



EXTRAORDINARY  
LUTHERAN  
MINISTRIES

# COMING OUT

## TO YOUR CONGREGATION

### BEST PRACTICES AND ADVICE FROM FELLOW RELIGIOUS LEADERS WHO HAVE LEFT THE CLOSET

2018

This resource is written from our particular perspective as Rostered Ministers (ordained pastors or consecrated deacons) in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada. We do hope and believe, however, that the insight we gleaned from the experiences of Rostered Ministers is helpful to people serving in different capacities such as: pastors in other denominations, leaders of youth ministries, etc. If you're not a Rostered Minister in the ELCA, please feel free to make use of this resource in whatever way you see fit and to adapt it as needed to fit your own context and polity. In order to make this resource accessible to as many people as possible who might find it useful, we're using the term "religious leaders" since we recognize that "Rostered Ministers" doesn't mean much outside of our own denomination.

# INTRODUCTION

If you're reading this, then you are embarking on a journey that may seem impossible, perilous, or maybe even foolish, but we believe it will be worthwhile and ultimately very beneficial. There is no right or wrong way to come out, but in a religious context, there are often additional layers that make it difficult.

*"This admission comes from a life's journey of discovery, growth and revelation. My own study, preaching, teaching, and spirituality have allowed me to grow in faith and I find myself trusting more deeply everyday in the very thing I have been called to proclaim, the love and grace of God. From that trust I have discovered comes new life and the courage to face my own fears. I am now conscious that to be authentic I must not only preach the truth, I also have to live it. I can no longer proclaim to you that you should live lives of transparency and vulnerability without fear unless I also do the same."*<sup>1</sup>

The resource we have put together here is tailored to the specific dynamics of religious leaders who are not currently publicly identified as LGBTQIA+, and are at a stage in their life and journey of self-discovery when they desire to share this part of their identity in order to foster more authentic, healthier relationships between themselves and their congregation, or the institution in which they serve. This is a spiritual transformation too. Churches have historically been places of extreme vitriol and violence towards queer people, but they have also been shelters, sources of inspiration, and liberating environments for us to thrive. Today we invite you to the open welcome of God's house and the life you have been formed to lead.

## STEP 1 - MOTIVATIONS

For many LGBTQIA+ religious leaders that have managed to stay closeted at church, there might be a number of basic questions: Why is it necessary to come out? Why force a potentially awkward conversation? Why expose yourself to possible ridicule and harassment?

Our answer is simple: **You should come out for your well-being and for the well-being of others.**

Your fears about coming out are probably based in some reality. We fear family rejection. We fear community retaliation. We fear being labeled a "sinner." We fear what others will assume about us. We fear what coming out will mean for our lives. But we are not called to live by fear, but to trust in the goodness of God.

*"Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go." (Joshua 1:9)*<sup>2</sup>

The closet might seem like a place of safety, in reality, it can be quite dangerous to always navigate who knows what and who suspects what. LGBTQIA+ individuals who feel they must keep hidden face alarming rates of suicide and self-destructive behaviors. Religious leaders like you deserve intimate trusting connections in life in order to help others connect with God and their neighbors.

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<sup>1</sup> Quotes from publicly out religious leaders are written in green and italicized.

<sup>2</sup> Bible Quotes from *The Holy Bible: The New Revised Standard Version*, New York, The National Council of Churches in Christ, 1989.

ACTIVITY: Make a list of all the things you are afraid of happening if you reveal who you are. Then for each item on your list, generate a corresponding list of blessings that could follow when you finally are living openly and honestly.

FEAR	BLESSING

In case you had difficulty with the activity above, we want to give you some positive motivation for coming out. So here are some advantages of being an out-LGBTQIA+ religious leader:

- Your ministry will be enhanced as you live a more authentic life.
- You do not have to worry about being “exposed” by someone else.
- You get to control how the conversations are handled.
- You will be surprised at how celebrated this news might be!
- You will make it safe for others to come out and for your church to welcome them.

**“Let Us Pray...”** Prayer and contemplation have been central elements in many religious experiences. Before you do anything, pray. Ask God to be with you through the journey ahead. Lay your heart open for the Holy Spirit. Praying connects us with the divine and gives us some measure of peace during turbulent times. As you proceed through this time, be sure to set aside time to tend to your spiritual needs. Maintaining your prayers, devotionals, meditations, or other centering practices will help you avoid neglecting the parts of your life that restore your soul. Many people find the confidence of a Spiritual Director to be a helpful addition to their spiritual resources during times of discernment. It’s important to surround your decisions with conversations with God.

“Answer me when I call, O God of my right! You gave me room when I was in distress. Be gracious to me, and hear my prayer.” (Psalm 4:1)

**RESOURCE:** Here is a website to help you locate a professional spiritual director  
<http://www.sdiworld.org/find-a-spiritual-director>

**“BUT I’M MARRIED...”** Lot’s of religious leaders are married. Sometimes there’s heavy social pressure in the church to be married and religious leaders, just like other people, can choose to do so. Depending on how you identify and how your spouse identifies this may add complexities to your situation. There are books, articles, and other resources that specifically address coming out as LGBTQIA+ while married. This may lead to a divorce, it may not. That’s up to you both and really isn’t anyone else’s business. If there’s a spouse involved, then your coming out directly affects them too, so please help them connect to every available support, LGBTQIA+ friends, other spouses who have gone through similar circumstances, professional counselors, whatever they might need. Particular attention should be focused on making sure a spouse’s spiritual needs are being met during this time. When relationships destabilize with religious leaders there is a tendency for the bonds of trust and faith in God to be shaken as well.

*“By that time I was married with children and decided that I would continue on in the closeted life I had created for myself. When I decided to answer a call to ordained ministry I thought I can do better work to affect change in the church and world as an ally and further solidified my decision to remain closeted and take my secret to the grave. But I realized that not only was I participating in my own oppression as a gay person, I was also preventing my wife from having the abundant life that Christ intends for her and for all people. “*

**RESOURCE:** <http://www.straightspouse.org/> Straight Spouse Network grew out of a task force within Parents Friends of Lesbians And Gays (PFLAG). They have LOTS of solid resources and can connect you with books, groups, and counselors to help during this time.

A few points of wisdom to consider:

-Feelings of Sexual Orientation are distinct and not a reflection of your affection and abiding love for your spouse. You may experience strong love for your spouse even while you explore your sexual orientation.

-Many married people had an inkling that they were gay prior to getting married, but not all. The religious and cultural pressures in our world are real and living an out-proud lifestyle was not an option for many until relatively recently. It’s a good idea to exercise as much grace with each other as possible.

-The isolation many closeted religious leaders have felt over the years and decades could have led to significant depression, low self-esteem, self-loathing and a sense of not being worthy. A counselor and/or spiritual advisor or friend can help an individual through these feelings; but they may never completely go away.

**“A Reading from...”** You might want to do some reading on your own about sexual orientation and/or gender identity. We are fortunate to live in a time when resources are plentiful and comprehensive. There are books, movies, and podcasts you can engage, and of course you can comb the internet for good information. There’s plenty of bad info out there too. A good starting place is with well-known established organizations, denominational affiliated welcoming movements, and friends.

You should know that there are several large organizations that are working every day to make the world safer for us. Each of them have resource lists that could be very enlightening.

GLAAD <http://www.glaad.org/resourcelist>

Human Rights Campaign (HRC) <http://www.hrc.org/explore>

National LGBTQ Task Force <http://www.thetaskforce.org/category/reports-studies/>

There are also some LGBTQIA+ welcoming religious resources online. Each denomination seems to have its own para-church organizations that can meet the needs of people within those traditions. The Reconciling Ministries Network is the collaboration of those organizations and can help you find a group that works within your community of faith.

<https://www.rmnetwork.org/newrmn/connect/lgbtq-affiliates-and-organizations/>

There are other LGBTQIA+ spirituality sites like <http://www.transfaithonline.org/>, <https://www.gaychristian.net/>, <https://www.believeoutloud.com/>, <http://queertheology.com/> that have more info and resources.

There are tons of books out there about coming out that can help make this process much easier. Some of the advice that follows will overlap, but some will be unique to a church community. It's a great idea to do some reading on your own so you can identify the aspects of your current life that may need to be addressed or changed. You are not alone.

**RESOURCE:** *Outing Yourself: How to come out as lesbian or gay to your family, friends, and coworkers.* by Michelangelo Signorile ([Goodreads Link](#))

## STEP 2: GATHERING SUPPORT

You know your situation better than anyone else, but that doesn't mean you are alone.

*"Where there is no guidance, a nation falls, but in an abundance of counsellors there is safety."* (Proverbs 11:14)

You've already made a list of your fears, so now it's time to try to get realistic. Which ones are likely, which ones are less likely? Worst case scenario, everyone freaks out, maybe you lose your job, your family, your reputation and then everything else. Ok, that's actually probably not ALL going to happen. But facing those fears of loss is absolutely crucial to figuring out how you'll build the support you need prior to making your announcements.

Everyone has a unique timeline for coming out. Some people prefer to move quickly and pick up the pieces afterwards, others are much more methodical, taking years to build up a careful plan that takes in as much information as possible. However you operate, your plan for coming out is up to you and shouldn't be controlled by anyone else.

## Types of Support:

**Local Support.** As you get your plan together, reach out to local in-person resources/groups/leaders. If you are Lutheran, connect with Extraordinary Lutheran Ministries' program director ([programdirector@elm.org](mailto:programdirector@elm.org)) to help you meet other LGBTQIA+ pastors/deacons in your area. Connecting with leaders of PFLAG, HRC, or your local LGBTQIA+ Center is also good. Ask for a meeting and let them know you're planning to come out to your congregation and you're gathering support for doing that.

**Personal Support.** Having some good friends who are outside of the church system will be crucial to maintaining your own balance and health through this process. You'll need a few folks you can laugh with and spend time doing the things you always enjoyed doing. Maybe it's a hiking group, a book club, your bowling team, or just folks you know and like being around. Coming out within a religious community can be stressful and potentially isolating. Whether or not you choose to clue your friends in on what you're dealing with is up to you, but it will be helpful to be reminded that God also works through our loving relationships outside of church.

**Professional Support.** For your own health we hope that you are simultaneously seeking the support of a licensed therapist (including Licensed Clinical Social Workers, counselors, psychologists, etc.) during this time. Seeing a counselor can be very helpful in navigating our complex lives. Coming out certainly qualifies as a time when the added guidance of a licensed LGBTQIA+ friendly therapist would be beneficial and worth the investment. Many health insurance plans include an Employee Assistance Program which can provide free or discounted sessions with a therapist; ask your provider about EAP benefits.

**RESOURCE:** [Here is a website to help you find a therapist.](#) Start by putting in your location and then you can filter the results by all sorts of criteria including LGBTQIA+ friendliness. In your initial conversation ask if they've worked with people coming out before. Ask if they've worked with religious leaders before. People who are transitioning would especially benefit from a professional counselor who has worked with trans folks before.

**Systemic Support.** Talk with your Bishop or District Leader. Let them know you are planning on disclosing your sexual orientation/gender identity. You don't need to ask for their permission or blessing, they might even try to delay your disclosure, but that's not their job. Your bishop serves to support ministry in their jurisdiction and hopefully they will realize the best way to do that is to encourage healthy ministers and healthy congregations. The closet is not healthy. You're informing them so they hear it from you as a sign of respect. If there are rules prohibiting LGBTQIA+ religious leaders in your denomination, then maybe they can help you find resources to support you within your denomination or help you being the process of transferring...etc. In our own history, it was bold defiance of such policies that eventually helped the denominational leadership realize their discriminatory practices and change the policy. We don't recommend enduring systemic abuse, but rather trying to find creative ways to rally support and raise awareness.

**Ecclesial Support.** If you can identify one person within your congregation who has explicitly declared their support for LGBTQIA+ inclusion in the past, then it can be extremely useful to give that person a “heads up” a day or two before you plan on self-identifying publicly. They may or may-not have an accurate read on the rest of the congregation...but they might help you identify folks who might react adversely. When you make your announcement, it would be nice to know you have supporters in the room.

Once you have your support systems in place. Here is a possible path to consider:

If you have a Mutual Ministry Committee who you trust, you can tell them,  
then we recommend informing the council president,  
then the council,  
then the whole community, in that order.

You might confide in other respected members who are unofficial power-brokers before going public, but it's worth recognizing that people tend to talk and gossip unless directly bound to keep information confidential (which is why starting with a confidential group like Mutual Ministry can be tactful). Leaders will feel respected and included when you invite them to accompany you on this journey...but plan to do this in fairly quick succession. The more time between each step, the greater the chances that people will start gossiping before you have a chance to say something. (Of course, they will gossip anyway, but you can minimize it.) However, don't assume that these groups will tell others, **and** don't assume they will keep it all a secret until you're ready. Be clear about your expectations and your shared need for this process to unfold as smoothly as possible. If you present a thought-out plan, it is more likely that your congregational leadership will respect that plan.

ACTIVITY: FLOW CHART. Work your way through the following flowchart that will help you discern some of the variables during this process.

**How long have you been a pastor in this context?**

**A long time**

Since you already have established connections with your parishioners, coming out might be more complicated. It can be very rewarding to finally be honest with a community you feel close to.

**Not long**

**Are you currently in a relationship?**

**yes**

Coming out will have consequences for this person too. It is important that you have good communication before you begin the public disclosure process.

**Nope**

**Appears hetero**  
**Same-Gender Loving**  
**Non-binary / etc.**

**Does your council/ board have the authority to dismiss you?**

**yes**

Coming out might feel like pressure on your significant other because you are connected to a whole community. You may not want to disclose your relationship to the congregation yet, it's none of their business. Some people are fine with single-gay people, but have very different reactions when confronted with a same-gender loving couple.

**Nope**

You may want to consult a lawyer or denominational advisor about your process so that you are fully aware of your options and the powers of the congregation and council/board.

**It's relatively smooth sailing, but that doesn't mean it will be easy.**



# STEP 3: PLANNING LOGISTICS

Think about your method. You have lots of options for HOW you want to come out. You can write a special congregational letter, you can self disclose during a Sunday sermon or even during the announcements time. Actually, if you can, we recommend coming out both in-person and in writing in close succession. If you want to come out first in-person, it's important to plan what you'd like to say. As a religious leader and public speaker, self-disclosure should be clear without being too wordy. Doing so during the sermon is a good time when you have everyone's undivided attention. If you'd like to come out in writing first through a special congregational letter, you could follow that up by hosting a forum where there will be room for discussion. Whichever path you choose, make sure it's personal, not ashamed, and that you attempt to guide the dissemination of the news instead of leaving it to the gossip rings.

1. If you plan to come out during a sermon, announcement or other time the congregation is gathered, think about why that is the best time. And what is going to happen immediately following your disclosure. If feasible, consider letting the assisting minister or other worship leader know prior to sharing your story, so they can be prepared to step in and lead worship for a moment or two (example a hymn or prayer) so you have a moment to catch your breath or drink some water. Every context is different, and many religious leaders feel that during a sermon, when the congregation is already paying attention and you have more time to explain is a good time to come out. Others feel like announcement time is better so it doesn't interfere with the regular pace or content of the service. After you come out, that's basically all anyone is going to remember from that morning. So, if you do it early in the worship, they may be distracted for the remainder of the time. It can be a very healthy practice to open up a brief time for questions and discussions following your revelation. You may feel attacked and bombarded with questions you are unprepared for, but you can use the time to gather the thoughts of the congregation and arrange to respond more fully with a forum at a later time.
2. Draft your congregational communication. It should be short, direct, loving and respectful. It should be in your own voice and style. Try to communicate that you want to honor your role and connection with the community by sharing this aspect of yourself with them. This is about love and honesty; an invitation to inform them that you've spoken to the church council already and the bishop and your plans going forward. Invite them to come talk to you if they want to.

Remember: THERE'S NO RIGHT/WRONG WAY...but there are plenty of things to consider before deciding your path. Share your plan with your support networks so folks are ready.

Write it down, practice in the mirror. **ACTUALLY PRACTICE SAYING IT ALL OUT LOUD.** You don't want to stumble over your words when you want folks to hear your intentionality. You want to let the emotional impact of this affect you and the community together.

“Do not say, “I am only a youth”; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord.” (Jeremiah 1:7-8)

Have a friend on stand-by that day. Tell someone who is completely outside the church-congregational system what you are up to. Ask if they would be able to be on-call that day so you could reach out after it's done and debrief and get some support. It's important, particularly after the coming out event, that you have a space to feel loved and affirmed, to cry or sit-silently, or whatever you might need to do. It's helpful if this person is totally detached from your religious community so they can be entirely present for you.

Here are some more suggestions for how to phrase things so that it will go as well as possible:

- a. DO say that you really value the relationships you've formed in ministry together, and it's important for you to be fully yourself if you're going to ask them to be fully themselves.
- b. DO NOT try to justify LGBTQIA+ inclusion in the church via rational statements. It won't work to convince anyone who isn't open to you, and the folks who are open to you don't need to hear it. Instead maybe share part of your personal story and how God has been active through this journey.
- c. DO publicly identify some of the support outside of the church that you've received. You might mention how you came out to your family or that you've been connected with a great group of other LGBTQIA+ religious leaders (Proclaim is such a community started by Extraordinary Lutheran Ministries; there are several cities with LGBTQIA+ clergy groups as well). It will help people to know you haven't been languishing along on this because some may feel guilty for not being the loving community you needed them to be.
- d. If you have a committed partner that they have not met, maybe mention that to the community and say that it's been difficult to try to hide one of your most important relationships from people who you love and trust. Or, if you are transitioning, or coming out as bi or queer, or are currently married, reassure people that you and your partner / spouse are navigating this together, and that it may or may not impact your marriage/partnership in the same way as coming out as gay or lesbian.
- e. If you want to talk about anything in the way of education with them, then just say that there are many resources for you all to explore together and you'd be happy to facilitate more education for the whole community. You don't have to be the expert.
- f. Keep it all relatively brief. You don't need to overshare or explain every detail. It might give them the impression that you are not certain. Don't worry, you'll get to talk SO MUCH later on.
- g. If the supportive ally in the congregation can run interference for you it could be really helpful. If someone freaks out and starts yelling, your ally can stand up for you, then you can step in offering to talk through anything folks want to talk about later on.
- h. Acknowledge the shock and invite them to prayer.
- i. Whether you come out first in-person or in writing, consider sharing a personal story about what's weighing on your heart. Why come out now? Why not earlier? These are the questions folks will be wondering. You can put them at ease by acknowledging that now is the right time.
- j. Make sure that your coming out sermon or congregational letter isn't the ONLY place you come out. Maybe come out in your newsletter, or print your sermon online, or host a forum where there will be some discussion. Remind folks that this isn't meant to be destabilizing news, but celebratory and necessary for the ministry you do together going forward.

- k. Some closeted religious leaders allow congregations to assume that they're heterosexual, or are currently in a relationship that appears heterosexual. Others have been functioning in a "don't ask, don't tell" sort of paradigm. It might be helpful to identify the nuances of what you've been navigating and why you are now choosing to be more authentically you in your role. Particularly, bisexual people who are happy and fulfilled in their current relationships may get pushback for "oversharing," or may encounter questions or statements about the particularities of their relationship or sex life that are beyond what they thought they might have to discuss in coming out. Because it isn't as talked about, people may need clear communication about what bisexuality means and what it means (and doesn't mean) for you in your life. Having a clear, non-anxious way of describing why you are coming out as bi can help put congregation members in a non-anxious place about your sexuality as well. Remember that bisexuality is a real and valid identity regardless of what your relationship status is (if no one in a relationship was allowed to identify as bi because they had chosen one partner, there would be many fewer bi people in the world!). Living an authentic life is about embracing all of who you are and being bisexual is part of that. As with other identities discussed in this resource, living authentically into who God has called you to be allows you to be your full and healthy self, and it paves the way for others to do the same.

It's a good idea to have some resources on hand for people who might want to know more. But if you've already done your own homework, you'll have more than enough info to share. Maybe there are some LGBTQIA+ brochures from HRC that you can print out or some materials from Reconciling Works. You aren't responsible to make sure everyone does their own research, but you can help them get started.

## STEP 4: THIS IS THE DAY!

You're ready! You've got folks to support you whatever happens, and a plan. You are confident and proud of who you are. There are people and communities praying for you that you don't even know about. God is with you. You got this!

*"Do not fear, for you will not be ashamed; do not be discouraged, for you will not suffer disgrace; for you will forget the shame of your youth, and the disgrace of your widowhood you will remember no more."  
(Isaiah 54:4)*

# STEP 5: OUTCOMES OF COMING OUT

You might get resistance from people who are being driven by their own fears. One pastor was told to reconsider her decision to come out on a Sunday morning because “there would be children and visitors there.” But what better place and time to display God’s abundant love? I hope there are children and visitors there when you come out so they can witness God’s grace and love in action!

You will have to be your own advocate. Every synod/district handles it differently and gives different advice. Coming out is a personal process and shouldn’t be orchestrated by those not in your shoes.

Sometimes coming out as one thing leads to a process of self-discovery that eventually lands somewhere else. Your journey is your own. As a religious leader, the quicker you can settle into a new mode, the more easily folks will be able to adapt. If you think your process might be more complicated, for whatever reason, consider taking some extended time off beforehand in order to do the personal work you really need to do. We can’t care for others until we can care for ourselves.

**KEEP IN MIND...** Many women, people of color, or disabled folks are the first leaders with those qualities a congregation has ever had. Having multiple marginalized identities can make coming out as LGBTQIA+ even more challenging. It’s important to acknowledge those obstacles and find specific support from others who have been in similar situations.

**OUTED...** Another complication that we haven’t discussed here is what to do if you are outed by someone else before you have the chance to go through this process at your own speed. Unfortunately, this happens, and it happens with more frequency for LGBTQIA+ religious leaders because others may think that our identities are scandalously in conflict. For example, if you are using a dating-app and someone screenshots your profile and sends it to your council, they might immediately react negatively (protip: no naked photos of you online whatsoever). Churches can be hypersensitive about potential scandal. It’s important to acknowledge the fears and quickly control the narrative. You could say, “you seem worried that I’m being inappropriate, but let me assure you, I conduct myself responsibly and respectfully and furthermore, my personal life is not up for oversight.”

**OUT Before or OUT Again...** Our whole lives are a journey of self-discovery. Some people come out as queer and this sparks a larger exploration of our personal gender identity and we later come to identify as transgender, gender non-conforming, agender, non-binary (or something else entirely!). Others might first identify as bisexual and later as lesbian or gay. Still others might first identify as lesbian or gay and later as bisexual or queer. Our lives are precious gifts of God and we get to explore who we are and who God is forming us to be. As we grow and develop more fully into who we are, it’s natural for our identities to grow and develop too. The language and vocabulary we use to describe it all might need to grow in order to keep up with us. This is an ever unfolding blessing!

## Possible Reactions and Opportunities to Respond:

“Some people just stopped talking to me.” Some folks will leave. That’s fine. You and your identity are NOT the “issue.” Homo/bi/a/trans-phobia is ALWAYS ALWAYS ALWAYS about something going on within those people. If folks tell you they are leaving, wish them well. Offer to write a letter transferring their church membership to another church whenever they’d like. (Reminding them that YOU are still a good pastor/deacon).

Others might have questions. That’s fine. You can handle questions and you can bring folks on-board. The best, most-helpful thing you can do when someone asks you a question is to ask THEM questions back...at least at first. (Jesus was a pro at this!) Before you can have a rational conversation, you’ve gotta identify the emotional landmines. If someone asks you “Do you not believe in the Bible anymore?” It’s good to ask them what they mean by that (even if you have a pretty good idea). Keep THEM talking. “Are there other parts of the Bible that we recognize as contextually tied to their own time, and not of serious import for our living context? Jesus seemed to think that some of the old laws weren’t especially applicable, Paul blatantly defies dietary laws.” THE BIBLE ITSELF is your ally because Christ is your ally!

Some folks might be confused. “What does this mean?” Take the time to answer people's questions and explain what your identity means for you and people in your community. The place where you serve has its own cultures and histories that will contribute to their reactions. **(Note: please respect your own boundaries, just because you are coming out as LGBTQIA+ (particularly T or I) doesn't mean you have to answer invasive questions about yourself, your body, or your relationships.)**

“We love you! But we need more help to understand.” We’re so fortunate to have so many queer-friendly theological resources. In fact, we have so many that LGBTQIA+ Christians don’t even always read things the same way. Again, you don’t have to have all the answers, you probably shouldn’t anyway, but God is always calling us into more loving connections with other people and if people are open to that, they’ll create their own rationale. That being said, theology or quoting bible, isn’t going to help anyone learn to accept LGBTQIA+ folks, only relationships will do that. You were created by God. That’s enough to know.

“It surprises me how many people associated it with a death. People would say that it felt like whoever I was died.” There certainly will be grief involved. Families and communities have active imaginations about who their leaders are and will be, and when those visions are taken away, they feel like they’ve lost an important part of who you are. It’s ok. Be prepared to acknowledge grieving and invite them to join your real vision for your future.

“Does this mean we are a gay church now?” YES! Actually that’s a silly question filled with latent heterosexism and fears and nasty theology. You can always respond with something like “What do you mean?” Will we accept LGBTQIA+ members? I hope so! Will we advocate for LGBTQIA+ justice? I hope so! Will we proclaim God’s good news of love? I hope so! Will we continue to do all the things we cherish about our tradition and community? I hope so! If you’re asked this, please don’t just say “NO.” Instead, try, “well, I would be so honored to lead a church that would welcome me even if I wasn’t the pastor/deacon. I

don't think we'll be getting a huge influx of gay folks suddenly converting to Lutheranism... but I'd be thrilled if folks from all walks of life started to realize what great stuff God is doing here."

Discuss your plan for addressing the fallout with the church council. Identify some of the concerns folks have raised. "Someone said they didn't know about having a gay pastor/deacon around kids." (LGBTQIA+ does not equal pedophilia no matter what the haters say.) "Someone said they don't know if they want to stay in the church or not." (Offer to talk with them whenever they'd like) "Someone else said they were proud of me and wanted to support me because they have a gay nephew they love and didn't realize their church was welcoming too. They want to bring their nephew and his boyfriend to church now!" (Hallelujah!) If the council has any other concerns, now or in the future, let's talk about them immediately and openly. Because it's not that these difficult conversations weren't possible before, but now is the right time to begin them in this current context. Offer to lead a bible study, bring in a speaker, or take a field trip to some other welcoming community to learn about their story.

**I PROMISE IT WILL GET BETTER...** but, it might take longer than we'd like, and given church financial situations these days...it might get really rough first. Folks might try to take action against you if folks leave and the finances dwindle. BUT, this is an opportunity for those who remain to take their ministry seriously; to be the truly welcoming church God is calling you into.

**Preacher PREACH!...** You have to find a balance in your preaching in order to invite folks along but not overwhelm them. They need time to absorb change. So maybe don't preach on overly gay-stuff every week (keep track). Folks can get saturated with similar messages and it will be good to remind them that you've got lots of good stuff to preach about. Maybe plan that you'll preach no more than once a month about something explicitly related to LGBTQIA+ welcome/justice, but no fewer than 4 times a year. (Recognizing that any story that involves you is now an LGBTQIA+-related story, this should be flexible.) Also, it's ok to mention LGBTQIA+ folks as a marginalized community alongside others who have faced oppression and discrimination. Does just saying LGBTQIA+ make it a "gay sermon"? Who knows, for some it might. Focus on the good news and allow the Holy Spirit to move and do her thing!

Maybe plan to preach about Pride during your city's pride month, or transgender and gender non-conforming concerns near the Trans Day of Remembrance/Resilience (<https://www.tdor.co/>). It's important to continue the conversation and it's equally important not to omit LGBTQIA+ concerns from your preaching, it will reinforce why it was vital for you to come out.

Stick around. Don't come out just before going on sabbatical or vacation. Folks need to know that this news isn't going to separate you from them. You'll need to be there in your regular fashion, maybe even more often than that, so people see you in your role. Similarly if you're already planning to leave a congregational call, doing a coming-out mic drop without any space for follow-up probably creates more headache and heartache than it solves, so please consult your denominational leadership.

"For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:38-39)

# STEP 6: FOLLOWING UP

After the dust settles, in a month or so, take time for yourself...because this is probably one of the healthiest moves you've ever made for yourself, but it's probably also been very stressful. Take a couple days off in a row to leave town. Do what you need to do to be healthy. Tensions may be ongoing, but the community will still be there when you return.

Here's a few things to keep in mind during the coming months:

1. You'll want to check in about some of the things your council talked about. If you have a mutual ministry committee then you can identify tensions and areas of hope. If you don't have a mutual ministry committee, it might be a good time to start one.
2. Do something positive. Keep visiting folks. Keep preaching the Good News. Keep calling folks to check in. Keep planning events. Keep community life pretty regular.
3. Don't demonize your congregation if it's not all rainbows and unicorns. They've been under the same social/cultural/theological pressures you have. Their prejudice is as much a result of that abusive fundamentalism as your closet was. Give them time. Invite them along on God's path of life abundant.
4. If the council wants to take steps to extend an even more inclusive vision, that's wonderful! It's great to support them if they want to say, become a publicly welcoming Reconciling In Christ congregation or fly the rainbow flag or volunteer at Pride. Please help your congregation go through the motions of becoming a recognized welcoming church. There are layers of conversations to be held, but too many of our churches won't consider an out-LGBTQIA+ religious leader when it turns out, that's exactly who God is calling for them.

For more information about how your congregation can become Reconciling in Christ:

<https://www.reconcilingworks.org/ric/>

If your congregation needs resources to help them consider calling an LGBTQIA+ religious leader in the future here's a helpful one:

<https://www.elm.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Enrich-and-Transform-printer-friendly-version.pdf>

5. "Coming out has to be about becoming sex positive, otherwise it's just moving from one colonization to another." Looking into the layers of oppression you've been under will eventually beckon a confrontation between religiosity and sexuality. Why not make it a conversation and collaboration? God is working through you to let justice flow! Consider doing some reflection on your sexuality and the feelings of joy, connection, and shame that you might associate with it.

**BOOK RECOMMENDATION: "Good Christian Sex: Why Chastity Isn't the Only Option-And Other Things the Bible Says About Sex" by Bromleigh McCleneghan**

You're going to have to keep coming out. Once you've gotten over the big one, the rest will be easier. But folks aren't likely to ask, so you may have to do some telling. The effects of coming out are powerful on many levels. "By being our true selves, we invite others to be their true selves."

6. Filling out institutional paperwork may be tricky. Years after coming out, one pastor/deacon was ready to move to another call and when asked about his current family on the forms he wrote: "I am currently married and we have an adult son, however my family situation is changing and I'm happy to discuss that if called for an interview." Others have chosen to be more direct, stating their sexual orientation as a given fact: "As an out-gay man, my experience of the church in the world has been different from many of my peers." It would be worth having a conversation with the bishop's assistant for mobility about what a potential congregation might need to know through the paperwork. Generally, it's recommended to be out on your paperwork to avoid placing an LGBTQIA+ person in a hostile environment. Being out on your paperwork may also occasion a healthy conversation with a call committee about how a congregation has interacted with LGBTQIA+ people in the past. Additionally, it gives you the power to control how you frame your own narrative; you get to set the tone and direct the content. The drawback to being out is that you might get passed over for an otherwise wonderful call, but then...would it really be such a good fit? There may be fewer welcoming calls available. But with God's help, we're working on it! If you aren't out on your paperwork following your coming out to the congregation, then you might find yourself unintentionally back in a closet.
7. The process of overcoming shame is huge and life-long. For a congregation to experience shame when a religious leader comes out is possible, but naming it and processing it will help your people find their sure footing in God's grace.

**BOOK RECOMMENDATION: "Queer Virtue: What LGBTQ People Know About Life and Love and How It Can Revitalize Christianity (Queer Action/Queer Ideas)" by Rev Elizabeth M. Edman**

8. The closet is not an option. Going forward, one pastor said to their council, "are you going to tell them or am I?" Find ways to continue to be publicly identified. Put your sexual orientation and/or gender identity in your professional bio on the website. Join a professional organization for out LGBTQIA+ religious leaders or just other out folks in the community or hang out at the gay-bar or other queer-space with friends. (sidenote: Alcoholism is a frequent side effect of being closeted, if you struggle with addiction, please know God is loving you to health in that arena too.) We each get to figure out what "being out" looks like for us. Some find that identifying themselves as religious leaders in the gay community can be very tricky too. "You're a PASTOR?" I think a good rule-of-thumb is: Share boldly, but maintain healthy boundaries. That means, be yourself, but also keep in mind that you still represent the church so always try to be respectful.



9. Single people may have special concerns as they navigate coming out. Dating can be difficult, but it can also be exciting and healthy! Without an existing partner, it might be easier for a congregation to accept your sexual orientation. But also, it will be a whole other bag of worms if you eventually bring a partner to church. (Protip: it's probably wise to wait until y'all are pretty stable and serious before they come 'round.)
  
10. As religious communities with rituals part of our core expression, it may be very useful to host a special ritual to mark an important transition. Some newly out LGBTQIA+ clergy find it useful to include prayers or litanies that help a community reconcile with a past that reinforced a closet condition. Re-naming rituals can be extremely powerful for a community to witness a leader who is transitioning their gender identity. More resources are being produced for these significant milestones all the time and the Holy Spirit may lead you to develop a new ritual that will benefit your community and others.

## CONCLUSION

We hope that this resource has helped you make some sense of the daunting task of coming out. Now that you've come out officially to your congregation, you'll find that you'll be coming out over and over and over again your whole life. Coming out is the single best thing you can do for yourself and the LGBTQIA+ community because your visibility will help others tell their own stories more authentically too. Blessings on your journey!

*"The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and for evermore." (Psalm 121: 8)*