Ministry with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Questioning Youth

Christie Billups

Young people struggle with complex issues of sexual identity. Drawing upon church teaching and her years of experience in campus ministry, the author offers valuable suggestions for renewed praxis with students, families, and academic communities.

I have worked extensively with youth in both parish and campus settings. My doctoral thesis-project focused on an underserved and relatively small portion of these adolescent populations (see Billups). Over the years, there had been more than one discussion among the high school administration and guidance departments regarding same-sex couples at the prom, or unsolicited sexual advances in the locker room, or girls with family conflict over their daughters’ sexual orientation and/or behavior.

One of these troubling dilemmas arose in spring 2005. A student had run away from home to live with her much older lesbian girlfriend. She was struggling with grades, truancy, home difficulties, and what appeared to be some level of depression. She was crying a lot and struggling greatly. Her mother had told her that she was an abomination and that she was going to go to hell because of who she was.

This level of pain and alienation begs the question of where the church stands in the midst of it. How do we reach into this situation with guidance as well as compassion? How do we offer direction for the staff as well as the family in crisis?

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How do we reach out to this young woman with comfort and care knowing that her pain is real and her dilemma overwhelming?

The story of the young woman mentioned above highlights some of the chief concerns and emergent realities of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Questioning (LGBQ) young people. (Transgender persons have very specific pastoral needs that extend beyond the purview of this article.) If this story and the following facts disturb us, we may be motivated to respond more expediently. The reality is that LGBQ youth are at higher risk for running away from home or being thrown out of their homes and subsequently living on the streets. They are frequently depressed and suffer from low self-esteem due in part to isolation and silence sometimes associated with being LGBQ. One of the most troubling discoveries is that LGBQ youth comprise up to 30 percent of teen suicides, and likewise, are two to three times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers (Maher, 2). Ryan and Futterman point out the proportionately high rate of victimization for homosexual young people in the form of violence and sexual abuse (60).

Though some progress has been made toward inclusion and acceptance, people have been killed and still are at risk for being “who they are.” Those who stand with LGBQ persons are also at risk. As campus ministers, pastoral caregivers, and Christians, how do we make our stand? We must break the silence and stand with the oppressed as Jesus commands us to, walking with those who are excluded, persecuted, and misunderstood. The question is how.

Accompanying the marginalized and oppressed always requires being prophetic and embodying a “presence that disturbs” (Gittins). If we disturb sleeping giants, we must be prepared to take risks. If LGBQ persons are misunderstood, or at the very least, silenced, then necessarily those of us who opt to be on the margins with them will also be misunderstood, ignored, labeled, and judged (Maher and Sever).

Tradition, both church teaching and Scripture, offers apparent inconsistency in guidance and direction. However, the incarnational God of love is mysterious but not ambiguous. Contrary to the oft-quoted phrase referencing homosexual persons as “intrinsically disordered,” there are pastoral, loving guides to lead us in discerning appropriate ministerial responses. The church can, in good conscience, respond to LGBQ persons without fear of compromising her convictions.

**Church Teaching**

Let us first clarify what in fact the church does teach. The teaching has often been reduced to hate the sin, love the sinner. But the phrase “intrinsically disordered” refers to homosexuality itself, not simply homosexual actions, because the attraction or “inclination” lends itself to tempting the person toward that action, which is deemed sinful. The reason it is deemed sinful is because, according to tradition, sex should occur within a committed relationship between a man and
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a woman. Homosexual activity is forbidden by both Scripture and various church documents.

This being stated, we are left no clearer about how we are to respond to those who find themselves to be homosexual or bisexual. When understanding and compassion have been offered by church leadership, ministers have been instructed a few years later not to take too much pastoral license lest the faithful get a conflicted idea of where the church stands on this issue (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Letter to the Bishops*, no. 3). But a few pastoral leads have been offered that might help us to get started in our call to respond as campus ministers or pastoral caregivers.

“It is deplorable that homosexual persons have been and are the object of violent malice in speech or in action. Such treatment deserves condemnation from the church's pastors wherever it occurs” (*Letter to the Bishops*, no. 10). Are we using our voices to condemn violence and hateful rhetoric directed toward LGBQ persons, their families, and their advocates?

The Congregation for Catholic Education explains: “The causes having been sought and understood, the family and the teacher will offer an efficacious help in the process of integral growth: welcoming with understanding, creating a climate of hope, encouraging the emancipation of the individual and his or her growth in self-control, promoting an authentic moral force toward conversion to the love of God and neighbor . . .” (*Educational Guidance*, no. 103). It is always and everywhere, with LGBQ youth as well as heterosexual youth, the responsibility of parents, pastoral ministers, teachers, and mentors to provide a moral compass and ongoing formation of the conscience and behavior of youth. “Self-control” or discipline is the path to true freedom to act in a way that brings wholeness to the developing young people and joy to those who love them.

In response to the relatively open dialogue about homosexuality within the culture of the United States, the U.S. bishops have offered a slightly different tone in their pastoral reflections. While always reinforcing the Vatican’s admonition against any type of homosexual activity, since the 1970s the U.S. bishops have responded to the difficulties in which we find ourselves as pastoral ministers. In their letters and documents they have reflected the revelations of studies and research in the psychological and medical realms regarding homosexuality and offered sensitivity to it.

One example is a statement offered by the United States Catholic Conference (USCC) entitled *To Live in Christ Jesus: A Pastoral Reflection on the Moral Life* (1976). “Some persons find themselves through no fault of their own to have a
homosexual orientation. Homosexuals, like everyone else, should not suffer from prejudice against their basic human rights. They have a right to respect, friendship, and justice. They should have an active role in the Christian community” (no. 52). Continuing, they go on to instruct all persons on moral sexual behavior: “Like heterosexual persons, homosexuals are called to give witness to chastity, avoiding, with God’s grace, behavior which is wrong for them, just as nonmarital sexual relations are wrong for heterosexuals.” But because heterosexuals can eventually marry if they choose, homosexual persons are offered a “special degree of pastoral understanding and care” (no. 52).

Certainly at the high school level, but often at the college level as well, those with whom we are ministering are not immediately concerned with marriage. Adolescence is a time for claiming a better sense of identity, growing in maturity, and learning to establish cohesive and lasting friendships. Therefore, our primary duty to all the students we serve is to offer them relevant and practical alternatives to the permissive moral environment of the culture around them. Adolescents aren’t ready for marriage, and therefore sexual activity should be discouraged regardless of sexual orientation. That said, ministers must “keep it real” lest we become an irrelevant adult in the minds of our youth.

If we are going to keep it real, we can no longer pretend that students aren’t wrestling with the issues surrounding homosexuality. Thankfully, we can again find support for breaking the silence among the voices of the bishops themselves. “Educationally, homosexuality cannot and ought not to be skirted or ignored. The topic ‘must be faced in all objectivity by the pupil and the educator when the case presents itself’” (USCC, Human Sexuality, no. 56). The bishops go on in this document to offer three suggestions for pastoral response: (1) model and teach respect of all persons, (2) be clear on the moral teachings of the church, and (3) remember that homosexual persons themselves might be struggling to understand and “accept his or her own homosexual orientation.” Therefore, we proceed pastorally with compassion and understanding.

Finally, we look to one more statement from the U.S. bishops, Always Our Children: Pastoral Message to Parents of Homosexual Children and Suggestions for Pastoral Ministers (1998). The bishops acknowledge the needs of parents of LGBQ children for accompaniment as well as the necessity of guidance and instruction for church ministers. Suggestions for ministers include pastoral care of parents,
welcome for homosexual persons and their family members, an injunction to be better informed about homosexuality as well as HIV/AIDS, use of appropriate and respectful language, keeping available resources that might help homosexual persons, and ongoing support on both individual and group bases.

**Toward a Renewed Praxis**

From these glimpses of guidance and pastoral concern as well as my own experiences, both troubling and revelatory, the mandate has been clearly illuminated that we are called as campus and pastoral ministers to reach out to LGBQ youth. Fortified with the insights of some high school students, here are a few suggestions for renewed praxis with young people on the margins, and arguably, all youth. One student I interviewed articulated the need for a bridge between LGBQ youth and the church. She suggested that both sides need to participate in building that bridge. She shared how she felt about the church:

I don’t think it’s right . . . the church. And personally to me, God has always been loving. It’s not him that I’m mad at. I would never be mad at God. It’s the church. They’re the ones who are supposed to be bringing the word of God but they’re screwing it up in the long run. And I don’t see it . . . I could see the bridge being built but it’s going to take time. (2/28/06)

She points the way, and it is up to us to access, create, and utilize the tools we need to build a more inclusive community with all parts of the Body of Christ intact and thriving. These suggestions are only a beginning. Allow these offerings to be a catalyst to move the conversation forward and to add a few pieces to the bridge.

**Pastoral Care**

If people are hurting, pastoral care is essential. They need a listening and caring ear and heart to accompany them. We need to be present holistically and actively, authentically and relevantly. This is not solely care for the young people who self-identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or confused. We need to extend our care and compassion to families, parents, and friends of LGBQ adolescents, as well as those called to be pastoral companions.

We need to begin by creating a safe place for young people. Safe place is not simply physical. Safe place requires training safe people to accompany youth. The campus or youth minister cannot do it all or be a resource for everyone in need of sharing her or his story. She or he must train others to be open hearts and active listeners for youth and their families. The Archdiocese of Minneapolis–St. Paul worked on this in the 1990s, and Michael Bayly collected some ideas that surfaced
over those years. He compiled them into a practical resource entitled *Creating Safe Environments for LGBT Students: A Catholic Schools Perspective*. His suggestions are timely and malleable for varied settings and age groups.

The issue of who the team of persons can or should be poses challenges but also divergent possibilities. In a high school or college setting, the teachers or professors are options. But sometimes there are keen and caring staff members who might also want to be trained as safe places. LGBQ youth also hunger for mentors. Naturally, it would be particularly helpful for some LGBQ youth to find an adult LGBQ person who has walked through much of what they are now grappling with and can offer useful tips on how to navigate the roughest of the waters with grace and hope. But adults need not be lesbian or gay themselves in order to provide a safe space. Straight allies can also be a source of mentoring, comfort, and understanding.

Further, the possibility of young people being peer mentors has a great deal of potential. At the college level, this reality would be particularly apropos. Training programs could be offered for interested LGBQ persons or allies who want to be companions for those who are searching or struggling. At the high school level it’s a little trickier but not out of the question. During the interview process for my thesis, a senior girl said she was bisexual, and a freshman in a different small group also self-identified as bisexual. Toward the end of the four-week process, the senior suggested that she would like to befriend the freshman. The older student seemed to have a level of maturity and self-awareness from which the younger woman could benefit. It might work with careful ministerial guidance and supervision.

Second, once the youth decide that a location, office, or indeed *the caregiver* is a safe place, one may be privileged to begin hearing some of their stories. This is indeed an honor; and because it is an honor, it demands that we hone our listening skills to receive the stories with integrity. Active listening requirements may alter slightly from culture to culture and setting to setting so it’s important to discern what respectful listening looks and sounds like. Ask some students how they know that someone is truly listening. Don’t assume it is the same for everyone.

Third, we need to honor the stories in some way. This is not an easy thing to define or explain. It may be as simple as saying that the story is important and remaining open to hearing more of it. Invite them to light a candle to signify the significance of their story and that it lives on even after they leave the safe space. Offer to pray with the young person if they seem open to it. Be sure that it is a

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gentle invitation and not a conditional expectation. Take small steps so as to maintain and grow trust.

Particularly in the high school setting, outreach to family members and friends is essential but complicated. Those LGBQ students who are most fragile and isolated often emerge from a home environment in which they do not feel they can be honest about who they are. One young woman put it this way:

My biggest fear would be my mom to find me out. I just don’t want her to look at me differently. Because I really like being who I am. And I don’t want people to cast me off because of something I can’t control. (2/21/06)

The problem is that if this young woman can’t be herself in her own home, she will be equally hard pressed to self-actualize in a church setting that she feels doesn’t accept her as she is. Again, we’re not getting into moral or immoral behavior here; we’re talking about identity.

This scenario begs the question of who needs the pastoral care. Certainly the young woman needs support and validation that she is acceptable and lovable the way she is. But clearly, the mom needs to hear that LGBQ children are lovable too. The USCC document *Always Our Children* offers suggestions to churches, some of which could be modified to fit the specific environment of schools, to address the needs and worries of Catholic parents of LGBQ youth. In the college setting, ministers need to accompany friends, roommates, and others who are in relationship with LGBQ persons. They also need support and accompaniment sometimes.

A final area of pastoral care is the mutual accompaniment of youth and campus ministers. Far too often, those who minister with youth are abandoned by other lay and clerical leaders. Not everyone is called to work with youth. Some people find teens and those who work with them perplexing. Therefore, it is essential, especially in the risky arena of accompanying youth on the margins and LGBQ youth in particular, that ministers network, support one another, pray and problem-solve together, and share resources. Scheduling time regularly for theological reflection with other pastoral ministers and one’s own pastoral team if these are safe places is also very important. Consistently processing the difficulties and joys of walking around on the margins can keep these realities from getting too heavy and can empower one in her or his call to accompany youth.

**Education**

In tandem with the process of pastoral care and creating safe places for all those on the margins is the dire need for education. We frequently bemoan the fact that our young people are getting a disturbing and skewed source of education and morality from the media, and yet we do not provide an alternative. Sexuality is part of who we are and is a particularly potent part of adolescence. Young people are contending with a surge of hormones and are naturally tempted to experiment
to seek understanding. Therefore, we need to offer informed guidance. At times, the topics of sex and sexuality make us nervous. But it is a fallacy that if we talk about sex with our young people we will give tacit permission to explore sex and sexuality more freely. All young people, not solely LGBQ youth, need open and frank input about sex and sexuality from educated leaders in the church.

A source of solace and relief for LGBQ teens and young adults in a more holistic approach to discussing sexuality is that the words lesbian, gay, and bisexual are said out loud. Adults who have gone through their own self-discovery in a time when these things were not discussed say they never heard stories or references to people like them. This leaves a person feeling isolated, ashamed, and confused. Speaking about it, not in the sense of “gay rights” but in the sense of “some people will find themselves to be sexually attracted to people of the same sex,” allows LGBQ youth to breathe, at least for a moment, and say to themselves, “OK, well at least I’m not alone.” Guiding them further to make moral choices is a natural next step.

LGBQ youth, their parents, peers, and community members need to hear the same statement—that some people have homosexual and bisexual attractions. Faith communities are also in need of enlightenment. If we convince young people that they are acceptable and lovable just the way they are, but we invite them to be a part of a community that hasn’t figured that out yet, we are setting that young person up for disappointment, spiritual damage, and lasting alienation from religious engagement. Pastors and ministers involved with the school or young people in any way need to constantly be stretched in their knowledge of church teaching as well as advancements in science. We are doing the important work of creating safe space, and informed people are much safer than those who are ignorant.

The multifaceted aspects of education should include breaking the silence about homosexual and bisexual people. All God’s children are called to treasure their sexuality as part of what makes them whole. Clear, scientific information about the physical perils of experimental sex and sexually transmitted diseases, especially HIV/AIDS, is needed. Teachers should address it in the high school classroom in the areas of health, science, and, yes, theology. Preachers should actively confront homophobia and heterosexism as symptoms of the social evils of exclusion and ignorance. Workshops and in-services should be held to discuss issues surrounding the various aspects of sexuality. All of this should be done while respecting church teaching and honoring the experiences and stories of LGBQ persons.

**Ritual, Art, and Prayer**

Rituals and liturgical celebrations offer a wealth of potential when it comes to embracing and celebrating the gifts of all members of the community, including our LGBQ sisters and brothers (Duncan). Ritual ties us to the foundation of our tradition in the paschal mystery. In liturgy we are reminded that we are the Body of Christ, bound as one Family created by God.
We, as Catholics, do a relatively poor job of including youth in our rituals. They should be invited to proclaim the word, sing and dance their joy and struggles before the Lord, and perform other ministries. Youth could help to establish a church environment that also speaks to them. Celebrate their gifts of energy, enthusiasm, artistic ability, and creativity. Offer them a sense of belonging.

Meaningful ritual bears much potential for creativity. Here are some ideas for brainstorming. First, today’s young people have amazing capacities and thriving interest in art and poetry. Plays, poetry slams, and art shows can be used to help youth explore and share their journeys in ways that provide healing and growth for them while also expanding the understanding and compassion of others.

Second, there is room for exploration into the importance of reclaiming rites of passage for our youth and communities. These help young people, in particular questioning teens, to come to a better understanding of who they are and to celebrate that with others who are choosing to love and support them as they emerge into adulthood. These rites lend clarity and confidence to their own stories while also building stronger community as each person within it is valued more intentionally. Confirmation, for example, could be a more powerful spiritual rite of passage. Such rituals need further study and better integration in our religious and communal lives.

Finally (but not exhaustively), through Chicago’s Community Justice Youth Initiative and the Precious Blood Ministry of Reconciliation, the art and amazing graces of Healing Circles, drawn from the wise traditions of indigenous peoples, are being explored in new and important ways. Circles are being used as a way to diffuse potentially violent conflict; to bring compassion, voice, and healing to those who have been victimized; and to provide safe places to share stories (Pranis, Stuart, and Wedge). It is these safe places that we need to be facilitating for our young people, especially those who are on the margins by virtue of race, gender, economics, or sexual orientation. Healing Circles are rich with possibilities for honoring the voices of parents, youth, teachers, community members, and pastoral caregivers.

Regardless of the starting place, the realities in which LGBQ youth find themselves demand a response. Each community must discern for itself the appropriate place to begin. The voices of LGBQ persons must be part of that discernment. And we must root all that we do in prayer. Prayer keeps us rooted in God, focused on the stories of those on the margins, and tapped into the compassion and wisdom of the Spirit.
References


