

# EXPLORING SEXUAL DIVERSITY:

HELPING CHILDREN AND YOUNG  
PEOPLE DEVELOP UNDERSTANDING  
AND RESPECT FOR DIFFERENCES IN  
THE HUMAN FAMILY

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## **SEX AND SEXUALITY: UNDERSTANDING THE BROAD SPECTRUM WITHIN THE HUMAN FAMILY**

Issues of sexuality have been prominent on many fronts recently so it seems appropriate to talk about sex: understanding the development of sexuality, how humans end up with such diversity sexually, and how we can help kids, and ourselves become comfortable with sexual diversity.

It is my hope that talking about sexuality openly will be helpful to parents and others who work with young people in developing more comfort when talking with children and teens about sex.

Take a minute to review your own childhood and what you were and were not told about sex. Take a minute also to recall the comfort level of your parent(s) and teachers when they approached the subject. Although many eons have passed since my own dismal sex education, I find in my own work that I am amazed at the misunderstandings that continue with regard to the wide variety of sexualities that develop: what they are and what they mean. I am also disquieted by how difficult adults continue to find these conversations. If knowledge is power, as we've often heard, hopefully adults will feel more "powerful" – able to feel assertive and able to influence others – in confronting issues of sexuality with children and teens.

Sexuality, especially gay sexuality, has become a topic of social conversation in at least three areas, and for some in worship communities taking a stand on acceptance of sexually diverse congregants even a fourth.

1. The news has been abuzz with the implications of recent court rulings with regard to marriage equality and the in-your-face acknowledgment that people who are sexually different have been denied their civil rights under the constitution. This “sea change” in American society will reverberate for many years now as state after state has confronted their own laws around marriage equality. As we move into 2015 more states allow same-sex marriage than deny it.
2. The attention that has been given to bullying, at schools and in the news, and in our own column last year, has pointed clearly to the disproportionate victimization of children and young people who seem to be developing into either a homosexual orientation or who are gender non-conforming, causing anxiety and aggression among their peers.
3. The field of Child Welfare has finally recognized that lesbian, Gay, bisexual, transgendered, and questioning children and gender non-conforming young people have been treated unfairly by the system designed to care for them. In response, legislation has been passed requiring both professionals and caregivers to discontinue practices of discrimination. In addition, it is now a requirement that people working with LGBTQ children and teens receive specific training on understanding these issues.
4. If you are a member of a faith community that has taken a stand to be openly welcoming and affirming of LGBTQ people, children are then exposed on a regular basis to the variety of sexualities possible.

For these reasons, we owe it to our children to be knowledgeable about sexual differences, and to be courageous in moving beyond “tolerance” to being accepting and affirming of these differences. Being willing to confront our own prejudices, discomforts, and misunderstandings is a gift we give our children.

One of my favorite quotes is from Ram Dass: "We're all just walking each other home". Each other means ALL of us. So it is my hope that the walking path will become crowded as adults walk the path together, considering, understanding, and learning to love, as we've been taught to do, those like us, those not like us, and those who need more than anything to feel as welcome in the world as anyone else.

## **HISTORY AND THE SLOW MARCH TOWARD JUSTICE**

We can help children understand issues of sexuality by using the history they study in school about how social changes happen. All cultures develop at their own pace and frankly very unevenly around the world. I would like to say that our Country helps to lead the way toward social justice but I don't think that's true. The United States tends to march behind some and in front of others as far as extending the benefits of equality for its' citizens.

Children will study in school how adults have always been challenged by issues of justice and seem to take them on one at a time. Children who are now exposed to Modern Family and many shows on television with gay characters would be astounded to know how very recently gay people have come to be represented in a positive way in the media. Teenagers who saw Heath Ledger and Jake Gylenhall play gay cowboys, and Annette Benning and Julianne Moore play a lesbian couple have no idea that straight actors playing gay parts is a radical step from the not too distant past when gay actors, such as Rock Hudson, only played straight parts. So you should tell them. It's good to use things that happen in your home (television) and things they learn in school to help them grapple with the way things change and the pace at which they do.

No one thought much about having very young children work in factories rather than go to school right here in America. Now the American media rants about "third world" countries who use

children to manufacture products we buy, but we did the same thing. Tell them. Slavery and the "owning" of humans by other humans was something that not just people, but many Christian people, were quite comfortable with. Until many persons of conscience, both religious and non-religious, came to believe that such a practice was totally unjust and fought to overcome the complacency with the degradation of other human beings. Issues of racial equality, reparation, and striving toward justice is still in the news today as States makes moves to do away with "affirmative action" and people of color are regularly gunned down in our cities and towns.

Not that long ago, in historical terms, white people felt "entitled" to have sex with people of color against their will. If people of color had sex with white people against their will they were hung.

Children will have studied how not only were people of color considered "less than" white people, but women - their mothers, aunts, and sisters - were considered "less than" men and not allowed to vote. Gay rights and the fight for marriage equality are just the latest major social challenge involving sex, following the fight for marriage equality for inter-racial couples.

For reasons I'm always puzzled about, "society" has decided it has the right to say who can love who, who can have sex with who, and who can marry who. Give your children the "context" with other similar issues, so they can have a better understanding of what they see and hear now, in the media, in school, and in church about the current controversies around sexual diversity.

In terms of getting along with adults and peers in other settings it is also important for children to know that every time society/culture decides to make a change, people "split". They disagree, and can become pretty ugly about it. Watch current relevant movies with them: Lincoln; The Butler; Fruitvale Station. While teaching about the rights of all people to love who they love, we also want to teach them that unfortunately this is a pretty new idea and friends, neighbors, and colleagues are not in

harmony about changes regarding sexuality. Help them watch with interest the struggle between those wanting to hold on to past traditions, and those pushing for change.

As we focus on issues of sexuality and how to help children and young people learn to accept and affirm sexual diversity, in themselves or others, it will be helpful for them to understand why these issues are difficult and divisive, as ALL issues of justice have been. Fortunately for Americans, the younger generation does not seem to have to struggle as much as older people with difference and diversity including sexual diversity.

### **WORDS, NATURE AND THE "NATURAL ORDER"**

In an attempt to regulate society, people often resort to the misuse of language to bolster the point of view they want to advance. Over history this has been done to keep various classes of people "in their place", and is still done in many ways. Children, for example, are often not referred to as "citizens", and therefore although our constitution grants certain rights to citizens, these rights often do not extend to children. In order to support the notion of males as being superior to females, so-called "generic" terms for people are kept male identified: **mankind; humans; humankind; women.** Even today many people addressing a group will say, "Okay **guys**, let's settle down". In a mixed group no group leader would ever say, "Okay girls, let's settle down". "Dude" is often used to refer to anyone as an expression: there are no "Dudettes".

Throughout the march toward justice and equality we have heard things about homosexuality as being "un-natural". Of course, we heard the same thing about mixed marriage not that long ago. Again, rent movies like "Lincoln" and "The Butler" so they can hear the arguments about the legitimacy of slavery by references to "the natural state" or "the natural order", which then equates "white" with good, white people as intelligent and superior. Cowboys who are the "good guys" wear white hats. Dark hats

were worn by the “bad guys”, who were often presented as being dumb, or even evil, or less than, like black people.

An interesting problem with the misuse of language is that even when language is used correctly it can be common to misinterpret it by giving it a negative meaning. For example, how do you respond when someone says that homosexuals are “abnormal”? If your instinct was to correct that statement or to hear it negatively, you have confronted the problem with language.

As a matter of fact, homosexuality is **abnormal**. To be normal is not the same as being “good”, or “healthy”. The word “norm” means “most”. When teachers grade on a “normal” curve, they consider how most students did. Some students will be below the “normal curve”, but others will be above it! I have a Ph.D. which is true of less than 1% of the population (except at IUCC). This makes me “abnormal”. If you are a blond or a redhead, you are “abnormal”. If you have perfect pitch – you guessed it, you are abnormal. The word “deviant” has the same meaning. To be deviant is not necessarily good or bad, it just means that someone is different from the general population. One can “deviate” from the norm by being exceptionally talented, as well as by being unusually evil. It is true that heterosexuality is more the “norm”, but that does not have implications for being “natural” or healthy. “Nature” loves diversity. Witness the Eagle and the Lion, and also the Anteater and Armadillo.

As parents and adults working with children and young people, it is important to listen to the words they use, and how they use them. As we know from the problem with bullying, words can hurt. But words can also cause unnecessary confusion. If one of your children is exceptional in some way, either due to deficits or gifts, they are abnormal. Help them to learn what that word means and to be comfortable with being “out of the norm”. Also teach them not to use a word that is intrinsically non-judgmental in a way that seems to put others down.

Another language task is to help children, especially teenagers who will be grappling with their own sexuality, how to listen carefully to uses of certain words to misinform. For example, one often hears the term "sexual preference" when referring to homosexuality, although it is never used to refer to heterosexuality. That word is used for gay people so that efforts to "convert" a gay person to a straight lifestyle seems likely to be successful, since one can always learn to enjoy a different flavor of ice cream if the store is out of your "preferred" flavor. That is why the word "sexual orientation" is more accurate than "sexual preference". If sexuality were really a preference for everyone, we would hear the word used equally for straight and gay people.

The words "queer" and "faggot" and even homosexual were replaced by the word "gay" for the same reason that "black" replaced the "N-word", Negro, and Colored. It was an effort by members of a disparaged community to erase the many negative connotations that became associated with the words. Later, for black people, the term "African-American" was introduced by Jesse Jackson, in an attempt to widen our definition of people of color to include more than the color of their skin and to link people to their heritage. This is another example of quite recent social transition, demonstrating that people seeking equality engage in a **continuous process** to gain respect. The use of certain kinds of language is crucial for conveying respect.

Interestingly, now there are some people of color who are objecting to the term "African-American" since many black people are not actually African by heritage. This illustrates, again, the power of specific language, and how words stir sensitivities in individuals.

Finally, in the 1980's, at the height of the women's movement, many gay women wanted to declare that issues between gay women and gay men were different, so many began using the word lesbian rather than gay, a distinction that is important to some gay women but not to others.

The use of language and the struggle for dignity and equality are very much intertwined. When children understand this, they will learn to become more respectful, and follow Micah's instruction to "love kindness". One of the ways to be kind to others is to be thoughtful in how we refer to them.

## **THE GIFT OF DIVERSITY AND NATURE'S NATURAL ORDER**

A visit to the Discovery channel (which, by the way, should be on a different channel every night, don't you think?) will reveal one of nature's great gifts to us all: a world filled with difference!

Not only are there different species, almost too many to count, but even wide variances within each species. Any study of nature will quickly reveal that the Creator has no problems with difference. This includes the diversity of sexualities within various species, including our own human species. Having considered that "deviant" and "abnormal" have no moral meanings we acknowledge that such terms only point to a spectrum of difference inherent within nature. When we say that someone is "average" looking, we are only saying that someone is not extraordinarily beautiful or handsome, or unfortunately unattractive. We are acknowledging that along the spectrum of appearance there is wide diversity of appearance. Being of "average intelligence" is the same: some have unusually low I.Q.'s and others are exceptionally bright: most of us are average, or normal. Why some people are so surprised and even disturbed that there is a similarly wide spectrum of sexual attractiveness can be a little puzzling. In fact, you know that people different than you find people you would not even consider as an affectionate or sexual partner very appealing.

We now take for granted that God/Nature/Creation contains a wide spectrum of difference in all plants and other living things. If we can accept this rather obvious truth we can move on to arming ourselves with information. This information will help us help young people who will learn as they grow about the wide

variety sexual attractions and self-definitions. Although for most adults the letters "LGBTQ" are unfamiliar, they are becoming used so often that soon almost everyone will at least be exposed to this designation. In guiding children through the array of sexualities we want to have a clear understanding of what each of these "labels" imply. This is especially important for parents as kids will often hear only loosely constructed labels thrown around, often to disparage themselves or someone else. Young children often throw words like "queer", "faggot" or "gay" around knowing only that there is some negative connotation to them, but not knowing what they are actually saying.

Using sexual designations loosely and without understanding is a problem for at least three reasons. One, if they don't know what they are saying they may cause hurt to another person without taking responsibility for the harm caused by their words. Also, if someone uses a derogatory term toward them, it may be meant to cause intentional harm. In this case, the child or young person should know what they are being called, and whether it "fits". If it doesn't fit, we can help them learn how to respond to such name-calling and to remind them that being called something doesn't make you something. Thirdly, sometimes the label may be accurate. In this case, we will want to help children develop assertive and self-confident responses to avoid feeling degraded and negative about themselves.

The use of labels related to sexuality is especially complicated because there are no outward signs that give "proof" of one's sexuality. For example, a white skinned child would never be called the "N-word" because clearly it doesn't fit. Someone who doesn't wear glasses would not be called "four eyes" and a tall kid would never be called "shorty". But how one **feels** is only known internally, so it makes all of us fair game for being mislabeled and potentially mistreated, or being labeled accurately and being mistreated.

It is the job of parents and other adults to “arm” children with confident responses to any labels directed at them which will take the power away from anyone trying to use negative labels to hurt them. We also want to remind children that “labels” in and of themselves are not positive or negative. The label “applesauce” on a jar of applesauce is not good or bad, but a description of what is inside of the label. In the same way, calling someone by a description should not be negative, unless someone has decided that being “applesauce” is bad. Unhappily, because not enough people enjoy the wonderful diversity of nature, and difference often causes anxiety in people, some labels, even when they are not “name-calling” are experienced as negative.

On the continuum of sexuality, some people are called “straight” or “heterosexual”, which means that they have affectionate or sexual feelings for people of the “other” sex. Some people are referred to as “lesbian”, which means which that they are a girl or a woman who has affectionate or sexual feelings for other girls or women. Some people are called “gay”, which currently means either a man who has affectionate or sexual feelings for another man, or either a man or a woman who has same sex attraction – similar to the way the word “human” or “person” refers to both men and women. The term “homo” (which means “same”) is sometimes used as a short word for homosexual and is always meant as a put-down of someone with same sex attraction. Someone who is “bisexual” or “ambi-sexual” has affectionate or sexual feelings for both people of their same sex and people of the other sex.

The words lesbian, gay, or bisexual refer to how people feel about other people. The word “transgender” refers to feelings a boy/man or girl/woman has about themselves, as far as whether they feel inside like the sex nature has assigned them. And “questioning” people are those who, for whatever reasons, aren’t sure about themselves. There are specific issues and challenges encountered by each of these groups of people. Understanding these challenges can help young people decide to be kind.

## **NEW "LINGO" AND WORKING TOWARD NEW UNDERSTANDING**

Almost all homes have a television, even the very poor. When your brain is young and unformed, it can mistake "hearing something on television" with "hearing something true". The same thing is true of the internet. Many young people assume that what they read on the internet is true. Conflicting interpretations of news events occurring simultaneously and a wealth of misinformation on the internet put us, as adults, clearly in the position of needing to clarify our own facts and positions so that we can help developing minds navigate the sea of conflicting information.

We will now review each of the groups represented by the letters LGBTQ, which stand for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and questioning people.

### **Homosexual (lesbian or gay) People**

Whether one is emotionally and sexually attracted to someone of the same sex or the opposite sex is called "sexual orientation".

Sexual orientation exists along a continuum. The continuum ranges across a scale from purely heterosexual to purely homosexual. This continuum is true of affection, attraction, inclination, fantasy and behavior. The fact of a continuum, first proposed by Kinsey in the 1940's, continues to cause anxiety for people who like things simple. (What are you, gay or straight?)

The term sexual orientation is NOT to be confused with the term "sexual preference", which is a term that was basically invented by people who want to believe that sexual attraction is a choice and can be changed. Sexual orientation is an enduring emotional, romantic, sexual or affectional attraction to another person. This cannot be changed. The only thing that can change in this regard is whether someone **acts** on their feelings. As we mentioned earlier, it is important that adults working with young

people never use the term "sexual preference" because it implies an emotional choice that gay people can't make.

**Sexual orientation is NOT necessarily related to sexual behavior. Who one is, is different from what one does.**

Sexual orientation is a matter of the heart and may be separate from behavior. Having "gay sex" does not make one gay. At the same time, abstaining from gay sex, or engaging in heterosexual relations does not make one not gay, or "straight". One can be gay, but celibate. One can be in a heterosexual relationship but be gay. One can engage in homosexual relationships due to circumstance but be heterosexual.

- Large numbers of adolescents and college-age young people engage at some point in sexual experiences with members of the same sex that could be classified as "experimenting" (McMillen; Kinsey).
- Homosexual thoughts and fantasies are common in both adolescents and adults

There is no "common" age when people become aware of same-sex attraction. Some do not "come out" (to themselves and/or others) until late in life; others are clear and relatively open at an early age. In the past, there was usually a span of years between the awareness of same sex attraction and the self-labeling as gay. This seems to be changing as society becomes more tolerant of sexual diversity.

Homosexual people are in the minority, so because of general discomfort with difference there is a good chance that a young girl or boy who is "detected" as being gay will be the brunt of some cruelty or harassment. It is important, therefore, that parents be the first to notice their own children's inclinations to be able to validate them and get them ready to function as a sexual minority with their self-esteem intact.

Being a gay person is about loving others, and wanting to express that love.

There are people who are gay and promiscuous, just as there are straight people who are promiscuous. There are gay pedophiles, just as there are straight ones, although it is much more common for straight men to buy sex from teenagers. Concepts of good and evil are not related to sexuality but to ways that people express or use their sexuality. The important thing to communicate to our children is that choices about how to live our lives is not related to who we choose to love.

### **BI-SEXUALITY/AMBI-SEXUALITY**

We continue our exploration into nature's tendency toward difference and diversity, specifically recognizing how individuals develop their emotional, affectional, and sexual feelings and behavior. People whose emotional and sexual "orientation" is toward persons of their same sex, given a situation in which they had free choice about who they would like to "give their hearts to", would choose another person with the same biological features as themselves. This is an important fact to tuck away in your minds because when we talk about "gender" we will see that one's biological makeup does not necessarily influence whether they think of themselves as "male" or "female". The terms male and female are biological designations, which are not the same as gender designations. More on that later. Homosexual, or "gay" people are emotionally and sexually oriented toward others who share their biology.

People who are referred to as "bi-sexual", or "ambisexual" feel attraction to both males and females. We know that being "ambidextrous" refers to people who can use both hands equally well to write or perform tasks. If you are a baseball fan, (and who wouldn't be?), you know that ambidextrous players are particularly valuable in the line-up because they can hit the ball equally well from either side, using either hand and arm to swing the bat. That is where we get the term sometimes used to refer

to bi-sexual people as people who can “swing both ways”. So there are, indeed, people who have equally strong emotional and sexual attraction to both men and women.

There is no social construct for “ambisexual” people. No other group accepts bi-sexual people. There is no bi-sexual “community”. Bi-sexual people do not have roles on television. Bisexual people are often not invited to either “gay parties or events” or “straight parties and events”.

Bi-sexual people, even more than gay people, can stir up fears in many individuals because they infer that we are not necessarily “fixed” in our sexual inclinations. In fact, most bisexual people, and many sex researchers, believe that all people are born ambisexual and have the capacity for bisexuality, but that socialization is able to repress that urge toward sexual flexibility on a large scale, leaving most people feeling either “gay” or “straight”. Many would argue that discomfort from this fact is why bi-sexual people get the least welcome from others.

Bisexuality has become one of the most controversial issues within both the “straight” and “gay” communities. While some straight and gay people will state that they don’t believe they have a choice with regard to their orientation, bisexuality can seem to imply that some of the people who have sex with others of both genders do have a “choice”. Those who are gay and do not believe they have a choice about their orientation believe that bisexual people give tormentors “evidence” that one can choose their affections, and therefore can be “fixed” from being gay and made to enjoy heterosexual relationships. This animosity is actually about an issue, but is often personalized toward bisexual people, causing difficult relationships and contradictions in a community striving for acceptance and affirmation.

“Biphobic” has emerged as a term for categorizing doubters and detractors of true bisexuality much as “homophobic” has long been used as a label for antigay forces.

The primary challenge for bisexual people is adapting to a culture that stresses and expects monogamy: choosing **one** other person to share life with as a sexual and emotional partner. If a bisexual person wants to have a "life partner", this would be the one time that the term "sexual preference" would be accurate, in that they would have to choose the person they prefer, while being very capable of having a similar relationship with a person of the other sex. Knowledge of this "flexibility" can cause considerable tension in a monogamous relationship, complicating issues of commitment.

Although bisexual people suffer from lack of a "support community" they also benefit from their involvement with both sexes and do not seem to elicit as much fear and hatred from others as homosexual people do. Their ability to engage in socially acceptable pairing with the "opposite" sex seems to spare them from the violence and overt discrimination often experienced by gay people. At the same time, being bisexual can be very lonely with no other group really trusting or understanding you.

To some in the gay community bisexuals are frauds, fence sitters, "closet cases" who are afraid to come out and/or who feel that being attracted to persons of the other – as well as the same – sex means they are still "real" men or women.

Being bisexual as an adolescent or young adult may be part of seeking out one's true "orientation" or it may indicate a true bisexual nature. A parent cannot change the developmental direction of their teen, but they can be supportive by providing clear information about sexual diversity and by assuring their child of unfailing love as they discover themselves.

## SEX AND GENDER

**Sex** refers to biological differences between male and female bodies.

**Gender** refers to social and cultural expectations and norms ascribed to that sex distinction.

**Gender identity:** refers to whether a person identifies as a female or male, regardless of that person's biological sex.

**Sex is biological, gender is sociological; sex is born in nature; gender is socially constructed.**

All people have subjective experiences of what it means to be male or female. As a result, we all have reactions to behaviors we encounter that do not mesh with our deeply held expectations and assumptions about gender. Being confronted with a young person or adult who is dealing with gender identification confronts our values, our beliefs, and our customs.

Predominant sex difference theories rely on two central assumptions:

- That the division of the human species into male and female categories is natural and fixed;
- That the physical (genital) bodies of the male and female indicate **internal** features that define us as male or female

You may recall reading that Sigmund Freud famously wrote that "anatomy equals destiny". However, the ideas of inherent and fixed masculine and feminine traits do not hold up well under scientific scrutiny.

Gender traits are influenced by dominant ideologies and power dynamics: worldviews that rise to prominence through repeated reinforcement by people in positions of control and influence. That is, powerful people who are allowed to influence how others

think and live have decided – in various time periods, and in various cultures, how people “should” act if they happen to be one sex or the other. Without looking at how history defines “appropriate” dress and behavior for one sex or the other, it can begin to seem that some things are “natural” that actually have nothing to do with nature! In fact, social customs are decided entirely by people, and not at all by a “natural order”. The development follows a pattern whereby each generation has a different experience dealing with how “men” and “women” should be. Eventually, it is thought that it is how men and women **are**.

### **Social customs:**

- 1<sup>st</sup> generation: “This is how we decided to do it”
- 2<sup>nd</sup> generation: “This is how our elders did it”
- 3<sup>rd</sup> generation: “This is how it is done”
- 4<sup>th</sup> generation: “This is the way the world is...this is reality”

But in fact, different cultures have different definitions of what is “masculine” and what is “feminine”. The same is true in nature, where males and females of different species behave differently.

A person struggling with “gender” issues find that social structures reinforce girls and boys into distinct patterns, which some people believe to be wrong for them. Currently, in clinical circles, when people experience dissonance with their sex and their gender they are said to have “gender identity disorder”. It is called a disorder based on the assumption that there is a natural “order” to the feelings and behaviors of the different sexes.

A person who is called “transgender” is someone who does not feel or act like others of their biological sex. A transgender female feels and is most comfortable dressing and acting as a man in her culture would be expected to feel and act. A transgender male is a boy or man who feels and is most comfortable dressing and acting as a woman in his culture would be expected to feel and act. Many transgender people talk about “feeling like strangers in their own body”. These feelings are private and cause transgendered young people to feel lonely and

out of place in any group of peers, since their struggle is not with sexuality, but with their own sexual identity. It is not about how they feel about others, but how they feel about themselves.

Gender struggles become very complicated, and each young person has to decide whether to be honest with other people about their feelings since most people they encounter will find their situation quite a challenge because it is so unfamiliar. Complications increase and challenge relationships because personal feelings of discomfort with one's "assigned" sexual identity are separate from one's feelings of affection and attraction toward others. One could be a young man, who feels inside like a young woman, who is sexually attracted to **either** someone of their own sex, or someone of the other sex. The same is true for a female who feels like a boy/man, and may be attracted to either girls/women or boys/men.

Life as someone not comfortable in your own skin is probably the most personally challenging of the issues we've been discussing. This is supported by findings of serious depression in this group of people and high rates of addiction and suicide. One of my personal goals in writing this piece is to give us all enough information to increase our comfort level with others of different feeling and attractions than our own. This is particularly important for the most marginalized group who need others who will be prepared to be the friend a transgendered person needs.

People who are transgendered are probably the least understood and most mistreated of the diverse groups we have discussed.

It is particularly difficult for young people having this internal experience because of the extreme loneliness it often produces, and because lack of knowledge and understand often result in very harsh and punitive responses from parents and other adults in a young person's life.

Research and experience spells out some of the many difficult obstacles for transgender youth:

- They may be thrown out of the house when their family or foster family discovers their identity, forcing them to live on the streets
- They typically face harassment and abuse in school to such an extent that they quit, which makes it hard for them to get a decent paying job
- Even if they are able to complete their education, they have difficulty finding and keeping almost any kind of job because of overt or covert discrimination
- If they live on the streets or are a sex worker (due to poverty and lack of other options) they are at greater risk for abusing drugs, becoming infected with HIV, and being subjected to anti-transgender violence
- Many lack access to health care, including proper counseling and medical supervision. Even if they do get medical care they frequently face discrimination and hostility from health care workers. As a result some decide to treat themselves by buying underground hormones, which may be dangerous.
- Gender reassignment surgery is beyond the means of most who identify as transgender and is not covered by most health insurance policies
- The result of their particular challenges is high rates of depression, drug and alcohol abuse, and thoughts of suicide (more than 1/3 report such thoughts)
- Transgender people who can “pass” often seek to remain closeted, so trans youth often do not have visible role models and mentors.

Young people who feel like the other sex and would like to start living congruently with their feelings often would like to begin hormone treatments as many transgender adults do but this is often either difficult to find for someone still legally a “child” or is outright denied because of prejudice or inability to understand the dilemma such young people face.

Most young people do not have exposure to other people who feel like they do and so they often are deprived of a “support group” of people who understand them and can provide encouragement and company.

Fortunately, we do not have to be like someone to offer them support and friendship. If we are truly to “love our neighbor” as we have been commanded we must try to find ways to show love to these members of our community. The greatest gift will be to listen to their story without judgment, and to offer opportunities to become involved with whatever communities they choose to affiliate with in a full and equal manner. It is okay to tell a transgender that you are uncomfortable and unsure what to say or ask: this is showing respect and offering friendship. We don’t have to wait to be comfortable or fully knowledgeable before reaching out as one child of God to another. Such an extension of good will is good for young people and adults who are transgender and it is good for us as we seek to embrace the whole of creation, those like us and those different than us.

### **Being transgender is not the same as being a “transvestite”.**

A person who is transgender dresses as the opposite sex because they identify internally **as** the opposite sex. People who are “transvestite” dress in the clothing of the opposite sex because they receive some sort of psychological and sexual gratification from wearing the attire of the other sex, but they do not believe themselves to **be** the other sex. Being “transgender” refers to an **internal experience** of feeling like the sex other than what nature has “assigned”. Being “transvestite” means enjoying

dressing like the other sex, but not believing oneself to be the other sex. This group is sometimes referred to as "cross-dressing". Cross dressers may be of any sexual orientation. A transvestite will not want to have surgery to change them from the sex they have been assigned to the other sex.

Most transgendered people would like to become the sex they identify with if they can afford it. We might not be able to tell whether a person is transgender or transvestite unless we ask them. Why guess? Why not have an actual conversation with someone you encounter and let them know you are interested in them as a person and would like to get to know them. It will be a treat for you and for them. Isn't the world interesting?

## **UNDERSTANDING GENDER NON-CONFORMING YOUNG PEOPLE**

Another group of people on the "diversity spectrum" are referred to as "gender non-conforming", which is not so much an internal experience as a clash with social expectations. Non-conforming people do not comply with social standards, attitudes, or practices of their immediate cultural group. In reality, this is not really a sexual difference, but a social difference.

We are talking about this issue because of the fact that many assumptions are made about ones' sexuality based on appearance and mannerisms, and people then get treated as they appear to be, rather than as they are.

Research has found that gender non-conforming youth are at high risk of being targeted for harassment and bullying, with proven lasting negative effects. Because of this problem, those concerned with gender differences and gender roles are shifting focus to the wide varieties **within**, not just between, genders. This new focus has coined the terms "femininities" and "masculinities" to address this diversity within genders.

Terms you may have heard for gender non-conforming people are "effeminate" (woman-like) for males and "butch" for females. These terms are applied based on: dress that goes against expected appearance for ones' sex – pink clothing or a lot of jewelry for males, trousers instead of slacks for females; appearance – short close-cropped hairstyles for females; or for gestures normally associated with the opposite sex – ways of walking or running, voice register, ways of crossing legs when sitting, etc. Because children are taught how to appear like "boys" or "girls", when someone does not comply with these expectations it is common for others to decide that their appearance and mannerisms "give away" their sexuality. Some of the terms used for homosexuals, such as "fairy", "queen", "dyke" are applied based on being gender non-conforming and thus consigned to a group one may not belong to.

I have a good friend who was "warned" by everyone in her circle, including all of her family and friends, that she was being "blind" for not seeing that the man she was dating was obviously gay. Not only was the man very effeminate, he was a Florist! Despite all the dire predictions she went ahead and married him – 35 years ago! They are a very happy, well-adjusted couple with a grown son and a grandchild, who have one of the best marriages I know of. Life was not easy for them when they started, however, based solely on the tendency to make assumptions about sexuality from appearance and gestures.

Society, for whatever reasons (we could discuss them but you can probably figure them out), is easier on gender non-conforming girls than boys. "Hitting or running like a girl" or being called a "sissy" usually has more of a cruel edge to it than being called a "tomboy".

When relating to gender non-conforming boys and girls we want to begin teaching them about issues of "prejudice" and "stereotyping" which lead to the cruel treatment of boys and girls who do not look or act like their peers and as they are expected to look and act. These issues (prejudice) require more time than

we can give them this month so we'll pick up this discussion next month, after spending some time talking about those young people referred to as "questioning".

## **QUESTIONING YOUNG PEOPLE**

By now you should be convinced that we have validated a quote by an author who writes frequently about sexuality: "Sexuality is very complex, and we know far too little about sex for our own good" (Presnell).

As young people develop into adolescents and their sexual hormones become more active they begin to experience sexual urges and social and sexual attractions to their peers. The nature of these attractions, we we've discussed, begin to provide them with information about themselves, and the degree to which they are comfortable in their own bodies, and the degree to which they are comfortable with their feelings of attraction.

Unfortunately, more children than we would like to acknowledge are prematurely exposed to sex by being sexually abused by an adult. Sexual abuse confronts young children with an experience for which they are both physically and mentally unprepared. Most sexual abuse begins when children are pre-adolescent and without sexual urges of their own. Premature exposure to sexual activity can lead to considerable confusion around their own sexuality when it's "time" for them to start dating and feeling attractions and responding to the attractions of others.

Since there is no way to know whether exposure to either pleasant or unpleasant sexual experiences at an early age lead to same sex orientation it is not useful to engage in speculation at the expense of working with a young person to deal with their current feelings. We can only know what comes "naturally" if they are left to develop normally and in safety.

- Pleasurable experience (orgasm, affection) during an abusive same-sex relationship can cause a young person to wonder if that means they are gay
- Unpleasant experience (fear, shame, guilt) during an abusive opposite-sex relationship can cause a young person to conclude that all opposite-sex experiences will be the same and therefore think they must be gay

We do not know what “causes” homosexuality, or gender discomfort, which unhappily leads to rampant opinion and speculation that can cause distress to youth struggling with their sexuality. It is important to remember that there is a very good chance that you will not know whether a young person you are having contact with has been abused, since it is rarely acknowledged. For that reason we want to be able to openly discuss with them the many unfounded theories they will be exposed to as they hear adults and peers talk about “why some people are queer”. They will almost certainly hide their distress as they try to make sense of what they are hearing compared to the experiences they have had.

Most scientists today agree that sexuality and sexual orientation is the result of a “complex interaction” of environmental, cognitive, and biological factors. The evolution of one’s identity is a web of interconnecting and interdependent features, including gender, ethnicity, class, ability, sexual orientation, thoughts, feelings, and experiences; the picture is fluid and always being negotiated (White, 2004).

Realizing that development is fluid and cannot be dictated causes anxiety not only in young people but in some adults who walk the developmental journey with them.

An adolescent may be in a stage of “exploration” or may feel in a stage of “confirmation” as a teen. A young person may be feeling a same sex attraction, but not feel comfortable labeling themselves as gay or lesbian. The pressures of dating can lead to severe stress for a young person who is not yet sure about

their affections and attractions. It can be especially puzzling to be attracted to both sexes. Be sure to reassure them that although there is pressure to “declare oneself” they actually have time to figure it out. Some people have quite surprised themselves as adults when they discovered a sexual aspect to themselves they didn’t know existed. As adults, we each have the responsibility to find a way to let young people know that they can bring their questions and talk with us without being judged. The good news for both them and us is that we don’t need to have “answers” to be their friend and to listen.

### **CONFRONTING CONTRIBUTORS TO MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS for LGBTQ YOUNG PEOPLE**

Most emotional problems experienced by LGBTQ young people are not related directly to their sexuality but to adjustment difficulties related to their sexuality. For this reason we want to help them understand and deal with the potentially hurtful behaviors they will encounter due to human problems with difference. Why, exactly, humans seem to have so much difficulty with something that is part of all of nature, namely that nature is replete with difference, is a feature of humanity that is puzzling and troubling. The inability to deal well with differences among people can lead to enormous harm – both emotional and physical – to young people struggling with being sexually different. Even people who claim to be Christian and thus follow the “Prince of Peace” often provide stress and pain rather than peace and fail to handle differences with respect and compassion, as Jesus did. The longest one-on-one conversation between Jesus and another person recorded in the Bible is that of Him and the Samaritan woman. Not only did Jesus have a long conversation with a woman, not something done in His time, but with a woman despised by the Jews, His own people. Further, not only did Jesus talk to her, he drank from her cup! Wouldn’t it be helpful if truthful stories like this could be shared with struggling LGBTQ young people.

A variety of research indicates that perceived or actual homosexuality and gender-nonconformity are two of the top three reasons teens are bullied (the third is the victim's appearance"). In addition to other challenges presented by being sexually different, bullying – whether in person or online – increases LGBTQ teens risk for anxiety disorders, depression, nightmares, substance abuse, post-traumatic stress disorders and suicide. Many studies indicate that LGBTQ youth are at least twice as likely to attempt suicide as their same-sex peers.

Non acceptance of differences in sexuality can lead LGBTQ young people to experience increased risk for mental health problems, from multiple sources:

- For some, the struggles with mental health stem from genetics, in the same way that is true for non-gay young people.
- For some, the struggles with mental health stem from childhood history of abuse and/or neglect, in the same way that is true for non-gay young people.
- For others, the struggles stem not from family history or experience, but from lack of acceptance by others that cause them added stress and lead to risky behavior or mental health issues (*Society for Adolescent Health and Medicine*, April 2013).
- Gay and lesbian kids can be happy and healthy dealing with the normal things adolescents deal with. But they are also a group that, because of pressures from society, face a number of challenges and risks other teens don't.
- Avenues of support, such as family, friends, school, the community available to typical youth may not be asked for help by LGBTQ youth who fear the possible response.

- Family acceptance – or rejection – of LGBT adolescents can make a significant difference in their health and well-being outcomes (*Family Acceptance Project*).
- Unlike other minority populations, LGBTQ youth do not grow up with people like themselves, leading to more loneliness and feelings of isolation.
- Gay teens risk losing self-respect as they “pretend” to be straight in an attempt to fit in.
- Friendships are often less genuine if a gay teen is hiding his/her identity

Sorting out the origin of mental health problem for sexual minorities becomes difficult as we try to the contributions of personal characteristics vs. the context in which their development is compromised by the additional stresses of being different in a world that prefers sameness. Further, LGBTQ young people whose families affiliate with a religious group may be additionally challenged as they try to find an open, affirming, and non-rejecting church family. Research has found that even though people tend to struggle with differences in religious beliefs among people, groups tend to deal with these differences even better than they do with sexual differences.

Adults living and working around sexually diverse young people owe it to them to become especially sensitive to the use of derogatory language or jokes regarding LGBTQ people. Unlike racial and ethnic diversity, LGBTQ young people are more likely to be exposed to hurtful treatment because their struggles with sexuality are not apparent. We always want to assume that it is possible that someone in a group may be hurt by something that is said, and step up and step in to interfere with harmful behavior. Ignoring such behavior and failing to “call others out on it” presents an unspoken endorsement. Loving our young LGBTQ neighbors may involve causing some momentary discomfort to others as we challenge them to be mindful of who

may be listening to pronouncements, off handed remarks, or jokes that cause internal wounds. We can train ourselves to listen to others in an "as if" manner, so that we listen "as if" they were talking about us. This will make it easier to do the right thing on behalf of those who may not yet be strong enough to stand up for themselves.

### **USING VERBAL MISREPRESENTATIONS TO PROMOTE PREJUDICE, BIAS, PHOBIAS AND STEREOTYPES**

Let's move now to a more general consideration of the human attitudes and behaviors that have caused the grief and misunderstanding for LGBTQ people that we have been discussing. Although even adults can find it challenging to discover what is really so, it is especially important to help children learn to "sort out" what they hear from others, whether it's from their peers, adults they come in contact with, or the media. **Saying that something is true doesn't make it true; and believing something doesn't make it so.**

Children are at a distinct disadvantage because they don't yet have enough knowledge to distinguish between truth and fiction when exposed to new information. When you don't have existing information to compare new information with, it's easy to take the new information as fact. And children are not yet sophisticated enough to "consider the source".

Another complicating factor is that when people are trying to convince someone of something they use many different words for the word "think" in an attempt to have the listener believe they are hearing the truth and to give ideas more credibility. Have you noticed how often people use the word "believe" when they want to make sure you pay close attention to their point. "You know, Frank, I don't believe you are correct". Or, "you know Margaret, I believe you will find...." So what's the difference between think and believe? None. A belief is an idea. There is no difference between something you think and

something you believe. Except that the word believe somehow carries more weight. People who use religious creeds to reinforce what they think is correct start with "I believe". It is my belief sounds more powerful than it is my idea. We want our kids to be careful what they "believe".

Another word that often gets used to beef up ideas is the word "conviction". I am convinced sounds more definite than "I think I am right about" something. People will sometimes state that they "happen to know" something, said in a way that puts others on the defensive to contradict what is being said, even when you happen to know something different.

This is more than just a lesson in grammar for children. It is a lesson in learning how to evaluate the truth about what is being said, which is particularly important when learning how to evaluate the truth about what is being said about other people.

People tend to act on their beliefs. Therefore people are known to cause great suffering to other people by acting on beliefs about them that happen to be incorrect. This can be applied to almost every LGBTQ person you will ever meet. Every sexually different person has a story to tell about emotional harm that has been caused out of ignorance and misinformation. But this is also true for a wide variety of people who are different from those around them. As parents and adults who work with or care about children, we want to provide very early lessons about language and truth, so that no child we know causes hurt and harm to another child or adult based on wrong information.

If you hear a child say something that has no basis in fact, challenge them immediately – in a soft and gentle way, of course. Ask them where they got that information, and then help them to figure out why they assumed it was true.

## **CONFRONTING “THINKING ERRORS”: PREJUDICE, BIAS, PHOBIAS, AND STEREOTYPES**

One of our tasks in preparing children to be able to challenge the various forms of thinking they will encounter – thoughts, beliefs, convictions, ideas, information, (which are all the same thing), to be sure that what they are being told is factual, not just what someone **thinks** is true. Of course, this is not a bad idea for adults either. Once children are aware that saying that something is true doesn't make it true, and that people often misrepresent truth, we can introduce them to specific forms of erroneous thinking that can cause harm to others. Specifically, we want to introduce them to prejudice, bias, phobias, and stereotypes.

**PREJUDICE.** This word is based on the word “pre-judge”. To pre-judge is to pass judgment on prematurely or without sufficient reflection or investigation. Prejudice is an unfavorable opinion or feeling formed beforehand or without real knowledge, thought, or reason.

We can show prejudice either positively or negatively. Usually when we hear the word prejudice we assume it's a negative judgment, but that is not necessarily true. Prejudice is **any** preconceived opinion or feeling, either favorable or unfavorable. For example, if we see a person wearing glasses and carrying a lot of books we may “assume” that they are smart. Or if we see an unkempt homeless person on the street we may decide, without any evidence, that they are an addict, or mentally ill, or unmotivated.

No matter how open minded or accepting we believe ourselves to be, and no matter how good a job we think we are doing when it comes to helping to raise tolerant children, the fact remains that we all carry prejudices and biases. You may want to share with your children times when you've made the wrong judgment about someone so they know how common it is and that is something to be careful about, not ashamed of. There are, unhappily,

numerous news stories that will provide a platform for discussions of prejudice, and of the harm that can come from un-checked judgments about others.

**BIAS.** Prejudice can lead to bias, which is an opinion, attitude, or tendency formed again without evidence, which leads us to favor one group or people over another, very often without any justification. Racial prejudice often leads to bias, when people assume that white children are “smarter” than black children and then treat them differently in our educational systems.

**PHOBIA.** A phobia is an intense, irrational fear. Common phobias are intense fear of spiders (even harmless ones), or talking in front of other people. One is “phobic” about something because they expect something awful to happen by what they are afraid of.

We’ve talked about sexually diverse people, who regularly experience prejudice, bias, and “homophobia”, which is an intense, irrational fear, disgust, or hatred of intimate same sex relationships that becomes overwhelming to the person. Irrational fears effect the way an individual treats individuals who provoke the fear. Homophobia sometimes results in fear of knowing, befriending, or associating with gays, lesbians, or bisexuals; fear of being perceived as gay, lesbian, or bisexual; and fear of stepping outside of accepted gender role behavior. Some gay people have been killed because someone mistook friendly gestures as “coming on” to them. Here we see how prejudice and phobias act together to cause totally unnecessary harm. You can do an exercise with your kids to see if they have any “phobias”, and ask what kinds of irrational behaviors they may have done in response to this phobia?

**STEREOTYPE.** A stereotype is a fixed image of a person or a group of people that is oversimplified and does not consider different individuals in a group. Again, stereotypes can be either positive or negative. There are many stereotypes based on ethnicity and culture. Talk with your children about stereotypes

about their heritage. Discuss where those stereotypes come from and where they reflect some truths and where they reflect myth. Stereotypes are a little more complicated than prejudices and phobias because there is often an element of reality for particular groups. Here it is important to sort through some stereotypes that we can just accept and even enjoy ("little old ladies; speech patterns common in a particular ethnic group; "senior moments"; strong silent types) from those that may hurt others. For example, when doing classes on culture and difference, almost always when I tell people that I'm Irish, gestures and jokes begin immediately about drinking. Well, in fact the Irish have more pubs than restaurants and are known to enjoy a pint. But if my family was struggling with alcohol addiction the joke might not be so funny to me. For this reason, we want to help children understand that something may be true a lot of the time, but not true all of the time. It is true that some gay men are comfortable feigning womanly gestures, but that is not true of all or even most gay men. A man using effeminate gestures being tagged as "gay" is a stereotype. It is true that some lesbians like flannel shirts and jeans and have short hair. But it is equally true that some lesbians wear lipstick and dress in female fashion.

So our task here is a little complicated. When can we accept and enjoy some stereotypes? When should we avoid using stereotypes to "pre-judge" a person? Most importantly, when should we notice that we are using a stereotype or pre-judging another person and use care to "get the facts" about a person before deciding who they are.

### **WORKING TOWARD THE PRINCIPLE OF BEING "OPEN AND AFFIRMING"**

To review our considerations of sexual diversity: We began by outlining the broad spectrum of sexuality that is part of the natural world, including the world of human relationships; We put the task of dealing with sexual diversity in the context of coming to terms with all diversity, including racial diversity, religious

diversity, gender diversity, and the entire rainbow of difference that comprises the human race. Working toward justice for all peoples has been a challenge throughout history, and we are glad that “God is still speaking” and working with us to embrace what the Creator has already embraced: a full range of difference in creation to keep life interesting and fun; we have covered differences in sexual and affectional attraction, differences in gender identity, differences in conformity to social expectations with regard to sex and gender, and differences in how individuals come to terms with their own similarities or differences with regard to their peers; We have reviewed the evidence that suggests that failure of parents, teachers, peers, and social groups to come to terms with sexual differences leads many to suffer with a variety of mental stresses; We explored how verbal misrepresentations and thinking errors lead some to form biased, prejudicial and stereotypical ideas about people who are different from them. But many “errors” can be corrected, and this one.

We end our discussion by outlining what the prophet Micah has called us to do as far as walking humbly amidst those who differ from us, extending kindness to others who may not love as we do, and seeking just ways of treating others, regardless of who or how they love.

“Tolerance” has often been promoted as a goal, but I don’t think that is really what we want to aim for with our young people. If you heard that someone’s opinion of you was that they could “tolerate” you, would you consider that a compliment? Of course not. We don’t want to be just tolerated. Wouldn’t you rather have someone truly “accept” you, as you are, and not just put up with you? Like tolerance, acceptance is really not our ultimate goal, but for some people it’s the best we’re going to get.

While better than tolerating, accepting someone or something implies that there is something that “needs” to be accepted: such as, “you’re not gay to me, you’re a person”. For some people this is as far as they will be able to go, and it is certainly better than prejudice, and also better than tolerance. Acceptance

does not imply “approval”, and some people will never be able to bring themselves to “approve” of others who are not like them, so it will be work for them to learn to accept others. A limited goal, but on our way.

What would really be “just”, would be to learn to “affirm” others, not just tolerate or accept them. To affirm is to assert positively; to maintain the other as true; to support and uphold the other, despite differences. For many individuals, affirming also includes admiration, and acknowledging that being gay, lesbian, bisexual, gender non-conforming, questioning, or transgender in our society takes strength. Another part of affirmation is an **appreciation**, which values the diversity of people in many areas and sees LGBTQ persons as a valid part of diversity. Affirmation also includes **nurturance**, assuming that our LGBTQ young people are indispensable in our society, viewing them with genuine affection and delight.

The road to justice and peace among peoples is a long and difficult one. History reveals a host of obstacles and hazards along the way. Our goal is clear, especially when it comes to providing our children and teens what they deserve in terms of acceptance, approval, and understanding. Some are still traveling, but thankfully not alone.

There are many good things about people. One is that they are each unique and diverse in a myriad of ways. Another really good thing about people is that they can change. Learning to embrace diversity, including sexual diversity, is something everyone can do if they listen to the Creator who created the diversity and to their own conscience. One of the wonderful features of children and teens is that they don't struggle nearly as hard as adults to change. This makes them a little unpredictable, which makes them interesting, but it also makes them more flexible than us. Our children and young people can move nicely, with our guidance, from ignorant (unknowing), to questioning, to accepting, to affirming in a beautiful way.

Think of yourself. How many of you thought dandelions were “flowers” and made a lovely bouquet for your mother? How many of you were “hit” as a child, and later decided to raise your children differently? How many of you who were raised reading the Bible eventually found yourself uneasy with the casual references to slaves? As I said, people can change.

I wish you and your children well on your journey through diversity. The world provides a wonderful path for exploration. I'll meet you at the corner of Interesting and Wonderful.

*For every girl who is tired of acting weak when she is strong, there is a boy who is tired of appearing strong when he feels vulnerable.*

*For every girl who is tired of people not trusting her intelligence, there is a boy who is burdened with the constant expectation of knowing everything.*

*For every girl who is tired of being called over-sensitive, there is a boy who is denied the right to be gentle and weep.*

*For every girl who is called unfeminine when she competes, there is a boy for whom competition is the only way to prove his masculinity.*

*For every girl who throws out her EZ bake oven, there is a boy who wishes to find one.*

*For every girl who takes a step toward her liberation, there is a boy who finds the way to freedom has been made a little easier.*

*Author Unknown (published in Relational Child and Youth Care Practice, Vol.17, NO.3)*

## **THOUGHTS AND ENCOURAGEMENT FOR CHRISTIANS STRUGGLING WITH ACCEPTANCE OF SEXUAL DIVERSITY**

I recognize that many faith traditions present followers with a challenge on their journey to respect for and acceptance of sexual differences. I am not in a position to address the struggle from all perspectives, but as a Christian person I can offer some encouragement. I believe "The Bible" has been misused and misrepresented in ways that have caused much pain for LGBTQ young people and their family members.

No Christian I know follows everything written in the Bible, which contains writings from thousands of years ago and from a variety of people (men) who struggled to understand God and to please the God they construed. While many Christians are perfectly comfortable totally ignoring almost all of the "laws" and "purity instructions" (over 300) in the Old Testament, certain passages are pulled out to obscure the historical intentions of certain teachings to imply that they should apply to our lives today. No Christians I know are "pleasing God with regular burnt offerings" and no Christian I know asks women if they are menstruating before touching them, although touching menstruating women is specifically forbidden by the Bible. Nor do we kill people found working on the Sabbath. And although I go to church regularly and attempt to follow Jesus, I am not fond of His instruction to "sell all that I have in order to enter the kingdom of heaven".

We are often told that "the Bible" calls homosexuality "an abomination". Yes it does. The Bible also uses the exact same word to condemn: women wearing slacks; eating shellfish and pork, or sacrificing an imperfect animal. The Bible also prohibits "wearing clothes made of wool and linen woven together", but most Christians do not inspect clothing labels for these abominations before buying something they like.

Incest (Lot) and having "concubines" (Abraham) and stoning and slaughter are not listed as abominations.

In the New Testament Jesus Christ is critical of adultery, lust, and divorce, but he was completely silent regarding same sex relations that we now call homosexuality. The only New Testament writer, and there were many other contributors, to condemn homosexuality was Paul, who is usually quoted out of context. The verses of condemnation usually cited are in the book of Romans which contains a very long paragraph full of "shameful" behavior including all manner of "lusts". Gossiping and being "haughty" is included in the same list as lustful same-sex behavior.

The Bible has been used to justify: burning women alive who "preached", slaughtering Jews, Indians, and Muslims; and enslaving Africans. Thankfully, we find more verses in the Bible telling us that God is Love, and that what God wants from us, yes "requires" of us (Old Testament, Micah) is to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God, and in the New Testament to love God and love our neighbor, thus "fulfilling all the law". And The Bible does not tell us which neighbors to love and which not to love.

I hope this helps.