

Transforming

The Bible and the Lives
of Transgender Christians

*Updated and Expanded Edition
with Study Guide*

Austen Hartke

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*For every trans Christian who feels alone;
for every parent caught between a rock and a hard place;
for every church and every ministry professional
committed to holding the door open—
this book is for you.*

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Foreword to the New Edition

Being transgender in the church, especially as a young person, can be scary. The people doing the most harm to the transgender community are overwhelmingly people of faith. They're so loud that it's easy to think all Christians think that way, but that's just not true. I want people to know that being transgender and being Christian are *not* mutually exclusive. Because so much of what we hear in the world today pits these two communities against each other, it can feel really weird to be part of both of them.

I am transgender, and I am Christian. I know not all churches are good and safe places, but I wish more people knew that there are churches that affirm and celebrate the beautiful diversity of God's creation, including transgender people. When you find one of those churches, that's when you finally feel how good it can be to be part of a community that sees you and loves you both as a transgender person and as a Christian: a community where you truly belong.

I've been really lucky to be a part of that kind of community all my life. My dad is a pastor, and my mom is a church professional. Together, they have four degrees in religion. For them, it was never a question of whether loving and supporting me was the right thing to do. They saw the difference in me when I stopped pretending to be someone else and stepped into who God made me to be. My church community saw that too. Knowing me helped them move from thinking about transgender people as an "issue" to seeing us as human beings. I was just a little girl in a flowery purple dress, twirling on the church lawn. After that, my parents did a lot of work to help educate the congregation about what it means to be transgender and what that means for the church. It took time, but two years after I transitioned, on the tenth anniversary of my baptism, we gathered with our congregation, my godparents, and my family to bless me and my forever

name. My grandfather, who baptized me as a baby, presided over the service. Being loved and supported so deeply by the people around me is what allows me to thrive.

That's not to say it was all sunshine and rainbows. It still isn't today. I have been excluded from some communities because of who I am. Some of the most hurtful and hateful things said about and to my family come from people of faith. They threaten to hurt me or my parents or tell us we're going to hell, in the name of Jesus. It seems about as unchristian as you can get, but I continue to find hope in the church.

When I was eleven years old, I spoke at the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's 2018 Youth Gathering in Houston, Texas. I stood on stage in front of 31,000 high school youth and their adult leaders and shared my story as a transgender person, and my hope for the church and the world. It felt incredible to know that my church cared enough about kids like me to put me on that stage, but it was even better to see the reactions of the people who were there and hear the stories that came after. I heard about youth who saw themselves celebrated in the church for the first time, young people who came out to their families and congregations, and pastors who came out to their youth groups. The ripples of impact that went out from that day continue to give me hope that people of faith can do this work and evolve their understanding just as they embraced the story of a transgender young person like me through the lens of Christianity. I don't have to give up part of who I am. I can be both transgender and Christian.

In 2021, I was confirmed in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. As a confirmed member of the church, I can vote on important matters, and my presence counts like that of every other adult in the room. It meant a lot to me to be confirmed in a church that sees me for who God made me to be, that proclaims that I am a called and claimed child of God, and that lifts up my voice as a transgender young person. Now my hope is that we can build a church and world where all transgender people can feel safe and loved.

REBEKAH BRUESEHOFF

Our daughter Rebekah shows us what is possible when a transgender young person is surrounded by love, affirmation, and celebration long before they ever hear any messages to the contrary. We work with a top-notch team at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia for Rebekah's gender-related care. She was eight years old for her first appointment at the Gender Clinic, where we began building relationships with their psychologists and social workers, years before hormones or any other treatments would be introduced. Dr. Hawkins, a psychologist and codirector at the clinic, spent some time talking to me and my husband, and then she spent some time with Rebekah. When she came back after talking with Rebekah, Dr. Hawkins confessed she was a little teary-eyed. Dr. Hawkins had asked Rebekah how she might explain what it means to be transgender to someone who didn't understand. Rebekah's answer was simple and honest: "Being transgender means being who God made me to be."

Rebekah has been told from the very beginning of her gender journey that she is a called and claimed child of God, created to be exactly who she knows herself to be. That's her foundation. When people tell her that God doesn't make mistakes, she says, "I know. I'm not a mistake." Of course, over time Rebekah has learned the ugly truth about the church's past and present when it comes to transgender people. She's seen the harm that people of faith continue to do to people like her, personally and politically. But because she is so secure in her identity and in her faith in the God that created her, she's able to hope and work for a world where that's not the case any longer. She's helped me find that hope too.

When Rebekah transitioned, the church was the place my husband and I most feared. We weren't afraid of God. We were afraid of human beings and of the institution to which they belonged. Rebekah's dad was the pastor of a small congregation in a rural, conservative area. While we knew there was room in our denomination for the affirmation and celebration of LGBTQIA+ identities, we didn't know how our congregation would respond. The first time Rebekah showed up at church as herself, one parishioner found my husband afterward and said, "I don't really understand this whole transgender

thing. But she used to hide behind you and refuse to say ‘Hi’ to me on Sunday mornings. Today, she ran up to me, twirled in her dress, and gave me a high five. What more is there to know?” By being herself and by showing up as God created her to be, Rebekah opens hearts and changes minds in a way I never imagined possible. That’s true of every transgender person I’ve ever met. That’s where I find hope.

Of course, there is a lot more to know, but we in the church don’t have to have all the answers. Things in our congregation weren’t perfect all at once, but people learned and grew alongside us. There will be mistakes and missteps. We have to learn and do the work, but there is grace for the journey. First and foremost, the church must understand and unequivocally proclaim that transgender people are whole and holy parts of the body of Christ. That’s where this book and Austen Hartke come in. I can’t think of a better place to start as we seek to understand what it means to be transgender and Christian, what the Bible says, and how it can inform our relationships and our ministries.

To some people, Rebekah’s experience of being loved, supported, and affirmed as a transgender young person of faith seems like an anomaly, but she’s not alone. There are families and congregations just like ours in communities all over the country. These families and congregations are loving and affirming the transgender young people in their midst, not in spite of their faith, but because of it. Transgender young people need those congregations. Families need pastors who can walk with them on this journey. Our communities are richer and the body of Christ is more fully present when transgender people are a part of them. I have the deepest gratitude to Austen for writing this book and to you for reading it. Together, we can make the church a safer and more welcoming place for all God’s children.

JAMIE BRUESEHOFF
January 2022

Foreword to the First Edition

This book is a gift to the church, and it couldn't come at a more urgent time.

As more transgender people have come out in recent years, many cisgender people like me have begun to recognize the daunting scale of discrimination and hostility that trans people have to face every day. It's not overstating the matter to say that our society's mistreatment of transgender people is an ongoing humanitarian crisis.

According to the landmark National Transgender Discrimination Survey published in 2014, in the United States, 41 percent of transgender adults have attempted suicide. Just think about that: forty-one percent. (The overall rate for the general population is 1.6 percent.) But as horrifying as that statistic is, it's not surprising in light of these other numbers: 90 percent of transgender people have experienced harassment or discrimination at work, 57 percent have experienced significant family rejection, 26 percent have been fired for who they are, and 19 percent have experienced homelessness because of their gender identity. In recent years, too, the number of transgender people who have been murdered has gone up, and transgender women of color are usually the victims of these widely ignored attacks.

Where has the church been amidst this barrage of harassment, discrimination, and violence against transgender and gender-nonconforming people? All too often, the church has been part of the problem. For many transgender people, some of the most painful rejection they've experienced has been in church. After being mocked and bullied in school, they've been told by their pastors on Sunday that who they are at a fundamental level is a disgrace to God. Unless they can change

something that cannot be changed, transgender people are frequently told that there is no place for them among God's people, and a few verses from Scripture are casually deployed as tools of exclusion by those who've barely gotten to know the people they're excluding.

In the face of that kind of hostility, it would be perfectly defensible for transgender people to want nothing to do with Christianity—and indeed, if Jesus were here, I think he'd be turning over tables to protest the church's inhumane treatment of them. But that only makes the faith and testimonies of transgender Christians all the more powerful. I've met faithful transgender Christians all over the world, from Mississippi to Minnesota and as far away as Budapest. I've been inspired by their stories, and I've grown and changed as a result of them. I've also learned a great deal about theology and biblical interpretation from transgender Christians, and in this book you'll get to learn from one of the best teachers I know.

Austen Hartke is an ideal person to write this profoundly important book. I first got to know Austen a few years back through his wonderful YouTube series "Transgender and Christian," where he breaks down theological issues related to gender identity with grace, warmth, and expert skill. A graduate of Luther Seminary's Master of Arts program in Old Testament/Hebrew Bible Studies and the winner of the 2014 John Milton Prize in Old Testament Writing from Luther Seminary, Austen has a keen theological mind and an infectious love for Scripture. He's taught at The Reformation Project's conferences, and I've seen firsthand how his work has helped countless transgender people reconcile their faith and their gender identity.

But as powerful as Austen's own story is, he isn't just interested in letting you learn more about him. Austen has a huge heart for other transgender people, and in this book he shares with you the stories of other extraordinary transgender Christians, like the Reverend M Jade Kaiser, a nonbinary believer, and Nicole Garcia, a trans Latina minister. Austen is passionate about amplifying the voices of trans people of color, trans women, nonbinary people, and others who experience

multiple layers of marginalization in the church. That commitment shapes and enriches every page of his book.

I have a story to share about Austen that will show you some of his character and heart for others. When I was in Budapest recently, I spent an evening with about twenty LGBTQ Christians and allies. One young man who came that night had recently come out as transgender. He told me he'd found Austen's work online and that it had helped him in his journey as a transgender Christian. But even more than that, Austen had actually struck up a friendship with this man, answering his messages and going out of his way to provide encouragement and support to him from halfway across the world. This trans Christian expressed his amazement to me that Austen, an American with a growing platform and reputation, would take the time to befriend and support someone who was coming out as far away as Hungary. I was thrilled for him, but not surprised. That's just who Austen is.

It's out of that same servant's heart that Austen wrote this book. There is a desperate need for more pastoral and theological resources to help transgender and gender-nonconforming Christians, and through this book Austen is taking a significant step toward filling that need. He easily could have walked away from the church. He could have scorned those who haven't accepted him for who he is. But he didn't. He stayed out of his love for the church, and his writing and teaching are changing lives around the world. This book will only increase his impact, and it will be the first resource I recommend for transgender Christians and those seeking to love—and learn from—transgender and gender-nonconforming people in the church.

So pull up a chair and get started. This is a conversation that cannot wait, and Austen is the best of guides.

MATTHEW VINES

Founder and executive director of The Reformation Project,
and author of *God and the Gay Christian:
The Biblical Case in Support of Same-Sex Relationships*
July 2, 2017

Introduction

Did God Make a Mistake?

Whenever I go to speak with Christians who are unfamiliar with transgender folks, it seems as if we spend the first few minutes dancing around the question they really want to ask. Not “Have you had the surgery?” or “What’s your real name?” (Though I’ve heard those too, and I always take a moment to remind people that those questions aren’t appropriate or a good way to start a conversation.) No, the question I get most often sounds more like this: “So, if God made you female, but you know yourself to be male, does that mean that you think God made a mistake?”

I asked myself that same question for a long time before coming out as transgender. As a teenager I believed strongly in the idea that everything happens for a reason, and if that was true, then there must have been a reason God had made me with a body that was designated female when I was born. Even though I’d known for most of my life that I didn’t feel like a girl, I did my best to ignore that fact and push it down deep where I didn’t have to think about it. The biggest hurdle I faced in addressing my gender identity was that it seemed like saying God was wrong.

So imagine my relief when I started coming across Scripture passages that appeared to have something to say about gender identity and the way God made the world! In seminary I read the Bible cover to cover and spent hours in the library poring over books about creation narratives, clothing in the ancient world, and the meaning of the incarnation. I learned from Job that sometimes things happen in the world that don't make much sense to us human beings. I learned from Abraham what it's like to have your name changed. I learned from the apostle Philip that sometimes you have to say yes to God even when you have no idea what God is doing. And of course I learned from Jesus, who after his resurrection chose to show his body to the disciples—a body that was scarred and transformed, and yet still his own.

The more I learned, the more I felt compelled to open up myself to the world. I wanted to take out the parts of myself that I'd packed away out of sight, and to let them breathe in the sunshine. It almost felt as if my heart was trying to escape my chest, pulling in the same sort of way it had when I began considering a seminary education. I decided to follow that call, and when I started talking with other transgender people and describing my experiences, I heard them speaking parts of my own story back to me. When I discovered that there were other transgender Christians (who knew?!), I felt as if I'd stumbled across buried treasure.

Before long, I was finding my own answer to that original question: "Did God make a mistake?" Personally, my answer is no. I don't believe God made a mistake in creating me just as I am. God created me with a body that was designated female when I was born—a body that I struggled to connect with for the first twenty-six years of my life and that I now finally feel at home in—but God also created me with a capacity for change and with a mind that knows that I'm male. I believe God made all of me—gender identity included—and intended for me to be a transgender person who sees the world through a different lens. I don't think God made a mistake. I think God made me transgender on purpose.

After I graduated from seminary I wasn't sure what to do next. I really wanted to keep talking with other trans Christians and to keep exploring the Scripture passages that had given me so much life! I began making videos about gender-related theological topics and posting them on YouTube, and before long people started leaving comments. Some were wonderful, and some were mean-spirited, but the ones that got to me the most came from transgender teenagers and young people who had desperate questions. Questions like, "Does God still love me if I'm trans?" and "My pastor says I'm going to hell. What do I do?" I did my best to point toward helpful resources (many of which you'll find in the Further Reading section in the back of this book), but in the end I couldn't find a written, accessible place where all kinds of different trans-affirming theologies came together. I wanted a book written by transgender people and for transgender people and the faith communities that care about them.

That's why I began talking with friends of mine who also identified as transgender Christians, asking them if they'd be willing to share some of the things they've learned. I certainly don't have all the answers! As a white, bisexual, transgender man, I have no idea what it's like to navigate Christian faith as a person of color, or as a nonbinary person, or as a trans woman. I wanted to include some stories that end happily—and some others that don't end on such an upbeat note. Trans Christians face incredible obstacles in churches around the world. While some of us find ways to make it back into affirming communities with a faith that's still strong, not all of us have found that fountain of healing yet.

I'm so thankful to the people who agreed to sit down and gift me with their time and their knowledge, as this project was coming together. When I talked with the people you're about to meet in these pages, I always ended each interview with the same big question: "Do you think God made a mistake?" Strangely enough, even though we're all very different, we seem to agree on this subject.

Here are a few of their answers:

If there's a mistake at all, it's that we've created this understanding of gender that is so deeply limiting of God's creation. That's the mistake. We've always been diverse people. We've always recognized that using tools, for lack of a better word, to best support our bodies is a good thing. Certainly those of us who change our bodies physically because of our gender identity are not the first people in the world who have needed assistance to be our best selves.

—M

God created us with the ability to also be creators, and some of those creators created surgical procedures and medical procedures and concepts and ideologies and systems and communities that do wonderful things! If we aren't taking part in that creative process, then we're going against our very created nature.

—Lawrence

God doesn't make mistakes; she just makes things easier or a bit more difficult to find. Transitioning doesn't mean that God made a mistake, just that I need to work a bit harder to find the fullness of life God has for me.

—River

I think that God knit me together in my mother's womb, but has also been knitting me together every day since. I think God knit together my body and my identity. I'm not just a woman. I'm not just a man. I'm transgender. That's what God intended.

—Asher

I can't wait for you to read more about each of these wonderful people in the coming chapters, and to get a glimpse inside their faith and their lives. One quick note before we get going: In this book I sometimes use the word "queer" as a synonym for people with LGBTQI2A identities. Not every gay, lesbian,

bisexual, transgender, intersex, Two Spirit, or asexual person uses this word to describe themselves, because even though it's in the process of being reclaimed by LGBTQIA2A communities, historically it has been used as a slur. In the interviews in this book I use the word "queer" only to describe someone who has already affirmed that they use this word for themselves. If you are unsure whether it's right to use a word to describe a person's identity, it's always best to ask first!

We'll talk more about language and definition in chapter 2, but for now let's wade a little deeper into these theological waters. Christians these days have questions about what the Bible has to say regarding clothing, changing bodies, new names, and the way God created human beings to exist in this world. I am thankful that trans Christians, who have been living and studying these questions for years, have come up with some pretty fascinating answers! Let's begin by asking ourselves why theology for and about transgender people is important.

PART ONE

1

Standing on the Edge

“Do they even let . . . people like you . . . in?”

This was the first thing my sister Madelyn asked when I told her that I was applying to seminary. Of course, she didn't mean it in a derogatory way—she was and continues to be one of the most supportive people in my life—but she was curious and concerned. In 2011, when I submitted my application to a degree program in youth ministry, I had not yet come to grips with my gender identity. I had been open about my bisexuality for about seven years, though, and I didn't relish the idea of having to get back into the closet.

This meant that when I started considering a seminary program, my discernment process didn't begin with “Is God leading me toward ministry?” or even “Would this degree give me a leg up in my career?” No, when I arrived on campus for visit days, I was seeking some more basic answers. For instance, if I brought my whole self to the study of Scripture and the building up of the church, would I be welcomed? If I opened myself to honest and authentic communion with others in the classroom and in the sanctuary, could I count on being physically safe?

Most Christians in the United States today don't have to choose between being open about their relationships or being excommunicated. Most Christians don't have to risk being assaulted on their way to services for wearing their favorite dress, only to arrive and hear a sermon condemning them to eternal punishment. But some do.

That is why, to this day, I feel just a little bit nervous when I walk into any unfamiliar church building. It's a response reinforced by years of necessary self-defense, which too many LGBTQIA Christians have to cultivate. The landmark 2013 Pew Research Center Survey of LGBT Americans tells us that 29 percent of LGBT-identified folks have been made to feel unwelcome in religious spaces.¹ When we consider the fact that in 2021 Gallup estimated that 7.1 percent of adult Americans (approximately eighteen million people) identify as LGBT,² this means that roughly five million people have been treated poorly by those who share their faith, simply because of their sexuality or gender identity.

That negative treatment—whether it manifests itself as hostile stares, a direct order to leave, or physical violence—doesn't exist in a vacuum. As Christianity continues to be the dominant religious force behind much of American culture, people outside church walls have begun to express frustration with the faith's attitude toward LGBTQIA people. A 2014 study revealed that 70 percent of millennials and 58 percent of Americans overall now believe that religious groups are alienating people by being too judgmental about issues like same-sex marriage.³ One-quarter of the people who were raised in religious families, but have left their tradition, admit that negative treatment or teachings about LGBTQIA people was a factor in their decision to leave. With organized Christianity in America already facing a steady decline,⁴ we might well ask how the church could possibly afford to push anyone out, especially persons who desperately seek to be recognized and accepted as part of the faith.

And that's the strangest part about these recent studies: despite Christianity's reputation for anti-LGBTQIA

sentiment, half of queer-identified adults claim a religious affiliation, and 17 percent consider their faith very important in their lives.⁵ What's more, these percentages appear to be getting larger every year.⁶

How does it feel to be caught in the crosshairs between your faith and your identity, which has been declared part of “the culture wars”? For some LGBTQIA Christians, it's a refining fire that brings about an even greater passion for mercy, justice, and a relationship with God. Gay and lesbian Christians like Rev. Dr. Horace L. Griffin and Rachel Murr have even written about their experiences and their journey to a greater understanding of the “clobber passages” related to sexuality. In recent years, cultural and political issues like same-sex marriage have brought lesbian, gay, and bisexual issues into the cultural limelight.

Up until recent years, however, transgender people have been more or less ignored, both within society at large and more obviously within Christian circles. The writers at *Christianity Today*, an evangelical magazine, expressed low-level apprehensions about trans issues beginning in 2008, but it wasn't until 2012 that the T in LGBT found its first big Christian news headline. A Girl Scout troop in Colorado allowed a young transgender woman to join; this prompted swift retribution, in the form of a cookie boycott by some Christians. In 2013, Dr. Donovan Ackley III, a professor at the evangelical Azusa Pacific University, came out as transgender and was subsequently asked to leave. In May 2014, *Time* magazine declared the year “the transgender tipping point” and predicted that trans issues would be “America's next civil-rights frontier.” This was followed by the introduction of a record number of trans-exclusionary bills in state legislatures in 2015.

While transgender visibility has increased rapidly since 2012 (the number of people who personally know a trans person jumped from 30 percent in 2016 to 42 percent in 2021),⁷ visibility itself has not always had a positive effect. As more trans people come forward and share their stories and the struggles that they face, those who find trans identities distasteful or morally corrupt feel that they must

also come forward with their own opinions, policies, and theological pronouncements. In October 2015, just three months after Olympic superstar Caitlyn Jenner came out as transgender on the cover of *Vanity Fair* magazine, the Association of Certified Biblical Counselors (ACBC) put together an event that they billed as “evangelical Christians’ first-ever conference on transgender issues.”⁸ No transgender people were asked to speak at this event. Instead, the largely Southern Baptist-identified speakers agreed beforehand to a statement that rejected the idea that “a human being could possess a gender other than the one indicated by biological sex.” Members of the ACBC argued that gender dysphoria is a result of original sin, and Owen Strachan, the executive director of the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, declared, “Even if we have never intended to choose a transgender identity, if we embrace this impulse, we are following, chasing a sinful instinct. We are in fact sinning against God.”⁹

Then, in 2016, what had previously been a predominantly theological debate, between conservative Christians and those who supported transgender justice, became an all-out battle that exploded onto the national legislative scene. On May 13, the US Justice Department and the US Department of Education sent out a joint guidance letter to all public schools, clarifying that Title IX protections against discrimination based on sex now functionally included discrimination based on gender identity. The letter stated that, in order to be in compliance with Title IX, public schools must not discriminate based on gender identity when it comes to gender-segregated spaces like restrooms, locker rooms, single-sex classes or schools, fraternities, or sororities. All schools that wished to continue receiving federal monies must be in compliance with Title IX.¹⁰

The movement toward protection for transgender people in the United States was becoming, in the opinion of some Christians, a threat to religious liberty. Dozens of schools began the process of requesting religious exemption waivers so that they would not have to comply with the clarified ruling¹¹—a move reminiscent of the religious exemption from

providing birth control won by Hobby Lobby in 2014 and the exemption from service to same-gender couples requested by a bakery in Colorado in 2013.

The May 2016 guidance on Title IX was eventually rescinded in February 2017, citing the problem of “significant litigation,” and as it turned out, the individual corporations, small businesses, and schools who had brought forward that litigation were not working alone. Three powerhouses of conservative Christian social action—the Alliance Defending Freedom, the Family Research Council, and Focus on the Family—have been instrumental in providing funding and legal counsel in support of what they consider to be religious freedom. When it comes to transgender issues specifically, each of these three organizations has had a hand in stirring the pot.

While it claims not to lobby government officials or promote legislation, the Alliance Defending Freedom—whose mission statement is “To keep the doors open for the Gospel by advocating for religious liberty, the sanctity of life, and marriage and family”—has created a policy template barring transgender students from school bathrooms and has offered to defend any school district that implements such a policy.¹² This “Student Physical Privacy Act” was then used as a model upon which several state legislatures built proposals banning transgender people from the public bathrooms that aligned with their gender identity.¹³

The Family Research Council, a public-policy organization whose mission is to “advance faith, family and freedom in public policy and the culture from a Christian worldview,” has also been instrumental in influencing legislative efforts against transgender Americans. Their political action committee, the Faith Family Freedom Fund, ran advertising campaigns against Houston’s proposed Equal Rights Ordinance in 2015, claiming that if the nondiscrimination measure passed, Houstonians could be fined for blocking a man from entering a women’s bathroom. Peter Sprigg of the Family Research Council argued that including gender identity as a protected category in civil rights laws would “threaten the public safety of women and children by creating the legitimized access that sexual predators tend to seek.”¹⁴

This has not proven to be the case. In the twelve states that had included gender identity in their nondiscrimination laws as of March 2014, no one had assaulted anyone else through access gained to these spaces as a result of this type of policy.¹⁵ Moreover, the same study done on nondiscrimination laws showed that there had never been an incident where a transgender person harassed or attacked anyone in a gendered facility, debunking the idea that transgender people are a danger to others. In fact, according to a 2013 study conducted by the Williams Institute, 70 percent of transgender people have themselves at some point been the victim of either verbal or physical assault in gendered restrooms.¹⁶

Focus on the Family is arguably the most well-known Christian ministry organization in the United States. In 2015 they updated a position statement on their website to contain an entire series on transgender issues, which included the assertion that transgender identities “violate God’s intentional design for sex and sexuality.” The statement continues,

We believe that this is a cultural and theological challenge that we must engage and win. The modern “transgender” movement is systematically working to dismantle the reality of two sexes—male and female—as the Bible and the world have always known this to be. If the transgender lobby succeeds, there will be striking consequences for individuals, marriage, family and society at large.¹⁷

In this spirit of engaging to win, Focus on the Family’s policy division, the Family Policy Alliance (formerly known as Citizen-Link), helped implement House Bill 2 in North Carolina in 2016. This bill was the first piece of state legislation signed into law that specifically required transgender people to use the bathroom or other gendered facility that corresponded with the gender marker on their birth certificate, and blocked any non-discrimination policy that included gender identity or sexual orientation from becoming law anywhere within the state.

These two stipulations may seem inconsequential to those who don’t identify as transgender, but the stress caused by the

realization that you might be arrested for entering one bathroom and harassed or attacked if you enter the other can hardly be overstated. In an interview with Greta Gustava Martela, one of the founders of the transgender crisis hotline Trans Lifeline, it was discovered that incoming calls to the crisis center doubled in the three weeks after HB2 was signed into law.¹⁸ This law, which was later found by the US Justice Department to violate the Federal Civil Rights Act, was put in place through the direct efforts of Focus on the Family and the Family Policy Alliance. According to the most recently released IRS documentation, the FPA contributed over a third of the operating budget for their affiliate, the North Carolina Family Policy Council.¹⁹ The NCFPC, in turn, pressed North Carolina governor Pat McCrory to call a special session,²⁰ which passed HB2 through the entire state legislative process in one day.

Many Christian denominations hold similarly negative views when it comes to transgender identities, though the actions they take may not be as recognizably detrimental. Some take a more moderate stance or promote a form of conditional acceptance. The Southern Baptist Convention passed a resolution in 2014 that declares “gender identity confusion” to be the effect of a fallen human nature, and something that must not be encouraged or normalized. Toward the end of the same document it is resolved that the Convention “love our transgender neighbors, seek their good always, welcome them to our churches and, as they repent and believe in Christ, receive them into church membership.”²¹ Though the statement calls for a loving response, the emphasis is placed on a required repentance, which presupposes three things: that transgender identities are themselves sinful, that a trans person can reject their identity if they try hard enough, and that trans identities are incompatible with faith in Christ.

Other Christian groups, like the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod (LCMS), have focused not so much on transgender identities as on a person’s physical transition. The LCMS Commission on Theology and Church Relations released a statement in 2014 that advises pastors to discourage any form

of transition for transgender congregants, and instead suggests that pastors refer trans people to a Christian therapist.²² In the same year, the Assemblies of God churches adopted a statement “discouraging any and all attempts to physically change, alter, or disagree with [a person’s] predominant biological sex—including but not limited to elective sex-reassignment, transvestite, transgender, or nonbinary ‘genderqueer’ acts or conduct.”²³ While these statements do not give much direction on how to treat a transgender person who has already transitioned, they create an environment that would give any current member some significant second thoughts before coming out.

The extent to which a transgender member might be allowed to be involved in the life of the church has also been a point of dissent for many Christians. Some denominations welcome transgender people looking for a church home but deny them official membership. Others allow membership but won’t elect a trans person into any leadership position. The Roman Catholic Church made the news in 2015 after the Vatican’s policy-enforcing arm, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, determined that transgender people are not eligible to become godparents. After Alex Salinas requested to become his nephew’s godfather, the church stated that being openly transgender “reveals in a public way an attitude opposite to the moral imperative of solving the problem of sexual identity according to the truth of one’s own sexuality.”²⁴ The statement went on to say that Salinas was not fit to become a godparent because “it is evident that this person does not possess the requirement of leading a life according to the faith and in the position of godfather.”

This was a blow to Catholics who had hoped that the church under Pope Francis’s leadership would be a more welcoming place for LGBTQIA Christians. Francis himself faced criticism for what many saw as a comparison between transgender people and nuclear weapons during an interview with authors Andrea Tornielli and Giacomo Galeazzi in their book *This Economy Kills: Pope Francis on Capitalism and Social Justice*. During a part of the interview in which he talks about things

that destroy the order of creation, Francis uses the following examples: “Let’s think of the nuclear arms, of the possibility to annihilate in a few instants a very high number of human beings. Let’s think also of genetic manipulation, of the manipulation of life, or of the gender theory, that does not recognize the order of creation.”²⁵ The phrase “gender theory,” when used in this sort of context, usually refers to the way that people have come to see all aspects of gender along a spectrum, rather than as a binary. Francis appears to be articulating his opinion that these ranges of human experience are outside God’s created order and may even be dangerous. This sentiment seemed to be echoed by the Vatican’s document “Male and Female He Created Them,” which was put out by the church’s Congregation for Catholic Education arm in 2019 and used similar language.

What effect must it have on young transgender Catholics to know that their church community considers them unnatural and dangerous? What does a transgender member of an Assemblies of God church do when they’re told transitioning is not an option? When James Dobson, the founder of Focus on the Family, goes on record encouraging men to “defend your wife’s privacy and security in restroom facilities” against “a strange-looking man, dressed like a woman,” and lamenting the fact that it’s no longer acceptable to shoot the transgender person in this situation, what effect does this have on our country?²⁶

The year 2020 was the deadliest on record for transgender and gender-expansive people.²⁷ At least forty-four transgender people were murdered in the United States that year, alongside at least 375 of our trans siblings in other countries around the world—and these are just the murders that we know about.²⁸ Oftentimes transgender people are misgendered by law enforcement and news agencies after their death; as a result, their true identities and their stories are lost to us. Additionally, it’s crucial to note that the majority of transgender homicide victims in the United States are women of color—specifically, Black trans women—who must deal with the triple threat of sexism, transphobia, and racism in the specific form of anti-Blackness. The number of

transgender and gender-expansive people killed nationally and worldwide in 2021 nearly met—but did not exceed—the previous year’s totals. Given the fact that more of our trans siblings have been killed each year since organizations began tracking these tragedies in 2008, we remain on edge as we wait to see whether the plateau reached in 2021 is just a statistical anomaly. Regardless of overall trends, we know that numbers don’t tell the whole story and that each life lost means a light snuffed out and whole world destroyed to the victim’s loved ones.

The National LGBTQ Task Force (then the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force) and the National Center for Transgender Equality put forward a report in 2011 that attempted to understand the reasons behind the current murder epidemic. They found that, when all other factors were accounted for, transgender people were disproportionately affected by homelessness, poverty, job discrimination, bullying in school, and harassment by law enforcement.²⁹ Essentially, the mental and emotional bias that American culture holds against transgender individuals leaks out into real-world actions against trans people, whether that action is turning down a nonbinary applicant for a job or shooting a trans woman in a bathroom.

When our churches support or even organically formulate the idea that transgender people are morally, intellectually, or theologically inferior, we feed right into the hatred that leads to death for an already marginalized group. The 2011 discrimination report found that 41 percent of trans individuals have attempted suicide, compared to 1.6 percent of the general population of the United States. Nearly half of trans folks attempt suicide, not because there’s something inherently wrong with them, but because they experience a phenomenon called “minority stress.”³⁰ Minority stress describes the friction that occurs between a person who holds a marginalized identity and the hostile environment in which they live. Transgender people live with a continuous expectation of rejection, and many experience an endless underlying current of fear because of the threat of physical or emotional violence. This constant stress can lead to depression, anxiety, substance use disorders,

and suicidal thoughts and actions. A study coordinated by the Williams Institute and the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention found direct evidence of minority stress when they discovered that suicide rates among transgender and gender-nonconforming adults jumped from the base 41 percent to 59 percent among those who were harassed at work, 61 percent among those who were harassed by law-enforcement officers, and 78 percent among those who experienced physical or sexual violence.³¹

The strain on transgender people has increased with the advent of bathroom bills and the legislation of gendered spaces. Williams Institute manager of transgender research Jody L. Herman confirmed that experiences in gendered restrooms are significantly affecting levels of minority stress. She states unequivocally that “policies to protect transgender people’s access to restrooms can be understood as policies that are connected to the health and well-being of transgender people.”³²

Living every hour of your life with your guard up can take its toll on anyone, but for trans and gender-expansive people, the stress can be deadly. Yet Christian churches and organizations continue to advocate and fund policies that make this state of being inescapable.

If the high rates of suicide and murder for transgender people can be traced to legitimate fears of harassment, discrimination, and rejection, then the obvious solution is to create an environment in which the injured, the worn-out, and the hopeless feel safe and loved. In fact, the number one predictor of health and well-being in LGBTQI2A youth is family acceptance and the creation of a safe haven at home.³³ Over half of the LGBTQI2A young people who were rejected by their families reported having attempted suicide, compared to only 32 percent of those who had supportive families. Family acceptance is also a protection against depression, substance use disorders, and other negative mental health issues that are usually seen in those who experience minority stress.

The problem is that family acceptance itself is intricately tied to religious affiliation. Many parents who try to follow

their faith and do what's best for their child's soul may end up doing irreversible harm to their child's physical and mental health. As Caitlin Ryan, director of the Family Acceptance Project, put it, "Most families, including very religious families, are shocked to learn that behaviors they engage in to try to help their LGBT children fit in and be accepted by others instead contribute to serious health risks, such as suicide attempts."³⁴ What the Family Acceptance Project and others have found is that high religiosity in families is directly connected to high levels of family rejection.

When parents attend churches that teach that being transgender is sinful, they are much more likely to reject their child if that child comes out; in turn, a child who is rejected is more likely to suffer from mental health issues and to die by suicide. This sad fact was made visible for many in the death of Leelah Alcorn, who stepped out in front of a truck in December 2014 after experiencing negative faith-based reactions from her parents and being forced to attend Christian conversion therapy to "cure" her of her gender identity.

Christianity has been dominated by the voices of those who speak out against the existence, the well-being, and the humanity of transgender people. These voices have sunk into the fabric of American culture, and the result has been a rash of murders that causes no religious outrage, no demand for justice from those who should have cared for the wounded ones on the side of the road. We have closed our ears to the cry of the parents who have lost their children because of toxic theology; we have turned away from the tears of the youth who ask if Jesus can love them just as they are. Too many of those questioning their gender identity have been made to feel that they must choose between God and an authentic and healthy life. Not all of the people forced into that decision make it out alive.

This is where transgender Christians have been forced to live: out on the edges. They walk the fine line between acceptance and rejection, between God's love and the church's judgment.

But this is also where God begins to bring life out of death, because although religious affiliation in families has been connected to rejection of LGBTQIA children, faith can also be one of the largest contributors to well-being in youth if their religious community supports them.³⁵ We know that family acceptance and the creation of a refuge in homes and communities is incredibly important to the health of transgender people, and so we must ask, is it time for God's house to truly become a house of prayer for all people? Will we hear the words of Scripture, and the stories of the trans Christians in our midst, and allow our sanctuaries to become the spaces they were always meant to be?