

In discussing sexuality and gender confusion, listen first

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MCALLEN—Following the principles of James 1:19 can guide ministry to those who struggle with LGBTQ+ issues, David Sanchez, director of ethics and justice at the Christian Life Commission, told a workshop during Texas Baptists' Family Gathering.

"We titled this workshop 'Ministering to those in our pews who struggle' because we have to reach those inside before we can know how to reach those outside," Sanchez said.

"We're fooling ourselves if we think there is no one inside our churches who is struggling with this, even if they are not saying much."

Sanchez referenced James 1:19 in guiding his discussion: "Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to anger."

Ask questions and listen attentively

He encouraged believers who may encounter individuals who are wrestling with issues related to sexuality or gender confusion to listen first to understand before giving any advice.

"When I don't know what to say, it's because I don't know enough yet," Sanchez said.

If someone tells a Christian they are gay or transgender, he suggested asking them what that means to them.

"In many ways they are their own people group, and we need to learn about

that culture and the terminology,” he said.

Don't make assumptions

Believers should not assume the person is sharing because they want to be “cured,” he said.

Sanchez suggested asking the individual why he or she felt the need to share and when those feelings first started, without presuming to know the reason. While many of these individuals have experienced traumatic and abusive pasts, that cannot be assumed in every case, he noted.

“They may be sharing to see if you will still love them after they shared. If the first words out of your mouth are, ‘I’m going to be praying for you about this,’ it sounds like your love is based on a condition of whether or not they change,” Sanchez said.

“Don’t assume sharing Scripture condemning LGBT-related sins will be of help to them right away. These issues are so important because of the way we are experiencing identity in our culture. But this isn’t the most important issue.”

Instead, Sanchez presented a series of questions related to the individual’s perception of their own Christianity and what they believe about the gospel of Jesus Christ and the Bible. Identifying whether the person is a believer will help guide the discussion and establish their faith stance.

Be patient

Many pastors ask how they can preach on LGBT issues from the pulpit in a way that would not discourage someone struggling from sharing with a church leader. First Corinthians 13:7 says, “Love does not rejoice in unrighteousness but rejoices in the truth.” But, he said, pastors would be

wise to read back to verse 4, where Paul says “Love is patient ... and not arrogant.”

Assuming that posture will prevent struggling individuals from closing down and feeling unable to share their feelings, he noted.

To assist pastors and other church leaders, Sanchez provided a set of points and Scriptures about God’s model for marriage, how it reflects the relationship between Christ and the church, issues of gender identity, sexual purity in all instances and the gift of singleness to guide messages around this sensitive topic. He made a point to deal with the question of sin.

“Homosexuality is one of many sins in a list. I’ve looked at the Greek. It’s not first, and it’s not in bold or italics. God calls us all to sexual purity, and we all have to deny desires that are not God’s best for us,” he said, then referenced 2 Timothy 2:22.

“We don’t have to struggle alone, however. Satan loves when we deal with our sins this way, by ourselves and trying to run without direction. We have to flee and pursue righteousness and not by ourselves.”

Love those with whom we disagree

Sanchez offered suggestions about how churches can be welcoming to those struggling but not affirming of sinful choices. He suggested singles ministries consider the unique needs of those struggling with same-sex attraction, and that men’s and women’s ministries reflect less stereotypical activities for church members to have a wider reach.

He encouraged churches to care for the whole person, not solely on the LGBT aspect, and to show the steadfast love of Christ in the midst of the ups and downs while ministering to these individuals.

Walking someone through these issues takes time, and the healing needed won't happen overnight, he said.

"There must be a concerted effort to show we can still care for those with whom we disagree," Sanchez said. "The world says, 'If you don't agree with me, you don't love me.' We can't argue them out of their lifestyle, but we have to prove that love."

Churches need to have clear guidelines on church involvement, membership and leadership related to LGBT issues, he recommended, adding there cannot be compromise on biblical truth and God's design in order to show care.

Sanchez noted his presentation is available in a four-hour workshop format that can be presented to churches or associations for a wide range of audiences who wish to dive deeper into the topic. Contact him at david.sanchez@txb.org.