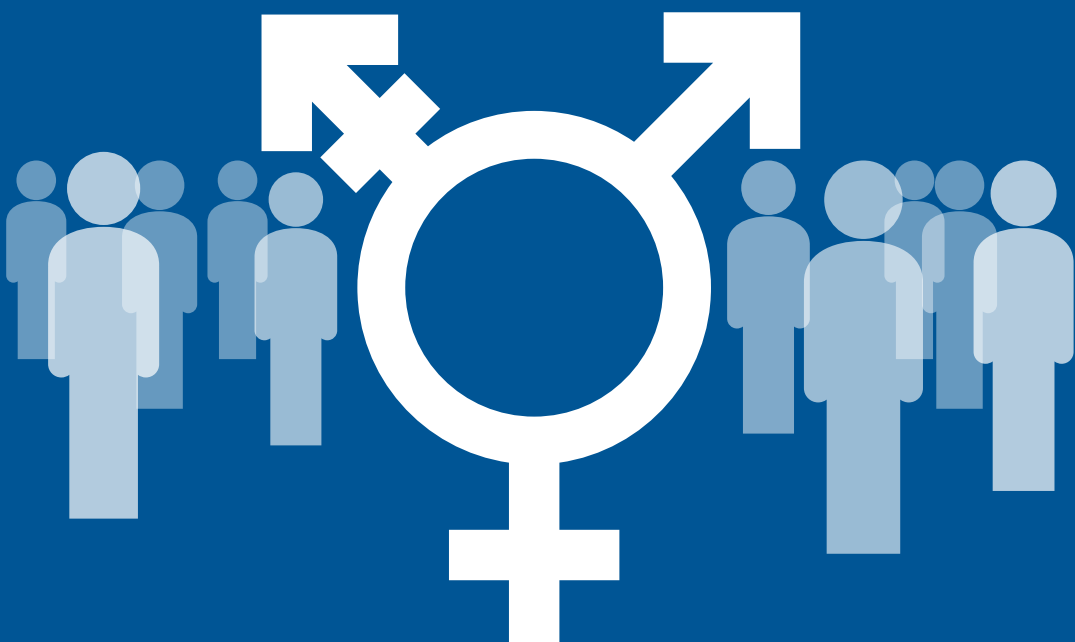


grove pastoral

People Not Pronouns

Reflections on
Transgender Experience



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Andrew Bunt

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Andrew Bunt

Assistant Pastor, King's Church Hastings and Bexhill,
Associate at Living Out

GROVE BOOKS LIMITED
RIDLEY HALL RD CAMBRIDGE CB3 9HU

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I pray that this small booklet will play its part in shaping churches where those who identify as transgender or who experience gender dysphoria can experience the love and the hope that Jesus offers us all.

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Introduction

There was a time in my childhood when I thought I was a girl. Although externally my body seemed to suggest I was a boy, and everyone else seemed to believe I was a boy, I thought that really, I must be a girl. At school, I always wanted to be with the girls. While almost all the other boys would be playing football, I was with the girls, trying (and failing) to do handstands. My best friends were always girls. I just did not feel comfortable with the boys.

One of my most vivid memories is the day I was suddenly struck by the fear that I might become pregnant. (Clearly this was before I knew how these things work!) If that happened, there would be no hiding my big secret. I concluded that I would not be able to get married and would just have to remain living with my parents forever.

As I grew up and went through my teenage years, the feeling that I might be a girl trapped in a boy's body faded away, but I continued to be uncomfortable with my masculinity. I still preferred the company of girls and felt actively uncomfortable in all-male contexts. Stag dos were my worst nightmare—I would usually just find a way to avoid them—but I secretly harboured a desire that one of my female friends would invite me to their hen do. I wanted to be one of the girls. And when a man said something that I and my female friends thought objectionable, I would say, 'He would say that. He's a man.' Clearly, he was in a group that I felt I was not.

This experience of discomfort with my gender identity has been fairly mild compared to the experiences of some. Some children experience much greater distress over their gender than I did in childhood, and for some people, these strong feelings continue through adolescence and into adulthood. In other, rarer cases, the discomfort can suddenly appear later in life. For some, the tension between the external characteristics of the body and the internal feelings of identity, or the clash between their community's and their own perception of themselves, is deeply distressing and painful, sometimes even making just living feel almost impossible.

Understanding Transgender

Transgender is a complex concept. In part this complexity is because the term can be used to cover a broad range of experiences. Stonewall, a prominent LGBT rights charity, defines transgender as:

An umbrella term to describe people whose gender is not the same as, or does not sit comfortably with, the sex they were assigned at birth.¹

This definition draws on two prior concepts:

Gender is (in this context) an individual's personal, internal sense of being a man or a woman. This is sometimes referred to as 'gender identity' or 'experienced gender.'

Sex is the identification as male or female based on physical anatomy (that is, chromosomes, gonads, genitals and hormones). Some who do not see these elements of anatomy as determinative prefer the terms 'sex assigned at birth' or 'assigned sex.'

To be transgender, then, is to experience a tension or conflict between an identity suggested by certain elements of the physical anatomy one is born with (sex) and one's internal sense of self (gender).

Another key term is 'gender dysphoria,' the medical diagnosis made when someone experiences considerable distress because of transgender experience.

Many different experiences and identities can be placed under the broad term 'transgender' (for example nonbinary, genderqueer or genderfluid), and there is debate over whether one must experience gender dysphoria in order to be able to identify as transgender. In this booklet, I will focus primarily on how Christians can best respond to those whose sex and gender are in conflict with one another and who experience gender dysphoria, although much of what I will say will also be applicable to other related experiences and identities.²

At this point, it is worth noting the distinction between transgender and intersex. People with intersex conditions are born with bodily characteristics which exhibit differences from the expected pattern for either male or female. Intersex is, therefore, somewhat different from transgender, and it is often unhelpful to seek to address the two together. Because of limitations of space, I will only address transgender in this booklet.

Transgender Debates

Transgender experience and gender dysphoria have given rise to many debates.

The key debate is on how transgender experience and, especially, the pain of gender dysphoria should be handled. Can the conflict between sex and gender be reconciled, and, if so, which one should change? Do we seek to help people change their internal sense of gender so that it matches their sex? Or do we help people change their bodies so that they more closely reflect the sex that matches their gender? In many circles, the former approach has been deemed ineffective and even harmful.³ The latter approach is now widely accepted and practised, though it is not without its critics. This process, known as transitioning, can start with social transitioning in which an individual adopts a name, pronouns and external presentation which matches their gender, and can be followed by legal transitioning (obtaining a Gender Recognition Certificate and new birth certificate) and medical transitioning (which may include hormone treatment and surgery).

How should the pain of gender dysphoria be handled?

The debate is most active when it comes to the treatment of children with gender dysphoria. While some campaign for early transitioning—which has sometimes been facilitated by medical professionals—there is an increasing pushback against this approach from medical professionals, parents and detransitioners (those who transitioned, often at a young age, but have since returned to live in line with their sex).

Other debates have tended to focus around some of the practical implications of transitioning. Should people be able to use the sex-segregated spaces, such as public toilets and changing rooms, of the gender they identify with? Which prisons should transgender prisoners be sent to? Can trans people compete in sports competitions for those of the gender with which they identify? And which pronouns (those little words like ‘he’ and ‘she’) should be used for transgender people?

People Not Pronouns

For many Christians, these public debates are the only real insight we have into the topic. Observing from a distance, transgender can easily become an issue of public toilets, prisons and pronouns, a political issue driven by activists.

These debates are important, and there is a role for Christians to play in them if we are willing to engage thoughtfully and sensitively, but before we get to the debates, we should engage with the people. Behind the debates, behind the news stories, behind (and often not amongst) the activists are real people, people created by God and loved by God, who are wrestling with their sense of self and are often suffering great pain and distress in the process. A truly Christian response to transgender must start by engaging with those who

are personally affected. We must start from the realization that this is not primarily a topic about public toilets, prisons or pronouns. It is about people.

A Christian Response

The focus of this booklet will be on how we as Christians should respond to people who identify as transgender or who experience gender dysphoria. I will explore three elements of a response: a heart response, a head response and a hope response. There are many practical questions that I will not have space to discuss, but the principles outlined here will give each of us a basis from which to think through such questions.