

Finding a Better Way: Conversations with Gender/Sexual Minority Youth

Setting the Table

In this video, we're going to explore compassionate, faith-filled conversations with gender and sexual minority youth and young adults. It's a big and sometimes intimidating topic so for starters, we probably need to be sure we are standing in the same place.

Now some of you are probably saying, "Good luck with that!" Right now, there is a broad continuum of interpretations from those who know and love Jesus when it comes to scriptures that refer to sexuality. But we're actually not going to review or resolve all of that here today. That's not what this time is about.

Instead, we're going to talk about having conversations - conversations that come from a place where we can stand together as people of God WITH God.

All over Scripture we see that God has a particularly soft spot in his heart for the vulnerable. Think back to Jesus' encounters with those that were seen as "outsiders" - the ones who weren't walking in step with the religious expectations of the day¹. He always pushed back against disgrace and shame and protected them from harm - as they were - where they were. He stands beside the vulnerable with compassion and he invites us to come and join him.

There are a lot of factors that create vulnerability in young people and young adults - things like family disconnectedness, mental health challenges, abuse, difficult life situations... These things leave some youth *in need of special care and attention* - which is exactly how the dictionary defines the word "vulnerable." Vulnerable doesn't mean weak - it means that for some reason that person is *bearing extra weight on their shoulders*. This is a good description of what it feels like for many LGBTQ youth -- partly because of the way those around them - including the church - have responded to them. We need to own our part in this and learn to move forward in a better way.

So let's go back to that definition of vulnerable - *in need of extra care and attention*. In some ways, just "caring" seems like a pretty low bar for ministry. But over the past few years multiple studies have found that only one third² of youth and young adults are saying that they *feel* deeply cared for by those around them. Learning how to care in a way that actually *resonates* with the person in front of you is hard work - it's not simple - but it is exactly what vulnerable youth need from the people of God.

¹ Matthew 20:29-34; Mark 1:40-44; Mark 5:25-34; Luke 13:10-17; Luke 19:1-9; John 4:1-26; John 7:53-8:11

² www.barna.com/research/global-connection-isolation/

So how does “vulnerability” show itself in gender and sexual minority youth?³ Here are a few examples:

- 82% of bisexual and non-binary youth say they feel unhappy *most* of the time.
- 65% of LGBTQ youth struggle with mental health challenges like depression, anxiety or disordered eating.
- 40% of trans youth report being harassed or assaulted because of their gender expression.
- And the amount of LGBTQ youth that carry suicidal feelings is 10-14 times higher than the general youth population. ⁴

These are just a few of the stats and they paint the picture of young people trying to navigate through a dark and difficult place.

The Canadian government recognizes this vulnerability, and has created a government bill that impacts our interactions around sexuality and gender. Simply looking at the wording of this bill helps us to define the intentions it prohibits, namely - “*practices, services or treatments that are designed to change or repress a person’s sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression.*” ⁵

So we know what it says, but what does it mean for our ministry with youth and young adults?

Well, for starters, this bill doesn’t stop us from having conversations that explain what our faith tradition says about gender and sexuality. It doesn’t prohibit us from answering questions, exploring the meaning of identity, or even sharing about what we’ve *personally* discovered as we have journeyed to understand these topics - as long as those conversations aren’t intentionally designed to push a youth toward changing or repressing their behaviour or beliefs around their gender or sexuality.⁶ That means that we are sharing information without holding the illusion that it is our responsibility to convince someone to adopt that information.

As youth workers, our core desire is to introduce young people to the love of God for them. We don’t ever want to confuse that with attempts to get others to live by a set of approved behaviours to avoid sin because that places the focus on managing sin rather than encountering God. And - it puts young people into a place of trying to purchase the love and forgiveness that are already theirs, rather than experiencing life *lived out of* the love they could never earn.

³For a helpful picture of the vulnerability see “Faith Communities and the Well-being of LGBTQ Youth”. https://oregonlgbtqresources.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/GAP_Faith-Communities-and-the-Well-Being-of-LGBT-Youth-1.pdf

⁴ https://mcs.bc.ca/pdf/not_yet_equal_sequel.pdf

⁵ www.parl.ca/DocumentViewer/en/44-1/bill/C-4/royal-assent

⁶ www.evangelicalfellowship.ca/Resources/Government/2020/Bill-C-4-to-Ban-Conversion-Therapy

Open and exploratory conversations without any coercion - those are the kind of conversations that respect God's gift of freedom. And those are the kind of conversations we want to have because they represent the essence of our Christian faith - a faith that begins and grows by the work of the Holy Spirit. When we trust that the Holy Spirit is actually fully engaged in doing his work, we are freed from carrying the weight of convincing or convicting ... freed to interact with others out of our identity as ones who are loved not because of what we have done but because of what *He* has done.

OK - that *sounds* simple. But somehow it doesn't *feel* simple. There are some pretty big internal obstacles to these conversations that can cause rising panic for those of us who really do want to walk well with others and with God.

These might not be questions you speak out, but have any of them ever rumbled around inside?:

- What if I misrepresent God's heart because I don't use the right words?
- What if my compassion is misunderstood as agreement?
- What if I get this wrong - will I be responsible for their eternal destiny?

There may be times when you feel conflicted between your faith and someone's sexual orientation or gender expression. But here's the thing: you don't have to choose *between* the two to build a relationship; you don't have to choose *between* the two to actually help lessen the risk of things like suicide, depression, and abuse for a young person; you don't have to choose between the two, to introduce a youth or young adult to Jesus.⁷

So now that we've got all that out in the open, let's talk about what it looks like to have those compassionate, faith-filled conversations. Over the next 30 minutes or so, we're going to look at creating relational places of care that protect a highly vulnerable population *and* represent our deep desire to love without harm. We won't hand you a script, but we'll give you some postures and practices that will make space for the Holy Spirit to form us *all* into the likeness of Christ in his own time and his own way.

Developmental Relationships Framework

Relationships are complicated but they're worth it because caring relationships change everything. But relationships aren't meant to just be a tool - something to get us to the result we want. They are themselves a sacred place where God meets young people. Good youth work doesn't "use" relationships - it grows out of them.

⁷https://oregonlgbtqresources.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/GAP_Faith-Communities-and-the-Well-Being-of-LGBT-Youth-1.pdf

But relationships aren't just something the Church values. For the past 50 years, the Search Institute has been one of the many places where careful and credible research has been done on how to build the best kind of relationships with youth. In the next part of this video, we're going to take a look at something they have called "the Developmental Relationships Framework"⁸. We're going to use this framework as a foundation for compassionate, faith-filled conversations with LGBTQ youth.

According to the Search Institute, Developmental Relationships are relationships between a young person and a trusted adult or healthy peer that positively shape a young person's identity and help grow patterns of thinking and being, that open up the way for flourishing.⁹ Isn't that what we want for young people and young adults when we walk with them in life and faith? What better place for conversations to grow out of!

The framework highlights 5 intentional actions - things we can all do - to create helpful and hopeful relationships:

Express care

~~Challenge~~ Invite growth (note: for the purpose of this conversation we're going to reframe "challenge" as "invite")

Provide support

Share power and

Expand possibilities.

Let's start by looking at Expressing Care.

1. Express Care - Show that I matter to you.

I heard about a camp where some of the cabin leaders thought they'd make the week extra fun for their kids by pranking them when they-- least expected it every day. You know the stuff - plastic wrap on the toilet seat, jumping out of the bushes in a bear costume, drawing a new permanent marker mustache on a kid while he's sleeping ... you get the picture.

The intention was to make camp memorable. The problem was that what was "memorable" in the eyes of the leaders actually translated to "humiliating" in the experience of some of their campers!

Expressing care shows a young person they matter to you, but only if we express care in a way that translates clearly to the youth in front of us - leaving them actually *feeling* cared for. So how do we make sure that happens in our relationships with LGBTQ youth?

I think it has to start with taking a step back and looking at *ourselves*. The way we carry and express ourselves - both verbally and nonverbally - communicates what we actually think as

⁸https://info.searchinstitute.org/developmental-relationships-help-young-people-thrive?_hstc=75443661.4bef6ec3f1bab729ce371350d0deb99e.1648753307740.1668185994364.1668190764655.11&_hssc=75443661.3.1668190764655&_hsfp=388684205

⁹ <https://searchinstitute.org/resources-hub/developmental-relationships-framework>

much - and sometimes more - than our words. Did you know that we only need 5 facial muscles to survive but God gave us 38 others to reveal what's going on inside? There's no pretending. **If the young person's sexual orientation or gender expression matters more to you than they do, it's going to show.**

But that doesn't mean we need to get better at hiding what we think¹⁰; it means we *change* what we think to line up with the heart of Jesus. He doesn't express his care as a reward for those who agree with him - it's extravagantly given for all, without reservation. His love cost him something and he gave it freely - even in the middle of our messiness.¹¹

That's the love we have experienced and that's our model to follow, so let's express care in a way that will leave young people knowing that they are *valued* just as they are.¹²

The Search Institute offers us five ways to communicate that kind of care:

Be dependable - Be someone I can trust

Listen - really pay attention when we are together

Believe in me - make me feel known and valued

Be warm - show me you enjoy being with me

Encourage me - praise me for both my efforts and achievements

Those seems pretty clear - and pretty important - so let's talk about how this practically translates into our relationships with youth who are identifying as LGBTQ:

- For starters, it means not letting a youth's declarations or exploration of sexuality and gender change anything about the way you relate to them.
- It means asking them to help you learn what it would look like to be an adult they could trust and apologizing when you don't get it right.
- It means being open and honest in all you do - never talking with others behind the back of a youth or manipulating conversations to focus on your agenda for them.
- Most of all, it means intentional listening - taking time to value and explore their feelings with them. Reflect back on what you hear them saying as you work to understand how they see things.

Truly expressing care requires that we push back against the lie that says that listening is somehow "condoning". When we believe that, we will try to be heard before we take time to hear and that doesn't reflect the heart of our God who "bends down to listen"¹³ and invites us to "cast our cares on him because he cares for us."¹⁴ Author Richard Foster said, "If we really want to be a countercultural people, I suggest first of all that we simply 'shut up and listen.' We listen to our neighbor. We listen to the angry. We listen to the fearful. We listen to the bruised and the broken. We listen, simply listen."¹⁵

¹⁰ Romans 12:9

¹¹ Romans 5:8

¹² John 3:16-17

¹³ Psalm 116:4

¹⁴ 1 Peter 5:7; Psalm 55:22

¹⁵ <https://renovare.org/messages/casting-a-vision-the-future-of-spiritual-formation>

That's where compassionate conversations begin.

2. Challenge Invite Growth

When we think of “challenging” someone, words like “confrontation” or even “competition” tend to come to mind - kind of like challenging someone to a duel. It starts with a disagreement and ends with a winner and loser. But according to the dictionary, “challenging” also means “inviting someone to *engage*.” It can be a posture of “coming *alongside* others” not “coming *at* them” - and *that's* good youth work.

We have the privilege of inviting youth to engage in exploring who they are, who God is, and what that has to do with the rest of their life. This kind of exploration happens as we invite them into intentional conversations where they can discover new perspectives and possibilities for life and faith.

With young people, discovery is usually less about delivering instruction or pre-packaged answers and more about time spent with a gracious person who lovingly asks good questions. Simply telling a youth what to do or think might feel like the shorter route, but that's a pathway to compliance not to personal and spiritual growth. God's heart for our growth always starts with our inner transformation¹⁶ rather than behavioural compliance.

Ephesians tells us that *all* the youth we work with are God's masterpieces¹⁷, created to do good things that he planned for them long ago. As we invite young people who are identifying as LGBTQ to stretch and grow, we need to be sure we are inviting them into *God's* vision of who they are - not our own. That begins with asking *ourselves* a few good questions:

What does God see when he looks at this youth?

Where are they showing that they were made in the image of God - even if they don't know him yet?

What good things has God prepared in advance for them to do and how is he equipping them for that?

Asking the Lord to share his vision¹⁸ for this youth releases us from our own agendas and helps us to invite them toward discovering and living out of the things that matter most to Jesus - things that have very little to do with gender and sexuality.

But for some young people - especially those who are newly identifying as LGBTQ - their gender expression or sexual identity may be the thing that is most important to them right now. They have found a place of belonging and significance in a new identity - often for the first time -

¹⁶ Psalm 51:6; Joel 2:13; Matthew 15:8

¹⁷ Ephesians 2:10

¹⁸ Jeremiah 29:11

so you may find them placing this journey of discovery at the centre of all their interactions. This one thing has literally changed their life - brought them a sense of freedom - so of course it will feel like the rest of life should orbit around it. That's ok.

In this place, young people just need someone to walk with them who makes space to listen and value their feelings without judgment or correction. We don't need to protect God. Maybe they feel relief, maybe uncertainty, maybe hope. God cares about all that we feel¹⁹ - and we reflect his heart when we do the same for others²⁰.

Because we are interested in their growth, we can also give young people opportunities to expand their view of themselves beyond their sexual identity by noticing and affirming gifts and abilities that we see - noticing and naming things that bring them joy and things that bring joy to others. We can help them begin to be curious about *all* aspects of who they are - and recognize what other parts of their identity might need some attention - as they discover not only themselves but the God who made them with all their amazing complexity.

One last thought about inviting growth:

If you have walked out your personal faith openly and honestly in front of a youth, and if you have fostered a relationship where the young person feels safe, invite them to share their spiritual questions, views, and doubts with you because you really do care what they think. As you engage in these conversations, make it your practice to always respond to their ideas first with a question to help you understand, rather than responding with information that you want *them* to understand. Here are a few other ideas:

- If there's a place in their questioning that feels familiar to you - that overlaps with your story - share that and how you are walking through it.
- Ask if they'd be interested in hearing about what your faith walk looks like and why God is so important to you.
- And be sure to watch for signs of when they are finished with the conversation. Don't ever push beyond that point - even if you still have more to say.

You know, some of the best growth opportunities come without any words²¹. They come when we invite young people to have a front row seat in our life with Christ - allowing them to see how our identity as His child²² has changed our lives and how we have found our belonging and significance in him.

Remember, our role is to provide places for young people to "taste and see that the Lord is good"²³ - and then leave space for the Holy Spirit to draw them toward his heart in his time²⁴ and in his way.

¹⁹ Psalm 34:18

²⁰ John 15:12-13

²¹ James 2:18

²² 1 John 3:1

²³ Psalm 34:8

²⁴ Ecclesiastes 3:11

3. Provide Support

There's a clear and sobering message from over 20 years of research²⁵ that we need to pay attention to. And here it is:

Young people who are exploring non-heterosexual orientations or non-traditional gender expressions have been critically harmed by the responses of their families and faith communities.

That's a fact we can not deny. But something else is also true: When LGBTQ youth experience acceptance and support from family and faith communities, they are far less likely to struggle with severe mental health challenges like suicide, self-harming, depression, and substance abuse.²⁶

So does that leave any of you in a bind? Are you saying, "But my understanding of scripture doesn't allow me to accept or support homosexuality?"

Well you know what? We can still lovingly engage in actions that show we value someone, even if our beliefs don't line up with theirs. When tension exists, the relationship we have built allows us to say, "We see things differently - and I still want to treat you well. How am I doing at that?" Accepting and supporting *the person* as they are and where they are is a welcoming posture that acts as a protective force against despair.

Just to be clear, let me list a few of the non-accepting behaviours that the research²⁷ has identified. The more non-accepting behaviours present, the greater the risk of harm. Here are a few of them that may apply to your youth work:

- Avoiding conversation about the youth's LGBTQ identity
- Telling the youth that this is just a phase
- Blaming the youth when others mistreat them because of their gender expression
- Letting others speak badly about gender and sexual minorities in front of your youth
- Telling the youth that God will punish them because of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

The word "support" means to bear all or part of the weight of something. The research has shown that even a small increase in accepting behaviours - like inviting a youth to talk about their LGBTQ identity even if you feel uncomfortable - will lead to an improvement in mental health outcomes. It helps a LGBTQ young person bear the weight of what is going on in their lives.

²⁵ www.psychiatrictimes.com/view/the-trauma-focused-cbt-and-family-acceptance-project

²⁶ https://oregonlgbtqresources.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/GAP_Faith-Communities-and-the-Well-Being-of-LGBT-Youth-1.pdf

²⁷ www.psychiatrictimes.com/view/the-trauma-focused-cbt-and-family-acceptance-project

So what does this kind of support look like in our conversations?

Well, for starters, we need to become aware of what we say about gender and sexual minority people - both when the young person is present and when they are not. Remember, Jesus told us that “Out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks²⁸.” So take a look at your words. Are they pointing to a need for some heart change?

As we think about words, do you ever feel overwhelmed by terminology around sexual minorities? Your youth probably know far more about words and definitions than you do in this area, so ask them to teach you what they think you need to know and to forgive you when you get it wrong. Start with replacing the word “homosexual” with LGBTQ and stop talking like everyone is only attracted to the opposite sex. It’s also a good idea to stop saying the phrase, “Love the sinner and hate the sin” because that’s actually confusing, painful, and offensive to an LGBTQ person. Being gay isn’t just one part of their life and so they simply hear you saying, “I hate your whole person.”

Here’s another thing:

From whatever “platform” you have been given, you need to always stand up for the vulnerable. So here’s how that might sound. Let’s imagine you’re beginning a program night with some youth:

- *“Welcome here everybody. One thing you need to know before we start is that everyone in this group is loved uniquely and individually. Here in this space, we want to care well for ALL of you. Your physical, emotional, and spiritual safety matters to us so you need to know that we won’t tolerate bullying, unkindness, or rudeness towards anyone based on race, gender, religion, or sexual orientation. If we hear about it or see it happening online or in person, we will be dealing with you immediately.”*

That’s what advocacy sounds like and that’s good youth work. It is our responsibility to protect the vulnerable, but it’s also a form of hospitality - a generous welcome which brings a sense of safety.

And speaking of hospitality, here’s one more thought.

What would it look like if we reframed the idea of addressing someone with their preferred gender pronoun as an act of hospitality. There are a lot of opinions on both sides of this, but we actually all have preferred pronouns. “If a young person identifies herself to you as “she,” could it be an act of Christ-like love to call her “she” out of respect, whether or not you believe that the way she expresses her gender identity is honoring to God?”²⁹ Talk with your youth about gender pronouns and what this means for them as you seek to genuinely understand how they see the world.

²⁸ Matthew 12:34

²⁹ www.centerforfaith.com/sites/default/files/cfsg_pastoral_papers_11.pdf

One last thing: When a youth has decided to come out³⁰ for the first time, how can we help them navigate that in a way that minimizes possible harm - to themselves and others? Well it starts with guarding our own response. Here are a few ideas:

1. Thank the youth for trusting you. Let them know that nothing has changed in the way you care about them.
2. Ask some genuine, open-hearted questions. This is a big step for them. Find out about their journey to this point as well as their hopes and fears for the future.
3. Clarify what this declaration means to them and what they would like to see change as a result of it.
4. Ask about their support system. What responses have they had from others? How is that affecting them?
5. Find out who else they plan to tell. Walk with them through how this might look and check back afterwards on how this went for them and for their inner circle. This is a big thing for others too - and helping the youth recognize that can be an opportunity for them to increase their empathy and understanding as well.

The best way to understand what it looks like to support an LGBTQ young person is to ask them. Humbly tell them you are trying to learn to enter into people's lives like Jesus did³¹ and ask them to help you do it well.

4. Share Power

As youth workers we often talk about the power of relationship in the life of a young person. We know that the single most common factor for young people who develop resilience is at least one stable and committed relationship with a supportive adult³², and we don't take lightly the privilege of being that adult.

But we also need to recognize the responsibility that comes with relational power. It is simply wrong to use your emotional connection to a youth as a way of pushing them toward adopting your beliefs. 1 John says, "We love *because* he first loved us³³" - not "we love *so that* people will change." Handing a youth a set of beliefs, packaged in our own expectations, is not what we are about as people of God. Neither is placing conditions on our emotional availability based on whether they live by our expectations.

Sharing power starts with *recognizing* the power we have in the life of a young person. According to the Search Institute, sharing power looks like this:

³⁰ www.centerforfaith.com/sites/default/files/cfsg_pastoral_papers_8.pdf

³¹ Luke 19:1-10; John 4:1-42

³² <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/resilience/>

³³ 1 John 4:19

- Respect me—Take me seriously and treat me fairly.
- Include me—Involve me in decisions that affect me.
- Collaborate—Work with me to solve problems and reach goals.
- Let me lead—Create opportunities for me to take action and lead.

We need to be aware that feeling dis-empowered is a common emotion for LGBTQ+ youth - and that brings out different things in different people. Some LGBTQ+ youth have grown to expect that Christians will disagree with them, so they come into relationships ready for a fight or planning to reject us before we reject them. Others have experienced scripture and theology used as weapons to overpower or repress them so they've retreated behind walls of protection. Either way, we will probably encounter some initial hesitancy in LGBTQ youth because we are Christian, but it may have more to do with past experiences than with us. So don't take it personally.

When we are faced with pushback or reluctance, it's a great time to check how we're doing with practicing genuine empathy and respect. Empathy is about standing beside someone rather than over them, because it is when we stand beside them that we can best begin to see things from their perspective. One thing that can help with this is to ask the young person "How does the fact that I am a person of faith sit with you?". Ask them to guide you in how you, as a Christian, can best show your care and respect for them. When we courageously ask young people for feedback and simply listen to what they say, we communicate that their thoughts matter to us and that we believe there are things *we* can learn from *them*.

When conversations about faith happen, try not to get pulled into the common debate that focuses on each of your opinions about right and wrong behaviour, because that isn't God's first concern. If a youth is argumentative, listen carefully to understand why their particular points of discussion are so important to them. What's the backstory that has resulted in their anger or frustration? Listen for hurts, for fears, for doubts and insecurities and listen for their true desires - what is it that they really want? Recognize that it is not your job to present a well-studied defense or a perfect answer to every question but to respond to challenges with humility. Scripture tells us that we see things dimly on this side of heaven³⁴ and we need to simply offer our best understanding and our honest uncertainties when we are asked.

Sharing power is a beautiful way of showing respect, but it also makes space for the gifts and abilities of the young person to grow and shine. One way to do that is to invite them to be a contributor in your program *or your relationship*. This not only values the individual but it opens up places for you to work side by side. Creating spaces for meaningful contribution allows the young person to be *known* ... beyond the labels that they carry. Ask yourself: Are there some things *they* know that they can teach me? Are there choices or decisions about the activities or structure in the program that they could have a voice in?

The opportunities we create when we share power will increase resilience, positive self-regard, and resourcefulness in our youth, but they will also guard against a power imbalance that can

³⁴ I Corinthians 13:12

unfortunately be part of a supportive relationship. Sharing power creates an accurate picture of who we are - not the shepherd but a sheep who is in need of Jesus.

5. Expand Possibilities - Connect me with people and places to expand my world

Recently, I saw pictures of a ministry training school that operated out of a retreat centre set on a hill. The fields around the building experienced an unexpected flood and the bridge that led to the training centre was washed away. Everyone was safe inside the house but they were stuck - because bridges open up our world.

In many ways we have been invited to function as bridges, opening up the way toward abundant life. "Expanding possibilities" is what we are about, and one of the ways we can do that is in building bridges between young people and the Church.

We've already heard that a relationship with a caring adult can tip the scales from risk to resilience for a youth, but research³⁵ has also shown that connecting youth to *multiple* supportive relationships actually creates *more* resilience! A relationship with you alone, can only go so far - but as a member of the body of Christ we have a *community* of faith to invite youth into.

But there's a problem. For LGBTQ+ youth who are interested in exploring faith further, transferring the trust³⁶ they have built with you to other Christians will probably be a challenge. We need to be wise and thoughtful as we invite these precious young people to discover more of God through his people.

For starters, it's important that we are honest about the fact that the Christian church has a lot of different opinions about sexuality and gender. Find out what the youth has encountered in the past and how it has impacted them. What are their expectations of the Church? What are their fears? Be sure to not excuse or diminish actions that have been harmful and hurtful but instead, like the prophets of old³⁷, take those sins as our own and humbly apologize on behalf of the family we are part of.

As we step into the shoes of this young person we'll begin to realize the risk that pursuing faith may open up. We need to find ways of introducing them to supportive relationships, not just to programs or services. Ask the Lord for wisdom³⁸ and ask the youth for patience as we seek to expand their experience to include more people of God and places of faith where they will be valued as God values them.

³⁵ www.search-institute.org/developmental-relationships/learning-developmental-relationships/

³⁶ www.springtideresearch.org/research/belonging

³⁷ Nehemiah 9:31-10:29; Daniel 9:1-27

³⁸ James 1:5

Is there a Bible Study where they could meet others who are exploring Jesus together? Invite them. Is there someone you know in the family of God that has an interest or a dream that this young person shares? Introduce them. Is there an opportunity to join in with others to meet needs in your community? Involve them. But always be sure you can fully trust the *hospitality* of the places you connect youth to, and *go along with them* if there is any uncertainty. After each new experience be sure to debrief, taking time to listen to their perceptions and feelings.

As we work toward expanding faith possibilities in the lives of LGBTQ+ young people, let's not forget to construct another bridge for them - a bridge toward God through prayer. Prayer isn't the possession of Christians - it's available to everyone. As you walk alongside young people, tell them you are a praying person and ask if there's anything you could talk to God about for them. Ask if they ever pray and invite them to pray for you!

Prayer connects *all of us* to God and to the possibility that he really does care for the things that matter right here and right now in *all* of our lives.

As young people begin to catch a glimpse of who Jesus truly is through the lives of his people and they begin to encounter his heart for them and for others through prayer, they'll begin to imagine that they are the VERY sort of person that Jesus wants to spend time with. Who he was on earth is who he still is today and he's still telling his church - like he told his disciples - to clear the way and let those who are being held back³⁹ come to him.

Conclusion

Thanks for taking the time to enter into this complicated conversation. You might have noticed that much of what we've talked about here together isn't actually just about doing youth work with gender and sexual minority youth - it's about doing good youth work with *all* young people - youth and young adults! Isn't that what this is all about? Sometimes we can get lost in the idea of ministering to LGBTQ+ youth because of our uncertainties or our discomfort - both theologically and personally. But our job doesn't change depending on who we are caring for. And it *shouldn't* change because of the youth's beliefs or behaviours around gender and sexuality. We are called to humbly⁴⁰ walk with young people toward Jesus and support them in establishing a foundation for all of life's challenging questions.

³⁹ Mark 10:13-16

⁴⁰ James 4:6-7

In a famous speech⁴¹ by Martin Luther King Jr., he talked about the parable of the good Samaritan⁴² where a traveller was beaten, robbed and left alone on the Jericho Road. The Samaritan's compassionate response was beautiful. But unfortunately, the next time that man walked this road chances are he would be harmed again because the road to Jericho was known to be an unsafe place to travel. There were so many hidden places where robbers could wait and way too many blind corners where unexpected attacks could happen.

Could it be that we have made the road to God's heart an *unsafe* one to travel for gender and sexual minority youth? Entering into their lives with compassion⁴³ is a beautiful response, but there's more. The road itself needs to be rebuilt.

Dr. King imagined a day, when it wasn't just an accepted fact, that vulnerable travelers on life's dangerous roads got beat up and needed to be cared for. Perhaps *this* is that day. As the Church, let's humbly ask the Holy Spirit to lead us into loving LGBTQ+ young people without harm. Let's walk with them toward the God who is totally in love⁴⁴ with them - as they are, where they are.

Together, we can build a new road. ⁴⁵

⁴¹ <https://rhettsmith.com/2008/01/martin-luther-king-jr-and-fixing-the-road-to-jericho/>

⁴² Luke 10:25-37

⁴³ 2 Corinthians 1:3-4

⁴⁴ John 15:12-13; John 3:16-17

⁴⁵ Isaiah 40:3