

PROVIDING PASTORAL CARE

For the Transgender Community

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I am a pastor who does not know what it's like to be transgender. Unfortunately, lots of people feel that to empathize with other people's location in life gives them the ability to "know exactly" how another person feels. But I'm here to make it perfectly clear that I do not "know exactly" how transgender people feel as I am not myself a transgender person.

What I can tell you — as a pastor who founded a church five years ago that includes African American transgender people as part of its founding membership — there are joys and blessings as well as challenges that are specific to pastoring with the transgender community. And there are additional challenges that come as a result of being African American and transgender in a society that is homophobic, transphobic and racist.

Unique Pastoral Concerns

There are unique ways in which I am called to love and support the transgender population in my congregation. The trials and struggles they face are sometimes different from LGBTQ and heterosexual allies I am called to pastor.

For example, early in the stages of transition for one of my female-to-male transgender members who is also a minister, I was asked to give remarks at his grandfather's funeral. I gained respect in his eyes and heart that day as I queried him, prior to giving those remarks, whether I should refer to him by his male name or by his female name. I wanted to show respect for his family and the stage of his transition with his family.

His previous pastors had forced their own personal agendas, believing that an "in- your-face" approach with his family was the way to force the issue and provide him with the liberty to be his emerging, new, male self. However, this approach had caused damage to his familial relationships and it deprived him of determining how, when and if he would negotiate his transition with his family.

New Family Models

Just over three years ago this same transgender minister and congregant went through the process of having his eggs harvested, inseminated and implanted into his wife/partner. He was, during this process initially rejected and turned down for the procedure by his family physician based on moral objections.

My pastoral care and support to him and his wife as a couple and as a part of our faith family required me to be sensitive both to their unique challenges and burdens and the particular grief and lament they confronted when negotiating medical care, family dynamics, employment and insurance issues.

I also felt the need to provide greater visible support at the hospital during the numerous visits that accompanied this high-risk pregnancy. Eventually, they gave birth and our faith community was blessed with twin girls. I was present in the delivery room as they were born and they are every bit my grandchildren as if there was a biological connection. The pastor that loves and pastors their parents and who did their baby blessing is not simply their pastor, but proudly, I am their “Granny.”

I am acutely aware of my responsibility, not only to be a part of the twins’ lives and learning, but also to help create a world that will accept and honor the different ways their beautiful selves came into being and the unique ways they model a new paradigm of being family.

Complexities of Race and Gender

This same transgender minister recently participated on a panel after a screening of a video about transgender people, but the video was blatantly bereft of transgender African Americans. He described his new reality as an African American man, which now included being stopped by police more frequently while driving and being harassed and questioned on the basis of his color and his male gender.

I recently made a hospital visit to see another minister in my church, an African American male-to-female transgender woman who is a U.S. Navy veteran receiving care in a Veteran’s Administration hospital. As I walked to her room, I realized that part of my pastoral care needed to include checking in with her about how she was treated there as a female, as well as how it felt emotionally to be in an environment which might be less empathetic and accepting of her transition to being female.

Pastoring people who are transgender also presents opportunities to examine stereotypical gender roles and how they are often duplicated in ways that are unhealthy and destructive in transgender relationships as well. Sometimes, I am required to provide pastoral counseling for the partner of the person going through transition. That partner must navigate the emotional and physical differences taking place in the person in transition, as well as the impact it has on them separately and together as a couple.

Toward a Kinder, Gentler World

Pastoring a faith community that includes transgender participants calls on me, as a pastor, to provide opportunities for those in our faith community who are LGBTQ, along with our straight allies, to learn more about our trans brothers and sisters. As a pastor, I seek opportunities to provide visibility for the trans members in our faith community and in the queer community at large. That way, others may recognize the full spectrum of who they are and the gifts they bring to the community. It also helps the community realize our range of who we are as a faith community.

As you can see, being a pastor who loves and supports transgender people in our family of faith includes experiences that are unique to the trans community. It also means acknowledging, affirming and reassuring the trans community of God’s love for them even though the gender that was biologically given to them does not match the gender in their hearts and souls.

Caring for them also includes some universal elements of pastoring which, at its foundation, entails corraling the whole community of faith to honor, respect, celebrate and love the diversity reflected in creation, including the diverse representations of gender identity among God’s children.

I provide pastoral care for people who are transgender out of dedication to my call to serve a radically inclusive vision of God’s people. But I also do it in the hope that by the time my grand-twins are required to negotiate the world for themselves, that it will, in fact, be a gentler, kinder world for them, their biological family and their church family.

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