



Part 1 of 2:

Equipping Youth to Reach Out in Love

by **Joshua Tyra**, LIA Admissions Coordinator



On a recent Wednesday evening I walked into a church classroom outfitted with comfy couches and trendy posters, the signature marks of the youth department. I was about to have the uniquely rich experience of speaking to a church youth group about homosexuality. Forewarned by the youth pastor that I needed to be as interactive as possible in order to keep their attention, I decided to lead off with a few questions. Inside two minutes my fears were history, as I was struck by the eager participation and at times brutal honesty of this young group.

“How many have ever heard a pastor mention homosexuality in a sermon?” I asked them. All the hands in the room went up. “And what did the pastor say?” “He said homosexuals are going to hell,” volunteered one young man. “Really?” I asked, genuinely surprised—and alarmed. I didn’t doubt the young man’s truthfulness, but in my hope that such a message was not being preached from a local pulpit, I silently questioned his understanding of the pastor’s underlying point. Another person remarked that most mentions of homosexuality in sermons were quite brief, offering no practical guidance at all on the issue. I moved on to probe other messages the kids were receiving.

“How many have heard a teacher (or professor, for you college people) mention homosexuality in class?” There were fewer hands this time, but one of the collegians volunteered this perspective from his professor: “He said there’s nothing wrong with homosexuality, it’s a personal choice, and you should just live and let live.” Having sounded the opinion of academia, I got more personal in my questions.

“How many here are aware of someone at school who ‘everyone knows is gay or lesbian?’” Every hand in the room shot up. “How many have had a personal friend tell you that they are gay or attracted to the same sex?” Remarkably, half the hands in the room went up at this. After these two questions, I felt I had received a crash course in just how frequently school-age kids are being confronted with this topic. “Would anyone mind sharing with me what your reaction was when your friends told you they were gay?” In one of the evening’s brutally honest moments, I learned that two of the teenage guys had rather abruptly rejected their male friends after learning about their same-sex attraction. They simply didn’t know how to handle interacting with someone in that situation.

After this brief discussion I could clearly see these kids’ need for more and better information about homosexuality. From the church they are either receiving inadequate information, or hearing a—perhaps unintentionally—judgmental and theologically harmful message. From secular leaders like teachers they are hearing an equally underinformed message of moral relativism. And neither message equips young people to show the love of Christ to their struggling friends, as evidenced by the guys’ rejection of their male peers.

Thanks to my life experiences and nearly five years on staff at Love In Action, I believe that God has uniquely placed me to speak to this information gap and equip young people. In the next two newsletters, I want to summarize the message that God has laid on my heart to share with them. I started out with some definitions, to make sure we were using the same words to mean the same things.

First, most discussions of homosexuality oversimplify an extremely complex issue. (Acknowledging that complexity in no way compromises Biblical truth.) There are at least six components involved: there is 1) same-sex attraction, the simple experience of a sexual and/or emotional pull toward the same gender. There is 2) a homosexual identity, the belief that same-sex attraction is foundational to one’s personhood, or is the central fact (or one of the central facts) about oneself. There is 3) homosexual behavior, the choice to act out the same-sex attraction emotionally and/or sexually with another person. There is 4) a gay-affirming mindset, involving the acceptance of a radical redefinition of human sexuality which views homosexual attraction and behavior as normal and effectively creates new gender categories: “gay,” “bisexual,” “transgender,” etc. There is 5) the “gay lifestyle,” the choice to make homosexual identity, behavior, and a gay-affirming mindset the organizing principles of one’s life. Lastly, there is 6) gay activism, the carrying of those principles into the public arena by lobbying for changes in the law, redefining marriage, etc. An additional layer of complexity comes from the wide variation in people’s experience of same-sex attraction. While some people are attracted exclusively to one gender or the other, many fall on a continuum some-

(continued on reverse)

Equipping Youth to Reach Out in Love (continued from front)

where in between, and their attractions to men and women may even vary at different times. In today's media, the terms "homosexual" and "gay" are used indiscriminately to refer to any one of the six components I mentioned, or to any combination of two or more of them; and our culture's widespread use of "gay" and "bisexual" as rigidly differentiated categories smoothes over mountains of personal variation.

Two observations can be made about this high level of complexity: first, until you get to know someone who self-identifies as "gay," you will not know where they stand with regard to all the different components of homosexuality. People can experience same-sex attraction without viewing it as the core of their identity; others may see themselves as having a homosexual identity without accepting all the radical implications of redefining human sexuality. Also, engaging in homosexual behavior does not mean someone is comfortable embracing a gay identity. At Love In Action, we find that most of our clients feel extremely conflicted about their homosexual behavior, and do not see homosexuality as their core identity. The second observation is this: when a 14-year-old boy tells his school friend that he is "gay," it is highly improbable that he has reasoned through all these complex issues and arrived at an unchangeable position. Most likely, he means that he is experiencing some degree of same-sex attraction, but he is probably pretty confused about its meaning in his life, and he may feel deeply conflicted about it. I think the two guys in the youth group wrote off their gay-identified friends based on a whole host of unfounded assumptions, coupled with a gut reaction against something foreign to their own experience. I encouraged them to reach out to their friends and push through that reaction, and I started to build my case for a compassionate response.

I told them about what life was like when I was in middle school at 13 and 14, the age when I started noticing my same-sex attraction. At that time my heart was full of pain, fear, anger, and anxiety. I was lonely and isolated, and I saw myself as small, weak, ugly, insignificant, feminine, and unlovable. I began to notice how I admired other guys who were strong, athletic, handsome, talented, and well-liked. I began to think that if one of those admirable young men would only put his arm around me, tell me he liked me, and tell me I was okay and that everything else was going to be okay, too, then I would feel better inside. The emotions I felt toward those guys were intoxicating, and I built up a substantial fantasy world based around what it would be like to receive attention and affirmation from them. Into that world I could easily retreat when life was difficult, as it frequently was. In seventh and eighth grade I daily endured the worst abuse of my school career, hearing every name in the dreaded catalogue applied to me and even suffering physical abuse. I retreated into myself even further, which only decreased my capacity to reach out for what I really needed: authentic connection with others, real intimacy, real love. I wouldn't have dreamed of telling anyone about my same-sex attraction, but the hurtful name calling and heartless joking went on just the same. My situation was made worse by my secret consumption of pornography, which added to everything else a crippling load of guilt and shame. By the time I was 18, I had sunk into a seemingly permanent depression, grown angry and resentful toward God, and all but discarded my faith in Christ. It would be years before I reached the point of surrendering my life to God and finding the courage to deal with the tangled mess in my heart.

While not everyone's experience is identical to my own, I have heard enough adolescent back stories from LIA clients (400-plus) to know that my experience is far from unique. I told the group that their gay-identified friends are probably carrying similar burdens, having to deal with the effects of all sorts of traumatic experiences and in some cases repeated abuse. Any school-age kid who chooses to publicly identify herself as "gay" knows that decision will be a costly one: even with an inner circle of friends who support her decision, she will still face the negative reactions of people at large. To me, the willingness to assume such a huge personal risk bespeaks the inner desperation these kids feel for love and acceptance. And how sad that is! How acutely do such young people need to meet with the acceptance and unconditional love of their school friends, rather than with rejection and more hurt!

Next month: *Four Practical—but not Easy!—Pointers for Reaching Out*



A Word From Tommy: The task of proclaiming God's love for those trapped in sexual and relational sin is a never-ending one, and one in which we depend on many partners. From the occasional special gift to the regular monthly donation, we depend financially on our individual and church ministry partners. They make it possible for men and women to experience healing in Jesus Christ through *The Source* residential program, the *4-Day Intensive* program, and weekly support groups. And they allow us to educate and support the Body of Christ through speaking engagements like the one Josh is writing

about. If God is calling you to become a financial partner of Love In Action, there could be no better time to respond to him than now. For more information, please call us at 901-751-2468 or e-mail us at info@loveinaction.org. To donate online, please visit www.loveinaction.org.

In His Service,

 Acting Director

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

Event	Location	Date	Time
Source Residential Move-In Dates	LIA Campus	Call to Schedule	1:00 pm
4-Day Intensive	LIA Campus	Call to Schedule	9:00 am
Family Freedom Intensive	LIA Campus	June 9-12	1:00 pm
Within Reach Support Group	LIA Campus	Tuesdays, call to enroll	7:00 pm
Love Won Out Conferences	Westover Hills AOG, San Antonio, TX	April 18, 2009	8:00 am

To make a donation, please call 800.201.4129 or donate online at www.loveinaction.org.