

Church on the Hill

Open and Affirming Seminar I

Understanding Sexual Orientation

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Introduction by Mary Rivollier

Please use the down arrow on your keyboard to click through the presentation

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Welcome, we are so glad you are here!

At Church on the Hill, we have a tradition of welcoming everyone to our church family, just as they are.

- Introduction by Mary Rivollier
- Opening Prayer

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➤ **Objectives** of today's seminar....

- To provide education and information, and respectfully address questions about the information provided
- To provide an opportunity to build and strengthen relationships within our congregation through graceful engagement, which is a way of practicing a holy conversation
- To listen deeply to what God is saying and doing, in each of us individually and in our congregation

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- Let's begin...
- An Exercise in Memory: Looking back.....
 - I want you to think back to when you were younger, to when you first became aware of having feelings of attraction to another person or persons. These could have been feelings of emotional attraction, or romantic attraction, or your earliest stirrings of sexual attraction.
 - Do you remember how it felt inside? You may have felt excited, or nervous, or expectant, or confused. Can you remember?
 - Do you remember what you thought about your feelings of attraction and about the person or persons to whom you were attracted?

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- An Exercise in Memory: Looking back.....(continued)
 - Now can you remember....were these mostly pleasant thoughts and feelings or were they sometimes unpleasant or even scary? Can you remember about how old were you when all this began for you? Now move forward a bit in your memories, and think about how these feelings evolved for you over time, as you grew into and through your adolescence and gradually into your early adulthood.
 - Now think about the family you grew up in during that time. Were your feelings of attraction something you could share with your family and friends and others? Was it considered “normal” for you to have these feelings in your family? And how did you know this?
 - Now can you imagine growing up in a family in which the persons you felt attracted to were different from what was assumed or expected in your family? Can you imagine how confusing and even scary that might have been?

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What is Sexual Orientation?

- Enduring pattern of emotional, romantic and/or sexual attraction
- Refers to a person's sense of identity based on those attractions
- Ranges along a continuum from exclusive attraction to the other sex to exclusive attraction to the same sex
- This range of attractions has been described in various cultures and nations throughout the world
- In the US, sexual orientation is usually discussed in terms of three categories
 - Heterosexual
 - Gay or Lesbian
 - Bisexual

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What is Sexual Orientation?(continued)

- Distinct from other components of sex and gender including biological sex, gender identity, and social gender role or behavior
- Often discussed as if it were solely a characteristic of an individual
- This perspective is incomplete, because sexual orientation is also defined in terms of our relationships with others
- People express sexual orientation through behaviors with others, including simple acts such as holding hands or kissing
- Thus sexual orientation is closely tied to the intimate personal relationships that meet deeply felt needs for love, attachment and intimacy

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How do people know if they are lesbian, gay, or bisexual?

- Core attractions that form basis for adult sexual orientation typically emerge between middle childhood and early adolescence
- These patterns of emotional, romantic, and sexual attraction may arise without any prior sexual experience
- People can be celibate and still know their sexual orientation
- People have very different experiences regarding their sexual orientation
 - Some know their sexual orientation for a long time before pursuing relationships with others
 - Some engage in sexual activity before assigning a clear label to their orientation

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What causes a particular sexual orientation?

- Research has examined possible genetic, hormonal, developmental, and social and cultural influences, including parenting styles
- No consensus among scientists about the exact reasons an individual develops heterosexual, bisexual, gay or lesbian orientation
- Most people experience little or no sense of choice about their sexual orientation
- We can choose our sexual behaviors and who we express them with, however we don't get to choose our sexual orientation

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What role do prejudice and discrimination play in the lives of lesbian, gay, and bisexual persons?

- Intense prejudice and strongly held negative attitudes against LGB persons was widespread throughout much of the 20th century
- Many LGB persons in the U.S. have encountered prejudice, discrimination, and sometimes violence because of their sexual orientation
- Many LGB persons also frequently experience an imposed and enforced invisibility, invalidation, and disenfranchisement of their identities and their relationships
 - This occurs in churches, healthcare facilities, workplaces, and families

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What role do prejudice and discrimination play in the lives of lesbian, gay, and bisexual persons?.....(continued)

- Sexual orientation discrimination takes many forms
- Numerous surveys indicate that verbal harassment and abuse are nearly universal experiences among LGB persons
- Discrimination against lesbian, gay and bisexual people in employment, housing, and sports, including youth sports appears to remain widespread
- More recently, although public opinion has increasingly opposed discrimination based on sexual orientation, expressions of hostility toward lesbians and gay men remain common in U.S. society

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What role do prejudice and discrimination play in the lives of lesbian, gay, and bisexual persons?.....(continued)

- Many LGB youth from religiously conservative families continue to experience condemnation and rejection by their families and their churches
 - Although Lesbian and Gay youth make up about 5% of the youth population, they comprise about 40% of the homeless-youth population in the U.S.
- Lesbian & Gay youth are also particularly vulnerable to anti gay bullying in their schools, which contributes to the elevated risk for suicide among LGB youth
- Heterosexual youth sometimes encounter similar experiences because of their perceived sexual orientation as Lesbian or Gay

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What role do prejudice and discrimination play in the lives of lesbian, gay, and bisexual persons?.....(continued)

- HIV/AIDS pandemic in the 1980s and 1990s highlighted prejudice and discrimination against LGB persons in the U.S.
- Early in the pandemic, the assumption that HIV/AIDS was strictly a “Gay Disease” contributed to significant governmental delay in addressing the situation with funding for research and treatment
- The association of HIV/AIDS with Gay and Bisexual men led to the inaccurate belief that all gay and bisexual men were infected, which further stigmatized this population

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What is the psychological impact of prejudice and discrimination?

- Social Impact
 - Prejudice and discrimination against LGB people are reflected in the everyday stereotypes of these individuals
 - These stereotypes persist even when unsupported by evidence
 - Stereotypes are often used to excuse and justify unequal treatment of LGB persons, including limitations in job opportunities, parenting and relationship recognition

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What is the psychological impact of prejudice and discrimination?.....(continued)

- Individual Impact
 - Prejudice and discrimination may have negative consequences on mental health, especially when individuals attempt to conceal or deny their sexual orientation (“Living in the Closet”)
 - Although many LGB persons learn to cope with the social stigma against homosexuality, this pattern of prejudice can serve as a major source of stress, both individually and on relationships
 - While social support is crucial in coping with stress, anti-gay attitudes may make it difficult for LGB persons to find such support.
 - Ironically, anti-gay attitudes often restrict the friendships that even heterosexual youth might have with one another, because of the fear of being perceived as Gay or Lesbian

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Is homosexuality a mental disorder?

- Research has found no inherent association between any sexual orientation and psychopathology
- Both heterosexual and homosexual behavior are normal aspects of human sexuality
- Both have been documented in many different cultures and historical eras
- All mainstream medical and mental health organizations in the US conclude that lesbian, gay, and bisexual orientations represent normal forms of human experience.
- These organizations have long ago abandoned classifications of homosexuality as a mental disorder

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What about therapy intended to change sexual orientation from gay to straight?

- All major national mental health organizations officially expressed concerns about therapies promoted to change sexual orientation
- There is no scientifically adequate research to show that therapy aimed at changing sexual orientation is safe or effective
- Promotion of change (“conversion”) therapies reinforces stereotypes and contributes to a negative climate for LGB persons, especially those growing up in more conservative religious settings or families
- Helpful therapeutic responses to individuals troubled about their sexual attractions/orientation include helping them cope with social prejudices and stigma, resolving their internal conflicts, and leading meaningful and satisfying lives

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What is “coming out” and why is it important?

- Refers to several aspects of lesbian, gay and bisexual persons experiences
 - Self-awareness of same-sex attractions
 - Coming to an acceptance of those attractions
 - Telling of one or a few people about these attractions
 - Widespread disclosure of same-sex attractions
 - Living “visibly” as a LGB person
 - Identification with the LGB community
- Many LGB persons hesitate to come out because of risks of exposure to prejudice, discrimination, and rejection
- Some choose to keep their identity a secret, some come out in limited circumstances, and some come out in very public ways

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What is “coming out” and why is it important?.....(continued)

- Feeling positively about one’s sexual orientation and integrating it into one’s life fosters greater well-being and a sense of personal integrity
- Being able to discuss one’s sexual orientation with others can increase the availability of social support, which is crucial to mental health and psychological well-being
 - Like heterosexuals, LGB persons benefit from being able to share their lives with and receive support and validation from families, their friends, and others
- LGB persons who feel they must conceal their sexual orientation report more frequent mental health concerns than those who are able to be more open with their identity
- Coming out publically can disarm or disempower those who would use exposure of a hidden LGB identity as a threat

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What about sexual orientation and coming out during adolescence?

- Adolescence can be a period of experimentation, and many youths may question their sexual feelings.
- Becoming aware of sexual feelings is a normal developmental task of adolescence
- Sometimes adolescents have same-sex feelings or experiences that cause confusion about their sexual orientation
- This confusion tends to decline over time, with different outcomes for different individuals
- Some adolescents desire and engage in same sex behavior, but do not identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual

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What about sexual orientation and coming out during adolescence?.....(continued)

- Others experience continued feelings of same-sex attraction, but do not engage in any sexual activity, or they may engage in heterosexual behavior for varying lengths of time.
- Because of the stigma associated with same-sex attractions, many youths experience same-sex attraction for many years before becoming sexually active with partners of the same sex or disclosing their attractions to others
- For some, this process of exploring same-sex attractions leads to a lesbian, gay, or bisexual identity
- Acknowledging this identity can help bring an end to confusion

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What about sexual orientation and coming out during adolescence?.....(continued)

- When these young people receive the support of parents and others, they are often able to live satisfying and healthy lives and move through the usual process of adolescent development
- Some young people may be perceived as LGB for not abiding by traditional gender roles, and regardless of whether they identify as heterosexual, or lesbian, gay, or bisexual, they can encounter prejudice and discrimination based on the presumption they are Gay
- The best support for these young people are school and social climates that do not tolerate discriminatory language or behaviors

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What about sexual orientation and coming out during adolescence?.....(continued)

- Young people who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual may be more likely to face being bullied and harassed in school
- These negative experiences are associated with negative outcomes, such as suicidal thoughts or behaviors, and high risk behaviors such as unprotected sex and increased use of alcohol and drugs
- Where problems do occur, they are closely associated with experiences of bias and discrimination in their environments
- Support from important people in the teen's life can provide a very helpful buffer or counterpart to bias and discrimination
- When these young people receive support of parents and others, they are able to live satisfying and healthy lives and move through the process of adolescent development

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What age should lesbian, gay, bisexual youths come out?

- Risks and benefits of coming out are different for different youths in different circumstances
- Some live in families where support for sexual orientation is clear and stable...these youths may encounter less risk in coming out, even at a young age
- Young people who live in less supportive families may face more risks in coming out, including violence, rejection, and abandonment by their own families
- All young people who come out may experience bias, discrimination, bullying, and even violence in their schools, social groups, work places, and faith communities
- Supportive families, friends, schools and churches are important buffers against the negative impacts of these experiences

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What is the nature of same-sex relationships?

- Research indicates many lesbians and gay men want, establish, and maintain committed relationships
- Studies have found same-sex and heterosexual couples to be equivalent on measures of relationship satisfaction and commitment
- Despite decades of social hostility toward and invalidation of same-sex relationships, research shows that many lesbians and gay men form stable and lasting relationships
- Factors that influence relationship satisfaction, commitment, and stability have been shown to be very similar for same-sex married or cohabiting couples and heterosexual married couples

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Can Lesbians and Gay men be good parents?

- At least 33% of female same-sex couples and 22% of male same-sex couples are raising children in their homes (2000 U.S. Census)
- Some people have raised concerns about the well-being of children in these families, with most of these concerns based on negative stereotypes about lesbians and gay men
 - Compared to children of heterosexual parents, are children of lesbian and gay parents more likely:
 - To have problems with sexual identity?
 - To have problems in personal development in areas other than sexual identity?
 - To have problems with social relationships?
 - To be sexually abused by a parent or by a parent's friends or acquaintances?

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Can Lesbians and Gay men be good parents?.....(continued)

- There is no scientific support for any of these fears. Overall, available research shows that children of lesbian and gay parents do not differ markedly from the children of heterosexual parents in their development, adjustment, or overall well-being.
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yMLZO-sObzQ> 3:01
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3UMMn6oVtOc> 1:46
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pvtKI_snIhM 3:02

Primary References

- American Psychological Association. (2008). Answers to your questions: for a better understanding of sexual orientation and homosexuality. Washington, DC: Author.
- Williams Institute, UCLA, Serving our youth: Findings from a national survey of services providers working with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender youth who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless.

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Open and Affirming Seminar I – Understanding Sexual Orientation

Presented on January 21, 2018 and repeated on January 22.

Questions asked during the seminar, with answers provided

Written Questions Submitted

1. Q: How many people in the U. S. are LGBT?
 - A. Sexual orientation occurs on a continuum from exclusively same sex orientation to exclusively opposite sex orientation. The best data we currently have indicates that about 5% of the population have an exclusively or primarily same sex orientation

2. Q: Can one's environment contribute to Sexual Orientation, such as following sexual abuse when very young? Questioner had a female friend who had never been able to trust men after early sexual abuse, but later in life had a long-term relationship with another female.
 - A. Although many factors that may influence sexual orientation have been researched, there is as of yet no definitive determination of what causes sexual orientation. Most people experience no sense of choice about their sexual orientation, and most people are aware by early adolescence or even younger which sex of individuals they are attracted to.
 - A. In the case in question, without speaking with the female friend directly, there is no way of knowing what sexual orientation she was or how her early sexual abuse may have contributed to her decision to maintain a relationship with another female.

3. Q: Are there genetic changes leading to a change in sexual orientation?
 - A. A: Genetic factors appear to be involved in determining one's sexual orientation, but to date studies do not identify all the genetic influences at work.

4. Q: The first woman who spoke during the service indicated that this process would make it possible for LGBTQ2A people would be welcome to become church leaders in this church; are they not welcome to do so now? Why do they need this approval?
 - A. John Fenner, Church Moderator, answered that we welcome ALL people and do not discriminate against anyone who would like to serve on or lead teams as volunteers with the church, and we always have. There may be some self-censorship when people are not totally sure of their acceptance.
 - A. Sarah Hugus, Vice Moderator and former Moderator, added that with the public ONA designation, LGBT individuals would feel welcome to apply for staff positions as well as volunteer leadership. In addition, a search committee for a new pastor would also solicit LGBT candidates, who would not have been likely to apply in the past when we have not had the official ONA designation. This enlarges the pool of talented and qualified individuals available who would feel welcome to apply and serve.
 - A. Jeff Newcomb, ONA Sub-Committee: The ONA covenant is exactly what it says it is: a public and explicit invitation to LGBT persons, *who are a historically excluded group within the larger Christian Church*, to take part in the full ministry and life of Church on the Hill. Without making this decision on the ONA covenant first, LGBT persons would

not know that Church on the Hill truly welcomes applications to the highest levels of leadership, nor would search committees or church leaders know that the congregation would accept the candidacy or appointment of LGBT persons to the most sensitive leadership positions at Church on the Hill.

5. Q: Regarding children raised by a Gay or Lesbian couple; as they mature, what percent become gay or lesbian vs. percent who become heterosexual? Is there any leaning toward parents' sexual orientation?
 - A. There is NO credible evidence to indicate that children raised in by Gay or Lesbian parents are influenced in their sexual orientation by the orientation of their parents. Overall, available research shows that children of lesbian and gay parents DO NOT DIFFER markedly from the children of heterosexual parents in their development, adjustment, or overall well-being.

6. Q: In prisons, are LGBT prisoners a focus point for violence by other prisoners - and should they be kept apart from violent prisoners? Also, are those prisoners actually lesbian, gay or bi-sexual?
 - A. Yes, LGBT prisoners are vulnerable to sexual violence and exploitation, as are many younger male prisoners. Men in prison frequently have no other option for sexual activity than fellow prisoners. Research shows that when these men are released from the prison system, they revert to having sex with women, making clear that their sexual behavior in prison was related to availability and not to sexual orientation.

7. Q: What percent of the gay and lesbian population have HIV/Aids vs. heterosexual population?
 - A. More than 1.1 million people in the U.S. are living with HIV today, but 1 in 7 of them don't know it.
 - A. Although new HIV infection in the U.S. and worldwide is declining somewhat, HIV infection in the U.S. is increasing most rapidly among young African American gay and bisexual men. HIV/AIDS has also spread rapidly in other areas of the world, including especially in Africa, where it is widely spread through the heterosexual population. HIV/AIDS is NOT a gay disease.

8. Q: Are women more fluid in their orientation/behavior, than men? (Additional written question submitted after seminar ended)
 - A. Women in the U.S. tend to have fewer societal restrictions on experiencing and expressing simple affection toward other women, whereas U.S. men continue to experience significant social and cultural pressures to restrict their experiences and expressions of affection toward other men, regardless of sexual orientation.

Additional verbal questions asked during seminar

9. Q: Asker's cousin acted very effeminate as a small child, and continued to act that way as he grew older. Much of his family accepted him as he was, except his father who could not accept his feminine tendencies. The cousin joined the military, which was not a good experience for him, as he didn't feel like he fit into military culture. He also abused drugs, but eventually got

cleaned up. Subsequently he had a long-term relationship with a female, who was also a drug abuser. Could this have been him changing from one sexual orientation to another?

- A. Highly unlikely, as sexual orientation is an enduring pattern of emotional, romantic and sexual attraction. It is not uncommon for heterosexual men to exhibit “feminine” mannerisms, however this does not determine their sexual orientation. In addition, there have been many instances in which gay or bisexual men or women maintain relationships with persons of the opposite sex for a variety of reasons. These relationships do not necessarily involve sexual interaction between the partners.
10. Q: What about transgender people and applying conversion therapy to them?
- A. Conversion therapy is a discredited method intended to change a person’s sexual orientation, NOT their gender.
 - A. Transgender individuals sometimes go through treatments to transition their gender. This will be addressed further in a subsequent ONA seminar.