

Understanding *and* Including *Our* LGBT *Brothers and Sisters*

We can all help unify our wards and communities.

By Ryan J Wessel

In the first few months after being called as a bishop, I was surprised when three sets of parents in my ward each approached me in private to let me know that they had a child who identified as gay or transgender. In each case, the parents expressed sincere love for their child coupled with various levels of concern that their child would not fit in the ward community.

Eventually, other families also shared similar information with me, and I realized that even though I wasn't too familiar with these experiences, as a bishop I had the privilege of helping *all* of my ward members build a more unified community, no matter what they were experiencing.

I quickly realized that to be a more effective bishop, I needed to be willing to try to understand the experiences of members who identify as LGBT and their families. So, through heartfelt and open conversations, trial and error, a lot of study, and relying on the Lord for understanding, I learned a lot about how I could provide greater support to members in these circumstances as they strive to come unto Christ.

My eyes were opened to the need for unity and understanding, and I learned a few lessons that helped me as a bishop set a more inclusive tone with regard to all of our LGBT brothers and sisters. I hope that as leaders and others read what I learned, they will find some helpful ideas for their own situations.



Lesson 1: Follow the Living Apostles

I quickly discovered the value of becoming familiar with the most recent apostolic teachings about the topic.

A beautiful truth of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is that we are led by *living* apostles and prophets (see Doctrine and Covenants 1:30). And to me, the word *living* implies that we have guidance *in* our time for how the gospel applies to the *needs* of our time. Therefore, if we rely only on the language of the past, we may miss out on beautiful and important guidance the Lord is providing through our current prophets.

One resource that helped me review recent apostolic teachings was the Life Help section of the Church's website, especially the pages titled "Same-Sex Attraction" and "Transgender." A few statements that specifically stood out to me include the following:

- Elder D. Todd Christofferson of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles said: "The diversity we find now in the Church may be just the beginning. Frankly, I think we will see greater and greater diversity. . . .

[T]he fact that people can bring different gifts and perspectives and the wide range of variance and backgrounds and challenges that people face will show us what really is essential in the gospel of Christ. And that much of the rest, that has been perhaps acquired over time and is more cultural than doctrinal, can slip away, and we can really learn to be disciples."¹

- Elder Quentin L. Cook of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles extended the invitation to "be at the forefront in terms of expressing love, compassion, and outreach. Let's not have families exclude or be disrespectful of those who choose a different lifestyle as a result of their feelings about their own gender."²

To encourage my ward to study the latest apostolic teachings on this topic, we dedicated one of our combined fifth Sunday lessons to discuss how we could better follow the guidelines. That lesson turned out to be a deeply useful, poignant, and edifying experience.



Find more resources in the Life Help section at ChurchofJesusChrist.org.

“When you’ve opened your heart to other people, you see that we all belong.”

—President Jean B. Bingham

Lesson 2: Choose Faith over Fear

The unfamiliar can be scary. As a new bishop, it was daunting to reach out to a member of my ward who identified as gay and needed spiritual help. It was challenging to lead discussions about this topic and to counsel parents of youth who were struggling with their identity.

A wave of anxious thoughts would come to mind:

“What if I say the wrong thing?”

“What if I sound too conservative or too extreme?”

“Do I even know enough to be helpful?”

One day while contemplating my fears, my mind was drawn to study scriptures that mentioned fear. I felt peace when I read, “Perfect love casteth out all fear” (Moroni 8:16), and that “there is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear” (1 John 4:18).

Those truths helped me to remember that if I acted out of sincere love, I could be confident in receiving guidance and help from the Lord.

I can testify that when I was willing and humble enough to follow the promptings of the Holy Ghost, even when I felt inadequate in unfamiliar situations, I experienced the promise that God will “make weak things become strong” (Ether 12:27).

Lesson 3: Utilize Simple Practices—for Leaders

By seeking advice from faithful resources regarding this topic, I discovered a few practical tips that have had a positive influence on my ability as a bishop to build a community of inclusion. As you rely on the Spirit, you may want to adapt some of the following suggestions to meet the needs of your ward’s circumstances:

- Reach out to individuals who are familiar with LGBT issues to help you learn and understand their perspectives. This could include your stake president, your ward council, other bishops in your area, trusted friends, and members of your ward who identify as LGBT and their families. The Church’s “Same-Sex Attraction” web page (ChurchofJesusChrist.org/topics/gay) can also provide guidance. There is so much help around us, and none of us are alone in fulfilling our callings.
- Humbly share your testimony, and likewise don’t be afraid to ask about things you do not fully understand. We offer support even by being willing to listen and learn.

- Do not be afraid to apologize if you have said or done something that is hurtful, even if it was unintentional. Reciprocal openness builds trust.
- If a friend or ward member makes unhelpful or hurtful comments about LGBT individuals, consider the best way to respond. Most of the time these comments come from inexperience and are not intended to be disrespectful. Giving private guidance can be helpful.
- Be careful that your language toward *all* of God’s children is harmonious with your covenants and calling, no matter whom you’re speaking with.
- When ward members share their experiences, it’s deeply personal. Don’t share their private information without their permission.
- Remember that what someone feels and how they choose to respond to those feelings are not the same thing. A Gospel Topics essay explains: “The Church distinguishes between same-sex attraction and homosexual behavior. People who experience same-sex attraction or identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual can make and keep covenants with God and fully and worthily participate in the Church. Identifying as gay, lesbian, or bisexual or experiencing same-sex attraction is not a sin and does not prohibit one from participating in the Church, holding callings, or attending the temple.”³
- Be careful not to limit members’ opportunities to contribute if they identify as gay or transgender. Your ward members all have unique experiences and points of view that can be beneficial to your ward. As Elder Christofferson also taught, “Someone who is following . . .

the standards, [the] teachings of the gospel of Christ, though they may be dealing with same-sex attraction, really there is no reason they cannot be fully participative, that they can’t be a full-fledged member of the Church, and hold callings, and speak, and enter the temple, and serve there, and all the other opportunities and blessings that can come from Church membership will be available to them.”⁴

Continuing to Learn and Love

In the time since I was called as a bishop, I have come to strongly believe that each of our brothers and sisters has a beautiful and unique contribution to make to the gospel of Jesus Christ, to our communities, and to our individual lives. And regardless of our role in the ward, it’s a blessed responsibility and privilege to build a more unified community by seeking to better love, understand, and support each of our spiritual brothers and sisters.

As President Jean B. Bingham, Relief Society General President, testified: “If you keep your mind open and your heart open, you find out lots of wonderful things about people that you might not have ever expected. When you’ve experienced, when you’ve seen, when you’ve opened your heart to other people, you see that we all belong.”⁵ ■

The author lives in Utah, USA.

NOTES

1. D. Todd Christofferson, in “Same-Sex Attraction,” Life Help, ChurchofJesusChrist.org.
2. Quentin L. Cook, in “Same-Sex Attraction,” Life Help, ChurchofJesusChrist.org.
3. Gospel Topics, “Same-Sex Attraction,” topics.ChurchofJesusChrist.org; see also *General Handbook: Serving in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 38.6.15, ChurchofJesusChrist.org.
4. D. Todd Christofferson, in “Same-Sex Attraction,” Life Help, ChurchofJesusChrist.org.
5. Jean B. Bingham, in “Same-Sex Attraction,” Life Help, ChurchofJesusChrist.org.

