

The background of the cover is a textured, light beige color. It is decorated with large, overlapping, abstract geometric shapes in various colors including red, green, yellow, blue, purple, and black. The shapes are arranged in a way that they seem to form a circular or semi-circular pattern around the central text.

**MARK  
YARHOUSE**

**OLYA  
ZAPOROZHETS**

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**WHEN  
CHILDREN  
COME  
OUT**

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**A GUIDE  
FOR  
CHRISTIAN  
PARENTS**



**InterVarsity Press**  
ivpress.com

Taken from *When Children Come Out* by Mark A. Yarhouse and Olya Zaporozhets.

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Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL.

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## HOW PARENTS BECOME AWARE

*Dear Mom and Dad,*

*I want to share something that has been hard for me to talk about with you. Since I first felt romantic feelings for others, which was about the time I went through puberty, I have been attracted more to girls than to boys. This is something I haven't always understood or had any idea what to do about. It isn't something that I chose to feel or that I'm choosing today to feel to upset you or make life more complicated. I've had these feelings for many years, and I have been trying to find a way to share what I've been feeling and thinking with you.*

*I've also struggled with shame for many years. I finally realized that I don't have to be ashamed of something I didn't choose. I also believe in my heart that God loves me.*

*You may be wondering about relationships, dating, and all of that. But that is not what this letter is about. To be honest, it's an area that I am continuing to pray about and ask God about.*

*I know this is very different from what you may have known about growing up, and it may take time to process. I'm open to talking about this with you and answering questions you may have. I am sharing this part of my experience with different people in my life and at my own pace as I feel safe and comfortable. I just wanted to find the words to share this with you too. Our relationship matters to me, and that's why I am taking this step to share more of myself with you. I am still the Lorelei I have always been, and I still love you both very much.*

This letter from Lorelei, written when she was twenty-four years old, represents a first step many LGBTQ+ young people make to share more of themselves with their parents.

We understand that not every parent receives a letter as well-worded as this, and we recognize that the nature of a child's initial coming out may very well set the stage for future experiences and dynamics. Also, complicating circumstances can add layers of complexity to the parent-child relationship.

*There is no one coming-out experience shared by all parents, not even by all Christian parents.* You and your family are on *your* journey.

At the same time, there is much to be gained from hearing the experiences of Christian parents such as Lorelei's. You may benefit from knowing you are not alone and that other Christian parents have had similar experiences or asked similar questions or faced similar challenges. If you are the parent of an LGBTQ+ child—or the parent of a child who might someday disclose to you that they are LGBTQ+—some of the accounts offered in this book may not resonate with you, while others likely will. Even if something doesn't match your experience, you still may benefit from reading how other Christian parents have responded, what their relationships looked like, how they responded to a different set of circumstances, and so on. Regardless, we believe that reading these accounts can help you as you face important decisions and wrestle with concerns unique to your own unfolding family story.

Much of the book will talk specifically about same-sex sexuality, and yet our findings are also relevant in many ways to LGBTQ+ experiences more broadly—and we make specific applications to gender identity (transgender and other diverse gender experiences) in each chapter. The rationale for this is that there is more research available on the experiences of parents of gay children than there is of parents of transgender children, and the primary conversations in the Christian community have been around same-sex sexuality and behavior. However, we do see growing awareness of and interest in gender identity, and we include the gender conversation as appropriate.

In this chapter, we will share with you the experiences of Christian parents as they first became aware of their child's same-sex sexuality. We refer to this component of the parents' journey as *awareness*. Subsequent chapters will consider other components of the journey: what it means for parents to simultaneously seek help and maintain their relationship with their child, how this relationship changes over time, how parents' faith changed over time, and what it means for parents to come to terms with the reality of their child's same-sex sexuality. Since awareness chronologically precedes these other components of the journey, we will begin there.

Awareness can come through *disclosure*, as when a child like Lorelei shares the reality of her same-sex sexuality with her parents. Disclosure might take the form of a letter, a conversation, or an answer to a question that's been asked. Any context in which your child shares with you the reality of their sexuality is a form of disclosure. While some children may disclose their experience using only descriptive language—that is, by speaking of their attractions to the same sex—they will likely refer to themselves using a sexual identity label such as *gay*, *lesbian*, *bisexual*, *bi-curious*, *asexual*, or *queer*. A child might choose to disclose their sexuality to their parents after coming out to another individual who insists that the child tell their parents (or threatens to do so themselves). This circumstance is also a form of disclosure, but it differs from other forms of disclosure in that the timing of the disclosure might not be the child's preferred timing.

Awareness can also come through *discovery*, as when parents discover that their child is gay without the child intending for them to know. Parents might stumble across pictures on social media or be told by a friend or family member. One mother we saw in our clinic confessed to going through her daughter's bedroom when her daughter was at school and discovering her diary. The mother made the decision to read the diary, and that was how she learned about her daughter's sexual identity. We do not recommend this kind of action, as it jeopardizes the trust you want to have as a parent with your child. Regardless of how *discovery* occurs, it is a very different experience of awareness from *disclosure*.

From the child's perspective, disclosure is commonly referred to as "coming out," a shortening of the phrase "coming out of the closet." The image of the closet is an apt metaphor for many LGBTQ+ children, especially those in Christian settings. These children have often felt isolated from their parents, feeling the need to keep a part of their experience hidden away. Disclosure at the child's own pace, at a time that feels safe, is very different from being forced to disclose—as when a family member or friend threatens to tell a child's parents about the child's sexuality if the child does not do so. And both of these forms of disclosure are very different from the experience of discovery, particularly if this discovery entails a breach of trust and privacy.

The process of disclosure to others typically begins with an LGBTQ+ person's friends and peer group, often during adolescence. This is thought to be the safest group of people for most teens to disclose to. However, responses to coming out are quite variable, with racial and ethnic background sometimes playing a role. In a study by Aranda and colleagues, for instance, African American lesbians were less likely to disclose to a nonfamily member than were whites and Latinas in the study, suggesting that comfort levels among different groups may vary for reasons not yet fully understood.<sup>1</sup>

In the most typical coming-out progression, after telling one or two friends, an LGBTQ+ person discloses to more friends, and word spreads to the rest of their peer group. After friends and peers, the person they are most likely to come out to next is a sibling, then their mother, and finally their father.<sup>2</sup> We found this pattern to be true in a recent study of Christians who have come out to their parents.<sup>3</sup> Fathers need not feel offended if they are the last to know about their child being gay; it appears to be a common experience. Perhaps in some families there is something about being a father that represents a more daunting task. We don't know. There are exceptions to this pattern, of course, and it applies only to controlled disclosure of a person's same-sex sexuality, not to discovery of their sexuality by others. Christians who come out are also likely to disclose their sexuality to youth ministers, who in the typical coming-out chronology fall between friends and siblings. These youth

ministers seem to provide another layer of anticipated safety for some teens along the journey of eventual disclosure to their family.

In our most recent study in which 125 Christian parents reflected on their experience of a child coming out to them, about half (49%) suspected their loved one was gay before their child came out to them, while 51% had no idea. One parent who had suspicions shared, “Over the years I had wondered if he might be gay because of some effeminate behaviors and his lack of interest in dating during his teens.” Another parent shared, “He had dropped some hints, but I didn’t respond to them, hoping I was misreading him.”<sup>4</sup>

Among those who had no idea their child was gay, one mother shared, “There was absolutely no indication that either I or my husband ever noticed.” Another parent shared, “I just never saw it. She was focused on college and really didn’t have time to date. I felt she was just waiting for the right guy to come along.”

Coming out occurs in the social and cultural context not only of family but also of race, ethnicity, kinship networks, and (for many) a religious faith community. Differences among these contexts can contribute to very different experiences when coming out. For example, in a study of gay youth, Black youth reported increased discomfort coming out compared to White youth, and Black and Latino youth disclosed to fewer people than did White youth.<sup>5</sup>

The coming-out literature is layered with complexity that we want to keep in mind as we think about how a Christian parent responds to their child’s disclosure as gay.

Before we discuss reactions to coming out, we want to introduce a diagram that will help us locate various ministry considerations throughout the book (see fig. 1.1). What we illustrate here is that, after parents become aware of their child’s same-sex sexuality, whether via disclosure or via discovery, two parallel journeys occur. One is the journey of the child who has come out or is navigating sexual identity questions; the other is the journey of the parents, who are now aware of their child’s same-sex sexuality. We will look in subsequent chapters at how this relationship changes over time. These two journeys are not always best

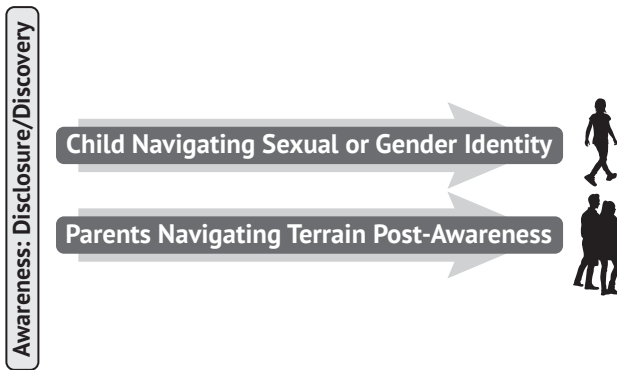


conceptualized as completely separate, but there are ways in which they each have their own terrain to navigate, as we shall see.

*Two parallel journeys occur:  
the child's and the parents'.*

## REACTIONS TO COMING OUT

Most parents are uncertain how to react when a child comes out to them. Parents report a wide variety of emotional responses, many of which can be quite negative, such as shock, grief or loss, guilt, shame, anger, emotional withdrawal, and even verbal and emotional abuse.<sup>6</sup> This means that just about anything can happen, and you can play a role in how your story turns out. Support and acceptance are also reported, but less frequently. As you will hear from parents who have gone through this before you, you have an opportunity to rise to the occasion.



**Figure 1.1.** Two parallel journeys

These initial reactions by parents are frequently followed by a period of distress and finding ways to cope or adjust to the news they have just received.<sup>7</sup> We will return to parents' coping responses in chapter two. For now, we want to focus on parents' initial reactions, specifically the experiences of Christian parents.

While every parental response is complex and individual, it can be helpful to broadly classify parental reactions as either positive or



negative. Psychologists tend to classify reactions this way—as positive or negative—to people you understand that their reactions matter. They can move toward something constructive (of emotional health and well-being), or they can move away from that toward something that can be destructive (of emotional health and well-being). Don't confuse "positive" and "negative" with "affirming" and "nonaffirming"; those are going to be different issues with some overlap, of course, but we are talking primarily about the impact on health and relationship. Some studies find that about half of parents respond positively to their child's coming out (by demonstrating support, for example), while the other half of parents respond negatively (through behaviors such as verbal harassment or worse).<sup>8</sup>

In one of our recent studies of Christian college students who came out to their parents, about 24% described coming out to parents in strongly positive terms, 28% in strongly negative terms, and 44% in a mixture of positive and negative terms.<sup>9</sup> One student who experienced a mixture of positive and negative responses when disclosing their sexuality to their mother wrote, "There were positives and negatives. . . . It was very much okay . . . but we're not going to deal with it. . . . She never brought it up again."<sup>10</sup>

What internal reactions do parents experience as they respond externally in positive or negative ways to their LGBTQ+ children? We found in one study of Christian parents that grief and shame were very common experiences.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, religious commitment and grief were highly correlated. Perhaps more encouraging is the research suggesting that many parents typically experience positive growth after the disclosure, and most parents grow more accepting of the circumstances their family faces and of their child over time.<sup>12</sup>

***What contributes to some parents' reactions?*** Other research has focused on variables that commonly underlie parental reactions to their child's coming out. Family, religious, and cultural values are all associated with parental reactions.<sup>15</sup> What we found in one of our earliest studies of Christian parents was that their responses were related to their Christian worldview, a sense of ambiguous loss, emotional distress,

and also unique situational stressors.<sup>14</sup> What do we mean by each of these terms?

Christian parents have much in common with nonreligious parents, but one thing that stands out in some studies is what we refer to as a “worldview” response. A worldview is the sum of assumptions a person holds about what is true, and a Christian often holds a distinct worldview that undergirds and organizes their beliefs, values, strivings, and other considerations. Beliefs about what is right and wrong, about morality and sexual behavior, about what God provision for a person, and other things like these would be a part of this response. Worldview can interact with and be expressed in relation to other aspects of parents, such as differing ethnic and racial backgrounds.<sup>15</sup>

Parents also reported ambiguous loss and emotional distress. Ambiguous loss is more of a free-floating sense of something not being the way a parent thought it would be. If you are a parent who feels a sense of loss but doesn’t know quite where to pin that loss or where to locate that loss, that’s what we are talking about here. It is a vague sense of loss that isn’t so much directed at your child or at God or at anyone in particular, which can sometimes make it hard to name and hard to work through.

Emotional distress would be tied to largely negative emotions. These might include ambiguous loss but would also involve common feelings of confusion, anger, frustration, guilt, and so on. Situational stressors just refer to unique situations that will vary from parent to parent. One set of parents will learn that their child is gay, while another set of parents will learn that their child is gay and sexually active. Or one set of parents finds out their child identifies as transgender, while another set of parents find out their child is transgender and now insists on the use of cross-sex hormones. The situation is different and creates additional stress. These are what we refer to as situational stressors.

There are additional considerations discussed in the literature. Two variables that make parents more likely to respond positively to a child who comes out are (1) education about sexual identity and orientation, and (2) previous contact with sexual minorities or the LGBTQ+

community through extended family, friends, and coworkers. Conversely, parents are more likely to respond negatively if they have had little exposure to LGBTQ+ individuals and communities or if they have strongly ingrained stereotypes.<sup>16</sup> A practical implication of this is that it really is worth learning all you can about the issues—as you are doing in part by reading this book.

Other variables that influence parental response include the nature of the information shared by the child (for example, if they are in a relationship), the method through which parents become aware of the fact that their child is LGBTQ+ (that is, whether they learn through disclosure or discovery), and the sex of both parent and child.<sup>17</sup>

***How thoughts are tied to feelings.*** Some research suggests that parents may have specific cognitions (or what you might think of as mental actions, thoughts) that affect their reactions.<sup>18</sup> These thoughts include concern for their child, whether their child is abnormal, whether their child will change, and what their child's future might look like. Parents may blame themselves, or they may have a sense of pride in who their child is.

Here are common thoughts held by parents at the time of disclosure:<sup>19</sup>

- concerns tied to safety, negative social attitudes, prejudice, and harassment
- concern for the future and worry that their child will have a harder life (being lonely or unhappy)
- concern that their child will not have children, meaning that the parent will not have grandchildren
- self-blame and belief that they have failed as parents

Other research, ours included, suggests at least two additional beliefs may be common among religious parents, making them especially important for this book:

- concern that their child will lose their religious faith
- conflict between the parents' love of their child and their religious beliefs and values

In our own analysis of data from more than two hundred Christian parents who had a child come out to them as gay, we noted several themes. Some of these themes are reflected in the broader literature about parents, while other themes seem to be more prominent among Christian parents or more closely tied to the Christian beliefs and values held by Christian parents.

• **JEAN COLES ON HER FIRST AWARENESS OF HER SON'S**  
 • **SAME-SEX SEXUALITY**

• Greg came out to us when he was twenty-five years old. I wasn't  
 • totally surprised. Occasionally throughout his life, I'd wondered if  
 • he might be gay. At the same time, I'd assumed that he was straight.  
 • And I'd prayed that being gay wouldn't be something he would have  
 • to deal with. It seemed to often be a life filled with angst, loneli-  
 • ness, and hardship, as well as ostracism and unfilled desire. And  
 • that's for those who choose not to act on their desires! I was sad to  
 • learn that this road was one he would have to walk, but confident  
 • that God was in this and would walk it with him.

• When he told us, we were quick to listen and affirm our love for  
 • him. We also asked questions, seeking to understand his journey  
 • and help him feel loved and accepted. We let him know that he  
 • didn't need to answer our questions unless he wanted to (which he  
 • did). I told him that I would be praying three things for him: to  
 • always (1) have healthy belonging with godly intimacy, (2) use his  
 • gifts without hindrance, and (3) not experience unhealthy shame.

**Additional Christian considerations.** One of the most frequent (and perhaps most obvious) concerns Christian parents reported had to do with whether homosexuality is sinful. A second closely related concern was the question about what their child's homosexuality meant for the child's relationship with God. These questions are often multilayered, in large part because the term *homosexuality* can refer either to same-sex attractions or to same-sex sexual behavior. Some parents were concerned only with the sinfulness of same-sex sexual behavior. These parents might not have viewed same-sex attractions as "good," but they did not

view such attractions as morally impermissible in the same way they viewed same-sex sexual behavior as sinful. They saw attractions distinct from behavior. For other parents, both attractions and behavior were considered sin. Still other parents did not view homosexual attractions or homosexual behavior as sin, or they were questioning those beliefs.

Among those parents who considered homosexual attraction or homosexual behavior sinful, some viewed that sin as no different from any other sin. Other parents viewed homosexuality as uniquely sinful, putting their child at spiritual risk in a way other sins might not do and threatening the child's salvation.

One Christian parent we interviewed shared the following response to her daughter's coming out. Her recollection captures both the love she expressed toward her daughter and her beliefs about what God thought: "Basically, I remember it was just like putting a knife through my heart. I remember crying a little bit. I told her that she was my daughter and that I would always love her, but I did not personally believe this was what God would want for her and I did not want this to come between us."<sup>20</sup> This kind of response may also confuse a parent's questions about what choices their child has made to be gay. We believe it is important for parents to give careful thought to what is volitional—that is, what their child has say over. In our experience, people do not choose to experience same-sex attractions. Rather, teens who may later identify as gay typically find themselves experiencing same-sex attractions when they go through puberty. When parents talk to their child about what God may want for the child, it is important not to frame this conversation in a way that suggests the child chose to experience their attractions. Parents sometimes respond to their child's coming out by expressing concern over a choice the child is making in contradiction to God's best for them. Such a response is often quickly rejected by the child—whose attractions usually developed unchosen during puberty—and will create a wider divide in any effort to convey respect for the child or to achieve mutual understanding.

The belief that homosexuality (whether simply same-sex sexual behavior or same-sex attraction as well) is a sin can also be related to beliefs about how best to respond to a child. A common theme among Christian

parents is the belief that same-sex attraction can or should be changed. Some parents considered ministry or counseling efforts to facilitate change, while others spoke of their child's attractions as a possible phase that the child needed to grow out of or as some sort of confusion on the child's part. Regarding counseling efforts, one parent said it this way:

I was really in denial for a long time. I said, "We have to get this thing fixed." I figured [our daughter's same-sex sexuality] had to be something psychological. We pushed [our daughter] to go into some Christian counseling with somebody that specialized with the SSA lifestyle but she was against that. She was already resigned to this was the way she is and how it is going to be. That made me even more angry.<sup>21</sup>

Parents' beliefs can fuel concrete steps that may backfire, as in this case where the parent tried to arrange therapy, which the child refused. Conflicts such as this can contribute to further anger on the part of the parent.

In our research, we heard less frequently from the subset of Christian parents who believed that neither same-sex attraction nor same-sex sexual behavior was sinful. For this group of parents, religious belief played a very different role in informing parents' reactions to their child coming out. Not every Christian parent will begin from the same ethical conclusions. Christian parents may reflect a range of beliefs and values about sexuality and sexual behavior.

### **WHEN A CHILD COMES OUT AS TRANSGENDER**

Although most of our research is on Christian parents whose child came out as gay, we have always had a small percentage of Christian parents share their experience of a child coming out as transgender. What was their experience like?

One thing we found in our initial study of over two hundred Christian parents was that the parents who reported a transgender child were less likely to be surprised at the coming-out moment. Most of the study's cases of gender dysphoria were what we refer to as "early onset"; that is, the child expressed a different gender identity through sustained gender-atypical behavior, dress, and other preferences at a

young age, prior to puberty. A child is typically aware that they are a boy or a girl between the ages of two and four, so early onset cases of gender dysphoria will often stand out to parents in important ways. In our research, these parents knew something was going on, even if they didn't know what it was at first. By the time their child grew up and came out to them as transgender, they were not as surprised as those Christian parents whose child came out as gay.

In our more recent research and consultations, however, we are seeing a dramatic increase in "late onset" cases of gender dysphoria—cases that begin after a child has gone through puberty. Many people who experience late onset gender dysphoria have little or no history of gender-atypical interests, behavior, or expression in childhood, so when they come out to a parent, the parent often reports feeling "blindsided." This feeling can lead to strong emotional responses: shock, confusion, concern, fear, and so on.

One of the more common responses by Christian parents when their child came out to them as transgender was an emotional response of grief or anticipated grief over the loss of their child as they knew them. One parent shared, "In the first couple of conversations we had, I did a lot of crying about feeling like I was losing my son. [My transgender daughter] kept saying, 'Mom, I'm the same person.'"<sup>a</sup>

Other Christian parents saw their child's transgender experience as a reflection of congruence. That is, these parents were aware their child was different, but they did not understand the nature of that difference until the child came out to them as transgender. For example, one mother of a biological male whose gender identity is female (a transgender daughter, as the mother would refer to her) shared,

When she came out to us as trans, my first reaction was relief. I was like, "Oh, now everything makes complete sense." As I look back, I see, "Oh, there she is," whereas I wasn't sure before. . . . So she told us [she is transgender]. She asked if we were surprised and I said no. I said I was really glad for her. As she described it, it was a deeply spiritual experience for her. She felt like she heard God say, "My beloved daughter." It was



- like a rebaptism, laying down the masculine and picking up
- the feminine, which was thrilling to hear.<sup>b</sup>

- For some parents, their child's coming out with a different gen-
- der identity answered some of the questions the parent had already
- been asking.

## EMOTIONAL RESPONSES/DISTRESS

Having looked at the initial thoughts of Christian parents, we want to discuss common emotional responses to a child's coming out, keeping in mind that thoughts and feelings are closely tied to one another. Generally speaking, we characterize the parents' emotional response as emotional distress, which we introduce previously. Emotional distress can be expressed as concern, fear, confusion, disbelief, anger, hurt, blame, or other emotions. Although we have also seen parents respond with positive emotions such as unconditional love, even these parents often experience additional feelings that, when taken together, reflect a degree of emotional distress.

**Concern/fear.** A common parental reaction to disclosure was to report concern for their child's future. Indeed, in our recent survey of Christian parents, concern was the most frequently cited emotional response, with 82% of the sample indicating this emotion.<sup>22</sup> This response is common for parents of all faith backgrounds, and it is equally shared by Christian parents. The parents we interviewed typically believed that their child's same-sex sexuality would have an impact on their child's life or the life of the entire family. One parent said this: "It was a sad moment. I remember my husband and I lying in bed worrying about what life was going to be like and how we were going to tell people. I never thought of the possibility of [same-sex] marriage. I never thought that there would be other Catholics with sons like this. I was very concerned. I worried about AIDS."<sup>23</sup> More specifically, some parents thought the disclosure would change the parent-child relationship. One parent recalled experiencing anticipatory grief for how their child's disclosure would change their relationship: "It was a time of grieving because I knew this was going

to change our relationship with him forever. No matter which direction we went, this was going to change and affect our relationship with him.”<sup>24</sup>

Another common theme had to do with worry for their loved one’s future safety. One parent offered the following:

I was afraid, as a mother, of violence that would come toward him and the depression that I saw in him because of it. I was fearful of what the outside world would do to [my son]. It brought it home as soon as he said, “Yes, I’m gay.” I realized those problems were . . . things that I was going to be dealing with that I had pushed aside [in the past] and thought I didn’t have to worry about. When I would hear it on the news, I would feel bad, but it was not a part of my life. That came right to forefront as soon as he said he was gay.<sup>25</sup>

Another parent said this: “From more of a civil approach, [I was] just concerned about, as an LGBT person, the discrimination he’s going to face. Actually, the hatred he’ll face.”<sup>26</sup>

Concern and fear are some of the most common emotional responses to a child coming out. However, not all parental responses to coming out are negative.

**Unconditional love.** Another, and in some ways a uniquely Christian, response to disclosure is that of unconditional love. There are Christian

• **LYNN AND GREG McDONALD ON THE DISCOVERY THAT**  
 • **THEIR SON WAS GAY**

• Our suspicions were confirmed when Greg Jr. was seventeen years  
 • old. I (Greg) found gay pornography on his computer. After we con-  
 • fronted Greg Jr., he confirmed he was gay.

• Instantly, I (Lynn) felt like someone punched me in the stomach.  
 • My fear and adrenaline were rising rapidly. I tried to keep together,  
 • but I just sobbed uncontrollably. I felt desperate and alone. Hope  
 • felt gone, but what I didn’t realize was hope was walking with me  
 • every step of the way. At some point, it became clear that we did  
 • not have to have all the answers to our difficult questions to experi-  
 • ence the comfort and hope in Jesus.

understandings of love, anchored in God's love for us in Christ, that can sometimes deepen the meaning and experience of love parents intend to live out with their child.

In our survey of 125 Christian parents, unconditional love was the emotional response with which parents identified second-most highly; 78% of parents indicated feeling unconditional love in response to their child coming out to them.<sup>27</sup>

When asked to explain what they meant by "unconditional love," some of these parents stressed God's unconditional love of their child, while other parents believed God called them as parents to love their child unconditionally. One parent put it this way: "We know that our role is not to judge our son but just to love him. It's not even our role necessarily to change him, but just to love on him in Christlike love and get our Christian friends to pray over him and let God lead in how he's going to deal in that relationship."<sup>28</sup>

Additionally, many parents stated that they needed to love their child unconditionally without any other specification:

Your kid just took a huge big step. They said something giant to you, [so you should] understand that they're in a really fragile place. That's the moment to overdo it on the acceptance. You can be a jackass later. You can tighten up the reins later. You can go back on some of the super loving, acceptance stuff later. In that minute, that's what they need. They're terrified that this is about to be a nightmare, that they are about to fall off of a cliff. The most important thing right at that [coming-out] moment is taking care of [your child's] fears.<sup>29</sup>

For some Christian parents, their commitment to unconditional love even meant they were open to leaving their faith in order to love their child: "I remember distinctly thinking to myself that I would walk away from my faith if it meant I couldn't love my son. As much as my faith is a part of my life and who I am, I would have walked away from it in a heartbeat if it meant I couldn't love my son."<sup>30</sup>

We have seen that parents' emotional responses often include concern, fear, and love. We have also seen that the tension between these differing

emotions can at times reflect a kind of heartbreak as well. The heart of many Christian parents is divided between love for their son or daughter and distress that may take the form of concern, fear, and other negative emotions. Another common emotion for parents is disbelief, reflecting their uncertainty about what is happening.

***Uncertainty/disbelief.*** In the survey we conducted, just over half of our sample reported hoping that their child was confused or that it was a phase. Similarly, about 42% of parents reported feeling uncertain whether their child was confused, or whether it was a phase. For example, one parent said: “My reaction was pretty much disbelief. I was thinking and saying, ‘You are only fifteen. You’re not sure what you are yet. You are a confused teenager.’”<sup>31</sup>

Another parent said, “We were sort of thinking that maybe he was just curious. . . . I think we sort of assumed or hoped that he was just curious about his own puberty or his own body changes.”<sup>32</sup>

It’s important to recognize the significant role that uncertainty, disbelief, and wishful thinking often play for Christian parents whose child has just come out. Ultimately, parents will benefit from gradually coming to terms with the reality of their child’s same-sex sexuality. That process may take days, weeks, months, or even years. It is a journey.

The next two common emotions parents experience both have to do with self-blame. The first is parents’ self-blame for not knowing about their child’s same-sex sexuality; the second is parents’ self-blame for causing their child’s same-sex sexuality.

***Self-blame (for not knowing).*** In one study we found that Christian youth became aware of their same-sex sexuality at age thirteen on average; the average age at which they first disclosed that reality to another person was seventeen.<sup>33</sup> This means that, on average, a Christian young person will navigate questions around sexuality and same-sex attractions for four years on their own. When parents learn that their child has been navigating this terrain alone, they often blame themselves for not knowing about it:

I cried. The hardest part for us was how hard it was for him to have held that in for so long when he knew we would be loving and accepting. I struggled a lot and still do with how much hurt he has

had to live with because he didn't feel he could tell us sooner. I wonder what it must be like to walk in his shoes for a day. Our whole family was always accepting. I was hurt for him.<sup>54</sup>

The sadness this parent describes is not uncommon. Another mother of a gay son shared a similar anguish: "I didn't take any responsibility for [our son] being gay—I know you don't make someone gay—but how did I miss it? I found myself second-guessing everything."<sup>55</sup>

One mother put it this way: "As a parent you think, 'This is negligence not to have known this.'"<sup>56</sup>

A mother of a gay daughter shared about her own experience of depression and feeling overwhelmed by not knowing: "I was very depressed that my daughter had gone through this by herself for seventeen years. It just crushed me that I didn't know and I couldn't help her. For seventeen years my daughter hid a part of who she was from me. I thought, 'Oh my goodness. I don't even know my own daughter.' It was just a very overwhelming moment."<sup>57</sup>

A father contrasted his not knowing to his wife's apparent insights into the possibility that their son might be gay: "If I had been as sensitive to see what [my wife] had seen, it wouldn't have been as much of a surprise to me. I guess it made me feel bad a little bit that I wasn't as close to [my son] as I perhaps should have been [to realize that he was gay]."<sup>58</sup>

Sometimes the blame parents feel has to do with a belief that they have lost the opportunity to prevent this outcome. One father, reflecting on his gay daughter, shared that he wished he had known sooner in order to intervene: "I thought, 'Why didn't I see this at an early age so I could have corrected it as a young child?' There might have been some things I could have done. I had no idea. I was asking, 'What in the world did I do wrong?'"<sup>59</sup>

As this father's final words demonstrate, the self-blame parents feel for not knowing about their child's same-sex sexuality can sometimes be paired with self-blame rooted in a belief that the parents themselves are the cause of their child's same-sex sexuality.

***Self-blame (as cause).*** Parents who struggle with blaming themselves for their child's same-sex sexuality are often responding to a common

theory of causation subscribed to by many conservative Christians. According to this theory, a child attracted to the same sex must have experienced a failure to identify with their same-gender parent, creating an emotional longing that later became sexualized. Although we do not subscribe to this theory, we see many Christian parents struggle with questions about whether they were present enough or invested enough in their child's life. They often wonder in particular whether the same-gender parent was close enough to their child to meet these emotional needs that, according to this theory, should have ensured heterosexuality if they had been met.

For example, a father shared, "The biggest concern for me was, 'Is it something I did as a parent that caused hurt inside of him that led him to have these feelings toward the same sex?'"<sup>40</sup>

Another parent said, "I needed to find a reason why [my son was gay], and obviously, I couldn't. When it came down to it, all I knew is that I loved him, and even though I didn't understand, I wanted to understand and I didn't want to lose my relationship with my son."<sup>41</sup>

Still other parents resorted to blaming someone or something for causing or influencing their child's same-sex attractions. Some blamed experiences of childhood sexual abuse. The majority of those issuing blame blamed themselves for either causing the same-sex sexuality or being negligent about it. One parent remembered:

It was very painful. I was hurt tremendously. Everything that I had read blames the father [for their child being LGBT]. So, I was feeling an incredible amount of guilt, like a complete failure as a father. All those things were running through my mind. . . . I wanted to know if he was ever abused as kid or if I had caused this. Had I been neglectful of him or abusive to him in any way? I was really concerned as to what caused his homosexuality.<sup>42</sup>

Another parent had this to say: "I blamed myself. I thought I did something wrong that caused it. I thought I didn't love her enough or pay enough attention to her. I thought maybe something happened [to her]. I was worried about her future."<sup>43</sup>

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