

An Introduction to Pastorally Supporting LGBTQ+ Young People



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Learning Outcomes

The intended learning outcomes are for training participants to:

- Feel more confident in pastorally supporting LGBTQ+ young people.
- Understand that LGBTQ+ matters are a regular part of many young people’s lives, and that issues related to gender and sexuality may be significant for those they care for and support.
- Understand and use terminology and acronyms associated with LGBTQ+.
- Consider practical issues when working with LGBTQ+ young people.
- Better understand the experiences of LGBTQ+ young people in church.

1. Welcome

Thank you for attending *An Introduction to Pastorally Supporting LGBTQ+ Young People*.

This handbook is designed to provide a clear summary of the key points from the training, offering a helpful reminder and practical guide for future conversations. The aim is to support you in feeling informed and confident as you pastorally walk alongside LGBTQ+ young people.

The training doesn't explore theological debates, but instead offers a starting point for conversation around this topic from a perspective of love and pastoral care for young people. It does not seek to provide answers to all the questions, but rather to equip youth leaders and churches to begin thoughtful, compassionate dialogue in their own contexts, with conversations that can grow and deepen over time, shaped by listening, reflection and a commitment to inclusion.

So if you leave with more questions than you came with, that's not just OK – it's a positive sign. It means there is space for further learning, discussion and exploration in your local context.

Thank you for choosing to take a step on the journey towards a truly inclusive ministry with LGBTQ+ young people.

The letters in LGBTQ+ stand for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Questioning/ Queer. These terms are defined in the Diversity Dice section. The '+' is there to represent the many other possibilities and terms that exist beyond the letters listed. There is also a shortened form LGBT, or a longer form LGBTQIA+, which includes Intersex and Asexual/Allies, and other combinations of letters in use. Language and definitions evolve, so they require understanding and contextualisation. Ultimately, terms like LGBTQ+ can help people feel connected to a larger group with shared experiences.

Resource background and development

Originally developed in 2019 as a training resource for Salvation Army youth workers, this session has since been delivered to hundreds of practitioners across the UK and Ireland. In response to growing interest, the content was updated in 2025 to ensure broader relevance for churches and Christian organisations of all denominations.

2. Understanding LGBTQ+ Experiences

For many LGBTQ+ young people, faith can be a source of strength, identity and belonging.

Yet historically the Church has not always lived up to its calling as a place of love. Instead of protecting young people from harm, it has too often been a place where shame, exclusion and silence take root. Some LGBTQ+ individuals may feel that their identity is incompatible with their faith – a tension that is sometimes deepened by the very communities meant to nurture them.

Much like anyone else, LGBTQ+ people have hopes, dreams, ambitions and beliefs – and they deserve respect, compassion, support and inclusion. Youth leaders play a vital role in creating spaces and relationships where LGBTQ+ individuals feel safe, valued and supported. This means fostering inclusive environments and challenging prejudice, especially when it stems from misunderstanding or lack of awareness.

By doing so, youth leaders in the Church can be part of rewriting the narrative of marginalisation that has too often defined LGBTQ+ experiences, and instead help shape a future where every young person is seen, heard and embraced in both their faith and identity.



Understanding the Realities

Creating inclusive and supportive communities, within the Church and beyond, requires an understanding of the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ young people in the UK.

These recent statistics, drawing from the 2024 national survey by The Trevor Project² and Stonewall's³ research, highlight both the challenges that LGBTQ+ young people face and the resilience they continue to show.

Challenges facing LGBTQ+ young people

Mental health concerns are widespread:

- 58% seriously considered suicide in the past year.
- 19% attempted suicide.
- 70% reported symptoms of anxiety; 62% reported depression.
- 58% engaged in self-harm.
- LGBTQ+ youth are twice as likely to experience poor mental health compared to their peers.⁴

Discrimination is common:

- 66% experienced discrimination due to sexual orientation.
- 68% experienced discrimination due to gender identity.
- Nearly 1 in 6 were threatened with or subjected to conversion therapy.
- 12% experienced homelessness due to being kicked out or running away, with 30% of homeless young people identifying as LGBTQ+.
- 43% of LGBTQ+ pupils are bullied in school because of their identity.

Barriers to support:

- Many fear judgement or rejection when seeking mental health care.
- Trans and non-binary youth face significantly higher risks and fewer affirming spaces.

² The Trevor Project report formed a survey of 9,600 LGBTQ+ young people aged 13 to 24 across the UK.

https://www.thetrevorproject.org/survey-international/assets/static/2024_UK_National_Survey_EN.pdf

³ <https://www.stonewall.org.uk/resources/lgbtq-facts-and-figures>

⁴ **Understanding LGBTQ+ youth mental health in the UK | Action For Children**

Positive signs and protective factors

Community and peer support matter:

- LGBTQ+ peers are often a vital source of affirmation and friendship.
- 29% turn to the internet as their main source of support.
- 90% of LGBTQ+ university applicants report a positive or neutral experience in the education system.
- Supportive, affirming and safe environments at school, home and in the community are among the most important protective factors against poor mental health and suicide.

Trusted adults make a difference:

- Having even one affirming adult is linked to significantly lower suicide risk, fewer mental health problems and less self-harm.

Faith and identity can co-exist:

- 29% of LGBTQ+ people of faith participate in regular faith-based activities.
- Many find strength in reconciling their identity with their beliefs.

Visibility and resilience:

- Despite challenges, LGBTQ+ young people continue to advocate for themselves and others, contributing to growing awareness and inclusive policy efforts across schools and communities.



“One cannot work out her approach to ministry with LGBTQ teenagers apart from relationship with real LGBTQ teens.”

Mark Oestreicher

3. Gender and Sexuality Terminology Definitions and How To Use Them

Terminology related to LGBTQ+ identities evolves as understanding of sexuality and human complexity grows. The terms used to describe sexual orientation and gender identity have changed over time and are expected to continue developing. Language is applied differently across individuals, generations and regions. It is important to maintain cultural awareness in order to interpret the terminology young people use appropriately and to refer to LGBTQ+ young people respectfully.

It is OK to ask a young person to help you to understand how their identity impacts them. It is also OK to research what a word means for when you next see a young person, but recognise that they may not use the terms in the same way. The key to getting it right, however, is relationship. If you have a good relationship and are able to articulate that you care for and want to support the young person and they feel safe enough to trust you, then this approach should be fine. If you do not have a relationship with them, the phrasing and tone of how you ask them to tell you more about themselves are really important, as is reassuring them that they are welcome to the event or group you are leading.

Of course, it is always the choice of any person, LGBTQ+ or not, as to who knows and when people know about their gender identity and/or sexuality, so this information should always be treated with confidentiality (as you would any other personal details about a young person you are working with).



“The homosexuality question is first and foremost about beautiful people loved by God.”

Preston Sprinkle

Gender

Sex and gender are different. Sex refers to biology, the anatomy of an individual's reproductive system and secondary sex characteristics. Gender refers either to the social roles based on the sex of a person or to a personal identification of a person's own sense of awareness of their own identity – our inner sense of how we see and feel about ourselves. Gender can feel complicated, both in how we see ourselves and how the people around us see and interact with us. Society has gendered roles, assumptions and pressures and uses gendered language every day that can affirm and validate people, but if used inconsiderately it can cause harm. Gender identity works in an affirming way, for example when a trans man can live and be treated as male.

Don't assume someone's gender identity – just ask. It's fine to ask a young person what pronouns they use (he/him, she/her/, they/them), and you can introduce yourself with your own pronouns to make it easier. If they don't know what you mean, it likely isn't important to them; if it is, you've started an open conversation about identity.

Transgender (or just **trans**) – an umbrella term meaning someone's gender does not match the sex they were assigned at birth. Many people use this term differently. Common uses are:

- **Trans man** – assigned female at birth, but identifies their gender as male.
- **Trans woman** – assigned male at birth, but identifies their gender as female.

Trans people can be gay, bisexual, heterosexual etc, but it is worth noting that not everyone will 'out' themselves as trans. For some people this is an important part of their identity for people to know about, but others wish to remain private or decide not to share their identity.

Cisgender (or just **cis**) – a term meaning a person's gender identity aligns with the sex they were assigned at birth.

- **Cis man** – assigned male at birth and identifies their gender as a man.
- **Cis woman** – assigned female at birth and identifies their gender as a woman.

Identifying with the sex you were assigned at birth brings an element of privilege, something that has become increasingly apparent over recent years. Cis men and women have very different experiences from that of trans men and women.

Intersex – may have the biological attributes of both sexes, or biological attributes that do not fit with societal assumptions about what constitutes male or female (genitals, gonads, hormones, chromosomes or reproductive organs). Intersex babies have to be assigned a sex at birth: male or female. Like everyone, they may identify as male, female or non-binary. There are many different variations of how this impacts people. Experts estimate that up to 1.7% of people are born with intersex traits.⁵

⁵ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/sexual-orientation-and-gender-identity/intersex-people>

Non-binary – a person who does not have a gender identity as male or female. They may recognise attributes of both genders in themselves or may feel as if they have no binary gender. For some people this will lead to medical body changes, but for many it will not.

Sexuality

Sexuality is our attraction to other people. Historically the term ‘homosexual’ has been used to describe a male attracted to other males. Today this terminology only tends to be used in the Church. Out in the world this term is redundant.

Some young people may use alternative phrases to describe themselves, some of which may have been viewed as a slur before. If they choose to use those words, then please ask them if this is the terminology they would like others to use. Labels on sexuality can be very important to some and less important to others.

Gay – attraction to those of the same sex or gender. People of all genders can use this term.

Lesbian – is also a term used to describe females attracted to other females; and while it is still used by many women, more and more youth language has moved towards the term gay instead.

Bisexual – attraction to more than one gender.

Pansexual – attraction to all genders not limited by gender.

Heterosexual – attraction to the opposite gender.

Asexual – experience little or no sexual attraction to anyone. We may assume all young people are wired for sexual intimacy, but for some this isn’t the case.

Queer – The word queer can be used differently by people from different generations or geography. Whilst historically it has been an offensive derogatory term, in recent years there has been a move towards reclaiming it. A dictionary would define it as an adjective meaning ‘strange or odd’: ‘She had a queer feeling that they were being watched’, or a dated term for being slightly ill: ‘He was feeling rather queer.’ Now many use it in a positive way to reclaim the use of the term and the pain it was previously used to create. Many reclaim it as an umbrella term – more of a sense of not fitting with, or wanting to be defined by, other labels. However, many people still see this as offensive, so only use it with permission.

4. Five Tips for Pastorally Supporting LGBTQ+ Young People

Transcript from the teaching video

1. Know your starting point and learn

In *The Art of Youth Work*, Kerry Young sets out the basis of anti-oppressive practice:

'Engaging with young people in their social education is a privilege and a luxury. So you have to be very careful that you don't impose your own standards and values on them. That's where it becomes really skilful because you can't deny your own beliefs and values. But if you acknowledge them and are aware of where you are coming from, then you stand a better chance of working effectively from your value base without imposing your view on young people.'

Young affirms that it is not wrong to have opinions on issues: we are human, so of course we do. But we need to acknowledge and own those opinions, so we work beyond them. For me, my opinions on the LGBTQ+ conversation are really clear in my head. I live every day in the tension of being gay and Christian. I have taken time to think things through, to read a variety of books, to pray and reflect and make sure I am crystal clear on my thoughts, so that when I am working with young people I can share a variety of opinions and perspectives on the subject rather than solely sharing my own.

However, if you ask me my opinion of my thoughts and opinions on disability, or conversations surrounding race, then my opinions wouldn't be as clear because they are not things I need to deal with on a daily basis. That means I have a responsibility to go out and to read, to listen to podcasts and to find videos that engage my thinking, broaden my knowledge and opinion and help me understand what my starting point is. Once I have done that, I can be open to engage with young people in a way that goes beyond what I already know.

You might never have taken time out to think about these things when it comes to the LGBTQ+ conversation. If this is the case, then I encourage you to find that time. Take time to stop, to read, to consider, pray and reflect. Acknowledge where you are at. Can you put your feelings to one side, so that when you are working with young people you are able to offer them a wide range of different perspectives rather than just sharing your own?

2. Listen and let them lead

Whenever a young person tells us something, the first thing we need to do is realise how important it is they have chosen to share that with us. The best possible response we could give is to listen and give them space and opportunity to share their story in the way they feel

comfortable with. Personal stories have a transformative power – they change the way that we think and feel about things. They stop conversations being about the ‘gay Christian’, the ‘trans young person’, and instead they flesh out and humanise these people and respect their experiences.

In his book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* Stephen R Covey discusses paradigm shifts. He tells a story about one evening on his way home from work. He was standing on the train station platform, opened his newspaper and started reading. A few minutes later a father with his two children came to the platform. The children were behaving very badly. They were running up and down, knocking into people. He said, ‘Excuse me, sir, but what your children are doing is causing a scene. Can you not see they are annoying people?’ The father looked at him, apologised, and said, ‘I am really sorry, but you see we are on our way home from the hospital where my wife, their mother, has just died. I don’t know how to deal with it and I am pretty sure they don’t either.’

Stephen R Covey continues:

‘Can you imagine what I felt at that moment? My paradigm shifted. Suddenly I saw things differently, and because I saw differently, I thought differently, I felt differently, I behaved differently. My irritation vanished.’

This is the same thing that happens to us when we talk to young people about the issues they are facing in their lives. Suddenly, instead of being this abstract concept, they are people that we love and care for. We start to see things differently, we think differently, we behave differently.

I think one of the most beautiful things we can do is listen to our young people and let them tell their story in their own way. As we are youth workers who care passionately about the young people we serve, their stories must inform our attitudes and our practice.

3. Affirm and celebrate

So often the conversations and stories we hear of LGBTQ+ young people are characterised by hurt, by shame, by heartache and by pain. Wherever we can, we should try to re-write the narrative. One way we can do this is to affirm and celebrate.

Regardless of your personal opinions, you can always find something to affirm a young person who has come out to you:

- You are so courageous to share that with me.
- You are a child of God (1 John 3:2).
- You are made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27).
- You are fearfully and wonderfully made.
- You are an important part of the body of the Church.

- You are an important part of our community.
- You've demonstrated a real integrity in sharing that bit of your life with me.

It is so important that we honour the trust that our young people place in us whenever they share anything with us, especially related to the LGBTQ+ conversation. Our young people might not always get positive responses from the people they share this personal information with, but we can make sure, in our roles as youth workers and leaders, that we affirm in them that God is at work in their lives and is using them for something beautiful.

After we affirm them, what do we do next? We celebrate! And what do we celebrate? We celebrate the fact that they are a gift to the church and community they are a part of, just as any other young person is.

So often in my work when young people have 'come out' they have gone on to do amazing things. They have been passionate about social justice, something we should celebrate in any context – but how exciting it is in The Salvation Army to have a new generation rising up who care deeply about tackling the injustices in this world! This may start by tackling the LGBTQ+ conversation, but it often goes on to fighting for so many other issues.

We should also celebrate that so many of our young people who 'come out' as gay and lesbian and bi and trans are passionate about pastoral care. If we look after them in the right way, then they can turn what has been a difficult time for them into something beautiful that will offer support and encouragement to their peers in whatever situations they face.

We can also celebrate their resilient faith. It is not easy to be gay and Christian. If our young people still want to be a part of the Church knowing what it might mean for them, knowing the cost it might have, then we need to celebrate the fact that they are passionate enough about Jesus that they are willing to go through it. We need to affirm them, we need to celebrate, because they are not a problem to be solved, they are a gift to the Church.

4. Help people find community

We believe in a God of community, and this is demonstrated in the very core of who he is in the beauty of the Trinity. We also know that humanity was made in God's image and likeness, so it follows that humanity too is created for community.

We see this all the way through the Bible. If we go to Genesis we learn that it is not good for 'man' (anyone) to be alone. This theme carries on throughout Scripture and is demonstrated clearly in Acts where we see the practical outworking of the early Church's commitment to community.

Some LGBTQ+ young people may find a welcoming and inclusive community in their church, and this is brilliant. However, that isn't always the case. We need to take time to think about the support and community they can find elsewhere.

In the book *4 Views on Pastoring LGBTQ Teenagers*, Gemma Dunning writes beautifully about this:

'This might terrify you: I know a lot of my youth work buddies were shocked when I started spending time with local non-Christian support agencies, but it is important that we keep the young person's wellbeing at the core of what we do. I have heard so many young people talk about being the "only one" and feeling isolated, lonely and disconnected. But as youth workers we have the power to connect young people to others who have more knowledge than we do, who have different areas of experience, and who have wider networks of support. Neither our holiness or the young person's holiness is altered by seeking support outside of the Church.'

This is a really valuable truth to hold on to when we think about how we signpost young people toward the expert support that they may need in the tricky transition of coming out.

This is especially interesting when it comes to trans young people, and there are all sorts of questions asked of them that we perhaps don't ask of LGBTQ+ young people. What are your rights in terms of the law, how do you find an accepting GP, what kind of questions do you need to ask of your school if you are going on residential? It is OK to acknowledge that we don't know everything, but what we can do is walk alongside these families as they find the help they need.

I encourage you to find out what local provision there is in your area, make contact with these organisations and individuals and build relationships, so when the conversations come we know where to direct the young people and families.

5. Don't wait until it's on your doorstep!

We need to be proactive when we are having the LGBTQ+ conversation. Too often when I travel around I am told we don't need to engage in these matters as there are no LGBTQ+ young people in our youth groups. However, whilst we might not have any young people who are 'out', we don't know how many of them might be in the closet. We also don't know how many of our young people might have friends who identify as LGBTQ+, or whose parents might themselves be part of the LGBTQ+ community, leaving young people with numerous questions about how sexuality and identity marry up with faith. We need to be responsible in trying to address these conversations.

The second thing we can do in terms of being proactive is starting to normalise the conversation. Taking the LGBTQ+ conversation seriously doesn't always require huge things such as writing a specific curriculum or session plans. Instead we can make small changes like addressing the language we use and the way we run certain activities.

The third thing we can do to be proactive is to take time out to start the conversation, to meet with people and share where we are honestly on this whole topic. I am excited that I get to talk to you about practical tips, but what is more exciting is you can take these things into your own individual settings and start to embed them in your youth work; that is how we are going to change the lives of LGBTQ+ young people.

5. FAQ's

The following are some frequently asked questions about LGBTQ+ topics. A number of these may have already been explored during the training, while others are included to encourage further personal reflection and to spark ongoing conversations within your own context.

- 1** How do we use pronouns (eg they/them/their, he/him, her/she) to describe or refer to someone's gender correctly? What practical implications might arise from being more inclusive in this way – for example, to consent forms or sign-in sheets?
- 2** How do we support the preferred names and pronouns requested by a young person whose parent is non-supportive/unaware, while still respecting the parent and their relationship with their child?
- 3** How might we accommodate trans young people who attend our groups and residential? What practical implications might arise from being more inclusive in this way – for example, to use of toilets or changing rooms, or to overnight stays?
- 4** How do we find a balance between sharing our own opinion with young people and the potentially differing positional statement of our church?
- 5** Can LGBTQ+ people perform ministry roles within the church?
- 6** Can we marry gay couples or bless LGBTQ+ partnerships within our church? Where do we stand on this, particularly if we communicate inclusivity to all?
- 7** Should LGBTQ+ people be celibate?
- 8** What role should the church play in advocating for LGBTQ+ rights and protections?
- 9** What are some of the practical ways in which my church can demonstrate that we are a safe and inclusive place for LGBTQ+ young people?
- 10** Why are so many LGBTQ+ people leaving the church – or never coming at all?
- 11** How might youth leaders / churches support parents of LGBTQ+ young people?
- 12** What local Christian or non-Christian LGBTQ+ support groups are there, and what would it look like to work in partnership to support LGBTQ+ young people?

6. Further Learning

Books

- ***Affirmative: Why You Can Say Yes to the Bible and Yes to People Who Are LGBTQI+.*** Jonathan Tallon
- ***To Inclusion and Beyond: Evangelical and affirming LGBTQ+ relationships and equal marriage.*** Danny Brierley
- ***4 Views on Pastoring LGBTQ Teenagers: Effective Ministry to Gay, Bi, Trans, Queer and Questioning Students Among Us.*** General editor: Mark Oestreicher
- ***Bible, Gender, Sexuality: Reframing the Church’s Debate on Same-Sex Relationships.*** James V Brownson
- ***Emerging Gender Identities: Understanding the Diverse Experiences of Today’s Youth.*** Mark A Yarhouse and Julia Sadusky
- ***God and the Gay Christian.*** Matthew Vines
- ***The God Box.*** Alex Sanchez
- ***Living in a Gray World: A Christian Teen’s Guide to Understanding Homosexuality.*** Preston Sprinkle
- ***Living it Out: A Survival Guide for Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Christians and Their Friends, Families and Churches.*** Rachel Hagger-Holt and Sarah Hagger-Holt
- ***Plausibility Problem: The Church and Same-Sex Attraction*** Ed Shaw
- ***Transgender. Christian. Human.*** Alex Clare-Young
- ***Undivided: Coming Out, Becoming Whole, and Living Free from Shame.*** Vicky Beeching
- ***The Widening of God’s Mercy: Sexuality Within the Biblical Story.*** Christopher B Hays and Richard B Hays
- ***Understanding Transgender Identities: Four Views.*** James K Beilby and Paul Rhodes Eddy
- ***Transforming, Updated and Expanded Edition with Study Guide: The Bible and the Lives of Transgender Christians.*** Austen Hartke
- ***Black, Gay, British, Christian, Queer: The Church and The Famine of Grace.*** Jarel Robinson-Brown

Organisations

- **akt** – Supporting LGBTQ+ aged 16-25 experiencing homelessness or a hostile living environment
- **Diverse Church** – Fully Christian, Fully Church
- **Mermaids** – Helping gender-diverse young people and families
- **Mind** – LGBTQIA+ mental health
- **Inclusive Church** – A network of churches, groups and individuals
- **Gendered Intelligence** – Expanding understandings of gender to improve trans lives
- **Stonewall** – Acceptance without Exception
- **The Proud Trust** – Education, Support and Advocacy for LGBTQ+ Youth
- **The Trevor Project** – Suicide Prevention for LGBTQ+ Young People

Podcasts

- Nomad: **Vicky Beeching – From Shame to Pride (N175)**
- Queer Theology: queertheology.com/listen/

Please note that this is not an exhaustive list and that the resources and organisations listed may not represent the positional statement and views of The Salvation Army.

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