



Faith, Gender & Sexuality: A toolkit

Resources for faith practitioners

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Sexuality and gender diversity: Overview

This module aims to offer information and debunk dangerous myths around sexuality and gender. It explains how gender and sexuality can be understood along a spectrum.

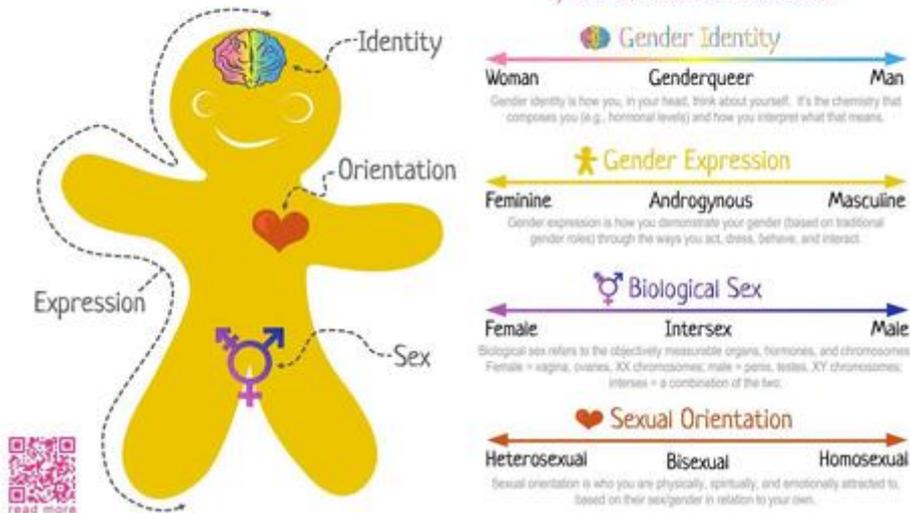
- In every society there are dominant ideas about sex, gender and sexuality. The dominant idea about gender is usually that there are only two **genders** (the way we identify, or are told to behave), linked to only two **sexes** (the physical characteristics of our bodies) – male and female. This is sometimes referred to as the '**gender binary system**'.
- But there are many more than two genders, and many more than two sexes. People have different gender and sexual identities that can change over the course of their lives.
- This two-gender system not only insists that there are only two genders, but it also harmful because it often promotes a **gender hierarchy** in which women are viewed as subordinate to men.
- The gender and sexuality binary systems reinforce stereotypes that harm everyone in society. In understanding gender and sexuality along a **spectrum**, faith leaders can explore opportunities to challenge harmful stereotypes and better reflect the full nature of human experience.

This diagram, of the **Genderbread Person**, explains the spectrum of human experience linked to:

- Gender identity
- Gender expression
- Biological sex
- Sexual orientation

The Genderbread Person

by www.ItsPronouncedMetrosexual.com



[Description of a person to explain gender identity and sexual orientation from ItsPronouncedMetrosexual.com](#)

Why is sexual diversity a human right?

'All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights...' **Universal Declaration of Human Rights**

According to the UN [2], 'Human rights are rights inherent to all human beings, whatever our nationality, place of residence, sex, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, language, or any other status. We are all equally entitled to our human rights without discrimination. These rights are all interrelated, interdependent and indivisible'.

Sexual rights embrace human rights that are already recognised in national laws, international human rights documents and other consensus documents. Like heterosexual people, lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans people are entitled to the same rights as those of other human beings.

For example, as far back as 1994 and 1995 respectively, the United Nations' (UN) International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) and the Fourth World Conference on Women debated the concepts of sexual health and rights and reproductive health and committed to enshrining rights that incorporate the rights of gays, lesbians, bisexuals and trans people.

Despite these important landmarks and the existence of numerous international treaties on human rights, people who do not conform to **gender expectations** (that make assumptions about how men and women should behave, the work they should do and the ways they express themselves), or **sexual expectations** (about who men and women should be attracted to) experience stigma and violence. Harmful expectations about gender and sexuality are sometimes created by a government's national laws and policies, and they can also be reinforced by cultural and religious organisations. Equally, cultural and religious organisations play a powerful role in challenging stigma and promoting equality and justice; and laws can also be changed, or implemented, to protect the rights of all people regardless of their sexuality and gender identity.

Myth busting

Harmful attitudes about gender and sexuality are often created and reinforced by incorrect knowledge – or myths.

Sometimes these myths come up in conversations at the bar with friends, or over dinner with family. If we challenge these myths with information when we hear them, then each of us can do something to foster knowledge and acceptance for all genders and sexualities in our communities. Here are some myths to bust!

Myth 1: Women are not natural leaders

Historically, women have been excluded from political and religious leadership positions, and denied the right to vote or participate as equal citizens. While women have far more rights now, than they did even ten years ago, there are still many countries, religions and cultural groups that deny women the right to enter into leadership positions. This can be linked to the gender-binary in which qualities that are thought to make good leaders are often assigned as ‘male’ qualities that their ‘female’ counterparts are unable to attain. As with all stereotypes, this belief has been constructed by people (this is also known as **social construction**) and communities over decades, and even centuries, and the reality is that effective leaders can be all genders.

Myth 2: People can be ‘recruited’ into homosexuality

There is no evidence to support the notion that people can be ‘made gay’ or ‘made lesbian’, just as there is no evidence to show that gay, lesbian or bisexual people can be ‘made straight’. Peer pressure, although a powerful influencer of young people’s behaviour, has not been shown to influence the development of same-sex sexual or bisexual orientations. Instead, there is substantial evidence to show that acceptance of sexual and gender diversity has not only benefited LGBTI people but impacted positively on public health, civil society and country’s long-term economic growth.

[Read more: Diversity in Human Sexuality: Implications for policy in Africa \[3\]](#)

Myth 3: Homosexuality is un-African

African history is filled with examples of erotic and non-erotic same sex relationships. Here are some examples:

- The ancient cave paintings of the San people near Guruve in **Zimbabwe** depict two men engaged in ritual sex.
- During precolonial times, the ‘mudoko dako’ (or effeminate males) among the Langi of northern **Uganda** were treated as women and could marry men.
- In Buganda, one of the largest traditional kingdoms in **Uganda**, it was an open secret that Kabaka (king) Mwanga II, who ruled in the latter half of the 19th century, was gay.

The vocabulary used to describe same sex relations in traditional languages, predating colonialism, is further proof of the existence of sexual diversity in precolonial Africa. To name but a few:

- The Shangaan of **southern Africa** referred to same-sex relations as ‘inkotshane’ (male-wife)
- Basotho women in present day **Lesotho** engage in socially sanctioned erotic relationships called ‘motsoalle’ (special friend)
- In the Wolof language, spoken in **Senegal**, homosexual men have been known, and respected, for centuries as ‘gordigen’ (men-women).

The context and experiences of such relationships did not necessarily mirror homosexual relations as understood in the West, nor were they necessarily consistent with what we now describe as a gay or queer identity. We talk about some of the problems with labels – like gay, queer, or LGBTI – in the Sexuality and Social Justice Toolkit.

[Read more: What's wrong with labels? \[4\]](#)

Sexual diversity in Africa is far more complex than the champions of the ‘homosexuality is un-African’ myth would have

us believe. In addition to a wide range of erotic same-sex desires that have been recorded in precolonial Africa, same-sex erotic practices were also acknowledge to be part of people's spirituality. For example, the Ndebele and Shona in **Zimbabwe**, the Azande in **Sudan** and **Congo**, the Nupe in Nigeria and the Tutsi in **Rwanda** and **Burundi** all engaged in same-sex acts for ritual purposes and for spiritual rearmament (i.e., as a source of fresh power to secure their territories). Among various communities in **South Africa**, sex education among adolescent peers allowed them to experiment through acts such as 'thigh sex', 'hlobonga', among the Zulu, 'ukumetsha' among the Xhosa and 'gangisa' among the Shangaan).

Myth 4: Homosexuality can be cured

There is no evidence that someone's sexuality can be changed through 'conversion' therapy. Given the documented dangers of such therapy and its direct conflict with medical ethics, these interventions should not be used. Instead, positive psychosocial and religious support, particularly for adolescents, is recommended to facilitate the adjustment of same sex orientated persons to the stress, stigma, shame and discrimination they may face and to affirm their choices and orientations.

[Read more: Diversity in Human Sexuality: Implications for policy in Africa \[5\]](#)

Conversion therapy that seeks to alter sexual orientation has a controversial and chequered history. For decades, dangerous physical methods, such as electroshock treatment and chemical castration, were used in some countries to 'cure' homosexuality. These were forms of serious punishment and in many cases lead to death (including suicide).

Myth 5: Homosexuality is unnatural and a crime against nature

There is now wide global consensus that a wide range of sexualities – including homosexuality and bisexuality – are normal and natural variations of human sexuality.

[Read more: Diversity in Human Sexuality: Implications for policy in Africa, 2015 \[5\]](#)

Hundreds of studies have found no scientific basis for considering bisexuality or homosexuality a 'disorder' or an 'abnormality.' Since the 1970s, dozens of national and international bodies, and in countries as diverse as Argentina, Uruguay, Germany, Russia, South Africa, Vietnam, Hong Kong Philippines, Denmark, Brazil, France, New Zealand, the USA and UK confirmed that same sex or bisexual orientation is a normal part of human sexuality and that same sex orientation – just like opposite-sex orientation – does not indicate any psychological impairment nor any inability in social or work life nor any threat to other lifestyles or persons.

Activities

These activities are designed for faith leaders to use with discussion groups from their congregation. They encourage exploration and reflection on different ways to think about sexuality and gender diversity.

Activity 1: Binaries and boxes (45 minutes)

This activity aims to get the group thinking about the differences between sex, gender identities, sexual orientation and sexual practices by helping to break down stereotypes. It uses a variety of terms and questions to provoke group discussion and help show that the binaries and boxes used to categorise people are limiting and harmful.

[Download the pdf of this exercise \[6\]](#)

Activity 2: Transforming the status quo (90 minutes)

This activity helps facilitate individual and group reflection with the expectation that participants will commit to concrete actions in the personal, congregational, and political arenas to create a loving place in which our LGBTI families can thrive. It involves participants reflecting on questions individually and then working in small groups. They are encouraged to think about their personal journey, the journey of the congregation and the journey of the wider community.

[Download the pdf of this exercise \[7\]](#)

Case studies

The following case studies are taken from 'For the Bible Tells Me So', a Human Rights Campaign training curriculum. The guide can enable the facilitation of a conversation about the Bible, the church and LGBTI people. It is designed to help create communities that move beyond acceptance to advocacy.

[Read more: 'For the Bible Tells Me So' \[8\]](#)

1. Approaching the Bible

Things to remember

- Biblical writers did not share our contemporary understanding of gender and sexual diversity.
- Any same-sex behaviour that biblical writers may have witnessed was either outside the bonds of heterosexual marriage (and so also viewed as adulterous and a sin) or outside the community of faith (and so associated with idolatry or 'pagan' faiths). It was therefore 'double-stigmatised'.
- Same-sex expression was condemned largely for crossing boundaries of gender: specifically, men viewed as abandoning their active role in intercourse to be passive with other men (as in Leviticus) and women perceived as abandoning their passive role to be active with women (as in Romans where the word for 'marriage' literally means 'under a man').
- Homosexuality was frequently confused with pederasty, the practice of men using boys for sexual pleasure. The King James Version (KJV) of the Bible has frequent references to 'sodomites'; more recent translations avoid this term because the word, when originally translated, referred to male pagan priests. Similarly, the word for pagan priestess was incorrectly translated as 'prostitute.' Ironically, historians have much evidence that King James, who first authorized the translation of the Bible into English, was himself homosexual.
- Jesus never condemned homosexuality, but challenged divorce, wealth, spiritual pride and exclusion.

Working with the Bible

Here are some useful texts from the bible that highlight the value of support for people of all genders and sexualities.

Creation: Genesis 1:27-28; 2:18, 21-25

So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.' Then the Lord God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.' So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, 'this at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken.' Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.

Interpretation

There are two creation stories, one in Genesis 1, and the other in Genesis 2. The first story is about the creation of the cosmos, the second about the first human beings: their curiosity, frailties, and relationship to earth. The second also explains humanity's relationship to God and each other – it is not just about marriage.

Christian traditions hold that there is much more in these two creation stories than marriage and that the stories serve a two-fold purpose. In the first story the purpose is 'to be fruitful and multiply' – in other words, the purpose of marriage is procreation. Roman Catholic tradition emphasizes this, though in the latter half of the 20th century canon law was changed to acknowledge marriage may exist between persons who cannot have children.

In the second story, the more ancient of the two, the purpose of marriage is companionship – to find a suitable partner. This is the story that Jesus quotes to refute divorce: the two become one in marriage. Protestant tradition recognizes both procreation and companionship as equal validations of marriage. Today, same-gender couples are capable of having and rearing children. Same-gender couples have always been capable of companionship and mutuality, which is the purpose of marriage that Jesus highlighted in Matthew 19:3-12.

Sodom and Gomorrah: Genesis 19:4-5

But before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house, and they called to Lot, 'Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, so that we may know them.'

Interpretation

Taken together (in context), the 18th and 19th chapters of Genesis serve as contrasting stories about hospitality. Jews do not separate these stories. In Genesis 18, Abraham and Sarah 'entertain angels unawares' when they invite three strangers to join them for food and drink, one of whom turns out to be God and the other two angels. Hospitality in the wilderness was not merely a courtesy; it was a moral requirement to offer food, drink and shelter. By extending such hospitality, Abraham and Sarah learn that they would have a son in their old age, and, after the two angels depart for Sodom, God confides in Abraham the plan to destroy Sodom for its wickedness. Abraham bargains God down from 50 righteous men needed to prevent the disaster down to 10. When all the men of the city surround Lot's house demanding to gang rape the two strangers, refusing Lot's offer of his own daughters to protect them, it is clear there are not ten righteous men in the city, sealing its fate. As Lot's reward, he is forewarned so he and his family may escape. (For biblical interpretations of Sodom's sin see also Ezekiel 16:49; Amos 4:1, 11; Isaiah 1:10-17; Matthew 10:14-15.)

Sin of Onan: Genesis 38:9-10

But since Onan knew that the offspring would not be his, he spilled his semen on the ground whenever he went in to his brother's wife, so that he would not give offspring to his brother.

What he did was displeasing in the sight of the Lord, and he put him to death also.

Interpretation

If unfamiliar with the story, people may be shocked to know that God and Hebrew law required Onan, after his childless brother's death, to go in to his brother's wife and have sexual intercourse with her to produce a child. This child would be both an heir to his brother's property and an ancient form of 'social security,' – someone to care for the mother in old age. Scriptural translations say that Onan 'spilled his seed' outside the woman rather than obey God's command, and so God killed him for disobedience. But the Hebrew words behind the translations actually read that Onan 'destroyed his seed,' killing its 'nascent life,' an 'abomination' – in other words, a ritual impurity. From this story, some have derived a prohibition against masturbation. The spilling of seed anywhere other than inside a woman was against ritual law. (By contrast, in Islam, this is an acceptable method of contraception.) You'll notice there is not a similar prohibition of a woman lying as a male with a woman, thus confirming this reason for the Levitical prohibitions against a man lying as a woman with a man.

Against Nature: Romans 1:26-27

For this reason God gave them [idolatrous Gentiles] up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.

Interpretation

Surprisingly those who quote Romans 1:26-27 as a prohibition of homosexuality often fail to point out the central point of Paul's letter to the church at Rome: that a Christian is saved not by obeying the Law of Moses but by faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the source of righteousness and eternal life for Christians. The church at Rome was divided on this point between members who felt Christians had to follow the Law and those who didn't believe that was necessary. Paul repeatedly emphasizes in his letters that Christians are 'saved by grace through faith' (Ephesians 2:8a). In the first Chapter of Romans, he sets up his legalist opponent by pointing out the sins of the idolatrous Gentiles, working his presumably Jewish-Christian opponent into a self-righteous frenzy, only to turn the tables on him in the second chapter, 'Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things' (Romans 2:1). Paul ultimately concludes in Romans 14:13-14 a, 'Let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another. I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself...' Instead of judging, he calls the Christians at Rome to 'love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour. ... extend hospitality to strangers' (Romans 12:10, 13c).

Excluded from the Kingdom: 1 Corinthians 6:9-11

Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers – none of these will inherit the kingdom of God. And this is what some of you used to be. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.

Interpretation

This scripture is often cited in reference to homosexuality. The apostle Paul here employs a 'laundry list' of sins that was standard for the time. Within that list are two words, 'arsenokoitai,' which literally means 'males who go to bed,' and 'malakoi,' which literally means 'soft' and implies moral softness. The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) of the Bible translates the first as 'male prostitutes.' Whatever the Greek word originally means, the word appears in heterosexual contexts in other ancient texts. The NRSV translates 'malakoi' as 'sodomites,' an inaccurate translation, as the term 'sodomite' was a later invention, appearing frequently in the King James Version as an inaccurate translation of 'male pagan priest.' Ironically, the King James Version translation of 'malakoi' as 'effeminate' is more 'accurate' for its time, given their sexist notion that women were morally soft.

Scriptures on which to base the welcome, acceptance and rights of LGBTI people

- Isaiah 56: God's welcome of foreigners and eunuchs (men who had been castrated) into God's 'house of prayer for all peoples.'
- Book of Ruth and 1 Samuel 18 through 2 Samuel 1: Same-gender couples modelling the love relationship are heralded in scripture in the stories of Ruth and Naomi (Ruth) and Jonathan and David (Samuel).
- Micah 6:8: The emphasis of justice in the prophets, 'God has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?'
- Deuteronomy 6:4-5, Leviticus 19:18 and Luke 10:25-28: As other rabbis of his time would have, Jesus blends Deuteronomy 6:4-5 ('Love God') and Leviticus 19:18 ('Love your neighbour as yourself' – note this comes between Leviticus 18 and 20) in Matthew 22:34-40 as the greatest commandments, and the lens through which to interpret all of the law and the prophets. To confirm this was a common pairing, see Luke 10:25-28, in which Jesus solicits the same conclusion from an expert in religious law.
- John 9: Jesus dissociates a human condition from a sinful cause when he declares a man was not born blind because of his sin or that of his parents, but so that the glory of God may be made manifest.
- John 4: Jesus reveals his messianic identity to the outcast Samaritan woman at the well who has had five husbands and is living with a man unmarried. She becomes the first evangelist, bringing others from her village to meet Jesus.
- Luke 10:25-37: The parable of the Good Samaritan, in which the most hated person to Jesus' listeners 'loved his neighbour as himself' in helping a victim of robbers – what a priest and a lay priest failed to do.
- Acts 10 and 11: The full welcome of uncircumcised Gentiles into the church, whose lifestyles were repugnant to Jews.
- Galatians 5:1 and others: The many letters of Paul that assert freedom from law and custom in Christ, such as Galatians 5:1, 'For freedom Christ has set us free.'
- 1 John 4:16b: 'God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.'

2. Gender identity and the Bible

Jewish and Christian perspectives by Reverend Chris Glaser, M.Div.

Scripture is so often used against a new idea or experience that progressive people can feel forced to take a defensive posture toward it. But the Bible records the reflections of people across millennia applying their faith to a myriad of new ideas and experiences. These faithful people model for us how we may respond with justice, compassion and welcome to transgender people. Here are some possible ways to begin the conversation in the context of biblical themes.

No longer male and female

'There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus' (Galatians 3:27-28).

The writer of this passage, the apostle Paul – himself a Jewish Christian free male – neither denies nor diminishes various identities, but affirms here that unity in spiritual community trumps cultural, ethnic, economic and gender divisions; all are one. Those in our own time who do not fit absolutely into the categories of male and female remind their congregations to practice what they proclaim: that our spiritual unity with one another and with God transcends matters of gender identity and expression. Those who know themselves as transgender reveal that there is a spectrum of gender identity that stretches between the experiences of male and female.

Positive references to 'eunuchs' in both Hebrew and Christian scriptures may be said to resemble this experience but, more explicitly, the Mishna and Talmud (the earliest Jewish law and folklore) have terms for differently gendered individuals between male and female.

Male and female God created them

In the Genesis creation stories, not even in the Hebrew, are 'male' and 'female' an either/or. In fact, Bereshit Rabah, a midrashic text, suggests that the first human creature ('Adam') was androgynous and the reference to taking a rib is more accurately understood as taking a side of the first to create the second human creature. Remembering that 'male and female' are complementary features in the imago dei (the 'image of God' in which human beings were created), may help us accept gender as a spectrum of experience. In Genesis 2:24 complementary features in an individual human – male and female – 'become one flesh', a view of marriage apparently shared by Jesus when questioned about divorce in Matthew 19:3-12. Thus, male and female blend into a single unit in marriage. This suggests that, just as binary distinctions between male and female are transcended in spiritual community, so they are transcended by the spiritual union of marriage.

When asked about marriage in the resurrection, Jesus says in Luke 20:35-36, 'Those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage...because they are like angels and are children of God.' Thus, in spiritual union with God, distinctions of male and female are also overcome. The Lord looks on the heart

It is in this context – a broader understanding of gender and of an inclusive and welcoming spiritual community – that two other verses of the Bible about gender expectations need to be interpreted.

Deuteronomy 22:5 says, 'A woman shall not wear a man's apparel, nor shall a man put on a woman's garment, for whoever does such things is abhorrent [against custom] to the Lord your God.' And Deuteronomy 23:1 says, 'No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord.'

These ritual laws appear alongside other applications of a Holiness Code that are no longer followed by even the most religious. The spiritual goals of the Holiness Code were separation as well as wholeness; they manifest in personal integrity and social harmony. The latter goal of wholeness may be achieved by transgender persons seeking gender integrity and by a community that supports and protects their rights and dignity to achieve social harmony. Consider when God charged the prophet Samuel to find a new king. All the sons of Jesse were brought forward, and all appeared to Samuel more like a king than the small ruddy youngster named David. But God declares to Samuel,

'The Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart' (1 Samuel 16:7).

The sex of a person may be culturally determined by externals, but gender is a matter of the heart.

What allowed the early church to become more inclusive was witnessing the Spirit at work in the lives not only of circumcised Jews but also of uncircumcised Gentiles. In Acts 10 and 11, Peter, 'the rock on which [Christ] would build [his]

church,' explains to the first church council that he could not refuse the welcome of baptism to those that God had given 'the same gift that God gave us when we believed' (Acts 11:14). For Christian congregations, this may serve as a model for the inclusion of transgender people. In the view of many Jews and Christians alike, what mattered to God was not the externals such as circumcision, but rather, 'real circumcision is a matter of the heart' (Romans 2:29, but a concept also in Lev. 26:41; Deut. 10:16; Jer. 4:4, 9:29; Acts 7:51). This too may guide congregations as they welcome transgender members and work for their equality before the law.

Further reading

There are many useful resources on this topic. We've selected a few and include a brief description of each resource under the link, so that you can see if it's something you'd like to read more about. If you have additional resources you would like to share through this toolkit, please send them to us by email at spl@ids.ac.uk

Source URL: <http://spl.ids.ac.uk/sexuality-gender-faith/sexuality-and-gender-diversity-overview>

Links

- [1] <http://itspronouncedmetrosexual.com/2012/01/the-genderbread-person/>
- [2] <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Pages/WhatareHumanRights.aspx>
- [3] <http://www.share-netinternational.org/publication/diversity-human-sexuality-implications-policy-africa>
- [4] <http://spl.ids.ac.uk/sexuality-and-social-justice-toolkit/1-issues-and-debates/whats-wrong-labels>
- [5] <http://www.assaf.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/8-June-Diversity-in-human-sexuality1.pdf>
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- [8] <http://www.hrc.org/resources/entry/for-the-bible-tells-me-so-a-study-guide-and-advocacy-training-curriculum>