

*A Brief Guide to Ministry
with LGBTQIA Youth*

CODY J. SANDERS

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To my niece, Rylee—a living sign of hope.

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Introduction and Terminology

Many lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (or questioning), intersex, and asexual (LGBTQIA) youth now grow up in a very different religious context than did LGBTQIA people just a few years ago. Over the course of the past few decades, numerous congregations and some of the largest mainline denominations in the U.S. and Canada have progressively opened their doors to the full acceptance, inclusion, and affirmation of LGBTQIA people. How does an affirming stance toward LGBTQIA people affect the day-to-day experience of teenagers in the context of the local congregation? In what ways can a church's youth ministry have a life-giving impact on the lives of LGBTQIA youth who grow up seeking to live fully into the practice of their Christian faith *and* with a lesbian, gay, bisexual, or asexual sexual orientation or transgender, intersex, or genderqueer gender identity? How can a youth minister or youth ministry volunteer embrace, nurture, and provide skillful care for LGBTQIA youth in a congregation or community? These are the questions I address in this brief text, which is more of a "crash course" or "conversation starter" than it is a comprehensive education.

In this book, I assume a theologically and biblically *affirming* stance toward LGBTQIA people. That means that I assume from the first page that living out one's sexuality or gender identity as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, or asexual is fully congruent with living out one's identity as a Christian. While there is no shortage of

printed resources to help readers develop LGBTQIA-affirming biblical and theological perspectives, there is a real gap in the available literature when it comes to practical texts helping ministers and ministry volunteers know how best to express these LGBTQIA-affirming biblical and theological perspectives within the bustling commotion of a lively, energetic, reflective ministry with youth.

For the purposes of this book, I aim to address concerns related to LGBTQIA “youth,” which I am defining as youth between the pre-teen years and age twenty-one or so. Many of the examples and much of the discussion that follow will address youth who are middle-school and high-school aged, but the material contained in the book is also applicable for college-aged LGBTQIA people as well.

A GLOSSARY OF TERMS: SOME WORDS YOU *SHOULD* USE AND OTHERS YOU *SHOULDN'T*

The terminology surrounding sexuality and gender identity can be quite confusing. Even the acronyms commonly used for grouping sexual orientations and gender identities now seem like a bowl of alphabet soup spilling over the brim. Commonly, *LGBT* (or *GLBT*) has been used to denote “lesbian,” “gay,” “bisexual,” and “transgender” persons. *Q* is often added to denote people who identify as either “queer” or “questioning” (of one’s gender identity or sexual orientation). But the acronyms keep growing as we become more and more aware of those who aren’t represented by our go-to letters.¹

While the language is admittedly complicated and confusing at times, this complexity should be quite understandable. Culturally and religiously, we are emerging from a long era of LGBTQIA invisibility during which speaking of one’s non-heterosexual sexuality and non-gender-conforming identity was, at the very least, taboo and could even make one the target of violence. As we become more comfortable talking in the open about experiences of difference and diversity in gender identity and sexuality, we start to notice our need for new language. Some experiences and identities are left out of our typical language, so we add new terms. Some words become confining and constricting, so we shift our ways of speaking about certain experiences. Words we once used with pride become adopted as words of abuse, and words once abusive are reappropriated as words of pride (e.g., the way the

term *queer* has recently been adopted as a word of unity and pride, rather than of shame and derision).

The following is a list of commonly used terms you might encounter in both popular and professional speech relating to concerns of sexual orientation and gender identity. The point of this list is not to provide you with an exhaustive glossary of sexual/gender language or to give the “right” definition of each term. New language is always being invented, and old terms go “out of style.” Definitions shift and change from context to context and even from person to person. So this glossary will get you only so far in your language skills surrounding LGBTQIA experience.

General Sexuality and Gender Terminology

affectional orientation: A term often used alongside or in place of sexual orientation to indicate that “sexual” attraction is only one factor in a person’s sense of attraction to another person. Affectional orientation highlights the emotional components and desires for connection that are an important part in a person’s sense of romantic attraction to another person. Everyone has one of these!

ally: Typically, the designation given to people who identify as “straight” and/or gender conforming but who support equality and justice for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer people. Being an ally is not an identity (like lesbian and gay); it is an *action*.

closeted: A term used to describe a person who is actively hiding one’s own sexual/affectional orientation or gender identity from others (e.g., “She is ‘in the closet’ about her lesbian identity.”)

coming out: A term used to describe a person’s process of coming to self-acceptance regarding one’s sexual orientation or gender identity and, often subsequently, making one’s sexual orientation or gender identity known to others.

gender: This term encompasses factors beyond biology in relation to the presentation of a male or female identity; factors such as emotions, attitudes, and behaviors culturally associated with a biological sex of male or female. This term differs from the term *sex*, which usually refers to the biological components (e.g., hormones, genetics, anatomy) of a male or female or intersex identity. Everyone has one of these!

gender identity: A person’s social, psychological, spiritual, and behavioral experience and expression of “gender” as male, female, both, or neither; or those for whom gender is experienced in a more fluid state not captured by the male/female binary. Everyone has one of these!

gender expression: The public cues and symbols that a person uses to communicate a gendered presentation, including such things as dress, mannerisms, behaviors, communication styles, and so on. A person’s gender expression or gender presentation may not match the person’s gender identity, as when a transgender person enacts a gender expression or presentation that is congruent with the gender assigned at birth, rather than the person’s deeply felt sense of gender identity, which may be different from the gender assigned at birth. Everyone expresses one’s gender in some way, even if it is to defy male/female gender categories!

sex: This term is typically used to describe someone’s biological gender status assigned at birth as male, female, or intersex, whereas the term *gender* usually encompasses factors beyond biology such as emotions, attitudes, and behaviors culturally associated with a biological sex of male or female. Everyone has one of these!

sex assigned at birth: This is the sex—usually male, female, or intersex—that a doctor assigns to you at birth by looking at your genitalia. Everyone gets one of these. But one’s sex assigned at birth isn’t always descriptive of how one’s gender identity will develop in life.

sexual identity: Sometimes used interchangeably with “sexual orientation,” sexual identity describes one’s self-identification in terms of sexual and affectional orientation and experience and attraction.

sexual orientation: This term describes a person’s primary attractions and desires for physical, sexual, spiritual, or emotional intimacy. Sometimes, “sexual orientation,” “affectional orientation,” and “sexual identity” are used interchangeably. Everyone has one of these!

Gender Identity and Expression Terms

agender: Term typically used by people who do not identify with any gender or gender identity. In other words, *agender* describes those who are without gender or who are gender neutral.

bigender: Term typically used by people who identify with two different genders or gender identities (typically male and female, but not

necessarily). These identities can be held simultaneously or they may shift at different times, as in the case of *genderfluid* people (see below).

cisgender: This term was created to describe the experience of people whose gender as assigned at birth matches their bodily presentation of gender and their own psychological and spiritual sense of gender identity. For example, if a person was biologically male at birth and the person's internal sense of gender as male aligns with this biological assignment, it would be appropriate to describe this person as a cisgender male. Prior to this term's creation, there was no term to use to describe the experience of people who were *not* transgender, transsexual, or intersex.

cross-dressing: A cisgender man wearing the clothing of and presenting as a woman or a cisgender woman wearing the clothing of and presenting as a man. It is *inappropriate* to use the term "cross dresser" or "cross-dressing" when referring to a transgender person who is presenting in the attire of the individual's sense of gender identity and expression. Cross-dressing is done more episodically and for a variety of purposes (e.g., for entertainment in "drag shows"), whereas transgender persons are not dressing across gender lines, but are actually presenting as the gender they experience as congruent with their deepest psychological, physical, and spiritual sense of self.

drag: Used to describe a person of one gender (e.g., a cisgender man) who presents in the clothing of another gender (e.g., wearing women's clothing). It is important to recognize that "drag," "drag queen" (a cisgender man wearing women's clothing), or "drag king" (a cisgender woman wearing men's clothing) should be used only to describe this gender presentation as it appears in a performance, typically for entertainment purposes (e.g., a "drag show"). It is *inappropriate* to describe a transgender person who is presenting in the clothing of one's gender identification as being in "drag." Performing in drag has no necessary relation to one's sexual orientation or gender identity but is, instead, a gender performance.

gender normative: The behavior and presentation of a person that ascribes to culturally assigned norms for living out male or female gender.

genderfluid: This term describes those whose gender or gender expression shifts between masculine and feminine. This shifting may occur in the ways they publicly present themselves in dress, appearance, or expression, or in the way they identify their gender to others.

genderism: In contrast to the term *transphobia* (see below), genderism is less about “fear” of trans people and, instead, points toward prejudice—both individual and societal—against trans people, and to the social experience of injustice and oppression experienced in relation to this prejudice.

genderqueer: Often a self-descriptor for people whose internal sense and external expression of gender “transgresses” or challenges or moves beyond categorizations like male and female and who live against culturally assigned norms of the male/female gender binary.

intersex: People whose physical, hormonal, or chromosomal sex characteristics at birth do not fit neatly into the categories of either male or female but are ambiguous at birth.

latinx: Instead of Latino (masculine) or Latina (femine), the “x” makes this a gender-neutral term inclusive of persons whose gender is not definable by the male/female binary (e.g., agender, non-binary, genderqueer, and genderfluid people).

nonbinary (gender): This term is descriptive of those who do not identify with the strict male/female gender binary. It may mean that they do not identify as gendered at all, as in the case of agender people (see above); that they identify with both genders, as in the case of bigender people (see above); or that they identify their gender identity as somewhere in between or beyond the male/female binary altogether.

transgender: People whose psychological and spiritual sense of gender differs from the social and cultural expectations attached to the biological/physical sex characteristics with which they were born (i.e., their “sex assigned at birth”; see above). Terms sometimes used to denote a transgender person’s experience are “male-to-female” (MTF) and “female-to-male” (FTM). It is important to note that the general preference is for use of the adjective form of *transgender* or *trans* to describe a person’s gender identity, rather than to use the term as a noun (e.g., saying, “He is a transgender man,” rather than, “He is a transgender” or “He is transgendered”). It is not preferable to use the term with an added “-ed” (“transgendered”). At the time of this writing, the general preference is shifting toward the simple term *trans* rather than *transgender*.

transition: A term used to refer to the process that a transgender or transsexual (see below) person undergoes to alter one’s birth sex to align with one’s gender identity. This may include any number of a variety of processes, including altering one’s gender expression

through choice of dress, mannerisms, behaviors, and so on; changing one's name on legal documentation; undergoing hormone therapy; and, occasionally, having sex-reassignment surgery to surgically alter one's anatomical sex characteristics. It is important to note that sex-reassignment surgery is often not a part of a transition process for a transgender person; it is only one possible step that a person may choose to take in living out one's transgender gender identity. The term *transition* is preferable over other terms like "sex change."

transphobia: The irrational fear of transgender persons.

transsexual: Refers to people who identify as the "opposite" sex to that which the person was assigned at birth. This term is sometimes used to describe people who desire to change bodily characteristics through surgical or hormonal treatments in order to achieve a closer match between bodily appearance and psychological/spiritual gender identity. This term is often implied as a subset of people within the broader transgender umbrella.

transvestite: An outdated term used to describe persons who engage in cross-dressing. This term should never be used to describe a transgender person.

two-spirit: This term is used by some Native Americans to describe intersex, transgender, or other gender-variant people for whom "male" and "female" gender identities are integrated into one person.

Sexual/Affectional Orientation Terms

asexual: Used to describe a person who does not experience sexual attraction in any regard (straight, gay, or bisexual sexual attraction). This should not be used to designate someone who chooses celibacy (abstinence from sex) as a lifestyle, but instead indicates people who simply do not experience sexual attraction as a part of their human experience.

bisexual: People who experience sexual and emotional attraction directed toward both men and women. This term speaks only to a person's sexual and affectional *attraction*, and not to how this attraction is expressed in relationships. For example, a bisexual man may be partnered to another man or married to a woman, but still experience sexual and affectional attraction to both men and women.

- demisexual:** Sometimes used to describe people who do not typically experience strong sexual attractions, with the exception of the sexual attraction experienced on rare occasions to persons with whom a demisexual person feels a strong emotional bond. Emotional intimacy and bonding is the primary component of a demisexual person's sense of attraction to others, primary over other factors, like physical attraction.
- down-low:** Used especially in African American communities, this term is sometimes used to describe men who present publically as heterosexual (straight), but whose sexual preferences and practices are for sex with other men. This term is not typically used as a self-descriptor and is often used with a negative connotation.
- gay:** The most common term, at present, for same-sex attracted persons. This is typically used in reference to same-sex attracted men, with "lesbian" used for same-sex attracted women. However, in popular speech, "gay" is often used to mean same-sex attracted people in general.
- heterosexual:** People who experience their sexual and emotional attraction directed toward persons of the presumed "opposite" gender (i.e., men who are attracted to women and women who are attracted to men).
- heterosexism:** In contrast to the term *homophobia* (see below), heterosexism is less about "fear" of queer people but instead points toward prejudice—both individual and societal—against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer people, and to the social experience of injustice and oppression experienced in relation to this prejudice.
- homophobia:** The irrational fear of lesbian, gay, and bisexual persons.
- homosexual:** Historically, this term was used in positive and negative ways to speak of those who experience sexual and emotional attraction to persons of the same sex (i.e., gay and lesbian people). Largely, *homosexual* is no longer used as a term of self-identification for lesbian and gay people. It has a cold, clinical ring and is now typically used only by those who hold non-LGBTQIA affirming theological positions (e.g., practitioners of "ex-gay" ministries).
- lesbian:** Women who experience their sexual and emotional attraction directed toward other women.
- pansexual:** Term descriptive of people who experience sexual or affectional attraction to persons of any gender identity or sex. Typically, people who use this term as a self-descriptor reject the notion of a

binary gender division between male and female and view gender as a more complex or fluid experience.

queer: The most common use of *queer* is as an all-encompassing term inclusive of anyone who lives outside of heterosexual and gender-conforming norms. So *queer* is often used to mean lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and so on. But *queer* also has a more radical meaning, especially in academic literature, as a term that challenges the notion that sexual and gender experiences can be neatly categorized and understood in the fixed, static, and scientifically driven manner we have typically attempted to use in describing these aspects of human experience.

same gender loving: In many African American contexts especially, this term can be preferred in place of the terms *gay* or *lesbian* (see above).

straight: Another, more commonly used, term for *heterosexual* (see above).

Keeping Up Your Language Skills

Anyone who has learned a new language knows that you have to practice in order to keep up your skills. The same is true for keeping up your language on sexual orientation and gender identity. While the need for practice when learning a new language is to avoid *forgetting* the vocabulary and grammar skills you've learned, the need for keeping up your LGBTQIA language skills is due to the fact that the *language keeps changing*.

For example, some years ago, *homosexual* was the commonly used term for gay and lesbian people. Now, *homosexual* has a cold, clinical ring to it and is more frequently used by those who hold *negative* views about gay and lesbian people. It often carries a derogatory connotation in contemporary contexts. In the 1970s, *queer* would have been a term of derision, used abusively to harass gay people. Today, you may know teenagers who proudly identify as *queer*. Perhaps the most important lesson is this: language continues to shift and change.

So that your language does not become outdated without you knowing it, you might choose a few queer-oriented publications to read at least two or three times a year. For example, *The Advocate*, the oldest gay publication in the U.S., covers news, entertainment, and politics, and can be accessed in print or on the web. *The Huffington Post* is an online publication with a "Gay Voices" section offering news and

commentary on LGBTQIA concerns. Websites for the Human Rights Campaign or the National LGBTQ Task Force or GLAAD are also helpful resources for keeping current in your language. These and many other publications can provide easy access to the most current language and vocabulary on matters of gender identity and sexuality. Accessing these publications at least a few times a year can help keep up your language skills, not to mention your knowledge of current events pertinent to LGBTQIA people. Even better, get to know LGBTQIA people with whom you can be in personal relationship. Nothing can replace the importance of personal conversation within trusting relationships.

Don't be nervous if this all seems overwhelming. You don't have to know all of the terminology in order to be an affirming presence in the lives of LGBTQIA youth. The best thing you can do if you are unsure about someone's preferred terminology for identifying their sexual or gender identity is just ask: "May I ask what words you use to describe yourself?" If the answer they provide is still confusing to you, a follow-up question may help: "Can you tell me about what that word means to you?"² This is much more respectful than assuming or guessing.

In order for your religious language to adequately match your developing theological understandings of sexual orientation and gender identity, it is helpful to keep reading books published by queer theologians and religion scholars. The citations found in the endnotes can help you to create your own reading list of books that seem most interesting and helpful to you in developing theological understandings of gender identity and sexuality and honing practices of ministry with LGBTQIA youth.

As you keep up your sexuality/gender language skills, remember that while "practice makes perfect" when learning a new language like Spanish or French, practice *won't make you "perfect"* in your ability to talk to youth about sexuality and gender identity. Ideas of "perfection"—not getting anything wrong, always using the "right" words, never having to search for the appropriate thing to say, never having to ask for clarity—will only make you so nervous that you avoid saying anything at all. Remember that this can be even more problematic than saying the "wrong" thing; your *silence* on matters of sexuality and gender identity may signal to youth that these are forbidden subjects to broach with you. You don't need to reach "perfection" in your LGBTQIA language skills. You just need to be intentional, attentive, and always willing to learn.