



transformative inclusion: a resource guide for transgender welcome in congregations



Center for
LGBTQ and Gender Studies
in Religion (CLGS)

INTRODUCTION

Thank you for picking up this guide. It is an important step to learning more about transgender people—both the gifts that they bring to our society and the challenges they face. Gaining this knowledge is also critical to becoming more welcoming to trans and gender non-conforming people. It is important to acknowledge that there is an ongoing learning process: no matter how successful an individual or a congregation is in welcoming trans people, there is always room to grow and extend your hospitality.

Many people find themselves initially unsure about trans people, or they have questions about trans identities. This is normal. But we have found that the more people know about trans people, the more accepting they become over time. Having the facts is really important.

Maybe you are using this guide because you have questions about transgender people, you want to help prepare your congregation for trans people who have not yet arrived, or perhaps you already have a number of trans people among your membership and in leadership roles. Regardless of how many trans people participate in your congregation, your faith community can always become more welcoming and a safer place for trans people.

Recently, the United States has witnessed a political shift that focuses on trans people in discriminatory ways. We find that in the wake of the nation-wide victory for marriage equality, other rights for LGBT people are suddenly being stripped away. Trans people are being scapegoated in this process, and the impact on the lives and spirits of trans and gender non-conforming people should not be underestimated. This is a spiritual issue for all people who are concerned with social justice.

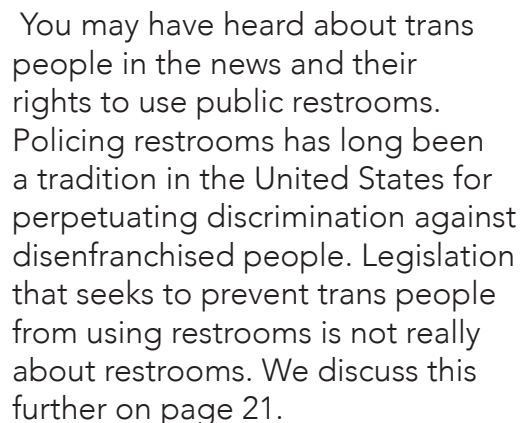
As a partner text to this guide, we recommend the CLGS publication *Transitioning to Inclusion: A Guide to Welcoming Transgender Children and Their Families to Your Community of Faith* by Kelsey Pacha, available for download at www.clgs.org/transitioningyouthresource

Human rights laws and other legislative measures aimed at protecting all people from discrimination are being overturned under the guise of “protecting” non-LGBT people from the imaginary threat of gender difference. Nowhere is this supposed threat more dramatically played out than in public restrooms. However, this is not taking place in real public facilities, but rather in the collective imagination of fear-mongering lawmakers. Whether yours is a state that is debating this harmful legislation or not, as people of faith this issue impacts all of us.

Trans inclusion in faith communities impacts all people of faith who are committed to social justice. Now is the time to stand together to protect those who are vulnerable and in need of support. This guide will provide you with some more information about transgender people and help you become more fluent in the language of inclusion. It will help you to build a community of welcome and support. As sexual and gender minorities face discrimination on new fronts, this guide will help you to support those who need your compassion and advocacy.

Oftentimes fear of saying the wrong thing keeps people from engaging in the vital discussions that would make our congregations more welcoming. In this guide you will find helpful tools for creating inclusive spaces. Please know that the journey to trans inclusion in faith communities is not going to be perfect, especially not in the early stages. There might be moments conversations are awkward and words may cause us to stumble. Discomfort and uncertainty are parts of the growing process.

The writers of this guide start with a basic assumption that communities mean well, even if they find themselves stumbling (rather than gliding) toward inclusion. We believe questions that come across as offensive are often well-intended, even if slightly misguided or misworded. We acknowledge and honor the learning process and want to provide you with tools that enhance your journey as a community. While the media may portray our work for inclusion as a battle between people of faith and the LGBT community, we are not fighting against one another but rather seeking to empower individuals to treat others as they want to be treated.



You may have heard about trans people in the news and their rights to use public restrooms. Policing restrooms has long been a tradition in the United States for perpetuating discrimination against disenfranchised people. Legislation that seeks to prevent trans people from using restrooms is not really about restrooms. We discuss this further on page 21.

BECOMING A TRANS-INCLUSIVE COMMUNITY

Welcome for All

Just like all other people in a faith community, trans people come to a church, synagogue, or meeting place with a complex combination of feelings and history that led them to that specific worship space. More often than not, we have found that trans people experience unique challenges when engaging in faith communities. Although these challenges shift from person to person and congregation to congregation, there are obstacles that trans people face when worshiping in community, regardless of whether a person is newly identifying as trans or has been fully transitioned for decades, whether they openly and publicly identify as trans or they keep that information private. By extending a welcome with an informed perspective on the needs of trans people, many of these obstacles can be addressed.

Diversity of Trans Experiences

In recent years the topic of transgenderism has emerged in popular culture in a far more comprehensive way than ever before. Celebrities who transitioned publicly, such as Laverne Cox, Caitlyn Jenner, and Chaz Bono, have added trans people to the popular culture milieu in a new way. With this new acknowledgement of trans lives in the media we also see a particular narrative of trans identity emerge. While the visibility of specific trans people can help shift social consciousness about trans people, it is important to understand that not all trans people identify in the same way.

Trans people reflect the full cultural diversity we see in this country and come from every walk of life. The relatively recent mainstream visibility has certainly enabled many trans people to live as their authentic selves in new ways. Yet, trans identities are also being discussed, critiqued, and regulated in politics, social media, and on television in new ways. It is important to understand that not all trans people live or transition in the same ways or come from the same cultural contexts. It is also important to understand there is a wide range of ways that people transition, which means to live in a gender or genders different than the one on someone's birth certificate.

Many trans people never feel the need to medically transition at all, living as neither male or female. Others take hormones or have surgery to change their bodies to become comfortable in their own gender presentations. Accessibility to medically necessary care is limited for many trans people. There is often a lack of access to knowledgeable medical staff. Financial constraints and a lack of adequate emotional support can make transition and basic medical care prohibitive. This is changing but not fast enough to provide equal access for all trans people. Ideally, all trans people should have access to doctors and other providers who understand the needs of transgender people and can work with their patients to develop a plan of medical care that best meets that person's needs.

Gender identity is an inward and subjective experience, lived out in the individual person. Many trans people utilize hormone and surgical interventions to align their bodies with their inward sense of self, but many do not. It is important to honor a person's identity, regardless of their access to, or need for, medical intervention.

As the visibility of trans identity expands, unfortunately, so does the backlash against trans people. Political commentary about trans people has a lasting impact beyond the politics and policies themselves. Faith communities play an important role in helping trans people understand that they are loved and valued, even when the media paints a different picture. Faith leaders can help reshape the narrative of trans exclusion and challenge culture biases that erroneously teach that trans people are different and do not belong.

The Language of Inclusion

Before we can explore the topic of inclusion in a comprehensive way, we acknowledge that it is difficult to engage in this conversation if you feel you do not have the right words to use. Terminology and definitions are often a challenge because language is not a static entity; it moves shifts and grows with the communities who use it.

LGBT communities have seen such major growth and transformation in recent decades, it is hard to pin down universally accepted definitions for how our people describe themselves. Our recommendation is that congregations not get too caught up in definitions, but rather focus on the larger issues of inclusion and social justice. It is important to keep in mind that the only way to understand an individual's identity is to ask that person for clarification.

The word "**passing**" is a term that is often used in the trans community to denote whether one is successfully able to live unquestioned as a man or as a woman. While "passing" as a non-trans man or a non-trans woman is a goal for many trans people, it can be problematic because some people see the phrase itself as implying dishonesty, as if trans people are only able to pass as something they are not or are only valued if they do pass. Instead of focusing on how well a trans person can blend in among non-trans people, it is important to honor gender identity, regardless of appearance. The purpose of transition is not necessarily to fit in but to feel that what a person feels inside matches what they express on the outside.

Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation

The term transgender refers to gender identity, that is, how a person understands their own subjective experience of gender and selfhood. Heterosexuality and homosexuality refer to sexual orientation, which is attraction, the people to whom one is romantically and sexually inclined. Trans people experience romantic and sexual attraction that is not necessarily connected to their trans identities. Just like non-trans people, trans people can be gay, lesbian, bisexual, asexual, straight, queer, and/or questioning.

Oftentimes congregations assume that trans people will automatically feel welcomed in a worshipping community if that community is already welcoming to lesbian, gay, and bisexual people. This is not always the case. Although there are many similarities between these communities, it is important to note that the issues trans and gender non-conforming people face are not identical.

Inclusion of Identities

A congregation that is truly inclusive encourages congregants to live and grow in their own identities. Gender expression for many people is a long process of searching for wholeness. It is a beautiful gift to support a person while they are in the process of becoming themselves. People often come to faith communities when they are vulnerable and searching. It is the responsibility and the calling of the faith community to nurture those who seek spiritual wholeness; for trans people, finding gender confirmation is often an important element in becoming spiritually whole. At the same time, it is important to note that not every trans person is seeking spiritual affirmation related to gender. Particularly those who have identified as trans or gender non-conforming for a long time might not see this as an issue for discussion in the faith community. It is equally important to support their need for privacy. There is no one magic formula that creates inclusion. As faith communities we must follow the lead of those we seek to include and allow them to define the level of importance that gender identity has for their own spiritual paths.



Nicole's Story

I was terrified the first time I walked into a Lutheran church. It was early in 2003 and I had just started my gender transition. My therapist recommended I dress and live as a woman every place, except work, to demonstrate my commitment to transition. When I walked into St. Paul Lutheran Church in downtown Denver, I was convinced the people would turn and stare at the "man in a dress." They didn't. They came up to me and talked to me. They asked me if I liked the service, offered me coffee, and asked me if I wanted to come back. I had found a church home where I could celebrate my faith in Jesus Christ.

In October of 2003, I officially became a member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). I really knew I was a member of St. Paul Lutheran when I was invited to be a member of a committee—the Reconciling in Christ (RIC) task force. In 1997, the congregation of St. Paul Lutheran Church made it publicly known they were open and welcoming of people of all sexual orientations. When I joined St. Paul, the welcoming statement was amended to include people of all gender identities. I have walked in the Denver Pride parade multiple times since then with many members of my congregation. We went to other churches to have discussions about what it means to be an RIC congregation and really live out the inclusive gospel of Jesus Christ.

My faith in Jesus was nurtured to the point where I discerned a call to ordained ministry. To be honest, when I applied to be a candidate for ordained ministry, I expected to be told there wasn't a place in the ELCA for a transgender Latina, but to my surprise and delight, I was granted entrance to candidacy and in September of 2013, I began a hybrid online/residential master of divinity program through Luther Seminary in St. Paul, MN. I am on track to earn an Master of Divinity in May of 2018 and, with the help of the Holy Spirit, I will be called as a pastor in the ELCA soon thereafter. I was loved and supported in my faith by the people of St. Paul Lutheran Church and for the rest of my life, I endeavor to be a beacon of hope and love for anyone who wants to celebrate their faith in Jesus Christ.

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Discussion Questions

- 1) What made you feel most welcomed when you first joined your faith community?
- 2) What comes to mind for you when you hear the word "transgender"? What images or phrases does this topic evoke?
- 3) Can you think of examples of ways you have helped, or would like to help, other people feel welcomed in your faith community?



LOOKING TO THE BIBLE

Many people look to the Bible for guidance and wonder what it says about transgender people. The short answer is that our understanding of gender identity today is a modern concept and is based on our much greater understandings of both the human body and mind. However, the Bible does have some very strong parallels to our current knowledge of gender that can guide our understanding today.

The Bible, in fact, offers strong support for the inclusion of those whose gender falls between male and female. This may be very surprising to you since often the Bible is not considered from this perspective or you may have been told that differences in gender are a very recent phenomenon, but that isn't true. The Bible includes the stories of eunuchs—men who were castrated for various reasons—and tells the story of their rejection from religious practices to their complete acceptance. We believe that we, as people of faith, are called to follow this same path.

Let's examine the Bible passages that address this more closely.

Genesis

According to the book of Genesis, the first human being God created did not have a specific gender. While the text calls this person Adam, the Hebrew word actually isn't a name but a noun for this unique first being; it only becomes a name later in the story. We were probably taught that it is a man's name in the same way it is today. But this ancient story is much more complex than that. "Adam" literally translates into something like "earth person." When this being, the adam, becomes lonely because none of the other creatures—the animals, birds, plants and so on—are of the same kind, God separates this person into female and male, Eve and Adam.

Some people argue that the creation of Adam and Eve means that God only intends for people to be either male or female, with nothing in between. But this fails to take into account that God first created a being without gender and only later created two sexes. It also doesn't acknowledge the great biological diversity of sex that occurs in nature, and in human beings, including those who are born intersex. The book of Genesis shows us a creator who is imaginative and celebrates an incredible range of beings, such as coral that is both plant and animal, or the startling array of ways that life manifests on our planet. Rather than an argument for limitations, Genesis speaks to us of possibilities.

Deuteronomy

There are two passages in Deuteronomy which are negative: one which prohibits cross dressing (Deuteronomy 22:5) and the other which bars men from full participation in ritual life if they have lost their penis or testicles (Deuteronomy 23:1). Both of these occur in sections of the Bible that are concerned with distinguishing Israel from its neighbors and set out codes of

behaviors that the Jewish people were to follow. If you read what falls before and after these single verses, you'll find many prohibitions against mixing things (like more than one kind of seed in a field) or excluding those who have physical blemishes, like skin diseases.

It is important to remember that Christians do not follow these ritual laws of ancient Israel, a question that was resolved in the earliest days of the church. To simply pick out some verses while ignoring others is not an accurate or faithful use of the text, particularly when the verses being selected are only the ones used to condemn others. More importantly, even while the Bible was being written, God was already contradicting these passages to embrace those who lived outside of the binaries of male and female.

Isaiah

One of the most beautiful passages of God's love and welcome for all people occurs in the book of Isaiah. Through the prophet, God tells the people what God wants: "to maintain justice, and do what is right." Then God does something radical—God says that these promises extend to unlikely people, foreigners, eunuchs, and barren women. Eunuchs are an ancient parallel to transgender and gender variant people; they were men who can be castrated and were therefore no longer considered male but neither were they female. As we considered earlier, this would have meant that they were excluded from the temple and other aspects of ritual life.

But here is what is important: the prophet says in Isaiah 56:3b-5,

... do not let the eunuch say, "I am just a dry tree." For thus says God: To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.

That is, those who were previously separated from the community by the laws in Deuteronomy will now be given a special place if they keep the covenant with God. In God's way of thinking, those who have been separated from their families and communities will be brought to the center, within God's own house, and given a cherished name that will never be forgotten.



Here God focuses on the faithfulness of each person and the call to justice. We are not to be excluded based on physical characteristics but uplifted when we are committed to doing what is right and establishing justice in the land. This reverses the commandments in Deuteronomy and puts a new standard before us, telling us to focus on the impact of a person's life first.

Matthew

The Bible tells us that Jesus was aware that there are different kinds of genders, demonstrating both God's knowledge of the natural and human made variations in gender as well as the fact that those in the ancient world were aware of this. Jesus states this quite clearly in Matthew 19:11-12:

For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuch who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the dominion of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can.

People who have been eunuchs from birth probably refers to those with intersex conditions, that is, with biological characteristics of both male and female bodies. Ancient peoples were aware that some babies are born this way. Jesus also talks here about those who have been created to be eunuchs, by the hand of others or by their own choice.

Jesus doesn't make any judgments or even offer any commentary, other than noting that some people have trouble accepting this. But for himself, he matter-of-factly states these conditions as different ways of being human. We can follow his lead by accepting those who live in gender diverse ways as full members of our communities.

Acts

In Acts 8:25-39 we find one of the most complete accounts of baptism in the early church and a clear sign of how we are to treat people who may be different from ourselves. A eunuch from Ethiopia is on his way home after visiting the temple in Jerusalem to worship; he follows Jewish practices but is not a Jew. He is traveling between cities in the wilderness, neither at home or at his destination. He is of a different ethnic background than most of the people in that place. And he is set apart because of his gender as a eunuch. The text tells us the many ways in which he is between things—race, nationality, gender, location, and religion.

And to this person and this situation, an angel of God sends Philip, one of the apostles, to go meet with him. They get to talking about the book of Isaiah and Philip tells the eunuch the story of Jesus, which immediately draws him in. The eunuch spots a body of water and asks Philip if there is anything that would prevent him from being baptized. Apparently, it is a question that doesn't even need a response because they immediately go together to the water and Philip baptizes the eunuch, who then goes on his way rejoicing.

Just as Jesus simply and without comment recognized differences in gender, Philip also did not see any need to speak about or create barriers to the eunuch's full participation in the community of faith. Again, this overthrows what is said in the book of Deuteronomy and follows with what God says through the prophet Isaiah. This story from the very early church tells us that baptism into the Christian community has been and should remain fully open

to people of all genders. More than that, this passage reminds us that that welcome leads to celebration; just as the eunuch continued his journey rejoicing, so too can full inclusion lead to joy in the lives of those who seek to join us in our communities of faith.

Faithfully Reading the Bible

As we read through the Bible, we see stronger and stronger messages of support for the full inclusion of transgender and gender different people. Where once there was condemnation, the Bible itself tears down that wall and shows that in God's realm such barriers do not matter. Just as there was nothing to prevent the baptism of the eunuch in the book of Acts, neither is there anything to block Christians and other people of faith from welcoming transgender people in community or insisting on their full dignity in our world.

Where transgender and gender variant people have faced rejection, violence, and discrimination, people of faith can reverse that, following the biblical example to move to a place of understanding, welcome, and justice. Moreover, we can apply what the Bible teaches us about who is our neighbor and how we are to treat other people—treating all as we wish to be treated by them.

Discussion Questions

- 1) What passage in the Bible most guides you about how to treat transgender people?
- 2) If a member of your community has a transgender family member, and is worried about what the Bible says, what words of hope could you offer them?
- 3) What other passages in the Bible do you think are helpful in considering how to treat and include transgender people?

WELCOMING TRANS PEOPLE INTO COMMUNITIES OF FAITH

The chances are that your community is already one that cares deeply about inclusion. Congregations that seek to welcome trans people are often already supporting multiple types of inclusion in transformative and powerful ways. It is likely that you are instinctively doing many things right and that your faith community can become more inclusive by simply utilizing and building upon the skills and resources that you already have.

When is the Best Time to Become More Inclusive?

The time to create change and welcome trans people is *now*. Sometimes congregations feel that they will be able to embark on a program to become more trans inclusive only after they reach some specific milestone in the future. This is particularly true for congregations that want to be fully welcoming of all, but might stumble or struggle with full acceptance of gay, lesbian, and bisexual people. While acceptance of a variety of sexual orientations is helpful for any congregation that strives for full inclusion of all people, total acceptance of gay, lesbian, and bisexual people from 100% of the congregation is not a prerequisite for educating the congregation about trans people. Even congregations that are very welcoming to gay, lesbian, and bisexual people do not automatically have the necessary tools to fully include trans people.

Transformation in the Pulpit and Social Hall

Those who most frequently address the faith community bear significant responsibility to transform faith communities to be inclusive of trans people. Religious leaders who stand in the pulpit regularly and lay leaders or clergy who teach classes, lead Bible studies, facilitate small groups, or perform other leadership roles, have the ability to vastly impact the lives of trans people. This transformation does not necessarily happen through direct interaction between the faith leader and an individual trans person; rather it occurs as the culture of the community shifts to meet and understand the trans person. It must not be the responsibility of a trans or gender non-conforming person to create the sacred space that is needed. The community can become welcoming and develop itself as a sacred refuge, regardless of whether or not trans people already attend.

For those who have the privilege of addressing the congregation or faith community as a whole on a regular basis through sermons or teachings, it is important to include a number of genders in the course of your work. Sacred texts offer many examples of gender differences that are helpful to highlight. As you learn about trans people in the community or in the media, incorporate stories of their achievements and lives into your sermons.

Cultural Shift from the Pulpit: A Personal Vignette

When I was just figuring out my own identity it became incredibly hard for me to go to church. I started attending a new church around the time I began my transition from female to male. I was not ready to announce to the world that I was a trans man. I was barely comfortable telling people my name. My voice was quite high and feminine and speaking at all was problematic and embarrassing for me.

I spoke to the pastor of my new church about this and she decided that as the pastor it was her responsibility to introduce the community to trans issues. She let me know that as a person who was only just figuring out my own identity, I did not need the added burden of creating safe space for myself. In her preaching style she often told stories, she made a point to include trans people in the stories and managed to introduce the language of trans identity and the importance of trans etiquette into her sermons in a very organic way.

Never once making reference to me, she consistently included narratives of trans people and gender diversity in her sermons. Any list of social justice concerns always included trans people. By the time I was ready to speak for myself, just a few short months later, the groundwork of trans inclusion was very solid in the community. Although I was at a very fragile place in my own journey, it changed my life to be part of a community that was willing to learn and grow with me and had the tools to do so.

Many years later, I am now a pastor and I still reflect on that powerful welcome with gratitude. My life was transformed by having my pastor take on the task of educating and creating safe space for me. She helped me discover who I am in a broader sense than just gender identity. It helped frame my commitment to social justice and solidarity.

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Gaining Clarity

You may encounter people whose gender presentation is different from most others in the congregation. You may not be sure how to interact initially. The simplest solution if you do not know how to address someone is to ask. The question “What pronouns do you use?” is a very easy solution to this dilemma. This question is vital in the context of rites, such as communion, where people may be offered individual prayer. If a congregant is approaching you for prayer and you are unsure how the person identifies, it is important to learn and not to guess. To misgender a person (that is, to incorrectly name a person’s gender) in prayer or during a sacred rite undermines the identity of the person, can be personally very painful for that person and implicitly gives the message that this person’s identity is not acceptable in the community. Please bear in mind that semantics matter, sometimes the way a question is asked is equally as important as whether or not the question is asked at all. The difference between “I don’t know what to call you, what is your gender?” and “what pronouns do you use?” is significant. The former conveys discomfort, whereas the latter shows a desire to meet the individual in the space where they are most comfortable.

Supporting Pronoun Diversity

In a well-meaning attempt at full inclusion, many progressive religious spaces have adopted the practice of having all people indicate their pronouns while doing mandatory introductions at the beginning of classes, workshops, or events. While the motivation behind this is good, the practice can be very uncomfortable for people who are not instantly ready to come out or discuss their gender identities. There are creative solutions for this, which maintain the spirit of inclusion but don’t put people on the spot in potentially uncomfortable ways.

Name tags are a great option. Having a variety of preprinted options conveys

Identity is Not a “Preference”

It is important to pay attention to how this question is presented. Asking what pronouns a person uses is more helpful than the commonly asked question “What pronouns do you prefer.” For most people identity speaks to the core of being; it is not a simple preference, but a fundamental aspect of identity, which is why we ask what pronouns people use.

an acceptance of gender diversity. Include multiple options such as they/them/theirs, zi/zir/zirs, he/him/his, she/her/hers. Blank stickers on which people can write their own pronouns are also helpful. Encourage non-trans people, particularly those with more traditional gender presentations, to also include their pronouns on name tags. It is a beautiful statement of solidarity with trans people when those individuals who never are forced to explain their own gender freely choose to state their own pronouns. Let’s shift the responsibility of claiming one’s identity away from those who are perceived as different and open up the conversation of gender diversity and inclusion as a responsibility for the entire faith community.

Some people experience discomfort when they have questions they are not permitted to ask. Spiritual leaders can set boundaries on questions and also remain aware and compassionate about the discomfort of the curious. It is okay to be curious, it is okay to be uncomfortable. It is not okay to violate a person's privacy with inappropriate questions.

A spirit of inclusion is not only about extending an invitation, but also about creating a culture of comfort and safety once those invited have arrived. A community becomes a spiritual home for trans people by widening the breadth of inclusion, welcoming trans identity in all areas of community, and avoiding the questions that make people feel unsafe and objectified.

The good news is that more and more people are learning about gender identity and transgender people through the media, resources like this curriculum, and from personal experiences with a transgender person. Despite all of this, transgender people continue to face extraordinarily high levels of discrimination and violence in our society, although many groups and individuals are working hard to change that. In this final section, we will detail some of the experiences that transgender people face and talk about how, as people of faith, we can take concrete steps to make the world safer and more equitable for people of all genders.

You may also be aware of legislation that has been introduced in the United States, maybe even in your state, which seeks to roll back protections against discrimination and to prevent transgender people from safely using appropriate restrooms. These efforts stem from a lack of knowledge and distort the truth to mistakenly say that transgender people are a threat to public safety, when, in reality, transgender people often experience danger in public places.

Keeping Previous Names in the Past

If a person chooses to change their name as part of their transition, it is up to them whether other people find out what their former name was. Although some people are comfortable with their former name being common knowledge, many others find it important to leave their old name behind. Some trans people even refer to their previous name as their "dead name". Statements such as "I knew Jennifer back when she was Jeffrey" can be invalidating to a person's identity and a violation of their privacy.

Curiosity and Appropriate Boundaries

In the years that the authors of this text have spent educating faith communities on trans inclusion, we have found that one of the largest stumbling blocks is boundary setting, specifically regarding curiosity about trans bodies. It is normal for people to be curious about bodies that are different from their own. However, asking questions about people's bodies makes them feel uncomfortable and unwelcome. Faith communities can support trans people by creating a culture that acknowledges that curiosity is valid, but that not all questions are appropriate. For trans people, faith communities can feel hostile when they are confronted with questions about their bodies, surgeries, medical treatments, or previous names. Additionally, a trans person may wish to share this information but fear that such information may make other congregants feel uncomfortable.

Surgical history, genital configuration, or previous names are not relevant to participation in a faith community. However, many trans people in faith communities report feeling interrogated on these details. Often the inquisitive party is not actually interested in the details of a person's transition, but rather they are trying to fully understand the journey a trans person has taken. Remaining true to our basic assertion, made in the introduction, that those who care about trans inclusion mean well, let's examine what motivates this line of questioning.

When people ask "Have you had the surgery?" they bring up a highly personal reference to a trans person's most intimate body parts. This question also erroneously assumes that transitioning is a simple 1-step process. The reality is that everyone's transition is different and not all trans people transition medically. Those who do transition go through a lengthy process of evaluation, hormones, and surgeries—generally topics far too personal to be casually brought up at coffee hour.

In a faith community context, detailed and inappropriately personal questions may arise when the questioner is actually curious about something entirely different, but doesn't realize their own motivation in asking. Questions about the transition process often come from someone actually wanting to know if the person they are talking to feels that they have reached a comfortable place in their process of transition. However, even when we mean well, our words and questions can inflict unintended pain.

Discussion Questions

- 1) What do you feel is the most positive step towards trans inclusion that your congregation has taken so far?
- 2) Has there been a time in your life when someone approached you with questions so personal about yourself that you felt unsafe answering them? In what ways can you help establish healthy boundaries around curiosity in your own congregation?
- 3) What is your own theological understanding of welcome? Why is it important to you that your faith community become more inclusive?

STANDING WITH TRANSGENDER PEOPLE

Violence

Every few weeks a transgender person is murdered in the United States because of their gender identity; the vast majority of the victims are young transgender women of color. Often these crimes go unsolved. We recognize that both racism and anti-transgender prejudice play critical roles in the deaths of these women. All transgender people—of all races, ages, and identities—face heightened levels of violence. Sometimes the attackers are strangers but they also include teachers, medical personnel, store clerks, intimate partners, government officials, and others who should be protecting people from assault.¹

By contrast, the Department of Justice has recorded zero cases in which transgender people have assaulted others in the restroom. To ban transgender people from certain public spaces, such as restrooms, exposes them to increased levels of violence while doing nothing at all to protect other vulnerable people.

Discrimination

Transgender and gender non-conforming people face unemployment levels more than twice that of the general population, with transgender people of color facing almost triple the national unemployment rate. People also face significant barriers to housing, public accommodations (like hotels, restaurants, gyms and other public spaces), medical care, and more. In fact, there is no area of public life where transgender people do not face overt discrimination. People are turned away from doctor's offices, government services, education and more. Young transgender people drop out of school at alarming rates because of bullying and discrimination.

Occasionally, people argue that making life very difficult for the transgender community will somehow discourage people from transitioning. This is simply not true and creates needless suffering for others.

Discrimination can range from large actions—like firing a person simply because of their gender identity or refusing to provide a transgender person with needed health care—to small things, like refusing to address the person by the names and pronouns that are right for them. Studies have shown that higher levels of discrimination lead to greater negative impacts on the person's wellbeing, increased rates of homelessness, suicide attempts, and substance abuse. The good news is that family acceptance and a supportive community lead to much higher levels of health and positive outcomes.

¹ See the *Injustice at Every Turn: Results of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey*, <http://www.transequality.org/issues/national-transgender-discrimination-survey>, for details.

What Can People of Faith Do?

You have already taken one of the most important steps—learning about transgender people and our lives. Being aware of the gifts and blessings that transgender people bring as well as knowing about the discrimination we face is vital to building a healthy community. Thank you for taking the time to gain this information and consider it.

Our faith already teaches us the most important way to respond: by treating others as we would want to be treated by them. Treating transgender people with respect and compassion, just as you would any other person, is incredibly important. When other people see you act this way, it sends an important message about what you believe and how you feel people should be treated. Regardless of how you feel about someone, the bottom line of our faith says that we should treat others fairly and kindly.



Other Vital Steps You Can Take:

Stand up and speak out if you see a transgender person being subjected to bullying, harassment, violence, or discrimination. No one should be targeted because of who they are. If needed, enlist the help of others. Your voice can make a crucial difference in stopping acts of abuse or harm; you could even save a life.

If people around you express fear or other negative emotions about transgender people, let them know that **you've learned the facts** that transgender people present no danger to you or your family. Make it clear that you think all people should be treated with respect and, when appropriate, let them know that this is an important aspect of your faith.

Support laws in your state and on the federal level that work to end discrimination against transgender people, including children and youth. It is vital that we resist efforts to erode or overturn these laws. These laws provide a clear path for employers and educators to follow in treating everyone fairly and make it possible for those who have experienced discrimination to address it.

Work to end racial injustice and inequity. Transgender people of color face higher levels of discrimination and violence when they are targeted for their race and their gender identity. Efforts to end racism will benefit those who experience the highest levels of discrimination, including transgender people.

Address violence. Transgender people, particularly transgender women of color, continue to be murdered at an alarming rate. Work with community leaders and public officials to decrease violence in your area. Be willing to offer space for survivors of violence, including holding vigils and memorials for those who have been killed. Sometimes victims' families have difficulty finding a religious space in which to hold a funeral; offer comfort at this most painful time by stepping up.

Continue to improve your community and include transgender people in your advocacy for fairer housing, quality education, safe shelters, and other needs that people have. Knowing that transgender people experience discrimination in housing, consider how they might be affected by a lack of affordable housing in your neighborhood. Because transgender people face high rates of poverty, ask if transgender people feel comfortable coming to your food pantry. If your community supports programs for the homeless, ask if transgender people are welcomed and safe at the facility. This awareness can transform the effectiveness of your programs and provide access for some of the people in greatest need who are often excluded from other places that might help them.

Let transgender people and families with transgender children and youth know that your community of faith is a place where they are welcome to worship and fellowship. There are likely to be more people in your community than you realize who have transgender family members. Having a safe haven in your faith community can help people deal with the negative impacts of discrimination.

People of faith and our synagogues, churches, mosques, temples, and other communities play an important role as leaders in our society. We can model treating transgender people—and all others—with dignity and respect, knowing that we are all children of God. Your work to end the discrimination and suffering experienced by those who are marginalized in our society is important and needed in our world, whether you do so in large or small ways.

Discussion Questions

- 1) What responsibility do we, as people of faith, to those who are being discriminated against?
- 2) How do you think your community could help those who have been victims of violence and their families?
- 3) What steps could you take as a community to show your solidarity with transgender people?

Transgender People and Bathroom Use

Laws which seek to limit transgender people's access to public facilities or force them to use a restroom which is different from their gender presentation have been proposed—and in some cases passed—in states around the country. You can learn more about this from the National Center for Transgender Equality: <http://www.transequality.org/issues/resources/transgender-people-and-bathroom-access>

It is most important to recognize that:

- Safety and privacy in restrooms is important to all of us. In the more than 200 cities and 18 states that have laws protecting LGBTQ people from discrimination, including allowing transgender people to use the restroom which fits the gender they live every day. There has been no increase in public safety incidents in any of those places, including where there have been non-discrimination laws for a long time.
- Transgender people regularly face harassment and violence in restrooms and can suffer negative health impacts when unable to find a safe place to relieve themselves. You can read more about this in the results of the US Trans Survey: <http://www.ustranssurvey.org/preliminary-findings>
- Targeting transgender people and their bathroom use only distracts lawmakers from addressing the real problems that girls and women face. Efforts to address violence against women should focus on preventing actual dangers; blaming a minority group does nothing to help.

Attempts to prevent any one group of people from accessing public spaces is a dangerous precedent. All people should have equal access to public spaces.

CONCLUSION

Thank you for taking the time to read this resource. We hope that the information and the discussion questions have given you new insights into trans people as well as offering you new ways to support and welcome them into your community. We hope that this is just the first step of many that you will take to support transgender people!





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