



Making a Righteous Noise: LGBTQ Teens Speak Back

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“No experience has made me want to leave the church but none of the bad ones can I forget.”

The epigraph above represents the voices of those who stand at the margins of faith communities across the world—the thoughts of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning (LGBTQ) teens on their experiences with the church, the black church in particular. Churches have been speaking, but seldom have they listened. In dominant discourse and meta-narratives around youth in general and black and queer youth in particular, we’re too used to talking for and on behalf of these marginal populations. Political scientist Cathy Cohen argues that youth, black youth in particular, are among the most marginalized in society—and even more when one has to deal with marginalization around sexuality.

Within this article you will encounter the wisdom we have garnered from LGBTQ youth experiences, as well as quotes and insights from LGBTQ youth we spoke with, placing these seldom-heard voices at the center of such conversation (as represented in italicized quotes). We seek to feature the voices and experiences of LGBTQ youth in the black church. From their accounts emerging from the underside of society, we seek to provide suggestions for churches as community institutions on how they can be more responsive and equitable to the very needs of this population within and outside of the walls of ministry.

“I used to go to church and he (the pastor) would say you’re going to Hell.”

“Not one of Jesus’ teachings says turn away gay people.”

Race *matters*. Often, it gets portrayed that the black church, compared to other faith communities, is among the most homophobic and unrelenting when it comes to LGBTQ community members. However true or false this may be, it must be noted that the black church and its members have much more to lose from the impacts of homophobia than do their white counterparts.

This article is not here to challenge you—or to fight theology with theology and Scripture with Scripture. After all, the good, the bad, and the ugly can be found in most religious traditions. This article is not here to be antagonistic or to question your authority. It is not looking for your approval, but it does require the utmost of your attention regardless of how you feel (or think you feel) about the LGBTQ community. This article simply seeks to speak a truth and an experience often left in the back of a dusty attic with little light or room to breathe. The truth of the matter is that we are often indoctrinated with so much hate against LGBTQ community without monitoring the effects.

The Least of These: The Vulnerability of LGBTQ Youth

“I was raised in the church. My grandmother would take me every single Sunday... It was when homosexuality was brought up that there was a problem.”

What is different in talking about LGBTQ teens (particularly those under 18) versus adults in our midst is that in the United States of America, if you are under 18, you have very few legal rights and decisions to make about how you are treated. Many gay teens are at the mercy of guardians and institutions for necessities such as food, shelter, clothing, and financial support. As adults, could we imagine what it might be like to live in a hostile situation where those given the charge of caring for you may be disgusted by your very presence?

Enter the church. In the house of the “loving” God, where it is often reinforced to teens and to their guardians that being gay is one of the highest and most unforgivable sins. Loving, thoughtful, caring parents and caretakers will sometimes result in beating their children to keep the gay demons away. Some of those loving, thoughtful, caring guardians will leave their children (and their souls) on the street as a lost cause like a broken gaming system or a bike. Even more, some will have their teens believing that any bad fortune that comes upon them (be it drugs, rape, assault, or death) is a direct result of their sexuality. Not only is this line of thinking incongruent with social justice, but it exacerbates situations already plaguing black teens such as school drop-out rates, homicide, HIV/AIDS, poverty, incarceration, pregnancy—the list goes on and gets more frightening.

“There are kids committing suicide. They’re already being told they’re going to Hell. They’re thinking, ‘Well, I might as well finish it...’”

In the last few months of 2010, it became very popular (even fashionable) to speak on the suicides of LGBTQ young people as a result of bullying and taunting. Not only can the church be

seen as a bully, but it can be seen as the training camp. Yes, on Sunday morning during worship service and on Wednesday night Bible studies all across the country, bullies are being trained and are experts at perpetuating all types of physical, psychical, and symbolic violence. We cannot teach our teens that being gay is against God and then be surprised when an act of violence against someone who is gay or is simply not straight/tough/strong enough has occurred. We can't wonder why many of our kids will stay home from school and drop out. We can't wonder why our gay teenagers, our children, would try to harm themselves with a knife, a drug, an alcoholic beverage, or unprotected sex in an era of HIV/AIDS, because we have taught them that they are worthless. We must acknowledge that when the message we put out about a specific part of our community is that their core being or core capacity for love is not in alignment with "God's plan" it is then that we open the door to violence on our very streets. If we resign ourselves to being incapable of adequately connecting with gay teens, they will find their connection somewhere else and it may be a lot less forgiving.

Come as You Are?: Taking an Inventory of Dangerous Thinking

"I have nothing to say to 'the church' in general, but to individual churches who don't fulfill God's will by expanding his kingdom and inviting others in I say, 'It's not your place to judge who God loves or who he will accept into heaven.'"

How are people in our communities suffering? After questioning our dangerous thinking and the roots of such thought, let's address specifically why this method of thinking is dangerous so that we can speak more on the task of what to do about it.

In order to create a welcoming environment for LGBTQ teens, we must prepare ourselves. First, we need to consider our theological perspective. If you believe that being gay is morally wrong, or against Christian teachings, ask yourself the following: At what age did I decide this was wrong? At what point did I decide this was wrong? Was I reading my Bible in a vacuum? Was it my decision to interpret theological texts in this way, or was it massaged into my mind by a loving pastor/minister/preacher/parent/elder with the intention of saving my immortal soul? We need to think about what we think, why we think it, and if we want to keep that same line of dangerous thinking. If we refuse to change our line of thinking, then this article can do nothing more for you, and young gay/straight teens and adults will continue to suffer.

What does suffering look like in the context of homophobia within the black church? Suffering for many is feeling as if they have lost God. Churches are literally closing themselves off to young people and having the audacity to say that they are able to discern without question who God wants them to be. It is a very different thing for a child to lose a friend because they have come out as gay, versus being told that they have lost their rights to God. The question becomes then "How do we as mortal beings get to dictate God's plans?" Furthermore, why would we want to, and what happens to the spirituality of those who have taken that stance as they impact others?

Walk Together Children: Action Steps

*“John 10:9 says; I am the door: by ME if **any** man enters in, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture. Let HIM be the door!”*

Since we do not expect this conversation to be a hypothetical one, we wanted to provide some tools for you to use.

Making A Righteous Noise: Resource Guide

1. Adults in the church need to accept one fundamental fact about teenagers of any sexual orientation/gender identity: You are not an expert on someone else’s experience regardless of how young they are and how much you’ve been through. So, do your homework! Seek out the experiences of LGBTQ folks in church spaces. As a starting point, try reading the following

Books:

Their Own Receive Them Not: African American Lesbians and Gays in Black Churches by Horace L. Griffin;

Representations of Homosexuality: Black Liberation Theology and Cultural Criticism by Roger A. Sneed;

What the Bible Really Says about Homosexuality by Daniel A. Helminiak; and

Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective by Kelly Brown Douglas.

2. Learn about Scripture that is affirming of LGBTQ people. Then share it. Your task is to look up books and Scripture that support LGBTQ figures and affirmation in the Bible. Discuss it at your next Bible study meeting. Try exploring the “Biblical Evidence” section on the website <http://www.wouldjesusdiscriminate.org>.

3. Create a task force at your church. **Institutional change requires infrastructure.** If you are serious, and we hope you are, your efforts need to be part of churches’ inner-workings. Many LGBTQ individuals have been exposed to very homophobic faith communities. In order to create an inclusive space that welcomes LGBTQ people, we must be explicit and intentional in our support.

4. Don’t wait until a crisis happens. Don’t wait until someone commits suicide, or is murdered, or an Eddie Long situation turns up in your local newspapers. There are gay people at your church right now—whether you like/accept it or not. You can choose to live in truth or create fear. Most of us have embodied fear for decades that we have not worked through; what would we like to pass on to our children?

Helpful Websites:

- www.nbjc.org

This is the website of the National Black Justice Coalition. It is an LGBTQ organization with a civil rights focus. Check out their LGBT-affirming curriculum for seminarians called *Higher Ground* in the publications section.

- www.soulforce.org

The online presence of Soulforce, an organization committed to ending religious based oppression aimed at LGBTQ people. Take some time out to leaf through co-founder Rev. Mel White's booklet titled *What the Bible says And Doesn't Say About Homosexuality* in the resource section.

- www.wouldjesusdiscriminate.org

This is a website sponsored by the Jesus Metropolitan Community Church of Indianapolis, Metropolitan Community Churches and Faith in America, this site provides a discussion of Scripture and affirmation relating to LGBTQ people and the Bible.

Suggested Films:

- **Dirty Laundry (comedy/drama, 2006)**

This film tells the story of a black gay man from Georgia and what happens when he learns about his son. This film has some great discussion points about reconciliation and family. Try using films such as this as an easy starting place for what can be a difficult conversation.

- **For the Bible Tells Me So (documentary, 2007)**

This documentary follows various Christian families and details the relationship between parents and their gay children. This would be great to share at church as part of a discussion group or Bible study.

Hotline:

- **The Trevor Helpline: (866) 4u-trevor**

This is the only national 24-hour, toll-free suicide prevention hotline aimed at gay and questioning youth. A great resource for youth in need if church may not be the safest place for discussion.