

**Faith Family Equality**

The Latinx Roundtable



**FOR YOU ARE**

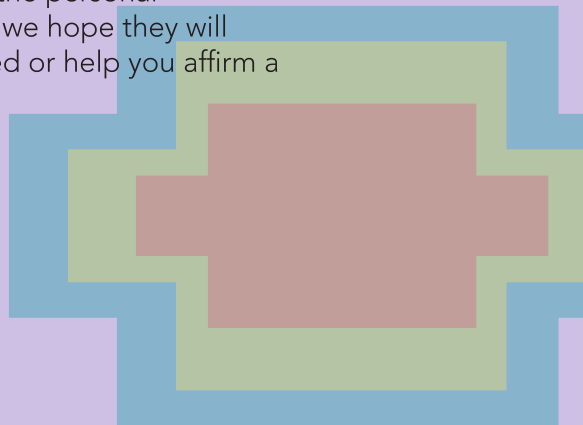
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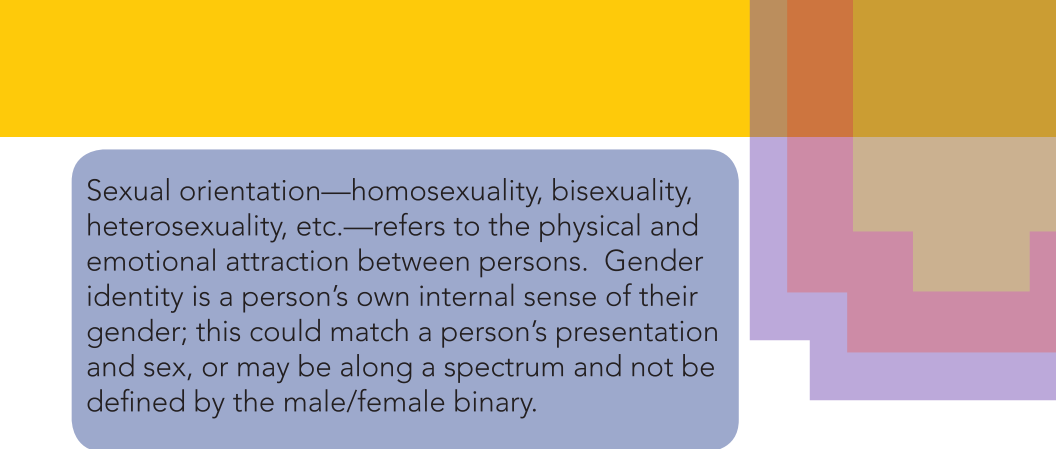


Center for  
LGBTQ and Gender Studies  
in Religion

Thank you for picking up this guide; it is an important step in learning more about LGBTQ+ persons. Gaining this knowledge is important to becoming more welcoming to LGBTQ+, trans, and gender non-conforming persons. It is important to acknowledge that there is an ongoing learning process. No matter how successful an individual, family member, or a congregation is in welcoming LGBTQ+ people, there is always room to grow and extend your acceptance, understanding and affirmation.

This guide is specifically for trans and gender non-conforming persons, and for others who want to respond in a more affirming way to them. Whether you are an LGBTQ+, trans or gender non-conforming person, a parent or friend, we hope that these reflections will be positive and supportive for you and your loved ones. Rather than focusing on scriptural passages that have been used against the LGBTQ+, trans, and gender non-conforming communities, these reflections are based on the personal experiences of its authors, and we hope they will make trans persons feel affirmed or help you affirm a trans person in your life.





Sexual orientation—homosexuality, bisexuality, heterosexuality, etc.—refers to the physical and emotional attraction between persons. Gender identity is a person’s own internal sense of their gender; this could match a person’s presentation and sex, or may be along a spectrum and not be defined by the male/female binary.

## **From an Episcopal Priest and Latinx Queer Perspective The Image of God includes you.**

Although not the experience of all transgender or gender non-conforming persons, for some trans persons the subject of embodiment may be difficult. This may be especially true for persons who feel that their gender identity does not match their sex assigned at birth; sometimes this leads persons to a desire to align their bodies to their identity. This change is called transitioning. Regardless of the desire or not to change corporeally, in our society trans bodies have been negatively made public, in a way that would not be acceptable of non-trans bodies. Persons whose gender identity and presentation do not “fit-in” are often challenged to conform to historical and current societal norms.

This reflection is meant to support the assertions that: a trans person is and continues to be a child and a reflection of God, whether they change their body or not. Changing their gender presentation or bodies to match their gender identities is part of their discernment of who God knows them to be. God knows who each person truly is.

One of the central beliefs in Christianity is the incarnation of Jesus. This incarnational theology is also related to the belief that all persons—in their corporeality and materiality—are made in the image of God. Every person is a reflection of the image of God. For a transgender or gender non-conforming person, what does it mean to be made in the image of God?

For me, as a Christian, priest, and queer Latinx person, some of the most important passages in scripture are those that convey the idea

of having always been loved by God and known by name, being made in the image of God, and being called to serve by God. As we read from the Prophet Jeremiah: *Before I formed you in the womb I knew you and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations. (Jer. 1:4-10)*

There is an incredible intimacy and vulnerability in being fully known. We cannot hide our true selves from God and God invites us on an ongoing journey to live into the wholeness of who we are. For LGB persons that may include coming out and living into our sexuality; for trans persons it may be embodying their true gender identity and expression. This exploration is one that all persons should do, but it is often one that LGBTQ+ persons have to do while confronting the static images (hetero- and non-trans normative) that have been created by society and churches. In our society, today, and in our churches, it is heroic for LGBTQ+ persons to bear witness, in their very persons, of the breadth of the image of God.

The "image of God" has traditionally been static and solely based on human representations of Jesus, or other representations of God as "Father": these images often being Eurocentric. Yet, scripture shows us varied images and qualities of God. God's desire to have a relationship with each person is ongoing, including the continual revelation of God's work in the world now. Just as God continues to seek a relationship with every person, we are called to not "box" God into one image or one moment. In our humanity, our imagination and experience are ever non-encompassing of the fullness of who God is and how God acts. As a trans woman friend often proclaims "God is not static: God is dynamic."

As queer Latinx persons our ongoing journey of discovery is one that we do within our family and faith contexts. We seek the understanding, acceptance, and affirmation of all those whom we love and love us. And, as our baptism reminds us, we also understand that God is with us always. The psalms are full of examples of God walking with us, including, *I have been sustained by you ever since I was born; from my mother's womb you have been my strength; my praise shall be always of you. (Psalm 71:6)*



LGBTQ+, trans and gender non-conforming persons are part of the breadth included in the Image of God and we are all called to discover who God has always intended us to be.

Honoring Identity: In the bible, there are many examples of people changing their name as commanded by God, as a reflection of their true identity, and turning toward and becoming closer in their relationship with God. These include: Jacob to Israel, Abram to Abraham, Sara to Sarai, and Saul to Paul.

For parents, it is important to honor each child's identity, and this includes their choices around names and pronouns. Oftentimes changes in names and pronouns are a way for your child to match their inward identity, which is a gift from God, to their presentation to the community around them. By honoring names and pronouns, you are honoring your child's embrace of their identity as being made in the image of God.

**From the perspective of a Gay Hispanic Pastor raised in a rural community.  
God saw everything that God had made, and indeed, it was very good. (Gen. 1:31a)**

As Latinos/as/xs, a question that many of us might have asked during our coming out process has a biblical connection to the creation story found in the book of Genesis: "if I am made in the Divine Image of God, and if everything that God creates is not only 'good' but 'very good,' then who can say that how I feel from my 'inward center' is a mistake?" When I began to ask this question to those who argue against homosexuality, not only from my Latino/a/x perspective but also from a human context, they seem to have no answer that is sufficient enough for me to say that God has made a mistake in how I feel and who I am from the inside. If being made in such a Divine Image, then exploring our sexuality becomes important in accepting ourselves and being able to explain our sexual orientation in a way that gives meaning to our lives. This may also be similar for

individuals who transition to whom they believe they are from the inside.

In an interview with a person who transitioned from male to female, I found a common theme about how many of us have looked inside ourselves only to realize who we are and then realized the importance of becoming our true inward-selves. Justin Tanis writes about the idea of “inward center”[1] and quotes from Howard Thurman’s book: “Jesus and the Disinherited.” Part of knowing and accepting who I am as a gay man, was to look deep within myself, my “inward center” and allow the expression of that center to display itself to the outside world, however that might be. In trying to understand the trans person I interviewed, in our commonality, I would infer that the male individual that everyone saw from the outside, might have gone through a process of allowing the female on the inside, to come out and express herself from this “inward center.” Justin eloquently speaks of this from the transgender perspective but I also feel that it can apply to many people:

“Transgendered people have learned about the value of the inward center and the ways in which it guides us into our identity. We have to speak from the power of that inward center both as individuals and as communities. That inward center drives us forward on this journey of self-discovery. It is the truth about us that we cannot turn away from and to which we are accountable. As Thurman states, the inward center can determine our destiny and so, we must pay attention to the inward center if we, as individuals and as a community, are to find the freedom for which we long and strive.” [2]

I also believe that for Latino/a/x LGBTQ+ individuals who live in rural areas, of less than two-hundred people, where the Latino/a/x culture might be in the majority, raised as Roman Catholics, and where members of the community know each other extremely well, that coming out is extremely rare, especially in the older generations. The use of social media today, such as Facebook, etc., have become important tools used to come out to family and friends.

I came out in 1997 to my family, but did not come out to cousins and other relatives and friends of my hometown in rural New Mexico until

[1] Justin Tanis. *Trans-Gendered: Theology, Ministry, and Communities of Faith*. (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press. 2003), 8.

[2] Tanis, *Ibid*, page 8

I became a Facebook user. Facebook became that “safe” space in which I could publicly post my sexual orientation status without the fear of physical abuse even though I had to deal with verbal and condemnation by some. Many Latino/a/x individuals, and people of other races or groups, from rural areas have found it necessary or easier to come out after moving to a more urbanized environment because of the resources available such as PFLAG, pride parades, gay or lesbian bars, community organizations that are geared toward the LGBTQ+ community, and sometimes faith denominations such as Metropolitan Community Churches or other open and affirming churches.

The person I interviewed is an example as to why many in my Latino/a/x community, living in rural communities have not and sometimes do not come out as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender for fear of being rejected by the family unit, condemned by the church, and the possible physical violence that a person might have to endure in the process. What makes the coming out process more difficult for those living in a rural area is the lack of resources available from local agencies, family, and community. In today's society, coming out may or may not be easier or safer for many, but for some, social media applications have become a safe space tool as part of the process.

If you are a family member or friend, supporting your loved one in the process of coming out reaffirms, not only your unconditional love for them, but God's as well. Because living as our true *inward* selves is what makes each of us “very good” and living into God's divine image of ourselves.

### **From a queer Latina, LGBTQ+ Advocate, and mother's Perspective. Accepting your loved one.**

Over the years, I've had the pleasure and honor of being a part of many families' journeys with and their acceptance of their transitioning loved one. It is not always easy. Some parents easily accept their trans child and others take a few years to sit with it before they understand and accept what was going on. Everyone's process is different but the bottom line is that they all love their children.

Each family has their own approach.

In one family I've worked with, the mother knew her child was different from an early age. At puberty, the mom asked her, "are you a lesbian?" and the youth kept saying, "I like girls but I don't think I am a lesbian." Then the mom did some research about trans issues and then asked, "are you a boy or a girl?" but her child had to sit with this for a while until finally he disclosed that he was actually a boy. He had to go through his own process of discovery. It had to be his decision. It was like his mom was being overly supportive and she had to let him come to it on his own. Moms of course want to fix the problems their children face, but need to embrace the process, supporting the child on their journey of discovery without doing it for them.

I also worked with a family who was a little more challenging. A man came to our support group because he wanted help convincing his son that he was not transgender. He kept saying his son was very manly and that this idea was crazy. He even insulted other parents in the group who accepted their children, and that didn't sit well with them. In the end, it was those other parents who helped him understand that his child was truly his daughter and, after a year and a half, he finally came to use female pronouns and respect her.

So, with patience and support we were able to help both parents, in both situations, navigate the situation from hormones to name changes to societal transitions. Some parents felt like they had to choose between their faith and their child, and discovered later on that they didn't need to do that.

I've learned many things through the years:

Our children are gifts of our creator. Their birth gives us tremendous joy and a sense of responsibility to do right by them; to give them the best of our selves and tools to survive in this world. Our hope is that no harm comes to them.

When we are given the news that our beloved child feels that their body doesn't match who they truly are, there are a lot of emotions and confusion. It's okay to have those feelings; it's okay to ask questions. This is a new journey that's full of fear and uncertainty. The question of "what did I do to cause this?" consumes us.

Our struggle between our faith and the love we have for our child

becomes a battle. “How do we overcome this?”

Give yourself permission to be with and go through your emotions, including anger and pain, knowing that eventually you will get out of them. It is okay to sit where you are at for a time.

Imagine how hard it is for your children to accept their reality. Imagine how difficult the task is of saying it out loud to themselves and to the family they love dearly and don't want to hurt or disappoint. Imagine the internal hell they are experiencing.

At the same time, it is important that your children also be patient with your journey of acceptance.

There is so much to learn and accept.

Be gentle with yourself; it is not easy to learn that whom you thought your child was is someone else. Take time to mourn the loss of one child and celebrate the new life of your child. The life where your child can be true to who they truly are, and live a healthy and productive life, the life we dreamed they would have.

Yes, there are a lot of questions about what the transition would look like, if any. What are the next steps, but more importantly, how do we support our child even if we don't fully understand? How do we participate in this journey together? We love them unconditionally the way God loves us.

**From a Pastor of an open and affirming denomination,  
Mother of a gay son, and Social Worker's perspective.  
God's Love reflected in a Family's love.**

The challenge of self-approval, affirmation and acceptance is highly influenced by the way the extended family view their family members. Latinx families are committed to preserve the traditions, religious and spiritual practices, and pass them on to future generations. Gender and sexual practices are also part of the tradition process utilized to maintain the family together, remind the family of its ancestors' beliefs and judge and reject them if they become and behave differently.

Often, religion and spirituality are tools wrongly utilized to present a judging God that rejects God's own creation and denies some God's

loving care as they are to be identified as different and transgressors of the word of God. Families with LGBTQ+ members are challenged by their religious beliefs, God's acceptance and community rejection.

The sense of guilt, shame and failure in parenting "correctly", responsible and failing to raise a "normal child" is overwhelming. It leads to critical thinking and considering what is the "norm", the "natural", the expected.

Latinx families formed in the Roman Catholic, conservative protestant, or evangelical faith traditions face rejection not only by their Priest or Pastor but also from their congregations and more difficult yet, God. The God they have worshiped and served from generations through generations.

Historically, spirituality has been utilized to promote homophobia and rejection of the LGBTQ+ community. The manipulation and misuse of the spirituality of religion and the Bible, the word of God, correlates with separation, isolation, hate crimes, and acts of self-harm.

Let's explore how the Bible talks about God's creation which includes all creatures including LGBTQ+ children.

The following scriptures reflect God's unconditional love, sending God's son Jesus to die for humankind and unifying all persons in God's name and finding joy and satisfaction in God's whole creation.

*"Oh Lord, you know me. you are familiar with all my ways. You have laid my hand upon me. For you created my inmost being. you knit me together in my mother's womb. Your eyes saw my unformed body. "*  
(Psalm 139:13-15)

The psalm affirms God's love. God created us all. Saw us in our mother's womb, even before our bodies were formed. God knew your LGBTQ+ child even before you knew of their existence. God loved your LGBTQ+ child and found pleasure in God's own creation.

The psalm indicates that the awareness and mindfulness of God's joy in God's own creation generates a grateful heart, self-acceptance and gratitude, and spiritual freedom, knowing that the God of their ancestors is a God of love and acceptance.

The LGBTQ+ community responds and acknowledges its relationship with God the creator and calls out:

*"Search me O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me". (Psalm 139:23)*

God established a relationship with your LGBTQ+ child long before you did. The Bible tells us that God validated his creation and found joy in it.

*"There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus". (Galatians 3:28)*

This scripture establishes that Christ abolishes the discrimination based on gender and nationality. Unity in Christ transcends ethnic, social, sexual and gender distinctions.

The Bible tells us that God loves and his love does not discriminate.

*"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16)*

This scripture establishes that God's love and salvation has nothing to do with gender or sexual orientation. This scripture has a powerful message to humankind, the LGBTQ+ community, men and women, to all God's creatures: God love God's creation so much that God sent God's only son to die at the cross for us all and give us eternal life.

God's love is still the same. This love does not reject the LGBTQ+ community or your LGBTQ+ child or family member. You stay faithful to God and your faith, by loving God and accepting and loving one another, trusting God to be your Lord and God's word to be your command.

The Bible tells us to love and accept each other.



## **From a LGBTQ+ activist and trans person's perspective. Shadows of our spiritual life.**

Coming from a place of doubt, fear and uncertainty we face the shadows of our spiritual life. The shadows are everything that we expect from our place of faith after coming out. A very common thing that happens when we come out is that we tend to isolate ourselves and lose touch with our faith because of our misconception of people within our faith and our parish. We feel as though we aren't worthy or are judged, but if you reach out to someone you will see that within our faith we can build support groups that can help us throughout the process of accepting ourselves.

During my coming out process, I isolated myself from my friends and family because I feared rejection from church after devoting my life to my community. Growing up in a Roman Catholic household, after attending a church since I was born I didn't see myself going anywhere else. This caused me to stop practicing my faith. There were times when there was shame for being Roman Catholic because, at the time, they weren't openly accepting of queer folks. Despite my parish showing me the opposite, I still felt alone and judged.

When I came out, I was accepted and loved because these people had seen me grow up. They knew that my soul and heart had not changed. Yet I was blinded by my shame and fear of what could happen; I lost an essential part of my life. I started pointing out the problems within my parish and with the people of my community, which ended up distancing me more and more because I felt that we had to be perfect.

Yet, I centered myself and realized that there is no perfect parish nor perfect community, we are all human and make mistakes. This was just me avoiding the real issues eating at my soul, which were my issues with accepting myself. I now realize that I was one of the lucky people that was blessed with a faith community that accepted me with open arms, and as I started transitioning, they started progressing.

The dark hole we face at the beginning of our journey is the hardest because we aren't sure whether there will be acceptance or rejection. The one thing that is certain is that having a support group that is available to help you, during these dark times, can sometimes be

the break it or make it point for someone. When you look at being LGBTQ+ and think about spirituality, we often see a huge disconnect; this is because of the things we hear about faith in the media, and how this differs from the support that we receive after coming out. While the coming out process is a difficult time for everyone, as a community we should always be there to support without judgment.

You can be one of those people that helps bring a person back to their faith, by showing them love and acceptance, because in the end that is what Jesus preached about: love and acceptance. The steps you can take to help an individual, within your community, that recently came out are simple: just be accepting and reach out to them. It might be your/our friend, brother, cousin, sister, son, parent, daughter, or even someone who is in our/your parish whom we have never talked to much. Check up on them, make sure they are doing okay, but also let them know you care. Sometimes they just need some loving words to bring a little light into their life. In the end the bible is built on the foundation of love and acceptance despite what people say or do. We are all loved, we are all God's children and it's so easy to forget that sometimes, but we must keep in mind that our God is a loving God and created us all equally.

## **I love you.**

*"Fear not for I am with you. You are precious in my eyes, and honored, and I love you." (Isaiah 43.)*

What a joy to be told that we are loved! Not only that, but also honored and precious! And that the source of that love is our creator God!

When was the last time you felt so embraced? Perhaps it's been a while. More than a few of us are not as close to our families as we would like to be. Sometimes along our life's journey we feel "less than". We carry the heavy burdens of shame, fear of rejection, depression. We miss the hugs, the after-church dinners, the family chats.

At such times, we may engage in less than healthy behavior. Some of us stay away from our families. "What if they figure out that I am not the child they thought I was? Would my Mamá, Papá and Abuelas/os/xs accept the person that I am? Who would not? "

They have heard about “celebrities” that have transitioned to a gender other than the one they were born with. *Telemundo* and *Univision* have kept them duly informed, and televangelists assured them that those folks are not welcomed in God’s Reign. We must be there to speak the goodness of our love and our lives.

A beautiful song named “Hosea” (1) after the prophet of old, tells us to “come back to me with all your heart, don’t let fear keep us apart.” Never for a moment consider that God does not love you fiercely, passionately, and faithfully. It is up to us to allow that knowledge to dwell in our hearts and minds. Then our families will also understand and accept the persons that we are.

LGBTQ+ children of God have travelled a rocky road to get to where we are. It’s been a long and arduous journey. Many of us carry emotional scars.

Those who walked the walk leave behind a legacy of courage and determination. But the struggle goes on.

Those who were at Stonewall, or at the marches in Washington and everywhere have paved the way.

Those who left their churches and found their faith have prevailed and remained faithful.

We are indebted to the many who have carried a heavy torch for a very long time.

Many of us who live in cities that are “gay friendly” perhaps forget that there is a lot of territory between the east coast and the west coast. There are a lot of LGBTQ+ folks as well. And a lot of Christian fundamentalists. And a lot of Latinos/as/xs. In some instances, this may become a critical situation for queer folks and their families, who don’t live in Chicago, Atlanta or Houston. But faith lives there as well. So, does the internet. The Latino/a/x community must have access to accurate information regarding LGBTQ+ issues. Those of us who do, have the duty to pass it on.

“Showing up” is critical. When issues regarding the LGBTQ+ community are debated we need to be there. Critical mass matters. Our clergy and congregation folks need to show up and speak. When our rights are being discussed we need to be heard. It’s not a

time to be humble. It's a time for solidarity and courage. When our community is vilified we are there to glorify it.

Faith, family and equality are core values that we honor as both Latinx and LGBTQ+ people. This courageous queer community has struggled, suffered, and triumphed. We will continue to do so. We embrace the faith that we have found in deep and at times painful search. We love the family that welcomes us and forgive the one that doesn't. We learn to love ourselves. We give thanks to the Creator that made us and rejoices in our goodness.

Our community may experience a setback due to the changes that are to be expected with the election of both a President and Vice-President less friendly to Latinx LGBTQ+ people and more beholden to religious conservatives. We may need to be more vigilant and to protect ourselves wisely. But, "we're gonna keep on moving forward, never turning back."

Latinos/as/xs were at the front of the LGBTQ+ movement from day one. The first openly gay candidate for public office was not Harvey Milk, who we all admire, but a transwoman of color named Silvia that most of us have never heard of. Nor do many of us know of Luis Roman, an early writer at Lambda Legal Defense, and many others.

Decades ago when singer and orange juice-queen Anita Bryant took her crusade against LGBTQ+ persons to Miami, she ignited a community that triumphed and has remained strong and engaged. Orange juice was not served at any LGBTQ+ establishment, while Ms. Bryant was the official promoter of the Florida citrus. The boycott went national.

The Latino/a/x community has a pre-conference at the National LGBT Task Force's, *Creating Change Conference*, every year. A good setting for an infusion of energy and pride. Many other such events take place all over the country.

When the whims of faith and politics leave us troubled and even fearful, we have a solid litany of saints that have preceded us and their faithful examples will strengthen our resolve.

Faith, Family, Equality, and a pinch of solidarity as well.

## Divinely Created, Divinely Becoming

12 For you formed my inward parts;  
    you knitted me together in my mother's womb.  
13 I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.  
Wonderful are your works;  
    my soul knows it very well.  
14 My frame was not hidden from you,  
when I was being made in secret,  
    intricately woven in the depths of the earth.  
15 Your eyes saw my unformed substance;  
in your book were written, every one of them,  
    the days that were formed for me,  
    when as yet there was none of them.  
16 How precious to me are your thoughts, O God!  
    How vast is the sum of them!  
17 If I would count them, they are more than the sand.  
    I awake, and I am still with you. (Psalm 139:12-17, NRSV)

This is a victorious shout out from the psalmist proclaiming God's creation to be complete and divine: "I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made." An expression of full satisfaction and gratitude by a genderless human being, at least in the context of this writing, for what they recognize to be God's creation from the beginning of times, "you knitted me together in my mother's womb."

The description of what God put together goes from the physical "inwards parts" to the spiritual "my soul knows it very well." God is glorified for their wisdom and their vastness. Our trans Christian siblings may find solace in a Psalm that praises God's creation, whose creation is not defined as male or female. Rather, the creation is praised simply for being fearfully and wonderfully made.

What if congregations were to share proclamations of God's perfect creation without emphasizing the gender binary? What if the Church celebrates our exquisite existence and the potential of living as who we are, divinely created to be? Welcoming trans siblings into the womb of a church can be simple if we open ourselves to a wider spectrum beyond what societal femininity and masculinity dictates.

In this way, the church has the capability of bringing life, instead of death.

In Spanish, the language of the Psalm defaults to the masculine gender, thus the verse *“when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth”* the word *“I”* has a male gender. It is important to indicate that the Spanish language often keeps the binary (masculine/feminine) well differentiated. It is almost impossible to write without using gendered language, either feminine or masculine. However, the praise of the psalmist to the divine creation should be interpreted as a neutral one, not with the limitation of the Spanish-language. The human being created by God has no gender, it is simply a creation that unifies the thoughts of a wise God.

This psalm can be a proclamation of liberty, a gift that we can give to all persons that our Latinxs churches have rejected because of their gender expression or sexual orientation. As in the case of Vicente, a transgender man that was rejected by the rector of a Roman Catholic Church. The priest briskly told him that if he didn't stop being what he was; he wasn't welcome in the church. When Vicente finally found a community of faith that accepted him, he decided to be baptized and embrace his Christian faith and a new legal name. Vicente's baptism was a celebration of him as a whole being and as the psalm says: *“I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made”*. This verse is inclusively neutral. It demands admiration for what God has created without a gender.

How much peace would be found in knowing oneself as loved and created by God's hands? This could be such a hopeful message preached from the pulpits, which still have enormous influence within Latinx communities, especially among those churches attended by immigrants.

*(Different sections of this last reflection were written in English and others in Spanish. The first three paragraphs were written originally in English, the others in Spanish.)*

## Notes

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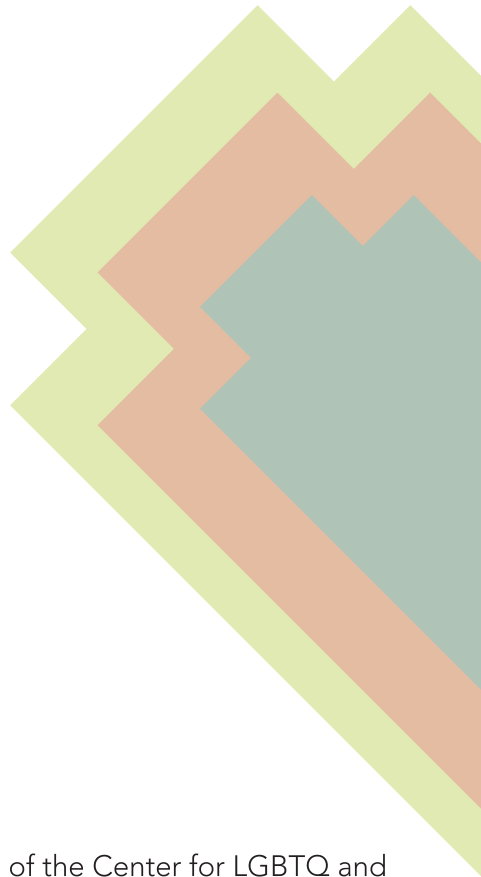
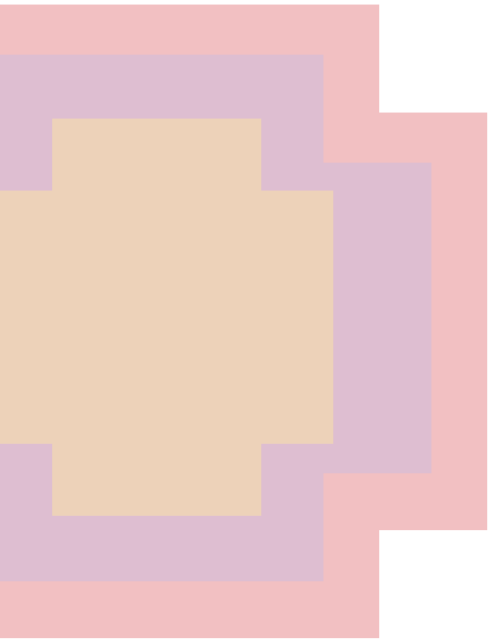
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Faith, Family, Equality: The Latinx Roundtable produces materials that aim to increase the understanding, acceptance, and affirmation of LGBTQ+ Latinxs persons by their families and faith communities. We believe that LGBTQ+ persons often look for affirmation from their families and faith communities, but do not always receive those affirmations. We also believe that with the right resources families and churches will become more inclusive of their LGBTQ+ members.