

Ministry to Transgender Teenagers (Part Two): Providing Pastoral Care, Support, and Advocacy to Trans Youth

Arthur David Canales

Marian University, Indianapolis, USA

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Abstract

This article considers the ministry and pastoral care to transgender teenagers. It begins by offering a brief introduction and then concentrates on the ways or methods for providing pastoral care, support, and advocacy to transgender teenagers. The article suggests a pastoral framework for those in pastoral positions who work with adolescents to minister appropriately and competently to this overlooked sexual minority group and motivate them with a sense of urgency to serve this population more effectively.

Keywords

Transgender, teenagers, pastoral care, youth ministry

Introduction

The ultimate evil is not suffering... which is meted out to those who are God's children. The ultimate evil of oppression... is when it succeeds in making a child of God begin to doubt that he or she is a child of God. (Tutu, 1991, p. 131)

As Archbishop Desmond Tutu warns in the epigraph, if Christianity is not careful, it might be responsible for perpetuating the misperception that transgender teenagers are not children of God just because of their sexual identity. Such a mistake would be a travesty. This article hopes to share some insights regarding pastoral methods for those who work with young people and who specifically want to provide pastoral care to and ministry with transgender teenagers.

Providing Pastoral Care, Support, and Advocacy

The proper stance for Christian communities to all God's people is one of openness and affirmation, because of the theological reality of *imago Dei*.¹ As stated in part one of this two-part article, *imago Dei* refers to all people being created in the image and likeness of God no matter if they are, Black or White, female or male, poor or rich, born

below the equator or above the equator, homosexual or heterosexual, or transgender or cisgender. Christian communities would be wise to begin to think about appropriate ways to minister to trans youth and begin to provide proper pastoral care, support, and advocacy to this particular sexual and gender minority group. For the parameters of this article, I have scaffolded these three categories from easiest to difficult, that is, pastoral care should be the easiest for Christian communities to integrate into pastoral practice, while advocacy would be more difficult for congregations to implement; of course, it may also depend on the personality and demeanor of the church-community.

Pastoral Care

Competent pastoral care (and counseling) is steeped in care, compassion, and empathy of the trans person—adolescent or adult. There are two areas of pastoral care that merit consideration for those working with and ministering to transgender teenagers: (a) welcoming the trans youth; and (b) utilizing a pastoral care checklist with trans youth.

Corresponding author:

Arthur David Canales, Marian University, 122 Oldenburg Hall, 3200 Cold Springs Road, Indianapolis, IN 46222, USA.

Email: acanales@marian.edu

Welcoming the Trans Youth into our Communities. The first step for any Christian church, organization, or ministry would be to acknowledge that transgender teenagers exist, and that it is an acceptable gender expression and a satisfactory way of living (Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006, p. 125). Second, welcoming churches, youth ministries, and para-youth ministry organizations would be pastorally sensible to adopt a posture of acceptance, openness, and affirming the human dignity of each and every person who walks through the doors, promoting an ethic of empathy and compassion for all (Canales & Sherman, 2016, p. 46). Third, catechize the entire congregation, but especially the youth ministry, about the transgender issues and their struggles as sexual minorities in society. Fourth, and this is a bit risky (for a traditional, heterosexual, and cisgender² congregation), preach on transgender topics at Sunday worship, again, from a loving and genuine pastoral position, embracing the person created in *imago Dei*. Fifth, offer discipleship programs for sexual and gender minorities in church to help enhance their faith life and increase their spirituality—all Christians can benefit from further growing in Christ. Sixth, it might be wise if adult members of Christian congregations were catechized and informed about society's gender constructs and the way those concepts contribute to trans youth vulnerability and devalue the spiritual, emotional, physical, and social well-being of transgender teenagers (Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006, p. 126). Seventh, and this addresses a larger systemic problem that exists, namely, Christians' negative attitudes and theological convictions that adults, have toward trans youth. Negative attitudes and theological convictions play a role in harming transgender teenagers. Evangelical and intersex scholar Megan K. DeFranza notes that communities of faith would be wise to reflect *imago Christi* in their attitudes, which replicates love, goodness, and kindness (DeFranza, 2015, p. 282). DeFranza states, "*Imago Christi* requires not only just dealings and the recordings of societal oppressions, but also the cultivation of personal holiness, a life of worship, prayer, humility, kindness, generosity, and other virtues. . . ." (DeFranza, 2015, p. 282). In other words, to help eradicate larger systemic issues that exist towards trans youth, Christian communities should focus on gospel values and become *imago Christi*.

Pastoral theologian and transgender advocate Justin E. Tanis recommends a good list for those communities which genuinely want to welcome transgender people into their congregation: (a) offer genuine hospitality; (b) provide non-discrimination policies and attitudes; (c) demonstrate appropriate and inclusive language; (d) create a visible and audible presence of transgender people and programs; (e) establish provisions of meaningful rituals to mark changes in people's lives; (f) offer outreach to transgender groups and individuals; (g) provide opportunities for the congregation to learn accurately about transgender issues; and (h) build restrooms that the gender-variant can access (Tanis,

2003, p. 122). This list is a good guide for communities to get started and to maintain a welcoming and affirming disposition for trans people.

Presbyterian minister James R. Oraker and small group process leader Janis Hahn suggest that designing a program of dialogue might be the path of least resistance for helping Christian communities and ministries to discuss sexual minorities. They offer this brief template as a welcoming model for sexual minorities, which can be used for pastoral care and ministry with transgender teenagers: (a) direct dialogue, an initial and open discussion about trans youth, which includes inviting trans young people to the table of discussion; (b) process, which moves beyond dialogue and examines the strengths and limitations of the issue—in this case—engaging trans youth within the church and inviting and calling (as distinct from texting or e-mailing) trans young people to the ministry; (c) small groups, which allows for voices to be heard, stories to be shared, and mutual understanding and discovery about the one person's life and journey; (d) establish an event, such as days of reflection, retreat, or conference, and work with the larger community toward that end; and (e) an action plan, which is planning, organizing, and implementing the desired ministry event and bring it to completion (Oraker & Hahn, 2009, pp. 122–123). These are just a few ways that Christian congregations, organizations, and ministries can welcome transgender teenagers.

A Pastoral Care Checklist for Trans Youth. Pastoral care is a relationship and it is primarily concerned with human benevolence, empathy, and compassion. Technically, there are no "official" set standards for pastoral care, but some basic competencies for pastoral care are: empowering; liberating; listening; healing; sustaining; guiding; reconciling; and nurturing a person toward God, self, or the other. Queer author and advocate David J. Kundtz and sexual minority scholar Bernard S. Schlager (2007) give a checklist for pastoral caregivers who serve sexual and gender minorities. I use their checklist, with minor alterations, in hopes that it might serve as a rudimentary rubric for pastoral ministers who work with transgender teenagers.

1. Examine your own assumptions—assume that:
 - (a) being trans may *not* be the issue that brings the adolescent to seek pastoral care;
 - (b) a young person may *not* wish to explore their sexual identity;
 - (c) because of social pressure and fear, sometimes trans youth avoid identifying themselves as transgender; and
 - (d) nothing is surprising about transgender behavior (Kundtz & Schlager, 2007, p. 81).
2. Be informed about:
 - (a) advocacy programs, help lines, books, web pages, films, and teaching-videos;

- (b) pastoral counselors, spiritual directors, and psychologists who work with trans people;
 - (c) the doctrines and practices of various Christian denominations regarding transgender issues; and
 - (d) the words and terms you use describing and referring to transgenderism and transsexuality (Kundtz & Schlager, 2007, p. 82).
3. Be self-aware of:
- (a) your own attitudes and responses, regardless of your own sexual orientation;
 - (b) your own limitations concerning your scope of pastoral care;
 - (c) your own feelings toward the person receiving your pastoral care; and
 - (d) all the boundary issues in your pastoral care relationship (Kundtz & Schlager, 2007, p. 82).
4. Respect your transgender care-receiver's:
- (a) orientation, identity, personal integrity, cultural assumptions, and life style;
 - (b) privacy by not asking inappropriate medical questions pertaining to surgery;
 - (c) personal pain, suffering, and continual struggle with their internal conflicts; and
 - (d) individual capabilities to find their own pastoral solutions (Kundtz & Schlager, 2007, p. 83).

Providing pastoral care to trans youth may not come easy for most people who work with adolescents. The natural inclination is to give advice, which is not always recommended or needed; however, the above checklist is a helpful rubric for those who truly want to empower trans youth through pastoral care.

Support

What does *support* look like? Support, like advocacy, comes in a myriad of ways. First and foremost, the cultivating of new conversations must take place within our churches and ministries. Baptist pastoral theologian Cody J. Sanders invites his readers to contribute to the "lagging literature" in our pastoral and practical fields concerning transgender people and issues. Sanders states, "We have failed to give equally serious and sustained attention to the concerns of trans people" (Sanders, 2016, p. 1). Cultivating a culture for transgender teenagers to flourish would be ideal, but creating a climate that does not breed fear, intimidation, harassment and one that fosters a spirit of wellness, openness, affirmation, and integrity would be wonderful. Parents, pastors, and youth ministers will all have to be unified on this front to cultivate a culture of trans awareness and openness.

Second and simultaneously, as pastoral ministers, support for transgender teenagers often comes by way of helping parents who struggle with their teens' gender and sexuality. Supportive parents are on this trans journey with

their teens.³ In addition, teenagers require reassurance from parents and pastoral ministers because there is a large gender spectrum and adolescents are often not aware of the existence of non-binary and non-conforming identities (Brill & Kenny, 2016, p. 170). According to gender diversity experts Stephanie Brill and Lisa Kenny, "Some teens struggle with claiming their gender identity because they think that all transgender and non-binary people are gay or lesbian, and they do not feel that they are gay or lesbian" (Brill & Kenny, 2016, p. 171). Explaining to adolescents that gender and sexuality are two distinct facets of their self is helpful for transgender teenagers as they embark on their journey of self-discovery. Furthermore, it may be worthwhile to help the trans young people to understand that being transgender or non-binary is about a person's individual gender identity; while sexual orientation is about to whom the young person is sexually attracted. Therefore, it is perfectly reasonable for different transgender teenagers to claim any gender because they are still evolving in their non-binary gender (Brill & Kenny, 2016, p. 171).

Third, transgender teenagers often experience various forms of discomfort. Understanding discomfort will be a great asset to their overall emotional health and spiritual wellbeing. Every trans adolescent figures out differently and *comes out* in their own way and in their own time. Coming out is a transition period; the time that a young person decides to disclose her/his sexual orientation and/or gender identity (Huegel, 2011, p. 201). Coming out is part of the transgender maturation process and a positive step in cultivating personal growth, gaining self-esteem, and becoming self-actualized. When trans youth do come out, sometimes there are specific areas of discomfort or a more global sense of unrest. Transgender teenagers may experience a variety of discomforts: *gender role discomfort* (feeling like their assumed gender is not a good fit for their gender identity and their gender presentation); *gender expression discomfort* (feeling awkward or strange in traditional gender conforming clothes); *body/self-image discomfort* (feeling of discomfort with their body beyond the usual adolescent feelings); *gender identity discomfort* (uncomfortable with the terms *cisgender* and *transgender*); *pronoun discomfort* (feeling that pronouns make a difference; some youth are more comfortable using one pronoun over another to describe themselves); and *name discomfort* (feelings of dissatisfaction with their baptismal/given name) (Brill & Kenny, 2016, pp. 175–184). One teen explains her gender role discomfort: "I am suffocating by the expectations everyone has for me. It seems like every sentence begins with 'Girls aren't supposed to' . . . But I'll never be a girl in the way they want me to be" (Brill & Kenny, 2016, p. 179). This youth's statement calls for parents and pastoral workers to be attuned and sensitive to the young person's issues, but also to recognize that not every trans person's issues are the same. Prudent parents and pastoral workers will be

ready to provide practical guidance for their transgender teenagers. Practical guidance may come in the form of listening, asking probing questions, and offering compassion and empathy.

Fourth, support comprises inviting parents and families of trans youth into the church. This process is more akin to “inviting-in” as distinct from a “coming-out” event. Pastorally, trans youth need help with the inviting-in process; it requires young people to muster-up a great deal of honesty and courage, which may need facilitation from a trusted adult. During the inviting-in process, transgender teenagers should experience God’s engagement and love through a non-judgmental Christian community. Sanders states,

The most vital thing to remember in the process of working with the families of [trans] youth is this: in the process of ‘inviting family in,’ the [trans] youth are always the hosts—deciding *who* to invite in, and *when*, *how quickly*, and with what *levels of access* to the sacred spaces of their hearts and souls. (Sanders, 2017, p. 67)

This process allows for questions to arise, misconceptions to be heard, and feelings to be shared in a safe environment. The inviting-in method also allows for six supportive scenarios for churches to help trans youth and their families: (a) coping with initial family rejection; (b) addressing conflict between parents and among families; (c) helping shift family narratives from negative to positive; (d) providing hurting youth with family support; (e) creating supportive communities for parents and families; and (f) inviting new family members into the process (Sanders, 2017, pp. 69–79). The “inviting-in” method is one of dialogue and support that allows for family narratives to find meaning and to work through any disappointment, bitterness, and shame, but it also creates a safe space for the trans adolescent to be heard and feel invited. Sometimes this coming-out/inviting-in process is affectionately called *coming home*. Coming home refers to an experience of the transgender teenager fully embracing her/his identity: it is a coming home to themselves; a coming home to their family, perhaps for the very first time; and a coming-home to God too. When done successfully, most transgender young people state that coming out is more akin to a coming-home party—a fiesta of choice food and drinks and friends and family gathered around enjoying themselves. One young person noted, “My coming out was more a coming home to God: You made me this way, you love me this way. I am lovable. And I will find love in my life” (Graham, 2009, p. 115).

Support for transgender teenagers comes in different forms and it is important for parents and pastoral ministers to be ready and willing to help and support these young people with their unique life and identity situations. Beyond offering practical guidance, parents and pastoral workers

can “move the needle” even farther by advocating for transgender teenagers; this for most congregations, is the hardest hurdle to overcome.

Advocacy

There are many forms of advocacy that Christian parents, ministers, and pastors can employ for transgender teenagers. A few rudimentary forms of advocacy that will be easy to implement for Christian parents and congregations are providing role models, mentoring, and social activism. All three of these forms of advocacy are part of a larger matrix of Christian social justice.

Adult role models. The importance of adult role models for transgender teenagers cannot be over-stated. Baptist practical theologian Amy Jacober notes that adult role models help teenagers to shape their worldview and remove the social disconnect between adults and adolescents (Jacobser, 2011, pp. 88–89). Finding a role model for trans youth should not be a problem; role models come in all shapes and sizes, from all walks of life, and from various Christian denominations. Adult role models can be a powerful ally for young people. Ideally, a trans youth would be with a trans adult role model. Being a role model is a relatively easy venture because it may be a private activity that occurs within one’s own families and/or in a person’s local communities (Riggle & Rostosky, 2013, p. 113). Many transgender teenagers would be wise to seek role models from their own extended families: aunts, uncles, and cousins who can be a little more impartial than their own parents (Riggle & Rostosky, 2013, p. 113). Trans youth can also find adult role models in the larger community as well, such as coaches, teachers, and other working professionals they might know. There is nothing ethically wrong with a trans youth experiencing cisgender role models, but there might be more in common with and to learn from a trans role model; however, it would be best if the role model was also trans. The ultimate purpose of finding a good role model for transgender teenagers is so that they can begin to adopt some of their insights, habits, and life practices.

Mentoring. Distinct from role models is mentoring. Mentoring is typically entering into a more formal process between two people. Mentoring is an active process of cultivation and supervision of the personal growth and development of someone else. According to gender diversity scholar Ellen D. B. Riggle and psychologist Sharon S. Rostosky, “Perhaps one of the biggest needs in the community is mentoring for [Transgender] adolescents and young adults as they come-out and transition into their adult lives” (Riggle & Rostosky, 2013, p. 111). Transgender teenagers, like all adolescents, would benefit greatly from adult mentors, those inside and outside the trans community. Some of the common elements for being a good mentor

for transgender teenagers are: (a) be open to becoming a trans ally; (b) be available to meet regularly; (c) be a good listener; (d) be able to engage in meaningful conversations; and (e) be empathetic and compassionate (Brill & Kenny, 2016, pp. 162–165).

Mentoring transgender teenagers also involves affectionate orientation towards young people. Presbyterian pastoral theologian Carrie Doebling maintains that hearing a youth's personal narrative is an essential part of mentoring and pastoral care.

Stories allow [youth] to lament with each other—express anger and question all they know about life—without imposing meanings prematurely.... When pastoral care is experienced as narrative it becomes more relational and communal. (Doebling, 2015, p. xv)

Part of mentoring is listening intently to stories, which helps trans youth to ask about meaning-making of their lives, introspection about their gender identity, and understanding preferences and hopes for their future.

Sanders states that there are four essential areas that heterosexual and cisgender ministers and pastoral care givers may want to provide to transgender teenagers in mentoring relationships: (a) asking inviting and personal questions to young people, even if you might be uncomfortable with the answers; (b) inviting personal stories from young people so they can share their journey, hopes, and fears; (c) talking openly about sex and sexuality with a non-judgmental attitude; and (d) helping young people reflect theologically on their experiences of being trans (Sanders, 2017, pp. 86–91).

As a trans ally and mentor, I have a three-prong area of focus with my mentees: (a) pastoral counseling; (b) spiritual direction; and (c) vocational guidance. This three-prong approach allows me to work through their personal and familiar issues, discuss their faith life or spiritual life, and help them to discern the direction of their career and vocation. All of the above mentoring techniques will help an adult mentor to become a better and more affective mentor with the transgender teenage mentee.

Social activism. The third level of advocacy is social activism. This can be a scary term for some Christians, but it need not be, and activism has lots of leeway. Catholic moral theologians Jozef D. Zalot and Benedict Guevin note that, social activism is part of social justice work, which seeks fair and equal treatment of all human beings in important social, economic, political, and sexual issues (Zalot & Guevin, 2011, p. 47). Social justice is the cherished principle that finds its footing in the bedrock of sacred Scripture and Christian doctrines (Zalot & Guevin, 2011, pp. 48–51). Social activism towards transgender teenagers begins with treating trans youth with dignity, respect, empathy, and compassion, from both adolescents and

adults alike, because transgender teenagers are created as *imago Dei*. In the transgender community, social activism may be simply attending a transgender-awareness meeting or being part of a local conversation that sparks local grassroots efforts. Or, social activism could do something larger that advocates for transgender rights and moves community, state, and federal legislation and becomes a catalyst to support large-scale social change. For example, transgender and non-binary teenagers not being able to use public bathrooms in their schools or businesses. Transgender and non-binary teenagers, who do not identify fully as either male or female, do not feel comfortable using either the women's or the men's restrooms, and might feel unsafe, because others may verbally harass them or even physically attack them (National Center for Transgender Equality, 2016). Transgender and non-binary teenagers should be able to use public restrooms that *they* feel the safest and most comfortable using.

Whether it is being a role model, mentor, or social activist, transgender teenagers will probably need all three forms of support. Whichever form of advocacy one chooses to be a part of, doing *something* is the most important part of advocacy. As one Tennessee transgender male notes, "I have learned to fight for right instead of just being a victim" (Riggle & Rostovsky, 2013, p. 123). Christian congregations are acting, hospitable, affirming, and prophetic when they choose advocacy for transgender teenagers.

Providing competent and proficient pastoral care, support, and advocacy to transgender teenagers will also require development of appropriate pastoral strategies for Christian youth workers to employ.

Conclusion

Transgender teenage issues are complex. Nevertheless, transgender youth are found in nearly every Christian community, even though it might not be evident. Christian congregations are called to work towards inclusiveness. This article has given parents, pastors, and youth ministers a few tools to work toward that inclusiveness and to further enhance their ministries with transgender teenagers by examining three areas: pastoral care; support; and advocacy. It is time that Christian denominations begin to reflect on the ways to help transgender teenagers. Parents especially, but also pastors, directors of Christian education programs, youth ministers, coaches, and all people of good will who work with adolescents have a tremendous responsibility to ensure that this generation of transgender teenagers stops becoming targets of oppression and condemnation and start to be understood and seen as authentic individuals whose non-conforming gender can be respected and admired. I pray that our Christian churches can begin to minister more openly and effectively to all transgender people, but especially trans youth.

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Notes

1. Megan K. DeFranza does a great job of addressing the principle of *imago Dei* from various Christian perspectives in her book *Sex difference in Christian theology: Male, female, and intersex in the image of God* (2015, Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company). For DeFranza *imago Dei* needs to be liberated from a "normal," two-sex, binary model of gender identity (DeFranza, 2015, p. 23) as well from a White, middle-class, evangelical, Roman Catholic, heterosexual, virgin-until-married, cisgender, female and male for doing theology (DeFranza, 2015, p. xv).
2. Cisgender is a term used today to distinguish from transgender and to signify that a person's psychological and emotional experience of gender identity is congruent with their biological sex (Yarhouse, 2015, p. 20). Therefore, it is not uncommon to hear someone from the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ) community state "I am a female, bi, who is cisgender" or an LGBTQ-ally or advocate say, "I am a male, straight, and cisgender."
3. There are several resources which parents can avail themselves of to help the process of adjusting to their transgender teenager's gender identity. Moreover, these sources can also help to alleviate some of the common instinctive reactions that parents might experience. Here are a few of my favorites:
 - (a) Stephanie Brill and Lisa Kenny. (2016). *The transgender teen: A handbook for parents and professionals supporting transgender and non-binary teens*. Jersey City, NJ: Cleis Press. This is a great resource and it is totally focused on helping parents understand transgender complexities and to help their teenage son or daughter with their gender identity.
 - (b) Ellen D. B. Riggle and Sharon S. Rostosky. (2013). *A positive view of LGBTQ: Embracing identity and cultivating well-being*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield. This book is written with emerging adults and young adults in mind who are looking inward, and are reflecting on themselves; however, the book is a good resource for parents and pastors as well.
 - (c) Kelly Huegel (2011). *GLBTQ: The survival guide for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and questioning teens*. Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit Publishing. This is a good book for teenagers to help them understand their struggles with sexual and gender identity, but equally good for parents to read from a young person's perspective.

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Arthur David Canales is an associate professor of Pastoral Theology & Ministry. He is considered one of the foremost Catholic adolescent ministry scholars and educators in the United States. He has written approximately 40 pastoral and catechetical essays for various magazines and newspapers. He has written over 30 scholarly, peer-reviewed articles. He has authored four books including *Models & Methods for Youth & Young Adult Ministry* (Cascade, 2018). He is currently writing a book on *Pastoral Care to and Ministry with LGBTQ Youth & Young Adults*. He is a member of several professional organizations including American Association of Pastoral Counselors.

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