

How to Minister to Teens Struggling with Same-Sex Attraction (SSA)

There are few issues in the Church that cause more angst and frustration than the issue of same sex attraction and transgenderism. Yet, the Church must learn how to handle this topic with grace, especially as more and more students are affected by same sex attraction (SSA) and are embracing “lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, and more” (LGBTQ+) lifestyles . This paper should serve as a helpful guide for ministering to students who either struggle with SSA or embrace a LGBTQ+ lifestyle.

6 Attitudes We Can Embrace When Ministering to SSA & LGBTQ+ Teens

1.) Walk in the tension between your pastoral and theological convictions.

LGBTQ+ youth are at higher risk for running away from home—and that means they’re more likely to experience homelessness and sexual exploitation. They are frequently depressed and suffer from substance abuse, due in part to the isolation and silence associated with being gay. LGBTQ+ kids represent almost a third of all teen suicides, and are three times more likely to attempt suicide than their non-gay peers.

A pastoral approach to these marginalized teenagers demands a compassionate response. That’s why North Point Community Church lead pastor Andy Stanley recently told church leaders: “We just need to decide from now on in our churches when a middle school kid comes out to his small group leader or a high school senior comes out to her parents, we just need to decide, regardless of what you think about this topic, no more students are going to feel like they have to leave the local church because they’re same-sex attracted or because they’re gay. That ends with us.”

There is a time and place for biblical and theological debate—both are important in our spiritual formation. But when it comes to Jesus, theology is never trumps pastoral ministry. Jesus showed compassion to the marginalized, the scandalous, and the vulnerable every time. Our starting point for ministry to LGBTQ+ youth is always compassion, because it was always Jesus’ starting point. (*Example: John 8:1-11*)

2.) Learn to trust more deeply in the Holy Spirit to guide you in the way you interact and minister.

We are most effective in building rapport with LGBTQ+ students when we let go of our agenda to convince them to think and act the way we want them to. This is possible only when we actively trust the role of the Holy Spirit in their spiritual formation.

It's the role of the Holy Spirit to help us understand the heart of Jesus (John 16:12-14), convict us of sin (John 16:8), lead us to repentance (Romans 2:4), stop sinning (Romans 8), understand scripture (Luke 24:25), and give us comfort (John 14). If that's the Spirit's job description, the same Spirit that lives in us, then we can move toward LGBTQ+ students without worrying about our agenda. What if, instead, we sought out the Spirit's agenda, then submitted to that guidance? The Spirit, Galatians 5 tells us, will bring love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control into every yielded heart. This is Good News to an alienated LGBTQ+ teenager longing for connection and belonging.

3.) Embrace the tension between love and truth.

Truth is important—it defines us as a tribe. Or does it? After washing his disciples' feet, predicting his betrayal, and foreshadowing Peter's denial of him, Jesus tells his friends that they'll be known by their *love* for each other (John 13:35). Apparently, Jesus believes love is our defining characteristic. This is huge for people that have spent their lives focused on the rules-and-regulations of holy living.

When truth is our starting point, then truth is the only entry point for others outside of that truth. By default, others must agree with our truth in order to be in right relationship with us. But when we elevate relationship above truth, we can be tempted to withhold the truth in order to preserve the relational connection. There is another way...

When Jesus is our starting point, then we move towards others in the tension between love and truth—this allows us to oscillate between truth and relationship. Because the relationship is grounded in love, we can say hard things when we need to. And because our starting point is Jesus, we can elevate the relationship over truth for a season, when the relationship needs tending before it can benefit from the “fertilizer” of truth. Love gives us the freedom to be responsive to what the Holy Spirit prompts and what the individual needs.

4.) Value spiritual formation over behavior modification.

It can be very easy for us to focus solely on the behavior or “sin manifested” and want to change the behavior... this is dangerous! When we focus solely on behavioral change, what we typically get is shallow compliance instead of true spiritual transformation. People learn how to say and do what we tell them they have to do in order to get what they want. The unintended consequence is that it drives sin and other maladaptive behaviors further underground.

And we do something similar in ministry—we teach our teenagers how to act so they can assimilate into our community. To get the community they long for, they must adopt our values, truths, customs, and rituals. But is that transformation internal?

- What if we created space for LGBTQ+ students to encounter Jesus, instead of focusing on behavior modification with them?
- What if we trusted the Spirit to do what the Scriptures promise the Spirit will do?
- What if we gave our LGBTQ+ youth a few spiritual tools to help them draw close to God, then trust that Jesus will complete the work he's begun in them?

Yes, this will require our trust and faith, enabling us to let go of fear.

5.) **Give the gift of belonging.**

Young, LGBTQ teenagers feel disconnected from community, and that pushes them further into isolation. Under this pressure, they seek comfort and numbing through high-risk sexual behaviors, drug and alcohol abuse, co-dependent and often violent relationships, and exploitative sub-cultures that lead them to homelessness and sex-trafficking. If our approach to LGBTQ+ youth drives them further into these coping strategies, then we're hurting, not helping.

Jesus is working to restore all things to himself (Romans 8:18-25). And when we are living in His Spirit, our focus will be to help LGBTQ+ students move toward this restoration—to do this, we must give them a place to belong, so they have the opportunity to attach more deeply to Jesus. It's not our kingdom; it is God's Kingdom. They'll struggle to experience the transforming power of Jesus if they're prevented from accessing his incarnate Body.

6.) **Match orthopraxy (correct actions) to orthodoxy (correct beliefs).**

It's good to remember that Jesus spent a lot of his time on earth in the garbage dumps outside the cities he visited. This is where many of the "undesirables" ended up after they'd been rejected and ostracized. He was drawn to the sinful, the sick, and the possessed. He liked to hang out with the drunks and the whores, the marginalized and the vulnerable, the harassed and the helpless, and the exploited and the powerless.

Always, he moved toward these people in radical ways. He touched the unclean, spoke to those who had no business talking to him, and even subjugated himself to power structures that had no real authority over him. In the end, he allowed himself to be killed by the ruling government. When we love Jesus and are led by his Spirit, we'll move toward LGBTQ+ students the way he would. We'll create sanctuaries for them to belong. Here's how...

- **Offer them pastoral care.** Give them a listening and caring ear, and join them on their spiritual journey. Be fully present. Celebrate small victories over sin and err on the side of grace. Arrange for mentoring or developmental relationships if you do not feel comfortable mentoring them.

- **Educate yourself and others.** We often struggle to talk about sex without infusing it with shame or fear. So learn about the process of coming out, and the unique stressors LGBTQ+ students live with. Equip yourself to better minister to them by asking them about their experience of coming out so that you can understand their struggles better.
- **Walk with their parents.** Parents of LGBTQ+ kids need guidance and companionship as they navigate an uncertain future. They fear disconnection from important relationships or that others will mistreat their child. You can offer profound help by supporting their parents, offering resources, and connecting them to the pastoral staff.

What If A Teen Comes Out To Me?

As we build relationships with our teens, many will open up about their struggles. And there may be a time when a teen first “comes out” about their same sex attraction to you! If this happens, praise God that they feel safe enough around you to share this intimate struggle with you and DON’T PANIC! Below are a few tips on how to handle a “coming out” situation without panicking and without blowing it.

1. Consider the “5 Minute Rule” & Offer Safe Space

There is a brief initial window to prove/reinforce that you are safe and comfortable to be with. How you initially respond will determine the level of openness the student will have with you in the future. For how to respond initially, meditate on John 13:34-35 as well as John 8:1-11.

2. No Triggers & No Hammers

Avoid using words or phrases (clichés) that stereotype or reflect judgmental attitudes. Resist any temptation to use doctrine as a crushing hammer on them... odds are that if they’re sharing with you, they know that scripture clearly denounces homosexuality and SSA.

3. Listen Well & Surrender Disgust

Make direct eye contact, smile warmly, and genuinely listen to what they are sharing. Do not run away from the conversation. If sinful people disgust us, then we have a real problem.

4. Keep a Perspective on Their True Identity

Engage them as a whole person. Never deconstruct them to their sin by ascribing the label “gay”, “lesbian”, or “homosexual”. As believers our identity is not found in our sin, rather it is found in Christ alone (*Galatians 3:27-28*).

Sources

- Lead Them Home - www.leadthemhome.org/
- The Source for Youth Ministry - <http://www.thesource4ym.com/youthculturewindow/article.aspx?ID=300>
- YouthMinistry.Com -- <https://youthministry.com/7-keys-counseling-LGBTQ+-kids/>