



EVERYDAY YOUTH MINISTRY



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Ministering to Gay Teenagers A Guide for Youth Workers

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MINISTERING TO GAY TEENAGERS

A Guide for Youth Workers

BY SHAWN HARRISON



AN **EVERYDAY YOUTH MINISTRY**
RESOURCE FROM SIMPLY YOUTH MINISTRY

:: THE VOICE OF THE IN-THE-TRENCHES YOUTH WORKER

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THE JOURNEY

When I was about 14, I remember watching a news segment that showed two guys kissing each other and thinking to myself, "That's what I am...gay." Ever since I could remember, I had liked guys. In my early teen years, I tried dating girls and even tried having sex with girls; but for the most part, those physical things never provided the same satisfaction that my attractions for guys did.

I knew I was different, and the comments of others confirmed it. I didn't hunt, drool over girls, or work on cars. I didn't play or follow sports religiously. I hated gym class. I had more girls than guys as friends. I was an art major who loved the theater, choir, and writing

poetry in coffeehouses. As my peers would attest, I was a typical gay teenager, and they weren't shy about reminding me what I was every day. "Fag," "Homo," "Queer," "Sissy," "Freak," and other slurs were my nicknames. Some days I wondered if they were my actual name and if "Shawn" was someone different.

People's favorite name for me, though, was "Faggot." Some days it was "The Fag," as if I was the only gay student in school. I had other classmates who were gay, but I was the most vocal of the group. People hated our existence, so I hated them right back. I was bold on the outside, but deeply depressed and suicidal on the inside. No one truly knew the cliff I was standing on—not even my closest friends. I had attempted suicide a couple of times; each time God thwarted my plans.

My biggest adversaries weren't jocks; they were Christians. Every day I was damned to hell, and while other "sinners" had a chance at God's love and forgiveness, my friends and I were never offered such hope. This condemnation further sealed my anger and hate toward God—a being I heard about growing up but didn't know or understand.

Different Time, Same Issue

My story takes place in the '90s, and while times have changed, my experience still resembles what many gay¹ teens today face. In fact, with students coming out as early as middle school, life seems a lot harder for gay teenagers now than when I was that age. Suicide seems to be on the rise, and the issue of kids being bullied remains significant, especially for gay teenagers. These patterns need to change.

While society is trying to be proactive, it seems that the church spends more time being reactive. As the vessel of God's message, however, the body of Christ needs to be at the forefront of proactively ministering to and loving gay teens. This needs to be done regardless of their response and regardless of other factors. The church is long overdue in stepping out of its comfort zone and embracing a group of people who need to experience the love of Jesus like never before. And I believe that one particular group in the church can be game changers in this area: youth workers.

This short book isn't about proving a theological position on homosexuality, nor is it a book of blame and judgment. *Ministering to Gay Teenagers* is

designed to equip youth workers in ministering to gay teenagers, their families, and the gay community at-large. While the majority of our conversation focuses on gay teenagers, many of the principles found in this book also are relevant when ministering to gay adults.

Ministry to the gay community isn't hard; it's similar to ministering to any other group of people. The main difference would be that ministry to gays and lesbians can require deeper authenticity in love, character, truth, and presence because of the years of mistreatment from the church toward this community. A lack of authenticity in these areas will cause your ministry to crumble. In this standard, then, we must understand and respond in the ways of Jesus.

An Opportunity for the Church

The issue of homosexuality is deep and complex. Whether genetics or family environments play a sole part in one's homosexuality—the nature vs. nurture debate—or whether it's a mixture of both, the fact remains that gays and lesbians are a part of today's culture and family structure. This book does not attempt to resolve or take sides in the debate over the causes of homosexuality. Along the way, I'll offer

my thoughts on the relationship between someone's homosexuality and faith, but I recognize that other Christians may disagree with my conclusions. My hope is to spur people toward an honest conversation about what we can do and how we can respond to people who are gay or who are struggling with their sexual identity. The question for the church, in particularly youth workers, is how we will respond. Some Christians are trying to take such action, but now it's time that the greater church awaken to do the same.

The same grace that was offered to you and me, as we entered into a relationship with God, should be extended to all who walk through the doors of our churches. The church should not compromise truth, but it should not withhold grace either. Nowhere in the church is this more vital to embrace than in the youth room. As more teenagers are coming out to family and friends, our youth rooms are often the entry point in which gay students first experience God. How they first encounter God, personally and communally, and how people react to them can determine their subsequent steps.

The Power of Authentic Friendship

I was never a part of a youth group growing up. I walked away from a shallow acquaintanceship with God and decided it was better to be agnostic. If God wasn't for me, I wasn't going to be for God, either. As I said earlier, Christians were my biggest intimidators and condemners—that is, except for one. I became friends with Yvonne in 11th grade. All I knew of her was that she was a Christian and that we belonged to the same SADD (Students Against Destructive Decisions) chapter at school. After some brief times of hanging out, we soon became good friends. She, my best friend (who was also gay), and I quickly became an inseparable trio. My best friend and I knew what Yvonne believed, but we also knew she was different from other Christians we'd met. For the first time in my life, I physically saw Jesus Christ within a person.

Yvonne never preached to us, she didn't slam the Bible over our heads—in fact, I don't think she ever read her Bible to us—and she didn't force us to attend church or youth group. My friend and I attended on our own, about two times, but it was because of the friendship we had already established with Yvonne. She really stood by us and our other gay friends

because she valued her friendship with us, as we valued our friendship with her.

She was there for us when my best friend and I dated each other, and broke up, and when we had failed relationships with other guys. She heard our doubts about God, and she stood beside us when other Christians condemned us. On the other side, my friends and I saw Yvonne slip up in her walk with Jesus. We saw her ask for forgiveness, we heard her own questions about God, and we stood by her as she tried to stand for her morals.

Whether it was known to Yvonne or not, she was planting authentic seeds into my life through her actions and love. God was using her to change my life, but neither of us knew it. On July 14, 1996, a month after I graduated, I accepted Jesus Christ as my Savior. Yvonne was the first person I called; she was also the first person to give me a Bible. Later she told me that before she would pick me up or after she had dropped me off, she would pray that I would see and follow Christ as my Lord and Savior. Those faithful prayers were heard.

In those subsequent days as a young Christian, I decided for myself that I wanted to “change” my identity focus—one that fit my new life as a follower of Christ. I had no idea what I was doing, and though people tried to offer advice and support, I kept struggling to find who I really was. It’s not that I had suddenly lost all my attractions toward men—I hadn’t. Instead, I began to make a choice that I was no longer going to allow my attractions toward men lead my life and define who I was. As I grew closer to Christ—and believe me, this took a long time—I began to have more freedom in denying my own desires for men, while growing a zeal to desire more of God.

As I grew in this newfound freedom, I began to realize and understand that we are all born with certain tendencies—some being useful and some being harmful. In reading the Bible and believing what the Bible says, I began to comprehend that I was born with a sinful nature, just like everyone else. In being born with a sinful nature, we are all prone to act upon temptations that come our way—such as greed, lying, stealing, adultery, lust—but we are also prone to not act upon given temptations.

This is how free will works: God gives us a choice to either do what is right or do what is wrong. My sinful nature caused me to choose my own ways in life, over what God wanted—and it still does! I was quickly becoming aware that I was in a serious battle, one in which I was a key player and where I was the “ground” being fought over (see Romans 6–8, Galatians 5, and Ephesians 6:10-20).

In this understanding, I felt God was asking me to resist my attraction toward men, to begin to see that acting upon my attractions was sinful, and to follow passionately after God. Again, this was over a four-year period (age 19-23) of growing, wrestling, doubting, trusting, and struggling with everything I was learning and reading about God. I had no clue what I was doing, but I was so in love with him that I didn’t care what God asked of me—as long as I was following him, I knew I would be OK.

By God’s awesome grace, I met a woman whom I fell in love with, and we married in May 2001. From the beginning, my wife, Emily, has known about my past and struggles. God has used her in mighty ways, as we have questioned things together and have walked faithfully on the path God has set before us. It’s very

humbling to be married—at times I really don't feel like I deserve it, nor do I feel I deserve being a father of three awesome kids. That's the beauty of God's grace, though: We get what we don't deserve.

I realize my ending doesn't speak for everyone's situation, as God calls each of us to our own unique journey with him. I also realize not everyone will agree with me on this, but I don't believe homosexuality is something that people can turn on or off at any given moment, nor can others change someone. In fact, the issue of "change" looks different for everyone, as we'll look at in the following chapters. Here's the main point we need to keep at the forefront. Christ came to offer life—abundant, eternal life—where death once reigned. In his death and resurrection, we are transformed into new creations. Through him, we have the power of the Holy Spirit to accomplish what seems impossible, as long as our focus is on him and not ourselves.

The issue is not whether one deals with same-sex attractions or not, whether one marries the opposite sex, or whether one stays celibate. The issue is whether we will forsake everything to follow Christ.