

MAKING YOUR CONGREGATION TRANSGENDER FRIENDLY

“HUMANKIND WAS CREATED IN GOD’S OWN IMAGE...” (GENESIS 1:27)

Institute for Welcoming Resources

WHAT DOES “TRANSGENDER” MEAN?

“Transgender” and “trans” are broad terms. They can include anyone who knows themselves to be a gender that is different than the gender they were assigned at birth. For example, a person may have been raised as a boy, but now see herself as completely female.

Other trans people may have an alternate gender identity that is neither male nor female, and for some people their gender identity may vary at different points in their lives. Some transgender people modify their bodies through medical means, and some do not.

WHAT’S AT STAKE?

Transphobia, the fear of gender variance in society, impacts all parts of life. Children who do not conform to conventional gender expectations often experience physical, verbal, and sexual abuse at home and at school. As a result, transgender youth are much more likely to drop out of school, be disowned by their families, or commit suicide. Transgender adults face discrimination in employment, healthcare, and social services.

Unfortunately, the Christian community is equally impacted by transphobia. As a result, many trans and gender nonconforming individuals feel unwelcome in churches and other Christian institutions, and cannot access spiritual care, social support, and Christian community life.

HOW TO MAKE YOUR CONGREGATION MORE TRANS-FRIENDLY

Congregations and other Christian organizations are making changes and developing programming to educate members about transgender issues. The following are some examples of steps that institutions have taken to become more inclusive and welcoming. As you implement changes, make sure to work with and support the leadership of transgender people themselves whenever possible.

EDUCATION

- Invite the whole community to a panel discussion, workshop, or other event that will offer information and open up dialogue about transgender issues.
- Offer an adult education class or sermon about gender diversity in Biblical texts or transgender issues in general.
- Advertise, host, or co-sponsor other organizations’ transgender-related programs.
- Assess the messages conveyed in your religious education or children’s programs about gender and gender roles. Make sure there is support for trans and gender- nonconforming children and parents.

FACILITIES

Create a non-gender-specific restroom that is available to everyone. If you already have a single-stall restroom in your building, this can be easily accomplished by covering the “Men” or “Women” sign with an “All-Gender Restroom” sign. This applies to temporary, shared or rental facilities also.

In buildings where a single-stall restroom does not already exist, it may be more complicated to create restroom options that will make all members of your community feel comfortable. However, doing this work sends a very important message about the accessibility of your community. Many transgender people decide where they will go based upon whether there is a trans-friendly restroom or not.

LANGUAGE

Let people know that you are trans-inclusive by using welcoming language. This is very important. In newsletters, event announcements, sermons etc., instead of saying “this event welcomes men and women,” try “all genders welcome”; rather than talking about “both men and women,” try “people of all genders.” Saying that your community welcomes “everyone” is not enough. Research shows that transgender, as well as gay, lesbian, and bisexual people often assume that the word “everyone” does not include them.

OUTREACH

Create an outreach plan that includes the changes your community is making. Remember that the world at large is not very welcoming to transgender people. Therefore, trans people often assume that they are not welcome or included in your community, unless it is stated otherwise. Publicize the trans-inclusive steps that your community has taken, as well as the programs that you are planning. This lets trans people know that your community cares about being an affirming place for them.

POLICY

Include “gender identity” and “gender expression” in your organization’s nondiscrimination and anti-harassment policy.

POLITICAL & SOCIAL ACTION

Include transgender and gender diversity issues as part of your community’s social action work. Support transgender community services and advocacy organizations.

RITUAL

- Be prepared to incorporate or develop new rituals or adapt existing ones in order to be trans-inclusive. How comfortable might a trans person be marking a wedding, baptism, loss, or other life-cycle event in your congregation? How open could they be about their identity from the altar? Transgender people often experience unique life-cycle events, such as moments of gender transition or a name change. Some wish to mark these events in a Christian way, either publicly or privately.

- Listen carefully to the needs that transgender people express, and be especially sensitive around vulnerable experiences such as illness. Be open to change and try to accommodate those needs to the greatest possible extent, even if it's not the way things are "usually" done.
- Adapt liturgy so that it is more inclusive of all genders. Include non-gendered and/or multi-gendered options for people and for God in your bulletin.
- Observe the National Transgender Day of Remembrance (November 20th). This can be as simple as adding a memorial reading in your Sunday service. For more information visit: www.gender.org/remember.

WHAT DOES CHRISTIAN TRADITION SAY?

In the Bible, Deuteronomy 22:5 is the one text that speaks to anything approaching transgender. And here most biblical scholars say the prohibition against wearing the garments of the opposite sex are aimed at, either: 1. Keeping women in their place as property; or: 2. Preserving Jewish traditions by prohibiting other worship services where priest donned the garments of female deities. In either case, the rules were aimed at preserving specific social or religious norms, not aimed at transgender people. This prohibition was just one of many rules in Deuteronomy that have little relevance in today's world. In fact, many would say these laws of the Old Testament were made void by Christ's exhortation to 'Love God and to love each other as you would love yourself. And then there is Paul's proclamation: "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

ASKING QUESTIONS

The first question to ask about someone else's gender is: "Do I really need to know?" In most situations, it is not necessary to know anything about a person's gender in order to include and welcome them. For example, if someone walks into a worship service and their gender is unclear, there is rarely any reason to ask or comment on this. The person is there to pray and be in community.

If you decide that you do need to understand more about someone else's gender, appropriate and respectful questions include: "What pronoun do you prefer?" or "Is there anything I/we/the community can do to make this a more comfortable place?" It is inappropriate to ask about transgender people's bodies or medical history.

MORE INFORMATION & RESOURCES

Institute for Welcoming Resources

www.WelcomingResources.org

National Gay & Lesbian Task Force

www.TheTaskForce.org

Sylvia Riviera Law Project

www.srlp.org

Intersex Society of North America www.isna.org

National Center for Transgender Equality

www.nctequality.org

For basic definitions of many terms associated with trans identity, as well as community information, and tips for friends and allies, visit: web.mit.edu/trans/

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