

MCC TRANSGENDER MINISTRIES

TRANS-Etiquette



MCC Trans-Etiquette

You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself Leviticus 19:18

MCC is a wonderful, diverse community of people from many backgrounds and experiences. Throughout our history we have learned to bridge the differences among us and to celebrate them. At times, this has been a challenging and thought-provoking process.

Transgender and gender-variant people have always been a part of MCC, but it is perhaps only in the last few years that transgender people have become more visible in our LGBTQI (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex) communities and in MCC. For many transgender people, MCC has provided a safe place in which to explore gender identity and to come out and live in the fullness of our selves as God has created us.

Even in light of our collective inclusion of transgender people, MCC continues to learn, grow and explore how to make our churches and local communities a safe and welcoming place for transgender people, their lovers, friends, and family. MCC has a calling to take the message of God's love for all people out into our LGBTQI communities and beyond; into communities and life situations where transgender people continue to experience considerable oppression and discrimination on a day-to-day basis.

Making our own faith communities welcoming to transgender people requires us to look at our assumptions about gender and sexuality and what it means to be part of the queer and gender-variant communities.

So, where do we start?

The following resource has been compiled from the suggestions, comments, and questions of many people who are transgender, gender-variant, gay, lesbian, bisexual, straight, male, female, gender-variant, young, and old and from books, the internet, caucuses, discussion groups, and on and on. This list is only the beginning of Trans-Etiquette that we can all know.

MCC Trans-Etiquette

What Choice in the Matter?

Think of it this way: When did you "choose" your gender?

Being transgender is not a choice. It is not a decision made one morning while sipping morning coffee. It is not a choice made by flipping a coin and assigning heads or tails. People do not decide to become a girl or boy any more than people decide how our bodies will grow ("Hmmm, I think I'd like to be tall.").

Being transgender has been linked to genetics through studies of DNA. Doctors, scientists and researchers in the Netherlands and Europe, along with some institutions in America and Canada, have found evidence that shows certain gender markers in the brain which transmit one gender identity while the body develops a different one. The technical terms most used by schools of medicine and psychology are Gender Dysphoria, Gender Dysmorphia and Gender Identity Disorder. Much can be learned about this "condition" on the Internet, in books and by talking with transgender people and their partners.

As this is a very personal issue, please be respectful of boundaries and approach transgender individuals with respect and care. Do not ever ask someone transgender when they "chose" to become a boy or girl.

To prepare:

Own your lack of understanding – it is ok to not understand and request clarification.

Do your own research. Find an online suggested reading list and check out as many books as you can. Don't expect the transgender and gender-variant people in your life to be your sole text.

Always approach any person with appropriate boundaries and respect, in the same way you would wish to be approached when asked about a very personal issue in your life.

Own your discomforts – become aware of what makes you uncomfortable and understand that it is yours, not theirs, to own.

Keep Reading!

In Conversation:

When it comes to being in conversation with someone who is transgender or gender-variant, consider using the following questions as a starting place. Once your conversation is going, be attentive to the fact that you are creating a relationship with this person.

Would you be willing to help me understand what your life is like?

When did you start thinking about your gender?

When did you realize you were gender-different?

Do you identify with the term transgender?

What term are you most comfortable with people using, if any?

What does your gender identity mean to you?

What has been most difficult about your gender journey?

What has been most helpful about your gender journey?

In what ways can I support you?

MCC Trans-Etiquette

A Rose by Any Other Name...

One of the most amazing and exciting moments in the path of a transgender person's life is choosing, proclaiming, and christening a new name. This is an opportunity for many to name one's true self, one's core being, the person God created them to be. Whether one is Jennifer becoming Steve or James becoming Amanda, there is nothing quite like the experience of naming the person one has always been.

Name changes can also be a very difficult change to make for other people who interact with a transgender person. These people might say things like, "But we've known you as [former name] for ___ years, how can we change now?" or "You just look like a [former name] to me!" Even though the person in progress has also, at least publicly, referred to themselves as their former name, it is important for supporters to make every effort to learn and use the preferred name. Often, the transgender person is put in the position of having to make repeated requests to be called by their new name. This can be incredibly frustrating and extremely painful.

Sometimes, people create nicknames for the transgender person. Many times, the nickname is a type of morphing of the person's former name. While nicknames can certainly help you in changing the name you have used for your friend, partner, or family member, be careful that the nickname is appropriate to the person's gender identity and does not cause them discomfort or hurt them.

To prepare:

Practice! If you're having trouble using the person's new name, practice running through various sentences using the new name. A few minutes of re-training your brain and associating your mental picture of the person with the new name can cut down on the number of times you miss-speak. The object is to call the person by their preferred name as much as possible, understanding that you are working to make the change, too.

In Conversation:

Forgive yourself. If you happen to refer to the transgender person by their former name, simply correct the name in the rest of your discussion.

Be aware of your surroundings. It can be dangerous in some areas to call a transitioning person by their former name. With transgender hate crimes still on the rise, please be aware of who may be listening to your conversation. Talk with your transgender friend about which name they would prefer to be used in public settings and be extra careful in those situations. When in doubt, wait to discuss anything on the subject of transition, transgender, or gender until you are sure you're in a safe space.

MCC Trans-Etiquette

He, She and Other Pronouns

In an ever-changing society that is becoming increasingly androgynous, it is sometimes difficult to get pronouns correct. Androgynous hairstyles, clothing and names are as commonplace now as ever before and perhaps more.

Still, as with changing names, pronoun usage is a challenge for people who interact with trans and gender-variant people. Many transgender people have a preferred pronoun and are hurt and uncomfortable when it is not used.

Women, have you ever been called "he"? Men, have you been called "ma'am"? How did you feel? Were you embarrassed or upset or angry? Imagine having that experience every day, several times a day.

For many transgender people, routinely being referred to with incorrect names and pronouns is not just embarrassing and hurtful; in some situations it can be dangerous for them and the people with them.

It is important to know that you cannot merely assume what pronoun to use, even with the best of intentions. For some transgender and gender-variant people, neither available common pronoun works. Our cultural struggle with pronouns exemplifies the failings of a binary gender system and its legacy of insufficient language. Even the gender-neutral pronouns that are emerging from transgender and intersex communities, such as "ze" and "hir," cannot be used for transgender people without asking for their preference.

For some, these neutral terms are desired; others may ask for another gender-neutral pronoun, like "they." And for yet others, it may still be important to be called by an existing gender-specific pronoun like "he" or "she." Ask people what pronoun they prefer.

To prepare:

Practice! If you're having trouble using the person's preferred pronoun, practice running through various sentences using it. Remember, a few minutes of re-training your brain and associating your mental picture of the person with the pronoun can cut down on the number of times you misspeak. The object is to call the person by their preferred pronoun as much as possible with the understanding that you are working to make the change, too. It is ok to make a mistake once in awhile!

In Conversation:

Forgive yourself. If you make a mistake, you don't have to correct yourself right away (which just calls more attention to the slip). Just make sure to use the correct pronoun later in the conversation.

MCC Trans-Etiquette

Surgery and Reality TV

Renew Your Awareness of Boundaries

With the surge of reality television invading the lives of avid watchers, it is easy to see why millions of people have lost their touch with reality...and boundaries. We watch each week as people eat bugs, have affairs, or go under the knife to improve their sun-withered faces, and we beg and beg for more.

Here is reality: few transgender people (few people in general, frankly) hold celebrity status or are accustomed to boundary-breaking inquiries. A rule of thumb: Do not ask someone what surgeries they plan on having, what surgeries they have already had, or if you can sneak a peek at the results of any surgery.

Be compassionate! Remember, transgender, gender-variant, and intersex people have often spent their entire life feeling confined by and uncomfortable in their skin. They have lived year after year in an unfamiliar body. The body, for many, has to be relearned and reintroduced. It is an entirely private experience.

To prepare:

Write down the things you are curious about and the questions you'd like to ask the transgender person you wish to talk with. Then, decide which of those questions you would like to be asked. Then, decide which of the remaining questions you would be comfortable with someone asking your partner, your child, your parent. The questions left are most likely safe to ask.

In Conversation:

Try these questions...

Will you be making any physical transition as part of your gender journey?

Are you comfortable talking about the physical changes you hope to encounter?

May I ask about your physical transition?

Are you willing to talk about what you will endure physically?

MCC Trans-Etiquette

Why are You Forsaking Us?

A Note about “Jumping Ship”

Many times in the LGBTQI communities the friends and family of the transgender person feel a sense of abandonment. For example, sometimes when someone assigned female gender at birth no longer identifies as a woman, his/hir friendships with women are challenged by their belief that he has abandoned feminism and is no longer invested in or willing to support women’s issues. Or when a transwoman transitions, sometimes her friendships with gay men are challenged by their belief that she has abandoned masculinity and is no longer invested in or willing to support gay culture.

This phenomenon often leads to loss of relationship with friends, family, and chosen family. Culturally, we associate gender with sexuality and sexuality with identity and identity with gender, all of which are assumed to fall under a binary system: male and female, heterosexual and homosexual, boy and girl. What is also happening in most cases is that the friend, family member, or chosen family is prioritizing their own identity, projecting it on the transgender person in their life, and making assumptions about what changes the gender journey will bring.

As supportive community members, we are called to interrogate our assumptions in these cases. Many LGBTQI people can identify with this experience of having family and friends assume that they have strikingly and irrevocably changed after coming out, but feeling that they are much the same person they have always been. This is equally true for transgender people. Transgender people are becoming more authentic in the same way that other LGBTQI folks are in coming out.

To prepare:

Spend some time becoming aware of the feelings that come up when you think about the transgender person in your life. Ask: Why is their gender journey making me feel so ____? What exactly do I believe about their gender that causes me such distress? What about their change affects me, my sense of self, my identity, my safety, or my sense of well-being? Work through the answers to these questions before you talk to the person in your life who is making the trans journey.

In Conversation:

Try these questions...

Now that you are experiencing and expressing your gender differently, what does it mean for our friendship/relationship?

What can I do to support you in these changes?

Will you continue to talk with me about your experience of gender and work on our friendship/relationship?

Can we commit to finding activities to do that support both of our needs, wants, and concerns?

MCC Trans-Etiquette

So, Does this Mean You're Straight?

Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Human beings are sexual beings and they fall on a wide spectrum of sexual orientations. It is important to note that, although gender and sexuality are connected in some ways, they are distinct human expressions of identity and behavior that are not necessarily interdependent. A person's sexuality does not have to change when gender identity changes. And, it can change. For example, a transwoman who remains married to her long-term wife will not necessarily identify as a lesbian. Nor will her wife, necessarily. A transgender or gender-variant person who does not identify predominantly as either male or female will not necessarily find any of the terms gay, lesbian, bisexual, or heterosexual meaningful.

Additionally, the various acronyms that we use to identify our communities (for example, LGBT or LGBTQI) demonstrate a common goal of working toward sexual and gender justice, reflect our similar experiences of oppression and violence – and also in some ways perpetuate the assumption that gender and sexuality are the same. “Fake-T” is a term that some transgender folks and allies use to refer to the unfortunate times that “trans” is included only in name. Be careful to examine your theology, lessons, other teaching tools, and ways of thinking to be sure that the unique issues and concerns that are relevant to gender identity and expression are being considered.

To prepare:

Practice the art of un-assumption; refraining from making assumptions about another person's sexual orientation. Think about a topic of concern for our communities (for example, marriage equality or anti-discrimination laws).

Try to come up with some examples of how gender identity is uniquely impacted and what particular considerations should be made to take gender into account.

In Conversation:

Do not make assumptions about another's sexual orientation.

Ask transgender people if they will share some of their thoughts with you about how a particular topic, such as equality in marriage, impacts their life.

MCC Trans-Etiquette

If These Walls Could Talk: The Journey of the SO (Significant Other)

The world of the SOFFAs (significant others, family, friends, allies) of transgender people can be very difficult in the midst of gender changes. Sometimes, people will communicate things about a transgender partner to their significant other that they wouldn't say directly to the transgender person. Often, this is because of discomfort or bias against the transgender person. People may comment on how the transgender partner looks, sounds, or dresses, or even make comments about the couple's sexuality. Some transgender people and their partners are told that they are no longer welcome in someone's home or in a certain community because of their gender identity or expression. Also, some more angry individuals may blame the SOFFA for the transgender person's journey with gender.

Be conscious of the SO's feelings. Gender changes and metamorphoses can be incredibly stressful for the partner of someone who is transgender. Especially during the early stages of gender change, being transgender is often the main topic of their life. Remember, the SO is just as much in transition as the transgender person and will also need emotional support from friends, family, coworkers, and others in their life. Also, understand that they may not want to talk about their experiences at all. Be respectful of their wishes. Being the partner of a transgender person can be extremely lonely in arena's outside of the primary relationship.

Additionally, when one partner experiences and undertakes gender changes, these differences and new understandings also impact the identity and self-understanding of their partner. Sometimes a partner is unable or unwilling to stay with their transgender lover.

Our senses of ourselves are often fundamentally important to our process of being and interacting in the world. A common example is this: Someone from a couple who identified together as lesbians when they met begins to identify as transgender and begins to transition as a man. The lesbian partner finds that she is uncomfortable and unable to be understood by others or herself as a straight woman. The transmale partner finds himself encountering a breakup at a time when he very much needs support and love.

It's important to understand in these difficult situations that both partners have identities and senses of self that are important and essential to their way of being and moving in the world. It is not necessary for their circles of community to take sides or privilege one identity and experience over the other. Remember that both are going through the difficulty, and sometimes pain, of change and loss, and both will need loving support. Do not assume that a partner is automatically trans-phobic or callous because they cannot remain in the relationship.

To prepare & Conversation:

Change the subject every once in a while to focus on the partner and what they are interested in and pursuing in life. This will help support the partner and give them a short rest from the intensity of the change in their life.

Do not assume that a partner is automatically trans-phobic or callous because they cannot remain in the relationship. Practice not taking sides. Practice offering support without bad-mouthing the other partner.

MCC Trans-Etiquette

The Never-ending Story

Once on the Journey, Always on the Journey

Once a person begins the journey of their gender identity and expression, whatever that may be, the process of change never ends.

The journey never reaches a finale.

Many transgender people have lived for many years in what they consider to be the "wrong" body, and some feel that they have lost much time. Often, they try to reclaim lost time while celebrating their newly-embraced self. Once one begins to recognize and accept their gender identity, there is no turning back.

While gender change can be remarkably hard on family and friends, remember, it is most difficult for the person in transition and their partner. This process is about the transgender person coming out, coming into their own, and feeling brave and free enough to embrace who they were created to be.

To prepare:

Review all the work you have done so far. Now add to it the beliefs you have about the “end” of the process. Do you believe that the journey will end next month, next year, two years from now? What do you perceive as the “end”?

Now, think about your own gender identity, how it affects your world, and how it affects the people around you. Does being a woman make life any harder or easier? Does being a man make life any harder or easier? How do people treat you, based on their assumption of your gender identity or presentation? Now, try to imagine those aspects of your existence coming to a halt. Does this fit with your timeline for your friend or loved one?

In Conversation:

Avoid any language about “when this is over” or “when you finish” or “this is temporary.” Remember that the process has no finite timeline; that your friend or loved one will be orienting themselves to the surrounding culture for the rest of their lives, in much the same way you will.

MCC Trans-Etiquette

Summary and Exercise

Though it may be difficult for the larger community to change the names or pronouns they use for the transgender people in their lives, there is no excuse for denying people the freedom to be who they are. With every intentionally misstated pronoun or name, people undermine this freedom. In the same way, with every use of a preferred pronoun, with every use of the transgender person's preferred name, we are showing that we are keeping open minds and open hearts and helping to create a louder voice for the person we love.

If you still struggle with knowing how to understand and support transgender identity and expression, here is an exercise you might use to gain a different perspective:

Go out one morning, afternoon, or a whole day in a gender role different than the one you identify with. Not simply donning mascara or a ball cap, go all out. Try with all your ability to "pass" as another gender. Every time you encounter people, take note of how they treat you, how they look at you, what they say, what is said about you behind your back. Are people staring? Every time someone addresses you with incorrect pronouns or gender-specific terms, consider that many transgender people are encountering the same frustrations at this very moment. Every time someone says something negative about how you look, notice how you feel inside. Did you say anything in response, and if you do not confront it, why not?

See if you can "pass" for the day, remember your Trans-Etiquette, and ask yourself, "How can I better support the transgender person I love?"

Being transgender is not role-playing, it is not dress-up, it is not a game. It's about the person in transition, in all its forms, in whatever ways the transgender person participates or does not participate in surgical or hormonal treatment. It's about freedom and liberation. It's about authenticity.

Appendix Local Church Trans-Friendly Suggestions

Here are some suggestions for specific things your church can do to communicate to transgender people that you are welcoming and affirming.

Gender-Neutral Toilets

Have gender-neutral toilets instead of or in addition to the assigned-gender toilets. Whether post-op, non-transitioning, or gender-variant, many trans people appreciate not having to face even the best-intentioned gender policing when in need of the facilities.

Language for God and Community

When we speak of God and of our community, we often remember to add "she" to "he" and "sisters" to "brothers." However, churches might also move beyond the binary and add gender-neutral language like "sibling." This will acknowledge non-transitioning transgender people and let everyone know that the church is thinking about gender outside of the binary cultural norm.

Bible Issues

Our churches and denomination have been working on and honing our "queering the bible" material. Ask yourself if you are including trans-specific issues, concerns, theologies, and scholarship in these resources, in your sermons, and in your other educational materials.

About MCC Transgender Ministries

MCC Transgender Ministries began as an outgrowth of the Transgender Resource Team, formed in 2005 with ten members. In 2010, more than thirty-five people contribute to MCCTM resources through writing and editing.

MISSION:

MCC Transgender Ministries creates, develops and distributes resources to enhance local church and local community ministry to and with transgender people. We believe that MCC's core values of inclusion, social justice, spiritual transformation, and community are integral to healthy and holistic life. MCC's core values are in great need in transgender (and gender-variant) communities and work to broaden the perspectives of those who are not transgender or gender-variant.

VISION:

MCC Transgender Ministries hopes to enhance ministries of spirituality, social action and community in local communities through resources designed to facilitate inclusion, understanding and activism.

STAFF:

Melanie ("Mel") Martinez joined the staff of MCC in January 2003 as a regional executive assistant. As part of her ministry exploration, Mel requested and received permission to begin a volunteer team focused on transgender ministry and resources. Mel identifies as trans-identified or gender-variant. Mel is a graduate of Perkins School of Theology (M.Div.) and hopes to enter ordained ministry with MCC.

Angel Collie co-leads the MCC Transgender Ministries and worked on In Our Own Words: MCC's Archive and Oral History Project. Angel identifies as transgender and male. Angel is a Religious Studies major and Sexuality Studies minor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and work with the LGBTQ center on campus as a program assistant. Currently, Angel is working towards entry into Divinity School.



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