

APPENDIX NINE

Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

How practiced is your congregation at having conversations with and about bisexual and transgender people? If you are like most, these conversations, if they happen at all, are very few and far between. The silence, the complexity, and the mystery of the issues surrounding sexual orientation and gender identity can make us feel inadequate and discourage us from engaging in public conversation.

As we have stated elsewhere, it is so important to avoid a paternalistic approach in your Welcoming Process. This can happen when well-intentioned people enter into the Process in order to do something for “those poor homosexuals.” This attitude does not bring people together. It only helps to further divide; reinforcing the idea that one group is “other” and the object of pity. Your Welcoming Process is not a mission of mercy. Rather, it is the pursuit of justice. And that distinction in intent is crucial.

There is a similar attitude to be avoided when dealing with bisexual and transgender issues. If handled clumsily, bisexual and transgender people can feel put on display as curiosities. Instead, we recommend that the Welcoming Process strive to create a space where bisexual and transgender people are empowered to share their stories as full and equal children of God.

If this conversation is fraught with such danger, why include it in your Welcoming Process? We choose to include it because this conversation is not about “them.” Instead, these conversations are about US! We ALL have sexual orientation and gender identity. Our society’s very rigid categories of “either/or,” “male/female,” and “gay/straight” simply do not serve any of us. The understandings to be gained by this conversation can be a huge gift to the Church. They can lead to a world where all of us – not just bisexual and transgender people – are free to more fully become the “fearfully and wonderfully made” human-beings God created us to be.

In this appendix, we will provide a basic level of understanding of the binary system of sexual orientation and gender identity, explore how that system has hurt people over time, and look at a more expansive view. With this background, you will be better equipped to assist your congregation in starting these conversations. There are SO MANY resources out there, but not all of them are of equal value. The information in this appendix can also assist you in evaluating potential resources for use in your Welcoming Process.

LIFE’S FIRST QUESTION

At the moment of birth, there is a mother, a new-born, a doctor, and a question: “Is it a boy or a girl?” The birth certificate has two boxes, and only one can be checked.

M

F

This is an example of the gender binary system, where there are two, and only two, very distinct options. It is one or the other, male or female. And the way the medical professional (such as doctor or midwife) answers that question – “Is it a boy or a girl?” – has ramifications throughout one’s entire life. Future options, expectations, and opportunities all hinge on which box is checked. And interestingly, notice that the very question – “Is it...?” – withholds personhood until a gender is assigned.

Let’s look at some of the implications of the gender binary system when “F” is checked on the birth certificate.

SEX is determined on the basis of physical characteristics. If the baby appears to have female external genitalia, then the sex is FEMALE.

GENDER IDENTITY is one’s internal sense of self as a gendered person. If the sex is female, then the assumed gender identity is WOMAN.

GENDER EXPRESSION is how we perform our gender. This includes the complex set of societal roles, behaviors, and appearance. If the sex is female, then the assumed gender expression is FEMININE.

SEXUAL ORIENTATION: In the gender binary system, even the person to whom one is attracted is determined by one’s sex. If the sex is female, then the attraction will be toward MEN.

And when “M” is checked...

SEX: If the baby appears to have male external genitalia, then the sex is MALE.

GENDER IDENTITY: If the sex is male, then the assumed gender identity is MAN.

GENDER EXPRESSION: If the sex is male, then the assumed gender expression is MASCULINE.

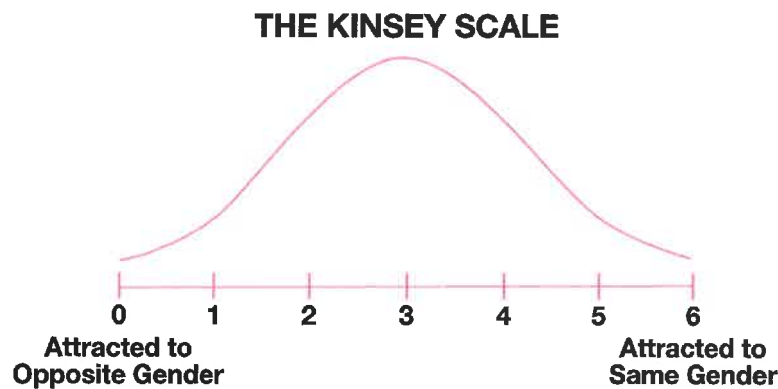
SEXUAL ORIENTATION: In the gender binary system, if the sex is male, then the attraction will be toward WOMEN.

THE GENDER BINARY SYSTEM

SEX	Female	Male
GENDER IDENTITY	Woman	Man
GENDER EXPRESSION	Feminine	Masculine
SEXUAL ORIENTATION	Attracted to Men	Attracted to Women

Public Discourse

In our public conversations, we began to hear the voices of those for whom the gender binary system was not working. For example, “Just because I am a woman does not mean that I am attracted to men.” One of the earlier systems to present a more complex understanding of sexual orientation was the Kinsey Scale, developed in the 1940’s and 50’s by Dr. Alfred Kinsey. Instead of people falling into one or the other of the gender binary system’s only two choices, he proposed that people actually fell on a continuum – a spectrum or range from zero to six, where zero represented being solely attracted to the opposite gender and six represented being solely attracted to the same gender.



Based on his extensive research, Kinsey further proposed that very few people fell on either end of that continuum. Most, his research found, fell somewhere in the middle. People having a mix of attractions to both opposite and same genders may identify as bisexual.

While our understanding of sexual orientation has become more complex, so too have our understandings of sex and gender. Like sexual orientation, we have learned that none of these components - sex; gender identity or gender expression – are distinct either/or categories. Each can be placed on a continuum. So as time has progressed, we have learned that the artificial confines of the gender binary system have failed to include everyone.

Sex is determined not only by external genitalia, but by reproductive organs, chromosomes, and hormones. And these four factors can appear in any one person in an infinite number of variations. People with ambiguous genitalia or other biological complexities (such as an unusual chromosomal pattern or hormonal shifts) may identify as Intersex. Until very recently, it was

common medical practice for doctors to respond to intersex babies by simply choosing a sex and making surgical modifications to the child's genitalia to "resolve" the ambiguity. The parents may or may not have even been consulted or informed. As these children developed, they often experienced great emotional trauma when the sex chosen for them did not align with their own sense of gender identity.

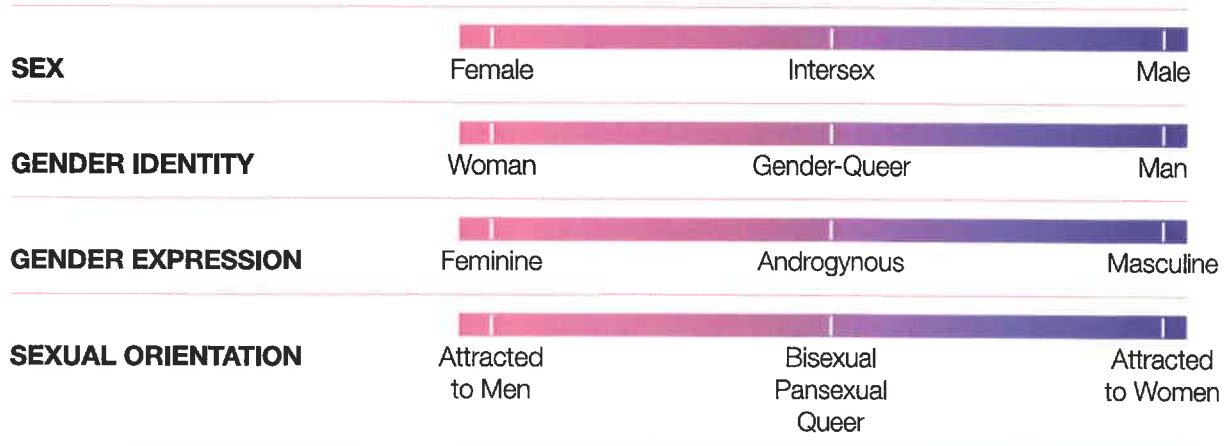
Gender identity is one's own sense of self. For most people, our sense of our own gender aligns with the category originally marked on our birth certificate. This is referred to as cisgender. For transgender people, our self-experienced gender is in some way different from the category marked on our birth certificate. For example, a child is raised as a boy but insists "I am a girl." In the same way that sex is not an either/or category, gender identity can also be experienced on a continuum. Gender identity can be experienced as a combination of woman AND man. Gender identity can also be experienced as NEITHER woman NOR man. Some people in the middle of the gender identity spectrum identify as gender-queer to honor their experience of not fitting completely in the category of woman or man.

Gender expression is how we live as a gendered person, including our behaviors, clothing choices, careers, and hobbies. In the gender binary system, gender expression is guided by a complex set of rules of behavior and presentation about what is appropriate for women and for men. These rules can be unspoken, or they can be taught specifically: "A lady does not speak until spoken to." "Boys don't cry." "A woman's place is in the kitchen." "A real man provides for his family." Because these rules are culturally defined, they can shift from place to place or over time. The rules for gender expression are reinforced through punishments, ranging in severity from a withering glance to being beaten and left for dead. When we think about our own experiences as a child, most of us can remember a time when we were punished in some way for behaving in ways that did not fit society's expectations for our gender. Transgender people can be at daily risk for the most severe of these punishments when they are visible in their transgender status. People whose gender presentation does not fit the rigid confines of the binary system may identify as gender non-conforming. People whose gender expression is a nearly-equal combination of masculine and feminine may identify as androgynous.

To summarize, sex, gender identity and gender expression can be experienced on a continuum, creating a nearly infinite combination of the three components. The binary gender system says that there are only two genders. Here, we can see that gender is truly far more complex than that. How does this complex understanding of gender affect our understanding of sexual orientation?

Remember in the graph of the Kinsey scale, the ends of the scale refer to same and opposite gender. How can there be a same or opposite with gender in such a mix? This is why some people who are attracted to people of a variety of genders identify not as bisexual (which still implies that there are only two genders) but as pansexual or queer. For them, these words better reflect their experience of falling in love with a person rather than a gender.

SEX, GENDER AND SEXUAL ORIENTATION: A MORE NUANCED VIEW



Because most of us have been so steeped in the binary gender system, some of these concepts can seem very foreign to us. This can be a lot of information to take in. So, let's pause and remember why we are exploring these ideas. In the Welcoming Process, we want to deepen and expand our ability to welcome people of all sexual orientations and gender identities. Too often, we continue to hear the stories of people who have been told that God does not love them as they are. Faith communities struggle to respond with hospitality and true welcome to people who are different, particularly differences in gender identity or expression.

If, during the course of your educational opportunities, you include a panel with transgender people, we urge you to invite everyone present to ask themselves a few questions before asking personal questions of any of the panelists. "Why am I asking?" "Will this question help me to know this person more deeply as a fellow human being?" "Would this question be appropriate to ask of different people and in a different setting?"

THE CURIOSITY CONTINUUM



Always keep in mind that the goal of this work is to break down the walls that divide us, and reinforcing the perception that transgender people are exotic oddities does not serve that goal. Questions about a person's genitalia, whether or not they have had "the surgery," their sex lives, etc., are deeply personal. If questions like these arise, we urge you to gently intervene so that the panelist isn't forced into an awkward situation. For these touchier questions, there are answers aplenty on the internet.

Know that it is so easy for the conversation to get lost down the rabbit hole of definitions... "Now what exactly is the difference between transgender and transsexual?" The goal for both you as a facilitator and for your congregation is not to make you experts. Rather, the goal is to give you a basic understanding in order to allow you to extend a more meaningful welcome to transgender and bisexual people. If you are hungry for more information, there are a lot of good resources out there. transACTION, published by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force's Institute for Welcoming Resources is an excellent three-session congregational curriculum on transgender issues. It is available as a free download at www.WelcomingResources.org. See Appendix Twelve for suggestions on where to find more resources.

EXERCISE

After presenting the information on this more complex view of sex, gender, and sexual orientation, handout copies of the **Complex Identities worksheet**.

In order to do this exercise while maintaining a sense of personal safety, here are some things to ask everyone present to consider.

- Practice self-care. These are personal questions, and you may be surprised by what feelings arise. You may be in a group you've known for quite some time and trust, or this group could be mostly acquaintances or strangers. During times of open discussion, you can reveal as much or as little as you care to.
- At the same time, recognize that transgender folks are our teachers. Every single day that they are seen in public is a courageous act of self-revelation. Invite folks to be inspired by their courage and to push themselves a bit.

People may be concerned about others being able to see their worksheets as they fill them out. So invite folks to spread throughout the room if they'd like to do this exercise more on their own.

Ask people to plot themselves on each of the four continua. Where do they fall today, right now, right here. Give them a few minutes to reflect and put their marks on the page.

Next, hand out crayons to everyone and ask them to now think about themselves as a kindergarten-age child (or the earliest self they can remember). How did you think of yourself? What were your favorite clothes to wear? Did you have to learn lessons about how a girl or a boy was expected to act? Ask them now to plot their childhood self on each of the continua on the worksheet.

As a facilitator of this exercise, you now have a few options.

1. If folks have spread out around the room, ask them to return to their seats. Invite people, as they are comfortable, to share what that experience was like. Did you learn anything new about yourself? Any insights?
2. As people are returning to their seats, collect everyone's worksheets. After shuffling them, hand them back out so that no one has their own original worksheet. Form a continuum on the floor, identify what each end signifies, and ask everyone to stand on the spot indicated on the worksheet they are now holding. Invite the group to discuss what they observe. Now ask them to move to their crayon-marked spot. What has changed?

We are all part of the Body of Christ. And for far too long, contrary to the instructions of scripture, the Church has said to many of its members, "I have no need for you." The Church is weakened with every person shut out. We are all better when we are whole. God loves diversity – just look at creation! A sincere and open welcome from your congregation fosters diversity, and with that growing diversity you will not lose who you are – you will grow more closely into the Church that God calls us all to be.