

THE CENTER FOR  
FAITH, SEXUALITY & GENDER

# Pastoral Paper

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10 THINGS I WISH EVERY CHRISTIAN LEADER  
KNEW ABOUT GAY TEENS IN THEIR CHURCH

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# Introduction

Those gay teens in your church? I was one of them. I didn't really know it yet—I didn't identify as gay—but I was attracted to women. I felt an increasing intrigue towards them, while boys were... kind of gross. I had five brothers (and seven sisters), so I grew up fighting with the boys, playing GI Joes with the boys, longing to be included with the boys.

I dated guys a bit. One of my boyfriends seemed like the male version of me: he was the other youth group superstar. When we secretly caught each other's eye in the prayer circle, we silently agreed dating the other superstar made sense. That was an interesting few months.

Nobody suspected me. I hardly suspected myself. Whenever I felt the draw towards women, I squashed it down. *That's a sin. Not just a sin, but the worst-worst sin, I believed.*

When I share my testimony, this is usually the part where I fast-forward to my secret same-sex relationship in college. I was attending a Christian university, facilitating small groups, and leading worship at the same church where my dad was a pastor. I wished I could tell someone, but I didn't know who I could trust. Every time I heard church people say, "Those gay people," their voices dripping with vitriol, or every time they elbowed me after making a gay joke, I threw up an invisible wall of distrust between us. *I will never be open with them, I promised myself. Staying in the church is harder than leaving.*

I often continue the story to a scene post-college where I wrestled between two choices: kill myself

or come out as a lesbian atheist. I talk about how a wise person taught me these "solutions" were not the answers I was searching for. There was a third way I didn't know was possible, and it was to sink my whole self into the truth of the gospel: "You are broken. You are beloved. But so is everyone. You can live in the tension with hope."<sup>1</sup>

Today, though, I do not want to fast-forward through high school. Instead, I want to push pause right at the moment I was first wrestling with my sexuality, and ask High School Laurie: *What do you wish your church knew about you? What do you wish they would do for you?*

Based on her responses, and the desires of many present-day young adults I have mentored, I offer you this paper.<sup>2</sup> It does not speak for every LGBTQ person who walks boldly or secretly through your church doors, but I hope it speaks for some. Here are ten things I wish my church had known about me:

### **1. I Have No Idea Who I Am.**

Sexuality aside, I hardly knew who I was in high school. Some of this was because the human brain is not fully developed until we are 25 years old,<sup>3</sup> but some of it was because I was a chameleon.

I am not the first or last chameleon to walk through high school.<sup>4</sup>

Before my senior year, I played many roles at the five different schools I attended: mean girl, flirty girl, smart girl, youth group girl, and mean girl again. It was all an identity based on performance and others' perceptions of me.

Then I had a real, Holy Spirit encounter on a senior backpacking trip with our youth group. God reached below the layers of hiding, pain, cruelty, questioning, self-hatred, and genuine love of God to say, "I see you, Laurie. I know the real you, and I love you."

I wish I had been taught back then how to get to know the real me. God was calling her forth, but I didn't know how to answer him. I didn't know what tools to use to bring the real me before a real God in a real world.

### **2. I Need a Gospel-Centered Identity.**

I didn't need self-help books; I needed an identity that was unwavering. The only unchangeable identity out there is found in the God of the Bible. I needed to learn how to read the Bible and let it read me. I needed to learn to express my pain through lament like the Psalmists. I needed to learn how the gospel fuels the joy that equips me to die a thousand deaths every day, and how that same gospel awakens me with more love than a thousand Instagram likes. (Back then, of course, it

was probably "e-props" on my Xanga site, but I digress.) I wish I knew how to listen to God, to fast, to celebrate, to meditate on the word, and to let him into the secret places of my heart.

Had I known—truly known—the foundational truth of the gospel that says I am more sinful than I believe and more loved than I can imagine, *when* I was ready to process some of my pain, I could have done so using the gospel as a template: I am broken. "This is my type of brokenness." I am beloved. "This type of brokenness doesn't make me less loved."

If I had known an identity based not on my goodness or failings but on God's grace, I might have been spared the hours I spent begging a God I thought hated me: "Please, squash me and start over. Just kill me. I am a failure."

I wasn't a failure. I was loved. But my achievement/works-based identity was failing me.

### **3. I Am a Prodigal, Too.**

Because I was such a good kid, people assumed nothing painful or messy could be hiding behind my smiling face and shiny blonde hair.

It's easy to forget that the older brother is just as much a prodigal as the younger.<sup>5</sup> We say it in sermons, but let's be honest: The older brother doesn't cause as many problems. The parent or pastor can take a mental break knowing the hardworking firstborn is getting stuff done. We don't have to have a sit-down, "How's your heart?" chat with them because their heart seems good. It's that darn pig-reeking younger brother who is the problem child—they are messing with our ability to make this family or church operate nicely.

We need to have those heart-to-heart talks with the good kids and the bad kids alike. We need to recognize that a well-behaved faith is not *always* a sign of a healthy heart; sometimes, it's the mark of a heart running from a terrifying reality within.

Some parents of LGBTQ-identifying or questioning teens are incredibly frustrated, shocked because their once-“good” kid is suddenly a prodigal. They feel as if their child has “turned” on them. These parents forget that we are all prodigals—gay, straight, genderqueer, valedictorians, *New York Times* bestsellers, older sisters, or pig-slopping younger brothers.

#### **4. I Need Room To Be Messy.**

“Give your child space to be messy,” my husband, Matt, a licensed counselor, often says to parents. *Messy?! Messy! How about switch them back to the good kid I had yesterday!* I see the parents’ faces twitch. “This is not who they are!” And maybe they even say to their child, “This is not who you are!”

What parents and pastors and church leaders often don’t realize is that statements like “This is not who you are” put pressure on a child to make a premature decision about who they are and perhaps even about how they are going to live. They may have already come out as gay, but parents often don’t hear the secret question mark at the end of the sentence: “I am gay...?” To say, “No, you’re not,” pressures the teenager to think of this question as a simple binary with only two possible answers.

Parents cannot contradict attraction. They can lay out for their child a biblical plan for what to *do* with same-sex attraction, but they cannot simply say “No” to their child any more than they could

tell their straight child not to feel attraction to the opposite sex.

The same-sex attracted child may be wrestling primarily with what to do about their attractions. (*Do I want to be a celibate gay Christian? A same-sex attracted Christian? Someone who is open to dating the opposite sex?*) Statements like, “No, you’re not this person” (which the child interprets as, “No, you’re not attracted to the same sex”), will isolate the child from parents at the very moment parental support is most important. That isolation can become a void, a Grand Canyon of misunderstanding. The child may then choose an easier emotion like anger to cover their pain, and double down: “Yes, I am this person, and I’m going to go live it out right now,” or turn their anger inward towards suicidal ideation and self-harm.<sup>6</sup>

We need to let our teens have room to be messy while we instill a gospel-centered identity—no matter how they decide to identify during and after their season of wrestling.

#### **5. If I Come Out To You, Here Is How You Can Respond:**

- Thank the child—sincerely. “Thank you so much for trusting me with what you shared. That must have been really difficult to do.”
- Reaffirm your care and love. “I don’t see you • any differently. I love you the same as I did five minutes ago.”
- Don’t say, “I thought so,” or even, “I never guessed it.” It makes the child feel like they are either a walking stereotype or a minority of a minority (by a “minority of a minority,” I mean they may think, “I don’t look gay, but I am gay. I

- Ask if it's okay for you to ask some questions. "Can I ask you more about your experience? Feel free to not answer anything you don't want to."
- Ask questions because you are genuinely curious. "I really would love to know, what has it been like for you wrestling through all of this?"
- Ask how they identify. "Would you mind telling me what words you use to describe yourself? Where are you at in this process? How would you like to be addressed?"
- If you're in a panic about what to say, restate what they just said. "It sounds like you are saying..." Listen for feeling words. "It sounds like it has been really painful to talk with your old friends at school." This is one way of helping them know that they are heard.
- Ask what their support system is like. "With whom have you shared? What has that been like for you?"
- Ask the child how they feel about themselves. You're listening for signs of self-hatred and potential self-harm. Safety is the highest priority based on statistics of LGBTQ teen suicide and harm.<sup>7</sup> "After all this, how do you feel about yourself?" (Get help if it seems they are a danger to themselves or others).
- Ask the child how you can support them. "I'd love to come alongside you any way I can. How can I support you in this season?" (Then do it. Keep your word).
- Reaffirm your love and care. "Just to reiterate, I love you so much, and I am with you."

- Hug them (but ask first). "Would it be okay if I hugged you?"

### ***6. Know That In Places Of Pain, You Can Speak Jesus To Me.***

When I was in a secret same-sex relationship, I remember staring at certain people and wishing they would ask me how my relationship was going. Tone mattered. Words mattered. Trust between me and the inquirer mattered. If someone I hardly knew had asked me directly and rudely, "Why are you doing that!? Don't you know it's sin? That's not who you are," I would have answered with a giant wall: "It's fine! It's great! You just hate who I am!" But if someone had come alongside me with genuine curiosity, I could have opened up about secret pain inside.

In the end, this is what happened to me. "It's so hard," I wept to my pastor-father. Instead of rebuking my same-sex behavior, he grieved with me and pierced my heart with the love of Christ. It opened up my heart to my dad while simultaneously showing me Jesus's love—something I felt for only seconds per week in that season.

In the compassionate counseling ministry I direct, we see such an infusion of hope occur inside of young clients with whom we meet. They come prepared to lob verbal grenades at us, to reject us before we reject them, but we startle them with empathy. "You want to talk about it? You want to talk about the breakup? How's it going with her?" When we courageously, tenderly engage mess (even sin-laden mess), we begin to hear the truth behind the walls: "I hate myself. I hate my life. I actually don't know who I am. Is there something better than this?"

*Right there* is where Jesus offers living water.<sup>8</sup> *Right there* is where the gospel is preached: We see you. We love you. We have experienced a better way—not of straightness, but of walking alongside one another through sexual brokenness, looking to Jesus as all of our hope and wholeness.

### **7. I Still Need To Hear Wisdom Concerning A Biblical Theology Of Sexuality.**

In my mess, in my gospel-identity formation, I needed to know what the church believed about sexuality. I was not smart enough to figure out the theology piece on my own, and I needed wise, tender, courageous guidance to teach me. Otherwise, I was going to pick the easiest theology I could find and go with it.

One of my friends, Pastor Johnny McKenna of Engedi Church in Holland, MI, has been making the entire month of February “Sex Month” for his junior and senior high youth groups every other year for nearly a decade. “We believe that it is important to address sex from the stage for a month because the students are making decisions about sexuality every single day,” Johnny said. He’s seen incredible results from taking four weeks to talk about pornography, heterosexual brokenness, same-sex sexual brokenness, and God’s design for marriage. “Being open and honest about sex has led to students sharing past pain and regret, current issues and struggles, and future fears,” he said. “Students feel safe to share anything, knowing it’s okay to talk about sex in the church.”<sup>9</sup> Johnny is talking and listening with empathy, compassion, and truth about sexuality, and he is seeing it facilitate community.

But he is teaching. As broken humans our default is entropy. Our default is not to “run... the race” (Heb. 12:1), “fight the good fight” (2 Tim. 4:7), “fix our eyes”

(Heb. 12:2), “put off your old self” (Eph. 4:22), or “put to death... whatever belongs to your earthly nature” (Col. 3:5).<sup>10</sup> We slide into sinfulness. We do not slide into holiness. We need to be taught what is holy—not only by our youth pastors, but by our senior pastors.

A lead pastor friend of mine, Pastor Marvin Williams of Trinity Church in East Lansing, Michigan, is unafraid to step into these tough sermons. He told me his reasons why in a recent conversation: “If a pastor is unwilling to speak what is true, I would question their love for their congregation, and I would question their calling. If you love someone, you will say what is true. If you are called to speak, you will be obedient and do it.”

Love me and people like me enough to preach—with empathy and compassion—the truth about sexuality.

### **8. I Need Protection.**

When you speak about same-sex sexual ethics, you are speaking to a highly vulnerable population. LGBTQ teens are 2 to 4 times more likely to attempt suicide than non-sexual-minority teens, and are 4 to 8 times more likely to attempt suicide in highly rejecting families.<sup>11</sup> This is why I urge you to speak truth only alongside two very gentle words: empathy and compassion.

When I think of empathy, I envision Jesus’s ability to sit next to us saying, “I get it. I’ve been there.” Because he has. His Spirit walks with us through every joy and pain, and he empathizes with temptation and grief from his tenure on earth (Heb. 4:15, Is. 53:3). Even if a pastor cannot empathize directly with same-sex attraction or gender dysphoria, they can unquestionably empathize with wrestling with broken sexuality.

Compassion, on the other hand, is looking *at* a situation and acknowledging, “I can never understand your pain enough. I have not walked in your shoes, but I see the miles they have trudged through the muck.” Straight pastors engaging this conversation will never be able to empathize completely. Though we all experience sexual brokenness, there are unique challenges sexual minorities face. This is where compassion comes in. A pastor must speak from a place of empathy (“I can understand sexual brokenness”), but also from a place of compassion (“I see your specific brokenness, and I can never ‘get it’ enough”).

When pastors take this heart posture of empathy and compassion, speaking out in specific protection for vulnerable populations from the main stage, it could sound something like this: “Everyone in this room is loved uniquely and individually. We want to care well for all of you. Your physical, emotional, and spiritual safety is our top priority. We do not tolerate bullying, unkindness, or rudeness towards anyone based on race, gender, religion, or sexual orientation. If we hear about it or see it happening online or in person, we will take it very seriously.”

One more specific way to protect me and people like me is to seek to remove unintentional marginalization through offensive language. Instead of saying “gay lifestyle,” say “someone who is engaging in same-sex behavior.” (What is a gay lifestyle? What is a straight lifestyle?) Instead of saying “homosexuals,” say “LGBTQ people.” Completely remove the air quotes around the words *gay* and *gay marriage*, because those air quotes create an unnecessary divide between LGBTQ people and straight people. “Those people think it’s marriage, but it’s not,” the quotes say disdainfully. You can believe same-sex marriage isn’t marriage as defined by God without using air quotes.

Lastly, stop saying the phrase, “Love the sinner, hate the sin.” This phrase is meaningless to an LGBTQ person who affirms same-sex sexual expression. There is no beginning and end to their being gay. It is infused in their identity, and so they simply hear you saying, “I hate your whole person.” Like Jesus does with all of us, begin with the person as they are, where they are, and trust God to work out their sexuality in his timing (see how Jesus interacts with the woman at the well in John 4:4-26 for an example of this). Focus on instilling a gospel-centered identity, speak what is true with tenderness, and let Jesus sanctify them.

### ***9. I Need A Mentor (Or Five).***

Chances were high that I would end up leaving the church completely. Chances are even higher for kids in youth group today—no matter their orientation. 40-50 percent of kids connected to a youth group in high school will drop out in college.<sup>12</sup> 59 percent of Millennials have stopped attending church completely.<sup>13</sup>

What’s the solution? A huge role is mentorship—specifically, a 5:1 ratio of adult, intergenerational mentors to kids.<sup>14</sup> According to longitudinal research from the Fuller Youth Institute, “More than any single program or event, kids were far more likely to feel like a significant part of their local churches when adults made the effort to get to know them.” They recommend using the 5:1 model, which means there are five significant adult relationships *per child*.

That may sound like too many people. As I reflect on my own journey and watch the students with whom I work, however, I suspect that young people are far more likely to experience increased support, less shame, and a submission of brokenness to the Lordship of Christ when they see how truth embodies itself in people. They watch their

mentors walk the hard, narrow road of following Jesus. As they broaden their support structure by opening up to more mentors and friends, they see the gospel lived out in others. *Perhaps there is something to living a broken/beloved life, they begin to realize. Perhaps I don't have to be temptation-free. Perhaps I only need to be on the sanctification journey towards wholeness and holiness just like my mentor(s).*

**10. Remove Heteronormativity (The Assumption That Everyone Is Only Attracted To The Opposite Sex) Whenever Possible.**

You may have heard and perhaps said, “Blue and pink make purple. Don’t make purple.” It is a lighthearted, well-intentioned way to tell kids not to make sexual choices with the opposite sex at events. But what if you’re not into the opposite sex? (Or what if you don’t identify as the gender you were assigned at birth?) This becomes an unintentionally shaming and ineffective statement for the LGBTQ kid going on a weekend trip with church.

Don’t assume every young woman is attracted to guys, and every guy is attracted to young women. Practically, this means making subtle shifts in the ways we talk about sex and attraction. “Guys, I know you want to hang with the girls (wink wink)...” becomes, “Okay, I know you all want to chat...” Rooming may need to be reconfigured at overnight events to ensure everyone feels comfortable (this is a big conversation that must be handled delicately). Additionally, rethinking gender stereotyping at events would be kind to the silent LGBTQ kid who often feels incredibly “other.” Perhaps even once per year the guys’ day out could include painting pottery along with paintballing. The young women’s day could include grilling meat as well as a day of pedicures.

## Conclusion

You're not going to get this right every time. If you haven't done it already, you are going to fail your LGBTQ kids—and your straight kids—many times. This is why, when I speak publicly about how to be a “safe” person for LGBTQ kids, I begin by talking about humility. Humility is the most incredible, approachable, attractive characteristic of Jesus, and it can transform our relationships with each other. “Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant” (Phil. 2:5-7, ESV).

When stepping into any conversation concerning the above 10 ideas with an LGBTQ student, it would be wise to begin with, “Hey, I want to understand and to care well for you. However, I don't know what I don't know. If I offend you, will you please tell me? I don't want to hurt you.” Humility draws hearts together no matter our differences in theology or life experience.

Humility is unquestionably the reason I stayed in the church even while I lived a secret double life. The churches I attended and the people in them were imperfect, but they were humble. They wanted to grow and to learn. It gave me hope that perhaps one day I would be free to share all of my struggles with them, knowing that they would learn to receive me and my story as another amazing but ordinary example of the gospel:

I am more sinful than I believe, and I am more loved than I can imagine. And so are you.

# Notes

1. My definition of the gospel is borrowed and adapted from Tim Keller. His exact quote: "The gospel says you are more sinful and flawed than you ever dared believe, but more accepted and loved than you ever dared hope." See <http://www.timothykeller.com/intro/> for more.
2. I am the executive director of Hole in My Heart Ministries—a compassionate counseling ministry for people wrestling with issues related to sexuality. The goal of HIMH is not orientation change but rather to create safe spaces for and around people wrestling with sexuality. HIMH Ministries has the unique privilege of walking alongside LGBTQ people, people wrestling with pornography addiction, adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse, and their families and friends.
3. Aamodt, Sandra and Tony Cox. "Brain Maturity Extends Well Beyond Teen Years." *NPR*, 10 Oct. 2011, [www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=141164708](http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=141164708).
4. Choi, Charles Q. "How Teenagers Find Themselves." *Scientific American*, Nature America Inc., 1 Feb. 2009, [www.scientificamerican.com/article/how-teenagers-find-themselves/](http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/how-teenagers-find-themselves/).
5. See Luke 15:11-32.
6. "Facts about Suicide." *The Trevor Project*, [www.thetrevorproject.org/pages/facts-about-suicide](http://www.thetrevorproject.org/pages/facts-about-suicide).
7. For instance, relative to their straight peers, LGBTQ teens are 2-4 times more likely to commit suicide while living with *accepting families* and 4-8 times more likely while living with families that are not accepting (Bill Henson, *Guiding Families of LGBT+ Loved Ones* [Lead Them Home Ministries, 2016], 4).
8. See John 4:4-11.
9. Email conversation with Johnny McKenna, 24 Aug. 2017.
10. All five passages are taken from the NIV translation.
11. Bill Henson, *Guiding Families of LGBT+ Loved Ones* (Lead Them Home Ministries, 2016), 4.
12. Powell, Kara, et al. "The Church Sticking Together." *StickyFaith.org*, *Immerse Journal*, 11 Oct. 2011, [stickyfaith.org/articles/the-church-sticking-together](http://stickyfaith.org/articles/the-church-sticking-together).
13. "Americans Divided on the Importance of Church." *Barna Research*, Barna Group, 24 Mar. 2014, [www.barna.com/research/americans-divided-on-the-importance-of-church/](http://www.barna.com/research/americans-divided-on-the-importance-of-church/).
14. Eaton, Sam. "59 Percent of Millennials Raised in a Church Have Dropped Out-And They're Trying to Tell Us Why." *Faithit*, 22 Mar. 2017, [faithit.com/12-reasons-millennials-over-church-sam-eaton/](http://faithit.com/12-reasons-millennials-over-church-sam-eaton/).

# About the Author

Our collaboration is a growing team of Christian leaders, pastors, scholars, and LGBT+ persons to serve as advisors, writers, speakers, researchers, and board members. Learn more about our collaborative team at [www.centerforfaith.com/leadership](http://www.centerforfaith.com/leadership).



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Laurie Krieg is the Founder and Executive Director of Hole in my Heart Ministries, a compassionate counseling ministry for those wrestling with issues related to sexuality. Laurie and her husband, Matt, a licensed counselor, speak, write, and counsel out of a heart to love people through the lens of the gospel. Laurie daily submits her same-sex attractions to the lordship of Christ, and comes alive sharing how and why she does that. Laurie is the chairperson of Caring Well, a conference that equips people with a gospel-centered approach to journeying with LGBT+ neighbors for a lifetime. Visit her blog and learn about their counseling ministry at [himhministries.com](http://himhministries.com).

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