

Commentary: Equipping church members to address sexuality

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“We’re getting divorced because I’m gay.”

My sister and best friend said the words as casually as if she asked me to pass the peas at the dinner table. That one sentence forever changed my life. In the 17 years since, I’ve clumsily navigated the emotional minefield of what remains of our relationship.

During nearly two decades, I have learned much from my mistakes, making one explosive misstep after another. In some ways, my local church failed to equip me to navigate my relationship with my sister and her chosen life.

Yet, what could anyone—let alone the church—have done to equip me better to handle my sister’s revelation? I believe churches can learn four lessons from my mistakes.

Talk about sexuality

When I entered high school in 1996, not many churches discussed sexuality. Finding a class or study in the church about sexual curiosity or confusion for any age proved difficult, if not impossible.

Beyond participating in True Love Waits, we didn’t discuss sexuality in my youth group. As a result, I took a legalistic, unnuanced, hard-nosed stance on homosexuality based on the biblical texts.

Today, churches don’t have the luxury of not having these conversations. They must have them and handle them with care. They must equip families to have discussions with pre-teens, teenagers and young adults.

God created us good. Part of that creation involves sexuality. Culture will teach our children and us about sexuality even if churches do not. Though potentially awkward, to have a biblical lens on sexuality, churches must teach God's view of sexuality with care and concern.

Offer support

I stumbled often in my sibling relationship—such as my intolerance of my sister's confusion, drawing hard lines in our relationship before engaging in controversial conversations, and impatience with her ambivalence toward God.

I struggled with how my sister could abandon her husband, her parents and her baby sister. I grieved the life I thought I would live, and I didn't do it well.

Unbeknownst to me, others in our church had family members struggling with same-sex attraction years before we did. A support group with some of these families might have helped me navigate some of the huge, new and overwhelming emotions I faced.

Studies have shown [support groups](#), in general, aid in developing coping mechanisms and empathy, and in helping participants feel less isolated during their struggles. I think hearing from others with an LGBTQ family member would have given me a perspective I desperately yet unknowingly lacked.

Offering support groups for families with kids, siblings, grandparents, nephews and others struggling with same-sex attraction could benefit churches greatly if the church hopes to gain any ground in the battle with cultural views of sexuality.

The responses we, as Christ-followers, offer to those who struggle with

same-sex attraction and gender confusion greatly affect their later receptiveness to God and the church. I wonder what would be different if I had the opportunity of hearing others' stories and receiving genuine support.

Communicating truth in love

Growing up in church, I heard phrases like, "Let go and let God," and, "Love the sinner, hate the sin." But I didn't know how to do that.

What does it actually look like in everyday life to love and follow God and to continue to love those who reject his ways?

I did the best I could, but I wish my church had equipped me to share the truth in love at a practical level. I would have taken the information from classes, the pulpit, weekend seminars ... anywhere.

I wish someone had said: "You do not need to sacrifice righteousness to continue a relationship. You can maintain your position and love your sister. Now let us teach you how."

If I could have done anything different with my sister, I would have shut my mouth. I focused so intently on arguing the points of the Bible regarding sins against the body, homosexuality and sexual promiscuity that I hurt my sister early and often.

More than a bull in my sister's emotional china shop, I spiritually kicked her after she'd fallen to the ground by trying to argue instead of trying to understand.

If I could go back and sit on the arm of the wingback chair during one of our pivotal conversations—like a ghost of Rachel future—I know I'd put my hand over my mouth and tell myself to listen.

Listen to her pain. Listen to her hurts. Give her space to tell her story. I don't blame my sister for running away; her wounds ran deep, and she needed to go somewhere that offered acceptance and time to heal. I could not provide that healing place, and I'll regret it forever.

I did not know how to speak the truth in love. I spoke like the Pharisees. In the last two decades, I've studied often how Jesus spoke to those he encountered, because I want to love as he did.

Jesus didn't encourage those he encountered to stay in their sin. Instead, he demonstrated his love first, found teachable moments, and waited to correct or reprimand. I can follow the same model. I can love first, speak truth in love when he gives me an opportunity, and trust he's in charge of conviction, not me.

Engage in difficult conversations

I believe the tension of peacefully engaging in conflict when necessary compels us to practice the art of difficult conversations.

I'm not suggesting a pastor should guide the church through a mock difficult conversation from the pulpit. Rather, churches can offer equipping classes. Utilize trained counselors in your church to help congregants to listen well and often. Practice role play about how to word our beliefs in love, without defensiveness, and to listen empathetically.

In my relationship with my sister, I have had two critical conversations at pivotal times, and in each of them, I failed. My words stung, fueled by my grief and anger. I used them to attempt to convict her instead of conveying deep love for my sister. I certainly could have represented better the love God feels for my sister.

I would love to say my relationship with my sister has grown and

strengthened since I've learned these lessons. Sadly, it hasn't. Let my story serve as a cautionary tale to you.

Talking about sexuality, offering support to family members of LGBTQ people, communicating truth in love, and engaging in difficult conversations will make a difference in our churches and homes.

These suggestions might give people like me—whose numbers grow every day—the ability to represent God's love more accurately to a family member and a culture desperately in need of him.

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