

Reaching Gay Youth

By DJ Thompson

The number of youth today embracing a gay identity is alarming. I was one of them. At nineteen I was fully immersed in my own struggle. I was desperate for attention, affirmation and affection from the same-sex, and slowly finding homosexuality as the only alternative for me. It was tempting to believe in the philosophy of this world: you are born gay and no, you cannot change. The hopelessness in that message is terrible to live with. However, I also know what it is like to have caring Christians reach out to me and help me come to terms with who I really was. As a confused

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and hurting teenager, I was referred to a Christian ministry to homosexuals in California. It was there that I recommitted my life to Christ and I began my discipleship, getting Godly answers to the questions that I had been asking the gay community. After a time of learning and coming to know God better, I began to feel compelled to give back and begin reaching gay youth in the same way that I was reached. I strongly believe that these youth can be redeemed by the grace of God and you & I can partner with God to help bring that about.

During adolescence most people determine the morals and personal identity they will embrace for the remainder of their life. This process often starts with much confusion and many challenges before any semblance of clarity comes. This is all the more true for youth deciding their sexual identity. The University of Minnesota Hospital & Clinics studied 35,000 students in Minnesota secondary schools. One of the things reported in the study was that 25.9% of 12 year-old children were "unsure" of their sexual orientation. This figure declined to 5% by age 17. The data from this study indicates that uncertainty about sexual orientation is a normal part of growing up and that it is usually replaced with certainty during the growing process. The data also indicates that social influences have a bearing on sexuality.

Today's youth live in a sex-saturated culture. The secular world bombards them every day using TV, movies, magazines and music. Tragically, misinformation and exploitation combined with the natural uncertainty of the growing-up process influence youth to embrace a gay identity. These fallacies and half-truths originate in the schools, media and propaganda of pro-gay organizations targeting teens.

A teenager's legitimate needs to feel special and accepted along with a history of abuse and rejection from the same-sex are the ingredients that make homosexuality appealing. These youth, starved for attention, find same-sex romance at least somewhat satisfying. That's the bad news. The good news is that these youth are redeemable. I am a living example of this. And so I say that the teenage years are a crucial period for the Church of Jesus Christ to speak to youth tempted by homosexuality.

Although we can become cynical about the times that we live in, when God is put in the equation of life, a hope that doesn't disappoint rises within us. How can we reach these youth and reverse this unfortunate trend?

Schools

One of the best settings to intervene in a struggling youth's life is school. A Canadian study of about 11,000 students reported that 51% of Grade 9 boys and 41% of Grade 9 girls identify school as their primary source of information regarding sexual issues. Christian schools increasingly say that while they are equipped to teach Christian morality to their students, they are not equipped to recognize or help the students in their schools who are struggling with the childhood roots of homosexuality. Exodus Global Alliance recently developed a curriculum unit designed to facilitate discussion and understanding about youth, sexuality and the roots of homosexuality. Designed for Christian schools, this study unit can be added to a school's curriculum to provide students with a Christian perspective about: why youth experience uncertainty in the area of sexuality, why same-gender attractions can develop when learning how to relate to the same sex, the contributing factors of homosexuality and what kind of help can be provided. Christian schools and teachers can provide a more complete message to students about Godly sexuality and they can learn how to identify and help those students who are struggling with the roots of homosexuality or other kinds of sexual uncertainty or brokenness.

Commissioning and Equipping Christian Youth

While this curriculum may not be embraced by secular schools, the Body of Christ can still be light and salt to struggling youth through Christian youth, youth leaders and educators. I believe this generation of Christians has the energy and willingness to help struggling friends; they just need to be encouraged and equipped for ministry. Many times youth groups neglect to adequately address the subject of homosexuality with young Christians. And Christian youth are reluctant to befriend lost or struggling youth because they do not understand homosexuality (and therefore, are not always compassionate) or they do not know how they can help. But when young believers have an opportunity to hear testimony and they learn that there are ministries prepared to disciple the youth and help with the issues of their sexuality, then many become motivated to come alongside gay peers or strugglers and lead them to Christ.

Many people are reluctant to befriend struggling youth because they do not understand homosexuality or they do not know if they can even help.

Last year I wrote a booklet titled *Reaching Gay Youth* in response to the most frequently asked question I received after speaking to groups of young Christians: "I have a gay friend. What do I do?" The booklet addresses the attitudes and approaches that I personally take in ministry to hurting youth. The booklet is affordable and you can purchase a copy by contacting the Exodus Global Alliance office. The following page has an excerpt from *Reaching Gay Youth*.

opening doors

Excerpt from Reaching Gay Youth

Have the right priority. Sometimes we can get our perspective skewed when it comes to teens and sexuality. If, for example, Christians want to minister to a non-Christian gay youth, our efforts should not be to initially get him in a support group to resolve his same-sex attractions. Heterosexuality is not the goal, but the byproduct of holiness. When I first meet homosexuals, I try to discern if they know Christ or not because eternal direction holds a higher value than sexual preference. If the individual is not a Christian then we should first look for an opportunity to introduce them to Jesus, share the Gospel with them and give them an invitation to a Bible Study or a healthy social function. Be gentle but diligent in inviting youth to church functions. A gay teen may have various reasons (including being intimidated, ashamed, ambivalent and fearful) for their reluctance to join such a group. Continue to invite them so they can see the great contrast between partying on the weekends in the gay lifestyle and what Christians do to have fun.

Homosexuality is a symptom of a spiritual and relational problem. Therefore, simply stopping the behavior is not really getting to the root of what is making the person “feel different.”

Often times a cycle of envy is the irritant at the root of same-sex attractions. In the case of pre-homosexual young men, for example, many claim they were never very athletic or fit in with other boys. Many were genuinely interested in solitary activities that included a lot of creativity and academics. While art, music, reading and imagination are great interests for anyone, by virtue of these interests, the young person or child may require prolonged times in isolation. As a result, some young people set themselves apart from the same-sex bonding that is normally necessary to build identification with the same-sex, self-confidence and camaraderie with others of their gender. An insecurity usually later develops into envy of those who are stronger, taller, masculine/feminine or confident, attributes they feel they lack. Furthermore, because the pre-homosexual child may not have developed the same interests, they later cannot connect with others of the same-sex during adolescence. It becomes a vicious cycle of “feeling different” while at the same time being physically attracted to those in which they feel they do not measure up. Although anatomically the same, in a pre-homosexual youth’s mind, they are in many respects opposite of their same-sex counterparts. In this regard, opposites do attract.

Be patient and trust God. What about the person who is not committed to the Lord or to change? Each time I meet with a young person who may be dabbling in homosexuality, I try to explain to him why homosexuality will leave him disappointed. While two men or two women can share the same erotic feelings, similarly they have the same deficiencies. Therefore, they are unable to complete one another. Since both suffer from the same spiritual and relational problems that preclude them from being able to fulfill each other, they are not complements.

Offering this material to those trying to reach out to someone and providing helpful resources to the struggling youth are both vital. What else can we do?

What Can I Do?

Pray. God works through Exodus only when you pray. Exodus needs people who will pray for our ministry to youth. Will you send us a letter telling us that God has called you to pray?

Give. Exodus’ ministry to people depends on your financial support. Most of our support comes from individual donors, not institutions, company sponsors or government grants. Will you give as God directs you so that a ministry leader or missionary who is looking for training can come to this conference? Send your gift using an Exodus response card or contact the Exodus Global Alliance office listed below. If you want to give specifically for youth ministry, you can designate your gift to Missions—Project DT.

Prevention

Prevention is another aspect of ministering to youth. We need to teach youth a more complete message about sexuality. This includes teaching youth that young people regularly begin adolescence with uncertainty. They should not interpret uncertainty as a sign of homosexuality. Temporary same-sex attractions may develop during adolescence as part of learning how to relate to and attach to people of the same gender. Sexual preferences are not fixed or hard coded. They can and do change.

Prevention must include healthy relationships and friendships. Head knowledge does not guide our feelings and attractions. The heart does. And youth learn how to have healthy relationships by encouragement and experience. Your role in the lives of strugglers is to provide loving, supportive Godly friendships.

Recognizing the frequency of abuse and exploitation that occurs in children’s lives, simple and loving steps can be taken so that children and youths can recover from these and will not grow up to find homosexuality appealing in the first place. Finally, we need to help parents about how to appropriately build a healthy gender identity in their children.

Youth need to hear a more complete and compelling Christian message about homosexuality.

Any endeavour to reach youth struggling with or involved in homosexuality must be balanced and multifaceted. It needs to counter the many ways that others try to mislead teens into believing that their experiences and feelings during the development of sexuality mean they are homosexuals, that homosexuals are born that way and God no longer considers that behaviour immoral. To proclaim the simple truth that any youth can inherit the kingdom of God and that God can restore their damaged sexuality requires boldness and persistence. ***Please join us in action and in prayer.*** It is only through the Lord Jesus Christ that these youth’s needs for significance, security, sexual redemption and salvation can be met. Jesus’ words two millennia ago encapsulates the situation that the church finds itself today:

“I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest.”

There is a harvest of youth looking for answers and love in the world. But who will reach them? May God grant us grace and wisdom to rise to the occasion and reach this generation.

Curriculum. The Exodus curriculum unit is designed for use in Christian schools. It is provided with a training seminar so that teachers will be equipped to use it. Contact info@exodusglobalalliance.org if you want more information about the material or you want to participate in additional curriculum development.

Youth Ministry. Contact info@exodusglobalalliance.org to invite a youth leader from Exodus to come and speak to young people or train youth leaders. Use the order form in the On-line Resources page of the Exodus Global Alliance website to purchase copies of the booklet *Reaching Gay Youth*.

www.exodusglobalalliance.org/onlineresourcesc65.php