



Transgender 101

Transgender Identity, Welcome, and Resources

Our culture tends to limit its understanding of gender to only two options: man and woman. LGBT Ministries believes there are more than two genders. We use the word “transgender” in our office’s title as an umbrella term to describe the following people: crossdressers; people who identify as genderqueer, third gender, gender fluid, and/or two spirit; some intersex individuals; transsexuals; and all self-identified trans people. But even this is not completely accurate. Read on!

Sex and Gender

People are assigned a *biological sex* at birth (e.g., Male, Female, Intersex)

People define their own *gender* (e.g., Man, Woman, Transgender, Genderqueer)

Gender Binary

A system of classifying sex and gender into two distinct and disconnected forms, dividing people into masculine and feminine bodies, identities, roles, and attributes. The gender binary is dependent on policing people to make sure they don’t digress from the system in appearance, anatomy, or behavior.

Sexual Orientation

Sexual orientation refers to whom you are sexually, affectionally, and/or romantically attracted. Gender and sexual orientation are often lumped together, despite being different, because of societal expectations around sex and gender. Women and men are expected to look and act a certain way and to be attracted to the “opposite” sex. Many people do not meet this expectation. Transgender individuals can have any sexual orientation.

Gender Identity

Gender identity refers to an individual’s sense of being a man, a woman, neither of these, both, and so on—it is one’s inner sense of being and one’s own understanding of how one relates to the gender binary. Everyone has a gender identity.

Gender Expression

Gender expression describes how people manifest feeling masculine or feminine through their appearance, behavior, dress, speech patterns, and more. This term refers to how a person expresses their gender identity or the cues people use to identify gender.

Transgender

The word *transgender* was first coined as a way of distinguishing gender benders with no desire for surgery or hormones from *transsexuals*, those who desired to legally and medically change their sex. More recently *transgender* and/or *trans* has become an umbrella term that is popularly used to include all people who transgress dominant conceptions of gender, or at least all people who identify themselves as doing so.

Cisgender

Cisgender, or *cis*, is a term that is becoming increasingly popular to describe people who are not trans or gender variant—in other words, those whose gender identities, presentations, and behavior “match” (according to the gender binary) the sex they were assigned at birth. *Cis* is a prefix with roots that mean “on the same side”; *trans* and *cis* are neutral descriptors analogous to the prefixes *homo* and *hetero*.



Cross-Dressing and Drag

Cross-dressing refers to occasionally wearing clothing of the “opposite” gender, and someone who considers this an integral part of their identity may identify as a crossdresser (note: the term *crossdresser* is preferable to *transvestite* and neither may ever be used to describe a transsexual person). *Drag queens* and *drag kings* are performers who offer exaggerated, performative presentations of gender and often cross-dress. Cross-dressing and drag are not necessarily tied to erotic activity or sexual orientation.

Genderqueer / Third Gender / Two Spirit

These identity labels are sometimes used by people who feel between and/or outside the gender binary. Individuals may identify as being neither man nor woman, as a little bit of both, as non-gendered, as a gender outside the binary, or they may simply feel restricted by gender labels. *Two spirit* is a term derived from the traditions of some Native North American cultures, and can sometimes mean a mixture of masculine and feminine spirits living in the same body.

Gender Variant / Gender Non-Conforming

General terms for people who bend gender in some way and/or have non-binary gender identities.

Intersex

Intersex is a general term used for a variety of genetic, hormonal, or anatomical conditions in which a person is born with a reproductive or sexual anatomy that doesn't seem to fit the typical definitions of female or male. When a child is born intersex, many doctors and parents panic and rush to “correct” the “problem” via surgery, which often causes mental and physical difficulties later in life. Some intersex individuals identify as transgender or gender variant; others do not. (Note: *Hermaphrodite* is an obsolete term that is not currently considered appropriate.)

Transsexual

The term *transsexual* has historically been used to refer to individuals who have medically and legally changed their sex, or who wish to do so. Most transsexual people feel a conflict between their gender identity and the sex they were assigned at birth. Other labels used within this group are MtF (male-to-female) and FtM (female-to-male).

Transition

Transition refers to the complex process of authentically living into one's gender identity, often but not always including leaving behind one's assigned birth sex. A transition may include coming out to one's family, friends, and/or co-workers; changing one's name and/or gender markers on legal documents; hormone therapy; and possibly (though not always) some form of surgery. Not all trans people identify with the word *transition* and it should furthermore never be assumed that a person will “complete” this process at any particular time. Some people who have transitioned no longer consider themselves to be transsexual or transgender and rather identify only as a man or a woman (occasionally “of transgender experience”). Others identify as a *trans man* or a *trans woman*.

Coming Out vs. Disclosure

Coming out (of the closet) refers to openly stating one's identity (usually sexual orientation). Being *out* means being open about one's identity. Being *outed* means someone else has disclosed one's identity, usually without permission. *Coming out* is often a liberating experience for people who have previously hidden their identity; it can lead them to feel like they can be their authentic selves. However, trans people who have transitioned are not “in the closet” about their identity, so telling people that they are trans is a *disclosure* and is different than *coming out*. Trans people are not “fooling” or “deceiving” anyone about their identity by presenting themselves authentically as male or as female.



10 Ways to be More Understanding and Welcoming of Transgender People

1. Make no assumptions about gender identity or sexual orientation.
2. Respect a person's identity and self-label, and respect a person's chosen name and pronoun preference.
3. Do not assume a trans person is all-knowing and/or wants to speak about trans issues. Do not assume a trans person can speak only about their trans identity, nor that it is or is not an issue at all.
4. Recognize that "transgender" is not a sexual orientation and educate yourself and others on the distinctions between sexual orientation and gender identity/expression. Don't say "lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender" if you are only taking about sexuality. Recognize that a person can identify with more than one of those labels.
5. Use terms that encompass all genders rather than only two (e.g., "children" instead of "boys and girls"; "people" instead of "women and men"; "siblings" instead of "brothers and sisters").
6. Review member policies for gender-exclusive groups sponsored by your congregation—do they make room to include transgender people? Would people with non-binary identities have a way to be involved? If your congregation ever uses forms that ask for gender, think about whether that information is necessary. If it is, include a "Transgender" option, as well as a box for "Other." Also, ask for "gender" rather than "sex." Allow people to check more than one box.
7. Talk to children about transgender issues. Provide age-appropriate education around understanding one's gender identity and how gender roles and norms play out in our society.
8. Create single stall, ADA-accessible bathroom(s) and label them in a welcoming way (e.g., as "gender neutral" or "all gender"). Make sure your signs elsewhere communicate that these bathroom(s) are available and point the way.
9. Do continuing education for your congregation specifically on transgender issues. You might consider the "Transgender Identity" workshop in the Welcoming Congregation Handbook, the transgender curriculum from the Institute for Welcoming Resources (www.welcomingresources.org), a film showing and discussion, a panel discussion, and/or a sermon on the topic.
10. Learn about local laws and how to change them if they are not inclusive (e.g., non-discrimination policies around employment, housing, credit, and public accommodations; name changes; and gender marker changes).



Further Resources

Links to all of these resources are available online!
Go to www.uua.org/lgbt → Identity 101 → Transgender 101

UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST RESOURCES

Crossing Paths: Where Transgender and Religion Meet

A 2003 UUA publication offering theological and personal reflections from transgender UUs and UU allies on transgender issues and Unitarian Universalism, geared toward congregations looking to further develop their welcome to trans people.

Transgender Identity

A workshop in the Welcoming Congregation Handbook.

Transgender, Gender, and Identity

A workshop in the Living the Welcoming Congregation curriculum.

RECOMMENDED CURRICULA

transACTION: A Transgender Curriculum For Churches and Religious Institutions

A transgender welcoming curriculum for people of faith developed by the Institute for Welcoming Resources, a program of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force.

Gender Identities and Our Faith Communities

A transgender welcoming curriculum for people of faith developed by The Human Rights Campaign's Religion & Faith Program.

MORE GREAT INTRODUCTORY RESOURCES

Sylvia Rivera Law Project's "Trans 101"

A great further introduction to transgender concepts and terms.

Fenway Health's Glossary of Gender and Transgender Terms

Written with health care providers in mind, this is a comprehensive, exhaustive, up-to-date glossary of terms for anyone looking to educate themselves further on transgender issues.

TransFaith's "Where Do I Begin?"

A collection of resources on faith and transgender issues, broadly applicable to congregations of any liberal religious tradition.

Injustice at Every Turn: A Report of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey

A 2011 report on a national study of discrimination faced by transgender people, conducted by the National Center for Transgender Equality and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force.



RECOMMENDED FILMS FOR CONGREGATIONAL VIEWING & DISCUSSION

Switch: A Community in Transition

A documentary (2009) about a progressive, multicultural community and their response to a member's changing gender expression. The basic premise of this film is that it is not the individual that transitions, but the community.

Call Me Malcolm

A documentary (2005) about a transgender seminary student and his struggle with faith, love, and gender identity. Study guide also available.

Thy Will Be Done

A documentary (2009) that follows Sara Herwig, a male-to-female transsexual woman, in her path to ordination in the Presbyterian Church, exploring issues of gender justice and sexual equality in faith communities.

No Dumb Questions

A short documentary (2001) that profiles three sisters, ages 6, 9, and 11, as they explore why and how their Uncle Bill is becoming a woman. VHS available for loan from LGBT Ministries. UU study guide also available.

You Don't Know Dick

A documentary (1997) that profiles six female-to-male transsexual men through their commentary and that of those closest to them. VHS available for loan from LGBT Ministries.