

Gender identity & trans identification

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Introduction

How can we best love and pastor those who are questioning their gender, identifying as transgender or experiencing gender dysphoria? Here are a few thoughts and pointers to further resources.

Understanding

We can't hope to respond well until we first understand someone's experience.

Transgender – An umbrella term used to refer to a wide variety of experiences in which someone feels there is a disconnect or conflict between their biological sex (what their body says about whether they are a man or a woman) and their gender identity (their internal sense of being a man or a woman).

Gender Dysphoria – The medical diagnosis that will sometimes be made when someone experiences considerable distress because of their transgender experience.

Transition – The process of moving to live in line with one's internal gender identity. This can include social (eg name, pronouns, clothes), medical (eg hormones), and surgical (eg mastectomy, sex reassignment surgery) transition.

Transgender covers a vast range of experiences and understandings. It's important not to make assumptions but to get to know each person as an individual.

A rounded Christian response

Good pastoral care will be based on a rounded, full-bodied Christian response to transgender experience.

- **Heart response** – God loves trans people and longs for them to find fullness of life in him. He also responds with compassion towards those who experience the very real pain and distress that gender dysphoria can cause. How can we communicate God's heart of love and compassion?
- **Head response** – The Bible reveals that who we really are is found not in what we feel inside but in what God says to us through our bodies and through his Word. Who we are as a man or a woman is communicated to us through the body God has given us. Trans experience is, therefore, an example of suffering, not a revelation of identity. How can we help people understand God's truth and the goodness of that truth?
- **Hope response** – The Bible and the Christian worldview equip us to handle suffering well and to help others to do the same. The Bible's big story (in particular its promise of a future end to suffering), the biblical invitation to lament, and the support of relationship with God and the church family are just some of the ways we are equipped to face suffering. How can we help people to live in and experience the gospel's hope, including how it helps us to handle suffering?

All three of these elements need to be included to give a rounded Christian response.

Top tips

Love well – Prioritise maintaining relationship. Show that you are a safe person to talk to. Express the same kind of welcome that Jesus has shown you. Embody the gospel in your love and welcome.

Listen well – Listening is a key way of loving. Just by listening, we validate the reality of someone’s experience and humbly acknowledge that we don’t know everything. ‘Tell me more of your story’ is one of our most powerful tools.

Learn well – Take time to learn about trans experiences and how to think about them and respond Christianly, but don’t assume that means you understand everything and everyone. ‘If you’ve met one trans person, you’ve met one trans person’ (Mark Yarhouse). Take time to learn about the individual and their personal story.

Keep employing common sense – You are probably a lot more equipped to help someone who is wrestling with gender identity questions or who is identifying as trans than you think you are. Don’t forget to keep applying good, standard pastoral wisdom, and don’t switch off your common sense. We should be aware and humble when there are things we don’t know about or don’t fully understand, but that does not disqualify us from helping people through listening and discussing.

Keep your priorities right – Remember that the key issue for us as pastors is each person’s relationship with Jesus. How can you keep drawing those you are supporting back to Jesus? By keeping our relationship with Jesus at the centre, we enact the gospel, demonstrating that our position before God is based not on what we do but on what he has done for us. This also helps us to show people that what God says to them about their experience of gender is for their good, rooted in his love for them, not just a set of harsh rules imposed for no reason.

Keep gender in perspective – Questions around gender are not unimportant, but they are also not the only thing that is important or even the thing that is most important. In your support of a trans-identified person, make sure that gender isn’t the only thing you talk to them about. They are more than their experience of gender. Help them to recognise that too. Gender can easily become an all-consuming element of life. We can help people to acknowledge its importance but not be unhelpfully consumed by it.

Embark on a journey – View your support of a trans-identified person as a journey they are on with Jesus – with you partnering alongside – not a problem to be fixed. There will be no quick answers to the questions and struggles an individual faces. Understanding, accepting, and living out what God says may be very difficult for them and may require a long and slow journey. Remember that it is Jesus who leads the journey, with us alongside.

For advice specific to supporting trans-identifying teens, see the CMF Quick Guides for youth leaders and for parents.

Suggested resources

Please note that we do not necessarily endorse everything in all of these resources:

Christian books and resources

Andrew Bunt, *People Not Pronouns: Reflections on Transgender Experience* (Grove Books, 2021)

Preston Sprinkle, *Embodied: Transgender Identities, the Church, and What the Bible Has to Say* (David C. Cook, 2021)

Mark Yarhouse, *Understanding Gender Dysphoria: Navigating Transgender Issues in a Changing Culture* (IVP Academic, 2015)

Nancy Pearcey, *Love Thy Body: Answering Hard Questions about Life and Sexuality* (Baker, 2018)

Living Out – resources on sexuality, gender and identity: livingout.org

True Freedom Trust – pastoral support for those wrestling with sexuality and gender: truefreedomtrust.co.uk

General books and resources

Stats For Gender – helpful summaries of research on gender-related questions: statsforgender.org

Gender Through a Wider Lens – a podcast exploring a wide range of gender-related topics: gender-a-wider-lens.captivate.fm

CMF Quick Guides to gender dysphoria and trans identification are also available for healthcare professionals, parents and youth leaders. Find them at: cmf.li/QuickGuides