming people. Every year we read the names and honor the lives of people who look like us, and often those are not just names but are friends, loved ones, and chosen family. It is tragic that the only day many cisgender people show up, hold vigils, or invite

---

<sup>59</sup> James, *Report*, 5.

<sup>60</sup> “Fatal Violence Against the Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Community in 2021,” Human Rights Campaign, December 6, 2021, <https://www.hrc.org/resources/fatal-violence-against-the-transgender-and-gender-non-conforming-community-in-2021>.

us to speak, preach, or share our story is around the Transgender Day of Remembrance—a day about our tragic deaths. Activist B Parker coined the call to ‘Give us our roses while we’re still here.’ In an interview, B reflects on the phrase and why it is so important:

How can someone celebrate who they are when all they are reminded of is the violence, tragedy, and mourning when reflecting upon the trans community to which they belong? That’s not cool. We are here to love, live, and fight! Rewriting the meaning of TDOR by highlighting resilience is, in my opinion, a radical move. The media tends to focus on the deaths of transgender people of color but rarely are our stories used to uplift the queer community or enhance our visibility within our intersecting communities. Personally, I want to celebrate the life I have, the vitality of my friends and loved ones, and share a message of prosperity, achievement and solidarity with other Black trans folks.<sup>61</sup>

As communities of faith, we must honor the lives, experiences, stories, and gifts of transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming people while we are still here because it is already too late once the funeral is planned. Still, there must be a commitment to working towards a day when there will be no need for vigils marking the numerous untimely loss of trans lives.

Ministering to the needs of transgender, nonbinary, or gender non-conforming people means confronting violence, grief, and death. There will be lives lost to suicide due to the often unbearable weight of rejection and discrimination. There will be lives lost due to hate and violence. And, there will be lives lost to natural causes. As spiritual caregivers, the calls and requests to do funerals are likely when you are known to have a genuinely trans-inclusive faith community. When those calls come in, it is critically

---

“Trans Day Of Remembrance Is Resilience Above All,” Medium, <https://medium.com/the-establishment/trans-day-of-remembrance-is-resilience-above-all-2e542fd6b147>.

important that the lives and identities of transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming people be honored. When we can no longer speak for ourselves, we need those who knew us to advocate for us. Sometimes, the family will plead that an individual's deadname<sup>62</sup> and wrong pronouns be used out of shame or fear. A high-profile case from 2011 serves as a heartbreaking example.

The murder and funeral of transgender activist Lashai McLean made news after she was gunned down in connection to her work and activism as a transgender woman. Reports about her hit the news again after a highly controversial funeral in which her transgender friends and colleagues walked out after comments such as "God let her get killed so that people could get saved," and "...when you live a certain lifestyle this is the consequence you have to pay" by those delivering the sermon and eulogies.<sup>63</sup> To make matters worse, speakers continually referred to Lashai using male pronouns and her deadname. Reports noted that the decisions were made because members of McLean's family "were struggling over McLean's status as a transgender woman."<sup>64</sup> The incident with McLean is far too common and attempts to find resources for transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming individuals and their family members are scarce. It is essential to find a solution that honors the integrity and identities of transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming people while making room for the genuine struggles of acceptance, understanding, and grief of their loved ones.

---

<sup>62</sup> Deadname refers to the name that transgender, nonbinary, or gender non-conforming people no longer use because it does not reflect their authentic gender identity. It is offensive to ask questions about the name transgender, nonbinary, or gender non-conforming people were given at birth.

<sup>63</sup> "Mass Walk-out at Trans Woman's Funeral," *The Washington Blade*, <http://www.washingtonblade.com/2011/08/02/mass-walk-out-at-trans-woman%E2%80%99s-funeral/>.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

The spiritual caregiver can play a critical role by helping transgender, nonbinary, or gender non-conforming people avoid finding ourselves in these situations in the first place. It is never too early to encourage people to make their wishes known so they will be honored. For example, helping us prepare end-of-life documents can help ensure that the individual's wishes are carried out. These documents should be clear about what the service should look like, what name should be used, what pronouns are correct, what the obituary should say, and what should be etched into the gravestone ahead of time. End-of-life documents prevent much turmoil when people are consumed with grief. When our lives are taken by violence for simply being who we are, or the weight of stigma and rejection renders them unlivable, do not murder us again in our remembrance by refusing us the dignity of the identity we died for.

Honoring B. Parker's call to 'Give us our roses while we're still here' means fighting for trans lives and trans rights so that there is less and less violence, shame, and rejection. Being a spiritual caregiver carries the power to inspire people to greater love and community. For example, it matters a great deal that people of faith attend vigils, rallies, parades, and protests. It bears witness to the unconditional overwhelming love of God and disrupts hateful theological narratives that cause so much harm in the first place. Austen Hartke suggests that "if the high rates of suicide and murder for transgender people can be traced to legitimate fears of harassment, discrimination, and rejection, then the obvious solution is to create an environment in which the injured, the worn-out, and the hopeless feel safe and loved."<sup>65</sup> There is no better way to reflect the love of God that

---

<sup>65</sup> Hartke, *Transforming*, 19.

embodies the ministry of Jesus, who always ensured the injured, worn-out, and hopeless were safe and loved.

## CHAPTER 7

### Sexuality and Relationships

Dating, relationships, marriage, sex, and parenting happen across the life span for transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming people. Likewise, as a whole, we represent a wide range of relationships, relationship statuses, and family make-ups. Spiritual caregivers need to approach the topic of familial, sexual, romantic, and platonic relationships with openness and fluidity. As a community, we are creative in developing families of choice, often closer and more significant than those with our biological families.

Sexual orientation and romantic orientation, though often conflated to be the same as gender identity and gender expression, are different. In the simplest terms, gender identity is who you are, while sexual and romantic orientation is about who you love or are attracted to. While they are not the same they are connected and there is an interplay. One's evolving gender identity can predicate a shift in sexual identity.

Reflecting on my journey, I first came out as a lesbian. I knew I did not fit the gender expectations placed on me, and at that time, it was the closest I could come to articulating my feelings and experiences. The boundaries between sexuality and gender expression are frequently blurred. Think about butch lesbians and studs that transgress the feminine gender roles expected of them based on sex assigned at birth but still identify as women. Similarly, effeminate gay men may subvert the masculinity expected of them based on their sex assigned at birth while still identifying as male.

This complexity and interplay present endless possibilities for discovery, playfulness, and exploration of sexual identity, romantic attraction, and partnerships. As



the community has evolved the rigidity of fixed labels and static sexual identity has eroded and given way to increased fluidity and malleability. When working with those exploring their gender identity it is common for sexual and romantic identities to be in flux as well. For this reason, remaining open to exploration is helpful in regards to sexual and romantic identity formation as it is a lifelong iterative process.

While I originally came out as a lesbian I eventually learned that for me it was the accessible route with the information I had for beginning my gender exploration. When I discovered what it means to be transgender, I immediately knew that was the most fitting term for how I felt internally. It made everything before that make sense. After coming out as transgender, I had to explore anew what that meant for my sexual orientation. I was attracted to girls, but lesbian did not fit me because I did not identify as a girl. As someone who identifies as a transgender male, I did not resonate with “straight” either. Through intention and reflection, I found that queer was the term that made the most sense for me, and at that time, I almost exclusively dated queer, lesbian, bisexual, or pansexual-identified cisgender women. I was in good company as transgender, gender-nonconforming, and nonbinary people are much more likely to also identify with a marginalized sexual and/or romantic orientation. The *2015 U.S. Trans Survey* found that only fifteen (15%) of respondents identified as straight.<sup>1</sup>

In contrast, some transgender people that are attracted sexually or romantically to a different gender might identify as heterosexual or heteroromantic. Not every transgender, nonbinary, or gender non-conforming person decides to seek transition-related care but taking testosterone and having top surgery were vital for me. As I sought

---

<sup>1</sup> S. E. James et al., *The Report of the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey* (Washington, DC: National Center for Transgender Equality, 2016), 59.

transition-related medical care, and my body began to align with my internal image of myself, it put my sexual orientation back into question. As I was more comfortable in my skin, and those around me more frequently used my correct pronouns, I felt affirmed that my outward expression reflected my inward identity. The more comfortable I became in my skin the more comfortable I was expressing my sexuality. Cisgender men who were attracted to me but viewed me as a woman felt very different than when they would see me and validate my authentic gender identity. I share this story because it demonstrates the nuance and interconnectedness of sexual orientation, romantic orientation, gender identity, and gender expression. It also demonstrates the fluidity and exploration that is iterative. This is my story, and no one story or experience will be the same. Be open to the individual story, experience, and nuance of the person in front of you, as you affirm and normalize this kind of exploration, fluidity, and discovery. As a spiritual caregiver, it is helpful to be aware that as one lives more fully into their gender identity and gender expression there might be a need to revisit conversations around sexual and romantic orientation regularly. Asking these questions periodically to those in your care helps normalize such fluidity and exploration.

Dating will bring many questions and decisions for transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming people at any age. Questions of ‘Do I want to disclose my identity?’ If so, how do I want to disclose it? Or, when do I want to disclose?’ are all questions that folks often have to work through and decide. This is a very personal decision that the individual must ultimately make. It can be a terrifying decision when romantic feelings and love are on the line. The fear of rejection, anger, or even violence are all feelings that can emerge. There are many examples where disclosing one’s identity

led to violence. Therefore, spiritual caregivers need to encourage and help formulate a safety plan just in case it does not go well. The fear, and its actuality, are so real that there is even a legal defense used in some cases called the gay/trans panic legal defense. As mentioned in an earlier chapter gay/trans panic is “a legal strategy which asks a jury to find that a victim’s sexual orientation or gender identity is to blame for the defendant’s violent reaction, including murder.”<sup>2</sup> Of course, that is not always the case. The worst results do not always happen.

Planning for the worst but hoping for the best is always a good approach. Cultivating hope amid what can easily slip into hopelessness is spiritual work. I have lost count of the times I have been asked, or the transgender, nonbinary, or gender non-conforming people I have worked with have been asked: ‘Who will want to date you if you do this’ about coming out or expressing a desire to transition. At this point, a spiritual caregiver can confer a great deal of psychological and spiritual power by disrupting this narrative and reaffirming that we are loved and lovable in a society that frequently attempts to tell us otherwise.

Feelings of being unloved, unworthy, or worse being rejected or harmed, are usually at the heart of decisions about disclosing one’s identity. The decision to disclose is a very personal one, and only the individual can decide for themselves what is right. Trans women are women. Trans men are men. The gender identity and expression of nonbinary and gender-nonconforming people are valid. The decision to disclose is wholeheartedly up to each person. There is no moral obligation to share one’s medical

---

<sup>2</sup> Alexandra Holden, “The Gay/Trans Panic Defense: What It Is, and How to End It,” *American Bar Association Journal*, March 31, 2020, <https://www.americanbar.org/groups/crsj/publications/member-features/gay-trans-panic-defense/>.

history or trans identity. The social idea that frames transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming people as deceitful is rooted in the idea that trans men are not men, trans women are not women, or the gender identity of nonbinary and gender non-conforming people is not valid. We are not hiding anything by being our most authentic selves.

Janet Mock in *Surpassing Certainty* reveals her process of deciding when, if, or how to disclose. Mock shares, “My rule about disclosing was simple: Tell when it’s serious.”<sup>3</sup> Early in her transition, it was different. As Mock pursued medical transition, she said that with her “gender nonconformity seemingly fading away, [she] began to attract the attention of men.”<sup>4</sup> Like many transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming people, she had to renegotiate moving through the world when her outward gender expression more fully reflected her inward identity. As this began to happen for Mock, she remembers not knowing how to act or respond, “I didn’t know what to do when attractive 18-to-24-year-old cisgender heterosexual men began to stop me on the street and tell me I was pretty. I didn’t know the correct protocol – or if any existed.”<sup>5</sup> These moments can very quickly become frightening and dangerous. Mock knew that all too well. She shares that in her early days she would “disclose almost immediately – usually over the phone – before accepting an invitation ... I was deathly afraid that a guy would find out I was trans and hurt me. Disclosing up front felt like the safest possible option.”<sup>6</sup>

From my standpoint, it can be hard to know how people perceive me at times. I am covered in tattoos, with a deep voice, facial hair, and am almost always seen as male

---

<sup>3</sup> Janet Mock, *Surpassing Certainty: What My Twenties Taught Me* (New York: Atria Books, 2017), 38.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 38.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 38.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 38-39.

when I am out and about. Most of the time, no one would know I am transgender if I did not disclose but not always. I still get the occasional “Thank you, ma’am” when checking out or buying fast food or in the checkout line as if coming from nowhere. It is not always clear when or why I get misgendered, but it creates a lingering sense of alert. There is always a subtle fear when out in public, especially when using a public restroom, that I could encounter the wrong person and be in a dangerous situation.

I will never forget my close call back in 2007. I was on the SoulForce Equality Ride, and we were stopping for a short break for Easter in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina.<sup>7</sup> My parents were visiting since it was the closest stop to my hometown in North Carolina. We met a group of guys also staying at the same hotel. They loved my tattoos and piercings, and we struck up a quick friendship. They invited me to go with them to Broadway at the Beach – a top tourist destination with restaurants, shopping, and entertainment. I was excited about the invite, as there seemed to be a mutual attraction between one of the guys and me. I was going to go alone, but thankfully another rider decided to join at the last minute. We grabbed a cab over and, when we got there, found a place to get dinner. As time went on, I remember that the guys began to act strangely. I did not think much of it until a bit later. I got up to use the restroom and realized one of them had followed me. I used the men’s restroom, and he came in behind me. My fellow rider and friend had noticed and followed behind him, making her presence known to him. When I turned around and saw him, I saw how red his face was and how angry he

---

<sup>7</sup> The SoulForce Equality Ride was a bus ride across the United States of LGBTQIA+ activists going to Christian colleges and universities to discuss policies against LGBTQIA+ students. We attempted to work with each college or university; however, if an agreement could not be reached, the Equality Riders would engage in acts of nonviolent civil disobedience.

was. Thankfully, the worst that happened was that the group left us suddenly sticking us with the bill.

Reflecting afterward, I realized I was in a very unsafe situation. Being younger and not as far into my transition, I rarely corrected people on my pronouns and did not think about it. He had been using female pronouns with me all night, but he followed me to see where I would go. I did not consider the danger I was in. His response, the subsequent ditching us, and then sticking us with the bill, have always made me feel that God had prompted my reticent friend to come along. I am afraid to think about what might have happened if I had been alone and isolated with these men. It was a very close call. I felt deeply reminded of the love and gift of a resurrected present Christ that next morning at the Easter sunrise service on the beach. I know God's love and angels had been with me that previous night.

So many of us have stories like this and constantly live with a very conditional sense of safety. The moment we are outed can become a dangerous one just like my situation. I have had the privilege to access transition-related care and have a binary gender expression as a transgender man. It has afforded me safety and privilege that I did not have before coming out and transitioning. I think of this as a conditional passing privilege because I am typically safe— until I am not. The fear of “what-if” has never entirely gone away for me, yet I know that the safety I am so frequently afforded comes with responsibility. I have experienced sexism when walking through the world being perceived as a woman. Now I know the conditional privileges of a cispassing white man. Therefore, I must consciously use my privilege to challenge systems of oppression and empower those with multiple marginalized identities. I carry stress; however, knowing

using the bathroom that affirms me, trying on clothes in a department store dressing room, or going about my daily life always carries risks as a public and visible transgender person.

Of course, these experiences do not always go as poorly as my encounter did. I was inspired when reading about Skylar Kergil and his young “crush.” In his memoir *Before I Had the Words: On Being a Transgender Young Adult*, he shares, “When she told me how she felt about me, I sensitively approached the transgender thing. Both laughing and serious, she admitted she had gone home over the weekend after I told her about my gender identity and had had a crisis. In the end, she thought for a while and established I was a boy. It was that simple. She saw me as a boy, and therefore it wasn’t some type of sexual orientation fiasco. I breathed a sigh of relief. She saw me for me.”<sup>8</sup> This story perfectly demonstrates that, in an ideal world, love and relationships would be about the heart and not our genitals. Unfortunately, this is not always the response.

While not everyone desires romantic or sexual relationships, discerning sexual and romantic desires takes time. Gender dysphoria impacts how we see ourselves, our attractiveness, and how comfortable we are relating to others. When we internalize society’s negative messages about transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming people, we begin to believe we are not worthy of love, are unattractive, or too difficult to love. On top of that, we frequently experience being fetishized when people see us as exotic or objectify us as an experience to be had. Many of us have longed for companionship only to be kept secret because of our partner’s shame for desiring us. As trans people, we are often asked to shoulder the weight of our partners’ internalized

---

<sup>8</sup> Skylar Kergil, *Before I Had the Words: On Being a Transgender Young Adult* (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2017), 182.

transphobia or homophobia when they fear rejection or judgment from their family and loved ones for loving us. Each of these experiences chip away at our feelings of self-worth.

Nevertheless, as a transgender person gazing out from a compassionate point of view, I understand how the people who love us are susceptible to the pervasiveness of the transphobia that plagues our society. We sometimes have a hard time finding people who are open to loving us. Furthermore, those who do frequently struggle with what loving us means for them and their sexual orientation. In providing holistic care, therefore, caregivers must not overlook the experience of the partner/s and loved ones of transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming people. Partners are the closest to the transgender, nonbinary, or gender non-conforming person coming out. They are impacted significantly yet rarely asked how they feel about their loved one coming out or transitioning. Partners fall along a broad spectrum of comfort with the transition of a loved one ranging from rejection to acceptance. Research has shown that while it is a common perception that relationships will end when a partner comes out as transgender that it simply is not true. Only twenty-seven (27%) percent of US Trans Survey respondents ended their relationship due to a partner coming out and/or transitioning.<sup>9</sup> Regardless, a caregiver will never know if an effort is not made to extend care for our partner/s, too.

Jo Green, a partner of a trans woman, shares extensively about her experience in her book *The Trans Partner Handbook: A Guide for When Your Partner Transition*. In the preface, she summarizes that for her, “Being the partner of a trans person means that

---

<sup>9</sup> James, Report, 65.



you are more than just an ally. You are an integral part of the transition process. You aren't just along for pride marches; you're there in the weeds. You're up at 2 a.m. holding your partner when their dysphoria is unbearable; you're there helping them research all the possible ways to make them feel better; you're there when they're hoping desperately for the right answer from the clinicians; you're there in the long stretches between appointments; you're there waiting for them when they're in surgery (hoping beyond hope they'll be okay and this will make it all right)."<sup>10</sup>

When we are coming out and transitioning, we receive a great deal of energy, care, and attention from people all around us because of the magnitude of the process. Sadly, the experience Jo describes, which is a labor of love, often does not come with the same types of support and care we have built into the process. *The Reflective Workbook for Partners of Transgender People: You Transition as Your Partner Transitions* offers prompts and questions for reflection, tools for working through a loved one coming out and transitioning, and stories to help partners know they are not alone. It is helpful for spiritual caregivers to provide such a resource and work closely with the partner/s if they are willing.

Although Philip Culbertson only focuses on coming out as lesbian and gay, his observations are still relevant in this example: A “perplexing pastoral situation...is dealing with [LGBTQIA+ people] who are heterosexually married. In most cases, the revelation of a spouse’s [transgender, nonbinary, or gender non-conforming] identity, ... or behavior comes at a terrible shock to the marital partner, and thus should be interpreted

---

<sup>10</sup> Jo Green, *The Trans Partner Handbook: A Guide for When Your Partner Transitions* (Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2017).

as a crisis ministry.”<sup>11</sup> Partners might have a wide range of responses from positive to negative, and they frequently experience a mix of emotions simultaneously. Maynard in *The Reflective Workbook*, summarizes this response well: “For some partners, finding out that your partner is now trans-identified can be a time celebrated with prideful excitement and a welcome relief. ... For others, however, being told that your significant other is transgender, especially when you were unaware of this fact and never expected this possibility, can be initially confusing, induce worry, trigger concerns, and prompt an array of fears. Sometimes, a partner can experience a combination of all of these emotions.”<sup>12</sup> Regardless of the feelings, such news can radically shift the relationship dynamic, and caring for the partner is essential. There is a commonly held misconception that almost every relationship will end when one of the parties comes out as transgender. Research dispels this myth. *The 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey* found that “just over one-quarter (27%) of respondents who were out to their spouse or partner reported that a spouse or partner ended their relationship solely or partly because they were transgender.”<sup>13</sup>

In his work *Trans-Gender: Theology, Ministry, and Communities of Faith*, Rev. Dr. Justin Sabia-Tanis shares the story of how God touched the relationship of a couple when one partner came out as transgender. Sabia-Tanis shares the story to demonstrate how “God can also be a model for us as we look for faithful ways to move forward.”<sup>14</sup> He

---

<sup>11</sup> Philip Culbertson, *Caring for God’s People: Counseling and Christian Wholeness* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 202.

<sup>12</sup> D. M. Maynard, *The Reflective Workbook for Partners of Transgender People: Your Transition as Your Partner Transitions* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2019).

<sup>13</sup> James, *Report*, 68.

<sup>14</sup> Justin Sabia-Tanis, *Trans-Gender: Theology, Ministry, and Communities of Faith* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2003), 132.

shares the story of Su Penn and her lover, who transitioned. Penn shares, "...for me it was all about God. When my mother asked what my talk was going to be about today, I told her, 'It's about how God saved my relationship.' ... I literally could not have accepted David's transition before I became a Quaker: I would have said that my lesbian identity was too important to me, and left him. This is in fact what many of my friends, especially lesbian friends, expected and encouraged me to do... but through the practice of silent worship I have learned to recognize the presence of God, at least sometimes, and I had felt the presence of God in my relationship with [David]."<sup>15</sup> New possibilities open up when a pastoral caregiver remembers, and reminds the partners, that God is at the head of a Christian marriage or partnership.

The story of Su and David introduces another important consideration into the conversation. Su mentions that when David transitioned, it also impacted her own identity. Being a lesbian was an important identity for Su, and now she found herself in a relationship with a man. Su had to explore her identity and reconcile what David's transition meant for her. Like many in a similar situation, Su also risked acceptance in her communities. As Su noted, many of her lesbian friends did not support or encourage her to stay in the relationship. That loss of identity and community can be painful for partners of transgender, nonbinary, or gender non-conforming people.

Chang, Singh, and Dickey's work, *A Clinicians Guide to Gender-affirming Care: Working with Transgender and Gender-nonconforming Clients* explores counseling couples and families when someone is transitioning. Based on historical precedent, "gatekeeping practices required trans people to end existing relationships, including those

---

<sup>15</sup> Sabia-Tanis, *Trans-Gender*, 132–33.

that involved marriage, if they desired to make a medical transition. Reasons for this expectation included the belief that relationships would not succeed due to the pressures associated with one of the partners making a medical transition.”<sup>16</sup> While not as strong within therapeutic fields anymore, these ideas and misconceptions still exist. It is essential to remain open and not instinctively assume relationships are doomed. Like Su and David, many couples go on to enjoy a long, loving, and lifegiving relationship beyond a partner coming out. On the other hand, despite deep love and hard work, sometimes romantic relationships will end.

Joy shares her story in *Trans: Transgender Life Stories from South Africa*. As an older transgender South African woman Joy talks about her experience of being married to her wife before coming out and transitioning. Joy recounts that "... the marriage didn't last very long because, soon after we got married, I had her buying my first pair of high heeled shoes and I was dressing up in her dresses. After a while she decided there were much more interesting fish elsewhere and she had an affair, telling me she was working late in the office."<sup>17</sup>

Joy's need for care and her ex-wives will look very different. The rejection and divorce pushed Joy deeper into the closet and her feelings remained a "deep dark secret." Joy would dress in affirming clothing and high heels only in hiding.<sup>18</sup> Hiding so much of herself from the closest people in her life made it impossible for her to maintain lasting meaningful relationships. When such internalized shame and transphobia exist it makes

---

<sup>16</sup> Sand C. Chang, Annelise A. Singh, and Lore M. Dickey. *A Clinicians Guide to Gender-affirming Care: Working with Transgender and Gender-nonconforming Clients* (Oakland: New Harbinger Publications, 2019), 195.

<sup>17</sup> Ruby Morgan, Charl Marais, and Joy Rosemary Wellbeloved, eds. *Trans: Transgender Life Stories from South Africa* (Auckland Park: Fanele Publishers, 2001), 130-131.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 131.

the intimacy, vulnerability, and belonging required for meaningful relationships nearly impossible. It takes incredible energy to conform to social expectations of gender roles that are incongruent with how one identifies. Simply put, how can anyone bring their whole selves into a relationship when they cannot be themselves?

In cases where the relationship does not succeed, Change, Singh, and Dickey argues that it is vital to "refrain from assuming that all relational challenges are related to a trans partner's identity."<sup>19</sup> In the case of Joy's second relationship, it had little to do with her actual identity. Other compatibility issues made the relationship rocky. When working with someone in a situation akin to Joy's, it is advised to take the presenting issues seriously while eventually addressing the underlying shame and incongruence in identity and expression.

The reality is that not every relationship will make it for many reasons – sometimes related to identity and sometimes not. A spiritual caregiver can promote healing by helping the couple to ritualize the parting ways and marking the ending of a relationship. Helping navigate the pain of a broken relationship for both parties is important if they are willing. As Culbertson rightly reminds us, "Divorce almost always brings a great deal of pain to all parties involved and quite often necessitates the intervention of counseling support and mediation to move all parties concerned toward greater emotional and spiritual health."<sup>20</sup> Divorce is frequently a long, drawn-out, and traumatic event for anyone. When sexual orientation and gender identity is involved, it further complicates the separation. If the cisgender spouse is homophobic or transphobic our transgender, nonbinary, or gender non-conforming identity can be used against us.

---

<sup>19</sup> Chang, *A Clinicians Guide*, 196.

<sup>20</sup> Culbertson, *Caring for God's People*, 159.

For example, attempts by the cisgender spouse to gain sole custody of children or have a more favorable outcome in legal matters are not uncommon.

Even in my own life, during a legal case concerning a contested will, there was intentional usage of misgendering language such as 'daughter' and false accusations that my grandparents paid for my 'sex reassignment surgery.'<sup>21</sup> Such language was intentionally used to characterize me negatively in a small rural conservative county. Intentional misgendering, refusal to use someone's correct name and pronouns, or threatening to out someone are forms of mental and psychological violence. Unfortunately, transgender, nonbinary, or gender non-conforming people all too often have to endure these kinds of stigmas and attacks. Therefore, refusing to engage in, or accept harmful behavior is critical for providing adequate care.

Similarly, it is essential to watch out for and recognize the signs of intimate partner violence. Such violence is sometimes not viewed as "possible" in LGBTQIA+ relationships. That could not be further from the truth. In fact, "trans people can be vulnerable to specific types of abuse. Something an abusive partner may threaten to do is stop paying for hormones or claim that we are not a 'real man' or 'real woman.' ... [or they] may threaten to out us to our friends, family, coworkers, or community."<sup>22</sup> When children are involved, it is not uncommon to try and withhold the children or demonize us based on our identity.

Not only are transgender, nonbinary, or gender non-conforming couples vulnerable to violence, just like any other, our relationships can include "verbal abuse

---

<sup>21</sup> Sex reassignment surgery is harmful language as nothing is being 'reassigned.' Appropriate language is gender affirmation surgery.

<sup>22</sup> Laura Erickson-Schroth. *Trans Bodies, Trans Selves: A Resource for the Transgender Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 347.

such as put-downs, physical abuse such as hitting or shoving, financial abuse such as withholding or controlling finances, emotional abuse such as threatening or intimidating, and sexual abuse such as forcing or coercing sexual encounters."<sup>23</sup> Ensuring the safety and wellbeing of all involved parties is paramount for providing care. Unfortunately, because of the bias that violence does not happen or is not possible among LGBTQIA+ people as a whole, it can go unnoticed or the signs are missed.

Further compounding the problem is that many domestic violence services have not been created with the unique needs and experiences of transgender, nonbinary, or gender non-conforming people in mind. Reaching out and asking for help when one finds themselves in an abusive relationship is hard enough without additional barriers, not being believed, or having the experience minimized. For many transgender, nonbinary, or gender non-conforming people, places that would typically be places of refuge or safety only cause more harm. There are no places to go in many cases because services are divided by gender, and therefore, transgender, nonbinary, or gender non-conforming people have sometimes experienced being turned away. For those who have found a place to go, many have only experienced more violence. The problem is so widespread that the *U.S. Trans Survey* found that "seven out of ten respondents who stayed in a shelter in the past year reported being mistreated because of being transgender."<sup>24</sup> As a spiritual caregiver, you must do your homework and ensure that, when referring those under your care to various resources, you have vetted them and know they will not cause further harm.

---

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 345.

<sup>24</sup> James, *Report*, 13.

Joy's story introduces another important consideration when working with partners and families. Joy's divorce was further complicated because they shared two children. Caring for children with a transgender, nonbinary, or gender non-conforming parent is important. In *Trans Bodies, Trans Selves*, parents Kel and Ryan Polly write about parenting as transgender people. They note that "Regardless of whether we become parents before or after we recognize our trans identity, who we are will have an impact on our children's lives in one way or another."<sup>25</sup> When a parent comes out, they will need to intentionally discuss when and how to share that information with children. It is vital not to forget the feelings and impact on the children. Validating those feelings, providing space for discussion and asking questions, and especially making space for negative emotions are vital to working through them. The authors in *Trans Bodies, Trans Selves* note that "the younger a child is when we come out, the less rigid the child will be with regard to their expectations about gender."<sup>26</sup> With less socialization or shame to combat it is much easier for children to reconcile, which results in less concern about how others might respond.

In some cases, a couple will want to have children and need support throughout that process. There are many possibilities to consider, especially if hormones or medical transition is desired. Having a child before seeking transition-related medical care, storing sperm or eggs before beginning hormones, or temporarily pausing hormones are all possible options. Others might consider adopting; however, intense screening processes mean that many couples face challenges or barriers related to their identity. It is also becoming more common for transgender men to carry a baby themselves. When

---

<sup>25</sup> Erickson-Schroth, *Trans Bodies*, 398.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 400.



working with men who decide to carry, it is vital to check in about how they are doing. Many birthing clinics and centers are not prepared to care for trans men in affirming ways. The processes can lead to heightened feelings of gender dysphoria.

Guiding a couple through the decision to bring new life into the world or love a child that another cannot care for is sacred and beautiful work. As a spiritual caregiver working with transgender, nonbinary, or gender non-conforming people and their partners to explore such questions, you must do your homework and be knowledgeable. You will need to have information and resources available for the couple about affirming and friendly providers, fertility clinics, and/or adoption agencies. Being present with couples in this long journey of hopes, disappointments, and love, while always pointing towards the Divine at work, is the role of the a spiritual caregiver.

## CONCLUSION

To know us is to love us. To love us is to celebrate us. The heart of this work is to make space for something entirely new and different in spaces so frequently resistant to change. So much of faith is enacted through years and years of tradition and ritual. There is a seductive pull to do things the way they have always been done. Traditional practices are known, comfortable, and socially acceptable. The problem is that the way things are done has been co-opted and shaped by power, empire, colonialism, white supremacy, and capitalism. Our social and cultural addiction to them has been ritualized in so many of our faith traditions and ways of worship that we have lost touch with a God who is present and acting in the world. Our God is a God who always stood in opposition to empire and in favor of liberation. God championed those pushed out, left behind, and ignored.

The problem today is that many churches offer acceptance only on the condition of conformity. We are asked to join in ritualized slumber rather than embody the radical transformation and witness of being God's people in the world that stands against injustice in all forms. We are not happy or content with the way things are. Academic and activist Urvashi Vaid famously said: "By aspiring to join the mainstream rather than figuring out the ways we need to change it, we risk losing our gay and lesbian [queer and transgender] souls in order to gain the world." If acceptance means dialing down the fullness of whom God has called us to be, it will not be enough. The good news is that Christianity was never meant to be mainstream. Our tradition always stood in opposition to the power and profit of the empire.

Eli Claire, in his work *Exile and Pride: Disability, Queerness, and Liberation*, envisions the gifts of our resistance: "... those folks who want to dehumanize, erase, make invisible the lives of butch dykes and nellie fags. We shrug. We laugh. We tell them: your definitions of woman and man suck. We tell them: your binary stinks. We say: here we are in all our glory—male, female, intersex, trans, butch, nellie, studly, femme, king, androgynous, queen, some of us carving out new ways of being women, others of us new ways of being men, and still others new ways of being something else entirely. You don't have pronouns yet for us."<sup>1</sup> This is the generative, creative, and holy space that transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming people occupy.

Forced assimilation is hurting us, limiting the fullest expressions of our spiritual selves. It is not enough just to welcome us only if we are willing to acquiesce silently, especially when the things we are asked to accept are the very things that perpetuate hurt and harm us, those who came before us, and those who will come after us. Hate crimes against transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming people have increased 587% between 2013 and 2019.<sup>2</sup> Just last year in the United States, there were more than 56 reported murders of transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming people, most of whom were Black or Latinx transgender women.<sup>3</sup> To welcome transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming people without paying real attention and care to such a dire situation is a hollow form of welcome and not at all reflective of an intimate Jesus whose

---

<sup>1</sup> Eli Clare, *Exile and Pride: Disability, Queerness, and Liberation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 149.

<sup>2</sup> Jane Gauthier, Kevin Medina, and Carly Dierkhising, "Analysis of Hate Crimes in Transgender Communities," *Journal of Hate Studies* 17, no. 2 (December 6, 2021): 4–14. <https://doi.org/http://doi.org/10.33972/jhs.158>, 4.

<sup>3</sup> "Fatal Violence Against the Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Community in 2021," Human Rights Campaign, December 6, 2021, <https://www.hrc.org/resources/fatal-violence-against-the-transgender-and-gender-non-conforming-community-in-2021>.

first move was to care for the physical, safety, and health needs of those whom he encountered.

The temptation to play respectability politics is understandable, but this has always come at a high cost to the most vulnerable.<sup>4</sup> In *Histories of the Transgender Child*, Gill-Peterson demonstrates this when discussing Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson. “Rivera’s and Johnson’s participation in the Stonewall riots, their affinities with and critiques of gay liberation activism, and their trans of color liberation activism at the turn of the 1970s present a rich tangle of categories, politics, and priorities that undermined the increasingly sanitized and progressive narratives that collapse retrospectively into the U.S. LGBT movement...”.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, fifty years have passed and sanitizing continues to shape the movement’s priorities so much that many people do not find mainstream LGBTQIA+ communities to feel like home. Colin Walmsley in *The Queers Left Behind: How LGBT Assimilation is Hurting Our Communities Most Vulnerable* explains that “while love may have won for middle and upper class gays, many transgender people, queer people of color and queer homeless youths instead find themselves left behind by a community that [is] defined by the interests of its white, cisgender, middle and upper class members.”<sup>6</sup> If you are a welcoming congregation, who are the out members you attract, and how might your priorities shift to meet the needs of the most vulnerable of our community? Furthermore, it is essential to ask: would you genuinely want us there if we came? Even if it means that

---

<sup>4</sup> Respectability politics refers to the pressure to present the needs, desires, and truths in ways more palatable or acceptable to mainstream society and culture.

<sup>5</sup> Julian Gill-Peterson, *Histories of the Transgender Child* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 22.

<sup>6</sup> Colin Walmsley, “The Queers Left Behind: How LGBT Assimilation Is Hurting Our Communities Most Vulnerable,” *The Huffington Post*, July 21, 2016, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-queers-left-behind-ho\\_b\\_7825158](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-queers-left-behind-ho_b_7825158).

we might demand a different response, create a new kind of discomfort, and expect our spirituality to be taken seriously? Would you be as ready to welcome a transgender woman who relies on sex work to survive as you would a lesbian couple with children?

I realize that some pastoral or lay leaders reading this might want to respond but fear there is too much to lose. Acceptance of transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming people in many denominations is still a question. Even fewer will affirm the ministry of transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming people who feel called to ordination. It has been my own experience that even some denominations with a more affirming stance are much farther along in the welcome, acceptance, and understanding of lesbian, gay, and bisexual people than of transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming people. We ask that those who may not be able to affirm us instead choose a stance of minimizing harm. Commit to no longer condemning transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming people. Commit not to advise families to ‘change’ transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming children. Commit to building strong families rather than breaking them apart by suggesting a tough-love approach like kicking out a transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming child or loved one. Commit to not using scripture against transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming people when preaching or extending spiritual care. In a word, if you cannot actively affirm us, you can commit to not hurting us. Of course, settling for neutrality means blocking the gifts we bring.

The late Virginia Ramey Mollenkott wrote *We Come Bearing Gifts: Seven Lessons Religious Congregations Can learn from Transpeople*:

Here are seven lessons [gifts]. First, any faith-congregation that honours the Bible should also honour transgender people because both the Hebrew

and Christian Scripture are extraordinarily transgender friendly. The gift here is that congregation will be empowered to see the Bible with a whole new perspective. Second, Trans people will assist congregations in transcending gender stereotypes that alienate men from women and from their own bodies, and oppress women and girls all over the world. Third, the transgender presence is a constant reminder of human diversity and hence of the much-needed diversity in religious language about, God the divine mystery that is beyond human imaginings and limitations. Fourth, until our recent cultural blindness, Trans people were always recognized as being specially gifted at building bridges between the seen and the unseen worlds, time and eternity; and many still carry that ability. Fifth, Trans people have by the circumstances of our lives been forced to become specialists in the connections between gender, sexuality, spirituality and justice, and many congregations are in desperate need of our assistance in making those connections. Sixth, because we embody ‘the forgotten middle-ground’ or ‘ambiguity’, Trans people can help to heal religious addictions to certainty – addictions that are threatening the survival of our entire planet. And Seventh, Trans people incarnate the concept that just as all races are ‘one blood’, all genders and sexualities are ‘one continuum’ – and that the one blood and one continuum are sacred, made in the holy, divine image.”<sup>7</sup>

We do bring gifts, yet that is not the most compelling reason to do this work. Morally and spiritually, I believe it is our duty as people of faith to respond to harm, respond to violence, respond to injustice, and always side with the oppressed.

Mark Sameth, a Rabbi and historian of the *Tetragrammaton*, mentioned earlier in this work, is far from the first to uncover the gender fluidity that has always been a part of our Abrahamic faith tradition. Rev. Dr. Justin Sabia-Tanis published the seminal work on trans theology and ministry in *Trans-gender: Theology, Ministry, and Communities of Faith* in 2003. This work by Sabia-Tanis

---

<sup>7</sup> Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, “We Come Bearing Gifts: Seven Lessons Religious Congregations Can Learn from Transpeople,” in *Trans/Formations Controversies in Contextual Theology*, ed. Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood, 46–58 (London, UK: SCM Press, 2009), 47.

saved many lives and kept so many people connected to the Creator. I will never forget reading his book, handed down to me from another trans-Christian, and having my mind radically reset. I had internalized harmful theological narratives that told me I was sick, sinful, and an abomination, but Sabia-Tanis reframing gender as a calling and a gift from God changed that for me. Sabia-Tanis shares, “I look at my experiences of gender as the following of an invitation from God to participate in a new, whole, and healthy way of living in the world – a holy invitation to set out on a journey of transformation of body, mind, and spirit.”<sup>8</sup>

This spoke to me deeply in a way that only Spirit can. Looking back on my journey, I could not give myself entirely over to God until I could present myself wholly before God. Not only did Sabia-Tanis heal the wounds of spiritual trauma, but he also helped me to understand that our calling as transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people are a sacred gift from God. We are a gift to the community from God.

The lifesaving work of Sabia-Tanis does something more: it gives birth to trans theology. This very early work uncovers gender fluidity and differences in scripture. Would an article like that of Sameth be written today had it not been for the radical work of Sabia-Tanis? While one cannot know for sure, I believe Sabia-Tanis laid the foundation. In this groundbreaking theological work, Sabia-Tanis powerfully refuses to concede the body to shame and disconnection. Transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming people bring the gift of reconnection to our bodies and spirits into a community. Shame is perpetrated as sexuality,

---

<sup>8</sup> Justin Sabia-Tanis, *Trans-Gender: Theology, Ministry, and Communities of Faith* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2003), 147.

pleasure, and embodiment is ignored in Christian practice. Our bodies and ‘flesh’ have been made the enemy as vessels of desire, decay, temptation, and sin.

Transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming people remind us that our bodies and how they work are made in God’s image. As Sabia-Tanis asserts: “one aspect of our maturity as spiritual people is learning to see beyond the dualisms, including the splits between life and death, female and male, spirit and body.”<sup>9</sup> I cannot help but remember the words of the apostle Paul in Galatians:

Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.<sup>10</sup>

Transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming people bear witness to the power of breaking free from the ‘disciplinarian’ of gender roles we have been subjected to and thus become closer to oneness in Christ.

The youth group, I grew to love but that eventually excluded me, went to many Christian concerts together, we would listen to Christian songs on our shiny new iPods, or we would gather around an acoustic guitar and sing together. Those were some of the best times and made up some of my favorite memories. One song we would often sing as the acoustic guitar was strummed was “They’ll Know We Are Christians by Our Love.” As people of faith that strive to follow Christ, love is what it comes down to. Are we reaching out in love to those

---

<sup>9</sup> Sabia-Tanis, *Trans-Gender*, 169.

<sup>10</sup> Gal. 3:23-28



hurting because of bad theology? Those who are hurting because of bad policy?  
Those who are hurting because of a society that would rather fear and kill us than  
get to know and love us? Who do transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-  
conforming people, especially transgender women and transgender people of  
color, know us to be? Do they know us by our love? They could.

## REFERENCES

- Ackerman, Susan. *Warrior, Dance, Seductress, Queen: Women in Judges and Biblical Israel*. New York, NY: Doubleday, 1998.
- Althaus-Reid, Marcella. *The Queer God*. New York: Routledge, 2003.
- Apostolacus, Katherine. "The Bible and the Transgender Christian: Mapping Transgender Hermeneutics in the 21st Century." *Journal of the Bible and its Reception* 5, no. 1 (2018): 1–29.
- Berger, Teresa. *Gender Differences and the Making of Liturgical History: Lifting a Veil on Liturgy's Past*. Farnham, England: Ashgate, 2011.
- Blackless M, et al. "How Sexually Dimorphic Are We? Review and Synthesis." *American Journal of Human Biology* 12 (2000): 151–66.
- Brill, Stephanie. *The Transgender Teen a Handbook for Parents and Professionals Supporting Transgender and Non-binary Teens*. San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2016.
- Brown, Brené. "Shame vs. Guilt." Brené Brown's Personal Website, January, 15, 2013. <https://brenbrown.com/articles/2013/01/15/shame-v-guilt/>.
- Chang, Rachel. "13 Powerful Marsha P. Johnson Quotes." *Biography* (January 28, 2022). <https://www.biography.com/news/marsha-p-johnson-quotes>.
- Chang, Sand C., Anneliese A. Singh, and Lore M. Dickey. *A Clinicians Guide to Gender-affirming Care: Working with Transgender and Gender-nonconforming Clients*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2019.
- Chibbaro Jr., Lou. "Mass Walk-out at Trans Woman's Funeral." *The Washington Blade*, February 8, 2001. <http://www.washingtonblade.com/2011/08/02/mass-walk-out-at-trans-woman%E2%80%99s-funeral/>.
- Clare, Eli. *Exile and Pride: Disability, Queerness, and Liberation*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015.
- Collie, Angel, and Mel Martinez. "Metropolitan Community Church Transformative Church Ministry Program." MCC Church, June 2013. [https://www.mccchurch.org/download/TFCMP\\_2013\\_Final.pdf](https://www.mccchurch.org/download/TFCMP_2013_Final.pdf).

- Crenshaw, Kimberle. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989, no. 1: 139–67. <https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=&httpsredir=1&article=1052&context=ucf>.
- Culbertson, Philip. *Caring for God's People: Counseling and Christian Wholeness*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000.
- Erickson-Schroth. *Trans Bodies, Trans Selves: A Resource for the Transgender Community*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Eriksen, Telaina. *Unconditional: A Guide to Loving and Supporting Your LGBTQ Child*. Coral Gables, FL: Mango Publishing Group, 2017.
- Evans, Cheryl B. *My Parenting Journey with a Transgender Child: A Journal*. Ontario, Canada: Cheryl B. Evans, 2018.
- Exum, J. Cheryl. *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)Versions of Biblical Narratives*. Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1993.
- Fabbre, Vanessa D. "Agency and Social Forces in the Life Course: The Case of Gender Transitions in Later Life." *The Journals of Gerontology Series B Psychological and Social Sciences*, May 1, 2017, <http://europemc.org/article/MED/27582504>.
- Fabbre, Vanessa D. "Gender Transitions in Later Life: The Significance of Time in Queer Aging." *Journal of Gerontological Social Work*, May 5, 2014, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4051396/>.
- "Fatal Violence Against the Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Community in 2021." Human Rights Campaign, December 6, 2021. <https://www.hrc.org/resources/fatal-violence-against-the-transgender-and-gender-non-conforming-community-in-2021>.
- Feliciano, Ivette. "PRIDE: 2021 Has Set a Record in Anti-Trans Bills in America." PBS, June 6, 2021. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/pride-2021-has-set-a-record-in-anti-trans-bills-in-america>.

- Foss, Sonja K., Mary E. Domenico, and Karen A. Foss. *Gender Stories: Negotiating Identity in a Binary World*. Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2013.
- Gainsburg, Jeanne. *The Savvy Ally: A Guide for Becoming a Skilled LGBTQ Advocate*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020.
- Garrigan, Siobhan. "Queer Worship." *Theology & Sexuality* 15, no. 2 (2009): 211–30. doi:10.1558/tse.v15i2.211.
- Gauthier, Jane, Kevin Medina, and Carly Dierkhising. "Analysis of Hate Crimes in Transgender Communities." *Journal of Hate Studies* 17, no. 2 (December 6, 2021): 4–14. <https://doi.org/http://doi.org/10.33972/jhs.158>.
- "Gender Reveal Party Couple Face Jail Over Deadly California Wildfire." BBC News, July 21, 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-57898993>.
- Gill-Peterson, Julian. *Histories of the Transgender Child*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018.
- Grant, Jamie, Lisa Mottet, and Justin Sabia-Tanis. "Injustice at Every Turn: A Report of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey." National LGBTQ Task Force, February 4, 2011. <https://www.lgbtagencycenter.org/resources/resource.cfm?r=283>.
- Green, Jo. *The Trans Partner Handbook: A Guide for When Your Partner Transitions*. Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2017.
- Hamley, Isabelle. *Unspeakable Things Unspoken: An Irigarayan Reading of Otherness and Victimization in Judges 19-21*. Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2019.
- Hartke, Austen. *Transforming: The Bible & Lives of Transgender Christians*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018.
- Heath, Elaine. *We Were the Least of These: Reading the Bible with Survivors of Sexual Abuse*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2011.
- Holden, Alexandra. "The Gay/Trans Panic Defense: What It Is, and How to End It." *American Bar Association Journal* (March 31, 2020).

<https://www.americanbar.org/groups/crsj/publications/member-features/gay-trans-panic-defense/>.

James, S. E., et al. *The Report of the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey*. Washington, DC: National Center for Transgender Equality, 2016.

Jennings, Jazz. *Being Jazz: My Life as a Transgender Teen*. New York: Ember, 2017.

Jeter, Joseph. *Preaching Judges*. St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2003.

Kergil, Skylar. *Before I Had the Words: On Being a Transgender Young Adult*. New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2017.

Koch, Anne L. *It Never Goes Away Gender Transition at a Mature Age*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2019.

Kundtz, David and Bernad Schlager.. *Ministry Among God's Queer Folk*. Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2007.

Lapsley, Jacqueline. *Whispering the Word: Hearing Women's Stories in the Old Testament*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005.

Lee, Hatty and Kai Wright, "Remembering the Transgender Women Murdered Last Year," *Colorlines. Race Forward*, November 19, 2010.

<https://www.colorlines.com/content/remembering-transgender-women-murdered-last-year>.

"LGBTQ+ Seniors Fear Having to Go Back in Closet for the Care They Need." SAGE, October, 12, 2021. <https://www.sageusa.org/news-posts/lgbtq-seniors-fear-having-to-go-back-in-closet-for-the-care-they-need/>.

Lorde, Audre. "(1982) Audre Lorde, Learning from the 60s." *Black Past*, August 12, 2012. <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/1982-audre-lorde-learning-60s/>.

Martin, James. *The Book of Judges*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1975.

Maynard, D. M. *The Reflective Workbook for Partners of Transgender People: Your Transition as Your Partner Transitions*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2019.

- “MCCNY CHARITIES.” Metropolitan Community Church of New York City. MCC New York. Accessed February 12, 2022. <http://www.mccny.org/mccnycharities.html>.
- Mock, Janet. *Surpassing Certainty: What My Twenties Taught Me*. New York: Atria Books, 2017.
- Mollenkott, Virginia Ramey. “We Come Bearing Gifts: Seven Lessons Religious Congregations Can Learn from Transpeople.” In *Trans/Formations Controversies in Contextual Theology*, edited by Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood, 46–58. London, UK: SCM Press, 2009.
- Moore, Catherine. *I Did Not Come Here to Die, Nor Be Your Butterfly*. Personal Essay.
- Morgan, Ruby, Charl Marais, and Joy Rosemary Wellbeloved, eds. *Trans: Transgender Life Stories from South Africa*. Auckland Park, South Africa: Fanele Publishers, 2011.
- Morgensen, Scott. *Spaces Between Us: Queer Settler Colonialism and Indigenous Decolonization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011.
- Murchinson, Gabe. “Supporting and Caring for Transgender Children.” Human Rights Campaign, September 2016. <https://hrc-prod-requests.s3-us-west-2.amazonaws.com/files/documents/SupportingCaringforTransChildren.pdf>.
- Nealy, Elijah C. *Transgender Children and Youth: Cultivating Pride and Joy with Families in Transition*. New York: W.W Norton & Company, 2017.
- Perry, David, Rachel Pauletti, and Patrick Cooper. “Gender Identity in Childhood: A Review of the Literature.” *International Journal of Behavioral Development* 43, no. 4 (2019): 289–304. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0165025418811129>.
- Ryan, Caitlyn. “Supportive Families, Healthy Children: Helping Families with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Children.” Family Acceptance Project, San Francisco State University, 2009. [https://familyproject.sfsu.edu/sites/default/files/FAP\\_English%20Booklet\\_pst.pdf](https://familyproject.sfsu.edu/sites/default/files/FAP_English%20Booklet_pst.pdf).

- Sabia-Tanis, Justin. *Trans-Gender: Theology, Ministry, and Communities of Faith*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2003.
- Sameth, Mark. "Is God Transgender?" *The New York Times*. August 12, 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/13/opinion/is-god-transgender.html>.
- Snorton, C. Riley. *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017.
- Soughers, Tara. *Beyond a Binary God: A Theology for Trans\* Allies*. New York: Church Publishing, 2018.
- "Spiritual Violence." Newfoundland Labrador . Accessed February 10, 2022. [https://www.gov.nl.ca/vpi/files/spiritual\\_violence.pdf](https://www.gov.nl.ca/vpi/files/spiritual_violence.pdf).
- Stryker, Susan, and Aren Z. Aizura. *The Transgender Studies Reader 2*. New York: Routledge, 2013.
- Tandy, Katie. "Trans Day Of Remembrance Is Resilience Above All." Medium, November 20, 2015. <https://medium.com/the-establishment/trans-day-of-remembrance-is-resilience-above-all-2e542fd6b147>.
- "The Human Rights Campaign 2022 Corporate Equality Index." Human Rights Campaign. Eugene, OR: Human Rights Campaign Foundation, 2022. <https://www.hrc.org/resources/corporate-equality-index>.
- "The Pride Index: National Listing of LGBTQ-Friendly Colleges & Universities." Campus Pride. Accessed February 13, 2022. <https://www.campusprideindex.org/>.
- "United Church of Chapel Hill Open and Affirming Ministry Covenant." United Church of Chapel Hill. Accessed February 14, 2021. <https://unitedchurch.org/open-affirming/>.
- Vellani, Saleema. "Innovating Through Empathy to Thrive in a Divided World." *Ellevate*, April 12, 2022. <https://www.ellevatenetwork.com/articles/11145-innovating-through-empathy-to-thrive-in-a-divided-world>.
- Violet, Mia. *Yes, You Are Trans Enough My Transition from Self-loathing to Self-love*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2018.

- Voelkel, Rebecca. "TransAction: A Transgender Curriculum for Churches and Religious Institutions." Institute for Welcoming Resources. Accessed November 17, 2021. [http://welcomingresources.org/transaction\\_final.pdf](http://welcomingresources.org/transaction_final.pdf).
- Walmsley, Colin. "The Queers Left Behind: How LGBT Assimilation Is Hurting Our Communities Most Vulnerable." *The Huffington Post*, July 21, 2016. [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-queers-left-behind-ho\\_b\\_7825158](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-queers-left-behind-ho_b_7825158).
- Webb, Barry. *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Judges*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012.
- Weekley, David. *Out From the Wilderness*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2011.
- Wilcox, Melissa. *Coming Out in Christianity: Religion, Identity, and Community*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2003.
- Bianca Wilson, Khush Cooper, Angeliki Kastanis, and Sheila Nezhad, "Sexual and Gender Minority Youth in Foster Care: Assessing Disproportionality and Disparities in Los Angeles," The Williams Institute, UCLA School of Law, UCLA, August 2014, <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/publications/sgm-youth-la-foster-care/>.
- Wirth, Mathias. "Demand for Space: Elderly Transgender and Gender Nonconforming People, Healthcare, and Theological Ethics." *Journal of Religion and Health* 60, no. 3 (2021): <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8137567/>.
- Wyckoff, Alyson. "AAP Continues to Support Care of Transgender Youths as More States Push Restrictions." *American Academy of Pediatrics*, January 6, 2022. <https://publications.aap.org/aapnews/news/19021/AAP-continues-to-support-care-of-transgender>.
- Zucker, Kenneth. "On the 'Natural History' of Gender Identity Disorder in Children." *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* 47, no. 12 (2008): 1361–63. doi:10.1097/CHI.0b013e31818960cf.



## **BIOGRAPHY**

Angel (he/him/his) grew up in rural North Carolina and received his BA in Religious Studies with minors in both Women's Studies and Sexuality Studies from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and his MDiv from Yale Divinity School. He served as the Assistant Director of the LGBTQ Center at UNC-CH before joining the Center for Sexual and Gender Diversity at Duke in 2016 where he currently serves as Interim Director. Angel hopes to graduate from the Doctor of Ministry program at Duke Divinity School in May 2022.