

4 VIEWS ON PASTORING LGBTQ TEENAGERS
Effective Ministry to Gay, Bi, Trans, Queer,
and Questioning Students Among Us

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INTRODUCTION

I'm going to be 100% transparent with you: *We want this book to change you.*

On one hand, we're not trying to “convert” you to a particular theology (unless that means that we want to “convert” you to a theology that truly loves teenagers in every conceivable category—gay, straight, bisexual, cisgender, transgender, gender fluid, queer, or simply wondering about one of these identity and gender issues). But it would be dishonest to imply we don't have an agenda in publishing this book as the first in our 4 Views series.

I mean, you bought this book from an organization called The Youth Cartel. You didn't actually think we'd be, uh... *tender*, did you?

We don't, however, have a liberal agenda (hidden or brazen). And we certainly don't have a conservative agenda. But we do have an agenda, and we want to be forthright about that.

We know for a fact that teenagers struggling with sexuality experience a way-higher-than-average amount of bullying. We know they consider suicide way more than average. And we know *Way Too Many* of them experience condemnation and judgment from the church.

We also know that for transgender teens, the percentages mentioned in the previous paragraph are even terrifyingly higher.

We know that for most gay and trans teens, the church is about the *least* safe place on earth. And we hope that in some way, this book will move the needle on that horrific reality.

I was particularly moved when reading the results of the largest study ever conducted on the faith of LGBTQ peoples (not just teenagers but all ages), reported in Andrew Marin's remarkable book, *Us Versus Us: The Untold Story of Religion and the LGBT Community* (NavPress,

2016). In short, one surprising finding of the study was that LGBTQ people score more than 10% higher than the general population when it comes to having a background in the Christian church (in America, that is). That fact itself is fascinating and worthy of reflection. The research team dug deep into the data, cross-referencing reams of data from other questions and digging into the responses from open-ended prompts.

They discovered that a large portion of *young teens* experiencing same-sex attraction (SSA) look for ways to rid themselves of the attraction they don't desire to have. Prior to their young teen years, survey respondents may have been aware of their SSA; but the questions (and often pain and fear) surrounding these issues become particularly urgent to young teens stepping into the developmentally normative work of identity formation.

Here's the news for youth workers (and churches in general): A statistically significant percentage of young teens experiencing SSA but *without* prior church experience turn to the church as a means of turning to God. Did you catch that? Young teens without prior church experience start attending church and/or youth programs specifically because of their SSA. They are looking, primarily, for answers and help (and often hoping that God will remove their SSA).

Sadly, the statistics also show that the vast majority of teens experiencing SSA *do not find help* in the church (all too often experiencing condemnation and rejection): The majority of LGBT adults report leaving the church (but not their faith) during their later teen years.

Teenagers are in our midst, looking for help; and we have been—for a very, very long time—failing them.

This is one of the reasons I am so firmly in agreement with Andy Stanley's insistence that the church should be the safest place to talk about anything, including SSA.

So we hope this book results in change. I know working on it has had

a huge impact on me.

What This Book Isn't (And What It Is)

When The Youth Cartel decided to pursue a series of dialogue books around a four-views approach, we knew this topic had to be our first shot. This comes from the conviction, borne out of interactions with countless youth workers, that most in our tribe passionately want to be effective in ministry to teenagers but don't know how to proceed with LGBTQ young people.

But our observation was that there wasn't much to be gained by hosting another debate about what the Bible says (or doesn't say). There are *plenty* of other places to read about those debates—and we encourage you to read, listen, watch. Be informed about “both sides.” (Really, it's essential that you compassionately understand how others who represent a biblical viewpoint divergent from yours think and interpret Scripture.) Instead, over and over again, we heard youth workers saying they needed more pragmatic help: *What do I do when a teenager comes out to me? How do I respond in a way that's helpful rather than creating additional problems?*

So this book is not a theological debate. We set out to find a handful of youth workers with experience in pastoring LGBTQ teens. We didn't want theory but practice. We didn't want propositions from someone who didn't actually know real-life LGBTQ teenagers; we wanted a collection of voices who have wrestled with these issues *because* they are involved with actual LGBTQ teenagers (and those teenagers' parents). We intentionally looked for a diversity of voices, which was a challenge that took roughly a year of conversations and dialogue.

We wanted this book to feel like you, the reader, are having a conversation with these four writers. Or at the least, we wanted you to be able to be a fly on the wall while the four of them had a meaningful conversation, one marked by compassion and respect.

This book is *not* intended to convert you to one of the four views represented. While each of the four writers believes strongly in their

perspective (as they should), the tone is intentionally more “this is what I’ve learned” than “do this or you’re an idiot.”

A Surprise During Development (And What It Taught Us)

After working for so long to find four writers who were clearly different from one another in both experience and theological perspective, we were a little surprised to discover something as first drafts of chapters started to take shape. *Because* these writers are all relationally involved with real teenagers struggling with LGBTQ questions (and not merely standing on a soap box), we discovered that their suggestions were less differing than we’d assumed they would be. This revealed something critical that I’d like to now posit as an axiom here at the get go:

One cannot work out her approach to ministry with LGBTQ teenagers apart from relationships with real LGBTQ teenagers.

I’d even go so far as to say that you and your church can’t effectively work out your *theology* in this area apart from real relationships (even though theological or biblical frameworks are not the focus of this book). Most youth workers intuitively know this, though they may be under pressure to align themselves with a statement created by others. Youth workers, for the most part, are *practical theologians* not systematic theologians. Youth workers live in the real world with complicated, messy, passionate, beautiful teenagers and can’t shake the divine compulsion to be missional, to meet real teenagers where they are, bringing a contextualized gospel to their world in hopes of having real teenagers connect with the real Jesus.

Ultimately, that’s our hope for you: that you would be better equipped to help LGBTQ teenagers and those who are questioning or wondering connect with the real Jesus, rather than a polity or theological framework.

A Bit of Self-Exposure

As the general editor of this book, I think it’s fair that I reveal some of my own journey (much of which I unpack in more detail in one of the two appendices). My own daughter, as a junior in high school,

came out to me and my wife as bisexual. Months later, she told us that “bi” probably wasn’t the full truth, that she was gay. About eighteen months later, Riley told us she was trans and wanted to take steps to transition to presenting as a male. And about six months after that, Riley settled on being gender neutral, using gender-neutral pronouns (they/their/them) and changing their name (Riley was Liesl). That was approximately five years ago.

As a result, my wife and I have walked this journey, not only as youth workers but as parents, from an extremely intimate and personal point of view. We’ve wrestled and cried and prayed and had a thousand conversations with our oldest child, who’s now twenty-three years old (and many conversations with our younger son). We’ve spoken with our local youth ministry leaders, when Riley was still involved in the youth group. We’ve processed with national ministry leaders from a wide variety of perspectives. We’ve watched online videos and read many books, some of which were helpful and some of which were not. And I’ll confirm right here that we have a wonderful and loving relationship with Riley and have learned so much from them. They were gracious and patient with us as we processed. (Shoot, even figuring out how to use plural pronouns took me a good two years!)

For many of these processing years, I said to those close to me that I didn’t think “helping people figure out LGBTQ issues” was part of my calling and that I wanted to focus my ministry work on what God had clearly called me to. But as time has passed and I’ve had more and more and more conversations with youth workers who need help, I’ve realized that this *has become* part of my calling. I, Mark Oestreicher, want to help you, youth worker, in both understanding and practice. I want you to be better equipped to *not* add to the high percentage of questioning teenagers who leave the church because they’ve only experienced what they perceive as condemnation. (That “what they perceive” part is super important, and I’ll unpack that a bit more in the appendix.)

So while I don’t hope that this book converts you to a particular theology, I do hope—desperately—that this book will result in the

teenagers you interact with experiencing a safe and loving mentor, a pastor (whatever your title or employment) who embraces them in the midst of their questions and provisional conclusions.

I invite you to read the pages that follow with an open mind (doing so is *not* a threat to your beliefs!), to read with compassion and a desire to learn. Allow Gemma, Nick, Shelley, and Eric to speak honestly with you. Know that they are not standing in judgment of you and they do not come to this armed for battle. They, along with me, invite you into dialogue, with the hope that God's Spirit would guide you.

– **Mark Oestreicher**
General Editor

VIEW 1: INTEGRITY AND IMAGO DEI



BY GEMMA DUNNING

I've been a sister, a physical one, longer than I've been a Christian. When my little sibling was born she was so small and precious, a tiny bundle of fragility that I swore as a big sister to protect and look after for all of my days. Little did I know that this would kick in much sooner than teenage bullies in the playground. She was a few weeks old when she got sick, really sick; and it looked like we might lose her, not just once but twice. To help us navigate this season we were given a sleep mat, a monitor that sounded an alarm whenever my sister stopped breathing, alerting us to a medical need and calling the whole family into action.

Living with this sense of impending doom had far bigger effects on the family. Even when the alarm was silent, we would all take turns watching the sleeping child, counting the breaths—always mindful, always checking in with each other: “Is she okay?” My big sister responsibility increased tenfold! Every scraped knee, every school report, there I was with her in it, right by her side.

Fast-forward to her late teens and, as a big sister, I maintained my

sense of responsibility by repeatedly checking in with her—the annoying big sister always on her case, always asking awkward questions that more often than not, would result in me being told to “jog on.” As we have grown up together, my love for her has only grown. That’s what happens right? A unique bond bigger than anything; sisters journeying together through the best of times and the worst of times. I always thought of myself as a sister who would always have her back, no matter what, in it for the long haul, dedicated to her by nature of our very birth. Even if, as we grew, our beliefs shifted into different paths. We would always have each other, united in love. So, you can imagine my heartbreak when I happened to overhear her talking to her friend: “No, you just don’t understand. I really can’t tell her. You don’t get it, she’s, she’s... religious. She’ll hate me.”

Crushed can’t even begin to sum it up. Someone who knew me so well, who I thought knew I loved her 100% without any condition or agenda, actually thought that her very being would change the nature of our relationship. She believed, deep in her gut, that my faith would make her being gay too much for me. That it would be too big a risk to tell me something she’d been struggling alone with for fear that I would not just no longer love her but actually despise her. What could I have possibly done to make her feel that this would be my reaction?

Truth is there wasn’t anything in particular. Nothing she could pinpoint apart from the usual “we all know what the church thinks.” And yet in that context the most painful thing for me was that this was my sister, my flesh and blood. We weren’t talking about someone I saw once a week; we were talking about someone who knew the very secrets of my heart, who was with me for every embarrassing childhood photo, and for whom this couldn’t have been further from the truth. Surely she knew that I would always love her?

I couldn’t wallow in the pain of this experience though; I had to see it for the call to action it was. For it quickly got me thinking: If she felt like this about me and she knows me, then what would those outside of my family think who didn’t know me? What would my neighbors expect from me? And what message were the young people of our

town hearing not just from me but from the wider church? It taught me that silence has its own voice—one that can cause damage and hold people hostage and is so often very different from the truth.

And as for my sister and I, well I bottled out the cringing conversation and texted her. It simply said:

“I know you are gay. I love you. It doesn’t change one thing about us. It will be okay.”

MY JOURNEY

I’ve been a youth worker in the United Kingdom for the last nineteen years, working with a broad range of young people both within and outside of the church setting; but it wasn’t until 2009 that I read Andrew Marin’s story of building bridges from the church to the LGBTQ community, *Love Is an Orientation*, and suddenly woke up.¹ The words on its pages felt like a call for me to engage more actively in my own neighborhood of Bournemouth on the South Coast of England. It left me praying that perhaps God was calling others to stir up a movement of people in my neighborhood that could embody some of the outreach aspects of Marin’s work. Bournemouth is recognized as being the fifth largest LGBTQ community in the UK—a physical piece of land just outside the town center that, despite being surrounded by churches, had no public contact with Christians outside of the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) denomination. While the MCC was doing a grand job, I believed (and still do) that the kingdom of God was bigger and more diverse than any one denomination; and seeing a town full of churches who so publicly ignored a whole people group grated on me.

The grating increased; and in response to the discomfort God

1. Andrew Marin, *Love Is an Orientation: Elevating the Conversation with the Gay Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: IVP, 2009).

was laying on my heart I gave copies of Marin's book to lots of friends, all of whom had the potential to start a movement of change in the community. However, that didn't really go as well as I had hoped. Sure, people were moved by his words and by the vision that more could be done to love our neighbors; but the resounding cry came back: "When you start something, let us know and we'll join in."

The only problem was that I hadn't planned on starting anything. I'm actually averse to starting anything, to be honest. I have seen many a great "project" pop up and make a big splash only to lose steam, run out of money, or (far too often) lose its core leader. (Not to mention the reality that I have never really liked anything branded. The non-conformist in me likes the unique, bespoke individual; and to be a movement, there needs to at least be a hoodie and a brand for people to connect with, doesn't there?) So things went a bit quiet. I prayed that God would bring back a sense of peace and comfort, so I could carry on as I had been.

Then the little niggles became a big hurting mess right on my own doorstep, and it became hard to ignore God. I remember the day my son came home and told me what was happening at school. A student, one of his friends in an all-boys secondary school (for eleven- to eighteen-year-olds) was transitioning from male to female; and, to put it nicely, it wasn't the best of times for the student, the school, or the student's friends. And that student has their own story to tell. Perhaps they will at some point, but it's not for me to share anything else other than that watching this situation unfold around me was a catalyst for me. No longer could I sit back; I needed to learn more about LGBTQ issues to be able to guide my child as he loved and supported his friend. The youth worker within me knew I need some training; but back then—and sadly even today—there were very few resources to draw on.

The town has a great LGBTQ youth nonprofit, so I approached them and asked if I could volunteer. Naively, I thought

they would jump at the chance of having a volunteer so experienced in youth work, but sadly this was not the case. I submitted my profile, which detailed my degree in theology and previous church-based experience. Being a non-religious organization, they didn't have a great working knowledge of the denominational structures we have; so, seeing that I was linked to a Baptist church, their only line of reference was to Westboro Baptist Church. As you can imagine, this proved for some interesting conversations—blunt ones, about agendas and whether I could separate my faith from my youth work practice. After much chatting, they could see it was unlikely I would be rocking up with a "God Hates Fags" banner; so thankfully they gave me a trial slot to see how we all felt about working together.

As they say, the rest is history. I went from volunteering once a week to twice a week, to being a staff member quite quickly. And I learned a lot from the fellow staff and the young people. But while I was learning a lot about LGBTQ issues and listening to lots of young people share their experiences and stories with me, there was still a black hole as far as youth work resources for me to draw from. So, as you do, I used some postgraduate work to seek answers to my own questions.

This drew me toward adapting an existing informal education theory in order to work with young people on a one-to-one basis as they wrestled with their faith and gender identity and/or sexual orientation. It meant that most of the time I was a general LGBTQ youth worker working with a broad range of LGBTQ youth; but when the nonprofit was approached to support a young person of faith, I was the worker allocated to be their one-to-one support.

This experience means I have had too many teenagers to count sit before me with suicidal thoughts, self-harm scars, and internal heart wounds from theology that has told them their young selves are an abomination. I have met many beautiful, creative, gifted young people who are no longer able to serve

in any capacity in their churches because they had the integrity to share with their church leader about their same-sex feelings. And sadly, I have met too many young people who—despite no actual sexual experience with anyone—have been refused sacraments such as communion and baptism.

As an evangelical, I am passionate about seeing young people encounter the fullness of life offered by Jesus. My heart's desire though is not just merely to see young people survive, but to equip and enable them to thrive. However, my experience tells me that for many LGBTQ young people, the church is not a source of flourishing. I am eternally grateful for that brilliant nonprofit and their committed bunch of youth workers—many of whom are volunteers giving back to either repay support they themselves had or to be the change in the lives of others after lacking support in their own journeys. They have modeled time and time again what it is to put young people's welfare at the heart of the matter, and they are literal lifesavers.

This then led to many beautiful experiences. From leading "Carols and Cocktails" in a local bar to repeated involvement with the local pride parade to being part of some truly moving vigils. My LGBTQ neighbors became my friends—friends who knew I was a Christian and, as such, would ask me to do Christian things like pray, respond in pastoral situations, share wisdom and advice, and lead community events.

As our relationships shifted from neighbors to friends, it also had some unforeseen side effects and gifted me with a community that stood by me and my family when we needed support. In fact, my first term's worth of fees at Bristol Baptist College, as I studied for training as a Baptist minister, were paid for by Bournemouth's Bourne Free Committee—that's the committee who organize the local gay pride parade and events around it. I believe this is a first and not a headline many would expect to hear. And it is from this experience that I have just moved to London to be a minister within the Baptist Union of Great Britain, a church and denomination with a core value of

inclusion that is expressed in a variety of ways.

On the side, over the last few years, I have also been a pastoral facilitator for Diverse Church, a UK-based online support network of over a thousand LGBTQ Christians (and their parents), many of whom are under thirty years old. And I have supported a number of LGBTQ Christian organizations—such as Christians at Pride and Affirm, a UK network of Baptist Christians working together for LGBTQ inclusion.

But, sadly, not many friends from the church have come along with me on this adventure. This mission has led to being cut off, removed, and—at times—ridiculed among my would-be Christian peers. I have been uninvited from speaking at events, uninvited from children's christenings, and had more than the average struggle to find a place in ministerial training—proving that the wider expression of church still has some really big issues around this topic to wrestle with in the days ahead.

WHAT DRIVES MY VIEW

Along the way, in my journey, I have picked up a few tidbits, learned some hard lessons, and had to ask big internal questions about how I personally respond to young people who identify as LGBTQ and all the letters we often leave out. To be clear, I'm not going to exposit Scripture and pull out the usual passages, as there has already been much written on this. Nor can I provide all the answers to all the questions you may have; this is just one chapter. I can, on the other hand, offer some reflections that have been, for me, key areas of learning, key concepts that have pushed my ministry in the direction it's gone. These are the ideas that integrity ought to matter to Christians as much as we say it does and that if we say we are all made in the image of God—the *Imago Dei*—then we must affirm that LGBTQ individuals are also made in the image of God.

However, it's important for you to note that since I'm far from perfect, my reflections on living out these concepts are far from perfect. Each

and every day I am still on a journey, learning something new and heading in a new direction from and with the beautiful humans God has grafted into my life. Missionary Vincent Donovan quotes wise words from a young collegiate in his book, *Christianity Rediscovered*:

“In working with young people, do not try to call them back to where they were, and do not try to call them to where you are, as beautiful as that place may seem to you. You must have the courage to go with them to a place that neither you nor they have ever been before.”²

Integrity and Imago Dei: Full Disclosure

In our evangelical circles, we talk a lot about the importance of having integrity and being open to the concept of being fully known to those who disciple us. It’s paramount to any individual’s growth and development, particularly in the teenage years when young people are learning, making mistakes, and testing boundaries. And yet, often when our young people disclose who they are in all their LGBTQ-ness, despite modeling true integrity in that moment, we, the church, fail to thank them for that integrity and honesty. Often, at best, we reduce our conversations to whispers in the shadows, monitoring their friendships and relationships, filtering the leadership opportunities we give them, and praying they don’t sign up for summer camp so we don’t have to have those awkward “which room” conversations. At worst, we the people of God can so often make it hard for the young person to remain in the life of the church. So much so that they leave, often without a sense of faith to hold on to and losing many of their church-based friends en route.

As youth workers, all too often our response can be to jump far too quickly to trying to fix the issue; and that, more often than not, means we fail to acknowledge what guts and courage it takes a young person to speak up. Disclosing a deeply personal truth to someone who sits in a place of power and position over them takes a lot of courage. Now, I know some of you are thinking, “Hold on. I don’t have any

power.” And perhaps that’s how you see yourself, but to a young person attending a group where you are a worker, paid or not, you do have power by default. And more than this, you are often a worker who is also a peer to their parents, older siblings, life-long family friends, teachers, community leaders, etc. By confiding in you, there is much at risk for that young person; and, as such, we need to not just assume they know we are thankful to them for trusting us with a part of themselves. Instead we need to actively say something to them about it. In matters of LGBTQ-ness, the silence and the words we fail to speak can have such devastating unintended effects.

I firmly believe that the church should be the safest place for a young person to talk about anything—including (but not exclusively) LGBTQ topics.

“Disclosing a deeply personal truth to someone who sits in a place of power and position over them takes a lot of courage.”

If a young person has come to you, it is because they feel safe enough to do so. So before you respond to any young person about your own theological stance, the stance of the church, or even suggest praying together in response, we need to—as youth workers—thank, if not physically applaud, young people for modeling to us the very thing we talk so much about: *integrity*. They need to hear that the sleepless nights, the stressed-out days, and the weeks rehearsing every possible outcome of this action were not in vain. As such, take a disclosure of this nature as a youth work win. Applaud and champion young people who are able to have these difficult conversations with you and credit them by modeling some integrity back.

Integrity and Imago Dei: Our Response

“What? Model it back? What does that look like in this context?” I can almost hear you asking. Well, here is the biggest thing I have learned over the last decade in youth ministry...

It is absolutely fine to acknowledge to a young person that you don’t know everything about everything.

2. Vincent J. Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered: An Epistle from the Masai* (London: SCM Press, 1982) p. vii.