



Celebrating the LGBTQIA+ Community in Campus Ministry

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As campus ministers, pastors, and college chaplains, we know how difficult it is for students to set aside their lives and experience moments of grace. We know that every student we meet has a different experience with church, scripture, faith and community. Each campus ministry is unique, but we all have one thing in common: we are meeting young adults at the intersection of their adolescence and their adulthood. What comes with this unique time are new realizations – about faith, God, and identity. As our communities reform each semester and year, we often find ourselves met with new challenges and questions about how we can make sure we are welcoming every student that comes to us for a place of connection and community.

Below, I will speak from my own experience (that of a white queer/genderfluid man) about various ways that campus ministry can be intentional about welcoming and celebrating people of all identities, especially those in the LGBTQIA+ community.

This is by no means comprehensive or complete.

1. Educate yourself

First things first: make sure you know SOMETHING about each of the unique experiences of non-cisgender (those born with the gender that they identify with) and non-heteronormative (any identity that is not heterosexual). How can you do this? Well, first make sure to recognize that queer people are not here to be your personal teachers or to serve those seeking to learn about our identities – ESPECIALLY when we are continuing to learn about our identities (a lifelong process). There is a wealth of organizations (More Light Presbyterians, GLAAD, also check your local communities and campus organizations) that can provide information. A part of education is examining the community that makes up your own personal circle – is it homogenous in terms of race, gender-identity/expression, and sexual orientation? Often, LGBTQIA+ people are socially kept at arms-length by being treated as accessories.

2. Pronouns, pronouns, PRONOUNS (and a note on language)

A HUGE part of creating a community where all can explore, question, and feel welcome is by asking for people's preferred pronouns. For instance, I prefer they/them/their pronouns. When I am "mispronounced" I feel like I am not known or respected. But consistently correcting people means that I am often placed in a social category of "that person just talks about pronouns and nothing else". It's incredibly isolating and even more exhausting. After a while, I would rather leave and only be around people who recognize this key part of who I am.

It is also important to practice and keep up to date with language. When I say practice, I mean actually practice saying things out loud like queer and trans (you don't have to whisper, they are not bad words). And please, PLEASE practice saying LGBTQIA+. I promise that if you can handle saying PC(USA), then you'll be able to master this one in no time. When people stumble over the acronym "LGBTQIA" or jokingly say "LGBTQI-ABCDEFGH ... I never know, there's so many these days!" it only shows that you don't have LGBTQIA+ people in your close circles.

3. Representation matters

Being able to see people like yourself represented in worship or other areas of ministry is lifesaving. Whether this comes up in worship leadership, ministry leadership or even in a book study or weekly liturgy – often times, LGBTQIA+ people have not seen ourselves positively in spaces of faith. Being able to read memoirs and articles & to follow queer/trans pastors on twitter and other social media allows us to see queer and trans culture incorporated into worship and faith. It's not only good for the queer and trans students we encounter, but it opens endless possibilities for our communal lives together.

4. Queer the larger church narratives

To queer something is to look at it critically through a lens that is not heteronormative and not cisgender. And it's an incredible tool for ministry. No matter what faith tradition we've grown up in, church narratives that involve us are usually either incredibly harmful or how a church is "wrestling" with how to include us. In the PC(USA), LGBTQIA+ people are subtly and not so subtly told that we are the reason churches are splitting. If we are at the table while church committees discuss how to include us, speaking up is incredibly daunting. But more likely, we are not at the table and only hear about it through other communications. Being talked about and not talked to feeds into the isolation that the church is continuing in its ever-growing desire to be more welcoming.

But to queer this narrative is not to say that queer and trans people are the reason churches are splitting, it's to realize that churches and faith communities are missing out on the unique perspectives and gifts that queer and trans people have to offer. When one is socially told that who they are is disparate at best, and sinful/worthy of death at worst, finding a way to reclaim that narrative is incredibly powerful. [Queer and trans people] have been told for so long that our bodies are not enough or wrong, that our minds need fixing and that our desires are worthy of death. I've said it before and I'll say it again, Queer [and trans] people are a living example of the resiliency of resurrection.

5. Ask and be thankful for grace.

You're going to mess up. You're going to assume heterosexuality and cisgender identity. You're going to misgender someone and use the wrong pronouns. But recognizing your error, apologizing, asking for forgiveness, and working to correct is okay.

As you examine your practices and your community, know that often the practice for queer, trans, genderfluid and nonbinary folx is to hold back parts of ourselves so that we don't make others uncomfortable. We negotiate our identities and expressions so that we too can experience God and deepen our faith in community. But ask yourself and *dream together* as a community about ways to be a space where there's no need to hold back, where queer and trans people see ourselves, where we are encouraged (verbally and nonverbally) to share. Dream together about being a community where queer and trans people don't say "I like it here because I'm welcome" but "I like it here because I'm celebrated".

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