

CHRIST CHURCH COURSES

LIVING IN LOVE AND FAITH

SESSION 7: GENDER

Learning Aim: by the end of the session participants will have considered some of the theological and pastoral issues surrounding gender, gender dysmorphia and transgender.

Pastoral aim: that the group have explored the beginnings of this complex subject and have an appreciation of some appropriate pastoral responses for the church and individual Christians.

CONTENTS

1. Introduction (5m)
2. Story Time (5m)
3. Terminology (5m)
4. Transitioning (5m)
5. Issues for the church (5m)
6. Theological approaches (30m)
7. Story Time (5m)
- 8A. The Bible and integrity/disability (15m)
- 8B. The Bible and diversity (15m)
9. How to respond (20m)
10. Practicalities (10m)
11. Time for reflection (5m)

1. INTRODUCTION AND WELCOME

LIVING IN LOVE AND FAITH

0. Engaging Well
1. What does the church believe?
2. The Beautiful story 1
3. The Beautiful Story 2
4. Living out the Beautiful Story
5. The case for change
6. Implications of change
7. **Gender**

In the course so far, we have been considering marriage, sex and sexuality. In this session we turn to the complex issue of gender and identity:

- Sex and gender
- Gender dysmorphia
- Transitioning
- Inter-sex

We will consider different approaches to the issues raised and a framework for responding to them.

Let us pray.....

We pray Come Holy Spirit. Grant us the openness to hear your voice. The wisdom to discern through your voice, your command and your heart. The humility to receive, to be challenged and to see things afresh as you lead us. In the name of your Son, our savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

2. STORY TIME 1: Phillipa

Phillipa spent decades as Phillip and shares some of the struggles that have been faced over many years. Watch Phillipa's story here

<https://lhf.churchofengland.org/mod/videotime/view.php?id=591>

3. SOME TERMINOLOGY¹

Stonewall defines transgender as:

An umbrella term to describe people whose gender is not the same as or does not sit comfortably with, the sex they were assigned at birth.

This draws on two concepts:

Gender is an individual's personal, internal sense of being a man or a woman. This is sometimes referred to as "gender identity" or "experienced gender".

Sex is identification as male or female based on physical anatomy (that is chromosomes, gonads, genitals and hormones). Some prefer to use the terms "sex assigned at birth" or "assigned sex".

¹ See People not Pronouns by Andrew Bunt (Grove Books 2021) p 4-5; see also Living in Love and Faith book pg2-97

Therefore:

Transgender (the T in LGBTI+) means the experience of a tension or conflict between an identity suggested by elements of physical anatomy one is born with (sex) and an internal sense of self (gender). Where this conflict causes significant distress, this can lead to a medical diagnosis of **gender dysphoria**.

Note that someone who is transgender does not necessarily experience gender dysphoria.

There are many different experiences of transgender (hence the + in LGBTI+). We can only look at the beginnings of this complex area in this course.

In addition to transgender people, some experience:

Intersex (the I in LGBTI+) means being born with bodily characteristics that exhibit differences from the expected pattern for either male or female.

Transgender is a psychological condition where self-identification does not match one's physical sex. Intersex is a medical condition where it is the anatomy that does not meet the expected pattern. It is therefore held by many to be unhelpful to consider these two broad conditions together.

To experience a conflict between sex and gender can be extremely painful.

4. TRANSITIONING

Transitioning is one attempt to address the conflict of transgender. It is the approach that is most obvious to many and is the one that leads to most controversy. There are three main ways to transition:

- **Social transition** – changed name, pronouns and appearance
- **Legal transition** – obtain a Gender Recognition Certificate and a revised birth certificate
- **Medical transitioning** – which has many different approaches including hormone therapy and different types of surgery.

Debates are most active when considering the practical applications of transitioning including at what age should it be considered and sex-segregated places such as public toilets, changing rooms, prisons and sporting events.

5. THE ISSUES FOR CHURCHES OF TRANSGENDER

Firstly, two quotes:

"Certainly, we can extend to a transgender person the grace and mercy we so readily count on in our own lives. We can remind ourselves that the book of redemption in a person's life has many chapters. You may be witness to an early chapter of this person's life or a later chapter. But Christians believe that God holds that person and each and every chapter in his hands, until that person arrives at their true end—when gender and soul are made well in the presence of God." (Mark Yarhouse)²

Observing from a distance, transgender can easily become an issue of public toilets, prisons and pronouns, a political issue driven by activists...but before we get into the debates, we should engage with the people....people created by God and loved by God, who are wrestling with their sense of self and are often suffering great pain and distress in the process. A truly Christian response to transgender must start by engaging with those who are personally affected...Its about people not pronouns.(Andrew Blunt)³

So, we have to be careful even using words such as "issue for the church" because that "issue" is a person who is experiencing dissonance and possible distress emotionally, physically or mentally (or all three).

So, what does the church need to decide?

- How does gender identity sit with our identity in Christ?
- If someone transitions how do we view that transitioning? – is it meddling with what God has created or is it honouring to God's intention for human flourishing?
- is gender a human construct and more about the self than God?
- if someone transitions should they be able to marry (bearing in mind that their sex at birth remains the same and so could be seen as effectively entering a same sex marriage).

Most importantly therefore how can we respond in a sensitive and pastoral way to these complex and personal issues for transgender people?

What are your initial thoughts at this point?

6. THEOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO TRANSGENDER

To explore the approaches that we might take we will be guided by a talk by Mark Yarhouse.

² Quoted by Ian Paul <https://www.psephizo.com/sexuality-2/navigating-the-transgender-agenda/>

³ People not pronouns by Andrew Blunt (Grove Books 2021)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CMqiD_4KslA

Mark Yarhouse⁴ provides a helpful framework for the approaches taken to consider transgender theologically.

- **The integrity framework.** This prioritises biblical texts and norms, and sees transgender issues as both developmentally and morally problematic.
- **The disability framework.** This takes seriously the theological idea that the world is not as God intended, and sees transgender issues as problematic developmentally, but not as a moral issue in the same way.
- **The diversity framework.** In its most extreme form, this sees all issues that question gender binaries as good, since they represent diversity of human experience which should be celebrated.

Quoting Yarhouse, Ian Paul highlights two dangers at the extremes:

"He notes the dangers of two opposite extremes of response: 'The one hazard is to look to Scripture for answers it is not prepared to provide. The other hazard is to fail to critically reflect on the sociocultural context in which we live and make decisions about gender identity and dysphoria' (p 30)"

In other words, the breadth of responses include being dogmatically critical by reference to scripture at one end and allowing current culture and secular ideologies to go unchallenged at the other.

The search is for what God might be saying about these things and how these might be translated into pastoral care for those affected.

Watch video to **1:13**

What is your initial reaction to Sarah's question?

Watch video to **9:20**

How did you react to the description of transgender being like permanently having a jigsaw piece that didn't fit or like the crackle on a radio that doesn't go away?

How relevant to the discussion is it that transgender usually presents at first under the age of 4 but in 80% of cases resolves on its own by puberty?

⁴ <https://www.psephizo.com/sexuality-2/navigating-the-transgender-agenda/> is a review of Mark Yarhouse's book "Understanding Transgender" from which the framework is taken.

Given that the scientists, including Mark Yarhouse, don't know how this happens, where does it leave us in our discussions?

Watch video to **14:14**

Which of the three lenses (see below) did you think you came in with? Which one do you look through now? (nb: we will ask the same question again at the end).

Integrity -*there is only male and female and cross-sex confusion is unhelpful or may not even exist and so transgender should be discouraged*

Disability – *this is caused by the fall and so has no moral aspect, no choice is made to experience these things, therefore the proper response is compassion*

Diversity – *the world was made diverse and so this is one of the aspects of God's planned diversity that should be celebrated , gender is a spectrum not a binary.*

*What do you think about the idea that because of these lenses we are **likely to speak past one another on these issues**. How can we avoid doing so and engaging more constructively?*

Watch video to end.

How do you respond to Mark Yarhouse's presentation of the benefits of each lens to the discussion as we attempt to bring together God's intention and plan with people's experience?

If someone asked you which chapter of your life you are in how would you react to being asked to fill them in on the ones that came before? Is this a helpful approach?

7. STORY TIME: Stephanie and Debbie

Stephanie married Debbie when she was known as David. They have children and have stayed together even though Stephanie is transitioning. Watch the video of Stephanie and Debbie's story at <https://llf.churchofengland.org/mod/videotime/view.php?id=587>

8. WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

Not a lot is the honest answer.

A) INTEGRITY AND DISABILITY LENSES

The big story (Vaughan Roberts)⁵

CREATION – two distinct and compatible sexes ordained by God ; *"So God created mankind in his own image , in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them"* (Genesis 1:27)); cross-gender identification distorts the creation order

FALL – not every biological or psychological experience reflects God's will; this is not our choice but a distortion of a fallen world

REDEMPTION – bodily resurrection affirms the importance of the human body; we will struggle between our desires and the will of God in the fallen world; God does not necessarily rescue us from our suffering but redeems us through it.

RESTORATION – in the new heaven and new earth we will enjoy restored bodies and minds.

How helpful is this big story approach?

Resulting themes

The body – is not something we just inhabit but part of us – mind, body and soul – and are "temples of the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor 6:19)

Sex – we are made men and women (Genesis 1:27) ; throughout the bible biological sex is binary therefore it assumes that sex determines gender. Intersex is therefore a disability within the fallen world – a deviation from the plan.

Gender – while affected by social influences the existence of man and woman is essential to the creational plan, a difference consummated in the future destiny with the marriage of Christ and his bride, the church (Ephesians 5:21-33).

Christian approaches that devalue the body and place self-determination above God's sovereignty and plan are problematic to one who holds either the Integrity view or the Disability view.

Other verses – include ⁵ *"A woman shall not wear a man's garment, nor shall a man put on a woman's cloak, for whoever does these things is an abomination to the Lord your God."* **Deuteronomy 22:5** and **1 Corinthians 6:9** which alludes to men making oneself attractive to men in a feminine way.

⁵ <https://www.eauk.org/assets/files/downloads/Transformed.pdf> Biblical critique and pastoral response from an integrity perspective.(p10-12)

Matthew 19:12 identifies three types of eunuch – born that way (an example of intersex), those made that way (castrated) and those celibate for the kingdom. It sits within a discussion about marriage that affirms the binary nature of creation as male and female. Jesus can be seen here to assert the creation pattern while making space for some who do not fit that pattern. In **Acts 8** Phillip meets an Ethiopian (hence gentile) believer and who “does not fit within a binary understanding of gender” and yet he encounters God on the way home when Phillip explains the scripture to him. **Isa 54:4-5** is similarly encouraging.

What are your reflections on these Bible passages?

DIVERSITY LENS⁶

Tallon takes the view that gender is more flexible and critiques three traditional assertions about gender which he calls “building blocks”:

a) Only two genders

Using scientific evidence of the existence of intersex as examples he says:

“The first building block is simply wrong. Some people – not many, but including trans people – do not fit neatly into one distinct gender or the other where everything lines up together.”

Others have argued that although the creation narrative operates as a series of dualisms – night/day, land/sea etc – in fact there are grades of these things such as dawn and dusk. Therefore, we cannot take male-female to be absolutes but rather they are descriptive umbrella terms for a spectrum.

b) God doesn’t make mistakes

“But what about the second building block? God doesn’t make mistakes, and therefore your gender identity ought to match your biological sex..... More importantly, if there is a mismatch, why does the physical body take priority over the mind and sense of identity?... If someone has a strong, abiding, permanent sense of one particular gender identity, there’s nothing in scripture to say that they shouldn’t seek to bring their body and gender expression into line with that rather than the other way around”.

c) Gender confusion is wrong

“People who are trans haven’t chosen to have a mismatch between their gender identity and their biological sex. They haven’t gone seeking any ‘confusion’, if you want

⁶ <http://www.bibleandhomosexuality.org/what-does-the-bible-say-about-transgender-people/> Biblical critique from a Diversity lens

to use that term. Instead, they are people who are actually trying to bring things more into line. They are trying to bring their biological sex and their gender expression in line with their gender identity – if anything, they are seeking to reduce 'confusion'.

How compelling do you find these arguments?

Specific verses⁷

Deuteronomy 22:5 – this is a cultural prohibition to prevent women engaging in male activities and men perpetrating offences against women. Many would argue that other prohibitions in Deuteronomy are voided and the Old Testament law no longer applies now so why apply this one?

The bible says very little about transgender directly. Can we form any view from the bible or do you think in reality it has nothing to say and we have to look elsewhere?

What is your reaction to the "big story" above that leads to restoration in the new creation?

Do you think that the bible narrative opposes the oppression of trans people? What about celebrating their right to do whatever it takes to alleviate dysmorphia?

9. HOW SHOULD WE RESPOND?

Andrew Blunt⁸ identifies three response types that churches can adopt:

A HEART RESPONSE

"It is possible to have the right theology – the head response – without having the right heart. If we know God's truth but we fail to communicate it with his heart, we are not really responding like him, and if we are not responding like him, we are not making a truly Christian response. We must therefore start with a heart response" (p7)

We should offer love and compassion to transgender people.

How can you, as an individual, grow in your love and compassion for transgender people?

How can your church make sure that it is a safe place for transgender people?

A HEAD RESPONSE

⁷ <https://www.hrc.org/resources/what-does-the-bible-say-about-transgender-people>

⁸ People not pronouns: Reflections on transgender experience (Grove Books 2021)

Blunt then goes on to consider identity. The question who am I? should be preceded by How do I find who I am?

"For many people in the modern West, the answer to this question is internal identity: you look inside yourself at your feelings and desires, and there you find the real you...this is the form of identity which underpins a pro-transitioning approach to gender dysphoria" (p13)

Others might argue that this approach is:

- *unstable* – feelings and desires change with circumstances and over time
- *ambiguous* – feelings and desires can easily conflict
- *inconsistent* – not all feelings are good so in reality we only choose those desires approved by society
- *lacks an authority* - why prioritise the internal self over the external?

Should we decide our responses based on our internal feelings or are they unstable, ambiguous, inconsistent and lack authority?

Yet external factors, eg how people think about us, can also be problematic. Do we seek man's approval which is variable on circumstances or God's which is constant?

Bunts conclusion is that divine identity is both our sex (male and female), our gender (how we live that out) in line with how God made us.

"We do not need to act in a certain way to create or earn that identity. We have received it from God, and now we get to express it in line with our God-given personality and preferences" (p17)

How important is identity in Christ to navigating gender dysmorphia?

He concludes with the integrity position:

- It is not possible to be born in the wrong body; our bodies are not separated from our true selves
- Transitioning to live in line with experienced gender is not the best approach when someone experiences a strong conflict between sex and gender.

He says that *"This is not an easy thing to say...I can see in my minds eye the faces of those who live with the pain of gender dysphoria"* (p17)

How can churches help people understand and enjoy the given nature of their identity as a man or a woman? Should they?

How would you respond to a transgender person who wants to serve in your church? Can you think of parallel situations that might help you handle the situation in a right and fair way?

A HOPE RESPONSE

Whatever head approach we take (integrity, disability or diversity) we need to offer hope for the suffering that is experienced.

Bunt says that while things are not as they should be between the fall and redemption phases of the biblical story, there is one to come where **every experience of pain** comes to an end. That:

- we should expect suffering
- we should lament over suffering
- we can have **eternal hope** even in the face of suffering

We expect, lament and hope in relationship with others and in relationship with God.

What can we do to be a better friend to those around us who are suffering?

How can we effectively communicate the hope that the bible's big story offers to those experiencing the pain of gender dysphoria?

7. PRACTICALITIES

Mark Yarhouse⁹ suggests adopting an **integrated framework**.

- **maintain respect for the integrity of sex differences** and encourage caution when considering the most invasive procedures in the light of a Christian view of sex and gender
- **respond with empathy and compassion** in management of gender dysphoria considering the least invasive approaches
- **offer opportunities in community** to help locate a person with broader support and kinship network that affirms their worth and helps navigate the terrain together
- **church is one of several voices** speaking into a trans persons life including family, friends, health services and the trans community.

Other practicalities include:

⁹ <https://www.eauk.org/assets/files/downloads/Transformed.pdf> p 14-17

NAMES

"Christians disagree on this matter. For some, grace and truth is struck by using the person's preferred name but not pronouns (he / she). For others, courtesy leads them to use both. Finally, integrity means that some find any use of preferred names or pronouns as confusing and ultimately results in their participation in, and perpetuation of, a deception"

Four considerations are suggested:

- **context** - such as age of person, nature and length of relationship
- **legal requirements** – are you required to use chosen pronouns in your public role?
- **relationship** – what damage will be done to a relationship by refusing to comply?
- **consistency** – are you consistent in your treatment of a transgender person as with others who may have changed their names?

BAPTISM

The Church of England has produced guidance for the use of renewal of baptism to recognize gender transition. Each church and each clergy should consider whether to make use of this if requested.

SEX SENSITIVE AREAS

Toilets and changing facilities need to offer discretion and safety both to the transgender person and to the other users of the facility.

With each of these considerations it is better to have established a policy before a request is made than try to sort it out based on the first request.

How do you think the church should respond to transgender people?

9. TIME FOR REFLECTION

Which lens would you adopt now that you have had time to reflect on some of the issues involved in pastoral care for transgender people? Has it changed? Are you clearer about why you believe what you do? How might you act or respond differently now?

Together we sit in silence and ask God to guide us through what we have explored today and we lift transgender brothers and sisters to the Lord.