

[COVCHURCH.ORG/EMBRACE](https://covchurch.org/embrace)



e m b r a c e

Embrace for Youth Case Studies

EQUIPPING MINISTRY LEADERS TO
BETTER CARE FOR THE YOUTH
IN YOUR COMMUNITY



The Evangelical Covenant Church

MAKE AND DEEPEN DISCIPLES



e m b r a c e

COVCHURCH.ORG/EMBRACE



EMBRACE YOUTH CASE STUDIES

Welcome

CONTENTS

HOW TO USE THIS RESOURCE page 2

CASE STUDY 1:
WHEN LEADERSHIP DISAGREES page 3

CASE STUDY 2:
RESPONDING WELL WHEN A
STUDENT COMES OUT AS LGBTQ+ page 4

CASE STUDY 3:
FOSTERING A SAFE AND HEALTHY
YOUTH MINISTRY FOR LGBTQ+ YOUTH page 5

CASE STUDY 4:
WHEN A TEENAGER TRANSITIONS page 6

CASE STUDY 5:
BIBLE CAMP ACCOMMODATION
QUESTIONS page 7

GLOSSARY OF TERMS
AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES page 8

Greetings, Ministry Partner!

Thank you for taking the time to use the Embrace for Youth Case Studies to help equip your ministry leaders to better care for the youth in your community! It truly is an honor to partner with you, and we appreciate the service and commitment you have made to the teenagers in your church and community. I also want to take this opportunity to thank the youth workers who helped to create, author, and edit this case study resource. You are all truly a gift to the Evangelical Covenant Church!

I wanted to provide some ministry perspective as you consider using these case studies:

- We have created these case studies based on real-life situations that have taken place in our churches, camps, and ministry contexts across the Covenant Church in North America. Our goal is to help spur on discussion among our leaders so we can be better equipped to care for the people in our churches and surrounding community.
- These case studies are designed to be used around small groups in discussion—perhaps around table groups. They are *not* designed to provide answers to the questions raised. Typically case studies are designed to help explore and gain clarity on how to approach ministry in each specific ministry context.
- We recognize the complexity that each case study brings, including the response each person may have as they strive to understand and care more effectively in any given scenario. We pray that each reader of this document is speaking with your community with the intent to seek grace and truth, keeping in mind that **every teenager matters to God and therefore must matter to us.**

Additional resources are available in the Embrace suite (covchurch.org/embrace) for you and your church to use as you foster quality conversations around caring for people well who identify as LGBTQ+. If you have any questions, concerns, or comments, please feel free to email our team at embrace@covchurch.org.

Thank you so much for your willingness to grow as a youth worker, your commitment to invest in teenagers, and please, keep praying for our youth!



Grace and Peace,

Tim Ciccone, Director of Youth Ministry
MAKE AND DEEPEN DISCIPLES



EMBRACE YOUTH CASE STUDIES

How to Use This Resource

HOW TO USE THIS RESOURCE

The Embrace Youth Ministry Case Studies have been created to invite quality discussion among our leaders so we can be better equipped to care for people in our churches and communities who identify as LGBTQ+. These case studies come from real-life situations happening in our churches, camps, and ministry contexts across the Covenant Church in North America. They are not designed to provide official answers to the questions raised. These case studies are designed to help you to explore and gain clarity about how you would like to approach ministry situations in your unique context.

GUIDELINES FOR CASE STUDIES

What Is Embrace?

Embrace is a suite of human sexuality discipleship resources and learning experiences which are in harmony with the adopted position of the Evangelical Covenant Church (ECC), the center of which is “Faithfulness in heterosexual marriage, celibacy in singleness—these constitute the Christian standard.”

The Goal of a Case Study

The goal of a case study can be summed up as an opportunity for healthy discussion around a topic for continued growth and learning. A realistic situation is considered, and a discussion focused on healthy dialogue is engaged. A good case study keeps people focused on facts that must be faced in real life—specifically, we are exploring how to better care for youth who may or may not be connected to our churches.

Before You Begin

It is imperative that each leader consider who needs to be in the loop prior to leading this discussion with your leaders or parents. We **highly recommend** that the youth leader sit down with their senior lead/pastor and discuss the content of the case study and the plan you would like to implement. Ask your senior/lead pastor to read through the case studies with you. Gain clarity together and then determine the best goals to use this resource with your specific group. Such collaboration will foster effective outcomes in your church community.

Additionally, consider how these case studies can be most helpful to your group. A primary option may be with volunteer youth ministry leaders in a training setting. Another might be with parents and leaders together. Still another might be with key youth ministry staff.

Setting Ground Rules

This resource might work best in your context in small group discussions led by a leader or facilitator. We recommend that the facilitator not engage in the dialogue so they can better help the discussion move forward. Setting ground rules as a group can be helpful in creating a safe and effective environment for discussion and learning.

Some Suggested Ground Rules May Include:

- Participants should keep in mind that a clear-cut answer does not always present itself. Aim for a generative conversation even if different approaches are represented.
- Generosity toward one another is vital.
- Everyone must contribute—both in sharing your perspective and as active listeners.

Tips for Leading the Case Study Discussion

- As the facilitator prepares for these discussions they should consider how to frame each case study. For example: “Approach this discussion as if you are the person who has to make a decision” or, “You are advising the person leading the group portrayed in the case study—how would you recommend they handle the situation?”
- You may also recommend certain aspects to avoid—for example, “I want you to ignore _____ and focus on _____.”
- Groups of no more than 5-6 are recommended. This gives ample opportunity for participants to share. Be prepared to help start the discussion off by providing a simple question related to the case study to discuss. (This may or may not be necessary depending on your group.)
- Ask one person in the group to be the note-taker. Prepare the groups to share their conclusions at the end of the discussion with the larger group (if applicable).
- Always ask clarifying questions to go deeper in the discussion. Also, a good facilitator will synthesize the issues that have been raised toward the end of a discussion.
- Beginning and ending with prayer is always critical.



EMBRACE YOUTH CASE STUDY NUMBER ONE

When Leadership Disagrees

FOCUS

Church Staff: Church leadership working together when leaders do agree to uphold the church's position but do not agree regarding care practice in a specific situation.

STORY

City Light Church has been a healthy and growing church for the past eight years under the leadership of Pastor Jonathan and his staff. The church has a track record of being consistent and intentional with their ministry endeavors. Overall, the staff enjoys the work of ministry together.

On a Tuesday afternoon, Pastor Jonathan asks the student pastor, Heather, into his office.

Heather has been at the church for five years and feels like she is hitting her stride. Students are actively engaging in the large group program, and many invite their friends. They have a strong team of volunteers.

Jonathan gets right to the point. He has heard from a trusted source that Jeremy, a volunteer small group leader in the student ministry, is involved in a same-sex relationship. Heather knows Jeremy has wrestled with same-sex desires, but she did not know he was in a dating relationship.

Heather feels the awkwardness rise. She knows Jeremy is very private about his sexual orientation and faith journey.

"You know where we stand on this matter," Jonathan says. "Jeremy cannot continue to serve in his role if he is going to pursue a same-sex relationship." Now Heather is distressed. She knows Jeremy loves Jesus, and he is a very involved leader who supports the whole church and the student ministry. Jonathan has another meeting, so he tells Heather they can revisit the conversation the next day.

In the coming weeks, Jonathan initiates several discourses with Jeremy and Heather as well as with several elders in the church. In those conversations they ask Jeremy about his personal convictions on the Bible, his sexuality, his dating life, and the boundaries he sets with teens. Jeremy has been honest about his same-sex attractions, but this is his first dating relationship.

The church's leadership team decides it's best if Jeremy steps down for a season.

As time passes, the conversation comes to a boiling point between Jonathan and Heather. Heather is seeking to minister in the context of the church's position, but she is not sure if this is the best way to handle the situation. Leadership warns that if she continues "fighting the issue," the church might need to consider what course of action would be in the best interest of staff unity.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How would you evaluate the role each person plays in this conflict?

- Heather
- Jonathan
- Jeremy
- Church leadership team

2. If you were an outside facilitator, how would you identify the top three issues contributing to the conflict? How could each issue be resolved?

3. If you were Heather, what would be the focus of your conversations with Jonathan, with Jeremy, with the students, and with the church leadership team?

4. As an outside facilitator, how would you coach each of the following on their leadership:

- Heather
- Jonathan
- Jeremy
- Church leadership team

5. What do you think will be necessary for Heather to continue to serve in this church effectively going forward?



EMBRACE YOUTH CASE STUDY NUMBER TWO

Responding Well When a Student Comes Out as LGBTQ+

FOCUS

Responding well when a student comes out as LGBTQ+

STORY

Joe is a youth pastor at a large suburban church. Lori and Sarah run the largest small group in the youth ministry, which is made up of sixth-grade girls.

At one worship night during the Easter season the students are invited to respond to God through artwork. Kate, one of the sixth-grade girls, is drawing and coloring a cross.

“That’s a beautiful cross,” Lori says. “I love the colors—they’re great for Easter!”

“Thanks,” responds Kate, “but I chose them because they’re the colors of the pansexual flag.”

“Oh, that’s so interesting,” responds Lori. “I want to hear more about that. What made you want to color the cross like the pansexual flag?”

“I’m pansexual,” Kate replies.

“I never knew that. I’d love to hear more about that—what does that look like for you?” asks Lori.

Kate begins to explain what being pansexual means for her and how long she has identified this way. She tells Lori she likes coming to youth group at this church because people are really accepting and she has never felt excluded. Lori tells her she’s glad Kate is in the youth group, and that she loves having Kate in her small group. She tells Kate that she’s always appreciated her creativity and she is glad Kate shared her art and her story with her. She tells Kate that she’d love to talk more later.

The following week Lori tells Joe about the conversation. She is reluctant to break Kate’s confidence, but she thinks the youth pastor should know about it. Joe’s not sure what to do—should he follow up with Kate? Or should he wait for Kate to talk to him about it? It’s the first time a student has come out as LGBTQ+ in their youth group, and there’s no protocol in place.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1. How do you think Lori handled the conversation with Kate? Would you have said anything different?**
- 2. What do you think Joe should do next? Should he talk to Kate?**
- 3. What protocols exist in your church for helping leaders navigate conversations with teens who identify as LGBTQ+?**
- 4. If you were Lori, what would you do next? If you were Joe, what would you do next? If you were Kate, what would you do next?**



Fostering a Safe and Healthy Youth Ministry for LGBTQ+ Youth

FOCUS

How does a youth ministry welcome an LGBTQ+ student while also honoring the church's view on sexuality?

STORY

In this busy town it's typical for some student attendance at youth group to drop off for short seasons. Basketball takes one group, theater takes another, and homework consumes others.

"I just have too much homework. I can't make it tonight," Sally often texts.

"Homework is the worst! We will miss having you around!" her small group leader texts back. She makes attempts to meet Sally for coffee, but those efforts never seem to work out.

Months pass, and Sally stops showing up to youth group altogether.

Then in the spring, seemingly out of nowhere, Sally attends one of the biggest youth group trips of the year. When her youth pastor, Marcus, reads her registration for the trip, one section catches his eye.

In response to the question "Tell us a little about your spiritual journey this last year," Sally had written, "I'm Bi, and I've been staying away from church for a while now. I feared how my friends would react, but it feels good to be back."

"How did we miss this?" Marcus wonders. "I've known her for years, and I had no idea."

When he checks in with the volunteer leaders, a story begins to emerge. Sally has remained connected with the girls in her small group through a text chain. As her friends reached out, Sally has been engaging more and more via text. When it came time for the big spring trip, her peers encouraged her to go, saying, "It's our last year. We can't imagine going without you!"

Sally begins to tell a few of the girls about her sexuality, admitting that she might be interested in girls as well as boys. She gradually starts showing up at small group every once in a while.

Then another girl joins their group. Brenna is "out" and talks about her sexuality often in small group. She wears rainbow apparel and is unapologetic about being lesbian. As the leaders and other girls interact with Brenna, Sally watches to see if they accept her. To her surprise, they never seem to focus on Brenna's sexuality, and when she talks about a new relationship, they ask her the same kinds of questions they ask each other.

"The important thing," her small group leaders reflect together, "is to develop a relationship first with all our students. We ask about the things in their lives they bring up—hobbies, relationships, school—and that doesn't shift when a student identifies as LGBTQ+. Students have to know you are interested in them and care about them before you have any space to speak into their lives. Sometimes this process takes a long time."

One night after youth group Marcus has a chance to catch up with Sally. "I'm really glad you're back. I can't imagine how hard that must have been. Can I ask what helped you come back to youth group?"

Sally recounts that seeing how Brenna was welcomed gave her the courage to finally come out to the whole group.

"I finally thought, 'If they accepted a girl they just met, I am pretty sure they will accept me.' I still get uncomfortable when we talk about where our church stands on this whole conversation and the places I'm not permitted to serve, but I know my leaders love me and I really missed our small group. I know what our church believes, but I am still trying to figure it out for myself. I don't want to be in a group that expects me to agree or get out, you know? I'm still reading and praying about it."

Since then, Sally's youth group has been walking the everyday journey of becoming a more welcoming place. They have realized the importance of sharing stories from the LGBTQ+ community. They've made time in small groups and large groups to hear the experiences of LGBTQ+ students even when it feels uncomfortable.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1. What do you notice about Sally's experience in youth group? What made it an unwelcoming place? What made it a welcoming place?**
- 2. Have you had a similar situation in your youth group? What was similar? What was different?**
- 3. If you were Sally's youth pastor, how would you feel when you read her response to the question about her spiritual journey? What would your first step be?**
- 4. What would it look like in your context to make space for both biblical teaching on human sexuality and also to welcome diverse stories from LGBTQ+ students in your midst?**



EMBRACE YOUTH CASE STUDY NUMBER FOUR

When a Teenager Transitions

FOCUS

What does community and pastoral care look like for a family when a child is transitioning?

STORY

In late August David, the new student ministries pastor, receives an email from a mother of a student in the youth ministry. In the email she explains that her daughter, Amy, has expressed that she is transgender and is asking questions about what that means for her involvement in the youth ministry.

David responds, thanking Amy's mother for trusting him with this information. He adds, "I don't feel right about entering this conversation until Amy shares her story with me herself."

The next week after youth group, Amy asks David if he has time to talk. When he agrees, she tells him that she is a transgender male and is going by the name Adam now.

"Thank you for sharing," David says. "You are always welcome here, and nothing will change how much I care about you as one of our students. How have your parents responded to this transition?"

Amy seems grateful for David's compassion. They schedule a time to meet with Amy and her parents to talk further, especially regarding her interactions with the youth group.

When David meets with the family, he asks what concerns they have. Amy immediately reiterates that she no longer goes by "Amy," and that her name is now Adam. She asks if she can switch to the boys' small group.

David tells her he would be happy to call her Adam. He also explains that the situation may be a challenge for the youth group. While it is a caring and welcoming group, it will take some adjustment. But, he says, "Adam, I will always have your back. I want you to know that we will not tolerate any instances of bullying in our community."

David decides to make some changes. The small groups at youth group are restructured so they are not gender specific. Pertaining to the bathroom, the church decided that Adam would still need to use the women's restroom during programming in the Student Center. But if Adam requested, they could make a bathroom available in the next building over so a private bathroom would be available.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What emotions were you feeling as you read this case study? Were there any characters you resonated with in particular? Why did you resonate with them?
2. If you were in David's place, how would you respond to the name change request if the decision were solely up to you? How would you approach the situation if the parents had a different response from you, i.e., if you are not comfortable honoring a name change but the parents use the new name, or if you think it's best to honor the name change, but the parents refuse to do so?
3. What suggestions do you have for pastoral care for the youth ministry when a student transitions?
4. What advice do you have for small group leaders when a student in their group transitions?
5. Do you feel like anything was missing in David's response to the situation?



EMBRACE YOUTH CASE STUDY NUMBER FIVE

Bible Camp Accommodation Questions

FOCUS

This is a case study about a transgender camper named “Parker,” which uses the pronouns “they,” “their,” and “them” to refer to Parker.

STORY

It is a warm summer day, and Maren, the program director at Community Bible Camp, is assigning the fourth- through sixth-grade students into cabin groups. She comes across a name of a camper that looks familiar—Parker Williams. Parker is 11 years old and going into sixth grade. At the winter retreat earlier this year, Parker shared with a staff member about a struggle with gender identity. Parker is biologically male, but at the time of the retreat was starting to identify as a female.

Maren talks to her boss, Liam, and they decide to call Parker’s parents to find out if they can hear any more of Parker’s story before Parker arrives. But they are unable to reach them, so Maren and Liam decide that since Parker is registered as a boy, Parker will be placed in a boys’ cabin.

Maren assigns two of her most seasoned counselors, Dustin and Michael, to Parker’s cabin. Before the campers arrived, she tells them what she knows about Parker. They are both a little anxious, but all three decide to move forward together.

Within the first few hours of the campers’ arrival, Parker takes down the “Women’s” sign from the camp bathroom and is carrying it around. Parker has also changed out of the clothes they arrived in and is wearing clothes a young woman would wear. During swim time, Parker wears a girl’s bathing suit. Campers in Parker’s cabin are confused about why there is a girl in their cabin.

Liam tries to call Parker’s family again but is unsuccessful. The staff decides they have no alternative but to keep Parker in the boys’ cabin. They partner Parker with Lydia, a seasoned summer staff leader, who will serve as Parker’s “go-to” person during the week. Lydia will be available if Parker wants to talk or just hang out. Michael and Dustin meet with the entire cabin and explain that Parker is a member of the cabin and that they are to treat everyone the same way.

As the week progresses, Maren realizes how gender-specific many of the camp activities are. When campers divide up by gender for games or other activities, Parker becomes anxious and hides in the cabin. The staff comes up with ways Parker can participate that are not gender-specific.

Lydia spends a lot of time with Parker throughout the week. They talk about life, pray together, and play games together. Parker shares with Lydia how easy it is to feel sad about life and how important it is to have someone to talk to. Parker feels like no one understands them.

Liam finally reaches Parker’s mom near the end of the week. When Liam asks her how the camp can best care for Parker, she responds matter-of-factly, “Parker is an 11-year-old boy. It’s good for him to spend time with boys his own age.”

Liam and Maren are taken aback. Does Parker’s mom know Parker brought girls’ clothes to camp and is wearing them? Maren realizes that perhaps Parker feels more comfortable at camp than at home.

On the final day of camp, Liam decides to send an email to the parents of campers in Parker’s cabin, letting them know about Parker. Each parent responds with gratefulness that he has let them know. One parent even says, “Though this is earlier than I would have preferred my nine-year-old to have conversations regarding gender identity, I am glad it happened at camp where he could be encouraged and pointed back to Jesus. Thank you for your diligence.”

When the week is over, the staff are emotionally exhausted. They are encouraged that Parker felt comfortable at camp, and they feel they have made a positive impact on Parker’s life. They are happy with the responses they receive from the parents. But the question dawns on them—what will they do the next time Parker comes to camp? What will they do if a parent of another transgender camper asks if their child can attend camp?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1. Who are the key players in this study? What are the unique challenges each person faces?**
- 2. What steps did the camp staff take to address the situation? What steps would you take in this scenario?**
- 3. What emotions did you experience while reading this story? Who did you feel empathy toward?**
- 4. What would you do the next time Parker came to camp? What would you do if a parent of a transgender camper asked if their child could attend camp?**
- 5. How would you help Parker connect to the other kids at the camp? In what ways would you recommend Parker participate in the camp activities? How would you help Parker connect to Jesus in this setting?**



Glossary of Terms and Additional Resources

In addition to commonly used terms in this conversation, here are simple definitions of terms used in these case studies. (This is not an exhaustive list.)

- **BISEXUAL:** Not exclusively attracted to one particular gender; sexually attracted to both men and women.
- **COMING OUT:** A person who self-identifies as LGBTQ+ in their personal, public, and/or professional lives.
- **LGBTQ+:** This is the general term for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning. The “+” often refers to additional communities (i.e., intersex, ally, genderqueer, etc.)
- **PANSEXUAL:** Pansexuality, or omnisexuality, is sexual attraction, romantic love, or emotional attraction toward people of any sex or gender identity. Pansexual people may refer to themselves as gender-blind, asserting that gender and sex are insignificant or irrelevant in determining whether they are sexually attracted to another person.
- **TRANSITION:** Refers to medical gender transition or change of a gender marker on a document or in a database, depending on the context.
- **TRANSGENDER:** An umbrella term for people whose gender identity and/or gender expression differs from what is typically associated with the sex they were assigned at birth.

The GLAAD Media Reference Guide is a helpful resource for definitions at glaad.org/reference/lgbtq (Please note: This is not an endorsement of GLAAD or their content but rather a recommendation of a potentially helpful resource of terms used in contemporary discourse.)

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Understanding Sexual Identity: A Resource for Youth Ministry

By Mark Yarhouse

This resource is a practical, compassionate explanation of how teens form their sexual identity in today’s culture. Yarhouse introduces readers to the developmental considerations in the formation of sexual identity, which primarily occurs during

the teen years. He also makes recommendations on how to graciously think about homosexuality, along with suggestions for talking with people who experience same-sex attraction. He also helps us learn to graciously respond to children and teens who struggle with questions of sexual identity and discusses how youth ministry can become more relevant in the lives of youth who are navigating these issues. Pastors, youth ministry volunteers, and parents will understand how to help youth navigate today’s culture and form a sexual identity that honors Jesus Christ.

Guiding Families of LGBT+ Loved Ones

By Bill Henson

This 140-page illustrated guide is a treasure trove of practical insights on how to honor God and deeply love the LGBT+ people in your life. It covers a number of topics, including how to:

- Respond well when LGBT+ people come out
- Understand risks LGBT+ youth face (family rejection, bullying, suicidality, and homelessness)
- Avoid using unintentionally offensive words and phrases
- Build a support team for LGBT+ loved ones and their families
- Engage LGBT+ individuals in trusting relationship over the long term
- Devote yourself to prayer that blesses LGBT+ loved ones and yourself.

Emerging Gender Identities

by Mark Yarhouse and Julia Sadusky

Adolescents today are the most sexually fluid of any generation. One key marker of this fluidity is the increase in diverse gender identities. How do Christians respond to this change in culture in the United States and beyond? This book offers a grace-filled and compassionate response for anyone who cares for gender diverse youth. Mark Yarhouse and Julia Sadusky focus on helping readers understand the difference between mental health concerns and emerging gender identities that adolescents explore for identity and community. This resource will encourage readers to minister and care well for teenagers navigating these questions.



The Evangelical Covenant Church

MAKE AND DEEPEN DISCIPLES