When providing spiritual counsel to Gender-expansive young people, faith and spiritual leaders must balance traditions and beliefs with love, justice, and humility.

See “How to Find a Welcoming Faith Community for Your Family,” and see our recent programs on “Reflections on Gender and Faith” here and our newly updated Resources on Gender and Faith here.

Gender, Spirituality and Faith Traditions

For many children, youth and their families, faith and spirituality are a core part of their identity. Regardless of religion, denomination, practice, or sect, people look to faith-based leaders and institutions for support, comfort and guidance in many aspects of their lives. A child’s gender diversity can bring uncertainties, and in such instances, one’s faith tradition may be the most important source for support as the entire family seeks to understand and affirm a child’s gender. Faith leaders, as well as their spiritual or religious community, are likely to be one of the first places someone will turn as they navigate issues related to gender.

Many aspects of gender may be new and unfamiliar territory for faith leaders—few religious training programs address contemporary gender issues. If you are a faith leader, we hope that the content provided throughout our resources and information helps you gain a foundational understanding on the topic of gender. Of course, the real challenge is incorporating this knowledge into your religious context. To help, we include resources that other faith leaders have generated on this issue. We hope this provides a launching place for your work on, and exploration of, gender. Though you may benefit most from reading the work of theologians and scholars within your own tradition, do consider diving into stories from other faiths, and learning about our shared commitment to all youth and families!

Welcoming Religious, Faith, and Spiritual Communities

Some children express their gender in ways that fall outside of the commonly understood norms of male and female. This gender diversity is a normal part of human expression, documented across cultures, faith traditions, recorded history, and around the globe. However, some interpretations of religious texts have been used to exclude people based on their gender. These exclusive interpretations are not the only way to practice or understand the articles of one’s faith. Most religious and spiritual traditions include welcoming theologies, like the ones you can read about in resources like The Way We Walk – Trans Torah, Coming Out Muslim: Radical Acts of Love, and Transgender Welcome by Bishop Gene Robinson.

There are many churches, synagogues, temples, mosques and other spiritual centers that welcome Transgender and gender-expansive people with open arms. A child’s experience and expression of their unique gender needs should not be a barrier to their full participation.
in a faith community. A substantive body of information has been written to describe affirmative practice strategies for faith and spiritual leaders. You will find some of these resources listed here; if you need additional information please don’t hesitate to contact Gender Spectrum. We can help connect you to faith leaders from many traditions as well as provide additional writings on this topic.

Self – Acceptance for Religious Transgender and Non-binary Youth

Though more and more information addressing how faith communities work to be intentionally inclusive has been written, little attention is given to stories by and about young people’s own journeys toward acceptance of their gender-diversity in the context of faith. What we have learned from some gender-diverse adults is that both self-acceptance of their gender and acceptance within their faith is essential to their well-being.

Those who are fortunate find the strength, often with the help of a therapist or spiritual director, to begin the journey toward self-acceptance. For most transgender persons, completing this transition takes several years. For some, the transition includes hormone treatment and gender-confirming surgery. And many report a profound shift in their spiritual lives, as they turn from the condemnation of a judging God (“You are going to hell!”) to the embrace of a God of paradox and extravagant love. This harrowing transition leads many to a confidence embrace, at last, of “the person God always intended me to be.” – Justin Tanis

For Faith Leaders: The Importance of Leadership on the Journey to Acceptance

Religious leaders have an incredibly important role to play in a world that has yet to fully embrace and understand gender-expansive identities. The spiritual journey toward acceptance acknowledges the central role of religion for many families, and acknowledges that religious condemnation takes away an essential source of solace and support for gender diverse young people of religious backgrounds. As referenced in the Curriculum for Faith Communities by the Human Rights Campaign, gender, its biases, expectations, and limitations impacts all young people. In particular, those who seek to have some spiritual connectedness and that have found themselves at odds with their religious practice, institution, or leader may more easily become disillusioned by faith and/or reject or resist upholding that once important value in their own life and family structure.

Having knowledge about gender, specifically, as well as recognition of the various ways in which gender intersects with other aspects of a child or teen’s life, can be one of the best ways in which to provide counsel when working with children, youth and families. Other aspects of identity—including ethnicity, race, geography, language, immigration status, and class— all influence how individuals (and those around them) perceive gender. Gender Spectrum’s aim is to support faith leaders as they practice gender-affirmative pastoral care within this broader context of identity. Once young people are affirmed in their Gender identity and expression, as they are in other aspects of who they are, then they can bring their full selves to the community – and their faith.