

Trans Etiquette

(An article to Trans Etiquette from the Metropolitan Community Churches - an worldwide, inclusive christian movement)

MCC is a wonderful, diverse community of many types of people, from many backgrounds and experiences.

Throughout our history we have learned to bridge the differences between us and celebrate them.

Sometimes this has been a challenging and thought-provoking process.

Transgender people have always been a part of MCC, but it is perhaps only in the last few years that transgender people have become more visible in our GLBT communities and in MCC as well. For many transgender people MCC has provided a safe place in which to explore gender identity and to come out and live in the fullness of our identities as God has created us.

But we still need to consider how to make our churches and communities safe, welcoming places for transgender people, their lovers, friends and family. MCC needs to take this message of God's love for all people out into our GLBT communities and beyond where transgender people still experience considerable oppression and discrimination on a day to day basis.

Making our own faith communities welcoming to transgender people requires us to look at our own assumptions about gender and sexuality and what it means to be part of the GLBT community.

So, where do we start?

The following Trans-Etiquette has been compiled from the suggestions, comments and questions of many people who are transgender, gay, lesbian, bisexual, straight, male, female, young, old, from books, the internet, caucuses, discussion groups, and on and on. This list is only the beginning of Trans-etiquette that we can all know.

{mospagebreak title=What Choice in the Matter}What Choice in the Matter?

Being transgender is not a choice. It is not a decision you make one morning while sipping your morning cup of coffee. It is not a choice you make by flipping a coin and assigning heads or tails. People do not decide to become a girl or boy any more than we decide how we wanted to look ("Hmmm, I think I'd like to be tall.").

Being transgender has been linked to genetics through studies of DNA. The brain gender clashes with the birth gender (or the physical gender). Doctors, scientists and researchers in the Netherlands and Europe, along with some institutions in America and Canada, have found evidence that shows certain gender markers in the brain transmit one gender identity while the body developed a different one. The technical term most used by schools of medicine and psychology is Gender Dysmorphia. Much can be learned about this "condition" on the internet, in books and by talking with people who are transgender and their partners (as this is a very personal issue, please be respectful of boundaries and approach transgender individuals with respect and care). Do not ever ask someone transgender when they "chose" to become a boy or girl. Think of it this way: When did you "choose" your gender?

To prepare:

- Own your lack of understanding – it is ok to not understand and request clarification.
- Always approach any person with appropriate boundaries and respect, in the same way you would wish to be approached when asked about a very personal issue in your life.
- Own your discomforts – become aware of what makes you uncomfortable and understand that it is yours, not theirs, to own.
- Read the other points in Getting Started.

In Conversation:

- Try using the following questions.
- Would you be willing to help me understand what your life is like?
- When did you start thinking about your gender?
- When did you realize you were gender-different?
- Do you identify with the term "transgender"; If not, what term are you most comfortable with people using, if any?
- What does "transgender" (or the term they choose) mean to you?
- What has been most difficult about your journey as a transgender person?
- What has been most helpful about your journey as a transgender person?

- In what ways can I support you?

{mospagebreak title=A Rose by Any Other Name...}A Rose by Any Other Name...

One of the most amazing and exciting moments in the journey of transitioning for many transgender people is that moment when one is christened with a new name. The name of one's true self, one's core being, the person God created them to be. Whether one is Jennifer transitioning into Steve or James transitioning into Amanda, there is nothing quite like the feeling of becoming who they have always been.

Many times, the transition in names for those around someone transgender is the most difficult change to make. From, "But we've known you as [former name] for ___ years, how can we change now?" to "You just look like a [former name] to me!" the people surrounding a person making a transition often struggle with this issue. It is important to remember that the person in transition has also always, at least publicly, referred to themselves as their former name. Often times, the transgender person must make request after request to be called by their new name. This can be incredibly frustrating and extremely painful.

Sometimes, people create nicknames for the transgender person. Many times, the nickname is a type of morphing of the person's former name. While nicknames can certainly help you in changing the name you have used for your friend, partner, family member, be mindful that the nickname is appropriate to the person's gender identity and does not cause them discomfort or hurt them.

To Prepare:

Practice! If you're having trouble using the person's new name, practice running through various sentences using the new name. A few minutes of re-training your brain and associating your mental picture of the person with the new name can cut down on the number of times you miss-speak. The object is to call the person by their preferred name as much as possible…with the understanding that you are working to make the change, too.

In Conversation:

Forgive yourself. If you happen to refer to the transgender person by their former name, simply correct the name in the rest of your discussion.

Be aware of your surroundings. It can be dangerous in some areas to call a transitioning person by their former name. With transgender hate crimes still on the rise, please be aware of who may be listening to your conversation. Be extra careful to address a person in transition by their preferred name when in public. When in doubt, wait to discuss anything on the subject of transition, transgender, or gender until you are sure you're in a safe space.

{mospagebreak title=He, She and Other Pronouns}He, She and Other Pronouns

In an ever-changing society that is becoming increasingly androgynous, it is sometimes difficult to get pronouns correct. Androgynous hairstyles, clothing and names are as commonplace now as ever before and perhaps more. As such, it would seem that switching pronouns would be easy when talking with someone transgender.

Yet, like changing names, pronouns are also one of the most difficult changes for people to make. Have you ever been called "he" ladies? Men, have you been called "ma'am"? How did you feel? Were you embarrassed or upset or angry? Now imagine having to experience that every day...several times.

For many, being transgender means that one must constantly be berated with incorrect names and pronouns. In public this is not only embarrassing but can put the transgender person and anyone with them in danger.

It is important to note that, for many transgender people, neither available pronoun works. Our cultural struggles with pronouns really exemplify the failings of a binary gender system; a system many transgender people don't relate to. Ask people what pronoun they prefer. (Note: this is not only for people who you can identify as transgender. Consider asking people as a general rule.)

Again, be careful in public places. What do you think could just possibly happen if you call Jason "she" at a bar. You're over-heard by a group of people at the next table. Jason goes to the restroom. Some of those who over-heard you follow Jason into the restroom...It happens more often than you think.

To Prepare:

Again…Practice! If you're having trouble using the person's preferred pronoun, practice running through various sentences using it. Remember, a few minutes of re-training your brain and associating your mental picture of the person with the pronoun can cut down on the number of times you miss-speak. The object is to call the person by their preferred pronoun as much as possible…with the understanding that you are working to make the change, too. It is ok to make a mistake once in awhile!

In Conversation:

Again…Forgive yourself. If you make a mistake, you don’t have to correct yourself right away (which just calls more attention to the slip); just make sure you use the correct pronoun later in the conversation. Be aware of your surroundings. It can be dangerous in some areas to call a transitioning person by their former pronoun, though less obvious, perhaps, than by their former name. Be aware of who may be listening to your conversation. Be extra careful to speak of a person in transition by their preferred pronoun when in public. When in doubt, wait to discuss anything on the subject of transition, transgender, or gender until you are sure you’re in a safe space.

{mospagebreak title=Surgery and Reality}Cosmetic Surgery and Reality TV: Renew Your Awareness of Boundaries

With the surge of reality television invading the lives of avid watchers, it is easy to see why millions of people have lost their touch with reality...and boundaries. We watch each week as people eat bugs, have affair after affair, go under the knife to improve their sun-withered faces and we beg and beg for more.

Here is reality: almost every transgender person does not hold celebrity status and is not accustomed to or justifiably subject to boundary-breaking inquiry. Do not ask someone what surgeries they plan on having, what surgeries they have already had, or if you can sneak a peek at the results of any surgery.

Be compassionate! Remember, a transgender person has likely spent their entire life feeling confined and uncomfortable in their skin. They have lived year after year in an unfamiliar body. The body, for someone transgender, has to be relearned and reintroduced. It is an entirely private experience.

To Prepare:

Write down the things you are curious about in what you believe is the process of transition for the person you wish to talk with. Then, decide which of those questions you would like to be asked. Then, decide which of the remaining questions you would be comfortable with someone asking your partner, your child, your parent. The questions left are probably safe to ask.

In Conversation:

Try these questions:

- Will you be making any physical transition in your identity transition process?
- Are you comfortable talking about the physical changes you’ll encounter in your transition?
- May I ask about your physical transition?
- Are you willing to talk about what you will endure physically for your transition?

{mospagebreak title=Forsaking us}Why are You Forsaking Us? A Note about ”Jumping Ship.”

Many times in the GLBT community the friends and family of the transgender person feels a real sense of abandonment. An example: A woman transitions to a man. His former female friendships are challenged by the belief that the transgender has abandoned all sense of femininity and she is no longer able to understand women’s issues. Another example: A man transitions to a woman. Her former friendships are challenged by the belief that the transgender has abandoned all sense of masculinity and she is no longer able to identify with what it means to be a “gay man.”

This phenomenon gets played out in loss of friends, family, and chosen family in many cases. Culturally, we associate gender to sexuality and sexuality to identity and identity to gender, all of which fall under a binary system: male and female, heterosexual and homosexual, boy and girl. Consequently, when one transitions, the surrounding community assumes that the entirety of the person’s current experience is wrapped up in the outward package…the woman loses femininity, the man loses masculinity, and so forth.

We are called to change our perspective in these cases. First, this issue is about the people who feel “left” rather than the person making the transition. Many GLBT people identify with the experience of having family and friends make the assumption that they have irrevocably changed after coming out, but feeling that they are the same. This applies in cases of transgender people as well. The person is becoming more authentic, in the same way that other GLBT people did in their coming out (transition) processes.

To Prepare:

Spend some time becoming aware of the feelings that come up when you think about the transgender person in your life. Ask: Why is their transition making me feel so _____? What exactly do I believe about their transition that causes me such distress? What about their change affects me, my sense of self, my identity, my safety, or my sense of well-being? Work through the answers to these questions before you talk to the loved one in your life who has begun this important

change.

In Conversation:

Try these questions.

- Now that you have begun this transition, what does it mean for our friendship/relationship?
- What can I do to support you in this transition?
- Will you continue to talk with me about this transition and work on our friendship/relationship?
- Can we commit to finding activities to do that support both of our needs, wants, and concerns?

{mospagebreak title=Orientation vs Identity}So, Does This Mean You're Straight? - Sexual Orientation vs. Gender Identity

Sexuality and gender are not mutually dependent. A person's sexuality does not have to change when gender identity changes...and it can change. Straight men transition and are straight women; straight women transition and are straight men. Gay men transition and are lesbians; lesbians transition and are gay men. Human beings are sexual and fall on a wide spectrum of sexual orientations.

To Prepare:

- Practice making no assumptions about another person's sexual orientation.

In Conversation:

- Do not make assumptions about another's sexual orientation. If These Walls Could Talk: The Journey of the SO (Significant Other)

The world of the SOFFAs (significant others, family, friends, allies) of transgender people can be very difficult in the midst of transition. Sometimes, people will communicate things about a transgender partner to their significant other that they wouldn't say to the person in transition. Often, this is because of discomfort or bias against the transgender person. People may comment on how the transgender partner looks, or sounds, or dresses, or even make comments about partners' sexuality as a couple. Some transgender people and their partners are told that they are no longer welcome in someone's home or in a certain community because of the transition. Also, some more angry individuals may blame the SOFFA for the transgender person's transition.

Be conscious of the SO's feelings. Transitioning is an incredibly stressful experience for the partner of someone who is transgender. During the beginnings of a transition, being transgender and transitioning tends to be the main topic of their life. Remember, the SO is in just as much transition as the transgender person and will need emotional support from friends, family, coworkers, etc. Also, understand that they may not want to talk about the transition at all. Be respectful of their wishes. Being the partner of someone transgender can be extremely lonely.

In Conversation:

Change the subject every once in a while to focus on the partner and what they are interested in and pursuing in life. This will help support the partner and give them a short rest from the intensity that is the transition.

{mospagebreak title=Transition}The Never-ending Story: Once in Transition, Always in Transition

Once a person begins the transition into their true gender identity, whatever that may be, the transition never ends. The journey never reaches a finale. Transgender people have lived so long in the "wrong" body, they have missed out on so much that they are continually trying to reclaim lost time while celebrating their newly-embraced self. Once one accepts their identity, they can't turn back.

While the transition is remarkably hard on family and friends, remember, it is the most difficult for the person in transition, and their partner. This transition is about the transgender person coming into their own, feeling brave and free enough to embrace who they were created to be.

To Prepare:

Review all the work you have done so far. Now add to it the beliefs you have about the "end" of the transition. Do you believe that the transition will end next month, next year, two years from now? What do you perceive as the "end" of the transition? Now, think about your own gender identity, how it affects your world, and how it affects the people around you. Does being a woman make life any harder or easier? Does being a man make life any harder or easier? How do people treat you, based on their assumption of your gender identity? Now, try to imagine those aspects of your existence coming to a halt. Does this fit in your timeline for your friend or loved one?

In Conversation:

Avoid any language about "when this is over" or "when you finish" or "this is temporary." Remember that the process of transitioning is not a finite timeline; that your friend or loved one will be reorienting to surrounding culture for the rest of their lives, in the same way you will.

{mospagebreak title=Summary/Excercise}Summary and Exercise

Though it may be difficult for the larger community to change names or pronouns, there is no excuse for denying the person the freedom to be who they are. With every intentional misstated pronoun or name, people undermine this freedom. However, with every correct noun, with every use of the transgender person's correct name, we are showing that we are keeping an open mind, an open heart and helping create a louder voice for the person we love.

If you still struggle with knowing how to move through the transition with someone who is transgender or how to support them, here is an exercise you might use to put the transgender role into some limited perspective…

Go out one morning, afternoon, or a whole day in a gender role different than the one you identify with. Not simply donning mascara or a ball cap, but go all out. Try with all your ability to "pass" as the opposite gender. Every time you encounter someone take note of how they treat you, how they look at you, what they say, what is said about you behind your back. Are people staring? Every time someone addresses you as the incorrect gender consider that most transgender people are being addressed by the incorrect pronoun at that same moment. Every time someone says something negative about how you look notice how you feel inside and did you say anything to confront it, and if you do not confront it, why not?

See if you can "pass" for the day and then remember your Trans-etiquette and ask yourself, "How can I better support the transgender person I love?"

Being transgender is not role-playing, it is not dress-up, it is not a game. It's about the person in transition, in whatever form transition takes place. It's about freedom and liberation. It's about authenticity.

You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself… Leviticus 19:18

{mospagebreak title=Local Church Suggestions} Appendix: Local Church Trans-Friendly Suggestions

Here are some suggestions for specific things your church can do to communicate to transgender people that you are welcoming and affirming.

Gender-Neutral Toilets

Have gender-neutral toilets instead of or in addition to the assigned-gender toilets. Whether post-op, non-transitioning, or genderqueer, many transgender people appreciate not having to face even the best-intentioned gender policing when in need of the facilities.

Language for God and Community

When we speak of God and of our community, we often remember to add "she" to he and "sisters" to brothers. However, churches may be willing to move beyond the binary and add gender-neutral language like "sibling." This will acknowledge the non-transitioning transgender people and let everyone know that the church is thinking about gender outside of the binary cultural norm.

Bible Issues

Our churches and denominational material have been working on and honing our "queering the bible." Ask yourself if we are including this in our sermons and local educational materials. Highlight and emphasize transgender issues (among others) alongside spirituality and sexuality inclusion.

{mospagebreak title=Credits/Copyright}Credits/Copyright

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