



FIVE STRATEGIES

Take a hard look at the environment that infuses your youth group. If you knew a couple of teenagers were struggling with issues related to their sexuality, would they feel welcome? Would they want to come back after a first visit or would they be turned off by your church? As leaders in the postmodern era, have we built a ministry environment that looks more like a courtroom for lawbreakers or a hospital for the hurting? These are hard and healthy questions, and here's how I'm trying to answer them in my own ministry.

1. Speak Truth and Correction Across the Board

God speaks to ALL sin equally, and we should as well. When I explore biblical truths with my teenagers, I'm focusing more on the Bible and less on my own opinions. Paul told Timothy to "correct, rebuke, and encourage with great patience and careful instruction" (2 Timothy 4:2). So don't be afraid to put an end to inappropriate conversation, activity, and behavior within your ministry—be gentle, but direct. But don't elevate some sins over others.

2. It Starts With You

I love this quote from John Maxwell, the Christian leadership guru: "We teach what we know, but we reproduce who we are." How do you interact with people who identify as gays and lesbians? Do you model love or do you model stereotypes? Your teenagers will, in the end, follow what you model.

3. Rethink the Way You Speak

Challenge your teenagers to banish offensive speech, including "you homo," "you fag," and "that's so gay." These statements have no place in the body of Christ—your teenagers should sense that youth group is a "no-offense" zone. It's never okay to laugh and joke at the expense of another.

4. Clearly Define God's Position on Sin

When you focus on homosexuality, be clear that God hates ALL sins—not just the homosexual ones. He hates pride, jealousy, envy, selfishness, lying, lust, and so much more. Your teenagers need to be reminded that, in the eyes of God, all sin is ugly. God wants us to love and witness to the straight sinners as well as the gay and lesbian sinners. Your teenagers need to know that God doesn't view sin on a continuum. He sees us all in need of grace. And when all your teenagers understand their own need for grace and forgiveness, it'll be difficult for them to throw stones at others.

5. Always Model Love

Jesus is our living example of unconditional "agape" love. Whether he's healing the blind, encouraging a Samaritan woman, or giving hope to a woman who just committed adultery, his love for people remains the same. Your kids need to know that showing love to gay or lesbian teenagers will not compromise their relationship with Jesus—instead, they'll be living out his heart for them.

Some things in ministry, just as in life, are non-optional. Finding a way to address the wider culture's approach to homosexuality is non-optional. If we don't move toward our teenagers in a balanced, biblically sound, and loving way, we are abandoning them to the prevailing currents that swirl around them. **g**