

Presbytery of Lake Michigan,
you reached out with questions about the trans community —
here are my answers!

Got more questions? [Check out this Google doc](#) or reach out to me at avery@mlp.org.

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I am wondering if Avery would be willing to elaborate on their perspective of Joseph being an early depiction of the Trans community. Does Avery see this playing a part of zer theology? Thank you

Heck yeah, Joseph of Genesis is one of my favorite biblical characters, and one whom I do find particularly trans-resonant! [I write about Joseph briefly on my website here](#) (scroll down to the section titled "Joseph's Princess Dress").

If you want a *much* deeper dive, [check out this podcast episode](#) where my friend Laura (they/them) and I talk about Joseph's whole story through both a trans and neurodivergent lens.

Another fantastic look at Joseph through a queer lens comes from Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg — [see her article here](#).

Do you want everyone to be greeted in the same manner, or are you asking that certain members of the congregation should be greeted differently? I think all should be greeted the same, but I'm getting the feeling that you want some to be greeted in a different manner (i.e., a more radical welcome) that will single them out.

Everyone should be greeted with the same level of respect and welcome; making anyone feel like a sudden spotlight is being thrown on them is definitely to be avoided.

So why is extra education / training needed to ensure that trans people *are* greeted with the same respect as everyone else?

It's the problem of [cissexism](#) — we are all taught to assume that everyone is cisgender (i.e. not trans), and that you can “just tell” what someone’s gender is at a glance. This means that when a trans person walks into a church (or any space), we often find ourselves immediately [misgendered](#) (for instance, people presuming they should call us “she” when we actually use “they” pronouns, or calling us “sir” when we go by “ma’am”) — usually not maliciously, but it’s still painful.

Learning to greet everyone in a gender neutral way will ensure that everyone is respected equally, instead of unintentionally disrespecting and hurting trans, nonbinary, or gender nonconforming individuals.

What is a respectful term to use when addressing a person you are waiting on in the grocery store? I was taught "mam" or "sir" or "miss" but that is using my terms. I work at the Community Food Club and seldom know their preferred identity. We strive to be respectful of all people. When checking out their groceries is not the time to ask.

You are completely right that the checkout line is not the right time to ask someone about their gender. There are two ways you could go:

- Remove all gendered language from your greetings to customers. Unfortunately the English language doesn't have a perfect non-gendered replacement for words like “sir” and “ma’am,” but you may find that as long as you use a friendly and respectful tone, just saying “Good afternoon, did you find everything okay?” works without any of that.

On a similar note, if you want to call out to a customer who hasn't noticed it's their turn, saying “I can help the *person* in the yellow shirt” instead of “I can help the *woman* in the yellow shirt” is a good alternative.

- I understand that based on culture or upbringing, some folks just can't part with *sir* and *ma'am*. If that's you, my recommendation is simply to be ready to correct yourself gracefully if you do call someone *sir* and they say “actually, it's ma'am” (or vice versa): don't get flustered or go on and on about how bad you feel; just say, “Oh my bad, *ma'am*” and continue the conversation calmly.

My grandchild is now 15 and is transitioning from female to male. When I accidentally call the child [old name] instead of Eli should I apologize immediately or privately later? I don't want to make it about forgetful grandma when I'm trying to be loving and respectful grandma. This has been a process since birth but only public knowledge for a few months

It always brings me joy to hear of grandparents who are trying to get it right! Be patient with yourself as you get the hang of Eli's new name. <3

My first recommendation is the hardest thing to do: try your best to erase Eli's old name from your head. Don't use it even when you're thinking just to yourself; don't write it out places (unless necessary for a legal document); because the more you use that old name, the harder it will be not to accidentally use it when it matters.

When you do mess up, I recommend a quick correction in the moment — don't hurry past the mistake as if it didn't happen, but don't linger and derail the conversation. Restart your sentence with the correct name, so that your brain will start getting used to it: e.g. "How are you, [old name]? — Oops, how are you, Eli?"

If you find yourself messing up again and again, an apology in private is appropriate — but as you rightly note, it shouldn't be an apology with lots of excuses! Focus on how you plan to keep trying: "I know it's hard for you as people get used to your new name, Eli. I'm going to keep trying; please keep correcting me when I mess up so I can improve."

Thank you for supporting your grandkid! Just give yourself time, and practice whenever you can — you *will* get used to it!

While I find the best way to support my trans son is to love him as Christ loves us, what have you found to be the most important way that I/we can support those within the LGBTQIA+ family? How can I/we respectfully express the importance of this support to other family, neighbors and friends who refuse to accept this/these person/s as are and some who even rebuke and turn away from their own family/friends.

Amen to loving a trans child as Christ loves us! For me, that means an unconditional love, and a love that isn't just general, but *particular*; Jesus loved *individuals* in their diversity, one-on-one, with his love for different individuals expressing itself in different ways. I imagine you've experienced how that looks in your love for your son: loving him as he is, not in the ways you may have expected him to be; and loving him on his journey, sticking with him through all fears, frustrations, and struggles as well as the joys!

Love and support for those within the LGBTQIA+ community means seeing them as beloved people who bear God's image not *in spite of* but in many ways in and through their LGBTQIA+ identity.

When it comes to emphasizing the importance of this kind of support to reluctant or flat-out hostile people...it's hard. It's really hard. It definitely depends on the person — some are more open to unlearning whatever misinformation they've learned; others are not. I'll tell you, it's not going to be comfortable or fun, and you're not always going to be successful — but being willing to have those hard conversations is one of the most powerful ways you can support your LGBTQIA+ loved ones.

Know it's also okay to take breaks from those hard conversations. You'll burn out if you try to do it all. Even if you're in the middle of a conversation with someone, especially if it's turned into more of a debate than a real dialogue, it's okay to say, "I want to keep discussing this with you, but it's important to me that we can do so calmly and remembering we care about each other. So I'm going to take a break now."

For any of these conversations, it's ideal if you've educated yourself pretty thoroughly in advance. Know the things the right wing is saying about LGBTQIA+ people, and the facts that debunk what they say.

Even so, I'll emphasize that you can have all the facts in the world, and that's not usually what's going to transform a person's heart and mind. For many people, it has to get personal before they are willing to listen. Offer to share some personal stories. Use language that focuses on how you feel. Keep your tone earnest, not accusatory. Some examples:

- It would mean a lot to me if we could take the time to discuss this. We don't even have to end up agreeing fully, but I'd be grateful if you could hear out my perspective. When would be a good time for us to have a conversation?
- I know that you love [person]. How would you feel if you lose them from your life over this?
- What you are saying about the trans community makes my heart hurt. You know [son's name]; does he seem like that to you?
- I'm hearing a lot of anger in your words. Where is that coming from? Do you need to talk?

I've gotten pretty good at knowing within a few sentences whether someone is simply *not* going to be willing to listen to my side of things. If they shut down any offers for resources or conversation with "It's JUST WRONG" or "I've done my own research" or "You've been brainwashed!!" (lol sigh), it's probably not going to work out.

If that happens with someone you *can't* end a relationship with, then the best you might be able to do is to set some boundaries in a calm but firm tone: for example, "I understand we aren't going to be on the same page about this. I do want to let you know that I am not willing to listen to disparaging comments about my son or the LGBT community as a whole." Enforce the boundary by calmly but clearly ending conversations every time the person violates that boundary.

Then there are people who have absorbed a *lot* of misinformation, but aren't quite so hostile. Some of these folks may not be open to new perspectives *yet*, but if you maintain your ties with them, the time might come that they will be. You never know when a small comment here or there might become the seed that grows into a willingness to learn — if that day comes, and they know you're someone they can come to for conversation without fear of you rebuking them for not being fully on board *yet*, that's wonderful! Cultivate connections where people know you're the person they can come to when they are ready to discuss these things, without judgment.

I hope this helps somewhat.

Why is it that you feel the need to cater to a secular ideology?

I'll be honest, hearing an intrinsic part of how God created me called "secular ideology" in a scathing way is quite painful. I invite you to reflect on the concept of the sacred/secular binary. Is there truly a difference between things we call secular, and things imbued with God's presence, power, and love? Or is that dichotomy a human construction? You might find Barbara Brown Taylor's book *An Altar in the World* a good introduction to this subject.

When it comes to human bodies, minds, and spirits in particular, what could be *more* sacred? What more poignant meeting point of "secular" and spiritual than our inspirited flesh — made of mundane mud, imbued with divine breath? My trans body is holy, a testament to God's gift of imagination and God's invitation to co-create with Them. My trans spirit manifests one facet of infinite Divinity — Their refusal to be pinned down by human assumptions and labels; Her playful invitation into exploring new, life-bringing ways of being. My trans self should be regarded with the same reverence and gratitude that *every* human life deserves. We are mundane, finite dust; we are sacred, beloved, made eternal by the one eternal God — if we could all truly understand this queer mystery, we'd fall to our knees in wonder.

...I "feel the need" to emphasize the importance of Christians fully supporting the trans community because of our direct involvement in attacking gender diversity and empowering transphobia across the years. European Christians in particular have a long history of responding to cultures that traditionally express gender outside of the Western binary construct with ruthless violence. I invite you to [check out the sections "Why this war against trans people?" and "Colonialists attempt gender genocide" on this webpage](#) for examples. We need to take accountability for our wrongdoings, repent, and work to make amends.

For trans folks and our loved ones, this isn't about politics. It's not about scoring ideological points. It's about saving lives. Real human beings beloved by God are dying; our holiness as beings in God's image is being denied; we are being prevented from living into God's invitation to be co-creators.

Churches and other Christian institutions have the power to protect and uplift trans people — or to enable our continued suffering and death. For God's sake, we *must* choose the former.

Why is it so hard to encourage people to use their given name?

I would flip your question back to you: Why is it so hard to encourage people to use their loved ones' *chosen* names? If you know that using an old name for someone brings them pain, why is it so hard to imagine them with a name that brings them joy?

There are numerous stories in scripture of people whose names change in their lifetimes. I wonder if Abraham's and Sarah's friends scoffed at their sudden change in name; if Israel ever got tired of reminding people "It's Israel now." If you are interested in my commentary on the connections between biblical name changes and trans name changes, check out the "[Called by name](#)" section of this webpage.

Let me share some of my personal experience:

My old name (which I call my deadname because it truly makes me feel dead inside, less alive, less *me*; reminds me that others don't see who I really am; and when people I care about use it for me I feel like they don't care to know the real me) is a name that my mom chose for me when I was born. It was a name that held a lot of meaning for her.

When I told her I was changing it, it was hard for her at first. I had to reassure her that I wasn't changing my name to spite her, or to disconnect from her; that I wasn't angry at her for picking the name for me — it just didn't fit me! As time went on, and she saw how much more *alive* my new name made me, she was able to embrace me with my new name. She even turns *Avery* into various nicknames, like *Aves* and *Avie*, to show her love.

Our relationship has been strengthened by her willingness to understand that even though she meant well in giving me the name she did, my new name suited me better. Our love has deepened with our mutual understanding.

I appreciate a message I once saw online about names: A name is a gift, not an obligation; if it doesn't fit you, it's okay to trade it in for a different one.

A last thought: many people find that the name they were given doesn't fit them, for a variety of different reasons — not just trans people! I know plenty of cis (not-trans) people who go by nicknames or middle names, or who have changed their name completely. It is cis-normativity that puts trans people under severe scrutiny for doing the same things cis people do every day.

Why is it not okay to say a Christian marriage is between a man and a woman?

Because such language limits the ways that the love God gifted each of us can be expressed! It denies the holy bonds between many people. It imposes your own limited understanding onto everyone else. Sticking “Christian” in front of the word “marriage” doesn’t help — Christians are a diverse group! Don’t pretend to speak for them all!

“Christian marriage” has been defined in a myriad of harmful ways, often with one man to whom a woman (or multiple women) must submit. But God calls us to a better way: one of mutual relationship, reciprocal love that spills out between individuals to bear good fruit to all the world.

If you’re curious about the idea of “biblical marriage,” [see this post for lots of links](#).

Why not simplify to “Your life matters”?

I don’t often pull the “just google it” card, because many questions are hard to google without a bunch of misinformation cropping up...but this is one that’s very googlable, and it’s hard not to assume someone asking this question is a troll.

[Here’s one article that pops right up](#), for instance, and I recommend you check out.

If you are talking one-on-one with someone and you want to tell them “Your life matters,” that’s great! Do it! But *mean* it! “Your life matters; and that means I will do whatever it takes to make sure your life is preserved, your humanity respected, your voice uplifted.” “Your life matters as much as mine; so I will put my life on the line for yours.”

But if someone says “Black lives matter,” or “Trans lives are human lives,” and your immediate response is to deflect with “Well all lives matter,” you are missing the point.

Yes, all lives matter. But in the world as it is now, many lives are treated as if they are worth less, or worthless — Black lives, trans lives, disabled lives, immigrant lives, and more. Those are the people made to feel like their lives *don’t* matter. So those are the lives we have to focus on.

We see this in scripture again and again: God has, as liberation theologians describe it, “a preferential option for the poor” — that’s not to say God loves oppressed peoples more than everyone else, but that God focuses attention and lavishes love on them, *because no one else is; because they need it most*.

God came to Hagar, an enslaved foreigner abused and left to die. God commands us to “love the stranger.” God’s chosen people were enslaved Hebrews in Egypt; the people of Israel and Judah, considered “nobodies” by the empires that surrounded them and constantly threatened to subjugate and eradicate them. In Isaiah 56, God promises

eunuchs and immigrants that they not only have a place in God's community — won't only be *tolerated* — but that theirs is a place of special honor; that a monument and a name will be given to them because of the rejection they've faced from other human beings.

God is with those whom the world hates. If you try to draw a line between yourself and the oppressed, you will be drawing a line between yourself and God.

If you want to read more about God's "preferential option for the poor" and what that means — and how it's good news for "oppressors" too! — [click here](#).

Why not stress that we accept you where you are?

Because that sounds like a conditional acceptance. It sounds like assimilation. "We accept you where you are — *and* we expect you to change, to become more like us, to start fitting into our assumptions about what a good Christian life looks like, if you join our community."

It sounds a lot like "**love the sinner, hate the sin**" — [and I have a lot to say about that: see this article](#). In short, you cannot claim to love us, or accept us, if you don't also acknowledge the oppression that is hindering us from living into our full, holy selves; or if you believe that the way God's love manifests in our lives is sinful rather than a sacred gift.

If you want to claim to accept someone, and genuinely want them to *believe* it, you must be willing to say more than "I accept you *where* you are." **Try "I accept you as you are."**

Try "I hope to show you that acceptance through my actions; if I ever do or say anything that belies that acceptance, please tell me so I can make amends." Try "I look forward to my own life and faith being enriched by knowing you; of learning from you as you learn from me; of finding my understanding of the Divine expanded by witnessing how the divine manifests in your unique self."