A Brief Guide to Ministry with LGBTQIA Youth

Updated Edition

Cody J. Sanders

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Praise for the New Edition

"This guide is essential reading for anyone who works with young people and seeks to approach questions of gender and sexuality from a place of wisdom and care, especially in ministering with LGBTQIA youth. With a warm, narrative voice, Cody Sanders weaves compelling real-world case studies, important research and statistics, local and national resources, and practical guidance. I have used the previous edition of this work in undergraduate and graduate classrooms, as well as in church and community settings. This updated edition speaks directly to our current tumultuous political moment and offers vital new insights into the intersections of gender, sexuality, and neurodiversity. Whether readers are new to these conversations or deeply experienced, they will encounter a thoughtful introduction to LGBTQIA terminology and resources alongside the best practices for care and mentorship."

—Keith A. Menhinick, Lecturer in Religious Studies,
Affiliate Faculty in Women's, Gender,
and Sexuality Studies, Georgia State University

"As an active youth minister at a progressive church, I found the updated edition of Cody Sanders's *A Brief Guide to Ministry with LGBTQIA Youth* to be both pastorally grounded and deeply practical. Sanders weaves thoughtful theology with real-world ministry wisdom, helping leaders create spaces where LGBTQIA young people are seen, safe, and valued. I wholeheartedly recommend this guide to any church and youth ministry, especially those committed to justice, compassion, and the flourishing of every young person."

—Chris Cherry, Associate Pastor of Youth and Families,
First Baptist Greensboro, North Carolina

"With characteristic clarity and authority, Cody Sanders offers this updated edition of his *Brief Guide to Ministry with LGBTQIA Youth*. Sanders argues cogently that it is more important than ever to practice LGBTQIA-affirming pastoral ministries. He patiently explains the evolving terminology related to sexuality and gender identity and invites pastors, parents, and caring adults to aim for flexibility and gender-expansive understanding. This book offers sensitive theological wisdom and potentially lifesaving practical resources; it should be on pastoral care course syllabi and on all our bookshelves."

—Mary Clark Moschella, Yale University School of Theology

"The world needs this book. It is thoughtful and informative and expertly explores the nuance of faith, humanity, identity, and the current political climate. Sanders has updated the original to reflect the ever-expanding landscape of the LGBTQIA community and the importance of allyship in today's world. This book will (once again) be an invaluable, lifesaving resource."

—Pepa Paniagua, Coordinator for Innovation
and New Ministry Development, Grace Presbytery

"Informative, vast, and practical, Sanders's work is so necessary for our world right now. This is a tremendous resource for ministry staff and laypersons seeking to better understand and support some of our most vulnerable young people—whether you're part of a faith community that is already fully open and affirming or whether you're an ally trying to provide a safe space in one that isn't there just yet."

—Becky Schroeder, Youth Minister,
Middletown Christian Church, Louisville, Kentucky

"This updated version addresses the changes and new concerns that our LGBTQIA young people are facing and responds to the very real and recent threats that have been placed on our young people in this country. As a youth pastor, I thank God for this work and for Cody Sanders's commitment to continuing the conversation so that our communities of faith are more welcoming and loving toward all God's children, especially the LGBTQIA ones."

—Shelley C. Donaldson, Associate Pastor for Youth and Mission,
First Presbyterian Church of Stamford, Connecticut

Praise for the First Edition

"Cody Sanders has condensed a lifetime of personal searching, faith, and scholarship into this remarkable book. *A Brief Guide to Ministry with LGBTQIA Youth* offers ministers and youth leaders the language, skills, and, most important, genuine encouragement needed to enter into healing pastoral conversations with LGBTQIA young people and their families and congregations. Every page matters. My students will be seeing this book on required reading lists for years to come."

—Robert C. Dykstra, Charlotte W. Newcombe Professor
of Pastoral Theology, Princeton Theological Seminary

"*A Brief Guide to Ministry with LGBTQIA Youth* is exactly that—a professional and compassionate guide that should be required reading for anyone in ministry today. With up-to-date and thorough information personalized by poignant stories, Sanders offers a window into the experience of LGBTQIA youth that is both spiritually and psychologically enlightening. This is a must-read guide that should have a prominent place in your library for frequent use."

—G. Penny Nixon, Senior Minister,
Congregational Church of San Mateo, California

"Sanders invites youth workers into the 'sacred calling' of walking alongside LGBTQIA youth who have blessed us by trusting us with their stories and struggles, providing us with the language, information, and sensitivities we need to share and embody God's love for them where they are, just as they are. A must-read for any adult committed to honoring the lives and dignity of young people."

—Elizabeth W. Corrie, Associate Professor
in the Practice of Youth Education and Peacebuilding,
Director of the Youth Theological Initiative,
Candler School of Theology, Emory University

"Sanders has done a great job in identifying and articulating the fluidity in language with reference to gender, gender identity, and sexual orientation. His glossary alone is an invaluable tool as clergy and layfolk alike navigate the identities and gender queerness of our emerging world. He also provides much insight, highlighting the challenges and the vast opportunities that await those of us in leadership as we navigate this world and offer vital, transformative, and vibrant ministry witness to a people who want to live authentically as they believe God is inviting them to do. For caregivers to the LGBTQIA community, this is essential reading."

—Neil G. Cazares-Thomas, Senior Pastor,
Cathedral of Hope United Church of Christ

"Whether it is developing a life-affirming ministry with LGBTQIA youth or attending to a 'what do I do right now?' pastoral need, Sanders's *A Brief Guide to Ministry with LGBTQIA Youth* provides a crash course full of timely and accessible resources for churches committed to loving and serving LGBTQIA youth."

—Kristen J. Leslie, Professor of Pastoral Theology and Care,
Eden Theological Seminary

Contents

Preface to the Updated Edition ix

Acknowledgments xvii

Introduction and Terminology 1

1. A Brief Guide to Gender Identity and Expression 11

2. A Brief Guide to Sexual/Affectional Orientation 27

3. A Brief Guide to Ministry amid Questions and Crisis 45

4. A Brief Guide to Ministry with Parents and Families 63

5. A Brief Guide to Pastoral and Mentoring Relationships with LGBTQIA Youth 83

6. A Brief Guide to Queer Neurodiversity 93

Appendix: National and Local Resources for Supporting LGBTQIA Youth 101

Notes 109

Preface to the Updated Edition

The day after the 2024 presidential election, two friends of mine were getting their three children ready for school. They were watching news coverage of the election results when their seven-year-old child, Arthur, walked into the room on the verge of tears and asked his parents in a quavery voice, "Dad, Mom, will Donald Trump make bad rules?"

The question surprised them because they hadn't talked much about Trump with Arthur. They couldn't remember ever saying anything particularly negative about Trump or sharing their frustrations over the news in the preceding months.

Arthur's dad asked him, "What do you mean by bad rules, buddy?"

"Is he going to make a rule that boys can't wear dresses?" Arthur asked in a trembling voice.

This was even more surprising, as they had never talked with Arthur about Trump being unsupportive of gender-diverse people. Arthur is a boy who feels most comfortable wearing dresses. He doesn't identify as trans or genderqueer, and he is clear with anyone who asks that he is a boy who likes to wear dresses. He says plainly, "I'm a boy, and I like to wear dresses, so I want to wear a dress." Now he was concerned about the election's implications.

"No, he can't do that," Arthur's dad tried to assure him.

For Arthur's parents, this was a window into the stress that Arthur had been carrying during the election season. And it was an affirmation of how important it is to Arthur to be able to wear dresses. Arthur has a school where he feels warmly embraced and supported as a boy who likes to wear dresses and belongs to a church that also loves and affirms Arthur's gender expression.

This was the first concrete statement that Arthur had ever made of his awareness that wearing dresses may be perceived by others as different or problematic in any way. His parents never expressed to him any negativity or concern about Arthur wearing dresses. They

told him that some people might think he is a girl so that he could be ready to explain. And they warned him that some kids at school may tease him, but that never happened. Arthur had not expressed any concern about what anyone thought of his wearing dresses prior to this day.

His parents assumed that kids at Arthur's school must regularly talk about the election. This is the only way they could imagine that Arthur developed a sense that anyone would have a problem with boys who wear dresses. They knew that Arthur's group of friends sometimes talks about trans issues, picking up on things from conversations overheard from parents. So, they tried to explain that adults whom he would see in the next few days and weeks are feeling sad and scared and unsure too.

Arthur's question that morning hit his dad hard. He teared up after Arthur left the room. His dad has a lot of queer and trans coworkers and processed the election with them over the course of many weeks. "This made the stakes of things more real for me," he said. "It made me feel worried."

Arthur's mom felt both protective of Arthur and a simultaneous lack of control. She said, "We can't really give him reassurance that everything will be fine, that he'll be safe." And she often wonders what the future will be like for Arthur.

The family lives in a great neighborhood, vocally and visibly supportive of LGBTQIA people. They walked to school the morning after the election feeling a sense of collective mourning, stunned and tired. And they know that the political climate is starting to become unsafe for their own kid, even while appreciating their strong and supportive neighborhood.

At the end of our conversation, Arthur's dad said, "It's really important for Arthur to be able to be accepted for who he is and to be able to express who he is at home." It is important for them as parents that their guidance and questions they ask of Arthur never be confused with judgments. Their aim as parents is "leading with love and acceptance of who Arthur is."

I asked Arthur's parents what they most wish people would take from their story. Most importantly, they affirmed "how valuable it is that your faith community is the place where you feel welcomed, and yourself, and safe, and loved." At their church, Arthur can wear dresses, and nobody thinks twice about it. People there notice and appreciate his personality. They are grateful that he's growing up in that affirming environment and that he will likely be surprised one day when he finds out that some faith

communities are *not* supportive. Because a loving, supportive, affirming faith community is, happily, all that Arthur has ever known.

A NEW LANDSCAPE OF LGBTQIA YOUTH MINISTRY

Arthur wasn't yet born when the first edition of this text was written, and since then, the landscape has shifted precipitously. The political climate of today is vastly different from 2017's. And by "different," I mean much worse for LGBTQIA people in several discernable ways. It's evident that our idea of "progress" as an uninterrupted process of things always getting better is a comforting fiction. But it isn't descriptive of our political reality. Things do often get better—and they have for LGBTQIA people in many ways over the last few decades. And, at times, they get worse again.

The better: In 2011, President Barack Obama repealed the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy, allowing gay, lesbian, and bisexual service members to serve openly in the U.S. military. Beginning in 2013, California and New Jersey became the first states to ban the practice of conversion therapy for minors, a psychologically harmful practice predicated on the assumption that gay and lesbian people can change their sexual orientation. They were followed by numerous other states. Then in 2015, the Supreme Court of the United States ruled that same-sex couples had a constitutional right to marriage in all fifty states.

Fast forward to 2025 as I'm revising this book for a new era of LGBTQIA youth ministry, we see things shifting for the worse and disproportionately affecting trans people:

—The new presidential administration quickly banned thousands of trans, nonbinary, and gender-nonconforming people currently serving in the U.S. military from service. All gender-affirming medical procedures for service members were paused, and currently serving trans military members were asked to resign from service in their respective branches.

—An executive order directed the State Department to no longer issue passports that accurately reflect a trans person's gender. Another order directed the Bureau of Prisons to deny incarcerated trans people gender-affirming health care or housing that appropriately reflects their gender identity. Another directed the Department of Housing

and Urban Development to reverse its rules that gave trans people safe access to shelters. And a comprehensive scrubbing of all federal government websites deleted the mention of gender identity or trans people from websites and relevant forms.[1] Many of these orders were immediately challenged in court.

—Pertaining specifically to youth, President Trump issued an executive order to ban gender-affirming care for trans youth under age nineteen.[2] And another order attempts to instruct schools to deny the existence of trans people in schools, including banning trans students' use of the appropriate restroom, not allowing them to participate in athletics, and even forcing schools to inform students' parents if they request to be referred to by a different name or specific pronouns.[3]

—On a state level, at the time of this writing, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) is tracking 604 anti-LGBTQ bills in legislatures across the U.S. that target a redefinition of sex, a ban on trans students using certain school facilities, curriculum censorship in public schools, healthcare funding restrictions for trans people, and a host of other proposed laws (70 of them have already been passed into law eight months into 2025).[4] In 2024, there were 533 bills introduced across the U.S., with 49 of them passing into law.[5] In 2023, some 510 bills were introduced in state legislatures, with 88 passing into law.[6]

You may be under the impression that young people don't pay attention to the news or aren't concerned about politics. But let the story of seven-year-old Arthur above correct your misperception. Even in a family that didn't talk openly about politics in front of the children, Arthur picked up on what was going on around him and in the larger political scene and was emotionally affected by the results of the presidential election.

The Trevor Project's 2024 study of LGBTQ+ youth mental health, which included eighteen thousand participants ages 13–24, found that 90 percent of LGBTQ+ young people reported that their well-being was negatively affected due to recent politics, and 53 percent reported that it was *significantly* negatively impacted. Nearly two out of every five respondents reported that their state's LGBTQ+ political climate had caused their family to consider moving to a different state, a statistic that increases to nearly half of trans and nonbinary youth.[7] And after the 2024 election, The Trevor Project's suicide phone and text lines received

a 700 percent increase in contacts the day after the election.[8] Soon after, the U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration cut its funding for specialized support for LGBTQ people in its suicide prevention hotline, which had been provided by The Trevor Project through the national 988 suicide hotline.[9]

While the political landscape for LGBTQIA people has grown more dire since the first edition of this book, we've seen discernable strides toward inclusion and justice on the ecclesial front. After five decades of policies that exclude non-heterosexual people, in 2024 the United Methodist Church removed all such restrictions and replaced them with affirmations of respect for the sexuality and gender identity of all persons.[10]

In 2022, the Reformed Church in America's (RCA) General Synod lamented the ways in which the denomination has failed to recognize the equal worth of LGBTQ+ people and the harm that this failure of love and compassion has caused. The RCA lamented the fear and frustration that has characterized their rhetoric on LGBTQ+ lives and affirmed the worth and human dignity of all persons, including LGBTQ+ people, as beloved image bearers of God.[11] And there's still room for the RCA to make strides toward inclusivity and belonging for LGBTQ+ people in order to move from expressions of lament to commitments of affirmation.

A denomination to which I have related, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (CBF), long refused to host a presence of the Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists (AWAB) at its annual general assembly. But in 2017, AWAB held its first ancillary event at a CBF general assembly, and in 2024 the CBF Affirming Network merged with AWAB, and CBF Executive Coordinator Paul Baxley celebrated the merger, noting, "Most conversations about matters of LGBTQ inclusion have been increasingly characterized by fear, demonization and dehumanization," while the merger resists this trend by "demonstrating a spirit of collaboration."[12] Now the Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists host a meal, reception, or concert annually at the CBF General Assembly in a packed venue. And, of course, there's still work for the CBF to do to end discriminatory hiring practices prohibiting LGBTQ+ people from certain positions within the organization.

The number of congregations publicly affirming the lives of LGBTQIA people increase every year. More queer and trans people are added to the rosters of ordained clergy in multiple denominations. More seminaries regularly teach courses in queer theology and LGBTQIA ministry practices. And while in 2017, this was the first

and only affirming book on the market addressing LGBTQIA youth ministry (though there were a few non-affirming ones), now several other titles have been added to mine, aiming to equip ministers and laypeople to love and affirm the lives of LGBTQIA youth.[13]

WHY LGBTQIA-AFFIRMING YOUTH MINISTRY MATTERS MORE THAN EVER

LGBTQ youth who have at least one accepting adult in their lives are 40 percent less likely to report a suicide attempt.[14] I don't always find statistics inspirational, but this statistic, based on a survey of 25,896 youth ages 13–24, is almost *magical*. One affirming adult equates to a 40-percentage point reduction in suicide attempt! If you are trying to get beyond your hesitations about being an openly LGBTQIA-affirming presence in your community, please let that statistic push you over the edge.

If one affirming adult can have that significant an impact on the mental health and well-being of LGBTQ youth, then any time you spend sharpening your abilities to be a *visibly* and *skillfully* affirming presence to the youth in your life will be time well spent. Note: You must be *known* as an affirming adult for your affirmation to have an effect! And I know that seems risky to some in churches or denominations that do not yet affirm LGBTQIA lives, or that punish laity or clergy who hold affirming stances, or that believe that affirmation is a good thing as long as we don't make a big deal about it.

When I talk with churches about LGBTQIA affirming ministry, I used to ask audiences to consider how they would tangibly embody their love and affirmation for queer and trans people. In our current political landscape, I ask a different question: *What will you risk to stand in solidarity with queer and trans people?*

And I ask you this question, too. Right now, the demand is different than it was even a few years ago. LGBTQIA lives are being pushed to the brink by a politics of cruelty and violence. Trans people bear the heaviest weight of the current political ire. And LGBTQIA youth are by far the most vulnerable among us. We need straight and cisgender allies to come alongside us in the struggle for justice. We need denominations and congregations to *boldly* embody love and affirmation and belonging for LGBTQIA people and to actively protect queer and trans kids.

We need pastors and laypeople who will be open, *visible* representations of God's fierce and abiding love for queer and trans people made in the divine image.

We need you. Now.

What will you risk to stand in solidarity with us?

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to Robert Ratcliff and the editorial team at Westminster John Knox Press for seeing the value in a book like this and its potential to contribute to the health and well-being of LGBTQIA youth. I am also grateful to Jessica Miller Kelley and the WJK team for seeing the need for a revised edition of the book. I am especially indebted to Avery Belyeu, Sam Coates, Carra Hughes Greer, Keith Menhinick, and Davi Reese Weasley, who each read drafts of the text either in part or in whole and provided invaluable feedback that undoubtedly makes the book richer and more useful to readers. Finally, I am thankful to those who pick up the book and read it. There is really no other reason I can think of to read a book of this kind unless a reader is committed to learning how best to minister in an affirming way to LGBTQIA youth, contributing to their health, well-being, spiritual vitality, and livability of life. If no one else ever thanks for you for that commitment, which you embody in your ministerial practice, please accept my deepest gratitude.

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 preteen 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. There were multiple changes to be made between the original 2017 and updated 2026 editions of this book, so know that 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 cisgender 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 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 actual gender identity, which may be different from the gender assigned at birth. Everyone expresses their gender in some way, even if it is to defy male/female gender categories!

sex: This is a medically oriented term used to describe one's sex assigned at birth (see below) with categories of male, female, or intersex based most often on genitalia, though hormones, chromosomes, and other factors also come into play with sex. This is distinct from the term "gender," which encompasses factors beyond biology such as emotions, attitudes, presentations, and behaviors. 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, or "cis": This term describes 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 assigned 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 in 1994, 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 attire consistent with their 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 people who do not identify with a static gender but whose gender identity and/or expression is ever-shifting. 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 and to themselves.

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," challenges, or moves beyond categorizations like male and female and who live against culturally assigned norms of the male/female gender binary. They may also describe themselves as "gender-expansive," embodying gender beyond the male/female 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.

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., one should say, "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*. When written with an asterisk, *trans**, it usually denotes a larger group more expansive than transgender people, e.g. nonbinary, genderqueer, etc.

transition: A term used to refer to the process that a transgender person undergoes to better 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 (that is, "social transition"); changing one's name on legal

documentation; undergoing hormone therapy; and, occasionally, having gender affirmation surgery to surgically alter one's anatomical sex characteristics (that is, "medical transition"). It is important to note that gender affirmation surgery is often not a part of a transition process for a trans person; it is only one possible step that a person may choose to take in living out one's trans identity. The term *transition* is preferable over other terms like "sex change."

transphobia: The irrational fear of or prejudice toward transgender persons.

transsexual: An outdated term applied to trans people who undergo gender affirmation processes, this term is no longer in regular use among trans people.

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

aromantic: This is a term related to asexual describing people who have little or no romantic attraction or interest in romantic relationships. Some asexual people are also aromantic, but some asexual people do experience nonsexual romantic desire or attraction.

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 partnered 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 attraction is for 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: A term for 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 or prejudice toward 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. Often, 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 "Queer 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.

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