

The Church and Sexual Socialization:
A Practical Guide Equipping Youth Ministers to Aid LGBTQ+ Students

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Abstract

Sexual socialization is the process by which people learn about their sexual desires and identity. This paper displays the process of sexual socialization as it specifically relates to the youth in the United States. The need for authority on the matter of LGBTQ+ beliefs is established through a biblical worldview. The gap between the church and gender and sexual minority youth is wide, and the problem must be addressed. The author then provides a process and set of beliefs that any youth minister should hold if they desire to aid LGBTQ+ students.

The Church and Sexual Socialization:**A Practical Guide Equipping Youth Ministers to Aid LGBTQ+ Students**

Consider the scenario: A 12-year-old boy reflects in his room after a family car ride where they passed a church displaying an LGBTQ+ flag on its grounds. Next to the flag, a sign featuring an image of Jesus with arms wide open is accompanied by the message “All are loved and accepted.” As the young boy grows into adolescence, he hears peers at school acknowledging that boys can be attracted to boys, and girls to other girls. On the first day of class, the teacher introduces themselves with they/them pronouns and asks each student to introduce themselves as well, along with their own pronouns. He lies down in bed with his phone and searches “Can Christians be gay?” After 15 minutes, he gets a wide range of sources. Some people tell him that it is okay for him to embrace his sexuality and his faith. Others tell him that gay people will be sent to hell. Others tell him he can still practice homosexuality and live in relationship with God, just apart from the church. What does he believe? What should he believe? Who is going to teach him the truth?

One must remember this paper addresses people, not just concepts. There is a struggle in every single LGBTQ+ youth in or outside of the church who has been neglected by people who claim to follow Christ. These people are worth much more than just an argument. If the reader of this paper happens to experience same-sex attraction or gender dysphoria, then the author hopes for them to feel the love of the church.

With that stated, this paper is specifically for church leadership; youth ministers, pastors, or other leadership roles within the youth ministry setting. The target audience is a firm follower of Christ, looking to know more about youth who struggle with LGBTQ+ beliefs, to lead them to Jesus, and to inform them with biblical truth while loving them generously. This research is not

for students who may be struggling with their sexuality. For those who are seeking biblical answers in this regard, see the appendix. Biblical inspiration, inerrancy and authority are important in this research and it is directed toward church leaders who hold these convictions. Scripture is the supreme and ultimate source for this research and is regarded as such throughout the project. If the reader of this paper does not believe in the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture, then this project will not be helpful to them. Scripture cannot be manipulated to fit the personal opinions of Christians.

Definitions of Terms

Definitions of terms and acronyms are provided below as a means of clarification for the reader. These definitions are derived from a secular source.¹

AFAB/AMAB- Assigned female/male at birth. The terms... are used by a wide range of individuals, including those who are transgender, non-binary, or intersex.

LGBTQIA+ (identified hereafter as LGTBQ+)- Abbreviation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, and Asexual. The additional “+” stands for all of the other identities not encompassed in the short acronym. An umbrella term that is often used to refer to the community as a whole.

Gender dysphoria- Used to describe when a person experiences discomfort or distress because there is a mismatch between their sex assigned at birth and their gender identity.

Trans- The term trans acts as a more inclusive term than transgender for gender non-conforming and non-binary folks.

¹ LGBTQIA Resource Center. (2014) “LGBTQIA Resource Center Glossary | LGBTQIA Resource Center.” Ucdavis.edu.. <https://lgbtqia.ucdavis.edu/educated/glossary>

Transgender- An adjective used most often as an umbrella term and frequently abbreviated to “trans.” Identifying as transgender, or trans, means that one’s internal knowledge of gender is different from conventional or cultural expectations based on the sex that person was assigned at birth.

Transitioning- Transitioning is the process of taking steps to live as one’s true gender identity. Transitioning is different for each individual and may or may not involve medical interventions like taking hormones or having surgery.

SSA- same-sex attraction. It is important to note that only Christians will use this term to refer to those who are attracted to the same gender.

Socialization- The process by which societal norms influence several aspects that frame how members of a community live, including how they might think, behave, and hold certain values. Socialization can reinforce assumptions or expectations that give power to systems of oppression.

Sexual and gender minority- anyone whose sexual orientation or gender identity falls outside of the norm.

Youth- When the phrase youth, is used, the writer is typically referring to children grades 6th-12th, or kids ranging from 11 to 18 years old.

Sexual Socialization

L. Monique Ward, an Arthur F. Thurnau (an esteemed professorship) Professor of Psychology at the University of Michigan, specializes in media psychology specifically as it relates to adolescents and sexuality. Ward states that “sexual socialization is often described as the process by which knowledge, attitudes, and values about sexuality are acquired. It is an intricate, multi-dimensional process that occurs gradually over many years and involves

coordinating input from several sources.”² The infamous teenager “sex-talk” given by many parents is not the only thing that influences their child’s view on sexual orientation, identity, and practice. While sexualization is a wide scope, this project will seek to focus primarily on sexual orientation and gender identity in youth.

The church must understand the driving factors behind the way students act and behave regarding sexuality. While there are many factors for sexualization, the media has become an overwhelmingly popular contender, especially amongst the younger generations. In a study conducted in 1982, females indicated receiving more sexual knowledge from their parents, while males indicated receiving more from movies.³ There are a few different sources of sexualization, and a conceptual review highlights a few of them; social relationships, media, education, government and policy, and finally religion. Tolman and McClelland say that “the media has long been a potent source of sexuality information for young people and feared as a quasi- or even replacement for parental influence.”⁴ As the use of media, especially social media platforms, has risen over the past decade among youth, this presumption becomes almost undisputed. In 2017, 93% of teens aged 14-17 reported having at least one social media account.⁵

² Ward, Entertainment media’s role in the sexual socialization of Western youth

³ Sally M. Davis and Mary B. Harris. (1982) "Sexual Knowledge, Sexual Interests, and Sources of Sexual Information of Rural and Urban Adolescents from Three Cultures." *Adolescence* 17, no. 66 (Summer): 471, <https://go.openathens.net/redirector/liberty.edu?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/sexual-knowledge-interests-sources-information/docview/1295891383/se-2>.

⁴ Deborah L. Tolman, and Sara I. McClelland. (2011) “Normative Sexuality Development in Adolescence: A Decade in Review, 2000-2009.” *Journal of Research on Adolescence* 21, no. 1 (February): 242–55.

⁵ Christopher T. Barry, et al. (2017) “Adolescent Social Media Use and Mental Health from Adolescent and Parent Perspectives.” *Journal of Adolescence* 61, no. 1 (December): 1–11.

In 2023, a NET average of 96% of teens ages 13-17 reported using the internet daily.⁶ Since 2014-2015, the number of teens who are online ‘almost constantly’ has doubled.⁷

The idea of social media and sexualization needs further research to understand youth entrenchment in social media. One must turn to the literature behind it. How does social media factor into the sexual socialization of LGBTQ+ youth? Hiebert conducted a study on how TikTok acted as support for gender and sexual minority youth throughout COVID-19. Gender and sexual minority youth are often isolated from their families, and due to their usual support systems being disbanded, they were able to “utilize TikTok as a means of creating a supportive community to foster connection.”⁸ When youth feel isolated, they will turn to their online communities, in which they will often find love, support, and affirmation for their identities and orientations. Another study was conducted on transgender adolescents between the ages of 15 and 18 displaying how social media functioned as an avenue for health. A few categories displayed in this study were “emotional support through peers and role models, appraisal support for validating their experiences, and informational support for navigating health decisions and educating family and friends.”⁹ However, in a more recent study, Fisher, Tao, and Ford found that social media is a “double-edged sword for LGBTQ+ youth” stating that while social media was a source of connection and refuge, it was also identified as a source of rejection.¹⁰ From the secular viewpoint, social media can be advantageous to sexual and gender minority youth in

⁶ Monica Anderson, Michelle Faverio, and Jeffery Gottfried. (2023). “Teens, Social Media and Technology 2023.” Pew Research Center: Internet, Science & Tech..

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Alexa Hiebert. “Finding Home in Online Community: Exploring TikTok as a Support for Gender and Sexual Minority Youth throughout COVID-19.” *Journal of LGBT Youth* 20, no. 4 (December): 1–18.

⁹ Ellen Selkie et al. (2019) “Transgender Adolescents’ Uses of Social Media for Social Support.” *Journal of Adolescent Health* 66, no. 3 (November).

¹⁰ Celia B. Fisher, Xiangyu Tao, Madeline Ford, (2024) “Social media: A double-edged sword for LGBTQ+ youth”

Computers in Human Behavior, 108194, ISSN 0747-5632, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2024.108194>.

terms of community. But how can this be addressed from a biblical perspective? Youth can find communal support and affirmation online. But, the depth of this community is limited, as are all online relationships. The youth of today need much more than TikTok videos and hashtags to ground their identities.

Mental Health of LGBTQ+ Teens

Church leaders must understand the mental health patterns that are correlated with LGBTQ+ youth. They must know the struggles of the people we are dealing with if they have any chance of helping them. Awareness of the situation also allows youth leaders to be cautious about their approach to these topics and discussions. So, the author explores some statistics surrounding this issue. Researchers in 2010 found that sexual minority youth reported significantly higher rates of suicidality (almost three times more likely) and depression symptoms than heterosexual youth.¹¹ Furthermore, another study from the *Journal of Adolescent Health* of June 2020 shows that “Transgender and nonbinary youth were at increased risk of experiencing depressed mood, seriously considering suicide, and attempting suicide compared with cisgender lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, and questioning youth.”¹² If LGBTQ+ youth are three times more likely to be suicidal, then any interaction youth ministers may have with these children must be accompanied by the utmost care. Isolation was identified by Steinke to be one of the driving factors for sexual and gender minority youth in seeking a supportive community.¹³

¹¹ Michael P. Marshal, et al. (2011) “Suicidality and Depression Disparities Between Sexual Minority and Heterosexual Youth: A Meta-Analytic Review, *Journal of Adolescent Health*, Volume 49, Issue 2 , Pages 115-123

¹² Myeshia Price-Feeney, Amy E. Green, and Samuel Dorison. (2020) “Understanding the Mental Health of Transgender and Nonbinary Youth.” *Journal of Adolescent Health* 66, no. 6 (January). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2019.11.314>.

¹³ Jessica Steinke et al. 2017. “Meeting the Needs of Sexual and Gender Minority Youth: Formative Research on Potential Digital Health Interventions.” *The Journal of Adolescent Health: Official Publication of the Society for Adolescent Medicine* 60, no. 5: 541–48. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2016.11.023>.

In a systematic review of research on LGBTQI+ youth and mental health, it was concluded that 34 studies “revealed five core themes relating to the mental health challenges faced by sexual and gender minority youth including (1) Isolation, rejection, phobia and need for support, (2) Marginalization, (3) Depression, self-harm and suicidality, (4) Policy and environment and (5) Connectedness.”¹⁴ Specifically, when it comes to rural LGBTQ+ youth (where the church can tend to play a more prominent role in all of the community), the probability of transgender students’ suicide attempts was higher, as well as bullying victimization.¹⁵ At the heart of this issue lies the exact problem at the heart of all of humanity: a lack of connectedness to God and the body of Christ.

Implications of Sexual Socialization

While media has a strong place in the lives of students, it also displays a lack of biblical hospitality in the church. LGBTQ+ members on social media are providing a much more welcoming place for these students than the church is, otherwise, they would be turning to the church for help. While the church does not have to provide approval of the LGBTQ+ lifestyle, it should still be the safest place for students to explore their sexuality and gender identity. The sexual socialization differs from student to student, however, there must be a change in the role that the church plays in sexual socialization.

Media and peers dominate the thinking of students surrounding sexual and gender conversation. Expressive individualism is defined by Carl R. Trueman as “the philosophical ideal that “the modern self is one where authenticity is achieved by acting outwardly in accordance

¹⁴ Clare Wilson, Cariola, L.A. LGBTQI+ Youth and Mental Health: A Systematic Review of Qualitative Research. *Adolescent Res Rev* 5, 187–211 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40894-019-00118-w>

¹⁵ Marla E. Eisenberg et al. 2018. “Emotional Distress, Bullying Victimization, and Protective Factors among Transgender and Gender Diverse Adolescents in City, Suburban, Town, and Rural Locations.” *The Journal of Rural Health* 35, no. 2 (June): 270–81. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jrh.12311>.

with one's inward feelings.”¹⁶ Since expressive individualism is the ideal that pervades American society, it has grabbed hold of children and teens as well. There is only one way that the church can counter this form of humanism that permeates our thinking. Scripture must be put back in its place of authority over Christian lives, meaning it should determine actions and thinking rather than culture.

A Brief Survey of Scripture and LGBTQ+ Beliefs

When it comes to the surrounding culture, including the hard advocacy and acceptance of LGBTQ+ beliefs, the reader may be questioning the things that they once believed to be true, such as the conviction that marriage was to be between one man and one woman. After all, did not earlier well-meaning Christians in America use the Bible to justify slavery, a practice that is so obviously unbiblical to anyone from today? The researcher explores a few different areas of the Bible that may seem to support LGBTQ+ beliefs and other passages that most believe to condemn this behavior that some interpret to be accepting. The purpose of this section is to uncover what it means to be faithful to God and give a proper interpretation of His Word. However, before delving too deeply into Scripture, and getting lost in these theological arguments, one must remember that there are people behind these arguments. Some people are hurting; hurting deeply, and desperately need the love of Christ, not another verse being thrown at them from a person who is trying to convince them that they are wrong and invalidate their feelings and experiences.

Another critical aspect of this section is examining Scripture in its entirety, not solely a verse, word, or chapter. Each passage broken down fits into a greater narrative, God's story. The

¹⁶ Carl R. Trueman, *Strange New World: How Thinkers and Activists Redefined Identity and Sparked the Sexual Revolution*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022. 23

text fits somewhere along the line of Genesis to Revelation and should be understood in that context. God's word should not be manipulated to fit one's beliefs.

When it comes to God's word, Christians must be willing to set aside their presuppositions and allow God to form their opinion on every topic and matter in their lives. They must not allow the culture to drive their interpretation of Scripture but allow the author's intended meaning and the original audience's interpretation to discern what God has to say today. For example, when it comes to the doctrine of hell, one would be hard-pressed to find a Christian who would be delighted at the idea of their unsaved friends going to an eternal place of torment. It is an incredibly hard topic to teach, and the tendency when it comes to hell is to just direct our minds towards something else and avoid the thought altogether. Many wish that hell did not exist, because there are people who do not know Jesus. It is possible to do a similar thing when it comes to what Scripture has to say about sexual orientation. Christians must be willing to accept what God has to say about a matter, even if they do not emotionally agree with the conclusion, because he is God. One must do their best to know what he says and teach it properly to a culture of young people who desperately need the truth. As the reader engages in this chapter, (even if they may not agree with the interpretation presented by the author of this paper) it is essential to acknowledge the content of Scripture.

This section examines some controversial Scripture in their context and attempts to reach a conclusion about where the biblical authors stand on this topic. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to give an in-depth exegesis of all of these verses, the author will attempt to bring a succinct and accurate view of them. The creation account has much value to bring to the topic of sexuality. Moses writes, "So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" (Genesis 1:27, New International Version). This

verse must be the basis of any Christian interpretation of sexuality. One must note that the Hebrew word used for mankind (אָדָם or ha'adam) refers to humankind, both male and female. However, the terms in the latter half of the verse hold a distinction between male and female. Not too far in the passage, at the end of the chapter, “God saw all that he had made, and it was very good” (1:31). It is crucial to note that God made two genders in the creation count, and then he looked back on this and said it was good. God celebrated sex, and humans should too. It appears that the idea of not only creation, but also sexuality, is a gift from God. Sexuality is something to be celebrated, not twisted and seen as oppressive. The author of Genesis also pens immediately after God created a woman out of Adam, “That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh” (2:24).

Miller from Princeton Theological Seminary argues that “Genesis 1-3 gives no direct, plain-sense teaching about contemporary same-sex relationships.”¹⁷ He goes on to argue that the idea of male and female relationships is central to Genesis, but nothing else in the text deems other sorts of relationships as sinful. However, this interpretation has a few problems. The first is that, if in the garden of Eden where everything was perfect, right, and holy, why would God have not placed male and female, or created a few different genders that would be acceptable to his order? Even though one may not see other relationships as labeled directly as sinful in Gen. 1-3, one can notice these relationships as less than perfection, because perfection was only displayed in the garden. The second problem is that Moses almost seemingly interrupts the creation account with his short discourse about marriage. Verse 24 in chapter 2 is a statement about the

¹⁷ Patrick Miller. “Frequently Asked Questions about Sexuality, the Bible, and the Church: Plain Talk about Tough Issues What Does Genesis 1-3 Teach about Sexuality, and How Should We Live in Response?” Accessed January 31, 2024. <https://mywt5-files.s3.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/71/2009/11/27075208/Miller-Genesis-1-3.pdf>

goodness of marriage between one man and one woman. While it might not precisely address contemporary same-sex relationships, the garden must still be viewed as a “paradigm for marital behavior.”¹⁸ This verse “serves as the bedrock for Hebrew understanding of the centrality of the nuclear family for the survival of society.”¹⁹ If the creation account shapes believers’ views about God’s holiness, mercy, man’s sinfulness, and many other doctrines, then it must shape the Christian view of sexuality and gender as well. So not only in the creation account do we see the foundation of Christian sexual relationships, but also a celebration of gender identity in male and female.

To continue with the Old Testament, Leviticus 18:22 reads “Do not have sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman; that is detestable.” Moses, giving YHWH’s law to the Israelites, answered the question “How do we live in relationship with the Lord, our covenant King, and how do we reflect his holy character to watching the world?”²⁰ Most evangelicals today (unless you hold to theonomy) would agree that Christians are no longer under the Mosaic law because we are now under the New Covenant (Rom. 6:14-5, Jer. 31:31-34). This is what many LGBTQ+ affirming Christians use to counter this passage. Robertson writes, “For the person embracing the New Testament ethic of Jesus and Paul...” (referring to NT figures being in transgression of Mosaic law) “it becomes increasingly difficult to claim any of the Levitical purity codes as binding or even relevant to the life of the Christian today.”²¹ The author of this paper would theologically agree that the law is not binding, but to say the law is irrelevant is

¹⁸ K. A. Mathews. *Genesis*. Nashville, Tenn: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996, 145

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 146

²⁰ Jay Sklar, 2014. *Leviticus: An Introduction and Commentary*. Westmont: InterVarsity Press. ProQuest Ebook Central, 35

²¹ Brandan J. Robertson, (2019). *The Gospel of Inclusion: A Christian case for LGBT+ inclusion in the church*, Google Books. Wipf and Stock Publishers, 18

wrong. The law is relevant because it reflects God's holy character, which Christians can draw on to know more about YHWH. Sklar, referring to verse 22 states, "The word refers to acts that are detestable because they go against the moral fibre of God's created world" and that homosexual acts are "a denial of the Lord's very intent for sexuality."²² The law, while not binding for Christians today, still holds relevance as God's inspired word.

In Romans, Paul writes concerning sinful humanity;

God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. In the same way, the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men and received in themselves the due penalty for their error (1:26-27).

Robertson makes a compelling argument surrounding the context of Romans, that the priests and priestesses of Roman and Corinthians culture were engaging in unnatural sexual relations as a way of worshipping the gods and goddesses of the culture. However, he also states that "in Paul's mind...sex was seen as an act for procreative purposes only."²³ According to this rationale, since Christians today view sex for pleasure, Paul's argument can be dismissed as simply the culture in Rome. However, there is a problem with the argument that Paul viewed sex solely for the purpose of procreation. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 7:5 when speaking about sex and self-control, "Do not deprive each other except perhaps by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. They come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control." There would be no need for a couple to "deprive" each

²² Sklar. *Leviticus*, 267

²³ Robertson, *The Gospel of Inclusion*, 21

other of sex if it were not intended by God to be enjoyed. Furthermore, the entire book of Song of Solomon (which Paul, as a Jew, would have been familiar with and believed in) celebrates and elevates sexual relations within the marital context. Moo clears the air regarding verse 26. “In keeping with the biblical and Jewish worldview, the heterosexual desires observed normally in nature are traced to God’s creative intent. Sexual sins that are ‘against nature’ are also, then, against God, and it is this close association that makes it probable that Paul’s appeal to ‘nature’ in this verse includes an appeal to God’s created order.”²⁴ Some would state the purpose of the letter to the Romans is that the Jewish people should not judge the Gentiles. That is not Paul’s intent and cannot be used as an argument to say the church should not see homosexuality as sinful. Paul intends to point out the hypocrisy of the Jews (Romans 2) and to display that all are sinful.

Furthermore, throughout Scripture, a common theme is that all humans must submit their feelings to God. Rather than being their own source of authority, one must always submit to an outside institution that is higher and greater than they are. A few different passages have been selected to demonstrate this theme. In Ephesians 4:14-16, Paul pens; “Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him, the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.”

²⁴ Douglas J. Moo. (2018). *The Letter to the Romans*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.. Accessed February 6, 2024. ProQuest Ebook Central. 126

Paul addresses the Ephesian church, which was a city of great economic stature as well as cultural and religious diversity. The reason behind Paul's exhortation here is that believers in Ephesus were challenged by practices that were predominant in their background such as the worship of Artemis and the imperial cult.²⁵ "These expressions of paganism assumed a metanarrative that reinforced Roman superiority politically, culturally, economically, and spiritually."²⁶ The Ephesian society was dominated by ideals that were not biblical, just like the culture of today is dominated by expressive individualism and humanism. Because of this presupposition, Paul had to counter the culture with truth, which must find its roots in God. The truth had to come from something greater than man, an authority that lies above humanity, not one that comes from within. "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?" (Jer. 17:9). Jeremiah relays from God that man cannot find his own way. Outside of a relationship with him, humanity is doomed and diseased (Rom. 3:23, Mark 7:21). Another passage that supports this theme is Proverbs 3:5-6. "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight." Solomon states that in all ways, man must submit to God. The most tangible way to submit to God is by submitting to what he has already written in his infallible word (2 Tim. 3:16). And as surveyed, according to the biblical authors, and Christ himself, all sexual promiscuity is considered sinful, as well as homosexuality and transgenderism. However, this sin must be approached with an overflow of grace and love, and most of all, empathy from those who do not know what it's like to suffer from gender dysphoria or feel same-sex attraction.

²⁵ Lynn H Cohick. *The Letter to the Ephesians*. Chicago: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2020, 52

²⁶ *Ibid*, 52

Research Surrounding the Church and LGBTQ+ youth

Existing research has already established the need for familial acceptance and mental well-being in LGBTQ+ youth.²⁷ Religiosity and sexuality have also been explored, in terms of sexual activity and age of involvement.²⁸ The research surrounding the church and its influence on sexual and gender minority youth has increased in the past five years drastically. One study states that “data indicated that identity conflict that comes from dissonance felt between religious beliefs and LGBT identity was associated with a higher risk of suicide.”²⁹ 42% of the participants in this study left their religious affiliation due to conflict. Out of this subgroup, 74% of these people identified as Christians.³⁰ There have been several studies on the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-Day Saints, focusing on both the negative effects, varying between isolation and rejection from the church to microaggressions from the church toward parents, as well as positive effects, such as parental acceptance regardless of their religious beliefs regarding LGBTQ+ behavior.³¹ Some researchers suggested a model for LGBTQ+ and religion, one that I will source many implications from later. However, most of the research surrounding religiosity

²⁷ Amy L. Gower et al. (2018). “Supporting Transgender and Gender Diverse Youth: Protection against Emotional Distress and Substance”.

Caitlyn Ryan et al. (2010) “Family Acceptance in Adolescence and the Health of LGBT Young Adults”.

Kristina R. Olson et al. (2016) “Mental Health of Transgender Children Who Are Supported in Their Identities”.

Elizabeth A. McConnell et al. (2016), “Families Matter”

Shannon D. Snapp et al. (2015), “Social Support Networks for LGBT Young Adults”

W. Roger Mills-Koonce et al. (2018), “The Significance of Parent-Child Relationships for Sexual and Gender Minority Adolescents.”

²⁸ Sam A. Hardy, Marcela Raffaelli. Adolescent religiosity and sexuality; an investigation of reciprocal influences” *Journal of Adolescence*, 26, 6. Dec. (2003) 731-739 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2003.09.003>

²⁹ Jeremy J. Gibbs and Jeremy Goldbach. (2015). “Religious Conflict, Sexual Identity, and Suicidal Behaviors among LGBT Young Adults.” *Archives of Suicide Research* 19, no. 4 (March): 472–88. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13811118.2015.1004476>.

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ Sydney Sorrell et al. (2023) “Microaggressions Experienced by LGBTQ+ Teens and Their parents in the CJCLDS”, Lesli Allen. 2021 “Experiences of LGBTQ+ Children within the CJCLDS”, Sydney Sorrell et al. 2023 “How LGBTQ+ Teens Build Positive Relationships with Their Active, LDS Parents”

and LGBTQ+ individuals has examined the negative aspects such as rejection and lack of belonging.

The research made prior in this paper shows that the process of sexual socialization is dominated by the media as well as peers. However, there must be a way that the church can change the process that teenagers currently undergo. There must be community to counteract that of social media; real community that lasts and supports teens. As previously displayed, the mental health of LGBTQ+ teens is in an overall negative state, so the church must be cautious when confronting these children. The rest of this paper is a practical guide as to how church staff and volunteers should minister to LGBTQ+ students.

Addressing the Problem

The crucial prompt is how can the church step up and reverse this narrative? The church does not appear willing to address the problem, which is a catastrophically large one. Children across North America are suffering as a result of the behavior of the members of the body of Christ. These children are those who might identify with the LGBTQ+ community or those who admit that they struggle with SSA. It is necessary to be said that the church will always have its faults, as a result of the fall and the sin that plagues this world. Students around the world face problems of rejection and isolation, but the struggles faced by LGBTQ+ students are notably more pronounced, as examined previously. Many youths are stoutly against the church because of its homophobic history. With the media pumping out videos of street preachers with anti-homophobic flags or people holding signs and wearing t-shirts that write “God hates fags” across them, the church does not carry a good image.³² Alongside these narratives, the research does not

³² Look no further than www.godhatesfags.com

support religiosity for LGBTQ+ teen well-being in any aspect. With a history and stereotypes like these, the church is fighting an uphill battle to become a loving presence to any LGBTQ+ youth.

As it specifically relates to LGBTQ+ youth, Andy Stanley said “Most gay men or women you know, once upon a time, were keeping a terrifying secret, and they asked God to change them, and God did not answer their prayer.”³³ He later followed this statement with a striking truth; “The Church should be the safest place on the planet for students to talk about anything, including same-sex attraction.”³⁴ How can the church be the safest place on earth for students to discuss and wrestle with their sexual and gender identity? How can the church be safer than social media is for LGBTQ+ teens?

Addressing the Problem

Sprinkle so clearly articulates how Christians should approach the topic of transgenderism in the church, and I believe that we should embody this as believers when it comes to the entire LGBTQ+ community. For the sake of clarity, I have included the following passage in its entirety.

I think there are good biblical and ethical reasons why a disciple of Jesus should not transition. But I also think we can make an even clearer biblical case for why Christians should care for the poor, the outcast, the immigrant, the downtrodden and oppressed, those who are marginalized and criticized by the religious elite; for why Christians should rebuke those who claim Jesus but are racist, misogynist,

³³ Andy Stanley “I Love My Church” n.d. www.youtube.com.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JEPHnpos17A>. 10:25

³⁴ Ibid, 11:20

unkind, unloving, ungracious, or downright nasty on social media. We can make a strong case for why Christians should confront fellow Christians who embody and promote cultural views of masculinity and femininity, baptizing them in the name of "being biblical" while hanging these stereotypes like millstones around the necks of struggling siblings in Christ. We need to consider questions related to transitioning with a deep commitment to Scripture and a deep disdain for hypocrisy.³⁵

Sprinkle shows just how important it is to eradicate hypocrisy in the church when it comes to transgenderism. There is much damage to be undone, especially when it comes to LGBTQ+ adults. But for children, many of them have not yet been tainted by the sin of the church, and you might have a fresh start. If their parents are unchurched, then their children are truly unchurched. Many parents have experienced church hurt in some form or fashion, and if they did, then their kids would not have any experience in the church. Or there is another side of this scale. The kid that you know who is struggling, probably grew up in a Christian household. Maybe their parents are long-time members of the church, and they have come to you for help because their kid believes that they were born in the wrong body. Whatever the situation, these kids need the love of Christ displayed in an unbiased way to them.

The reader of this paper may have found themselves encountering problems in ministry they never would have expected. They had a conversation with a student that took a turn and left them shocked with no idea how to address the situation at hand. The answer is not to throw Scripture

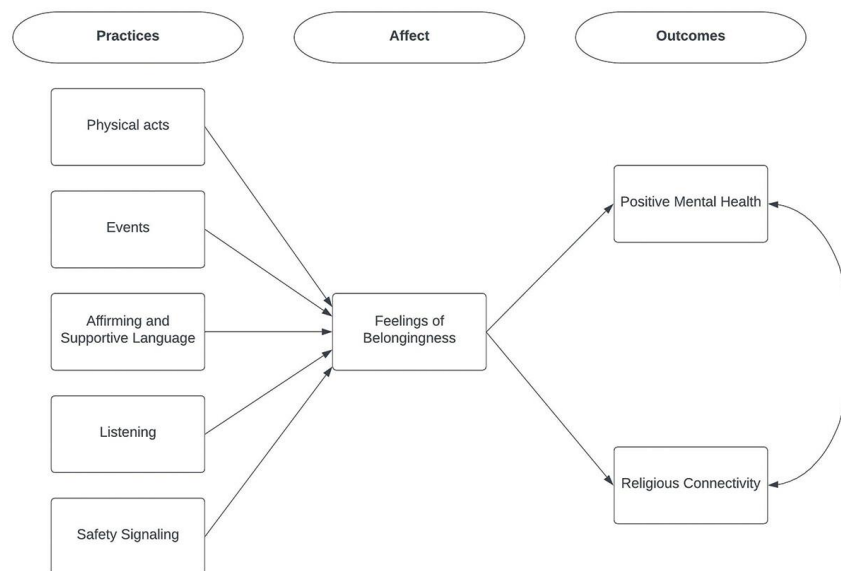
³⁵ Preston M. Sprinkle *Embodied: Transgender Identities, The Church & What the Bible Has to Say*. Colorado Springs, CO: David C Cook, 2021. 187-188

in their face and tell them they are going to hell. The answer is also not to affirm the things they are feeling. There is no silver bullet for ministering to LGBTQ+ students. However, there are a few biblical principles that need to be implemented in the process. The author of this paper puts forth a few practical tips and processes to better prepare anyone involved in youth ministry to come alongside sexual and gender minority youth.

Practical Tips and Scenarios

One group of researchers created a beneficial figure to aid the LDS church in their interactions with LGBTQ+ students.³⁶ The model is presented below.³⁷

Figure 1



Physical include greetings such as hugs or pats on the back. Events include church members accepting invitations to events such as weddings or birthday parties, as well as being invited to events hosted by church members. Listening has already been previously described in this paper

³⁶ Sarah M. Coyne, et al. (2023). “‘I’ll Walk with You’: LGBTQ+ Individuals and Religious Belonging.” *Journal of Homosexuality*, (October), 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2023.2246617>.

³⁷ Please see the Appendix for Author’s note on the LDS church.

because the ministry of presence is exactly what the Father gives to us, and we should give it to others as well. Affirming language includes things such as pronoun hospitality, which will be discussed at greater length later in the paper. The last aspect of this model is safety signals, which can be items such as rainbow socks, an LGBTQ+ flag, or rainbow pins. These are symbols that make LGBTQ+ people feel seen and heard by the people or communities that display them. Because safety symbols can be seen by many within the Christian community to be endorsements of a sinful lifestyle, these are optional and up to the decision of the leadership of the church. Instead of safety signaling, the church could take an approach of safety in general, which rather than signaling safe spaces, focuses on practical ways to create safety in everyday avenues, such as restrooms and small groups. I would argue the other aspects are obligatory to the lifestyle that Christ calls us to lead. In turn, relationship leads to LGBTQ+ teen well-being and connectedness. A few different practical situations that relate to this model are explored below.

Parents

While parents are not specifically addressed in the model, they are crucial to youth ministry. The need for parental relationships and acceptance of LGBTQ+ children for their mental well-being has already been stated previously in this project. While this paper is not directed toward parents, any youth minister knows that they are to partner with the families of students to disciple children. Parental involvement in the child's life, especially as it relates to LGBTQ beliefs, has a significant impact.

After all, one study conducted about religion and family acceptance for LGBTQ youth concludes that “teachers and school counselors, youth workers, mental health providers, and healthcare clinicians should advise parents that their support and acceptance of their LGBTQ

child is beneficial for that child's health, even if this advice conflicts with religious teachings."³⁸

Should we set aside our religious beliefs to support these children? Is it not our job to provide these kids with biblical truth? Here is my pitch: we don't have to deny our religious beliefs to show acceptance to LGBTQ kids. Both can occur at the same time.

Practical themes have been discovered in one study with LGBTQ+ teens and Latter-day Saint (LDS) parents. This study identified teen behaviors that aided in improving their well-being; "having authentic and meaningful conversations, fostering family connections, engaging in casual communication, being open about LGBTQ+ identity, and giving parents time and grace."³⁹ You do not have to be a scholar to realize that these are healthy behaviors that will extend much further than LDS families. Partnering and ministering to parents is an important part of ministering to LGBTQ+ students. Encourage a relationship of love and listening, and most importantly, show that isolation is the worst-case scenario for the child.

"Love the Sinner, Hate the Sin"

This surrounds the aspect of loving and affirming language. It is one of the most common mantras in the evangelical Christian community, especially when it comes to the concept of gender identity and orientation. However, this ideology is simply not going to win any more members of the LGTBQ+ community to Christ. The top-down approach is not going to cut it. Coming down upon some of these kids with a heavy hand is only going to drive them further away from the church. The conflict with this mantra is that LGBTQ+ youth are encouraged for

³⁸ Kathleen K. Miller, Ryan J. Watson, and Marla E. Eisenberg. (2020). "The Intersection of Family Acceptance and Religion on the Mental Health of LGBTQ Youth." *Annals of LGBTQ Public and Population Health* 1, no. 1 (March): 27–42.

³⁹ Sydney Sorrell et al. 2023 "How LGBTQ+ Teens Build Positive Relationships with Their Active, LDS Parents"

their sin to be their identity. Their identity is so deeply intertwined with their sexual orientation or their gender that it becomes their very source of worth. If a person cannot express their feelings or their personality in the form of their gender, then they will never truly be whole. Their sin then becomes their identity. To love the sinner and hate the sin essentially says to the LGBTQ+ community that a Christian hates the sinner and the sin. There is no separation between the two. For example, the “HRC Foundation”, a Christian organization, says that the Nashville statement denounces “LGBTQ+ people and their identities as “inconsistent with God’s holy purposes in creation and redemption.”⁴⁰ Notice how in this statement, the authors do not separate the sin and the sinner. The battle is not supposed to be fought to make gay youth straight or to make transgender youths align with their biological sex. The battle that must be fought is radical hospitality, by displaying to the youth that all are sinners in need of a savior and that Christ has bled and died for them, just like he did for each youth minister.

Creating Biblical Community

As examined previously in the paper, social support is a dire need for LGBTQ+ students, especially those who have been isolated from both their family and friends. A few principles for creating biblical community regarding LGBTQ+ teens are developed below.

Minimizing LGBTQ+ Hate

If the reader of this paper is a youth minister, then they already can speculate or have experienced the outcome that comes with middle and high school students interacting with sexual and gender minority students. Anyone who has been around youth ministry long enough, especially male students, does not have to research to know that there is plenty of bullying to go

⁴⁰ n.d. “Stances of Faiths on LGBTQ Issues: Southern Baptist Convention.” Human Rights Campaign. <https://www.hrc.org/resources/stances-of-faiths-on-lgbt-issues-southern-baptist-convention>.

around many youth groups. When it comes to gender and sexual minority students, especially those who have already come out, they can be at risk of harmful comments from students and even group leaders. One way to minimize this heart is by setting the expectation among leaders and students that anyone should be able to confess whatever they are struggling with without feeling the backlash or laughter of other students. Whether it be a pornography addiction, anxiety, or same-sex attraction, students must be able to have a safe experience where they can speak to others about their problems without being ridiculed. This transitions into the next suggestion, training small group leaders.

Listening (A Coming Out Conversation)

The author suggests a simple two-step process for training small group leaders surrounding LGBTQ+ students: humility and hospitality. While this paper is aimed at the average American church, the author recognizes that not every church has the blessing of small group leaders or youth volunteers. It could just be you and ten to twenty students, in that case, you don't have to train small group leaders. However, there are a few different aspects that must be addressed in LGBTQ+-related training. Consider presenting a hypothetical scenario in which a student confesses same-sex attraction. Are the small group leaders in your church prepared to give that student what they need at the moment, whether it be comfort, truth, or just someone to listen? The first rule of confession in youth ministry should be to listen. Rather than jumping the gun by calling a 7th grader a sinner and telling them they are going to hell, a safe first step would be to address the student's heart in a caring and merciful way. This answer could look many different ways, but one response could sound like "Thank you so much for telling me what you have been dealing with. I want you to know that you are welcome here, and we are going to figure this out together." The aim and priority of the church should be to come alongside

students wherever they are in their journey and aid them with biblical truth. I would make the argument that if the student has identified themselves as homosexual or transgender, then nothing from that first conversation should label the sin as sin, because it is only going to further isolate the student. We must keep in mind that having your sins pointed out wounds pride. Now imagine that sin is your entire identity. Leave the hellfire and brimstone conviction out of the first conversation, especially if the church wants to make a true difference in their walk with Christ. Instead, if the student is not a Christian, offer them the gospel. When the conversation feels right, a key piece could be “Jesus loves you more than anyone else, more than me, more than your parents, or your friends. And he paid a price we could not pay to make up for where we fall short. And, he holds the answers more than you know.”

Invitation and Events

However, if that student either is a Christian or decides to follow Jesus, the reality of the conversation is that not every student who struggles with SSA or gender dysphoria will get rid of those feelings throughout their lifetime. The second aspect of this training requires mentorship. Odds are, if a student is confiding in the leader or group about their struggles, then the leader is already doing this well. In that case, the leader simply needs to continue what they are doing. But, if the student is newer to the ministry or religion, and has already come out to their friends, then the process could change. In this case, the church needs to make a greater effort to be hospitable. Instead of just sharing the gospel right away, create a safe space for the gospel relationships to be fostered. One group of researchers concludes “Ministering experiences should

focus on developing friendships and helping carry pain instead of holding hidden agendas to change individuals or to increase Church membership.”⁴¹

Relationships are best fostered through hospitality. Take Jesus for example. Jesus reached out to sinners through meals. He sat at the table with a man whose chosen identity caused him to be an outcast. Zacchaeus was hated by the people because he was a tax collector. Yet Christ himself knew that Zacchaeus’ identity was not enough to not fellowship with him. Christ displayed true humility and hospitality, and so should we. Henri Nouwen states,

In our world full of strangers, estranged from their own past, culture and country, from their neighbors, friends and family, from their deepest self and their God, we witness a painful search for a hospitable place *where life can be lived without fear* and where community can be found... it is possible for men and women and obligatory for Christians to offer an open and hospitable space where strangers can cast off their strangeness and become our fellow human beings.⁴²

As mentioned, it is intimidating for any student to come to a youth group, overwhelmed by the desire to fit in and make friends. Let alone a student who comes to youth group and feels like there is a deep-rooted feeling and emotion rooted within them that can cause them to be an outcast not only in their homes and their schools, but also at the church. There is a deep desire for a place “where life can be lived without fear.” Fear of judgment, fear of isolation, fear of missing out, or just plain anxiety. Small group leaders and other students must seek to combat

⁴¹ Sarah M. Coyne et al. (2023). “‘I’ll Walk with You’: LGBTQ+ Individuals and Religious Belonging.”

⁴² Nouwen, Henri J.M. *Reaching out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life*. Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1986. 66

this by inviting LGBTQ+ students in and just be in relationship with them. Invite the outsiders to youth group on Sunday nights, to weekend retreats

Safety

A safe space is what LGBTQ+ youth need, but this can look a few different ways when it comes to interaction with kids and practicality. The approach I suggest is to be as accommodating to LGBTQ+ youth to reach them with the gospel. When it comes to matters concerning making transgender kids feel welcome, there are some tough questions to address. Does an AMAB trans woman get to participate in the girls' small group? Does an AFAB trans man get to sleep in the guys' cabin on their retreat? Does the gay girl sleep in a separate room at their in-home weekend retreat than the rest of the sophomore girls?

The solution to a lot of these answers is to simply talk to the more mature Christians in your youth group. Ask if they are willing to go the extra mile and reach out to the students who do not conform to the normal standards of the youth group. Odds are, they will be happy to bunk with the student or be in a small group with them along with another mature leader. However, as mentioned earlier, this must be discussed with the parents of the mature child. Tread lightly here and approach the situation with a heart of humility and understanding. Once again, a key to life change in the church is relationship. Leverage what God is already doing in his ministry to aid other students. A note must be made regarding the safety and health of heterosexual or gender-conforming students. The approach of allowing transgender or SSA students into small groups where others are requires a conversation with these students and possibly their parents. Others in the church are likely to have problems with the way LGBTQ+ students are approached and welcomed into the ministry. It is the shepherd's job to protect the sheep, and he must make sure

his sheep are taken care of. These decisions should not be made by the youth minister alone but with the support of other staff and the church body.

Discussion

In light of the role media plays in sexual socialization, as well as the need for LGBTQ+ students to find community, the church must do its best to step into the lives of students and fill the gaps that have been presented. The love and acceptance that LGBTQ+ students find in social media groups should be exceeded by what they discover at the church. Students should discover through graceful truth that they are not just defined by their sexual or gender identity. Instead, they are defined by God's love and the abundance of wealth and life that Scripture, Christ, and the Holy Spirit have to offer them. They cannot experience this if the church is not first willing to set aside their desire to be comfortable and put their need for perfection below the need for relationships with outsiders.

Conclusion

While the gap between the church and LGBTQ+ teens is closing because of influential persons like Butterfield, Perry, and Sprinkle, the church still has much work to do, especially when it comes to individual congregations. As examined, LGBTQ+ adolescents have some of the worst mental health conditions, as well as the greatest need for community and supporting families. The church must function as a loving body that is willing to call sin for what it is, but not willing to allow the Enemy to further the divide between the church and students who are seeking help.

Rosaria Butterfield says this: “Being a lesbian wasn’t my biggest sin, being an unbeliever was.”⁴³ Butterfield, a former lesbian, saved from a life of sin by Christ, lays one of the most crucial principles Christians must keep in mind when dealing with sin. Heterosexuality or gender conformity is not the goal of the believers' interactions with gender and sexual minority youth, a relationship with Christ is. And even further, relationship, in general, must be the goal because sinners can see right through Christians trying to play savior. The relatedness of God is the same relatedness that defines our being. Within a relationship is where laughter is shared, wisdom is gained, walls come down, and lives are changed because the gospel thrives in relationship.

The church can no longer be comfortable with allowing their lack of knowledge to contribute to the hurt of LGBTQ+ members. It is time that youth ministers are informed of how to come alongside their students and create a space for them to wrestle with their sexuality and gender identity, as well as questions about where the church stands on their identity. The goal cannot be to make gay teens straight or make teens conform to their biological sex. Instead, the goal must be to foster relationships with sinners, so that the Spirit can create real change in their lives. Training small group leaders in the areas discussed above is one of the most effective ways to interact in healthy ways with LGBTQ+ students. Individual congregations and their staff must know where they stand theologically and practically surrounding the LGBTQ+ lifestyle. It is time the church closed the gap between religiosity and LGBTQ+ youth.

⁴³ Rosaria Butterfield. “What Christians Don’t Get about LGBT Folks.” *YouTube*. The Gospel Coalition, November 4, 2015. Last modified November 4, 2015. Accessed October 6, 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c0mw52P9UyU>.

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Appendix

For those who are struggling with their sexuality and gender identity, I recommend a few resources as the topic pertains to Christianity

Books

- *Gay Girl, Good God* by Jackie Hill Perry
- *Is God Anti-Gay?* by Sam Allberry
- *Embodied* by Preston Sprinkle
- *Openness Unhindered* by Rosaria Butterfield

Online Resources

- Theology in the Raw
- The Center for Faith, Sexuality, and Gender (<https://www.centerforfaith.com/what-we-do>)
- Christian Sexuality (<https://christian-sexuality.com/about/>)
- Out of Egypt Ministries (<https://outofegyptministries.org/media/>)

*Note on the LDS church:

While many practical implications can be drawn from the LDS studies, their theology was not discussed in this project. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the theology of the LDS church in depth. While the author of this paper disagrees with some of the theology regarding the church, (including but not limited to: the Book of Mormon, ongoing revelation, and the deity of Christ) this paper is not aimed at proving the LDS church wrong. LDS researchers and missionaries have done much to close the gap between the church and LGBTQ+ adolescents, and for that Protestants must strive and seek to follow after. There is much to learn from LDS members and their mission-focused mindset.