



# Transgender 101

## Transgender Identity, Welcome, and Resources

Our culture tends to limit its understanding of gender to only two options: man and woman. LGBT Ministries believes there are more than two genders. We use the word “transgender” in our office’s title as an umbrella term to describe the following people: crossdressers; people who identify as genderqueer, third gender, gender fluid, and/or two spirit; some intersex individuals; transsexuals; and all self-identified trans people. But even this is not completely accurate. Read on!

### Sex and Gender

*Sex* (e.g., male, female, intersex) is based on biological attributes such as anatomy, chromosomes, and hormones. *Gender* (e.g., man, woman, transgender, genderqueer) refers to cultural and social understandings.

### Gender Binary

A system of classifying sex and gender into two distinct and disconnected forms, dividing people into masculine and feminine bodies, identities, roles, and attributes. The gender binary is dependent on policing people to make sure they don’t digress from the system in appearance, anatomy, or behavior.

### Sexual Orientation

Sexual orientation refers to sexual, affectional, and/or romantic attraction, and is different from gender identity. Gender and sexual orientation are often lumped together, despite being different, because of societal expectations around sex and gender. Transgender individuals can have any sexual orientation. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and straight are examples of sexual orientations. Everyone has a sexual orientation.

### Gender Identity

Gender identity refers to an individual’s sense of being a man, a woman, neither of these, both, and so on—it is one’s inner sense of being and one’s own understanding of how one relates to the gender binary. Everyone has a gender identity.

### Gender Expression

Gender expression describes how people manifest masculinity, femininity, both, or neither through their appearance, behavior, dress, speech patterns, and more. This term refers to how a person expresses their gender identity or the cues people use to identify gender.

### Transgender

The word *transgender* was first coined as a way of distinguishing gender benders with no desire for surgery or hormones from *transsexuals*, those who desired to legally and medically change their sex. More recently *transgender* and/or *trans* has become an umbrella term that is popularly used to include all people who transgress dominant conceptions of gender, or at least all people who identify themselves as doing so.

### Cisgender

*Cisgender*, or *cis*, is a term that is becoming increasingly popular to describe people who are not trans or gender variant—in other words, those whose gender identities, presentations, and behavior “match” (according to the gender binary) the sex they were assigned at birth. *Cis* is a prefix with roots that mean “on the same side”; *trans* and *cis* are neutral descriptors analogous to the prefixes *homo* and *hetero*.



### **Cross-Dressing and Drag**

Cross-dressing refers to occasionally wearing clothing of the “opposite” gender, and someone who considers this an integral part of their identity may identify as a crossdresser (note: the term *crossdresser* is preferable to *transvestite* and neither may ever be used to describe a transsexual person). *Drag queens* and *drag kings* are performers who offer exaggerated, performative presentations of gender and often cross-dress. Cross-dressing and drag are not necessarily tied to erotic activity or sexual orientation.

### **Genderqueer / Third Gender / Gender Fluid / Two Spirit**

These identity labels and terms are often used by people who feel between and/or outside the gender binary. Individuals may identify as being neither man nor woman, as a little bit of both, as non-gendered, as a gender outside the binary, or they may simply feel restricted by gender labels. *Two spirit* is a term derived from the traditions of some Native North American cultures, and can sometimes mean a mixture of masculine and feminine spirits living in the same body.

### **Gender Variant / Gender Non-Conforming**

General terms for people who bend gender in some way and/or have non-binary gender identities.

### **Intersex**

*Intersex* is a general term used for a variety of genetic, hormonal, or anatomical conditions in which a person is born with a reproductive or sexual anatomy that doesn't seem to fit the typical definitions of female or male. When a child is born intersex, many doctors and parents panic and rush to “correct” the “problem” via surgery, which often causes mental and physical difficulties later in life. Some intersex individuals identify as transgender or gender variant; others do not. (Note: *Hermaphrodite* is an obsolete term that is not currently considered appropriate.)

### **Transsexual**

The term *transsexual* has historically been used to refer to individuals who have medically and legally changed their sex, or who wish to do so. Most transsexual people feel a conflict between their gender identity and the sex they were assigned at birth. Other labels used within this group are MtF (male-to-female) and FtM (female-to-male).

### **Transition**

*Transition* refers to the complex process of authentically living into one's gender identity, often but not always including leaving behind one's assigned birth sex. A transition may include coming out to one's family, friends, and/or co-workers; changing one's name and/or gender markers on legal documents; hormone therapy; and possibly (though not always) some form of surgery. Not all trans people identify with the word *transition* and it should furthermore never be assumed that transition is a process to be “completed.” Some people who have transitioned no longer consider themselves to be transsexual or transgender and rather identify only as a man or a woman (occasionally “of transgender experience”). Others identify as a *trans man* or a *trans woman*.

### **Coming Out vs. Disclosure**

*Coming out (of the closet)* refers to openly stating one's identity (usually sexual orientation). Being *out* means being open about one's identity. Being *outed* means someone else has disclosed one's identity, usually without permission. *Coming out* is often a liberating experience for people who have previously hidden their identity; it can lead them to feel like they can be their authentic selves. However, trans people who have transitioned are not “in the closet” about their identity, so telling people that they are trans is a *disclosure* and is different than *coming out*. Trans people are not “fooling” or “deceiving” anyone about their identity by presenting themselves authentically as men or as women.



## 10 Ways to be More Welcoming & Inclusive of Transgender People

1. Avoid making assumptions about gender identity or sexual orientation.
2. Respect a person's identity and self-label, and respect a person's chosen name and pronoun preference. Practice offering your own preferred pronouns when you meet new people.
3. Do not assume a trans person is all-knowing and/or wants to speak about trans issues. Do not assume a trans person can speak only about their trans identity, nor that it is or is not an issue at all. Learn more about transgender identity on your own (consider starting with the resources below).
4. Recognize that "transgender" is not a sexual orientation and educate yourself and others on the difference between sexual orientation and gender identity/expression. Don't say "lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender" if you are only talking about sexuality. Recognize that a person can identify with more than one of those labels.
5. Use terms that encompass all genders rather than only two (e.g., "children" instead of "boys and girls"; "people" instead of "women and men"; "siblings," "kindred," or "brothers and sisters and siblings of all genders" instead of "brothers and sisters").
6. Review member policies for gender-exclusive groups sponsored by your congregation—do they make room to include transgender people? Would people with non-binary identities have a way to be involved? If your congregation ever uses forms that ask for gender, think about whether that information is necessary. If it is, include a "Transgender" option, as well as a box for "Other." Also, ask for "gender" rather than "sex." Allow people to check more than one box.
7. Talk to children about gender and transgender issues. Provide age-appropriate education around understanding one's gender identity and how gender norms and stereotypes play out in our society.
8. Create single stall, ADA-accessible bathroom(s) and label them in a welcoming way (e.g., as "gender neutral" or "all gender"). Make sure your signs elsewhere communicate that these bathroom(s) are available and point the way.
9. Do continuing education for your congregation specifically on transgender issues. You might consider using one of the recommended curricula below, a film showing and discussion, a panel discussion, and/or a sermon on the topic.
10. Learn about local and federal laws and how to change them if they are not inclusive (e.g., non-discrimination policies around employment, housing, credit, and public accommodations; name changes; and gender marker changes). Follow the leadership of local and/or federal transgender organizations.

## Further Resources

### RECOMMENDED CURRICULA

**transACTION: A Transgender Curriculum For Churches and Religious Institutions:** A transgender welcoming curriculum for people of faith developed by the Institute for Welcoming Resources, a program of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force.

**Gender Identities and Our Faith Communities:** A transgender welcoming curriculum for people of faith developed by The Human Rights Campaign's Religion & Faith Program.



**Crossing Paths: Where Transgender and Religion Meet:** A UUA publication of reflections from transgender Unitarian Universalists and UU allies on trans issues and Unitarian Universalism. Includes three workshops.

#### MORE GREAT INTRODUCTORY RESOURCES

**Sylvia Rivera Law Project's "Trans 101":** A great further intro to transgender concepts and terms.

**Fenway Health's Glossary of Gender and Transgender Terms:** Written with health care providers in mind, this is a comprehensive, exhaustive, up-to-date glossary of terms for anyone looking to educate themselves further on transgender issues.

**TransFaith's "Where Do I Begin?":** A collection of resources on faith and transgender issues, broadly applicable to congregations of any liberal religious tradition.

**Acting Out Loud: Is Everyone Included?: Transgender:** A collection of transgender information, resources, and tips for people of faith from the Religious Institute.

**Transformations: Transgender 101—the Dos and Don'ts:** A 2011 article in the *San Diego Gay & Lesbian News* by Melinda Harris.

**Action Tips for Allies of Trans People:** A great list of ways to be an ally from Trans@MIT.

**Injustice at Every Turn: A Report of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey:** A 2011 report on a national study of discrimination faced by transgender people, conducted by the National Center for Transgender Equality and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force.

#### RECOMMENDED FILMS FOR CONGREGATIONAL VIEWING & DISCUSSION

**Switch: A Community in Transition (2009):** A documentary about a progressive, multicultural community and their response to a member's changing gender expression. The basic premise of this film is that it is not the individual that transitions, but the community.

**I Am: Trans People Speak (2011):** A collection of recorded stories that aims to challenge stereotypes and misconceptions of transgender individuals by highlighting the realities of their lived experience. These voices span across a diversity of communities and intersecting identities.

**Call Me Malcolm (2005):** A documentary about a transgender seminary student and his struggle with faith, love, and gender identity. Study guide also available.

**Thy Will Be Done (2009):** A documentary that follows Sara Herwig, a male-to-female transsexual woman, in her path to ordination in the Presbyterian Church, exploring issues of gender justice and sexual equality in faith communities.

**No Dumb Questions (2001):** A short documentary that profiles three sisters, ages 6, 9, and 11, as they explore why and how their Uncle Bill is becoming a woman. VHS tape available for loan from LGBT Ministries. UU study guide also available.

**You Don't Know Dick (1997):** A documentary that profiles six female-to-male transsexual men through their commentary and that of those closest to them. VHS tape available for loan from LGBT Ministries.