



## THE CHURCH AND PEOPLE WHO ARE TRANSGENDER OR INTERSEX

### Introduction

*Everyone Welcome!* These or similar words are posted on many church signboards and congregational websites, but when it comes to applying this message to people who are transgender or intersex there can be confusion, misunderstanding or resistance.

Within secular culture there has been a broadening awareness of gender and gender identity and expression. There are legal protections for people who transition from their gender identified at birth to another gender. There is a growing awareness of people born with reproductive or sexual anatomy does not appear to fit with the typical definitions of female or male. All of this has implications for faith communities.

Does this challenge our understanding of gender? How do we demonstrate the gospel imperative for compassionate love of neighbour? How do we demonstrate respect and mutuality and build communities of love, peace and justice as we discern future directions for shared discipleship?

In 2017, the General Assembly adopted the report, *The Church and People who are Transgender or Intersex*. This report invites conversation and discussion. The report offers reflections from conversations with trans people who are, or whose family members are, Presbyterian. The report explores transgender, intersex and other terminology and includes a list of additional resources.

Some possible ways of interacting with this report are to read it and:

- Think about gender standards. What expectations about gender have been shaped by the influence of families, friends, schools, culture and churches? What effect do you think these expectations can have on someone who might not fit within these expectations?
- Is it possible to understand being transgender or being intersex as evidence that the diversity of creation is broader than we may understand?
- In conversation with trans people and their families, Justice Ministries heard about the importance of non-judgemental acceptance and pastoral care from faith communities. How would you respond to language and actions directed at you by people within your faith community that made you feel excluded?
- How do you respond to the comments and suggestions made by trans people about their experiences of acceptance and spiritual sanctuary (pp. 6-7)?

## About the Report

A recommendation from the Committee on Church Doctrine's report to the 2016 General Assembly was adopted by General Assembly (A&P 2016, p. 264–65, 28). It read:

*That the Life and Mission Agency in consultation with the Committee on Church Doctrine continue to reflect theologically on the spiritual needs of transgender and intersex people and report back to the 2017 General Assembly.*

The Presbyterian Church in Canada has never considered or made a statement regarding transgender or intersex people. This report discusses definitions of transgender, intersex and related terminology, and offers reflections from conversations with transgender Presbyterians and members of their families. This report includes an annotated bibliography of resources regarding people who are transgender or intersex.

The Life and Mission Agency (Justice Ministries) met with several members of the church who are transgender, and with members of their families. These conversations are confidential. Justice Ministries staff are grateful to those who graciously participated in these conversations and who shared their experiences, advice and hopes for the church. Common themes that emerged during these conversations are incorporated in this report. Justice Ministries staff have been unable to meet with a Presbyterian who is intersex, but will continue to seek opportunities to do so.

This report was adopted by the 2017 General Assembly and was encouraged for study to congregations, ministers, chaplains, elders and youth leaders (A&P 2017, 36).

## Terminology

### References

BMS	from <i>Body, Mind and Soul</i> , The Presbyterian Church in Canada.
NG	from National Geographic resource named in education resources
Hillel	from “The Hillel LGBTQ Resource Guide” by Hillel: Foundation for Jewish Campus Life, Washington DC, 2007.

**Androgynous** – (of a person) a) having some or all of the physical or social characteristics of men and women. People with both male and female sex organs were formerly called hermaphrodites; b) neither male nor female. (BMS)

**Cisgender** – (pronounced sis-gender) a term to describe a person whose gender identity matches the biological sex they were assigned at birth. (NG)

**Gender binary** – the idea that gender is strictly an either-or option of male/man/masculine or female/woman/feminine based on sex assigned at birth, rather than a continuum or spectrum of gender identities and expressions. The gender binary is considered to be limiting and problematic for those who do not fit neatly into the either/or categories. (NG)

**Gender complementarity** – the belief that men and women are essentially different from one another, both anatomically and socially, and that each gender complements or makes up for deficiencies in the other. (BMS)

**Gender dysphoria** – the medical diagnosis for being transgender as defined by the American Psychiatric Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, fifth edition (DSM-5). The inclusion of gender dysphoria as a diagnosis in DSM-5 is controversial in transgender communities because it implies that being transgender is a mental illness rather than a valid identity. But because a formal diagnosis is generally required in order to receive or provide treatment, it does enable access to medical care for people who wouldn’t ordinarily be eligible to receive it. (NG) Quebec is the only province that allows people to change the gender on their identification without involving medical practitioners to confirm identity.<sup>10</sup>

**Gender expression** – a person’s outward gender presentation, usually comprising personal style, clothing, hairstyle, makeup, jewelry, vocal inflection and body language. Gender expression is typically categorized as masculine, feminine or androgynous. All people express gender. Gender expression can be congruent with a person’s gender identity, or not. (NG)

**Gender Identity** – is each person’s internal and individual experience of gender. It is their sense of being a woman, a man, both, neither, or anywhere along the gender spectrum. A person’s gender identity may be the same as or different from their birth-assigned sex. Gender identity is fundamentally different from a person’s sexual orientation. (Ontario Human Rights Commission: <http://ohrc.on.ca/en/gender-identity-and-gender-expression-brochure>)

**Intersex** – (of a person) a) having some or all of the physical or social characteristics of men and women. People with both male and female sex organs were formerly called hermaphrodites; b) neither male nor female (BMS). One whose external genitalia at birth do not match the scientific

standards for male or female, or one whose sex glands or sexual development do not match the sex assignment they received at birth. (Hillel)

**Non-binary** – a spectrum of gender identities and expressions, often based on the rejection of the gender binary’s assumption that gender is strictly an either-or option of male/man/masculine or female/woman/feminine based on sex assigned at birth. Terms include “agender,” “bi-gender,” “gender-queer,” “genderfluid” and “pangender.” (NG)

**Queer** – an umbrella term for a range of people who are not heterosexual or cisgender. It has been historically used as slur; some have reclaimed it as affirming, while others still consider it derogatory. (NG)

**Sexual orientation** – a person’s sexual identity, as characterized by the gender(s) to which they are attracted. (BMS)

**Transgender** – (used to describe a person) identifying with or expressing a gender identity that is not the one that corresponds to one’s sex at birth. (BMS) Transgender is sometimes abbreviated to “trans” and is an adjective. It refers to both boys or men who had a female natal gender (e.g., the gender a baby is assigned at birth), and girls and women who had a male natal gender. (NG)

**Transsexual** – This is an old term that has been used to refer to a transgender person who has had hormonal or surgical interventions to change their body to be more aligned with their gender identity than with the sex that they were assigned at birth. (NG) Transgender is the preferred language.

## Confusion and Misinformation

The individuals with whom Justice Ministries staff met noted that there is a significant amount of confusion and misinformation about people who are transgender or intersex. Clarifying terminology, therefore, is where this report begins. Transgender and intersex are different. Both deal with different aspects of gender and gender identity. Gender and gender identity are also different than sexuality or sexual orientation. They are often conflated, but should not be. Misinformation leads to misunderstanding and harmful prejudice and can lead to increased stigmatization and discrimination.

Before you read the report, read the terminology section. **Transgender and intersex are very different. It is essential not to conflate them.**

## Transgender

A transgender person is born with male or female anatomy but feels she or he has been born into the wrong body. Transgender is an umbrella term for persons whose gender identities and gender expression or behaviour do not conform to that typically associated with his or her natal gender. Gender identity refers to a person's internal sense of being male or female. Gender expression refers to the way a person communicates gender identity through behaviour, clothing, hairstyle, voice or body characteristics, etc. A transgender person may decide to have sex reassignment surgery, or not.<sup>1</sup>

Most people will not know people who are transgender. Sadly, many people who are transgender are vulnerable and often subject to bullying or worse. In a recent nationwide survey, 74% of transgender youth reported experiencing verbal harassment in school; 37% reported experiencing physical violence. People who are transgender in Ontario face unemployment over three times the national rate and many more are underemployed. As a result of discrimination and bullying, the transgender community faces high rates of mental health issues. Rates of depression are as high as two-thirds; 77% of transgender individuals in Ontario report having considered suicide, and 43% have attempted suicide at least once.<sup>2</sup>

There are few academic studies about the intersection of transgender and Christian faith. One study, done in 2012, involved 32 transgender (male to female) participants. This study gives readers an opportunity to hear the voices of transgender females (those who are transitioning or have transitioned from male to female) to speak about the gifts and challenges of their Christian faith in the context of being a transgender woman. The report observes:

*This study looked primarily at religion as an important dimension in a person's life. As with most confusing and painful life experiences, gender-identity questions and concerns raise larger questions of meaning and purpose in life that can draw a person toward the sacred, and the participants in the current study indeed expressed desire for more understanding and support within religious communities. Participants shared a strong personal faith, and they often reported a strong and meaningful connection to God (with some notable exceptions), but where they struggled was with the local religious community. They struggled most with the people who represent that religious faith in local communities. (Yarhouse and Carr, 29)*

In conversation with Presbyterians who are transgender and members of their families, several themes emerged which provide a helpful outline for this discussion: language, non-judgemental acceptance and spiritual sanctuary.

## **Language**

It is important to gain an understanding of the language that is used in relation to gender identity and transgender people. The terminology section of this report names and defines many, though not all, terms or reference that may pertain to gender identity or that have been either correctly or incorrectly associated with gender identity.

Using appropriate pronouns is important. This will mean asking people the pronoun that they prefer to use and then using it. The importance of this cannot be understated. It is a form of respect for the dignity of people who are transgender. It is common for “they” to be used as a singular, gender neutral, pronoun. Here is advice from Presbyterian conversation participants:

- “Some people believe that gender is binary. It’s hard to erase this perception, but it is important to a transgender person to not use binary language, unless that’s what the person wants.”
- “If you feel uncertain about pronouns, just ask.”
- “Language matters. It can make people feel safe.”

## **Non-Judgemental Acceptance**

All people are made in the image of God and there is a place for all people in Christ’s church. Acceptance means suspending judgement and affirming someone’s personhood as a beloved child of God. It does not mean having to understand everything about the people you encounter. Conversation participants said:

- “Accept that you may not understand something (e.g., the challenges a person in transition may be facing) and accept that person regardless.”
- “It’s hard when people don’t understand the depth of the change and transition going on inside and not just on the outside of a person.”
- “If you haven’t gone through it, you may not understand it. It can be hard to wrap your head around it. I don’t want to hear negative opinions. If you don’t know about gender dysphoria, ask questions.” Note: gender dysphoria is the medical diagnosis for being transgender as defined by the American Psychiatric Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, fifth edition (DSM-5).
- “The person who is transitioning [genders] is still the same human being they were before – they still have all the qualities they had before.”
- “Don’t qualify the emotional experience. Comments like ‘it’s not as bad as you think’ or ‘they are rebelling and things will be fine’ are not helpful.”
- “I can’t imagine what it would be like for families that don’t have experience or exposure to the LGBT community. Many people go out of their way to distance themselves, based on fear and judgement.”
- “A safe place gives unconditional love and is the absence of judgement.”
- “Christian transgender people and their family need to hear a message of love and total acceptance. That as God’s children, all expressions of gender are welcome and valid.”
- Advice for parents: “your faith doesn’t have to be separate from your love for your child.”

- “Your support is for the kids growing up in the church.”
- “Have visible symbols of openness for a diversity of people (e.g., pamphlets or signs for transgender washrooms) – or, for churches with only one stall bathrooms, you can remove gendered signs.”

## **Spiritual Sanctuary**

The theme of spiritual sanctuary was raised by conversation with participants when they were asked about what qualities they felt were most important in a supportive congregation, and their hopes for their church. Participants said:

- “A supportive spiritual community is a sanctuary. A lot of the time transgender people have no other home.”
- “A supportive faith community listens and never closes its doors.”
- “Church: Be a safe place.”
- “This is a very vulnerable community. They need you. They need your sanctuary and your Samaritanism.”
- “Unconditional love is a powerful force, when everyone else says no. It is powerful and life changing to have a spiritual community.”
- “Churches can provide the sanctuary of a physical church community and be present and be there to support them, especially during transition.”
- Advice for churches: “make safe spaces for people to be – support groups or drop in groups. It is so important for transgender people and their families to be able to speak with other people who are familiar with their experiences and struggles.”
- “Provide a space to celebrate difference. We don’t always have to focus on the hard stuff.”
- Advice for ministers: “you are in a position of power and have a responsibility to do that well. Don’t wait for a trans person to teach you how to work with them. They are seeking help from you. Find appropriate resources to understand what this might mean as a minister they are seeking help from. It makes a difference to people who need help.”

## **Gender Identity and the Canadian Human Rights Act**

Over a third of countries worldwide, including Canada, permit a gender change on documents such as passports. Researchers have only begun to document this as a legal issue.<sup>3</sup> Almost all countries that allow changes to gender on legal documents require a medical diagnosis.<sup>4</sup> Five of these countries allow for changes based on the request of the individual.

Gender identity and expression is not currently listed in the Canadian Human Rights Act. In 2016, the Government of Canada introduced Bill C-16 (An Act to amend the Canadian Human Rights Act and the Criminal Code), which proposes to add gender identity or expression as prohibited grounds for discrimination. As of February 2017, Bill C-16 had been sent for second reading in the Senate. It may receive royal assent by June 2017.

## **Intersex**

Intersex is an umbrella term for a variety of situations in which a person is born with the reproductive or sexual anatomy that does not appear to fit with the typical definitions of female or male.<sup>5</sup> It may include a broad range of variations in chromosomes that can (but may not) affect the expression of anatomy. Deciding who is intersex (that is, which medical conditions constitute intersex, which do not) is diverse. There is no definitive list of conditions or differences in sexual anatomy that define intersex. The Intersex Society of North America list several medical conditions that have (though are not always) associated with intersex. These can be found online at <http://sna.org/faq/conditions>.

A person might be born appearing to be female on the outside but having mostly male-typical internal anatomy. Or a person may be born with mosaic genetics so that some of the cells have XX chromosomes and some cells have an XY chromosomal configuration. Mosaic genetics or mosaicism occurs because sometimes cells divide inconsistently early in the life of an embryo. Some intersex conditions are identified at, or before, birth. Some individuals aren't found to have intersex anatomy until they reach puberty. Some people may have a chromosomal configuration that is labeled "intersex" but has little or no affect on their anatomy. Some people die with intersex anatomy without anyone, including themselves, ever knowing. Mosaic genetics and the diversity of anatomy among intersex people contradict the binary concept of gender.

In the past, prevailing medical advice was to assign a gender to intersex children as early as possible. Intersex tended to be treated through a prism of concealment. This could include withholding medical information or conducting undisclosed medical procedures on intersex people. The Intersex Society of North America advocates for more openness with and for intersex people. In her book *Sex and Uncertainty in the Body of Christ*, Suzanna Cornwall notes that intersex people have diverse experiences: "Many of us have had medical treatments done to us without our consent to make our sex anatomy conform to someone else's standards. Many of us suffer from intense shame due to treatments that sought to fix or hide our bodies. And many of us have experienced none of the above."<sup>6</sup>

## **Canadians Who Identify as Transgender or Intersex**

How many Canadians are transgender and intersex? According to an article in *The Globe and Mail*, transgender and intersex persons account for 775,000 Canadians or 2.5% of the population (of whom 0.5% are transgender and 2% are intersex) for whom sex characterization on official documents is wrong at one time or another in their lives. Many of these persons cannot truthfully answer if they are female or male on a document due to subtleties. Identity documents in Canada provide two choices – female or male.<sup>7</sup> In the United States an estimated 0.3% of adults identify as transgender.<sup>8,9</sup>

## Pastoral Care

What does it mean to provide pastoral care to members of our congregations who may be transgender or intersex, and who are often invisible members in our congregations? Are transgender or intersex people willing to reveal themselves to a congregation? Some people have, others have not. Unless trust exists or is developed, a pastoral relationship will be fraught. Presbyterian conversation participants stressed the need for pastoral care givers to provide a safe, non-judging and listening space, and also to create opportunities to listen to those who identify as transgender or who are intersex. Great care should be taken by individual Christians and congregations to use language sensitively and to apologize and confess when people act and speak disrespectfully, uncaringly, and with cruelty in regard to people who are intersex or transgender.

## Resources for Education

- “Growing up Trans”, by Mary Rogan, *The Walrus*, October 2016. This is a comprehensive editorial that shares experiences from Canadian transgender people, including youth, and the parents of gender-questioning youth. It also outlines the changing, and sometimes opposing, views of medical practitioners regarding appropriate actions for intervention for people who are transgender or gender-questioning.
- “Gender Revolution”, *Special Edition of National Geographic*, January 2017. This is a helpful overview of contemporary gender issues. It provides a detailed terminology list, reflects on gender expression (e.g., the traits and characteristics typically and atypically associated with the genders), provides global cultural information about gender roles, and discusses ideas like “gender fluidity.”
- “Understanding the Transgender Phenomenon” by Mark Yarhouse, *Christianity Today*, June 2015. <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2015/july-august/understanding-transgender-gender-dysphoria.html>. This is an article from a Christian scholar on gender dysphoria and suggests helpful ways for Christians consider what he calls the “transgender phenomenon.”
- Interview with the Rev. Dr. Erin Swenson <http://vimeo.com/144512116>. Dr. Erin Swenson is an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church (USA). Dr. Swenson is a transgender woman. She transitioned in the mid 1990s. This twenty minute video interview is a candid reflection about her gender transition process, and the consequences it had for a minister ordained in the Presbyterian Church (USA).

## Resources for Pastoral Care

- “Celebrating Gender Diversity – a toolkit on gender identity and trans experiences for communities of faith”. The United Church of Canada, March 2016. This contemporary resource provides information about gender identity and Christian perspectives (reflecting The United Church of Canada traditions and policies), has helpful guidelines for creating inclusive environments in church forums (events, ministry, facilities including washrooms). It provides an annotated bibliography for many resources related to pastoral care, ministry, family members of transgender people, and reflections of transgender Christians.

- “A Pastoral Care Resource for Pastors Ministering to LGBT Individuals and their Families.” Mennonite Church Canada, June 2009. This resource provides advice for those ministering to LGBT members of the church. It reflects Mennonite policies and church structures at the time it was written.

## Endnotes

- 1 “Answers to Your Questions about Transgender People, Gender Identity and Gender Expression,” in American Psychological Association; <http://apa.org>.
- 2 <http://transequalitycanada.com>.
- 3 Gender Revolution, *Special Edition of National Geographic*, January 2017, 65.
- 4 *ibid.*
- 5 *What is intersex?* Intersex Society of North America. <http://isna.org/faq>.
- 6 Thea Hillman quoted in *Sex and Uncertainty in the Body of Christ* by Suzanna Cornwall.
- 7 *Globe and Mail*, December 23, 2015.
- 8 The Gates, Gary J., *How many people are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender?*, The Williams Institute, UCLA School of Law, Los Angeles, April 2011.  
<http://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/Gates-How-Many-People-LGBT-Apr-2011.pdf>.
- 9 The Forum Research poll, commissioned by the *National Post* and taken twice in June to confirm its accuracy, found that 5% of Canadians identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender. The same poll found that a third of LGBT people say they are in a same sex marriage. *National Post*, July 6, 2016.
- 10 Morgane Oger, “Transgender people still struggling to be heard,” *The Globe and Mail*, December 23, 2015.