

4 VIEWS ON PASTORING LGBTQ TEENAGERS  
Effective Ministry to Gay, Bi, Trans, Queer,  
and Questioning Students Among Us

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Shelley Donaldson

Gemma Dunning

Nick Elio

Eric Woods

# 4 VIEWS ON PASTORING LGBTQ TEENAGERS

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## INTRODUCTION

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I'm going to be 100% transparent with you: *We want this book to change you.*

On one hand, we're not trying to “convert” you to a particular theology (unless that means that we want to “convert” you to a theology that truly loves teenagers in every conceivable category—gay, straight, bisexual, cisgender, transgender, gender fluid, queer, or simply wondering about one of these identity and gender issues). But it would be dishonest to imply we don't have an agenda in publishing this book as the first in our 4 Views series.

I mean, you bought this book from an organization called The Youth Cartel. You didn't actually think we'd be, uh... *tender*, did you?

We don't, however, have a liberal agenda (hidden or brazen). And we certainly don't have a conservative agenda. But we do have an agenda, and we want to be forthright about that.

We know for a fact that teenagers struggling with sexuality experience a way-higher-than-average amount of bullying. We know they consider suicide way more than average. And we know *Way Too Many* of them experience condemnation and judgment from the church.

We also know that for transgender teens, the percentages mentioned in the previous paragraph are even terrifyingly higher.

We know that for most gay and trans teens, the church is about the *least* safe place on earth. And we hope that in some way, this book will move the needle on that horrific reality.

I was particularly moved when reading the results of the largest study ever conducted on the faith of LGBTQ peoples (not just teenagers but all ages), reported in Andrew Marin's remarkable book, *Us Versus Us: The Untold Story of Religion and the LGBT Community* (NavPress,

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2016). In short, one surprising finding of the study was that LGBTQ people score more than 10% higher than the general population when it comes to having a background in the Christian church (in America, that is). That fact itself is fascinating and worthy of reflection. The research team dug deep into the data, cross-referencing reams of data from other questions and digging into the responses from open-ended prompts.

They discovered that a large portion of *young teens* experiencing same-sex attraction (SSA) look for ways to rid themselves of the attraction they don't desire to have. Prior to their young teen years, survey respondents may have been aware of their SSA; but the questions (and often pain and fear) surrounding these issues become particularly urgent to young teens stepping into the developmentally normative work of identity formation.

Here's the news for youth workers (and churches in general): A statistically significant percentage of young teens experiencing SSA but *without* prior church experience turn to the church as a means of turning to God. Did you catch that? Young teens without prior church experience start attending church and/or youth programs specifically because of their SSA. They are looking, primarily, for answers and help (and often hoping that God will remove their SSA).

Sadly, the statistics also show that the vast majority of teens experiencing SSA *do not find help* in the church (all too often experiencing condemnation and rejection): The majority of LGBT adults report leaving the church (but not their faith) during their later teen years.

Teenagers are in our midst, looking for help; and we have been—for a very, very long time—failing them.

This is one of the reasons I am so firmly in agreement with Andy Stanley's insistence that the church should be the safest place to talk about anything, including SSA.

So we hope this book results in change. I know working on it has had

a huge impact on me.

### **What This Book Isn't (And What It Is)**

When The Youth Cartel decided to pursue a series of dialogue books around a four-views approach, we knew this topic had to be our first shot. This comes from the conviction, borne out of interactions with countless youth workers, that most in our tribe passionately want to be effective in ministry to teenagers but don't know how to proceed with LGBTQ young people.

But our observation was that there wasn't much to be gained by hosting another debate about what the Bible says (or doesn't say). There are *plenty* of other places to read about those debates—and we encourage you to read, listen, watch. Be informed about “both sides.” (Really, it's essential that you compassionately understand how others who represent a biblical viewpoint divergent from yours think and interpret Scripture.) Instead, over and over again, we heard youth workers saying they needed more pragmatic help: *What do I do when a teenager comes out to me? How do I respond in a way that's helpful rather than creating additional problems?*

So this book is not a theological debate. We set out to find a handful of youth workers with experience in pastoring LGBTQ teens. We didn't want theory but practice. We didn't want propositions from someone who didn't actually know real-life LGBTQ teenagers; we wanted a collection of voices who have wrestled with these issues *because* they are involved with actual LGBTQ teenagers (and those teenagers' parents). We intentionally looked for a diversity of voices, which was a challenge that took roughly a year of conversations and dialogue.

We wanted this book to feel like you, the reader, are having a conversation with these four writers. Or at the least, we wanted you to be able to be a fly on the wall while the four of them had a meaningful conversation, one marked by compassion and respect.

This book is *not* intended to convert you to one of the four views represented. While each of the four writers believes strongly in their

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perspective (as they should), the tone is intentionally more “this is what I’ve learned” than “do this or you’re an idiot.”

### **A Surprise During Development (And What It Taught Us)**

After working for so long to find four writers who were clearly different from one another in both experience and theological perspective, we were a little surprised to discover something as first drafts of chapters started to take shape. *Because* these writers are all relationally involved with real teenagers struggling with LGBTQ questions (and not merely standing on a soap box), we discovered that their suggestions were less differing than we’d assumed they would be. This revealed something critical that I’d like to now posit as an axiom here at the get go:

*One cannot work out her approach to ministry with LGBTQ teenagers apart from relationships with real LGBTQ teenagers.*

I’d even go so far as to say that you and your church can’t effectively work out your *theology* in this area apart from real relationships (even though theological or biblical frameworks are not the focus of this book). Most youth workers intuitively know this, though they may be under pressure to align themselves with a statement created by others. Youth workers, for the most part, are *practical theologians* not systematic theologians. Youth workers live in the real world with complicated, messy, passionate, beautiful teenagers and can’t shake the divine compulsion to be missional, to meet real teenagers where they are, bringing a contextualized gospel to their world in hopes of having real teenagers connect with the real Jesus.

Ultimately, that’s our hope for you: that you would be better equipped to help LGBTQ teenagers and those who are questioning or wondering connect with the real Jesus, rather than a polity or theological framework.

### **A Bit of Self-Exposure**

As the general editor of this book, I think it’s fair that I reveal some of my own journey (much of which I unpack in more detail in one of the two appendices). My own daughter, as a junior in high school,

came out to me and my wife as bisexual. Months later, she told us that “bi” probably wasn’t the full truth, that she was gay. About eighteen months later, Riley told us she was trans and wanted to take steps to transition to presenting as a male. And about six months after that, Riley settled on being gender neutral, using gender-neutral pronouns (they/their/them) and changing their name (Riley was Liesl). That was approximately five years ago.

As a result, my wife and I have walked this journey, not only as youth workers but as parents, from an extremely intimate and personal point of view. We’ve wrestled and cried and prayed and had a thousand conversations with our oldest child, who’s now twenty-three years old (and many conversations with our younger son). We’ve spoken with our local youth ministry leaders, when Riley was still involved in the youth group. We’ve processed with national ministry leaders from a wide variety of perspectives. We’ve watched online videos and read many books, some of which were helpful and some of which were not. And I’ll confirm right here that we have a wonderful and loving relationship with Riley and have learned so much from them. They were gracious and patient with us as we processed. (Shoot, even figuring out how to use plural pronouns took me a good two years!)

For many of these processing years, I said to those close to me that I didn’t think “helping people figure out LGBTQ issues” was part of my calling and that I wanted to focus my ministry work on what God had clearly called me to. But as time has passed and I’ve had more and more and more conversations with youth workers who need help, I’ve realized that this *has become* part of my calling. I, Mark Oestreicher, want to help you, youth worker, in both understanding and practice. I want you to be better equipped to *not* add to the high percentage of questioning teenagers who leave the church because they’ve only experienced what they perceive as condemnation. (That “what they perceive” part is super important, and I’ll unpack that a bit more in the appendix.)

So while I don’t hope that this book converts you to a particular theology, I do hope—desperately—that this book will result in the

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teenagers you interact with experiencing a safe and loving mentor, a pastor (whatever your title or employment) who embraces them in the midst of their questions and provisional conclusions.

I invite you to read the pages that follow with an open mind (doing so is *not* a threat to your beliefs!), to read with compassion and a desire to learn. Allow Gemma, Nick, Shelley, and Eric to speak honestly with you. Know that they are not standing in judgment of you and they do not come to this armed for battle. They, along with me, invite you into dialogue, with the hope that God's Spirit would guide you.

– **Mark Oestreicher**  
General Editor