

Welcoming Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Questioning Youth into YRUU

YRUU has a reputation of being affirming and welcoming to people of all genders and sexual orientations, but that reputation comes because of people who have done a lot of work, work that must be continued if that reputation is to remain. Providing a space that is safe for GLBTQQ youth is a vital step to becoming intentionally welcoming. To be welcoming doesn't mean recruiting or tokenizing people, but instead means actively creating an atmosphere that nourishes the needs of GLBTQQ youth. It is likely that you already have someone, or many someones, within your group who identifies as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer, or who is questioning their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. It is the role of the group to be a safe space for these people, since YRUU is often one of the only places where GLBTQQ youth can feel safe. If you think that your group is completely welcoming and safe, chances are that your group has a lot of work to do. The process of becoming a welcoming space for GLBTQQ people is ongoing, and there is always more that can be done. There are lots of different ways to go about creating this space, and the following are some ideas that have helped other:

- Assume that you have GLBTQQ members in your group. In addition assume that many people in your group have parents, brothers, sisters, children, and/or friends that are GLBTQQ. "But we don't have any..." Odds are that you do. However, people are not going to be open about their identity unless it is safe for them to do so. Do not assume that you know anyone's sexual orientation or gender identity. As there are many youth comfortable with their sexual orientation and gender identity, many youth (and adults, for that matter) are not really sure how they might identify themselves, or they may choose not to identify in any category at all. All people need to be given plenty of room to wonder, question, and possibly conclude, in a safe environment.
- Inform yourselves about the realities of GLBTQQ people's lives, but be careful not to assume that all GLBTQQ people have the same experience. Because of multiple identities and different lives everyone is different, but taking time to understand the oppression of GLBTQQ people is something you can do. Do not assume that because you saw a panel of lesbians on "Oprah" that you know what you need to know to be a friend to someone who is not "straight". One of the realities of GLBTQQ youth is that the suicide rate is three times that of "straight" youth (Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Study 2003). GLBTQQ youth are also more likely to be assaulted at school, abuse substances, have unprotected sex, and be diagnosed as clinically depressed. YRUU groups can be great places for youth to process their lives, find a spiritual home, and the support to get through the hardships of daily life. GLBTQQ youth have particular struggles that need to be respected and their experience needs to be affirmed, that will help to provide safe space.
- Always use inclusive language, examples and activities that include references to the lives of people of all sexual orientations, races, genders, etc. Language can be a major barrier and contributes to unconscious heterosexism. Sometime, if it feels safe, during a group check-in consider asking everyone to inform the group of their preferred gender pronoun. You may learn that you have been using the wrong pronoun for someone for quite a while. We often assume people's gender as being either male or female and use the terms he, she, his, her when the person may prefer one different from what you are using. There are also people who prefer no pronoun or a gender neutral pronoun such as ze, zer, hir, etc. You may also learn that some people just don't care. Language is a very powerful force and using inclusive language can open a door that hasn't been open before.

- Always confront any heterosexist language, even jokes. We often think it goes without saying that racist, sexist, and anti-gay jokes are hurtful, but it shouldn't; people often need reminders. Confronting these situations can be hard, but if youth leaders model such confrontations, the language will hopefully stop. Be warned: people may try to make you feel bad when you confront them on their language. "Can't you take a joke?" "Don't you have a sense of humor?" Tell them from your heart about your concerns - how you want your youth group to be safe for all members.
- Enjoy the special gifts of GLBTQQ people. Do not assume that glbtqq youth wish they were hetero. Identifying as glbtqq is really rad, fun, exciting, fantastic, fabulous, excellent, fantabulous, and more. These youth, while having extremely difficult challenges, are not to be pitied. Sexuality and gender identity can be a sacred gift to some people, and for many, learning about ourselves is a roller coaster adventure. Take time to celebrate with each others self-discovery.

Programming at Conferences and During Youth Groups

Programming at YRUU conferences and during youth group meetings can be a great way to inform people about homophobia, heterosexism, transphobia, biphobia, and the realities of the lives of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning youth. It is imperative to remember that it is not the job of the GLBTQQ community to educate the "straight" community. Make sure that people of different sexual orientations and gender identities run any programming on GLBTQQ issues. In other words do not just put a GLBTQQ person in front and have them talk. These issues must be presented as belonging to all of us, no matter what our sexual orientation or gender identity may be.

What kind of programming is appropriate?

There are lots of great things that you can do. Even something as simple as having an open discussion can be very effective. The first rule in deciding appropriateness is identifying the people for whom you are programming. Ask these questions before you start deciding the types of programming you will do:

1. How much understanding does the group have about GLBTQQ issues?
2. How willing is the group to discuss emotional issues?
3. Has the group had any problems dealing with these issues in the past? (i.e. was there an incident in a recent meeting, is there a problem with homophobic language, etc.)
4. Is there a support system of sorts for any out GLBTQQ youth (i.e. a queer adult mentor, super supportive friends, or something else)?
5. Who will be leading the programming and what kind of understanding do they have on GLBTQQ issues?
6. Any other essential information to think about?

Once you have a good grasp on the way the group works, you will have an easy time deciding on appropriate activities.

Programming Ideas:

- Show a movie dealing with GLBTQQ issues and follow it up with a discussion in small groups. Some good movies on video are: *Get Real*, *Boys Don't Cry*, *Ma Vie En Rose*, *Gia*, *Better than Chocolate*, *Beautiful Thing*, *Amazing Adventure of Priscilla Queen of the Desert*, *All Over Me*, *The Incredible True Adventure of Two Girls in Love*, *Watermelon Woman*, and many more.
- Bring in a panel of GLBTQQ people and allies to have a forum and answer questions anonymously written on index cards, or from the floor, depending on the comfort level of the group.
- Have a letter-writing campaign asking for the repeal of laws and policies that discriminate against GLBTQQ people. i.e. sodomy laws, Boy Scouts of America anti-gay policy, school anti-discrimination codes that don't include GLBTQQ people, etc.
- Run workshops taken from the *Welcoming Congregation* curriculum published by the UUA and encourage your church to do the same.
- Find out about a local GLBTQQ youth network by searching online and find out what they are working on and how you can get involved as a youth group.
- Read the Youth Office resource for GLBTQQ youth and discuss what comes up for people in the group.
- Attend a "Pride" march and talk about all the different dynamics that come up, from corporate sponsorship to race relations, from sex-positive space to gender performance. Think about what you hope to achieve by going to the event, being careful not to act like you are going to the zoo to watch the funny animals.
- Join together a "rap" group of "straight" and "non-straight" youth in a fishbowl, if the group feels comfortable enough to do this. This is when you take turns asking each other questions and answering. These questions are not to be directed at individuals directly but to groups. For instance you would not ask, "Hey Jason what's it like being queer?", but instead "What has been y'all's experience been dealing with gender pronouns?"
- Look at how heterosexism, transphobia, homophobia are present in YRUU or Youth Group policies or practices, such as same-sex sleeping areas at overnights and conferences.
- Come up with some of your own ideas and let everyone else know; maybe even make your own resource... what an idea!

Resources for Allies

From the Safe Schools Coalition

Allies wanted: This article poses a string of provocative situations and in each case asks, "What would a queer ally do?" They would be GREAT discussion starters. <http://www.peak.sfu.ca/the-peak/2000-1/issue6/allies.html>

Building Anti-Racist Gay-Straight Alliances: This page on the GSA Network's site (1) addresses some of the reasons GSA's are disproportionately white and (2) proposes strategies for addressing some of those reasons and building diverse, anti-racist organizations!! Think about how GSA's and YRUU groups are similar and what issues parallel. Go to: <http://www.gsanetwork.org/resources/pdf/Antiracist.pdf> (pdf format)

Coming Out as a Straight Ally: This series of web pages from the Human Rights Campaign includes sections specifically for youth allies, parents-as-allies, other family allies and more:

http://www.hrc.org/Content/NavigationMenu/Coming_Out/Get_Informed4/Straight_Allies/Coming_Out_as_a_Straight_Ally2.htm

I Thought I Knew You: Quick Answers for Friends of Gay, Lesbian, or Bisexual Teens: a pamphlet available free online. Written by a private individual. It is a very good, simple starting place for a friend to whom someone comes out. Find it at Stopping the Silence:

<http://www24.brinkster.com/thalerfamily/glbqa.html>

When a Friend Comes Out to You: <http://www.ssmu.mcgill.ca/queer/info/friend.html>

Transgender Issues, Terms & Definitions: This page from the GSA Network is specifically for Gay-Straight Alliances, but useful for everyone: <http://www.gsanetwork.org/resources/trans.html>