



## Talking to Gay Teens – What Should the Church Say?

By Evelyn Parker

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I was outraged as my research produced one account after another of violence against black lesbian teens! I was equally angered at the number of violent crimes against young black gay men. One article identified a pattern of the gruesome violence against gay black males: someone familiar to the victim and desecration of the body. The pattern of violence against lesbians was rape and fatal shootings. Some of these rapes and murders were committed by black church folks, even pastors. The Houston Chronicle published a brief article about a Fort Worth, Texas pastor charged with raping a 22-year-old member who sought his counsel as one struggling with her sexuality. The Rev. Leonard Ray Owens, 63, of the Prayer House of Faith Church told the young woman she had a “lesbian demon” and allegedly sexually assaulted her in his effort to excise the demon. Egregious crimes such as these did not merit an outcry from the black community, least of all a cry of outrage from the Black Church.

As I begin this essay on talking to gay teens, I must confess my anger at the Black Church, an institution which I dearly love, for failing Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning (GLBTQ) black teens. Also, I want to briefly note two assumptions associated with talking with black teenagers. The first assumption is that the Black Church *wants* to say something positive and life-giving to all teenagers about black sexuality regardless of their skin color, social status, gender, and sexual orientation. A related assumption is that the Black Church wants such a positive conversation with black gay teens. Black congregations commonly communicate negatively to youth using abstinence and homophobic rhetoric spoken from Sunday morning pulpits and pews as well as weekday youth programs. As ethicist Victor Anderson has noted, black congregations and their leaders are consistently vocal about the “abominable sin of homosexuality” among the young and old. I believe more congregations speak negatively about black sexuality to youth than those congregations that speak positively, and I wish to suggest a positive approach to black sexuality, specifically, to consider a positive word for black gay teens. So, what should the church say to gay teens? I suggest two things: “Forgive me, for I have failed to love you.” And “Come; let me be your sanctuary.”

### **The African American Church Must Seek Forgiveness from Gay Teens**

First, the African American Church must ask forgiveness of gay teens for failing to love them. Loving black gay teens involves loving like Jesus loved. John’s Gospel records how Jesus prayed for his disciples and for those who would believe in him because of them, “...the love

with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.” (John 17: 26b). Loving as God loves is unconditional and perfect. Love “...bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” (I Corinthians 13:7) Since love is from God we are called to love one another for “Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love...If we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfect in us.” (I John 4:8 and 11b) The Bible is clear that we should love all people without any conditions, including their sexual orientation. The perfect love that we receive from God enables us to act on behalf of gay teens.

Perfect love advocates and protects gay teens along with all other teenagers. This type of love fashions youth ministries relevant to negotiating the difficult, death dealing, and bullying, terrains of school, home, and peers. Perfect love must accompany black gay teens as they journey toward a “whole” and wholesome identity that includes race, religion, and sexuality. Generally, within the black community youth view being homosexual as the worst mark of identity. In an ethnographic study with low-income black teenagers, Carissa Froyum discovered that teens construct affirming identities through heterosexuality. Froyum observed poor black teens using strategies to create and protect their heterosexual identities that included appropriating heterosexist ideologies. Froyum’s research suggests that black teens may not be able to deny being poor but at least they are not gay, for poor black youth being gay is the absolute worst mark of identity.<sup>1</sup> Perfect love provides a corrective to such dehumanizing and class stratifying beliefs.

### **The African American Church must become a Sanctuary for Gay Teens**

Second, the Black Church must become a sanctuary for gay youth, inviting them to a physical and metaphorical place of safety where God dwells. A sanctuary is a holy place where God, known in Jesus Christ and present in the world today as the Holy Spirit provides a place that should shelter gay youth from harm. I have argued that the Black Church should allow black youth to express their anger and well as their joy in the presence of God and the congregation. This is the physical setting of the church where gay youth can be themselves without fear of being exploited or ridiculed. Metaphorically, the church should be a safe place for gay youth to be their authentic selves with all their emotions, gifts, and concerns. The Black Church becomes truly holy where gay teens realize that they are created in the image of God, created in God’s own goodness. In the sanctuary gay teens can live into their “sacred-selves” with confidence.

How does a sanctuary church function in a homophobic society? Let us imagine the Black Church as a place where gay youth literally run when someone threatens to kill them or when they are being bullied. I want to imagine a “sanctuary” for fifteen year old Sakia Gunn who was killed on May 11, 2003. She and her lesbian friends, ages 15-17, were returning from New York City’s Greenwich Village to Newark, New Jersey, early Sunday morning when two men driving by propositioned them at the bus stop. When Sakia told the men they were not interested and that they were lesbians, the two men jumped out of the car and attacked the three girls, stabbing Sakia as she defended her girlfriend. Sakia died in her friends arms on the way to the hospital. I want to imagine a Black Church that would have been a hiding place, a place of safety where the Spirit of God dwells for girls like Sakia.

I wonder what the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit, feels when Black congregations refuse to love and offer sanctuary to gay teenagers. I also wonder how gay teens would have responded to the question of what should the Black Church say to them. I am concerned that we keep asking the

question until black gay teens lift their voices and speak to the Black Church and we listen and accept them.

## Resources

### Books

Pat Davis, "Okay with Who I Am" Listening to Lesbian Young Women Talk about Their Spiritualities. In Evelyn L. Parker, ed., The Sacred Selves of Adolescent Girls: Hard Stories of Race, Class, and Gender. Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2006.

### Support Groups

- Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network, Online location: <http://www.glsen.org/cgi-bin/iowa/all/home/index.html>
- Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, Online location: <http://community.pflag.org/Page.aspx?pid=194&srcid=-2>
- Richmond Organization for Sexual Minority Youth, ROSMY, Online location: <http://www.rosmy.org/>
- The Sexual Minority Youth Assistance League, Online location: <http://www.smyal.org/>
- Sisters of Sakia, Online location: <http://www.myspace.com/sistersofsakia>

## Notes

1. Carissa M. Froyum, 'At Least I'm Not Gay': Heterosexual identity Making Among Poor Black Teens. In *Sexualities*, December 2007, Vol. 10 Issue 5, pp. 603-622.