

Engaging LGBTQ Issues: It's Still Complicated

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Abstract

Public school administrators deal with a range of culture war conflicts on a regular basis, and LGBTQ issues are particularly challenging. When I joined my Christian university's faculty after a long career working as an Evangelical administrator in public schools, I looked forward to shifting from experiencing these conflicts as a public-school administrator to equipping others to handle them. Instead, the challenges have become even more complicated.

The social conflicts churning within America's increasingly partisan culture were a regular feature of my 30 years in public education, most of which were spent serving as an administrator. All the common categories of conflict were part of my experience, such as multiculturalism, science and religion, assessment, and sex education (Dill & Hunter, 2010). The last third of my public-school career was spent as a central office administrator with an insider's view of how the district responded to these conflicts. Most took place out of public view, but from time to time conflicts erupted like media volcanoes.

Issues concerning LGBTQ students and families ignited many such public conflagrations. One incident featured a visit from the infamous Westboro Baptist Church traveling protesters, triggered by a high school's staging of the *The Laramie Project*. Another involved a gay student teacher in an elementary school who had an honest conversation about his identity with a student. The content of that exchange traveled home, and a firestorm ensued.

In all such conflicts, school administrators madly thrash below the surface, trying to put out the fire—or at least contain it—and bring the situation to a prompt conclusion. All the while, these leaders work very hard to project a public image of calm control. As an insider, I observed—and sometimes participated in—both

the thrashing in private and the posturing in public when a culture war incident went viral. But the majority of my involvement in cultural conflicts was much less dramatic. A steady stream of culture war issues played out in mundane meeting discussions, curriculum planning, and policy development.

Working in a professional setting where faith was to be kept personal, I carefully guarded my identity. Whatever my role in a particular situation, my goal was to empathize with all parties and pursue a just outcome, all the while keeping my identity cards close to my chest. As a result, I was able to do complicated and delicate work in the midst of such conflicts without the added burden of having to be an apologist for the Evangelical subculture or the larger Christian community. I believe my involvement brought some of Christ's peace to the conflicts and promoted human flourishing.

However, the battles exacted a price from all involved. Passions ran particularly high in public forums, and the conflict was often personal and intense. When the evil or ignorant "other" railed against was the school district, as was often the case, I was viewed as one of "them." In such moments, the very worst of people often spewed forth, and I had the same unpleasant visceral response as everyone else. The more common day-to-day matters handled behind the scenes also taxed me, as I strove to faithfully serve Christ by promoting justice from within the system while simultaneously doing a good job for the district. Simply put, the work was complicated and it was hard.

When I joined my Christian university's faculty, I looked forward to shifting from experiencing these conflicts as a public-school administrator to equipping others to handle them. That is not how my career transition played out. The conflicts—and especially the LGBTQ issues—that were complicated when I was in public education are now even more complicated in

my university work. That reality crystalized during an experience two years after I started teaching at George Fox.

I was with three colleagues on a warm, sunny September day. Led by our dean, we were heading to the central office of the largest district in our state to meet with several school administrators. Those waiting to sit down with us were members of the district's gay and lesbian administrator group. The meeting was arranged by our dean as a chance to listen in the wake of a high-profile conflict over student teacher placements. One of the district's principals had refused to accept a placement because that teacher was from our university. In the eyes of some, we were considered to be a homophobic institution. The stand taken by the principal hit the airwaves and social media ignited.

We met in a small room around a large rectangular table. The sun poured in tall windows, pounding our backs. We truly were in the "hot seat," but we came to listen and we did. We offered ourselves as living sacrifices in the hope that some goodwill seeds might be sown. The gay and lesbian administrators shared their hurt, pain, and fairly well contained anger. It was clear that we were the embodiment of a powerful subculture they viewed as "enemy": Christians who had wounded them throughout their lives and who they considered dangerous still.

Following the gracious lead of our dean, we absorbed it. When it was over we exchanged pleasantries and walked to the car for the long drive back to our campus, which is geographically and culturally well beyond the city limits. A significant and unexpected change in both my identity and my role in the culture wars was made quite clear that day: I was an ambassador and public witness for the university.

In the years since that sunny September afternoon, the complex thicket of questions, issues, and conflicts regarding the LGBTQ community has seemingly engulfed American culture. My university and other Christian institutions of higher education have been targets in the polarized social media battles that magnify the cultural gulf, amplify the divisiveness and incivility, and deepen the challenge of serving as agents of reconciliation and peace. For those who consider Evangelicals as "other"—and especially those who see Evangelicals as dangerous—my university and I are

one. There are many moments when I feel unequally yoked.

Being an ambassador for my university is not the same as being an ambassador for Christ. As a Christian, I am to present Jesus to the world through my actions and words as a living witness. In my role as university ambassador, I am expected to be an apologist for the way Christ is interpreted by the university through institutional policies and practices. My faith identity, which I could carefully manage in my public-school years, still exists, but it is obscured by the long shadow of my institution's cultural profile. Even if there was perfect harmony between my understanding of faithful Christ-centered policies and practices and the university's understanding, it would still be challenging to "wear" that public identification in many contexts where I now serve. When there is a lack of harmony, as with LGBTQ issues, the degree of difficulty increases exponentially.

I appreciate that my university must find a way through these uncharted waters. The institutional leadership must negotiate the expectations of various stakeholders in the context of a culture rife with conflict. As much as I empathize with the challenges faced by university leadership, I can't help but focus on my own situation. I teach graduate students who serve in both public and private schools. Many of my students are Christians of various sorts, but many are not. This is far different from the undergraduate student population at my institution, which is dominated by students raised in Evangelical homes. My students are either aspiring leaders or are currently serving in leadership roles, and I encourage them to bring all of who they are to their work. That includes their faith as broadly understood (Riaz & Normore, 2008) to be inclusive of all understandings of the "sacred." I use my religious "tribe of origin"—Baptists—as a case study in the process. The goal is to create something few leaders in my region of the country have experienced: meaningful discussion about hard issues where core identities are welcomed.

The attending "fight or flight" responses triggered by LGBTQ issues are hot-wired from the larger culture into public schools. When incidents flare up in a school or a district, they are a volatile test of leadership even in the most homogeneous of communities. For school administrators serving in districts with diverse

demographics and a spectrum of religious (and non-religious) worldviews, it is especially difficult. My experience has been that, particularly in the most diverse settings, school leaders are expected to be LGBTQ advocates and allies. In effect, this demands that leaders assume a place in the ranks of the culture warriors on one side of the battle.

My challenge as a professor working in the shadow of my university's public persona regarding LGBTQ issues is to prepare leaders for public schools in accordance with performance standards for public school administrators, and do it with integrity. All graduate programs that prepare students for social service roles—nursing, counseling, social work, etc.—share this challenge. We cannot avoid or minimize the issue, as professors in other fields can. For many of our students, the role of LGBTQ “champion” is an obvious and righteous aspect of being a social justice leader. For my conservative Christian students, it is often inconceivable.

I have had extensive experience with fellow Evangelical educators who have drawn bright lines on this issue. Quite early in my central office experience, I attended a workshop for all the district's administrators. The subject was families with same-sex parents. A panel of gay and lesbian parents told powerful stories of the challenges they faced at our schools. Sitting next to me were two building principals. Like me, both were white, heterosexual Evangelicals. I knew about their faith only through discreet conversations. Personal religion was never discussed in the district's leadership culture.

Alert to the divisiveness of the workshop topic and the hostility it generated in the conservative Christian world, I leaned in to hear my new colleagues as they exchanged quiet comments. Every action promoted by the panel to assure a warm welcome and physical and emotional safety was met with immediate affirmation by both of them. But one of the school principals added, “Just don't ask me to celebrate them.” To expect anything that celebrated or normalized homosexuality would have been a violation of a core cultural stance that has dominated Evangelicals for decades.

It has been my experience that virtually all Christian educators are committed to caring for LGBTQ students and families by supporting, helping, comforting,

and protecting them. They seek to eliminate bullying and harassment in the school, and they work to establish trusting and respectful relationships with these students and their families. However, many will not assume the role of advocate or activist for the “LGBTQ cause” and refuse to be a party to normalizing—or worse, celebrating—what they consider sin.

Evangelical graduate students I work with often embrace this “love the sin, hate the sinner” stance. The dominant view in the school administration guild today, however, is that leaders must be social justice advocates who are willing to put their careers on the line to champion the cause of LGBTQ rights and create school cultures that welcome, affirm, and normalize. LGBTQ school reform efforts seek to call out “heterosexist, anti-gay attitudes of staff and students, lack of homosexual-themed content in school curricula, non-existent or rarely enforced antidiscrimination policies, and an absence of visible services and role models for LGB students” (Zammitt, Pepperell, & Coe, 2014, p. 688). The expectation is that administrators will be the tip of the spear in this social justice battle.

Charles Haynes (2012) of the First Amendment Center detailed expectations for administrative leadership in this area of cultural conflict:

In areas of the country where gay rights are strongly protected, religious conservatives need GLBT people to support religious freedom and free speech for religious students in public schools. And in places where gay rights are not yet recognized, GLBT people need religious conservatives to help ensure safe schools for all students. (p. 5)

Haynes's challenge is a noble call to local cultural leadership. However, the unique challenge it poses for Evangelicals, both in reconciling their personal beliefs to the task and what those risks might trigger in the local Evangelical churches where these school leaders worship, is significant. Haynes also minimizes the intensity of the conflict. Social psychologist Jonathan Haidt described the dynamics of the divisiveness evident in culture war skirmishes: “It's as though these giant electromagnets got turned on in the '60s and they've been cranking up ever since. And anything that has the vaguest left-right charge gets pulled to one side. Everything gets purified” (Tippett, 2014). It is my responsibility to provide my students with the tools to

lead in this risk-filled environment, and especially to help Evangelicals who are part of a subculture in the center of the larger cultural conflict. However, I am far from certain how to successfully achieve this important outcome.

It would be helpful to experience the very thing I want to provide for my students. Jenell Paris (2016), anthropologist from Messiah College, has described homosexuality as part of a larger complex of issues that are best viewed and treated as conflict. My deepest belief is that believers must work together to engage productively in conflict, and that at the heart of this work is robust worship and Christian practice. (p. xxii)

If the university faculty wrestled with these questions as a body, sharing wisdom and insight and learning together as we muddled through this complex, messy journey, that would be of immense value to me.

I am more hopeful that I will have the opportunity to engage in productive conflict at my university than at my church. When it comes to culture war topics, the local church is a poor training ground for working towards Paris' vision. Instead of promoting engagement in conflict as "robust worship and Christian practice," a social and political orthodoxy concerning topics such as homosexuality, gay marriage, and abortion is a common element of the enculturation process in most local Evangelical churches, and those who disagree typically remain silent or leave (Bean, 2014).

There have been efforts at my university. For example, a panel made up of a local conservative Evangelical seminary professor, the pastor of a gay church (who is also a friend of the professor), a Christian attorney, and a Christian clinical psychologist drew an overflow crowd. I was deeply appreciative that my university hosted this event, and yet frustrated that such opportunities are so rare within the Evangelical subculture. Of course, it's also important to point out that the panel met in the "safe bubble" of the campus; the "other" was our guest. Engagement is much more difficult in the rough and tumble of life outside the bubble, and that is much closer to the world where our graduate students serve.

There are other thoughtful Christians offering wisdom for this journey, which also gives me hope. Clarence Joldersma (2016) is one such voice. Build-

ing from philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff's theory of justice, Joldersma called for Christian schools to embrace LGBT students who are the object of harm and a vulnerable population. Joldersma has offered a pathway for considering more biblical responses to the challenges faced by all Christian educators. Though he writes with K-12 schools in mind, his analysis and suggestions apply to higher education as well. For example, he noted that Christian schools are often places where LGBT students face "particular dynamics" that add to the harm experienced through formal and informal practices (p. 8).

I believe our mission is to bring healing and reconciliation, especially in the most difficult conflicts. Paris (2016) suggested that "religion can be constructive when it serves as a container for conflict...holding disputing people in community and activating helpful values and behaviors" (p. 76). I want my university to be a messy model of that very kind of constructive conflict. And I want my students to experience that in my classes. In achieving that, I could plant seeds of peace and reconciliation.

However, even with all these positive steps and important resources I have described, I am skeptical. The fact remains that the undergraduate faculty and the graduate faculty do not serve the same students, so we experience the challenge differently. Even if we did have the time and commitment to work collaboratively, much bridging work would be needed to get to productive conflict. Barring a significant, intentional effort, I doubt that we as professors will have much success.

I want my university to be known as a community where LBGTQ students are loved and served well, generating a counter-narrative born from actual student experience. I want us to be known as allies of the LBGTQ community in a manner that is true to our faith commitments. For now, I am constantly seeking wisdom and discernment as I personally navigate these pathways, both in professional settings where I am an ambassador for my university and in my teaching. Just as I struggled to figure out how best to serve Christ in the day-to-day conflicts I faced as an administrator in K-12 schools, I continue to explore how to achieve this difficult goal. It was complicated then; it's even more complicated now.

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