

Accompaniment

A Resource For Youth Leaders

Provided by Kaleidoscope,
a program of



BRETHREN MENNONITE COUNCIL
FOR LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL
AND TRANSGENDER INTERESTS

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Preface

Whether you are just beginning to learn about LGBTQ individuals, or have been an ally for years, thank you for taking the time to gain a better understanding of how to work with LGBTQ youth in your Church of the Brethren or Mennonite congregation.

Youth group leaders reading this resource may have a variety of backgrounds and knowledge. While some may hold the view that homosexuality is sin, others may identify as LGBTQ. Regardless of your background, it is important to stay informed and up to date with current information.

A recent study published in the journal *Pediatrics* found that LGBTQ people who experienced higher levels of rejection in adolescence were 8.4 times more likely to have attempted suicide, 5.9 times more likely to report high levels of depression, and 3.4 times more likely to use illegal drugs or engage in unprotected sex, compared with peers who reported no or low levels of family rejection.¹

Such statistics will concern all of us who care about the well-being of our youth, as well as the well-being of our adult family, friends, and neighbours (Samaritan and otherwise).

The Brethren / Mennonite Council for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Interests (BMC) formed in 1976. Although youth and young adults have always been included in the work of BMC, the Kaleidoscope program for youth and young adults (formerly called *The College Network*) began in 1996. This branch of BMC works to provide resources and support to LGBTQ youth and young adults within the Church of the Brethren and Mennonite denominations.

While contexts differ across congregations, conferences, denominations and countries, many of the same issues face youth and youth group leaders within the Church of the Brethren, Mennonite Church USA and Mennonite Church Canada.

BMC is open to any questions or comments you have as you explore this resource. Working together, we can create a safe environment for the LGBTQ youth in our churches.

Peace and strength,



Kirsten Freed
Kaleidoscope Coordinator 2009/10

¹Ryan, Caitlin, David Huebner, Rafael M. Diaz and Jorge Sanchez. Family Rejection as a Predictor of Negative Health Outcomes in White and Latino Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Young Adults. *Pediatrics*, Vol. 123 No. 1 January 2009, pp. 346-352.

Introduction

As a youth leader, one of your primary concerns is the well-being of the youth in your congregation. It is important for all youth to have a community of support and unconditional love as they grow and explore what it means to be a child of God. Youth who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning (LGBTQ) depend on their youth leader(s) to create a community that they too can experience as safe and loving.

This package of information is a resource to aid in providing LGBTQ youth with a supportive community, including their relationship to you, their youth leader(s), as well as the youth group. While there may be disagreement in the church regarding the inclusion or exclusion of LGBTQ people, this resource is designed for educational purposes to enable youth leaders to care for youth in a deeper way.

The goals of this resource are to:

- ◆ Assist individuals leading youth groups in Church of the Brethren or Mennonite congregations become more helpful to a young person who is starting to come out as LGBTQ
- ◆ Encourage an exploration of Biblical insights regarding how to be in relationship with people who are LGBTQ
- ◆ Deepen a youth leader's understanding of issues faced by LGBTQ youth, including those in the church, school and community context
- ◆ Aid youth leaders in becoming a safe and supportive presence in the life of LGBTQ youth
- ◆ Provide youth leaders with the basic information needed to be an ally for LGBTQ individuals

If there are any unanswered questions, concerns, or comments after working through this resource, please feel free to contact the BMC office:

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We are grateful for the generous support the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation has given this project.

Coming out and confidentiality

Coming Out: The individual journey of realizing, understanding and accepting one's sexual orientation or gender identity, and beginning to share that with others. As part of a majority, most heterosexual people do not go through a conscious process of coming out. Their orientation is assumed by the dominant culture. Some however, do come out as allies to show solidarity with their LGBTQ brothers and sisters.

As youth continue to learn about and grow into who they are, some begin to identify as LGBTQ. Recent trends have shown LGBTQ individuals coming out earlier than ever before. Although colleges and universities are still witness to countless coming out stories, the high-school aged LGBTQ population is starting to find its voice.

If an individual in your youth group talks to you about questions they have about their sexual orientation or gender identity, or if they come out to you as LGBT, remember that:

- Your actions and words may potentially influence this young person's self-esteem, self-worth and behaviour.
- This individual has chosen to share an important part of their identity with you. They have trusted you to treat the situation with respect.
- Coming out is different for everyone. Some people experience the journey as a happy, celebratory process, while others experience feelings of fear or anxiety about coming out to loved ones.
- Keep the information shared with you confidential, unless the youth tells you otherwise. *Never tell the family of a young person who has come out, unless the youth has asked you to do so.*
- See the *FAQ* section for more information.

More on Confidentiality:

If a member of your youth group comes out to you as LGBTQ, it is important to remember that they trust you to treat this part of their identity with respect. Every LGBTQ individual deserves to come out at their own pace. Having someone else "out" them to family could be detrimental to their development or even their safety. Beliefs regarding sexual orientation and gender identity may differ greatly within your church community. Do not make assumptions about which families would or would not be supportive of an LGBTQ child. No matter how accepting a family would be, each individual needs to come out to family when they are ready. (See *Questions and Answers*)

Myths and facts

Because LGBTQ people are stigmatized and marginalized, you and your youth (including LGBTQ youth) may have heard or learned myths and stereotypes. Correcting false information is one step towards ending discrimination.

- Myth:** All gay and lesbian people are promiscuous and base their relationships on sex.
- FACT:** As with heterosexual relationships, sex is a part of a relationship while love, commitment and respect are the foundations of a relationship.
- Myth:** Certain situations, environments or experiences can make people “become” gay.
- FACT:** People continually discover things about themselves through experiences and exposure to different situations.
- Myth:** HIV/AIDS is the “gay disease.”
- FACT:** HIV/AIDS does not discriminate based on sexual orientation.
- Myth:** LGBTQ people are not religious.
- FACT:** LGBT people all over the world practice many different religions and spiritualities.
- Myth:** Being LGBTQ is a mental disorder.
- FACT:** In 1973 the American Psychiatric Association (APA) removed “homosexuality” from the list of mental disorders, as there is no correspondence between being gay and being mentally ill. However, “Gender identity disorder” remains on the list. Many advocate for its removal, as many transgender people do not experience distress or disability (the qualifications for a mental disorder) outside of prejudice imposed by our society. However, if removed, health insurance companies will not cover hormone treatment and/or surgery for transgender people who seek these options.
- Myth:** LGBTQ people can be “cured” through reparative therapy, prayer or a religious conversion experience.
- FACT:** Reparative therapy and ex-gay ministries teach people to repress their natural feelings, not make them go away. They are harmful and lead to feelings of guilt, shame, depression and self-hatred.
- Myth:** Transgender people are simply flamboyant homosexuals.
- FACT:** Gender identity is different from sexual orientation. Transgender people have gender identities or expressions that differ from those society deems appropriate for their physical sex.
- Myth:** Gay men are effeminate and lesbian women are masculine in appearance and behaviour.
- FACT:** Gay, lesbian and bisexual people range from being very feminine to very masculine.
- Myth:** Bisexual people are just confused / are inherently promiscuous.
- FACT:** Like straight people, bisexual people are attracted to an individual based on many factors. In the case of bisexual people, gender is not necessarily the most significant factor.

(Myths and Facts include excerpts from the Chicago Metro Training Manual)

Bullying

National surveys of high school students continue to find high percentages of LGBTQ students reporting verbal or physical harassment and bullying. These range from the all too common "That's so gay!" to verbal or physical threats and actions.

US statistics from the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network's 2007 National School Climate Survey:

60.8% of students reported that they **felt unsafe** in school because of their sexual orientation, and 38.4% felt unsafe because of their gender expression.

36.3% of LGBT students reported having a gay-straight alliance group at school.

Nearly 9 in 10 students reported being **verbally** harassed at school because of their sexual **orientation**, 2 in 3 students because of their **gender** expression.

38.6% of students reported that school **staff never intervened** when homophobic remarks were made in their presence; 42.6% regarding negative remarks about gender expression.

Nearly 2 in 3 students reported hearing school **staff** make homophobic remarks.

22.1% reported being physically **assaulted** because of their sexual **orientation** and 14.2% because of their **gender** expression.

Almost half of students had been **physically** harassed because of their sexual **orientation** and 3 in 10 students because of their **gender** expression.

Canadian statistics from Egale Canada's first National Climate Survey on Homophobia in Canadian Schools (2009):

3 in 4 LGBTQ students and 95% of transgender students **felt unsafe** at school, compared to 1 in 5 straight students.

6 in 10 LGBTQ students reported being **verbally** harassed about their sexual **orientation**.

9 in 10 transgender students, 6 in 10 LGB students, and 3 in 10 straight students were **verbally** harassed because of their expression of **gender**.

1 in 2 transgender students reported that **staff never intervened** when homophobic comments were made, compared to 34.1% of LGB respondents.

1 in 4 LGB students had been **physically** harassed about their sexual **orientation**.

Almost 2 in 5 transgender students and 1 in 5 LGB students reported being **physically** harassed due to their expression of **gender**.

1 in 5 LGBTQ students could talk to a parent very comfortably about LGBTQ issues. 3 in 4 could talk to a close friend.

Self-esteem, depression and suicide

Issues such as loneliness and depression are universal truths facing all youth today. Consider planning activities dealing with establishing good self-esteem. LGBTQ youth often report a far higher rate of depression than other youth due to environmental stressors such as:

Victimization based on sexual identity

Internalized homophobia

Fear of rejection and ridicule

Rejection by peers or family

Kelly Huegel's book, *GLBTQ: The Survival Guide for Queer and Questioning Teens*, includes several changes that should be monitored closely:

- Emotional changes including: *hopelessness, irritability, indifference, feeling helpless*
- Physical changes including: *fatigue, overeating or loss of appetite, sleeping problems*
- Changes in thinking including: *loss of interest in things one used to enjoy, believing that one doesn't deserve to be happy, difficulty remembering or concentrating*
- Behavioral changes including: *crying more than usual, acting out, moving and talking more slowly, withdrawing from friends or family*

Hate crimes

Hate crimes occur when a perpetrator targets a victim because of his or her membership in a certain social group, usually defined by race, religion, sexual orientation, disability, ethnicity, nationality, age, gender, gender identity, or political affiliation. Hate crimes "send a message" that an individual and "their kind" will not be tolerated, many times leaving the victim and others in their group feeling isolated, vulnerable and unprotected.¹

In the U.S, The Hate Crimes Prevention Act was signed into law on October 28, 2009. It gives the Department of Justice the power to investigate and prosecute violence where a perpetrator has selected a victim because of the person's actual or perceived race, color, religion, national origin, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity or disability.²

The Criminal Code of Canada prohibits the expression of hatred against "identifiable groups,"³ and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms gives "individuals the right to the equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination."⁴

¹ Human Rights Campaign, www.hrc.org/issues/hate_crimes.asp

² HRC, www.hrc.org/laws_and_elections/5660.htm

³ CCC sections 318, 319, and Bill C-250 *An Act to amend the Criminal Code (hate propaganda)*

⁴ Charter section 15 (1)

Student rights

Students in your youth group may attend a school where talking about sexual orientation and gender identity is common, and openly LGBTQ students and staff feel safe and supported. It is also possible that your youth attend a school where there is a culture of fear, silencing and heterosexist practices.

All schools should have policies on bullying, though they may or may not specifically name LGBTQ bullying. Find out your school's policy, and ask your youth about how it is put into practice. Also see the *Bullying* and *Hate Crimes* sections in this resource.

In addition to bullying, there are many other school-related issues LGBTQ youth may face. For example, youth may be told by their school that they can't: talk about being LGBTQ at school, wear rainbow pride clothing, publish an article about LGBTQ rights in the school newspaper, wear makeup or a skirt if they're a guy, wear a tux in a yearbook photo or to graduation if they're a girl, start a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA), etc.

While the First Amendment of the United States Constitution grants the right to free speech, and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (2b) grants the right to freedom of expression, these do not necessarily cover the rights for an LGBTQ youth in all situations and settings.

Public Schools in Canada:

Contact your local school board to learn about their policies and practices that effect LGBTQ students. The Canadian Teacher's Federation "advocates for educational systems that are safe, welcoming, inclusive, and affirming for people of all sexual orientations and gender identities."¹

Public Schools in the U.S.:

The American Civil Liberties Union has collected information regarding LGBTQ student rights. For example, a school does not have the right to tell the family of an individual that they are LGBTQ without their permission, teachers are not allowed to make anti-gay comments to or about LGBTQ individuals, and if heterosexual students are allowed to hold hands in the hallways, so are LGBTQ individuals.²

Private Schools:

Private or religious schools are not necessarily required to follow the same laws or policies of public schools in their area. Contact the school to find out what its policies are. If necessary, talk to them about making their school a safer place for LGBTQ students.

Gay-Straight Alliances:

GSA's are a way for students to come together to create spaces of safety and support in their school. If a student is interested in forming a GSA, they should learn the rules about non-curricular clubs and follow them closely. By U.S. law (Equal Access Act, 1984), if a public school allows any non-curricular club, all non-curricular clubs must be allowed to form. In Canada, each school board has its own policies regarding creating and recognizing clubs. Creating a GSA should follow the same process as creating any other club.

¹ CTF Policy 2009-10, section 5.7.1 , www.ctf-fce.ca/Documents/AboutCTF/EN/2009-10_CTF_Handbook_EN.pdf

² www.aclu.org/lgbt-rights_hiv-aids/know-your-rights-quick-guide-lgbt-high-school-students

Use of the Bible

“Those who have sought to punish and oppress me have used the most powerful tool I know of as a weapon against me. They have perverted the Holy Bible - that powerful standard of justice for even the most marginalized among us - the touchstone of grace that offers hope and reconciliation - they have perverted the Bible into a tool of oppression.”

- Harry Knox, Director, Religion and Faith Program, Human Rights Campaign

People often use scripture to justify their own feelings of fear and misunderstanding of the LGBTQ population. Many young LGBTQ individuals who struggle to accept their sexual orientation or gender identity have repeatedly heard that “homosexuality is a sin,” or “the Bible condemns homosexuality.” As a youth group leader it is important that you become familiar both with the Biblical language commonly used against LGBTQ people, as well as the overarching themes of justice and unconditional love in Bible.

Often in Church of the Brethren, Mennonite, and other religious communities, people will refer to up to seven passages in the Bible which are said to speak directly to homosexuality: Genesis 18-19, Leviticus 18:22, Leviticus 20:13, Judges 19, Romans 1:26-27, I Corinthians 6:9-11, and I Timothy 1:9-11.

Many Biblical scholars challenge assumptions made about these passages. They believe that the passages must be understood in their historical context, and note that the concept of a same-sex sexual orientation as we understand it today was unknown several thousand years ago. They argue that these passages do not condemn loving same-sex relationships, but have been misused as tools of LGBTQ oppression.

*Love God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind;
and love your neighbour as yourself. - Luke 10*

In addition, many who are deeply committed to the Bible note that passages related to justice, hospitality, love, and relationship far outnumber and outweigh the passages cited above. The gospels do not record Jesus speaking about sexual orientation or gender identity. However, we do know that Jesus said much about loving our neighbours, and that he was often a critic of those who used scripture to do harm to other people.

If you would like to read more about understanding what the Bible says about homosexuality, some suggested readings to begin with are:

Homosexuality and the Bible, by Walter Wink (www.bridges-across.org/ba/winkhombib.htm)

Homosexuality and the Bible; a case study in the use of the Bible for ethics, by Loren L. Johns (www.ambs.edu/LJohns/Homosexuality.htm)

Some Beginning Thoughts on Homosexuality and Christian Ethics, by Keith Graber Miller, in the Kaleidoscope Resource Packet (www.bmclgbt.org/documents/resource.pdf)

Institutional church statements

There are currently over 50 Church of the Brethren or Mennonite Communities in the U.S. and Canada that have joined BMC's Supportive Communities Network. Every day more congregations, pastors and laypeople are speaking and acting for love, justice, and hospitality.

The Church of the Brethren and Mennonite Church have both released rather lengthy explanations for their non-acceptance of lesbian and gay individuals. Neither church has released statements regarding individuals with various gender identities, but one would assume a similar response.

Church of the Brethren

In 1983, The Church of the Brethren Annual Conference adopted the statement *Human Sexuality From A Christian Perspective*. This paper has since been the basis of other statements and resolutions passed by the Annual Conference body that exclude gay and lesbian members from leadership in the church. The passage included here is only one portion of the essay, one often sparking a large number of questions and comments. If you would like to read the statement in its entirety, including detailed biblical passages, contact the BMC office, or visit www.cobannualconference.org/ac_statements/83HumanSexuality.htm.

The Church of the Brethren upholds the biblical declaration that heterosexuality is the intention of God for creation. Nature, in the very functional compatibility of male and female genitalia, confirms this biblical revelation that males and females are meant for each other. This intimate genital contact between two persons of opposite sexes is not just a physical union; it also embodies the interlocking of persons. This intimate companionship is heterosexuality at its fullest. It is the context for the formation of family.

Some persons, for reasons not fully understood, experience a romantic attraction for persons of the same sex. Some of these persons claim Christ as Lord and are actively involved in the life of the church. They need the active support and love of the church as they struggle with God's plan for their lives.

In ministry to homosexual persons, the church must guard against oversimplifying Christian morality. Instead the church should endeavor with Christian love and with gentle evangelistic skill to offer redemptive help. Proof texts, condemnation, and a sense of guilt will not empower change. Rejection isolates homosexual persons from the church. It frequently results in a preoccupation with and intensification of the very inclinations their accusers deplore. The power of the Gospel incorporates an acceptance of persons who seek forgiveness for their sins and who strive to be disciples of Jesus Christ. It is this non-accusatory acceptance that sets people free from guilt, depression, and fear. When we are saved it is not because we are without sin but because our sins are not held against us by God's grace. We are made whole through God's righteousness, not ours (Rom. 3:21-4:5)

In relating to homosexual persons, the church should become informed about such lifestyle options as the following.

Celibacy, refraining from sexual activities, is one alternative that homosexuals and bisexuals choose. The scriptural teaching on celibacy for heterosexuals provides a model for this lifestyle. Celibacy ought to be voluntary and not a requirement (1 Tim. 4:1-3). Those for whom celibacy is a gift and a special calling (Matt. 19:11-12; 1 Cor. 7:6-7) are to be honored and supported.

Conversion to a heterosexual orientation is another option. For many homosexual persons, however, this choice is extraordinarily difficult and complex. For some it is impossible. The church must seek to create a climate for hope, for praise of God, for renewed effort, for claiming and exploring the heterosexual dimensions of being. Thus the Good News is shared with homosexual persons who seek to convert to heterosexuality. Yet

not all are set totally free of homosexual feelings and urges. For some, impulses diminish, mindsets change, the grip of homosexuality is broken, and affectional and physical attraction to the opposite sex can begin.

Covenantal relationships between homosexual persons is an additional lifestyle option but, in the church's search for a Christian understanding of human sexuality, this alternative is not acceptable.

(The underlined section was added to the paper as an amendment, and passed by a narrow margin.)

Mennonite Church

The Mennonite Church has, since the early 1980's, made numerous statements involving homosexuality. Provided for you here is the 1991 *General Board Summary on Homosexuality* (written before MC USA and MC Canada separated). If you are interested in reading more from the Mennonite Church, contact the BMC office, or go to www.ambs.edu/LJohns/ChurchDocs.htm.

In the interest of clarifying the stance of the General Board on homosexuality, and to further interpret the Purdue 87 statement on sexuality, the following summary statements are commended to the church. It is our hope that area conferences and congregations will provide pastoral leadership in addressing this concern with fidelity to the scriptures and a spirit of love and openness toward one another.

- 1. We support and encourage the church to support the Purdue 87 action on Human Sexuality in the Christian Life*
- 2. We acknowledge and accept that some of our members have a homosexual orientation through no seeming choice on their part. We do not fully understand why or how this occurs.*
- 3. We invite homosexual persons in our congregations to commitment to Jesus Christ and participate in the community of faith, abstaining from homosexual genital relationships and rejecting promiscuity and any form of immoral behavior.*
- 4. We deplore the harsh and unloving attitudes often shown toward homosexual people in society-at-large and too often in the church.*
- 5. We support the several ministries in our church for assisting homosexual persons who desire a change in sexual orientation and freedom from same sex practice and compulsions, and encourage members to avail themselves of these ministries.*
- 6. We support the ministry of the Listening Committee for Homosexuality Concerns as a means of pastorally responding to homosexual people and their families, and to those with a range of concerns about homosexuality. (Since August 1992 there has been no Listening Committee.)*
- 7. We acknowledge there are among us sincere differences of understanding of the Scriptures, the causes of homosexuality, and the appropriate ethical standards for such persons, and encourage a spirit of humility and openness to the Spirit of God on this issue.*
- 8. We call on our area conferences and congregations to provide pastoral leadership in clarifying understandings and responding redemptively to homosexual people among us as a means of broadening the settings for discussion beyond the biennial General Assembly sessions.*
- 9. We call on our congregations to express love and grace towards homosexual persons, to receive into their membership those who express genuine faith and abstain from homosexual genital relationships, and to express pastoral openness to the pain and struggle of homosexual persons and their families.*
- 10. We encourage more attention to the broad range of human sexuality issues including heterosexual concerns and problems among us which may not receive attention due to fear and preoccupation with homosexuality.*

Reflecting on the institutional church statements:

Many who read these statements feel overwhelmed by their negative tone. However, it is important to note that each statement also includes points of openness.

The Church has not lived up to its call for understanding and Christian love. Nevertheless, the persistent efforts of a growing number of individuals, pastors and congregations advocating for the full and positive inclusion of LGBTQ people in the life of the Church are bringing change.

In 2009:

Several MC USA pastors wrote a resolution for the 2009 Convention calling for dialogue and an end to the disciplining of congregations and/or individual pastors. The resolution was significantly altered by the Resolutions Committee before being offered to the delegate body. After discussion, the delegate body made several amendments to the resolution, most notably changing the language from “we affirm the church’s statements regarding human sexuality” to “we acknowledge the church’s statements...” and calling for leadership to actively provide resources for conversation.

At the Church of the Brethren 2009 Annual Conference there were two LGBTQ related items on the agenda: a Standing Committee Statement and a query from a congregation questioning “whether it is the will of the church that [the language concerning same-sex covenantal relationships] will continue to guide our journey together.” Both items were assigned to a special response process for “seriously controversial” issues, which has not been used since its adoption 20 years ago. BMC’s Executive Director, Carol Wise, was appointed to the committee assigned to develop resources for the process. This represents the first time that an openly LGBTQ person has been able to be actively involved in directing the course of the conversation.

Remember:

- Your youth depend on you to provide a nurturing environment to explore their faith.
- Your youth pay attention to what you say and do, even if it doesn’t always seem that way.
- Church statements are not creedal, and many have changed over time.
- You are not alone. Contact the BMC office if you are looking for others to talk with.

Talking about sexuality in your youth group

Sexuality is a natural part of who we are as human beings. While talking about sexuality can feel uncomfortable, that only makes it more important for leaders to model open and straight-forward communication. When youth are not comfortable talking about sexuality within a faith-based institution, they will turn for guidance to other sources such as their peers or the media.

As a youth leader, you have an opportunity to provide a safe, faith-based setting in which all members of your youth group can express questions about sexuality. Youth are trying to figure out what their values are, how to express their sexuality, and how the two are related. You can guide conversations that encourage (physically and emotionally) healthy sexuality.

Tips:

- Recognize and work to overcome any discomfort you have talking about sex/sexuality.
- Be aware of how your own emotions, thoughts and experiences regarding sexuality may influence group discussions.
- Expand the conversation beyond simple declaratives of “don’t do it” or “wait until marriage.” Youth are actively exploring who they are as sexual beings and need to talk about healthy options for expressing sexuality. (See some suggested books in the *Resources* section)
- Remember that sexual feelings are normal and part of who we are.
- Do not assume that everyone in your youth group is heterosexual, and make sure that LGBTQ youth will feel included in discussions.
- Listen to what the youth are saying / asking and be ready to engage with the topics they feel interested in and affected by.

Opening question suggestions:

- How do messages/pressures from parents, teachers, mentors, the church, peers, and the media influence personal beliefs and practices of sexuality?
- How do we claim and honour our bodies as God’s beautiful creations?
 - How does that affect the choices we make?
- How are our physical, emotional and spiritual well-being related to each other and to sex/sexuality?
- What issues related to sexuality are especially relevant to youth today?
 - As a youth leader, what should I be aware of as I try to support you?

What should I do if I think someone in my youth group is LGBTQ?

- Treat the youth with the same amount of care and respect you give to any member of the group.
- Pay attention to your use of language, and the language of others in the group. (See *How can I help my youth group be a safe place?*)
- Create a safe environment where everyone knows they can talk to you. Do not single out an individual, either in front of the group or alone. (See *How can I let people know I am a safe person?*)
- Let the youth come to you. If they want to discuss their sexual orientation with you, they will when they are ready. **Do not** ask someone if they are LGBTQ.
- Honour the journey of each individual. If this person is LGBTQ, they deserve to come out at their own pace. **Do not** share your wonderings with others, including the youth's family or friends. (See *Coming Out and Confidentiality*)
- Check your assumptions:
 - A youth can identify as LGBTQ without having been sexually active.
 - Stereotypical masculine or feminine behaviour is not necessarily an indicator of sexual orientation, and neither are necessarily related to gender identity.
 - Problems a youth is experiencing may be or may not be related to their orientation or identity.
 - See other common assumptions in the *Myths and Facts* section.

What should I do if someone in my youth group comes out as LGBTQ?

- Tell the youth that you care for them, that God loves them unconditionally, and that you are honoured they have chosen to trust you with this personal journey. Even if you think the youth knows these things, say them anyway.
- Honour the trust the youth has put in you. Every person deserves to come out at their own pace. **Do not** out the youth to others, including the youth's family or friends. (See *Coming Out and Confidentiality*)
- Ask the youth what you can do to support them, both now and in the future.
- Engage the youth in conversation about how they are doing and what they are experiencing. Check in with them periodically. Some examples of important questions or topics include:
 - What is it like for you to identify as LGBTQ? (ie. relief, joy, ambivalence, anxiety, fear, etc)
 - How is it going with your parents (and other family and friends)?
 - What is the climate at school like?
 - Are you experiencing any harassment?

- How are you experiencing the church and this youth group?
- What are your values related to dating, relationships, physical intimacy and sex? (School sex education is often silent about LGBTQ people, so it is essential that youth have other ways of accessing information about sexual health.)
- In addition to me, do you have other supportive people in your life (including LGBTQ peers and role models) you can talk to about things, and if not, can I help you find some?
- With the youth, look at the resources section in this booklet, and give them BMC's *Coming Out Strong* booklet for youth.
- Continue to learn more and keep up-to-date about issues and resources related to LGBTQ youth.
- Contact BMC to find people who can mentor you through the process of supporting an LGBTQ youth.
- AND everything in the *What should I do if I think someone in my youth group is LGBTQ?* list also applies.

What should I do if someone in my youth group comes out as having an LGBTQ parent/ family member?

- Children and family of LGBTQ people are often the target of harassment and discrimination in the same way that LGBTQ people are. Most of the points in the previous two sections would also apply.
- There are particular resources that you and the youth will find helpful. On the resource list in this booklet, note the movie *In My Shoes: Stories of Youth with LGBT Parents*, as well as the *CO-LAGE* website, which has many more resource suggestions.

How can I let people know I am a safe person?

- Attend a Safe Zone Training. (Contact BMC for more information.)
- Display a visible indicator of your safety, such as a rainbow sticker/pin/poster, books on LGBTQ issues, etc.
- Discuss with your youth group that you are a safe person to talk to about a variety of issues, and be sure to include sexual orientation and gender identity.
- Correct false assumptions and myths when you hear them.
- Vocalize your support of LGBTQ individuals.
- Help your youth group and congregation move towards becoming a safer place for LGBTQ individuals. (See *How can I help my youth group be a safe place*, and/or contact BMC for more ideas)

How can I help my youth group be a safe place?

- Include sexual orientation and gender identity in your youth group’s discussions. This can happen not only during discussions about sexuality, but can also be incorporated into topics such as family, faith and current events, Jesus and the marginalized, living with our neighbours, etc.
- Incorporate movies/ books/ websites from this booklet’s resource section into youth group meetings.
- Make it clear to your youth group that homophobic or transphobic remarks will not be tolerated. For some specific ideas about how to do this, see www.safeschoolscoalition.org/TeachersGuideIntervene.pdf.
- Dedicate one or two evenings or Sunday School classes to a Safe Zone Training (or equivalent) for your youth group. If you would like a BMC representative to lead a Safe Zone Training for your youth group, contact the BMC office.
- Use inclusive language. Some examples of exclusive/inclusive language include:

Exclusive Language	Inclusive Language
Do you have a girlfriend / boyfriend?	Are you seeing anyone?
guys / girls	people
mom and dad	parents, close family
boyfriend / girlfriend	significant other, special person

What should I do if I think homosexuality is a sin, or if I’m not sure what I think?

- Follow the example of Jesus who showed compassion to the marginalized, without passing judgment.
- *NEVER* tell anybody they are a sinner or going to hell (directly or indirectly). This could have very negative implications, including ruining your relationship with this youth and increasing the feelings of abandonment, guilt, shame, self-hatred, and/or depression they may already be experiencing.
- Educate yourself about issues facing the LGBTQ community.
- Read articles, books, essays, and commentary by Biblical scholars, historians, and theologians with a different point of view than your own.
- Talk with people you respect who hold different beliefs.
- Recognize your own feelings of discomfort that limit your ability to help youth grow into who they are. While you are working to overcome your discomfort, refer the current individual to someone who can provide a safe space. If you do not know of a safe person in your congregation or area, contact the BMC office.

What do I do if I'm ready to be an ally for my LGBTQ youth, but others in my congregation are not?

- Most Biblical scholars, church leaders and laypeople base their affirmations of LGBTQ people upon their faith and understanding of scripture, and it is helpful for you to be well versed in this approach. If you'd like to learn more, start by reading some of the suggested essays and books in the "Use of the Bible" and "Resources" sections of this booklet.
- Take some time to put together the reasons you think it is important for you to be an educated, informed and supportive adult in the lives of your LGBTQ youth. Practice saying these things out loud to yourself or a safe audience to gain confidence in your ability to explain your beliefs.
- Seek out others in your congregation (especially parents of youth) who would also be supportive of LGBTQ youth, and/or people with whom you have a good and trusting relationship. Talk to them about why you feel it is important for you to be an ally for LGBTQ youth.
- Remember that your first priority is the well-being of your youth, which does not require that everyone in your congregation agrees with your perspective. Consider ways to be supportive of your LGBTQ youth regardless of the environment in which you find yourself.

When is it time to refer a youth to a professional?

- With an LGBTQ youth, as with any youth, sometimes issues may come up that you are not qualified to deal with. Examples of issues that call for a referral to a professional include but are not limited to: depression, suicide, self-harming behaviours, ongoing emotional or spiritual abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse or harassment, etc.
- If you refer the youth, you should continue to maintain a relationship with them if at all possible.
- If you are feeling uncomfortable only because the youth is LGBTQ, see *What should I do if I think homosexuality is a sin, or if I'm not sure what I think?*

Resources for learning more

Listed below are websites, books, and movies with information to further your understanding and knowledge of the LGBTQ community. This is a sample of the resources available - if you are interested in more, contact the BMC office.

Websites - faith based

Brethren Mennonite Council for LGBT Interests <www.bmclgbt.org>

BMC provides programming, support and advocacy for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender individuals and their families and friends in the Mennonite and Brethren traditions.

The Church of the Brethren <www.brethren.org>

The official website for the Church of the Brethren.

The Institute for Welcoming Resources <www.welcomingresources.org>

The purpose of this ecumenical group is to provide the resources to facilitate a paradigm shift in multiple denominations whereby churches become welcoming and affirming of all congregants regardless of sexual orientation and gender identity.

Mennonite Church Canada <www.mennonitechurch.ca>

The official website of Mennonite Church Canada.

Mennonite Church USA <www.mennonitechurch.org>

The official website of Mennonite Church U.S.A.

Websites - youth specific

Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere (U.S.) <www.colage.org>

COLAGE is a national movement of children, youth, and adults with one or more lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and/or queer (LGBTQ) parent/s. We build community and work toward social justice through youth empowerment, leadership development, education, and advocacy.

Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (U.S.) <www.glsen.org>

GLSEN strives to assure that each member of every school community is valued and respected regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity/expression.

National Youth Advocacy Coalition (U.S.) <www.nyacyouth.org>

The National Youth Advocacy Coalition (NYAC) is a social justice organization that advocates for and with young people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning (LGBTQ) in an effort to end discrimination against these youth and to ensure their physical and emotional well-being.

The Safe Schools Coalition <www.safeschoolscoalition.org>

The Safe Schools Coalition is an international public-private partnership in support of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender youth, that is working to help schools - at home and all over the world - become safe places where every family can belong, where every educator can teach, and where every child can learn, regardless of gender identity or sexual orientation.

The Trevor Project (U.S.) <www.thetrevorproject.org>

The Trevor Project operates the only accredited, nationwide, around-the-clock crisis and suicide prevention helpline for LGBTQ youth.

Websites - other

American Civil Liberties Union <www.aclu.org>

The mission of ACLU includes four basic aspects: First Amendment rights, right to equal protection under the law, right to due process, and right to privacy.

Canadians for Equal Marriage <www.equal-marriage.ca>

Canadians for Equal Marriage is a nation-wide campaign working at the grassroots, in the media, in Parliament, and beyond, to persuade MPs to oppose any measures to take away equal marriage.

Canadian Human Rights Commission <www.chrc-ccdp.ca/default-en.asp>

The Canadian Human Rights Commission administers the Canadian Human Rights Act and is responsible for ensuring compliance with the Employment Equity Act. Both laws ensure that the principles of equal opportunity and non-discrimination are followed in all areas of federal jurisdiction.

Canadian Rainbow Health Coalition <www.rainbowhealth.ca>

CRHC is a community-based movement dedicated to improving the emotional, physical, spiritual and mental health and wellness of people who have experienced significant inequities based on our sexual orientation and/or gender identity.

Egale Canada <www.egale.ca>

Egale Canada is a national organization that advances equality and justice for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans-identified people and their families across Canada.

Human Rights Campaign <www.hrc.org>

The Human Rights Campaign is America's largest civil rights organization working to achieve gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender equality.

Intersex Society of North America <www.isna.org>

The Intersex Society of North America (ISNA) is devoted to systemic change to end shame, secrecy, and unwanted genital surgeries for people born with an anatomy that someone decided is not standard for male or female.

Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays <www.pflag.org>

PFLAG promotes the health and well-being of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender persons, their families and friends through: support, to cope with an adverse society; education, to enlighten an ill-informed public; and advo-

cacy, to end discrimination and to secure equal civil rights. PFLAG provides opportunity for dialogue about sexual orientation and gender identity, and acts to create a society that is healthy and respectful of human diversity.

Soul Force (U.S.) <www.soulforce.org>

Soul Force works for freedom for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people from religious and political oppression through the practice of relentless nonviolent resistance.

The World Professional Association for Transgender Health <www.wpath.org>

As an international interdisciplinary, professional organization, the mission of the World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH) is to further the understanding and treatment of gender identity disorders by professionals in medicine, psychology, law, social work, counseling, psychotherapy, family studies, sociology, anthropology, sexology, speech and voice therapy, and other related fields.

Books

Brown, Timothy and Leanne McCall Tigert, Eds. Coming Out Young and Faithful. Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2001.

Clapp, Steve, Kristen Leverton Helbert, and Angela Zizak. Faith Matters: Teenagers, Religion and Sexuality. Fort Wayne, IN: LifeQuest Publications, 2003.

Clapp, Steve. The Gift of Sexuality: Empowerment for Religious Teens. Fort Wayne, IN: LifeQuest Publications, 2006.

Huegel, Kelly, ed. GLBTQ: The Survival Guide for Queer & Questioning Teens. Minneapolis: Free Spirit, 2003.

King, Michael A., Ed. Stumbling Towards a Genuine Conversation On Homosexuality. Cascadia Publishing House, 2007.

McDougall, Bryce ed. My Child Is Gay: How Parents React When They Hear the News. Crows Nest NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2006.

Mollenkott, Virginia Ramey. Omnigender: a Trans-Religious Approach. Pilgrim Press, 2007.

Rogers, Jack. Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality: Explode the Myths, Heal the Church. Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.

Showalter Kreider, Roberta. The Cost of Truth: Faith Stories of Mennonite and Brethren Leaders and Those Who Might Have Been. Strategic Press, 2004.

Wills, Gary. What Jesus Meant. Penguin Group, 2007.

Movies

All God's Children. Dir. Dee Mosbacher and Frances Reid. 2001.

Prominent religious, intellectual, and political leaders, family members and activists speak out about the role of the Church and the importance of commitment to equal rights and social justice for all people.

Camp Out. Dir. Larry Grimaldi and Kirk Marcolina. 2006.

10 Midwestern teenagers attend a summer camp for gay Christian youth.

De Colores. Dir. Peter Barbosa and Garrett Lenoir. Eyebite Productions, 2001.

Coming out in Hispanic families is explored from the points of view the families as well as those coming out.

For the Bible Tells Me So. Dir. Daniel G. Karlake. Atticus Group, 2007.

The stories of five Christian families who have a gay child.

The Making of a Gay and Lesbian Community: Before Stonewall. Dir. Greta Schiller and Robert Rosenberg. First Run Features, 1984.

A history of the gay community before the Stonewall riots of 1969.

In My Shoes: Stories of Youth with LGBT Parents. Dir. Jennifer Gilomen. Frameline, 2007.

A youth-produced documentary film by and about children of LGBT parents.

Milk. Dir. Gus Van Sant. Focus Features, 2008.

The story of Harvey Milk, his struggles as an American gay activist who fought for gay rights and became California's first openly gay elected official.

Prayers for Bobby. Dir. Russell Mulcahy. TV. Daniel Sladek Entertainment, 2009.

The story of Mary Griffith and her struggles to accept her gay son.

Transgeneration. Dir. Jeremy Simmons. Logo Entertainment, 2005.

An eight part documentary series about four transgender college students.

Glossary of terms

Note: These definitions are not meant to be comprehensive. Nor are they definitive, as our understandings continue to evolve.

Ally: A non-LGBTQ person who works in solidarity both with other heterosexual people and with the queer community to aid in the struggle against hate, discrimination, and the heterosexist and patriarchal norms present in our culture. Being an ally means: sharing the power, taking a risk, taking responsibility, opening yourself up to the unknown, realizing that you are part of the solution, leveling the playing field, accepting differences, making allowances, and leading by action. It is important for an ally to join LGBTQ persons in solidarity, and not play a patronizing role in the journey towards equality.

Androgyny: Displaying characteristics of both or neither of the two culturally defined genders.

Biphobia: Hatred and/or discrimination against bisexuals. Like *transphobia*, this form of discrimination comes from both the straight and gay communities. Some members of the straight community often collapse bisexuality into homosexuality and refer to bi people as “gay.” Thus, bisexuals often face the same forms of discrimination, difficulty in adopting children, and emotional and physical violence as the lesbian/gay community. Some members of the lesbian/gay community, on the other hand, often feel hostility toward bisexuals for being able to “pass” as straight or for being “confused.”

Bisexual: A person who is emotionally, spiritually, physically and/or sexually attracted to those of any sex or gender.

Coming out: The process of realizing, understanding, and accepting one’s sexual orientation or gender identity, usually involving the process of telling others. Because it’s a process, coming out is not a one-time occurrence, but happens each time one presents oneself as nonstraight. Because heterosexuality is part of the dominant culture, straight people do not have to come out. See also, *Outing*.

Dyke: Historically, this term has been an insult used against women perceived to be lesbian or “masculine,” similar to butch, she-male, bulldyke, bulldagger, lezzie, *et cetera*. Some LGBTQ people have reclaimed the word as a way to identify and empower themselves.

Fag: Historically, this term has been an insult used against men perceived to be homosexual or “feminine,” similar to sissy, pussy, pansy, punk, fairy, *et cetera*. Some people have reclaimed the word as a way to identify and empower themselves.

FTM (Female to Male): A male-identified person who was categorized as female at birth. (See also *MTF* and *transgender*)

Gay: A person who identifies as a man who is emotionally, spiritually, physically and/or sexually attracted primarily to other men. *Gay*, however is often used as an umbrella term for both same-gender loving men and women, and many women identify as *gay* rather than, or in addition to, *lesbian*.

Gender: Characteristics of masculinity and femininity that are learned or chosen. A person’s assigned sex does not always match their gender identity, and most people display traits of more than one gender. It is important to note that *gender* is different from and not inherently linked to *sexual orientation*.

Gender bending: Not conforming to stereotypical gender roles.

Gender binary: The concept that there are only two genders and that they are inherently connected to biological sex.

Gender identity: Describes the gender with which a person identifies (i.e, whether one perceives oneself to be a man, a woman, or describes oneself in some less conventional way.)

Genderqueer: A term used by some people who identify outside of the traditional two-gender or gender-binary system. This term refers primarily to gender identity rather than sexual orientation.

Heterosexism: The belief that heterosexuality is “normal,” or superior to other sexual orientations. It is one of the central ideas behind homo-, bi- and transphobia and is key to maintaining patriarchy. This often takes form as systemic or institutional heterosexism.

Homophobia: Hatred and/or discrimination based on perceived or actual sexuality or gender identity. Homophobia manifests itself in a variety of ways, including verbal threats, jokes, physical/emotional violence, and discrimination in adoption, marriage, employment, *et cetera*.

Internalized homophobia: A hatred or fear of one’s own existing or potential homosexuality. It is largely responsible for the staggering numbers of queer teen suicides, depression, and substance abuse. It is also a contributing factor in violence against those perceived to be LGBTQ. Internalized *ableism, biphobia, racism, sexism, and transphobia*, likewise, are responsible for shame, negative body image, and violence within our communities. Though the word *internalize* sounds negative, it is possible to internalize positive self-images and pride.

Intersex: Describes people born with some combination of male and female sex organs. According to the Intersex Society of North America, “Anatomic sex differentiation occurs on a male/female continuum, and there are several dimensions.” It is estimated that anywhere from 1 in 100 to 1 in 2,000 infants is born intersexed, but the most common reaction by the medical establishment is to “fix” these babies immediately through surgical means. Many consider surgeries to often be medically unnecessary and a form of mutilation.

Lesbian: A person who identifies as a woman who is emotionally, spiritually, physically and/or sexually attracted primarily to other women.

LGBTQ: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning/Queer.

MTF (Male to Female): A female-identified person who was categorized as male at birth. (See also *FTM* and *transgender*)

Outing: When an LGBTQ person has their identity shared with others without their permission. Depending on a person’s situation, being outed could cause great damage to their life and well-being. The term refers to “coming out of the closet.”

Queer: Can be used as an umbrella term for those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or intersex. Historically, the term was used as an insult against those perceived to be LGBTQ. For this reason, its use can be controversial. It has been reclaimed by parts of the LGBTQ community, especially

younger generations.

Questioning: A term used to describe a person who is unsure about their sexual orientation and chooses to label themselves as “questioning.”

Safe Space/Zone: A safe space is a place where LGBTQ or questioning individuals feel comfortable and secure in being who they are. In this place, they can talk about their gender identity or sexual orientation without fear of being criticized, judged, or ridiculed. A safe space does not provide advice, but rather a caring environment for the sharing of concerns.

Sexual orientation: The orientation within human beings, which leads them to be emotionally, spiritually, physically and/or sexually attracted to persons of one gender, another gender, or multiple genders. One’s sexual orientation may be homosexual, heterosexual, bisexual, asexual, or other, *et cetera*.

Straight [Non-Gay, Heterosexual]: Someone who is emotionally, spiritually, physically, and/or sexually attracted primarily to members of another sex/gender.

Transgender: An umbrella term for people whose gender identity is different from the sex and gender role they were assigned at birth. Transgender people can be heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, and may not identify as queer. *Genderqueer* people may or may not identify with this term.

Transsexual: A person whose gender identity is different from the sex they were assigned at birth, so they may take hormones or get sex reassignment surgery (SRS). Policies differ from location to location regarding the point in one’s journey when a transsexual individual can legally change their name and other legal documents. *Transsexual* is often seen as a clinical, even dated term.

Transphobia: Hatred and/or discrimination against people who break or blur gender roles and sex characteristics. Transphobia is mandated by a gender regime that says we are either man or woman, masculine or feminine. Like *biphobia*, it is prevalent in both straight and lesbian/gay communities.

Two-Spirit: A concept present in some, but not all, indigenous cultures across North America and parts of Central and South America. It is a term of reverence, traditionally referring to people who display both masculine and feminine sex or gender characteristics. Those who are Two-Spirited are highly respected, and are often healers and leaders thought to possess a higher spiritual development

*Definitions include excerpts from *Revolutionary Voices: A Multicultural Queer Youth Anthology*. ed. by Amy Sonnie.

I, _____, am a person members of my youth group can feel safe confiding in.
As a safe person, I pledge...

To continue wrestling with my questions, seeking guidance through prayer, meditation, scripture, my congregation, the denomination, trusted mentors, other persons of faith, and friends and colleagues;

To educate myself, my youth group, and others about oppression based on sexual orientation and gender identity;

To be active in the struggle against all forms of oppression;

To offer unconditional support to members of my youth group who identify as LGBTQA;

To provide affirming resources and referrals to the best of my knowledge to members of my youth group who seek support, even though I may not have all the answers;

To make my youth group a safe space for members of the LGBT community;

And to be a loving and compassionate presence to my youth group and celebrate each individual as a beautiful child of God.

Signature _____ Date _____